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ORDNANCE FACTORY BLAST, EIGHT KILLED



Rescue operation underway after a blast at the ordnance factory, in Bhandara district, Maharashtra

PN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

At least eight people were killed and seven others injured when a massive explosion rocked an ordnance factory in Jawahar Nagar taluka of Bhandara district in eastern Maharashtra on Friday morning.

Of the injured, the condition of five was reported to be serious. While the cause of the mishap has not been established, rescue and relief operations were still underway at the vast complex housing the Ordnance Factory in Bhandara until late evening.

A press release issued by the National Disaster Response

Force (NDRF) earlier in the day stated that the incident took place at 10:30 am. "The incident resulted in a fire and a subsequent building collapse. Initially, 13 individuals were reported trapped at the site. The NDRF team was immediately deployed to the location and is working tirelessly to rescue those affected," the NDRF said.

The Ordnance Factory, located in the Satpura Mountain ranges in Jawahar Nagar taluka of Bhandara, manufactures single-base propellant, double-base propellant (ballistite), double-base propellant (rocket), high explosives, and their compounds.

The explosion was so intense that its sound could be heard up to seven to ten kilometers away from the accident site. Objects from the exploded factory were flung several meters away, eyewitnesses said.

The smoke from the explosion-hit factory continued to billow out for several hours and could be seen from a distance of two to three kilometers away.

Confirming the deaths and injuries in the incident, Union Minister and MP from Nagpur Nitin Gadkari described the explosion as "unfortunate". He was speaking at an event in Nagpur.

MP enforces liquor ban in holy towns

GIRISH SHARMA ■ BHOPAL

The Madhya Pradesh government has announced the closure of liquor shops in 17 holy towns across the state to preserve the spiritual atmosphere of these religiously significant locations.

These towns, home to sacred temples and attracting devotees from across the country, include Ujjain, Datia, Panna, Mandla, Multai, Mandasaur, Maihar, Omkareshwar, Maheshwar, Mandleshwar, Orchha, Chitrakoot, Amarkantak, Salkanpur, Barman Kala, Linga, Kundalpur, Bandakpur, and Barmankhurd.

Chief Minister (CM) Mohan Yadav, who hails from the religious city of Ujjain, emphasized the importance of these towns in the state's religious and cultural landscape. He highlighted their association with revered deities such as Lord Krishna and Lord Ram. Addressing the media, Yadav explained that the decision was motivated by the harmful effects of alcohol consumption on individuals and families. He stated that alcohol addiction has caused significant distress within families and that the



initiative aims to promote better governance and improve the lives of women, children, and farmers.

The CM further underscored the government's commitment to creating a better environment for the youth, stressing their role as the future of the country. By restricting

alcohol sales in areas with high religious significance, the government seeks to align these regions with their sacred identity while curbing alcohol abuse. Yadav expressed hope that the decision would contribute to improving the overall quality of life in the state.

After the State Cabinet approved the ban of liquor in 17 religious places, the Excise department would start process of closing down the existing shops at these places. The announcement also drew attention to longstanding demands for prohibition in Madhya Pradesh.

Former CM Uma Bharti and former Lok Sabha member Sadhvi Pragya Bharti have long advocated for total prohibition. During a previous government, Uma Bharti had staged protests against the sale of liquor, even pelting stones at a liquor shop. However, her agitation failed to gain momentum, leading her to revise her demand to controlled liquor sales in the state.

The previous Shivraj Singh Chouhan government had approved a new excise policy in 2023, aimed at discouraging liquor consumption, but refrained from implementing

total prohibition. Following the recent announcement by CM Mohan Yadav to ban liquor sales in 17 religious towns, Uma Bharti welcomed the move, describing it as a significant step toward achieving total prohibition in Madhya Pradesh.

Madhya Pradesh Congress Media in-charge Mukesh Nayak has criticised the state government's decision to close liquor shops in 17 holy towns, alleging it could lead to illegal activities similar to those in Gujarat. Speaking to The Pioneer, Nayak claimed that in Gujarat, BJP leaders are allegedly involved in a liquor business worth Rs 10,000 crore despite the prohibition policy. He expressed concerns that a parallel network for the illegal sale of liquor might emerge in the 17 designated religious towns in Madhya Pradesh.

Nayak further alleged that the ban could pave the way for clandestine operations, making liquor easily accessible through home delivery. "Currently, customers have to visit shops to buy liquor, but soon it might be delivered to their homes in these areas," he remarked, accusing the ruling party of exploiting the situation for profit.

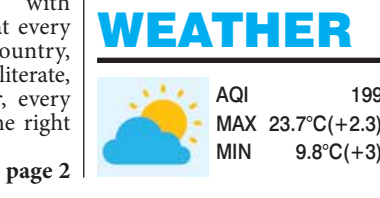
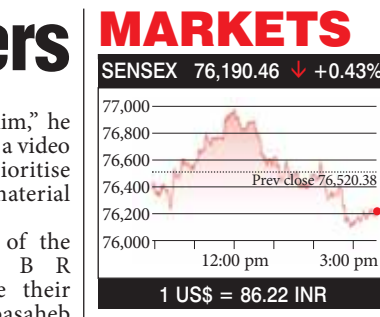
Kejriwal accuses BJP of bribing voters

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The political battle for the Delhi Assembly elections is heating up with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) accusing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of trying to sway voters by distributing gold chains, sarees, shoes, and cash while urging voters to resist these attempts.

Dubbing BJP as 'Gali galoch party' and calling the individual who distribute money as a 'threat to the democracy', Kejriwal said, "Vote for whoever you want to, but the one who is trying to buy your vote and destroy this country, don't vote for him. The one who is distributing jackets, blankets and cash to you is a traitor of the country. Take all the money from him but swear to God, never vote for him," he said, urging citizens in a video message to prioritise democracy over material offerings.

He reminded voters of the sacrifices made by B R Ambedkar to secure their right to vote. "Babasaheb Ambedkar fought with everyone and said that every person in this country, whether literate or illiterate, whether rich or poor, every person should have the right to vote," he said.



Waqf panel meet ends in protests

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Ten opposition members attending the Parliamentary panel meeting on the Waqf Amendment Bill were suspended for a day on Friday amid protests and accusations against Chairman Jagdambika Pal of steamrolling through the proceedings.

While opposition members accused Pal of reducing the proceedings to a farce and alleged that he was acting on the government's directions, the chairman slammed their conduct aimed at disrupting the meeting. He accused Trinamool Congress leader Kalyan Banerjee of hurling abuses at him and said he strove to bring the meeting to order, adjourning it twice but in vain.

BJP member Nishikant Dubey moved the motion for suspending the opposition members which was adopted by the committee. The suspended members are Banerjee and Nadeem-ul

CBI uncovers ₹350 Crore crypto scam

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has conducted search operations across seven locations after registering a case of a Rs 350 crore crypto-ponzi scam against seven individuals, officials said on Friday.

The accused were allegedly running seven separate modules based in the cities of Delhi, Hazaribag, Bathinda, Ratlam, Valsad, Pudukkottai, and Chittoargarh, collecting money from gullible investors by promising returns from cryptocurrency investments, they said. "These ponzi schemes were being promoted through multiple social media groups. An analysis of bank account transactions and cryptocurrency wallets has revealed that the illegal proceeds from these schemes were being converted into cryptocurrencies to obscure their origin," CBI's spokesperson said in a statement. It is alleged that the accused conducted transactions totaling over Rs 350 crore in these schemes, the officials said.

On Thursday, the agency carried out operations in Delhi, Jharkhand, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Rajasthan.



During the searches, the CBI seized digital virtual assets totaling approximately USD 38,414 in the cryptocurrency wallets of the accused, which have been digitally secured for investigation.

"The searches resulted in the recovery of cash amounting to Rs 34.2 lakh (approx), along with significant digital evidence, including seven mobile phones, one laptop, one tablet, three hard disks, 10 pen drives, memory cards, SIM cards, ATM cards, debit cards, email accounts, and several incriminating documents," the statement said.

The agency registered the case under Indian Penal Code Section 120-B (criminal conspiracy), Section 420 (cheating), and Section 66D of

Prices for 1 litre Amul milk packs reduced by ₹1

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF), which markets dairy products under the Amul brand, has reduced milk prices by Rs 1 per litre across India. However, the reduction in prices is only for one-litre packs.

"We have reduced the prices of one-litre packs by Rs 1 per litre across India," GCMMF managing director Jayen Mehta told PTI.

"This is to encourage consumers to buy larger packs of milk and get incentive for the same," he said.

In Delhi, the rate of Amul Gold milk has been reduced to Rs 67 from Rs 68 per litre while price of Amul Taaza will now be Rs 55 from Rs 56 per litre earlier. GCMMF's turnover increased 8 per cent to Rs 59,445 crore in the 2023-24 financial year. Mehta had earlier said that the cooperative is expecting double-digit growth in revenue during this fiscal on strong demand. GCMMF handled 310 lakh litres of milk per day on average during the last fiscal. It has a total annual milk processing capacity of around 500 lakh litres.

Delhi: Man arrested for ₹15 Crore COVID-19 vaccine scam

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of the Delhi Police has arrested a man who impersonated an officer from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and duped innocent people of over Rs 15 crore under the pretext of providing work orders for the transportation of COVID-19 vaccines during the pandemic.

According to the police on Friday, he had been absconding for nearly three years in a Rs 15 crore-fraud case. "The accused has been identified as 48-year-old Prafulla Kumar Nayak, who played a key role in duping victims by promising work orders related to COVID-19 vaccine transportation during the pandemic," the EOW statement read.

The fraudulent scheme came to light when a complaint was lodged by Sunil Kaushik, stating that he had been duped of Rs 4 crore. The fraudsters promised to arrange work orders from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for the transportation of COVID-19 vaccines across various states in 2021.

Four more victims came forward with similar complaints, all revealing the same modus operandi. The EOW registered a case under sections 420, 406, 467, 468, 471, 120B IPC, and Section 7 of the Prevention of Corruption Act. "Four additional complaints revealed a similar modus operandi, with the accused collectively duping victims of over Rs 15 crore," Additional Commissioner of Police (EOW) Amrutha Guguloth said in the statement.

Investigations revealed that in May 2021, the accused contacted the victims and took them to Nirman Bhawan, the headquarters of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, to gain



their trust. Forged work orders were issued, and trust was gained by leveraging illicit access to the government complex through a bribed ministry employee, the statement read. In exchange, the fraudsters collected Rs 15 crore from the victims.

The key accused, including the kingpin Hermenn Sabherwal, were arrested in 2022. However, Prafulla Kumar Nayak had been evading arrest until he was apprehended on January 21. Nayak played a crucial role in facilitating the entry of victims and accomplices into Nirman Bhawan by bribing ministry employees. Three government employees, including a reception officer and two Multi-Tasking Staff (MTS) members, were also arrested earlier for their involvement.

"Previously, eight other accused, including the kingpin Hermenn Sabherwal, were arrested in 2022. Ministry employees, including a reception officer and two multi-tasking staff members, had already been apprehended for their involvement," the officer said in the statement. Nayak, a resident of Pandav Nagar in Delhi and originally from Odisha, facilitated the group's entry into Nirman Bhawan.

Jail in Assam turns into organic farming success story

PTI ■ BARPETA

It might appear to be just another normal prison at first glance, but as one steps inside the Barpeta District Jail complex in Assam, it is nothing less than an agricultural hub with vast fields of multiple crops.

Located in lower Assam, the fields in the jail compound are filled with mustard, along with trees laden with fruits and vegetables, a mini bee farm, and even rare crops like nutritious apple berries.

Spread over 127 bighas (almost 42 acres), the Barpeta jail has a capacity to house 413 inmates - 368 men and 45 women. It currently has 335 inmates, including 325 men and 10 women.

"I, along with the jailer, got transferred to this prison around a year ago. At that

time, only paddy farming was done. We decided to go for multi-cropping to utilise the land throughout the year," Barpeta District Jail Superintendent Pranjal Kumar Sarma told PTI.

Thanks to the new initiatives, the jail generated a revenue of over Rs 1 lakh for the government during the April-December period last year by selling agricultural produce alone, he said.

"Apart from revenue generation, there was another reason for introducing year-long agriculture activities. The inmates are always mentally stressed due to their jail terms and for staying away from home. We tried to reduce their stress level by engaging them in productive work. They laugh and share jokes with each other while working in the fields," Sarma said.

He said all the produce is purely organic and no chemical or fertiliser is used during farming.

What makes this transformation even more special is that the prisoners are engaged in all agrarian activities within the premises, which keeps them engaged and helps them learn a new skill for the life after release from jail.

Jailer Nilotpal Kakati said multi-cropping started from April last year, after the authorities cleared the weeds from the unused barren lands and made them cultivable.

"We could utilise only 35-40 bighas of land as there is shortage of manpower. Though we have over 300 inmates, we could engage only 20-25 of them serving rigorous imprisonment due to legal restrictions. The law does not



allow the rest to work in the fields," he said.

Kakati, however, said the jail authorities are planning to expand the farming area this year by engaging a few more people, thereby increasing the produce.

Asked about the marketing, he said, "So far, we have not marketed it outside Barpeta. Local vendors come and collect the vegetables from us.

cruciferous ones, including perennial Indian favourites cauliflower and cabbages, are grown in the jail premises. Additionally, the compound houses a small fishery for inhouse consumption.

Another highlight is a small berry farm, housing around 200 trees producing several precious variants of the fruit - Apple Berry, Miss India and Thailand Berry.

Kakati also claimed that berry farming is the first of its kind in an Indian jail.

The jail authorities have recently started planting strawberries and varieties of flowers in an effort to uplift the mood of the inmates as well as employees.

"The multi-cropping farming was done as a pilot project this time. We wanted to check if the land is cultivable. As we got satisfactory results, we will try to do it in a more professional way in the next fiscal," he said.

The Barpeta civil administration has taken note of the agricultural practices in the district jail and lauded the efforts of Sarma and Kakati.

Barpeta Additional District Commissioner Jayanta Bora, who recently visited the facility, has stressed that being engaged with agriculture could inadvertently help the inmates step away from a life of crime and become honest citizens.

"Apart from generating revenue for the government, agriculture in the jail will allow the prisoners to step out of their routine and motivate them to be more productive citizens," he said.

Initially established as a makeshift jail in Barpeta town, it was relocated to its present location, just two kilometers outside the town, in 1970.



Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, left, the religious head of Kashmir, with Maulana Rehmatalullah of Bandipora waits to appear before the parliamentary panel on Waqf Amendment Bill

Haque (Trinamool Congress), Mohammad Jawed, Imran Masood and Syed Naseer Hussain (Congress), A Raja and Mohamed Abdullah (DMK), Asaduddin Owaisi (AIMIM), Mohibullah (SP) and Arvind Sawant (Shiv Sena-UBT). The suspension of the opposition members came on a day when a delegation from Jammu and Kashmir led by Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, the religious head of Kashmir, appeared before the Joint Committee on the Waqf Amendment Bill to share their concerns about the draft legislation.

Continued on page 2

Yogi launches attack on SP ahead of Milkipur by poll

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ AYODHYA

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Friday launched a blistering attack on the Samajwadi Party (SP), accusing it of glorifying mafia elements and disrespecting marginalized communities. Addressing a rally in support of BJP candidate Chandrabhanu Paswan for the Milkipur by-election, CM Yogi called for the victory of "nationalists" over those who support "Moeed Khan and his ilk."

"They mourn the deaths of mafia members and even recite 'marsiya' for them. Those who glorify someone like Moeed Khan, who disrespected a Dalit daughter, must not succeed. Milkipur deserves better," he said, urging voters to reject SP's candidate and ideology. The Chief Minister accused SP leaders of shielding criminals under the guise of their party flag. "SP MPs from Ayodhya openly support Moeed Khan and celebrate him as a hero. This reflects their true character—one that prioritizes criminals over the safety and dignity of our daughters," he said. He cited past incidents,



including the SP's opposition to renaming a medical college in Kannauj after Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, as evidence of their disregard for the marginalized. "Under SP rule, Dalit land was encroached upon, and the voices of the poor were suppressed. In contrast, our government stands for justice for the poor and Dalits, not for criminals or mafias," he asserted. Highlighting the inclusivity of the ongoing Mahakumbh 2025, CM Yogi described it as a testament to India's unity. "Over 10 crore devotees have taken a holy dip at the Triveni Sangam in just 10 days. By the end of the event, we expect 45 crore devotees—more than the combined populations of

transforming Ayodhya into India's first solar city. He credited Prime Minister Narendra Modi for elevating Ayodhya's global significance, stating that "the SP would have erased Ayodhya's name if given a chance."

He contrasted his government's achievements with SP's alleged negligence, pointing out that during SP rule, festivals often led to riots and women felt unsafe. "Under the SP, criminals held positions of power. Today, under BJP rule, law and order have improved, and UP Police are being praised nationwide," he said, citing a recent example of a police inspector who sacrificed his life during an encounter. CM Yogi reiterated the BJP's commitment to nationalism over caste and family politics. "For BJP workers, the country comes first. Unlike the SP, we do not support criminals or mafias. We believe in justice and progress for all," he said. He urged voters in Milkipur to ensure its development reaches the same heights as Ayodhya. "We must reject the mindset of slavery promoted by the SP and embrace a vision rooted in faith, unity, and nationalism. Milkipur deserves to be a model of progress," he concluded.



Colonel Apurva Bhatnagar Receives VSM on Army Day

PNS ■ PUNE

The Training Regiment Commander of Military Training Regiment at Madgaon, Colonel Apurva Bhatnagar was awarded the prestigious VSM (Vishisht Seva Medal) on the occasion of Army Day parade on January 15 for his exceptional service as Electronic Warfare

Advisor to the Indian Army at Ladakh. Col Bhatnagar who is a distinguished officer of the Indian Army Corps of Signals presently, has had a remarkable career by his exceptional leadership and strategic brilliance and commanded the Electronic Warfare Battalion initially at the Pakistan border in

Rajasthan and later at the China and Pakistan border in Ladakh. According to a Press note, in Ladakh, Col Bhatnagar drew upon his experience during the Galwan standoff to plan and deploy Electronic Warfare detachments that revealed critical data of the enemy that is secret and confidential in nature.

Delhi seizes liquor worth ₹50 Lakh ahead of polls

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi government's excise department has seized nearly 20,000 bottles of illicit liquor worth Rs 50 lakh over the past fortnight, since the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) for the Assembly polls came into force. The total value of the seizures, including 15,376 liters of illicit alcohol (both Indian-made foreign liquor or IMFL and country liquor) and 32 vehicles, stands at around Rs 1.5 crore, according to an official from the excise department. So far, 52 cases have been registered in connection with the seized illicit liquor. The liquor seized by the excise department after the imposition of the MCC accounts for about 25 percent of the total seizures, including those by the Delhi Police, the official said. Teams of the Excise Intelligence Bureau (EIB) have been working tirelessly to gather intelligence on liquor smuggled, mostly from neighboring Haryana, and to apprehend the offenders, said a senior excise department officer. Voting for the 70-member Delhi Assembly is scheduled for February 5. The counting of votes will take place on February 8, and the excise department has declared both days as "dry days" in the city. The MCC came into effect with the announcement of the poll dates on January 7. The EIB teams intercepted two vehicles from Burari and Mahipalpur on Thursday night, seizing a total of 5,000 bottles containing 3,600 liters of smuggled liquor worth Rs 12 lakh, the officer said. In the first operation, an excise team chased a truck carrying 3,036 liquor bottles for 14 km after it entered Delhi through GT Karnal Road and intercepted it in Burari, north Delhi, the officials said. A total of 253 cases of liquor (for sale in Haryana only) were seized from the truck, they added. In another operation, a mini-truck was intercepted in Mahipalpur, and 151 cases with 1,812 bottles containing 1,317 liters of liquor were seized, the officials said.

Delhi HC rejects special sitting for CAG reports

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Friday criticized the AAP government for an "inordinate delay" in tabling the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports in the state assembly but declined to order a special sitting of the Delhi Assembly, calling it "impractical" just days before elections. In a 31-page judgment, Justice Sachin Datta emphasized that the audit reports was a mandatory constitutional

requirement and directed that once the Legislative Assembly is constituted and summoned after the upcoming elections, the Delhi government must take the necessary steps to table the CAG reports as soon as possible. "It is quite evident that there has been an inordinate delay on the part of the respondents/Government of NCT of Delhi in taking requisite steps to lay the CAG reports before the Legislative Assembly," the court said. "...It has been pointed out that the term of the current

Legislative Assembly is about to expire, and elections for electing the next Legislative Assembly are just a few days away. In such a situation, it would be impracticable to hold a special sitting of the assembly. This is also due to the fact that once the CAG reports are tabled in the House, they must be examined and scrutinized by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), as stipulated under Rule 192 of the Rules of Procedure. Given that the Legislative Assembly is nearing the end of its current term, the examination and scrutiny by the PAC will now take place only after the newly elected assembly (pursuant to the upcoming elections) is reconvened," the order read. The court noted an "inordinate delay" by the AAP government in tabling the CAG reports.

Man claiming to be AAP MLA's son fined by Delhi Police

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police has made a general diary (GD) entry against two individuals, including one who claimed to be the son of AAP MLA Amanatullah Khan, for misbehaving with officers and riding a motorcycle with a modified silencer. The incident occurred during a security patrol in Okhla ahead of Republic Day. The individuals were fined approximately Rs 20,000 for violating multiple sections of the Motor Vehicle Act. According to the police, two individuals were seen riding a motorcycle recklessly with a modified silencer, causing excessive noise and following an irregular path. Upon police intervention, one of them

claimed to be the son of AAP MLA Amanatullah Khan, implying that the police were targeting him because of his father's political position. The Delhi Police reported that both individuals refused to present their driving licenses or identification documents, stating it was unnecessary. One of them contacted Amanatullah Khan, who then spoke with the Station House Officer (SHO). However, the individuals left without providing their personal details. Subsequently, the police filed a case, issued a challan, and seized their motorcycle under various legal provisions. The police stated, "During a routine patrol, two individuals were spotted riding a bullet motorcycle. They were

coming from the wrong side and making loud noises with the modified silencer. The motorcycle was being ridden in a zigzag manner. The police apprehended them, and one individual claimed to be the son of AAP MLA Amanatullah Khan. He misbehaved with the officers, accusing them of targeting him because of his father's position. "When the police requested their driving licenses and IDs, they refused. One of the individuals called Amanatullah Khan and had him speak to the SHO. Later, the individuals left without disclosing their names or addresses. The ASI brought their motorcycle to the police station. A case has been registered, and a challan has

been issued. The motorcycle has been impounded under several legal provisions," they added. According to the diary report, the two men were riding the motorcycle erratically, making loud noises with the modified silencer. When confronted by the police, one of them claimed to be the son of AAP MLA Amanatullah Khan and accused the officers of targeting him because of his father. They also refused to present their driving licenses and identification, as noted in the GD entry. "One of them even called Amanatullah Khan, who spoke to the SHO. Despite this, they left without disclosing their names and addresses," the GD registered by the police states.

CBI uncovers ₹350 Crore crypto scam

From page 1

The probe has uncovered multiple bank accounts and Virtual Digital Asset (VDA) wallets with cryptocurrency exchanges, including CoinDCX, WazirX, Zebpay, and BitBns, held by the accused. "Over two years, these accounts and wallets witnessed transactions exceeding Rs 350 crore. The victims were allegedly defrauded by the accused under various pretenses, such as online loans, online lucky orders, UPI frauds, and internet banking scams," the CBI said. Last year, the CBI uncovered a cyber-enabled fraud syndicate originating in Delhi-NCR, which allegedly defrauded foreign nationals from the US, Canada, and other countries to the tune of Rs 260 crore through a fake call center. The syndicate, led by accused Tushar Kharbanda, a Noida resident, employed advanced techniques to commit cybercrime and launder money by converting bitcoin into US dollars and vice versa. The agency filed a chargesheet against three accused-

Kharbanda, Gaurav Malik, and Ankit Jain—under various sections of the IPC and the Information Technology Act. "The accused were involved in running a fraudulent call center in Delhi and Noida that targeted elderly citizens in the US and Canada," the CBI said. The CBI had also filed a case last year against late Amit Bhardwaj and his brother Ajay Bhardwaj for running an alleged Ponzi scheme involving bitcoins worth up to Rs 6,600 crore in 2017. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) had earlier taken up the investigation into the money laundering angle after the police in Maharashtra and Delhi filed first information reports (FIRs) against Variable Tech Pvt Ltd and individuals Amit Bhardwaj, Ajay Bhardwaj, Vivek Bhardwaj, Simpy Bhardwaj, and Mahender Bhardwaj—all members of the same family. The FIRs also named several multi-level marketing agents who were alleged to have collected a massive amount of money in the form of bitcoins (worth Rs 6,600 crore in 2017) from the public, with the "false promise" of a 10 percent monthly return in bitcoins.

Prices for 1 litre Amul milk packs reduced by ₹1

From page 1

GCMMF is the world's largest farmer-owned dairy cooperative having 36 lakh farmers across 18,600 villages of Gujarat and its 18 member unions procure 300 lakh litres of milk per day. It also ranks 8th among the top 20 dairy companies in the world in terms of milk processing, as per the International Farm Comparison Network (IFCN). Besides the domestic market, GCMMF is exporting dairy products to about 50 countries. Last year, GCMMF entered the US market with the launch of four variants of fresh milk to cater to the Indian diaspora and Asian population.

Congress demands details on Maharashtra Davos deals

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Seeking to puncture the euphoria surrounding the record investments worth Rs 15.75 lakh crore received by Maharashtra at the 54th World Economic Forum (WEF) meet in Davos, the Opposition Congress on Friday called for details about the agreements signed and demanded that the BJP-led MahaYuti government release a white paper on the investments and jobs generated from previous Davos visits. A day after Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis proudly announced that the state had signed 54 MoUs with investments worth Rs 15.75 lakh crore in Davos, State Congress President Nana Patole said: "While significant

investments in the state are welcome, the public has a right to know the specifics of these agreements and the reality behind them." "Similar grand announcements have been made in the past as well. It is in this context that the MahaYuti government should release a white paper on the investments and jobs generated from previous Davos visits," Patole added. Speaking to the media, Patole explained that out of the 61 agreements signed in Davos, 10 involved foreign groups, while the remaining 51 were based in India, with 43 of them coming from Mumbai and Pune. "Among these, a Rs 1,500-crore deal was signed between CIDCO and BookMyShow, despite the latter facing a

Building collapse scare grips Kolkata

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The proverbial "joy" is steadily fading away from the faces of lower and middle-class families living in and around the City of Joy as reports of tilting low-budget high-rises continue to trickle in from Kolkata and beyond. This, even as the political powers that be indulge in a blame game. On Thursday, more reports emerged of inadequately built "dignified slums" (read: mushrooming high-rises) leaning precariously over adjacent structures, this time in the Tangra and Topsia areas of Kolkata. This led the political opposition to blame the multi-billion builder-TMC-police nexus for the anomaly. Even as the Building Department of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) issued notices to the occupants of the tilting buildings to vacate their

apartments, the owners found themselves in a fix. "Where do we go? We have invested everything... now we are paying loan installments, and the KMC is asking us to vacate the house... so where do we go?" said Ratna, an occupant of a high-rise in Tangra in east-central Kolkata. Another resident of Tangra said, "We will die in this building but will not move out... what was the KMC doing? Who gave the completion certificate to the building? We purchased the building from the promoter... but how could he manage a sanctioned plan in a world-class city like Kolkata? If they drive me out, then I will commit suicide." A resident of Baghajatin lamented, "I have invested my whole life's earnings to purchase this small flat, and now they are asking me to go away... where will we go?"

Does the government have no responsibility? Why has no one been arrested till now when reports of tilting houses are coming from so many places?" Residents at Ward number 75 in Kidderpore said they were living in fear. "We have also purchased a new property... if this building too tilts, where shall we go?" Indeed, palpable panic gripped Kolkata as multi-storied buildings continued to tilt. Located on Christopher Road in Ward 58, one of the two buildings that tilted on Wednesday has at least two illegally constructed floors, locals said, blaming the builder and the local municipal councilor, who could not be contacted. A senior Building Department official, requesting anonymity, said, "The cut money goes from down to the top... even beyond the Mayor level... we

ordnance factory blast, eight killed

From page 1

"A sad incident has occurred. At the ordnance factory in Bhandara, an explosion took place, causing the death of eight people and injuring seven others. This is the early report. I ask everyone to stand for a minute to honor them, and then we will continue with the program," he said. Expressing his grief over the casualties in the ordnance factory blast, Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh wrote on the micro-blogging site "X": "Deeply saddened to know about the blast at the Ordnance Factory at Bhandara, Maharashtra. My condolences to the bereaved families. Praying for the speedy recovery of the injured. The rescue teams are deployed at the site. All efforts

are being made to provide assistance to those who are affected." Giving details of the incident, Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis - who is away at the 54th World Economic Forum (WEF) meet in Davos - wrote on "X" earlier in the day: "There is news of an incident where 13-14 workers are trapped due to a roof collapse caused by an explosion at the ordnance factory in Bhandara. Five workers have been safely rescued. The Bhandara Collector and SP are at the site, ensuring immediate rescue measures and all required support. SDRF and Nagpur Municipal Corporation teams are deployed for the rescue operation." "District administration is

also coordinating with multiple teams. Medical assistance teams are ready too. As per the info received till now, one worker unfortunately lost his life. My condolences to his family. We stand with the family in this tough time. I pray for the speedy recovery of the injured," Fadnavis added. Bhandara District Collector Dr Sanjay Kolte and Superintendent of Police Noorul Hasan are camping at the site. Teams from Bhandara and Nagpur, along with specialized teams from NDRF and State Disaster Response Force (SDRF), are carrying out the rescue and relief operations. The NDRF personnel are utilising specialised equipment to carry out the rescue operation.

Waqf panel meet ends in protests

From page 1

The meeting of the Committee began on a stormy note with the opposition members accusing the chairman of steamrolling through the proceedings and changing the agenda of the meeting at will. The 10 opposition members were suspended as protests and unruly scenes continued at the meeting of the Committee, which had re-convened after a brief adjournment. "After our meeting on January 21, the chairman informed the members that the next meeting will be held on January 24-25. Opposition members protested and A Raja also wrote a letter requesting to

schedule the meeting after January 30 or 31. But the chairman did not listen to us," Banerjee said. He said the agenda of Friday's meeting was changed late night on Thursday and intimidated members close to midnight. "The chairman is treating opposition members as domestic helps and ordering them around," Banerjee said, and alleged that the proceedings were being rushed through with an eye on the Delhi assembly elections. The Trinamool Congress leader said Pal received several phone calls as the meeting was in progress and alleged that he was taking orders from the government in conduct of the proceedings.

However, BJP member Aparajita Sarangi claimed the conduct of opposition members was "disgusting" as they were continuously creating ruckus during the meeting and using unparliamentary language against Pal. Official sources said the committee will be adopting its final report on January 29. The Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, was referred to the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) on August 8, 2024 following its introduction in the Lok Sabha by Union Minority Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju. The bill aims to amend the Waqf Act, 1995, to address issues and challenges in regulating and managing Waqf properties.

Kejriwal accuses BJP of bribing voter

From page 1

"The struggle that Babasaheb did for you, and fought with the rest of the people to get you the vote, doesn't let that vote be sold in a sari or a blanket for 1100 rupees," the AAP Convenor added. "If our votes can be purchased, then our democracy will end. There will only be the rule of the wealthy. Vote for anyone but not for those distributing money," he said. Hitting out at the BJP, Kejriwal said, "The money that is being distributed is not from the government's money. It is being distributed by a few politicians of 'Gali Galoch

Party'. Where did they get this money from? This is their corruption money, which they have looted the country in the wrong way and earned it. All the money that they are distributing, all the goods that they are distributing, take it all but do not vote for them." As AAP battles to retain its stronghold for a third consecutive term, the BJP is aiming for a comeback after 25 years. Kejriwal also addressed concerns about voter intimidation, assuring the public that their votes remain confidential. Voting for the elections is slated to be held on February 5 and the election results will be declared on February 8.

Security Forces arrest 14 Maoists in Bijapur

STAFF REPORTER ■
BIJAPUR

In a major success for the ongoing anti-Maoist operations, a joint team of the Bijapur District Reserve Guard (DRG), District Police Force, CoBRA Battalion, and the CRPF apprehended 14 hardcore Maoists from the forests of Mallampet and Nadpalli, police officials said.

The operation targeted Maoist strongholds in forests of Tekmetla, Nadpalli, and Mallampet regions. Among the 14 arrested, 8 Maoists carried a cumulative bounty of Rs 36 lakh on their heads.

The arrested Maoists are suspected to have been involved in various violent incidents and acts of sabotage in Bijapur district.

The arrested Maoists are implicated in multiple incidents in the Usur police station area, including planting spikes in the Tekmetla forest and injuring two soldiers on November 30, 2022.



On June 9, 2024, they planted a pressure IED in the Nadpalli forest, which seriously injured a woman collecting Mahua.

On January 6 this year, these Maoists attempted to target a police patrol by planting an IED on the Usoor-Nadpalli road which was

successfully neutralised by the CRPF's Bomb Disposal (BD) squad.

After being taken into custody at the Usur Police Station, the Maoists were presented before the Chief Court in Bijapur. Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP) Mayank Gurjar

confirmed that all the accused have been remanded to judicial custody.

Just three days ago 16 Maoists were killed in a gunfight with the security forces in a joint operation launched by Odisha and Chhattisgarh police in Gariaband district.

Just three days ago 16 Maoists were killed in a gunfight with the security forces in a joint operation launched by Odisha and Chhattisgarh police in Gariaband district.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah has said time and again that the central government is committed to free the country of Maoism by March 31, 2026.

Paddy procurement crosses last year's mark

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

Paddy procurement in Chhattisgarh has crossed last year's mark of 144.92 lakh metric tonnes, an official statement said on Friday.

Food department officials said that over 145 lakh metric tonnes of paddy have been procured so far for the Kharif year 2024-25.

A total of 25.13 lakh farmers have sold their paddy. In return, over Rs 29,599 crore has been paid to them through the bank linking system.

Millers have lifted 87 lakh metric tonnes of paddy, they said.

Chhattisgarh aims to procure 160 lakh tonnes of



paddy this season and is paying the highest support price of Rs 3,100 per quintal.

The procurement began on November 14, 2024 and will conclude on January 31. The total registered paddy growers this year are

27.78 lakhs, including 1.59 lakh new registered farmers. Procurement is underway at 2,739 procurement centres across the state. Micro ATMs have been arranged in all the 2058 cooperative societies.

Budget session from Feb 24



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

The budget session of Chhattisgarh legislative assembly will begin from February 24, it was announced on Friday. The budget session of the assembly will be concluded on March 21, an official statement said. The session will have 17 sittings. The session will begin with the Chhattisgarh Governor's address besides financial and government works will be executed during the session.

EC to felicitate polling staff today

To mark National Voters' Day

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

The Election Commission in Chhattisgarh will felicitate polling staff on Saturday for their exemplary work in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

The event will be held at the Indira Gandhi Agricultural University in Raipur. It will mark National Voters' Day, the foundation day of the Election Commission of India. State Election Commissioner Ajay Singh will be present.

Chief Electoral Officer Reena Babasaheb Kangale details about the officers and employees to be honoured.



Raigarh Collector Kartikeya Goel will be honoured as the best District

Election Officer for achieving the highest voter turnout of 81.66 percent, Dantewada and Durg Collectors Mayank Chaturvedi and Richa Prakash Chaudhary for increasing the voter turnouts by 10.39 and 2.48 percent respectively, and Raipur Collector Gaurav Kumar Singh will receive a special award for excellent training of polling parties.

Rajnandgaon Chief

Voters will be administered an oath to exercise their franchise in all elections.

Election Officer Suruchi Singh will be felicitated for organising quality sweep activities, and District Panchayat Chief Executive Officer of Mungeli Prabhakar Pandey for inspiring migrant labourers to vote.

On this occasion, voters will be administered an oath to exercise their franchise in all elections. Oath-taking ceremonies will be held in all government offices and educational institutions of the state.

Punjab National Bank
पंजाब नेशनल बैंक

Circle Office **SASTRA, Naya Raipur**
PH.No. (0771)2210417/19

POSSESSION NOTICE (For Immovable Properties)

Whereas, the undersigned being the Authorized Officer of the Punjab National Bank under the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 and in exercise of Powers conferred under Sub-Section (12) of Section 13 read with rule 9 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002, issued Demand Notices as below mentioned calling upon the Borrower(s) & Guarantor(s) to repay the amount mentioned in the notices and interest thereon within 60 days from the date of the receipt of the said notices. The borrowers having failed to repay the amount mentioned in the notices and interest thereon within the time specified in the notices, the undersigned has taken possession of the properties described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him/her under sub-section (4) of section 13 of the Act read with rule 9 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules 2002 said rules on this date mentioned below. The borrowers & guarantors in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the properties and any dealings with the properties will be subject to the charge of Punjab National Bank for amount mentioned below and interest thereon. The borrower's and/or guarantor's attention is invited to provisions of sub-section (8) of section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available, to redeem the secured assets.

Sr. No.	Name & Add. of the Borrower(s), Guarantor(s) & Branch Name	1) Date of Demand Notice & 2) Date of Possession	Outstanding Amount	Description of Immovable Properties
1	Borrower - M/s Arg Estate India Private Limited, Through its Directors - Mr. Ankit Gumber & Mr. Ravish Gumber, Guarantors - Mr. Vikas Yadav, Mr. Dinesh Chandani & Mr. Dharmendra Rampuriya, Mortgagees - M/s Amarkant Developers (India) Pvt. Ltd. Through its Director Mr. Ankit Gumber & M/s Vinayak Enterprises, Through its Partners - Mr. Vikas Yadav and Mr. Dinesh Chandani. Branch - Raipur, Jaistambh Chowk-039900	(1) 15.10.2024 (2) 20.01.2025	Rs. 3,51,43,605.64 + Int. & Other Charges w.e.f. 15.10.2024	Property No. 1) Land bearing Kharsa No. 1154/1, 1154/2, 1154/3, 1155/1, 1156, 1157/1, 1182, 1186/5, 1183/1 & 1183/2 situated at Mauja - Pandari, PH No. 47, RNM Sakri, Tehsil & Development Circle Takhatpur, Gram Panchayat - Pandari, District - Bilaspur (CG) having area 2.077 hect. Or 5.13 acre in the name of M/s Amarkant Developers (India) Pvt. Ltd. Through its Director Mr. Ankit Gumber. Bounded: North- Land of Sitaram, South- Land of M.A. Siddique & Grass Land, East- Govt. Land, West- Land of Motilal & Kanwal Prasad. Property No. 2) Land bearing Plot No. 124, khasra number 346 (Part), Mauza Kududand, PH No. 21, Nehru Nagar ward number 03, RNM - Bilaspur, Development Circle - Bilha, Tehsil & District Bilaspur (CG) having area 4000 Sqft or 71.747sqmtr in the name of M/s Vinayak Enterprises through its partners Mr. Vikas Yadav & Mr. Dinesh Chandani. Bounded: North- House of Ashok Verma, South- Road, East- 40ft Colony Road, West- Plot No. 125
2	Borrower - M/s Crown Distilleries Pvt. Ltd. Through its Directors - Mr. Ankit Gumber, Mr. Ravish Gumber, Mr. Rajendra Singh Gumber, Mr. Mahendra Singh Gumber, Mr. Nitin Gumber & Guarantors - Mr. Ravish Gumber, Branch - Raipur, Jaistambh Chowk-039900	(1) 01.08.2024 (2) 20.01.2025	Rs. 2,66,93,312.52 + Int. & Other Charges w.e.f. 01.08.2024	Leasehold property (CSIDC land) bearing plot no. 172 & 53 situated at village Siltara, Industrial Area Siltara, Tehsil & District - Raipur (C.G.) having area 19200 sqmtr. or 206592 sqft. or 4.74 acres in the name of M/s Crown Distilleries Pvt. Ltd. Bounded: North- Amenities, South- Plot No. 71 & 54, East- 24M wide Road, West- 60M wide Road.

Date : 25.01.2025, Place: Raipur Authorised Officer, Punjab National Bank

AXIS BANK
Address Retail Asset Centre Chawla Chamber: 2nd Floor opp. New Bus Stand Jeevan Bima Marg Pandri, Raipur, Chhattisgarh
Publication of Notice Regarding Possession of Property u/s 13(4) of SARFAESI Act 2002
RAC PANDRI Branch

Notice is hereby given under the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 (54 of 2002) and in exercise of powers conferred under section 13 (12) read with rule 9 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002, a demand notice was issued on the dates mentioned against each account and stated hereinafter calling upon them to repay the amount within 60 days from the date of receipt of said notice. The Borrower having failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the Borrower and the public in general that the undersigned has taken possession of the property described herein below in exercise of power conferred on him/her under section 13(4) of the said Act read with Rule 9 of the said Act on the dates mentioned against each account.

The Borrower in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property and any dealings with the property will be subject to the charge of the AXIS BANK LTD. for an amount and interest thereon.

The borrowers attention is invited to provisions of Sub-section (8) of Section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available to redeem the secured assets.

Name of Borrower/ Guarantor/Address	Description of Immovable Property	Date of Demand Notice	NPA DATE	Date of Possession	Amount Outstanding
1. MR. ARUN KUMAR SHARMA 2. MRS. JYOTI SHARMA	All That Piece And Parcel Of The Property Situated At Layout Plot No.53, Kh.No. 367 Of Part Mouja Gatauni, Ph.No. 01/21, RNM Bilaspur, District - Bilaspur (Cg) North- Plot No. 54, South- Plot No. 52, East- Plot No.41, West- Road.	27-09-2023	08-11-2023	21-01-2025	Rs. 3,28,096/-
1. PARUL PATEL 2. ANIL KUMAR SINGH	All That Piece And Parcel Of The Property Situated At Ph.No. 26/43, Mouja- Ameri, Kh.No. 6/28, Layout Plot No. 43, RNM- Sakri, Block & Tehsil- Takhatpur, District- Bilaspur (C.G.) North- 9 of the said Act on the dates mentioned against each account. South- Building Of Kanwar Community, East- Plot No.44, West- Plot No.42.	05-09-2024	09-04-2024	21-01-2025	Rs. 13,00,044/-

Date: 25-01-2025, Place: Bilaspur Authorised Officer, (Axis Bank Ltd)

PUBLIC NOTICE

I, Promoter/Director Reebhuraj Agrawal, am surrendering/cancelling the project "Ashoka Kohinoor Phase-2" registered with Chhattisgarh RERA, Registration Number PCGRERA220618000273, due to personal reasons. If any booking has been done in this project by any person/institution etc., please submit your claim. The said claim along with the details should also be sent to Chhattisgarh RERA's email id - registrar.rera.cg@gov.in within 15 days and the claim details should be sent to the Registrar, Chhattisgarh RERA Office, Shastri Chowk, Raipur 492001."

Reebhuraj Agrawal
(Promoter/Director)
Aarti Infrastructure & Buildcon Limited

Bank of Baroda
Regional Office, Jeevan Prakash, I.L.C. Building, Pandri, Raipur (C.G.), PH: 0771 - 4222611, 4222612
E-mail: recovery.raipur@bankofbaroda.com

POSSESSION NOTICE

(As per Appendix IV read with rule 8(1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002) whereas, the undersigned being the Authorized Officer of the Bank of Baroda under the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 and in exercise of powers conferred under section 13(2) read with Rule 9 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 issued a Demand Notice to the following borrowers / guarantors calling upon the Borrowers to repay the amount mentioned in the respective notices within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notice. Under the mentioned Borrower / Guarantor having failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the Borrowers/Guarantors and the Public in general that the undersigned has taken possession of the property described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him under sub-section (4) of section 13 of the Act read with Rule 8 and under section 14 of the Act of the Security Interest Enforcement Rules, 2002.

S. No.	Branch Name / Ph.No.	Name of Borrower / Guarantor	Description of Property	Demand Notice Date, Amount & Symbolic / Physical Possession Date
01	Geetanjali Nagar Branch Avanti Vihar Raipur 9109993985	Mr. Samuel Prakash Masih S/o Mr. Sant Kumar Masih R/O- H No. LIG - 51, Deen dayal Awaz Yojna Housing Board Colony Mouza-Mungi, Kh.No. 66/1 Part, P.H. No. - 13, R.N.M.- Mandir Hasaud, Tehsil- Arang, District - Raipur, C.G. admeasuring area - 899.75 Sq ft. in the name of Mr. Samuel Prakash Masih S/o Mr. Sant Kumar Masih. Bounded: As per Deed : North: LIG - 42, South: ROAD, East: LIG - 50, West: LIG - 52.	All that part and parcel of the property consisting of Equitable Mortgage of diverted house situated at H. No. LIG - 51, Deen dayal Awaz Yojna Housing Board Colony Mouza-Mungi, Kh.No. 66/1 Part, P.H. No. - 13, R.N.M.- Mandir Hasaud, Tehsil- Arang, District - Raipur, C.G. admeasuring area - 899.75 Sq ft. in the name of Mr. Samuel Prakash Masih S/o Mr. Sant Kumar Masih. Bounded: As per Deed : North: LIG - 42, South: ROAD, East: LIG - 50, West: LIG - 52.	14.06.2024 Rs. 12,33,682.00 + interest 23.01.2025 Symbolic Possession
02	Serikhedi Branch Raipur 7024101865	Mr. Anoop Kumar Singh S/o Mr. Krishna Govind Singh (Borrower) and Mrs. Ruchi Verma W/o Mr. Anoop Kumar Singh (Co-Borrower), Prop. Kanha Agency, Opp. Dewangan Mandir, Kanha Agency, Gandhi Nagar, Murrabhatti, Gudhyari Raipur, Chhattisgarh	Equitable Mortgage of House property situated at bearing Kh. No. - 42/1(part) after online Bhuyian mutation Kh.No. changed to 42/20, Plot No. K- 06, Area - 827 SQFT, Bhurkoni, Wasitk Park Avenue, PH No. - 13, RIC Dharsiva- 1, Tehsil and Distt. - Raipur, C. G. - 492001 belonging to Mrs. Ruchi Verma W/o Mr. Anoop Kumar Singh. Boundaries : East - Plot No. K 11, West - Road, South - Plot No. K 07, North - Plot No. K 05.	05.10.2024 Rs. 7,50,139.00 + interest 22.01.2025 Symbolic Possession

The Borrowers / Guarantors / Mortgagees in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the above mentioned property and any dealings with the property/ies will be subject to the charge of Bank of Baroda for above mentioned amount interest and other charges thereon. The Borrower's attention is invited to provision of sub-section (8) of section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available, to redeem the secured assets.

Date: 25.01.2025, Place: Raipur, Chhattisgarh Authorised Officer, Bank of Baroda

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Illegal compensation to land owners: SC appoints SIT to probe Noida functioning

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Dissatisfied with a UP government-appointed panel probing the issue of illegal compensation to land owners paid by Noida officials, the Supreme Court has appointed an SIT to look into it. A bench of Justices Surya Kant and N Kottiswar Singh ruled while hearing the anticipatory bail pleas of the legal advisor and one of the law officers of Noida who were accused of corruption. It said the allegations related to the release of huge amounts of compensation in favour of some landowners, who were allegedly not entitled to seek such a higher compensation for their acquired land. The top court constituted the special investigation team (SIT) comprising IPS officer and Additional General of Police, Lucknow zone S B Shiradkar, Inspector General CBCID Modak Rajesh D Rao and Hemant Kutiyal, Commandant



of UP Special Range Security Battalion. "The special investigation team shall, inter alia, look into the issues (i) whether the quantum of compensation paid to the land owners was higher than they are entitled to in terms of the judgments passed by the courts from time to time; (ii) if so, who were the officers/officials responsible for such exorbitant payment; (iii) whether there was any collusion or con-

nivance between the beneficiaries and officers/officials of Noida; and (iv) whether the overall functioning of Noida lacks transparency, fairness and commitment to the cause of public interest," it said on January 23. Directing the SIT to file its report in a sealed cover within two months, the bench said the team was free to look into any other allied issue during the investigation. The bench however pro-

hibited the beneficiaries, farmers and landowners, who were paid the extra compensation from any coercive or penal action without its permission. It observed on September 14, 2023, when the matter was heard, it was learnt that the FIR in the case was not a solitary instance of alleged excess payment of compensation to the land owners but there were numerous instances of such payments, prima facie, for

extraneous considerations and on quid pro quo basis. "It was consequently desired that an independent agency should hold a deeper probe into the functioning of Noida as a statutory authority," the bench noted. On October 5, 2023, the state government informed the top court that it had constituted a fact-finding committee comprising three officers, including the additional director general of police, Meerut Zone, to examine the cases where Noida might have paid illegal compensation in collusion and connivance with the officers of the authority and the beneficiaries. It said, "Keeping in view the limited mandate given to that committee and the manner in which the proceedings were conducted, we were not satisfied with its outcome, especially when it was brought to our notice on November 22, 2023 that under the garb of investigation, the committee was trying to question the grant of higher compensation to the landowners under the court orders."

Defence Ministry unveils new system to boost reconnaissance capabilities

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Friday here flagged-off 'SANJAY' - The Battlefield Surveillance System (BSS). It is an automated system which integrates the inputs from all ground and aerial battlefield sensors, processing them to confirm their veracity, preventing duplication and fusing them to produce a Common Surveillance Picture of the battlefield over secured Army Data Network and Satellite Communication Network. These systems will be inducted to all operational Brigades, Divisions and Corps of the Indian Army in three phases from March to October. This system has been developed under the Buy (Indian) category at a cost of Rs 2,402 crore. This system will enhance battlefield transparency and transform the future battlefield through a Centralised Web Application which will provide inputs to Command and Army Headquarters, and the Indian Army Decision Support



System. The BSS is equipped with state-of-the-art sensors and cutting-edge analytics. It will monitor the vast land borders, prevent intrusions, assess situations with unparalleled accuracy and prove to be a force multiplier in Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance. This would enable commanders to operate in both conventional and sub-conventional operations in a Network Centric Environment. Its induction will be an extraordinary leap towards data and network centricity in the Indian Army. SANJAY has been indigenously and jointly developed by the

Indian Army and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) creating a conducive ecosystem towards achieving 'Aatmanirbharta' as a follow up to the Indian Army's 'Year of Technology Absorption'. Minister of state for defence Sanjay Seth, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan, Chief of the Army Staff General Upendra Dwivedi, Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh, Secretary (Defence Production) Sanjeev Kumar, Chairman & Managing Director, BEL Manoj Jain and other senior officials of defence ministry and BEL were present on the during the flagging-off ceremony.

CEC Rajiv Kumar slams social media platforms

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Chief Election Commissioner (CCE) Rajiv Kumar on Friday lamented that social media platforms were not blocking or at least labelling easily detectable fakes and leaving it to poll bodies to engage fact checkers to rescue themselves. "Business interest appears to be at work here. It is like first spreading the disease and then selling medicines. The casualty is a fair election process and purity of democracy," he said. Delivering his valedictory speech on the conclusion of an international conference of election management bodies here, Kumar said social media companies need



to introspect before it is "too late". "Let the social media platforms, which have been instrumental in providing a critical space for free expression, especially to voices not heard, not be clouded by the shadows of fake, unverified

and misleading narratives, disruptive by design," he said. The CEC was of the view that it is in the interest of social media platforms that fake clutter is detected and blocked before it is too late. "Do not help forces disrupt-

ing democracies and thereby freedom of speech, which is the basic tenet of intermediaries as well," he cautioned. He said election management bodies must devise and adopt a framework to manage these challenges. As technologies evolve, Kumar noted, artificial intelligence (AI) will play a critical role. AI can help poll bodies refine voter rolls, detect irregularities, and manage polling logistics more effectively, he said. "It can help in optimising resource allocation and fostering greater efficiency. However, these advancements come with challenges that demand vigilance, particularly as we strive to balance innovation with inclusivity, facts with fake," he pointed out.

Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Goa among top-performing states in fiscal health index

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mineral-rich Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Goa and Jharkhand have emerged as top-performing 'achievers' among the states listed in NITI Aayog's first Fiscal Health Index (FHI) report released on Friday. The report titled 'Fiscal Health Index 2025' ranked states for 2022-23, covered 18 major states that drive the Indian economy in terms of their contribution to India's GDP, demography, total public expenditure, revenues, and overall fiscal stability. According to the report, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, and Kerala were worst-performing states in Fiscal

Health Index (FHI), each focusing significant fiscal challenges, and listed under 'aspirational' category. The report which aims to evolve an understanding of the fiscal health of states in the country has listed Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka under 'front-runners' category. Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Rajasthan and Haryana were classified as performers. As per report, released by Chairman of 16th Finance Commission Arvind Panagariya, Odisha excelled in fiscal health with the highest overall index score of 67.8. Referring to top five achiever states, the Aayog said these

states have higher capital outlay of up to 4 per cent of GSDP, effective mobilization of non-tax revenue, are revenue surplus and have low interest payments, which is up to 7 per cent of revenue receipts. Analysing the performance of front runners, the government think tank said these states reported high total developmental expenditure up to 73 per cent, witnessed consistent growth in own tax revenue, had balanced fiscal management and improved debt sustainability with debt-to-GSDP ratio of 24 per cent. The report noted that, the aspirational (Kerala, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab) states are struggling to meet the

fiscal and revenue deficit targets, have low revenue mobilization, witnessing a growing debt burden with debt sustainability a concern in these states. As per the report, Odisha tops the debt index (99.0) and debt sustainability (64.0) rankings with better than average scores under quality of expenditure and revenue mobilization. Odisha has maintained low fiscal deficits, a good debt profile, and an above average capital outlay/GSDP ratio. While Kerala and Punjab struggle with low quality of expenditure and debt sustainability, the report said, West Bengal faces revenue mobilisation and debt index issues.

PM Modi pledges support for girl child empowerment

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his message on National Girl Child Day said on Friday that India is proud of the accomplishments of its girls across all fields. He also said his government is equally resolute in ensuring no discrimination happens against the girl child. In a social media post, Modi said, "Today, on National Girl Child Day, we reiterate our commitment to keep empowering the girl child and ensure a wide range of opportunities for her. India is proud of the accomplishments of the girl child across all fields." Their feats continue to inspire us all, the prime minister added. Modi said his government has focused on sectors like education, technology, skills and healthcare among others which have contributed to empowering the girl child. Union Women and Child Development Minister Annapurna Devi urged for a

collective commitment to their education, safety and empowerment. In a series of social media posts, the minister emphasised the importance of creating an environment that would allow every girl child to thrive and fulfil her dreams. She said in one post, "On National Girl Child Day, I extend my endless good wishes for a bright future to all daughters. Let us take a pledge today to remain committed to the education, safety, and empowerment of our girls." In another post, the minister reiterated the need for societal support. "Balika Devo Bhava: On this occasion of National Girl Child Day, let us resolve to provide every girl the opportunity to fulfil her dreams and create an environment where they feel free, empowered, and respected," she said. Observed every year on this day, National Girl Child Day highlights the importance of addressing issues such as gender inequality, access to education, and safety for girls.

Defence Secretary flags off school band competition

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the 76th Republic Day celebrations, Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh on Friday said the National School Band Competition is being held here to evoke a feeling of oneness and foster a sense of pride and patriotism among children towards the country. Singh was addressing a gathering at the front lawns of the Major Dhyan Chand National Stadium where the top 16 school bands selected from across the country are battling it out in the grand finale. The National School Band Competition 2024-25 is being jointly organised by the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Education. The defence secretary addressed students participating as members of contesting teams and others at the venue. In the grand finale, 16 teams spanning 466 school students are taking part, who have been selected after a "rigorous scrutiny", he said.



Referring to the participation of military bands in the annual ceremonial parade, Singh said the armed forces have a very vibrant tradition of military music. This tradition boosts morale, gives dignity to ceremonies and gives talented people opportunities to display their talent, he said. The defence secretary said in the last couple of years, the government has made efforts to "involve and encourage

"talented school children" to become co-participants in Republic Day celebrations. "The wonderful, visual spectacle of marching school bands...Rouses patriotic passion and courage among children and adults alike, thus evoking a feeling of oneness, belonging and national pride," he said. "The aim behind conducting the National School Band Competition is to evoke a feeling of oneness, of esprit

de corps, and a deep sense of pride among children towards their schools and the country, thus rejuvenating and rekindling the spirit of contributational values, patriotism and unity, and motivate them to walk the path of becoming patriotic and useful citizens of the country," he said. The students who are part of the finalist teams have been invited to witness the Republic Day ceremony on

January 26, as special guests, the defence ministry earlier said. The first performance by a pipe band of girl students from PM SHRI KGBV Patamda, East Singhbhum, Jharkhand was an instant winner, as they delighted the audience with their swinging moves and lilting tunes. A pipe band of boys followed PM SHRI Kendriya Vidyalaya No. 2 Belagavi, Karnataka. A brass band of girls from a government school in Gangtok, Sikkim and a pipe band of boys from a private school in North Sikkim are also among the finalists and their performances left the crowd spellbound. 'Sare Jehan Se Achha', 'Ae Watan Tere Liye' tunes were also played by several bands. A brass band of girls from St. Joseph Anglo-Indian Girl's Higher Secondary School, Kozhikode, Kerala belted out patriotic tunes and also played 'Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram' and 'Vande Mataram'. The competition is being held over two days, ending on January 25.

PM Narendra Modi congratulates Ireland's re-elected PM Micheál Martin

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday congratulated newly-elected Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin and said he is committed to working together to further strengthen the partnership between India and Ireland. Martin has been elected Irish prime minister for the second time. Martin is one of the longest serving MPs in the Dáil (lower house of Irish Parliament) having been first elected in 1989. "Congratulations @MichealMartinTD on assuming the office of Prime Minister of Ireland," Modi said in a social media post. "Committed to work together to further strengthen our bilateral partnership that is based on strong foundation of shared values and deep people to people connect," the prime minister said.

India condemns disruption of 'Emergency' screenings in UK

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/LONDON

Taking strong exception to pro-Khalistani extremists who stormed movie theatres across UK and disrupted screening of film 'Emergency', India on Friday said these elements should be held accountable. New Delhi also hoped the UK government would take appropriate action against the culprits. The film, which sees actor and BJP MP Kangana Ranaut playing the role of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, focuses on 21 months of Emergency from 1975 to 1977. The film ran into controversy over allegations that it misrepresents the Sikh community. "We've also



seen several reports on how the film 'Emergency', which was being screened in several halls, was being obstructed. We consistently raise concerns with the UK government regarding incidents of violent protests and intimidation by anti-India limits. Freedom of speech and expression cannot be applied selectively, and those

obstructing it must be held accountable," Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said here at a weekly press briefing. "We hope that the UK side will take appropriate action against those responsible. Our mission is that our High Commission in London remains in touch and it is in regular communication with our community members for their safety and welfare," he added. This strong reaction came after pro-Khalistani protesters organised protests against Ranaut's 'Emergency', disrupting the film's screening at some cinemas in the UK during its opening weekend. Community organisation Insight UK posted a video on

its social media platform, showing protesters interrupting a screening of the film, directed by Ranaut, at a cinema in Harrow in north-west London. News agency PTI reported from London an Opposition Conservative Party Member of Parliament has urged the UK Home Secretary to intervene after his constituents in north-west London were threatened by "masked Khalistani terrorists" who burst into a screening of Kangana Ranaut's film 'Emergency'. Bob Blackman told the House of Commons that similar disruption of the screenings of the "very controversial" film took place in Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Slough, Staines

and Manchester. It has resulted in the Vue and Cineworld cinema chains deciding to pull the film from many theatres in the UK. "On Sunday, many of my constituents gathered and paid for a screening of the film 'Emergency' in the Harrow Vue cinema. At about 30 or 40 minutes into the screening of the film, masked Khalistani terrorists burst in, threatened members of the audience and forced the screening to end," Blackman said in Parliament. "The film is very controversial, and I am not commenting on its quality or content, but I defend the right of my constituents and other members' constituents to be able to view it and make a decision on it. It covers the period

when Indira Gandhi was the prime minister of India," he said. The MP noted that there are certain views in the UK that it is an "anti-Sikh film" but asserted that his constituents should be able to judge for themselves and not be "threatened by thugs who want to disrupt democratic opportunities to see public films". "May we have a statement from the Home Secretary (Yvette Cooper) next week on what will be done to ensure that people who want to see such films, which have been passed by censors, can do so in peace and harmony? I absolutely defend the right of people to demonstrate outside cinemas, but not to disrupt viewings," he added.

Gurugram police arrest five criminals after encounter

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

A crime branch team of the Gurugram police have arrested five dreaded criminals after an encounter from Golf Course Extension Road on the intervening night of Thursday and Friday, police said. The accused was present in the city to commit theft, police said on Friday. According to the police, the police received information regarding four to five youths coming towards Golf Course Extension Road with illegal weapons, riding in a CNG auto rickshaw to commit a crime. Based on an information, a police team blocked the Golf Course Extension Road from

Village Ghata to Faridabad Road. After some time, an auto rickshaw without a number plate was seen coming towards the police check point. When the police team signalled the CNG auto rickshaw driver to stop the auto-rickshaw, the auto-rickshaw driver tried to escape by increasing the speed of the auto-rickshaw and hitting the barricade and police vehicle. "Five persons got down from the auto-rickshaw and started firing at the police team and running towards the forest. During this, One bullet hit the bulletproof jacket of the in-charge of crime branch sector-39, and one bullet hit the window of the police car," Inspector Vishwa Gaurav, In-Charge of Crime Branch Sector-39, said.

Preparations underway for Mauni Amavasya Amrit Snan

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

As Mahakumbh 2025 approaches its most auspicious bathing festival, Mauni Amavasya Amrit Snan, preparations are in full swing to accommodate an expected turnout of 10 crore devotees at the sacred Triveni Sangam in Prayagraj. This key festival, falling between January 27 and 29, is being marked by extraordinary administrative efforts to ensure safety, convenience, and seamless crowd management.

The Uttar Pradesh government, led by Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, is sparing no effort to make this Mahakumbh a grand and divine spectacle, reinforcing Prayagraj's status as a cultural and spiritual hub. Following the 2019 Kumbh's resounding success, the 2025 Mahakumbh is being positioned as the largest human congregation in history, with extensive arrangements being made to enhance the experience for pilgrims.

Comprehensive Crowd Management Measures

Given the anticipated surge of devotees, the Mela administration has implemented strict crowd management protocols to ensure a

smooth flow of pilgrims. Officials have been instructed to enforce sector-wise management, wherein devotees will return from the same sector or zone they enter. Movement to Sangam Nose and other zones will be strictly restricted to prevent overcrowding.

A sprawling 12-kilometer-long bathing ghat has been constructed to provide easy access for devotees. The administration is encouraging pilgrims to bathe at the ghat nearest to their entry point and avoid traveling between zones. Evacuation teams equipped with ropes, loud hailers, whistles, flying squads, and watchtower teams will maintain control over hard barriers and barricades to ensure safety.

Temporary holding areas, parking facilities, and overnight accommodations at nearby institutions have been prepared to handle any overflow of pilgrims. To support the arrangements, the administration has reinforced infrastructure at the ghats, including river barricading, deployment of water police, installation of watchtowers, improved lighting, signage, toilets, changing rooms, and comprehensive cleanliness



measures. Essential materials like straw, sacks, and casa will be made available to ensure the safety and comfort of devotees.

Railways Rise to the Occasion

The Prayagraj Railway Division has devised a detailed plan to manage the influx of devotees,

with a special focus on Mauni Amavasya. A major highlight of this plan is the creation of an additional holding area at Khuroo Bagh, located near the railway station. This facility, with the capacity to accommodate over 1 lakh people, will provide a resting

space for pilgrims while reducing congestion at the station premises. Senior PRO of Prayagraj Railway Division, Amit Malviya, stated that pilgrims returning from the fair will be directed to Khuroo Bagh before entering the station premises. From the holding area,

passengers will be guided to color-coded shelters based on their destinations. These shelters will ensure orderly boarding through the use of color-coded tickets, preventing confusion and minimizing the risk of stampedes. The Railway Protection Force (RPF) and civil police are working in close coordination to ensure seamless crowd channelization at the station and its surroundings. The additional holding area is equipped with essential facilities to manage the extra crowd pressure, ensuring a safe and organized experience for all travelers.

Record Turnout Expected

The grand Mahakumbh 2025 has already witnessed an overwhelming response, with 3.5 crore devotees taking a holy dip at the sacred Sangam on Makar Sankranti. For Mauni Amavasya, the most significant event of the Kumbh, the number is expected to reach a record-breaking 10 crore pilgrims.

Recognizing the cultural and spiritual importance of Mahakumbh, the Yogi Adityanath government is determined to make it a global showcase of India's heritage and unity. Robust infrastructure, meticulous

planning, and extensive security arrangements are being put in place to provide devotees with a divine and memorable experience. The Heart of India's Spiritual Heritage

Mauni Amavasya marks a day of silence and devotion, drawing millions of pilgrims who believe in its purifying and transformative power. The confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati rivers at Triveni Sangam is considered the holiest site for this ritual.

The administration's efforts, combined with the unwavering faith of devotees, are set to make Mahakumbh 2025 a landmark event in India's spiritual and cultural history. As the sacred city of Prayagraj prepares for this monumental occasion, it stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of India's traditions, attracting pilgrims and tourists from across the globe.

With an unparalleled scale of arrangements and an extraordinary influx of devotees, Mauni Amavasya Amrit Snan promises to be a spiritual experience like no other, bringing together faith, discipline, and unity on the banks of the holy Sangam.

Hindu code of conduct to be distributed

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

For the first time, a comprehensive Hindu Code of Conduct will be distributed to one lakh Sanatanis at the Maha Kumbh. Prepared by scholars from Kashi, this 300-page document has been finalised after approval from Shankaracharyas, Ramanujacharyas, and prominent saints. The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) will unveil this historic document during the Sant Sammelan, scheduled after Mauni Amavasya.

"This is a landmark step in the history of Hindu society. After 351 years, a structured code has been developed for guiding Sanatanis," said Swami Jitendranand Saraswati, National General Secretary of the Akhil Bharatiya Sant Samiti.

The Hindu Code of Conduct has been developed after 15 years of meticulous research by the Kashi Vidwat Parishad, in collaboration with scholars from across the country. "Eleven years of conceptual debates and four years of intensive study of scriptures



have gone into creating this code," said Prof. Ramnarayan Dwivedi, General Secretary of the Kashi Vidwat Parishad. The code draws from ancient texts such as Manu Smriti, Parashar Smriti, and Deval Smriti, alongside excerpts from the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and major Puranas.

"We formed 11 teams comprising 70 scholars from northern and southern India to ensure inclusivity. After 40 rounds of discussions, we finalised the code," Prof. Dwivedi added.

Key Features of the Code

The code emphasises duty and responsibility within Hindu society. It seeks to curb social evils like extravagant spending during weddings, promotes day-time Vedic marriages, and prohibits dowry. It also sets guidelines for funeral rituals, including limiting feasts. "Marriages must align with Vedic traditions, and practices like kanyadaan should be prioritised. However, dowry has been strictly prohibited," Prof. Dwivedi said.

Swami Jitendranand

Saraswati highlighted the significance of the initiative, saying, "For centuries, there has been no structured revision of Hindu practices. This code will instill discipline and preserve the values of Sanatan Dharma."

The Vishva Hindu Parishad plans to distribute one lakh copies of the Hindu Code of Conduct during the Maha Kumbh, with an additional 11,000 copies to be circulated across the country.

"This is not just a document; it's a guide for the future of the Hindu community. We hope every Sanatani will adopt it," said a VHP official. The document will be officially endorsed by Shankaracharyas, Mahamandaleshwars, and other saints during the Sant Sammelan, starting January 25. Following this, the Hindu community will be encouraged to accept and implement it.

"This code is rooted in scripture and tradition, but it addresses contemporary issues like wasteful expenses in rituals. It's a step toward reforming society," Prof. Dwivedi concluded.

'Sadhuon Ke Mann Ki Baat' to be organised

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

Inspired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popular Mann Ki Baat initiative, a special program 'Sadhuon Ke Mann Ki Baat' will be organised at the Mahakumbh in Prayagraj. This unique event will provide a platform for prominent saints and sages to share their thoughts on key aspects of Sanatan Dharma and the grand initiatives undertaken by the Yogi government for the Mahakumbh.

The Mahakumbh, held on the sacred banks of the Triveni Sangam in Prayagraj, has become a hub for spiritual discussions on devotion, liberation, and higher knowledge. To enrich this spiritual dialogue, the Mann Ki Baat program will be hosted for the first time on January 25 from 2 PM to 5 PM at Hari Dham Sanatan Seva Trust in Sector 20 of the Mahakumbh. The event will feature



and Maha Mandaleshwar Computer Baba of Shri Digambar Akhara, among others.

With millions of saints and sages attending the Prayagraj Mahakumbh, the event bridges devotees and the saintly community, offering discourses and satsangs on spiritual growth and liberation.

However, the 'Sadhuon Ke Mann Ki Baat' program aims to address broader social and religious challenges that saints encounter in contemporary times. Swami Prakashanand, the program's spokesperson, highlighted that the saints will discuss critical issues such as the ban on cow slaughter and the planning and execution of the divine and grand Mahakumbh. He said, "This initiative will provide a unique platform for the saints to voice their resolutions and ideas for societal and religious progress."

Congress accuses UP Government of mismanagement, corruption

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Congress leaders have accused the state government of mismanagement and corruption in the preparations for Mahakumbh 2025, alleging inadequate facilities for pilgrims and misuse of allocated funds.

Addressing a press conference at the Congress headquarters, State Congress President Ajay Rai and MP Ujjwal Raman Singh criticized the Yogi Adityanath-led government for failing to ensure proper arrangements at the Mahakumbh. "The budget allocated for Mahakumbh is being misused, and corruption is rampant," Rai alleged, adding that the administration must complete all pending preparations before the Mauni Amavasya Snan.

Ajay Rai revealed that a Congress delegation, led by MP Ujjwal Raman Singh, visited the Mahakumbh site after reports of a fire incident. "Our delegation found that devotees and saints are facing significant inconveniences due to mismanagement and a lack of proper facilities," Singh said.

The leaders pointed out issues such as inadequate fire safety measures, unhygienic conditions, and poor crowd management, which are causing hardships for pilgrims and saints alike.

The Congress leaders announced that they would closely monitor the situation and hold the government accountable. "If the administration fails to ensure adequate preparations for Mauni Amavasya, we will intensify our agitation," Rai warned. The Congress leaders also stated that they would participate in a holy dip at the Mahakumbh on February 3 to express solidarity with the devotees. The Congress leadership emphasised the need for transparency in the utilisation of funds allocated for Mahakumbh.

"The government must disclose details of the budget spent and ensure that every rupee is used for the benefit of devotees," said Ujjwal Raman Singh.

More than 1.21 lakh devotees availed Ayush services

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

More than 1.21 lakh devotees have availed Ayush services at the facilities set up at Maha Kumbh by the Ayush ministry in collaboration with the National Ayush Mission, Uttar Pradesh.

The Ayush OPDs, clinics, stalls and sessions are emerging as key attractions for devotees and visitors at Maha Kumbh, Prayagraj.

Ministry of Ayush has arranged a host of facilities in collaboration with National Ayush Mission, Uttar Pradesh, at the mega festival, providing free healthcare services to domestic and international devotees, the ministry said in a statement.

The Ayush team at Maha Kumbh comprises 80 doctors across 20 OPDs to provide 24x7 medical services. These OPDs are equipped to address a wide range of common and



chronic conditions. Foreign devotees are also utilising Ayush services, including OPD consultations, the statement said. Also, daily therapeutic yoga sessions are being conducted from designated camps in the Sangam area and Sector-8, led by trainers from the Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga (MDNIY), Ministry of Ayush, Delhi.

The participation of international devotees in these sessions highlights the growing interest and trust in Ayush services among the local and global public, the statement said.

Dr Akhilesh Singh, Ayush nodal officer at Maha Kumbh, said, "Our team not only treats patients but also informs them about the economic potential of medicinal plants. By promoting their cultivation, we aim to create a source of livelihood for people alongside improving their health."

At Maha Kumbh, the Ayush team has also arranged free distribution of medicines, including immunity boosters and calcium tablets, he said. In line with the ongoing efforts of Ministry of Ayush to ensure special attention towards the elderly's health, the Ayush team at Maha Kumbh is dedicated to facilitating the elderly and extending Ayush services to them, the statement said.

Nearly 45 per cent of the beneficiaries, so far, are elderly. Informative pamphlets on common ailments and their Ayush remedies are also being distributed.

Devotees visit Dwadash Madhav Parikrama gallery

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

In addition to the sacred dip in the Triveni Sangam, the circumambulation of the twelve temples, known as the Dwadash Madhav Parikrama, holds immense significance in the Maha Kumbh journey. To explore the significance of this sacred tradition, a growing number of devotees are visiting the Dwadash Madhav Parikrama Gallery, curated by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), at the Namami Gange Exhibition Hall in Sector 01, Kali Sadak.

This gallery offers an immersive experience, featuring detailed information, visuals, and replicas of rare 10th- and 11th-century idols of Lord Vishnu, including a unique statue of Vishnu in a rare yoga posture. According to mythology, the fruits of Kalpavas near Prayagraj's Sangam and the sanctity of bathing in the Triveni Sangam are fully realized only after completing



the Dwadash Madhav Parikrama. INTACH has also published a research-based booklet with insights from priests, temple committee members, and other knowledgeable contributors.

Visitors to the gallery gain deeper insights into the Dwadash Madhav temples and their historical and spiritual significance and appreciate the cultural and artistic heritage on display.

The Dwadash Madhav temples—Shri Veni Madhav, Shri Adi Madhav, Shri Manohar Madhav, Shri Bindu Madhav, Shri Gada Madhav,

Shri Chakra Madhav, Shri Shankh Madhav, Shri Akshay Vat Madhav, Shri Sankashthar Madhav, Shri Anant Madhav, Shri Asi Madhav, and Shri Padma Madhav—are across various parts of Prayagraj. These temples, dedicated to twelve divine forms of Lord Vishnu, embody the region's profound spiritual heritage.

In Treta Yuga, revered Maharshi Bharadwaj initiated the Parikrama of these temples. However, this tradition faced interruptions during the Mughal and British eras when several temples were destroyed.

After India's independence in

1947, Sant Prabhudatta Brahmachari revived the Parikrama in 1961 during the month of Magh with the support of Shankaracharya Niranjan Devtirth and Dharmasamat Swami Karpatri Ji Maharaj.

Today, under the Yogi government, the tradition of Parikrama continues seamlessly, symbolizing the enduring spiritual devotion of devotees.

The Dwadash Madhav temples are believed to reflect Lord Vishnu's eternal presence at Triveni Sangam, the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati rivers. According to classical belief, Lord Vishnu manifested in these twelve forms to preserve the sanctity of the Sangam and bless countless devotees.

Another legend holds that Lord Brahma and other deities implored Lord Vishnu to establish himself in the Prayag region as its divine protector. In response, Vishnu vowed to safeguard the land, taking the form of Dwadash Madhav to fulfill this celestial duty.

'Jugaad' for helmet rule sparks debate on civic sense and road safety

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

A creative yet controversial workaround by petrol pump staff in Uttar Pradesh to enforce the helmet rule has sparked widespread debate on social media and among citizens. The ingenious method—lending helmets tied to ropes to riders without helmets while refuelling—has drawn both applause and criticism.

In a video, which is from west UP, that has gone viral, a two-wheeler rider is seen entering the petrol pump without a helmet. Instead of being denied service, he is handed a

helmet secured with a rope. After refuelling, the rider returns the helmet and rides off. The unique arrangement ensures riders momentarily comply with the law to access fuel.

The solution has left people divided. For some, it showcases Indian ingenuity. "This is what makes India unique. Even when rules are imposed, people find a way to adapt," said Ramesh Gupta, a local shopkeeper in Noida. "At least this way, the helmet rule is being followed, even if temporarily." Others, however, view it as an example of misplaced

priorities. "This is a complete joke," said Meena Sharma, a college professor. "The whole purpose of the helmet rule is to ensure safety. Borrowing a helmet just to get petrol defeats that purpose entirely." Social media was abuzz with reactions. One user commented, "Petrol pump attendants are doing their job to avoid losses, but where is the enforcement of real civic responsibility?" Another remarked, "This shows that rules in India are just about ticking boxes, not about genuine concern for public welfare." The issue of enforcing helmet



rules has been contentious across the state. In a separate incident in Hapur, a lineman from the electricity

department was denied fuel for not wearing a helmet. Frustrated, he retaliated by cutting off the power supply to the petrol pump. CCTV footage showed the lineman scaling a transformer and severing the connection, leaving the pump and surrounding area without electricity for 20 minutes. "I couldn't believe my eyes," said Vinod Kumar, a bystander who witnessed the scene. "Instead of accepting his mistake, he went out of his way to cause trouble. This kind of behavior shows a lack of accountability on all sides." The pump owner later filed a police complaint against the lineman. "We are just following the law," said a staff member at the petrol pump.

"But incidents like this make it difficult for us to enforce rules. We don't want to face backlash, so we try to find middle ground." Experts and citizens alike believe that these incidents reflect a deeper issue with civic responsibility in India. "The helmet rule is not just about compliance; it's about saving lives," said traffic safety expert Alok Verma. "If people treat it as a formality, the rule loses its purpose. Both enforcement agencies and the public need to work together to change this mindset." Commoners echoed this

sentiment. "Wearing a helmet is for our own safety, not the government's benefit," said Sunita Mishra, a homemaker from Lucknow. "If we can't even follow such basic rules, how can we expect to improve road safety in India?"

As debates continue, the jugaad of tying helmets with ropes highlights both the creativity and challenges of enforcing road safety laws in India. While it ensures compliance on paper, critics argue it undermines the larger goal of fostering a culture of safety and accountability.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Rekindling historic ties

The President of Indonesia is the chief guest at the Republic Day, a fitting tribute to the friendship between two nations

India will celebrate its 76th Republic Day on January 26, 2025, marking a moment to reflect on the country's remarkable journey since its first Republic Day in 1950. This year's celebrations will have a special touch as Prabowo Subianto, President of Indonesia, will be the chief guest. His presence is a reminder of the deep historical and cultural ties between the two nations, which have seen their share of highs and lows but continue to thrive. Incidentally, the chief guest at the first Republic Day parade was President Sukarno of Indonesia, highlighting the camaraderie between two newly independent nations that had emerged from colonial rule. The relations between the two countries have come a full circle. The early years of India-Indonesia relations were marked by solidarity and mutual support. Biju Patnaik, a prominent Indian freedom fighter, played a key role in aiding Indonesia's struggle for independence, even flying its leaders to safety during critical moments. This partnership extended to global platforms like the Bandung

Conference of 1955, which laid the groundwork for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), co-sponsored by India and Indonesia.

India has come a long way since 1950. From grappling with post-independence challenges like poverty, illiteracy and infrastructural deficits, the nation has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing economies. It boasts advancements in science, technology, space exploration and global diplomacy, while remaining rooted in its democratic ethos. Similarly, Indonesia has evolved into a vibrant democracy and a leading voice in Southeast Asia. Both nations share a legacy of anti-colonial struggles and have worked



together in various domains, including trade, culture and defence. The partnership between India and Indonesia has seen its ups and downs. In the 1950s, ties were warm and cooperative, but by the 1960s, geopolitical differences, particularly over relations with China and the 1965 India-Pakistan war, strained the relationship. Indonesia's support for Pakistan during that conflict and claims over parts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands led to significant diplomatic tensions. However, the 1970s marked a period of reconciliation, with agreements on maritime boundaries and a renewed focus on cooperation. Today, Indonesia is one of India's largest trading partners in Southeast Asia, with bilateral trade reaching nearly \$30 billion in 2023-24. The two nations have also strengthened defence ties, including a Defence Cooperation Agreement signed in 2018, signalling a strategic partnership in a region increasingly shaped by competition with China. Prabowo Subianto's visit as the chief guest at India's Republic Day parade holds symbolic and strategic importance. This visit underscores the growing warmth in India-Indonesia relations. The presence of the Indonesian president at this year's parade is a tribute to the enduring friendship between two nations that have weathered challenges and found common ground in their aspirations for peace, prosperity and global cooperation.

PICTALK



Children holding national flags in a mustard field ahead of Republic Day 2025, at a village near Balurghat

The complex terrain of relationships



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

Relationships, whether personal or professional, are a delicate balancing act of emotions, perspectives and communication

Relationships are a tricky business. Two people who, at one stage of life, can agree so well that they cannot see or believe in having any difference in the point of view that they will hold. Different perspectives are an enigma; affection, agreement and endorsement are all rolled into one. Identification with each other is more important than identity any day. Very often, it is the bedrock of affection and togetherness in action. The same couple, as time passes and because of hormonal changes in their systems, can and do start having different points of view. What is initially a pleasant disagreement can soon become an assertion of identity. Personality conflicts follow.

These personality conflicts can be a logical derivation, and very often, it is difficult to find the origin of the derivation itself. Coherent dialogue in a spirit of give and take can often be substituted by the urge not only to protect one's turf but also to prove oneself more talented and resourceful. It can often become the source of further identity conflicts. The skill to handle such disagreements cannot be taught and is often taken over by other habits.

These habits may include being short-tempered, incoherent talking and having a high pitch in conversation, which is seen as an extension of good logic. The aberrations are far too many to be recounted, and the results are easy to identify. Instead of working together to resolve the differences, it becomes a battleground to show who can prevail. The rest, as they say, is history. In an era, that is full of talk about skills, it is important at this stage of dialogue to focus on life skills. Two people who cannot get together try to demonstrate who has the right of way in a marital relationship.

The life story moves from one end of the spectrum to an often incoherent hurtling down the slope of not only a difference of opinion but also a difference in personalities. The analysis can go only so far because then logic gives way to preferences and pas-



sion. This is at the root of many marital discords, and it is difficult to reverse the gears and change the pitch. Unfortunately, while there are numerous dissertations in psychology and elsewhere on relationships, practical-oriented thinking in handling relationships is few and at best, commonsensical.

One is merely indicating the value of focused research and showing how a structured approach to problem-solving, even in everyday life, can be very valuable. There is a need to see research as an enabling situation for problem-solving, and many use the phrase 'applied research' for it. In the present day and age, more of the fashion world is about skill, and it is being generously used because of its attractive value in situations that cannot be practically handled. Sometimes it works; sometimes it does not.

The important thing is to realise that research requires insights and the adoption of a structured methodology, even in commonsensical situations. It is this aspect of research that can lead to a better quality of life, which can be termed as enabling research and it has to do with life skills. Solving this situation, which afflicts many interpersonal relationships, is simultaneously easy and yet difficult. It is easy to control if one can limit one's communication and how



THE LIFE STORY MOVES FROM ONE END OF THE SPECTRUM TO AN OFTEN INCOHERENT HURLING DOWN THE SLOPE OF NOT ONLY A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION BUT ALSO A DIFFERENCE IN PERSONALITIES

much one talks more wisely, keeping the number of words used in a conversation minimal. The truth is, that the more one seeks to talk and explain, the more complex it can become. Let simple things remain simple; it is a significant strategic choice.

This approach works because passion subsides, irritations sort itself out and the choice of words and pitch of the voice can be better controlled. One only has to look around to notice how talking less is such an asset in keeping relationships positive. Interpersonal relationships apart, work relationships, also get affected and the impression of losing an argument, even in work-spaces, is a personal defeat. This, by itself, is a self-defeating proposition. It is self-defeating because even if one wins the argument due to positional power or manipulative skills, the scars of a lost argument leave long-lasting damage to relationships. One can indeed often lose a battle to win the war. As indicated earlier, this applies to work situations as much as to real-life, non-work situations. Gentleness and soft words go far, especially when gentleness is received not as a proposition of the weaker person, but as a characteristic and indicator of mutual respect.

The best solution to many conflicts is when both come out as winners, and no one is

growing, smitten by the dangerous feeling of having 'lost one's face'. Be that as it may, it is necessary to reduce differences, not to personalities, but to find the best way forward. This best way forward must focus on protecting everyone's ego and be in the interest of the larger good. Much will depend on the personality elements of the players in the situation and indeed the time available to sort it out. Many times, a shortage of time necessitates two decisions that are suboptimal and more to 'get along with a job' than 'finding the best option'. Using tentative words and a hypothesis open to correction and improvement may be the best recipe for conflict resolution. In such situations, the personalities do not win or lose; it is the cause that is handled in a far-sighted way. Examples can be many, and one has to see what the issue at stake is how people perceive the result of the outcome and how they interpret it. In all cases, if there is a loser in an argument, it is best to make him feel that he has not 'lost' and that no personalities are involved. This can be a useful approach to handling institutional issues because every resolution of a conflict should be for the institutional good.

(The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRUMP'S HYPOCRISY EXPOSED

Madam — The ultimatum from Trump to end the prolonging Ukraine-Russia war exposes his hypocrisy. He is aware that it is with the pumping of arms by his country and its allies in Europe that Ukraine is continuing the war. He is also aware that the sanction imposed on Russia had failed miserably, as the same EU partners are buying the same Russian oil from different sources like India. Pumping arms and funds into Ukraine on one hand and giving an ultimatum to end the war on the other is rightly understood by one and all as meaningless, non-serious, and merely publicity-orientated. The entire world knows that maximum wars are waged or promoted by his country. Even while addressing after assuming office, he had demonstrated his imperial thirst by expressing his policy to take over the Panama Canal and Greenland, besides arbitrarily changing the name of the Gulf of Mexico into the Gulf of America. His threat to wage a tariff war goes against the very basic principles of globalisation that promote the free movement of goods, labour, and capital. The world also knows the key role played by the production of arms and promotion of arms trade in the economy of America. Therefore, America needs a war between some countries or the other. Mr. Trump speaking with concern over the huge human loss in Ukraine and Russia due to war is another display of his hypocrisy. Because more devastating impacts are experienced due to climate change, and his actions are hostile to the global efforts to overcome this serious issue. Therefore, one need not attach so much importance to his utterances or Quixotic actions.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

LIQUOR BAN AT RELIGIOUS SITES

Madam—CM of Madhya Pradesh Mohan Yadav has formally announced in Narsinghpur district that a liquor ban

UNESCO honours Mahakumbh



To foster the honour and delight of every Indian, the 45-day-long Mahakumbh Festival was listed in the UNESCO list as the largest peaceful religious congregation of pilgrims on earth. To disperse the Hindu aesthetic religious and spiritualism at the next

level, Maha Kumbh is truly a festival of positivity and spiritualism in India. From Naga Sadhus to Aghoris to all the other pilgrims, Kumbh is an auspicious celebration of Hindu devotees to enchant spirituality for developing godly connection, inner peace, and spiritual harmony.

A dip in the Triveni Sangam of the three rivers of Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati will be considered as the precursor of all devil deeds done during the lifetime. A congregation of 450 million, including people from local and global communities, is one of a kind incidence. It is welcoming that UNESCO added this one-of-a-kind religious festivity to its list. It is a moment of extreme celebration and glee for every Indian back at home. We all welcome the UNESCO listing favourably and positively with utmost joy in our hearts.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

will be implemented in 17 religious places in 11 districts of the state. It is believed that the government will send an order to the administration of the cities of the districts where the liquor ban is to be implemented, and the licensed liquor shops will be closed. He also said that liquor will not be allowed to be sold at any cost in the places where God Ram and Krishna set foot. These include Ujjain, Amarkantak, Maheshwar, Omkareshwar, Chitrakoot, Mandasaur, etc. In the Narsinghpur program, he also talked about the harm caused to the health of the family due to alcohol. I do not understand one thing: more or less all the politicians in India, in their speeches, there is a lot of mention of the ill effects & demerits of alcohol and the diseases caused by it. All those smart politicians are found appealing to the people that 'please stay away from consuming alcohol; it harms your health. Hey, when these leaders are so concerned about the health of the people, then why do they not declare a complete ban on the production and

marketing of alcohol?

Jang Bahadur Singh | jamshedpur

SCAMMERS TARGET JOB SEEKERS

Madam — The rise of job scams has become a significant problem, with scammers deceiving job seekers by creating fake job postings. These scammers often promise unsuspecting victims the opportunity to work from home and earn a high income, but only after paying for training or equipment. Research the company thoroughly to verify its legitimacy and reputation. Use reputable job boards and websites to search for job openings.

Report any suspicious activities or job postings to the relevant authorities. By being aware of these job scam tactics and taking the necessary precautions, job seekers can protect themselves from falling victim to these fraudulent schemes.

Khushi Uchenia | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Cooperative commodities exchange: A global vision for farmer empowerment

This initiative leverages technology, blockchain and India's PACS network to empower farmers with fair pricing, sustainability and direct market access

The agricultural sector is the backbone of many economies, particularly in India, where nearly 60 per cent of the population depends on farming for their livelihood. Yet, smallholder farmers often remain at the mercy of intermediaries, fluctuating market prices and unequal access to global markets.

To address these challenges and promote equity, sustainability and growth, a bold initiative is proposed: the establishment of a Global Farmer-Centric Cooperative Commodities Exchange (GFCCE). This platform, rooted in the cooperative model, aims to empower farmers by ensuring fair pricing, direct market access, and sustainable practices. This ambitious project resonates with the global agenda of the World Cooperation Economic Forum to foster inclusive economic growth and social equity. **Empowering Farmers Through Technology** APEX Integration at the heart of this initiative lies technology—a powerful enabler that can bridge the gap between farmers and markets. The



GFCCE will leverage the Government of India's support to develop a robust and accessible digital platform integrated with blockchain technology to ensure transparency and reduce pilferage in the supply chain. Blockchain will create a tamper-proof record of transactions, from production to storage and distribution, enhancing trust and accountability.

The project will adopt a PACS-to-APEX (Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies to Apex-level organisations) approach, leveraging India's extensive network of over 95,000 PACS. These societies will act as the foundational nodes, aggregating produce from farmers at the village level. The commodities will then be funnelled through district and state-level federations, culminating

at the national apex organisation, which will oversee operations, ensure fair pricing and manage exports. To address storage issues, a network of modern warehouses will be constructed and integrated with blockchain systems. These warehouses, equipped with real-time inventory tracking, temperature controls and pest management systems, will be strategically located across key agricultural regions.

Blockchain connectivity across warehouses will enable seamless tracking of stored produce, ensuring reduced wastage and pilferage. Farmers will also receive warehouse receipts, which can be used as collateral for loans, providing them with immediate financial support.

This interconnected system will not only provide farmers with better access to markets but also ensure that the supply chain is efficient, transparent and secure. It will serve as the backbone for procurement planning and play a vital role in stabilising food prices. **Impact on Food Inflation** The GFCCE's blockchain-enabled supply chain and warehouse network will rev-

olutionise procurement planning and control food inflation. With real-time data on production, storage, and distribution, government agencies will have accurate insights into commodity availability and demand patterns.

This data-driven approach will enable timely procurement decisions, ensuring that food stocks are adequately replenished and distributed. By reducing post-harvest losses and pilferage, the initiative will improve the efficiency of the Public Distribution System (PDS), preventing artificial shortages that often lead to price spikes. Additionally, the transparent pricing mechanism of the exchange will curb hoarding and speculation.

This system will also facilitate targeted interventions during periods of surplus or deficit. For instance, in the case of bumper harvests, surplus stocks can be stored efficiently and exported strategically to global markets, preventing a price crash domestically. (The writer was a member of the high level MSP committee, Ministry of Agriculture; views are personal)



BINOD ANAND



FIRST COLUMN

SEEKING TRUE SHELTER IN THE DIVINE

Amid the chaos of desires, ego and karmaphal, how do we find lasting peace



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

We are small, ignorant, helpless and unsafe. There should not be any doubt about our smallness with eight billion of us on the earth's planet itself. How knowledgeable we are or can be? Knowledge is unlimited. How much can we learn in one lifetime? Helpless we are from the time we are born till the time comes to dispose of our bodies. Just count how many people we need daily to survive well. And unsafe all of us are, as the Covid-19 pandemic proved. Therefore, we instinctively seek shelter all the time. An infant needs his parents. As one grows, one takes shelter from education to maintain oneself. Education/training over, time comes to seek shelter in a job or a business.

The idea is to have the shelter of enough money to be able to survive decently. Sex overpowers thinking beginning from a young age. Some are drawn towards fame like a sportsperson, while others get into politics, etc. for power. The most fortunate seek the shelter of God. Shelter of God is crucial to exist well. Let us see the degree of difficulty for a quality life. Our nature ('svabhava') is a huge handicap. Something or other from lust, anger, greed, jealousy, ego, etc. predominates if not more than one.

What chance is there to have a quality life? Lust derails almost everyone. One assumes that sex is pleasure, and it has so many forms. The worst thing is it's possessing our minds. Ego is not far behind. Have you met anyone who does not feel his or her superiority vis-



à-vis others? Greed does not allow us to assess our needs sensibly. More is better is the desire and there is no satisfaction. Anger is always lurking near the surface. It surfaces at the drop of a hat, literally. Then, there are karmaphalas always ready to manifest. We know how bad ones hurt. What most people don't realise are the ill effects of good karmaphalas. This is when one gets the feeling of invincibility and makes big mistakes.

People look for rewards during success, and we know what these rewards do to us. The third big enemy is old age, when we become weak and are mostly written off. Are we stuck? Far from it. God would not have made such a sorry Creation. Guidance and help are available to all of us if we accept the role of God in our lives. Ignorance, false pride or laziness stops us from taking God's help, who is the owner, controller and everything. You seek guidance sincerely and see what happens. But we don't; we prefer to be in cyclic thinking short-circuiting our own lives. We condemn ourselves by our obstinate attitude. God is prepared to help all of us at any time, but there is a rider.

We must deserve such help. How to determine who should get or who shouldn't? Therefore, the question everyone should be asking is: how do we become deserving of God's 'kripa' (favour)? Simply, you recognise yourself as a soul – part of God. Then, all spiritual activities will make sense.

Shouldn't parts take shelter from God? Shouldn't we be very respectful to God and pay obeisance to Him? What about the 'dhyani' (meditation) of the entity, who is everything? How about thanking God for all that He does for everyone like providing air, water and sunlight free. In short, we should stop taking shelter of anyone or anything except God, and remain there.

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

Winter's tale in Northern India: A season of discontent

Northern India's winter is more than just a fleeting season; it is a relentless narrative of marrow-freezing cold, breath-choking pollution and a grim forecast for years to come



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR



Of freezing marrows and choking breaths William Shakespeare, emperor of narratives, master of metaphors, celebrated craftsman of sentences and acclaimed presenter of deep insights into human nature, had a way of coming up with expressions surviving the passage of time. One of them is "winter of our discontent." Richard, Duke of Gloucester, says in Richard III, "Now is the winter of our discontent/ Made glorious summer by this sun of York;/ And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house/ In the deep bosom of the ocean buried." The expression, which adorns one of John Steinbeck's most famous novels as its title, should resonate particularly strongly with people in northern India still in the grip of a winter that is cold, damp and utterly polluted. The chances of things improving in the next few years, are, to put it mildly, bleak.

As the chilling flipside of global warming, the cold months will continue to be increasingly marrow-freezing, since, with Donald Trump taking over as the United States' president, the chances of a deceleration in the pace of climate change, have diminished significantly. This is not to look wistfully back over one's shoulder to a mythical place like the island valley of Avilion, where, pace Alfred Tennyson in a very different context, "falls not hail, or rain, or any snow, / Nor ever wind blows loudly." Climates and the weather have been notoriously fickle cousins throughout history. If any part of the past seems golden, it is because of the distance in time which lends it enchantment.

It had, when it was the present, its warts, some of them rather large and ugly. Floods and droughts took very heavy tolls when meteorological devices and skills for predicting their advent and coping with their aftermath, were far less advanced. In the absence of electrical heating devices, which we have, life could not have been terribly pleasant during the last ice age which had covered



AS THE CHILLING FLIP SIDE OF GLOBAL WARMING, THE COLD MONTHS WILL CONTINUE TO BE INCREASINGLY MARROW-FREEZING, SINCE, WITH DONALD TRUMP TAKING OVER AS THE UNITED STATES' PRESIDENT, THE CHANCES OF A DECELERATION IN THE PACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE, HAVE DIMINISHED SIGNIFICANTLY

about 30 per cent of the earth's surface and ended 15, 000 to 20,000 years ago. On a more specific note, slavery was legal in most parts of the world—including the chest-thumping democracies of the West—as late as the second half of the 19th century. The weather, doubtless, has an impact on life and its moods, which influence thought, speech and feeling which, in turn, trigger action.

All of these, at a certain elevated level, power the wheels of history. These also affect inter-personal relations, causing friction and hostility arising from anger and discontent, or cordiality and warmth caused by harmony. The sum total of the interaction among these factors determines the quality of a community's social existence in terms of tensions between collective bodies like class and caste, and stress caused by individual actions like crime, which is often caused by alienation resulting from marginalisation, poverty and anonymity in impersonal societies. A crime can be a perverse act of self-assertion, a sub-conscious statement like, "I kill, therefore I exist"—a variant of Rene Descartes much-quoted assertion, "Cogito ergo sum (literally, "I think, therefore, I am")."

Another form of self-assertion can be participation—to say nothing of playing a leading role—in a mass movement. Eric Hoffer writes in The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements, "There is in us a tendency to locate the shaping forces of our existence outside ourselves. Success and failure are unavoidably related in our minds with the state of things around us. Hence it is that people with a sense of fulfilment think it a good

world and would like to conserve it as it is, while the frustrated favour radical change. The tendency to look for all causes outside ourselves persists even when it is clear that our state of being is the product of personal qualities such as ability, character, appearance, health and so on." What is the result? Hoffer quotes Thoreau as saying, "If anything ail a man, so that he does not perform his functions, if he has a pain in his bowels even ... he forthwith sets about reforming—the world." (Italics by Hoffer; Thoreau has used the plurals "ail" and "have" as it was done by many in his time in such contexts).

Attempts to reform the world invariably lead to struggles with status quoists. Besides, social tensions and conflicts will increase following rising ocean levels, caused by global warming, submerging coastal areas. Inward migration of people from these regions would trigger clashes over land and resources in the interior areas. The same factors will also be in operation in other areas to which people may escape from regions made uninhabitable by temperatures rising too high to support life.

One can, of course, argue that people would be kind to global warming refugees, realising that they may have to leave their homes someday for the same reason. But then, kindness is not what a person encounters frequently in life; it is the same with gratitude, the lack of which weighed heavily on the Bard of Avon. "Ingratitude," he lamented in King Lear, "thou marble-hearted fiend..." He bewailed in As You Like It, "Blow, blow, thou winter wind, / Thou art not so unkind/As man's ingratitude."

And he says in Twelfth Night, "I hate ingratitude more in a man/ Than lying, vainness, babbling, drunkenness, / Or any taint of vice whose strong corruption/ Inhabits our frail blood." Character attributes like openness towards gratitude are rooted deep inside one's DNA and are modified by the environment as one grows up. Seasonal changes can impact their intensity, as discomfort caused by extreme heat or cold can put one's temper on a short leash.

On the other hand, as Anton Chekhov put it, "People don't notice whether it's winter or summer when they're happy." This brings us back to our starting point—northern India's butt-freezing, breath-choking winter. Can one be happy in its midst? The answer will be in the affirmative, as the news of a progeny scaling new heights at work or being gifted with a baby, will warm the cockles of one's heart. This, however, is most likely to be a passing phase, overwhelmed, sooner than later, by the many worries and sadnesses that quotidian existence brings and that, again, are ephemeral.

The more relevant question will be whether one can survive northern India's winter and for how long. The transition to the hereafter caused by pollution stalks one silently but lethally. The final truth in life is mortality. All this has been said before, and will be said again, as one will hear the much-quoted proverb, "What can't be cured must be endured." It has joined the ranks of venerable clichés blessed with eternal life.

(The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

Cultural heritage tourism: A path to sustainable growth and mutual understanding

Respecting the balance between tourism and heritage enables a mutually beneficial relationship that supports communities, preserves cultural identity and promotes global harmony

Cultural tourism, as defined in the 22nd session of the UN Tourism General Assembly in 2017, is an activity where a visitor's primary motivation is to learn, discover, experience, and engage with the tangible and intangible cultural attractions and products of a destination. These motivations shape the agendas of both the visitor and the tour guide at cultural heritage destinations, bridging the gap between the historical and the contemporary.

The Evolution of Cultural Heritage and Tourism

Cultural heritage has undergone a significant shift in perception, moving from an archaeological focus to the concept of "living heritage" and its reuse. Similarly, tourism has evolved from being largely

centered on pilgrimage to a multifaceted industry encompassing learning, entertainment, experiences, and relaxation. This transformation has elevated tourism as a catalyst for inclusive economic growth and job creation across diverse sectors, such as hospitality, transportation, and entertainment. The industry's ripple effect benefits individuals and communities alike, engaging local businesses, transport operators, craftspeople, tourist guides, and the hospitality industry in a symbiotic relationship.

For these benefits to be fully realised, collaboration among stakeholders is essential. They must work collectively to offer authentic and meaningful experiences that resonate with travelers while preserving the



SUKHDEV SINGH

integrity of cultural sites. **Cultural Heritage as a Driver of Tourism**

A rapidly growing segment within the tourism industry is cultural heritage, which encompasses natural and architectural sites, traditional crafts, cultural events, performances, and intangible knowledge. Recognised as both a commodity and an experience, cultural heritage attracts mar-

ket players, planners, and governments aiming to expand the scope of tourism. It promotes inclusive growth, intercultural exchange and mutual understanding.

The relationship between tourism and cultural heritage is built on mutuality. While cultural heritage serves as a key attraction for tourism, the latter provides the financial and structural support required for its preservation and promotion.

Navigating Contradictions

Tourism operates on the principle of profit and economic growth, while cultural heritage centers on identity and inheritance. These differing foundations can create contradictions. For the tourism industry, cultural heritage is often commodified, whereas for her-



itage conservation, tourism acts as a feeder for sustainability. While these sectors can support one another to an extent, unchecked tourism practices can lead to significant challenges, including overcrowding, environmental and degradation.

To mitigate these issues, regulated practices in cultural heritage tourism must prioritise the symbiotic relationship

between factors influencing tourist experiences and those fostering cultural understanding. Tour operators and tourists must respect the sanctity and protocols of cultural heritage sites. Travelers should be encouraged to appreciate local customs without overstepping boundaries, ensuring a balance between immersion and respect. Sustainable cultural heritage tourism, thus, becomes a pathway to fostering "culture for peace."

Economic and Cultural Benefits of Heritage Tourism

Cultural heritage tourism creates opportunities for income generation and employment. This is achieved by maintaining and showcasing heritage structures, sites, and products. Preservation and management efforts, such as cata-

logging and storytelling, directly benefit from tourism revenue. Simultaneously, the broader economic ecosystem, including hospitality, transportation, and entertainment, flourishes through increased visitor engagement.

However, cultural heritage is far more than a revenue-generating commodity. It serves as a repository of customs, values, and artifacts, connecting communities to their past and reinforcing their identities. Tourism, when responsibly managed, can amplify the significance of heritage sites by fostering research, introducing new narratives, and raising awareness. Reinvestment of economic returns into preservation ensures the longevity and authenticity of cultural heritage.

Challenges of Cultural Heritage Tourism

While tourism can elevate the value of cultural heritage, it also introduces challenges. Overcrowding, environmental degradation, and disruptions to the local population's way of life are common issues.

Sustainable and Responsible Tourism

To maintain a harmonious balance between tourism and cultural heritage, sustainable practices are essential. These include regulating visitor numbers, promoting eco-friendly initiatives, and ensuring that tourism revenue is reinvested into preservation efforts.

(The writer is retired professor of Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar and Vice-Chairman, INTACH; views are personal)

'Putin should negotiate with Ukraine, Zelensky ready for talks'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON/ MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin "should make a deal" with Ukraine, US President Donald Trump has said and asserted that they would meet as soon as they can.

Earlier, he warned his Russian counterpart to end the 'ridiculous war' in Ukraine or face high tariffs and further sanctions. Trump, who was sworn in as the 47th President of the United States on January 20, said this on Truth Social on Wednesday, a social media platform owned by him.

Talking to reporters in the Oval Office on Thursday, the president said, "I think he (Putin) should make a deal." When asked if he thinks that sanctions on Russia will force Putin to negotiate, he said, "I don't know."

"Russia should want to make a deal. Maybe they want to make a deal. I think, from what I hear, Putin would like to see me. And we'll meet as soon as we can. I'd meet immediately. Soldiers are being killed on the battlefield," he said.

"That battlefield is like no battlefield since World War II... and I have pictures that you don't want to see. Soldiers are being killed on a daily basis at numbers that we haven't seen in decades. It would be nice to end that war. It's a ridiculous war," the US president said.

In response to another question, Trump said Ukraine is ready to make a deal. "He's (Volodymyr Zelensky) ready to negotiate a deal. He'd like to stop. He's somebody that lost a lot of soldiers. So did Russia. Russia lost more soldiers, they lost 8,00,000 soldiers," Trump added.

Called out Russian President Putin by name in the social media post on Wednesday, Trump argued that he always had a good relationship with the leader, but that it was time to settle "this ridiculous war!"

He also warned that if there was not a ceasefire deal soon, he would "have no other choice" but to impose tariffs, taxes and sanctions on "anything being sold by Russia to the United States, and various other participating countries."

Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Trump said on Thursday that the OPEC+ alliance of oil exporting countries shares responsibility for the nearly three-year conflict in Ukraine because it has kept oil prices too high. "If the price came down, the Russia-Ukraine war would end immediately," Trump said. Energy sales form a large part of Russia's earnings.

Asked about Trump's comments, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov affirmed Moscow's view that the Ukrainian conflict was triggered by the West's refusal to take into account Russian security interests.

"The conflict doesn't depend on oil prices," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters. "The conflict is ongoing because of the threat to Russia's national security, the threat to Russians living on those territories and the refusal by the Americans and the Europeans to listen to Russia's security concerns. It's not linked to oil prices."

He said Russian President Vladimir Putin remains ready for contacts with Trump.

Peskov's comments echoed Putin's statements that he had to send troops into Ukraine in February 2022 to fend off a threat to Russia's security resulting from plans for Ukraine to join NATO and to protect Russian speakers living there. Ukraine and the West have denounced Moscow's action as an unprovoked act of aggression.

Asked to comment on Trump's claim that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is ready for a peace deal, Peskov pointed out the Ukrainian leader's earlier decision to rule out any talks with Moscow. "Zelensky can't be ready for a deal," Peskov told reporters, adding that "in order to reach a settlement it's necessary to conduct talks, and Zelensky forbade himself to hold talks by his own decree."

On Wednesday, Trump threatened to impose stiff taxes, tariffs and sanctions on Russia if an agreement isn't reached to end the war in Ukraine.

Peskov said that the Kremlin was closely following Trump's statements and noted that he imposed a slew of sanctions during his first term.

He said Moscow "remains ready for an equal dialogue, for a mutually respectful dialogue."

"This dialogue took place between the two presidents during Trump's first presidency. And we are waiting for signals that we have not received yet," Peskov said.

UK to convince US Prez Trump not to impose trade tariffs

PTI ■ LONDON

The British government on Friday said it has an argument in favour of convincing US President Donald Trump not to impose tariffs on its trade with the UK. Business and Trade Secretary Jonathan Reynolds told the BBC that the United States did not have a trade deficit with the UK on manufactured goods, which would make tariffs unnecessary.

"We've obviously got a services-based economy. The US does not have that deficit with us so if that's the logic of that position, I think we've got an argument to engage with," said Reynolds.

Tariffs are a key part of Trump's economic agenda as he assumed office for a second term earlier this week. He not only sees them as a way of growing the US economy, protecting jobs and raising tax revenue but also as leverage to pursue other policies targeted at certain countries.

He has indicated a tax on imports from China and has also threatened tariffs on Canada and Mexico. Tariffs, or higher taxes on imports to the US, would make it more expensive for companies to sell goods in the world's largest economy. However, Trump has since indicated that he "would rather not" impose tariffs, suggesting trade deals are on the table.

The US President told global executives at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos this week that they could either produce their goods in the US or face widespread tariffs worth hundreds of billions or even trillions of dollars.

Reynolds, among the ministers who were in Davos to "spotlight UK's investment offer to global business leaders", met European Union Trade Commissioner Maros Sefcovic at the summit and went on to thank him for "incredibly positive" comments on a possible new post-Brexit agreement between Britain and the 27-member economic bloc. "We can improve the terms of trade with the EU in a way which doesn't revisit customs unions or single markets or the arguments of Brexit, and we can do that whilst pursuing closer trade links around the world," Reynolds said.

The Labour Party had contested last July's general election with a manifesto pledge to lower Brexit-related barriers and red tape for the export of food and farm products to the EU. "Britain is back in business under this government, and our Plan for Change is already delivering for working people. The UK is the most connected market on earth, and we will continue to be the home for innovative businesses looking to face outwards to the world," added Reynolds.

His Cabinet colleague, Chancellor Rachel Reeves, was also in Davos to make the case for Britain as one of the "most exciting places in the world" for investments at a time when the domestic economy is navigating a sluggish phase.

"I will not rest until the UK economy is growing and this government is delivering on its Plan for Change, so we can put more money in people's pockets. The time to invest in Britain is now," she said.



President Donald Trump signs an executive order as he attends an indoor Presidential Inauguration parade event at Capital One Arena, Monday in Washington, as White House staff secretary Will Scharf watches.

Donald Trump signs executive order to declassify JFK assassination files

Washington (PTI): US President Donald Trump has signed an executive order seeking to declassify files on the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Senator Robert F. Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Asserting that the victims' families and the American people deserve to know the truth about these assassinations, the executive order directs the Director of National Intelligence to present a plan within 15 days for the "full and complete release" of all John F. Kennedy assassination records. It also directs the Director of National Intelligence to immediately review the records on the Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinations and present a plan for their full and complete release within 45 days.

"That's a big one. A lot of people are waiting for years, for decades. And everything will be revealed," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office wherein he signed the executive order.

This executive order stated that continued withholding of the John F. Kennedy records is long overdue and not in the public interest.

"Although no Act of Congress directs the release of information pertaining to the assassinations of Senator Robert F. Kennedy and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I have determined that the release of all records in the Federal Government's possession pertaining to each of those assassinations is also in the public interest," Trump said in the order.

Making President John F. Kennedy assassination files public was part of Trump's poll campaign promises. He had on mul-

Japan's leader says he's preparing for tough negotiations with US President

Tokyo (PTI): Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, struggling to stabilise his minority government, said Friday he will seek to maintain regional security and prepare for tough negotiations with US President Donald Trump to maintain a strong American presence in the Asia-Pacific.

Ishiba has been seeking to meet with Trump since his election victory in

November and is arranging a trip to Washington in the coming weeks. With a minority government following a significant election loss in October due to voter anger over his party's financial scandals, Ishiba is struggling to stay in power at least until the next major elections this summer.

"With the balance of power in the region making a historic change, we must further deepen Japan-US cooperation and ensure the US commitment to the region to prevent any power vacuum from destabilizing it," Ishiba said in a policy speech to parliament.

Japan's concern about a US retreat from the region comes as China's military is becoming increasingly assertive and North Korea has repeatedly test-fired ballistic missiles as it advances its nuclear and missile programs.

multiple occasions pledged to release the JFK files, specifically stating in June 2024 that he would do so "early on".

"When I return to the White House, I will declassify and unseal all JFK assassination-related documents. It's been 60 years, time for the American people to know the TRUTH!" Trump had said.

Israelis await next four hostages' names in ceasefire deal

PTI ■ TEL AVIV

Relatives of hostages still being held by militants in Gaza called on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Friday to ensure all remaining captives are freed, while also appealing to US President Donald Trump to continue pressing for their release.

As a fragile six-week ceasefire between Israel and Hamas entered its sixth day, Israelis waited anxiously for the names of the next four hostages who will be released from among the more than 90 still held in Gaza. In the Palestinian enclave, civilians in the central and southern part of the Gaza Strip hoping to return to the remnants of their home in the battered north faced an agonizing wait. Israel believes about a third, or possibly as many as half, of the more than 90 hostages still in Gaza have died. Hamas has not released definitive information on how many captives are still alive or the names of those who have died. Dear President Trump,

first of all we want to say thank you for the happy moments we felt this week. But we want to tell you we still have 94 hostages, we need them all at home," said Ayelet Samerano, whose son Yonatan Samerano is among those still being held. "Please do not stop. Please continue to press and do everything so that all the 94 hostages will come home immediately." In the first phase of the ceasefire deal, 33 hostages are expected to be released gradually in return for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

The first three Israeli hostages were freed in exchange for 90 Palestinian prisoners on Sunday, the first day of the ceasefire that has halted the 15-month war that has devastated Gaza. More than 47,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza and wide swaths of the territory have been destroyed. According to the deal, on Friday Hamas is to announce the names of the next four hostages to be released on Saturday, after which Israel

will also release a list of which Palestinian prisoners will be freed.

The hostages were among about 250 men, women and children captured by militants who burst across the border into Israel on Oct 7, 2023, killing around 1,200 people in an attack that sparked the war in Gaza. About 100 were released during a brief ceasefire in November that year, while the bodies of around three dozen hostages have been recovered in Gaza and eight hostages have been rescued by the army. "I call from here to the Prime Minister and negotiating team — you're doing excellent work — do whatever is necessary to bring everyone back, to the last hostage," Samerano said. "We ask you to ensure phase two of the deal is agreed upon before finishing the current phase. We cannot continue living in uncertainty. All hostages must return, and none of them has time left."

The 33 to be released in the first phase will include women, children, sick people and those over 50 — almost all civilians, though the deal also commits Hamas to freeing all living female soldiers in Phase 1. Hamas will release living hostages first, but could release some bodies if they don't have enough living hostages in this category. Male soldiers are not expected to be released in the first phase. "This week we were moved to watch images of mothers embracing their daughters, but our hearts break thinking that my son Nimrod and other men remain behind, and each day they're there poses a real danger to their lives," said Vicky Cohen, whose son Nimrod Cohen is among the hostages.

"The worry that the deal won't be fully implemented gnaws at us all. All senior officials openly say that stopping the deal means a death sentence for those left behind." Under the terms of the deal, Palestinians in Gaza will have more freedom of movement from the north to the south of the enclave.

US Prez targets California water policy as he prepares to tour LA fire damage

Washington (PTI): As President Donald Trump prepares to tour wildfire damage in California, he's zeroing in on one of his frequent targets for criticism: State water policy. Since the fires broke out Jan 7, Trump has used social media and interviews to accuse the state of sending too much water to the Pacific Ocean instead of south toward Los Angeles and highlighted how some hydrants ran dry in the early hours of the firefight in Pacific Palisades.

In the first hours of his second term, Trump called on federal officials to draft plans to route more water to the crop-rich Central Valley and densely populated cities in the southern part of the state. Two days later he threatened to withhold federal disaster aid unless California leaders change the state's approach on water.

Here's a look at the facts behind Trump's comments and what power the president has to influence California water: In general, most of the state's

water is in the north, while most of its people are in the drier south.

Los Angeles, the nation's second largest city, depends on drawing water from elsewhere. Meanwhile the relatively dry Central Valley is home to fertile land where much of the nation's fruits and vegetables are grown.

Two complex systems of dams and canals channel rain and snowmelt from the mountains in the north and route it south. One is managed by the federal government and known as the Central Valley Project, while the other is operated by the state of California and known as the State Water Project.

Both transport water through the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, an estuary that provides critical habitat to fish and wildlife including salmon and the delta smelt, one of Trump's fascinations.

Southern California gets about half its water from local supplies such as groundwater,

according to the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, a regional water wholesaler. Metropolitan provides the rest of the water from state supplies and the federally managed Colorado River system.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power also manages its own aqueducts that draw water from the eastern Sierra Nevada.

Federal officials guide how much is routed to the delta to protect threatened species and how much goes to Central Valley Project users, mostly farms. That project does not supply water to Los Angeles. State officials are expected to follow the same environmental guidelines, said Caitlin Peterson, a research fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California's Water Policy Centre.

Federal and state officials typically coordinate how they operate those systems. The delta connects inland waterways to the Pacific, and keeping a certain amount of water flowing through helps support fish populations and the waterway itself.

But Trump and others say the state lets too much water go to the ocean rather than cities and farms. His prior administration allowed more water to be directed to the Central Valley and out of the delta. Environmental groups opposed that, saying it would harm endangered species.

Gov Gavin Newsom filed a lawsuit saying the rules would drive endangered fish populations to extinction. There were concerns about the tiny delta smelt, which is seen as an indicator of the waterway's health, as well as chinook salmon and steelhead trout, which return annually from the Pacific to spawn in freshwater rivers. Then-President Joe Biden's administration issued its own rules in December that environmental groups said provided modest improvements over those of the first Trump administration.



Caretakers release panda cubs at a playground to make public debut ahead of Chinese Lunar New Year at Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding in Chengdu in southwestern China's Sichuan Province on Thursday.

UK MP flays 'Emergency' film screening disruption by 'Khalistani terrorists'

London (PTI): An Opposition Conservative Party Member of Parliament has urged the UK Home Secretary to intervene after his constituents in north-west London were threatened by "masked Khalistani terrorists" who burst into a screening of Kangana Ranaut's film 'Emergency'. Bob Blackman told the House of Commons that similar disruption of the screenings of the "very controversial" film took place in Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Slough, Staines and Manchester. It has resulted in the Vue and Cineworld cinema chains deciding to pull the film from many theatres in the UK. "On Sunday, many of my constituents gathered and paid for a screening of the film 'Emergency' in the Harrow

Vue cinema. At about 30 or 40 minutes into the screening of the film, masked Khalistani terrorists burst in, threatened members of the audience and forced the screening to end," Blackman said in Parliament on Thursday.

The film is very controversial, and I am not commenting on its quality or content, but I defend the right of my constituents and other members' constituents to be able to view it and make a decision on it. It covers the period when Indira Gandhi was the prime minister of India," he said.

The MP noted that there are certain views in the UK that it is an "anti-Sikh film" but asserted that his constituents should be able to judge for themselves

and not be "threatened by thugs who want to disrupt democratic opportunities to see public films."

"May we have a statement from the Home Secretary (Yvette Cooper) next week on what will be done to ensure that people who want to see such films, which have been passed by censors, can do so in peace and harmony? I absolutely defend the right of people to demonstrate outside cinemas, but not to disrupt viewings," he added.

Leader of the Commons Lucy Powell responded on behalf of the Labour Party government by saying that Blackman had raised a "very important matter about the relationship between free speech and the right to protest peacefully".

US arrests 538 illegal immigrant criminals

Washington (PTI): The US has arrested 538 illegal immigrant criminals, including a suspected terrorist, and several illegals convicted of sex crimes against minors, the White House has said.

In a series of posts on X on Thursday, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said the Trump administration also deported hundreds of illegal immigrant criminals via military aircraft. "The largest massive deportation operation in history is well underway. Promises made. Promises kept," she said. Leavitt said, "The Trump Administration arrested 538 illegal immigrant criminals including a suspected terrorist, four members of the Tren de Aragua gang, and several illegals convicted of sex crimes against minors."

Underlining that deportation flights have begun, she asserted that President Donald Trump is "sending a strong and clear message to the entire world: if you illegally enter the United States of America, you will face severe consequences".

The Republican-led House on Wednesday gave final approval to a bill requiring the detention of unauthorised immigrants accused of theft and violent crimes. This marks the first legislation for President Trump to sign, aligning with his plans to crack down on illegal immigration, which has received some bipartisan support. Trump on Wednesday also issued executive orders aimed at sealing the US-Mexico border and deporting millions of immigrants without permanent legal status.

Government approves ₹500 Crore capital infusion in IFCI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Domestic financial institution IFCI on Friday said the government has approved ₹500 crore capital infusion in the company through the preferential issue of shares. The Department of Financial Services has conveyed sanction of the President of India to release funds of ₹500 crore to IFCI Ltd towards subscription to the share capital during FY 2024-25, the state-owned entity said in a regulatory filing. Following this, the meeting of the board of directors of the company is called on January 29, 2025, to consider the Preferential Issue of equity shares to the central government, subject to the approval of shareholders, stock exchanges and such other regulatory authorities



As may be required. With the infusion, the government's holding in the company is expected to further increase from the existing 71.72 per cent as of September 2024. The capital infusion plan for IFCI was approved through the passage of the first Supplementary Demand for Grants for 2024-25 in the

Lok Sabha in December. The Industrial Finance Corporation of India was set up by the government on July 1, 1948, as the first development financial institution in the country. The Finance Ministry, in November 2024, in principle approved the 'Consolidation of IFCI Group', which entails the merger/amalgamation of

IFCI Limited and Stock Holding Corporation of India Limited and other group companies. As per the proposal, Stock Holding Corporation of India Ltd, IFCI Factors Ltd, IFCI Infrastructure Development Ltd and IIDL Realtors Ltd will merge with IFCI Ltd. Further, Stock Holding Services Ltd, IFCI Financial Services Ltd, IFIN Commodities Ltd and IFIN Credit Ltd will be merged into a single entity, which will be a direct subsidiary of the consolidated listed entity. Additionally, Stock Holding Management Services Ltd, Stock Holding Securities IFSC Ltd, IFIN Securities Finance Ltd, IFCI Venture Capital Funds Ltd and MPCON Ltd shall be direct subsidiaries of the consolidated listed entity that is IFCI.

FM Sitharaman takes part in customary halwa ceremony

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Friday participated in a traditional 'halwa' ceremony, marking the final stage for the preparation of Union Budget 2025-26 to be unveiled on February 1 in the Lok Sabha. The ceremony is a customary ritual in which traditional dessert 'halwa' is prepared and served to officials and staff members of the finance ministry who are involved in the preparation of the budget. It is organised in the basement of North Block, which houses the ministry in the national capital and is attended by the finance minister and other high-ranking officials. According to sources, the Finance Minister participated in the ceremony and also took a round of the Budget Press and reviewed the preparations besides extending her best wishes to



the officials concerned. Sitharaman is going to present Budget 2025-26, the eighth straight budget in a row, on the backdrop of GDP growth moderating to 6.4 per cent in the financial year as against 8.2 per cent recorded in the previous fiscal. Like the previous four full Union Budgets and one Interim, the full Union Budget 2025-26 will also be delivered in paperless form. All the Union Budget documents, including the Annual Financial Statement

(commonly known as Budget), Demand for Grants (DG), Finance Bill etc. As prescribed by the Constitution, will be available on the 'Union Budget Mobile App' for hassle-free access to Budget. Besides Sitharaman, Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary and other senior officials, including Finance Secretary Tuhin Kanta Pandey, Economic Affairs Secretary Ajay Seth and other senior officials were present at the ceremony.



RBI penalises J and K Bank, Bank of India, Canara Bank

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank on Friday said it has penalised Jammu and Kashmir Bank, Bank of India, and Canara Bank for deficiencies in regulatory compliance. Jammu and Kashmir Bank has been penalised Rs 3.31 crore for contravention of certain norms related to financial inclusion - access to banking Services - Basic Savings Bank Deposit Account (BSBDA), 'Know Your Customer' and 'Loans and Advances - Statutory and Other Restrictions'. In another release, the RBI said Rs 1 crore penalty has been imposed on the Bank of India for non-compliance with certain provisions of the Banking Regulation Act, 1949.

A penalty of Rs 1.63 crore has been imposed on public sector Canara Bank for non-compliance with certain directions on priority sector lending, the interest rate on deposits and financial inclusion - access to banking services - BSBDA, the RBI said. Also, a penalty of Rs 1 lakh has been imposed on Datson Exports, West Bengal for non-compliance with certain directions issued by the RBI on 'Managing Risks and Code of Conduct in Outsourcing of Financial Services by NBFCs'. In each case, the RBI said penalties were based on deficiencies in statutory and regulatory compliance and were not intended to pronounce upon the validity of any transaction or agreement entered into by the entities with their customers.

Insurers expect tax benefits, concessions for healthcare sector in Union Budget

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Insurers are hopeful of a host of tax benefits, including concessions for the insurance and healthcare sectors, from the Union Budget 2025-26 to be unveiled by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1. SBI General Insurance MD and CEO Naveen Chandra Jha said that as India advances toward financial inclusivity and universal healthcare, the upcoming Budget is expected to further strengthen the health insurance sector. Initiatives like Bima Sugam, designed to achieve the goal of 'Insurance for All' by 2047, are expected to receive regulatory and fiscal support to address the protection gap, he noted. "Additionally, the budget is likely to focus on expanding access in underserved regions through government-private partnerships, targeted subsidies, and advancements in digital infrastructure," Jha added.

Bajaj Allianz Life MD and CEO Tarun Chugh said India's economic growth presents immense opportunities for the insurance sector to enhance financial resilience. "Aligning tax deduction of life insurance annuity products with the National Pension Scheme (NPS) and addressing the issue of tax on principal component on annuity products can evolve retirement needs effectively," he added. Chugh also made a case for the introduction of a separate tax deduction for term insurance and extending the tax deduction on life insurance premiums under the new tax regime. According to the Annual Report of the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai), the country's insurance penetration in 2023-24 was 3.7 per cent compared to 4 per cent in 2022-23. The penetration for life insurance industry marginally declined from 3 per cent in 2022-23 to 2.8 per cent during 2023-24. The penetration with respect



to the non-life insurance industry remained the same at 1 per cent during 2023-24. Subrata Mondal, MD and CEO of IFFCO Tokio General Insurance said the Union Budget provides an essential opportunity for the government to implement reforms that can address industry challenges and encourage the broader adoption of insurance products. One key expectation is the enhancement of tax incentives for policyholders to promote wider uptake of insurance, he added. Another priority is increasing budgetary support for government-backed insurance schemes, such as the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana and Ayushman Bharat, he added. "They would significantly improve access to insurance for underserved populations, particularly in rural and economically weaker regions," Mondal said. Sameer Bansal, MD & CEO, PNB MetLife, said that while India is a fast-growing economy fuelled by its rising middle-class population of 25-45-year-olds, the proportion of people above the age of 60 is equally increasing at a rapid pace. Financial stability is a cornerstone of a secure future. One of our hopes for the upcoming budget is to see support for pension and annuity plans, which are key financial instruments for the retirement planning needed to create that stability, he added. "Tax support for pension plans offered by life insurers on par with the National

Pension Scheme will provide both greater choice and allow diversification of assets into multiple pension plans," he said. Bansal also urged the government to consider removing GST on premiums for annuity plans to support pensioners and make annuities more affordable and accessible. Universal Sampo General Insurance Managing Director and CEO Sharad Mathur opined that strengthening the insurance sector is essential for driving financial resilience, economic stability, and inclusive growth. With targeted reforms and incentives like the reduction of GST on Health insurance, we can unlock the true potential of insurance, ensuring wider coverage, encouraging innovation, and building a secure future for every individual and business, Mathur said. Srikanth Kandikonda, Chief Financial Officer, ManipalCigna Health Insurance, said that given the rising healthcare costs and the need for higher sum insured cover, the government should reduce the tax burden by increasing the limits under Section 80D of income tax for premiums paid for health insurance to Rs 50,000 for all and Rs 1 lakh for senior citizens. "This is crucial for achieving the government's vision 'Insurance for all by 2047' and would substantially reduce the financial burden on families investing in their health and financial wellbeing," Kandikonda added. During 2023-24, the non-life

Rupee rises 22 paise to close at 86.22 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Rupee appreciated 22 paise to close at 86.22 against the US dollar on Friday, as a decline in the US dollar index supported investor sentiments. Forex traders said weak crude oil prices also boosted the local unit, while sustained foreign fund outflows weighed on the local unit. Traders further noted that the upcoming Union Budget will play a crucial role in shaping market sentiment and the rupee's trajectory. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened on a strong note at 86.31 against the greenback. During the day, the local unit touched an intraday high of 86.16 and a low of 86.36. It finally closed at 86.22, rising 22 paise against the US dollar from previous close. On Thursday, the rupee declined 9 paise to settle at 86.44 against the US dollar. Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst - Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities, said the rupee strengthened this week as the dollar index saw a



significant decline. He said the drop in the dollar came after US President Donald Trump's oath taking on January 20, while concerns over heavy tariffs on China were alleviated after no such drastic measures were announced. This brought relief to global markets and supported emerging market currencies like the rupee. "Adding to the rupee's strength was a softer trend in crude prices, which reduced import pressure and supported the domestic currency. The rupee is likely to remain in a range of 85.80-86.50, with further movement depending on global cues, crude price trends,

and any fresh policy signals from the Indian government," Trivedi said. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading down 0.56 per cent to 107.44. The Dollar Index has recently surged, reaching a high of 110, fuelled by escalating uncertainty surrounding the "Trump factor". However, this rally in the Dollar Index is unlikely to be sustained as global uncertainties subside and Trump-related risks diminish, CR Forex Advisors - MD Amit Pabari said. Moreover, at the World Economic Forum in Davos,

Switzerland, US President Donald Trump called for an immediate interest rate cut by the Federal Reserve, a move that will generate a negative sentiment for the DXY, Pabari added. Meanwhile, Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, rose 0.47 per cent to USD 78.66 per barrel in futures trade. Brent oil was trading at USD 78.03 per barrel as Trump asked Saudi to lower prices so that he could make Russia stop the war. He has also threatened sanctions against Russia if they do not get out of the war, Anil Kumar Bhansali, Head of Treasury and Executive Director Finrex Treasury Advisors LLP, said. In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex fell 329.92 points, or 0.43 per cent, to settle at 76,190.46 points, while the Nifty declined 113.15 points, or 0.49 per cent, to 23,092.20 points. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) remained net sellers in the capital markets on Friday, as they offloaded shares worth Rs 2,758.49 crore, according to exchange data.

CBIC notifies rules for entities to get TIN

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Entities that are not required to get a GST registration but are required to make a tax payment under the GST Act provision can now obtain a Temporary Identification Number (TIN). The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) has notified an amendment to GST rules to issue TIN to entities that are not required to register under the GST Act but need to make payments under some specific provision. Under Goods and Services Tax (GST) rules, registration is mandatory for businesses with an annual turnover of ₹40 lakh and ₹20 lakh in the manufacturing and services sectors, respectively. "Where a person is not liable to registration under the Act



but is required to make any payment under the provision of the Act, the proper officer may grant the said person a temporary identification number," CBIC said while introducing Rule 16A in Central GST Rules. The decision to issue TIN to entities that are otherwise not required a GST registration was taken by the GST council in its meeting last month. This would ensure smooth tax payments while reducing the compliance burden on those who do not regularly engage in taxable activities.

AIMTC urges government to address challenges faced by transport sector

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC) national president Harish Sabharwal on Friday asked the government to address issues like exorbitant increase in toll tax rates and misuse of the e-challan system. The charge handover and oath taking ceremony of the newly elected office bearers of AIMTC was held on Friday, where Amritlal Madan, the outgoing President of AIMTC, officially passed on his responsibilities to the newly elected president Sabharwal and his team. AIMTC in a statement said some of the key issues that will be high on Sabharwal's agenda include abolition of border checkpoints in the states especially in



Maharashtra, Karnataka and Chhattisgarh. The truckers body said exorbitant increase in toll tax rates, checking misuse of E-challan system and impractical ban on 10-year old diesel vehicles in Delhi-NCR are also on

agenda of the newly-elected president of AIMTC. AIMTC also demanded that the government should constitute 'Drivers Samajik Suraksha Welfare Board' with representatives from AIMTC. It also demanded that drivers

should be covered in the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) and Ayushman Bharat Yojana. According to the statement, the transportation sector is a key contributor to India's economy, accounting for approximately 7.7 per cent of India's GDP (PPP adjusted). AIMTC also announced that every year the 24th Day of January will be celebrated as 'National Drivers Day'. In 1936, AIMTC was established as a non-political, not-for-profit apex body representing India's road transport sector in both cargo and passenger segments. It encompasses over 95 lakh truckers, 50 lakh passenger vehicle operators, and 3,500 associations nationwide, impacting over 20 crore people directly or indirectly.

Used-car sales in India to cross one crore annual mark by 2030: Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian used-car market is expected to cross 1 crore sales mark annually by 2030 with offtakes increasing across both urban and smaller towns, according to a report by CARS24. As per the 'Gear of Growth: The 2024 Indian Used-Car Market Report', Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi are driving the country's used-car boom. "The market is projected to grow from 4.6 million sales in CY23 to a whopping 10.8 million by CY30, cruising ahead with an impressive CAGR of 13 per cent," CARS24 Co-Founder Gajendra Jangid said. As the customer preferences change for more affordable and dependable options, the



used-car market is witnessing an uptick vis-a-vis the new car market, he added. As per the report, SUVs continue to dominate the used car market with a share of 16.7 per cent in 2024. Their spacious design, versatility, and premium appeal make them a favourite across both urban and rural markets, it noted. The report highlighted that the post-COVID era has seen a significant shift in consumer preferences, with 12 per cent

of car buyers prioritising personal mobility for convenience and safety over shared transportation. Maruti Suzuki Swift has become the most sought-after model across both metro and non-metro cities, the report said. Additionally, models like the Hyundai Santro, Tata Tiago NRG, and Maruti Wagon R have consistently delivered exceptional resale value, solidifying their popularity among budget-conscious and value-driven buyers, the report said. As per the report, financing for new cars has seen significant growth, climbing from 60 per cent in 2010 to 84 per cent in 2024, highlighting the increasing consumer reliance on loans for vehicle ownership.

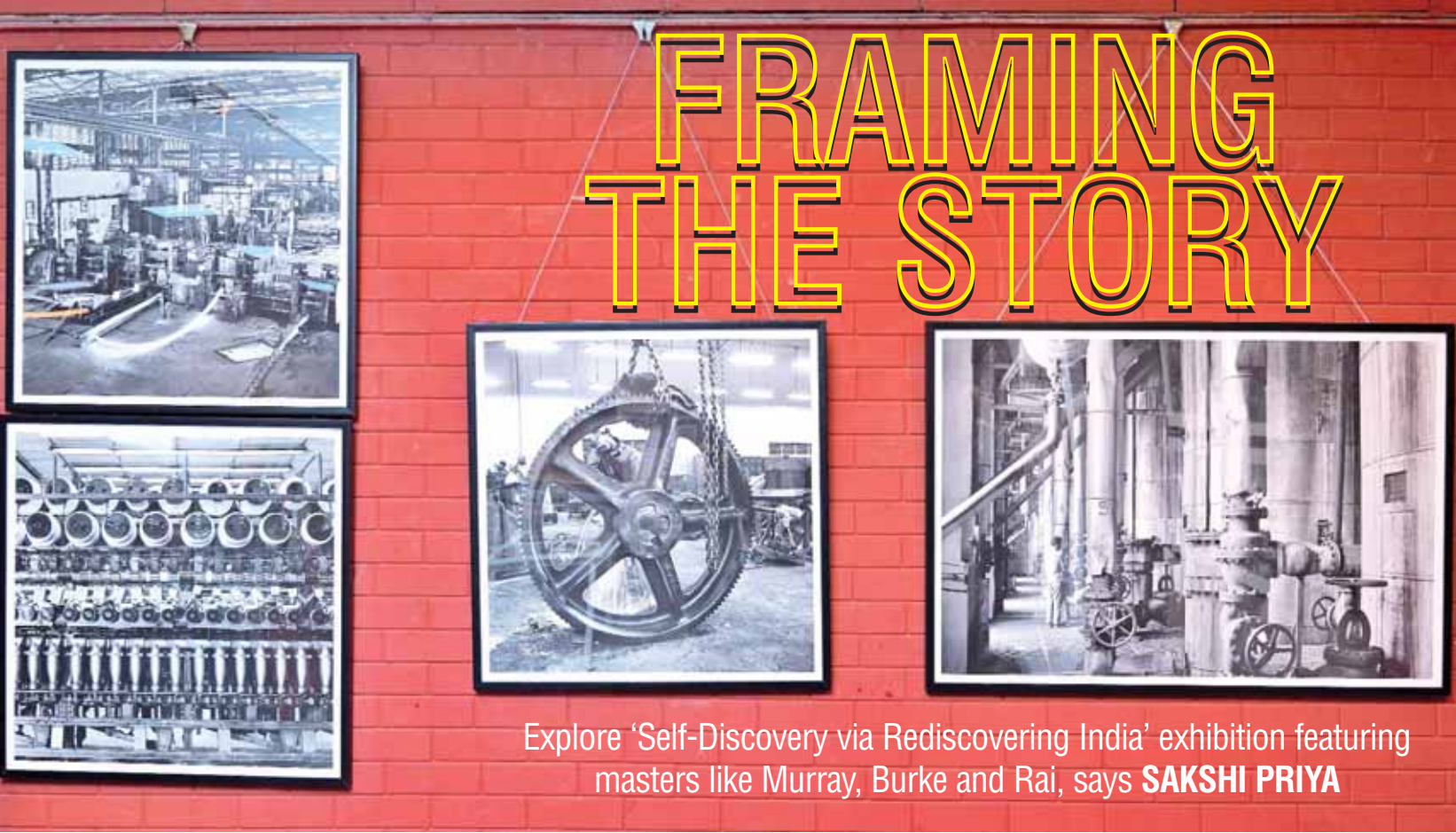
INBRIEF

AMPHENOL LAUNCHES TWO MADE-IN-INDIA TECH SOLUTIONS

Amphenol, a world leader in interconnect solutions for Communications, Mobile Consumer Products, RF, Optical, Broadband and Commercial electronics markets, today ushered into the next era of sustainable technology solutions with the launch of DuraSwap Concentric Connectors and Type 6 Charging Gun solution designed and manufactured in India at the country's premier battery technology showcase, the Bharat Battery Show 2025 organised under the aegis of Bharat Mobility Global Expo 2025, at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi.

WORKSHOP ON BEAUTY FOR BETTER LIFE

AMRITSAR: Directorate of Placement and Career Enhancement of Guru Nanak Dev University in coordination Life Long Learning Department organised a workshop on the topic of "Beauty for Better Life" under the CSR of Loreal implemented by Naandi Foundation - Mahindra Pride classroom. Workshop offered 40 hours of free training for Cosmetology and Beauty culture to the students of Life Long Learning Department. The students were trained on the said domain and life skills. More than 50 students have undergone the skill training from an Industry expert.



FRAMING THE STORY

Explore 'Self-Discovery via Rediscovering India' exhibition featuring masters like Murray, Burke and Rai, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

becomes evident how photography has documented India's evolution. Early works by pioneers like *Linnaeus Tripe* and *Samuel Bourne* provide a visual history of India's landscape and architecture. Their photographs are windows into a bygone era, evoking a sense of nostalgia for a time that is both familiar and distant. The collection doesn't just stop at capturing landscapes or monuments, it explores the lives of people, the complex relationships between humans, animals and nature and the political shifts that have shaped the country. Works by contemporary masters like *Raghu Rai* and *Jyoti Bhatt* add a modern perspective, demonstrating how photography has continued to evolve as an art form while remaining true to its roots as a medium for storytelling. The exhibition's focus on India's cinematic and political history further enhances its significance. Photographs from the sets of iconic films, as well as snapshots from key political



Photography has a way of preserving moments, not just in images but in emotions, in stories and in history. Stepping into the *Self-Discovery via Rediscovering India* exhibition, curated by *Neville Tuli*, feels like embarking on a personal journey through time. Hosted by the *Tuli Research Centre for India Studies (T.R.I.S.)*, the collection showcases photographs that capture the essence of India, spanning over a century. This third installment of the series presents a stunning collection of photographs that bring together India's rich cultural heritage, its landscapes, and the people who have shaped its story. The exhibition offers a unique opportunity to experience not only the visual beauty of India but the depth of its historical and emotional connections. The collection highlights some of the earliest photographs from the mid-1800s, including *Dr. John Murray's Bishessur Nath Temple, Benares (1858)*. The albumen print, preserved in its pristine form, speaks to the timeless spirituality of Varanasi. Similarly, *Colin Roderick Murray's Jagmandar Water-Palace at Udaypur (1873)* captures the reflective beauty of Rajasthan, where the delicate interplay of water and architecture tells its own story. As one moves through the exhibition, it



moments, provide an intimate look into the country's cultural and social landscape. These images not only reflect history but also shape the way we remember it. With access to an extensive digital archive containing over 22,000 photographs, the exhibition offers a deeper dive into India's history, allowing visitors to explore beyond the gallery walls. This combination of physical and digital resources provides a comprehensive view of India's rich visual heritage. The *Self-Discovery via Rediscovering India Part III* exhibition is a reflection of India itself. It is an invitation to reconnect with the nation's history, to see it through the eyes of those who have captured its most defining moments. For anyone interested in understanding the soul of India, this exhibition is a rare and valuable opportunity to experience the country's past, present and future through the lens of some of the greatest photographers.

PHOTOS : PANKAJ KUMAR

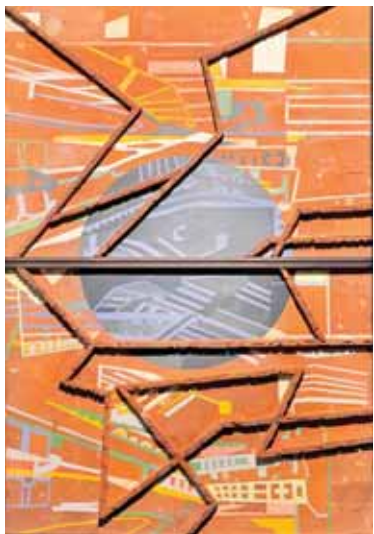


ART BEYOND THE CITY

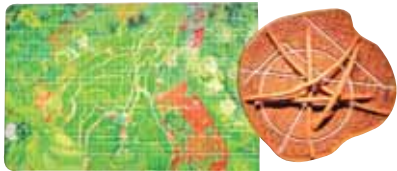


By **SAKSHI PRIYA**

In *Terraform*, *M. Pravat* invites us to walk through a world that feels both familiar and unsettlingly fragmented. This solo exhibition, hosted at STIR Gallery, Delhi, is an ambitious exploration of how our built environments intersect, clash and coexist with nature. By using materials like bricks, pigment, dust and LED lights, *Pravat* creates pieces that feel like echoes of urban landscapes, half-built, half-ruined and wholly captivating. Walking into the gallery feels like stepping into a suspended reality. The sculptures and installations seem to hold secrets, each fragment whispering stories of cities in transition. *Pravat's* work doesn't just replicate the urban environment; it deconstructs it, laying bare the tensions between construction and destruction, between human ambition and nature's quiet defiance. As I moved through the space, I found myself reflecting on my own relationship with the city, its noise, its chaos and its beauty.



What struck me most was how each piece felt alive, as if caught mid-metamorphosis. There's a raw, unpolished energy to the work that mirrors the constant flux of modern life. *Pravat* has a remarkable ability to take the ordinary, bricks, stone, dust



land elevate it into something profound. The interplay of light and shadow adds another layer, creating moments that feel almost cinematic, as though you're watching the city breathe. But beneath the aesthetic appeal lies a deeper message. *Terraform* is a powerful commentary on the relentless pace of urbanisation and its cost to the natural world. *Pravat's* art is not preachy; instead, it nudges you gently, encouraging introspection. It's a reminder that we are living in a delicate balance, one that we often take for granted. For me, the most thought-provoking aspect of the exhibition was its sense of incompleteness. These aren't polished, finished works, they're intentionally raw, mirroring the way cities are always in a state of becoming. It's both unsettling and oddly hopeful, a

expression to human resilience and the possibility of change. *Pravat's* ability to turn complex themes into visceral experiences is what makes this exhibition so memorable. *Pravat's Terraform* goes beyond being a traditional art exhibition. It's an immersive experience that urges us to pause and reflect on the way we shape and inhabit the world around us. It encourages a deeper look at the delicate balance between creation and destruction, challenging us to rethink our relationship with the spaces we build and the nature we often overlook. As the artist explained, "This landscape is actually magical lands, a digital landscape. I'm inspired by the digital format and I started rendering a digital feeling. When you see it from a distance, it looks consciously faded, like it's mathematically exercised in certain ways, cutting your land and developing your shape. The challenge is how I mixed everything together, where contrast exists between the elements, and people should think about why this context has changed."



Steps of Serenity

By **TEAM VIVA**

In moments where words cannot express the depth of emotion, dance becomes a powerful form of communication. *Samaya Chauhan's Rangapravesham* performance in New Delhi was a beautiful example of this truth. At just sixteen, *Samaya's* talent shone brightly, captivating the audience and bringing to life the rich tradition of Kuchipudi. The evening marked her transition from a student to a full-fledged performer, celebrating her growth as an artist. The recital opened with the graceful *Ganpati Vandana*, a prayer to Lord Ganesha, followed by *Dashavtar*, in which *Samaya* depicted the ten avatars of Lord Vishnu. Through her precise footwork and expressive movements, she brought each avatar's story to life. A particularly emotional part of the performance was *Saanson Ki Maala pe Simrun Main Pii Ka Naam*, choreographed by *Padma Bhushan Shri Raja Reddy*, where *Samaya* beautifully expressed the spiritual

connection between two souls. The performance concluded with *Tarangam*, in which *Samaya* danced on the rim of a brass plate, telling stories of *Lord Krishna's* childhood. The complexity of the rhythmic patterns and *Samaya's* graceful footwork demonstrated her technical skill and deep understanding of the dance form. *Dr. Aseem Chauhan*, Chancellor of Amity University, presented a Vote of Thanks, saying, "The essence of today's incredible performance by my daughter *Samaya* is the notion of Guru Shishya Parampara, the sacred bond between the Guru and his disciple." This connection was evident in the performance, with *Samaya* drawing on the teachings and guidance of her esteemed gurus, *Padma Bhushan Shri Raja Reddy*, *Smt. Radha Reddy* and *Smt. Kaushalya Reddy*. The evening was a celebration of culture, tradition and the bond between mentor and disciple. *Samaya's* performance highlighted the beauty of Kuchipudi, reminding the audience of the timeless connection between dance, history and emotion.



BRM 2025: UNITING CULTURES THROUGH THEATRE



By **TEAM VIVA**

The *National School of Drama (NSD)* is set to host the 25th edition of *Bharat Rang Mahotsav (BRM)* from 28 January to 16 February 2025, marking a significant milestone in its history as the world's largest theatre festival. For the first time, the festival will expand beyond India, with performances in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Kathmandu, Nepal, alongside 11 Indian cities including Bengaluru, Jaipur and Ranchi. Themed *One Expression, Supreme Creation*, BRM 2025 will feature over 200 productions from nine countries, including Russia, Germany and Taiwan, creating a

global platform for collaboration and cultural exchange. Renowned actor and NSD alumnus *Rajpal Yadav* has been named the *Rang Doot* (Festival Ambassador) of this year's event. The festival will also emphasise inclusivity by featuring productions involving marginalised communities such as *Santhal tribes, sex workers, transgender persons and children*. Virtual performances under the initiative *Vishwa Jan Rang* will include NRIs and youth from all seven continents. NSD Director *Shri Chittaranjan Tripathy* said, "Bharat Rang Mahotsav has evolved into a global celebration of theatre, providing a platform to share and celebrate

diverse creative expressions. With its expanded reach, this year's festival sets a new benchmark." BRM 2025 will also include director-audience dialogues, masterclasses, seminar and cultural experiences like folk and traditional performances, Rang Haat exhibitions and a vibrant food bazaar. The Opening Ceremony at Kamani Auditorium, New Delhi, will feature Rang Sangeet, a musical performance by the NSD Repertory Company, as part of celebrations marking NSD's 65th anniversary and the Repertory's 60th year. With its unique blend of global outreach, inclusivity, and cultural immersion, BRM 2025 promises to be a landmark event in the world of theatre.

Bumrah, Jadeja and Jaiswal named in ICC Test Team of the Year

PTI ■ DUBAI

Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, veteran all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja and young opener Yashasvi Jaiswal deservedly found a place in the ICC's Test Team of the Year 2024 that featured four Englishmen with Australian Pat Cummins as its captain. The team also had two New Zealanders, including the redoubtable Kane Williamson. Cummins was the lone Australian to make the all-star XI. Bumrah was nothing short of magical in 2024, dominating every team and every batter he bowled to. He became the first bowler to average under 20 with a minimum of 200 wickets in Test cricket, solidifying his place in history. In total, Bumrah took 71 wickets in 2024 at an astonishing average of 14.92, finishing as the highest wicket-taker in Test cricket for the year. Thirty two of these scalps came in the

recent Border-Gavaskar series against Australia, which India lost 1-3. He began the year with a stellar performance against England, taking 19 wickets in four matches, including a remarkable nine-wicket haul in Visakhapatnam. At home against Bangladesh, he further extended his tally with 11 wickets in just two games. Although his outing against New Zealand was subdued, where he picked up three wickets, it was against Australia that Bumrah truly cemented his legacy as one of the greatest bowlers of all time. Jadeja, meanwhile, scored 527 runs in 2024 at an average of 29.27 and picked up 48 wickets at an impressive average of 24.29. Jaiswal established himself as a premier Test opener and a standout figure in Indian batting during 2024. After a challenging series in South Africa, he made an impressive comeback in the home series against England,



amassing a staggering 712 runs. This included two double centuries and three fifties, showcasing his dominance. The 23-year-old left-handed batter continued his fine form with three half-centuries in four innings as India thrashed Bangladesh at home. He was also one of the few bright spots in an otherwise disappointing series for India, as New Zealand achieved a historic whitewash on Indian soil. In the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, Jaiswal demonstrated his class with a magnificent 161 in the second innings at Perth, bouncing back strongly after a first-innings duck. He finished as India's top scorer in the series, accumulating 391 runs. Over the calendar year, Jaiswal scored a remarkable 1,478 runs at an impressive average of 54.74, a tally second only to England's Joe Root (1,556 runs in 2024 at an average of 55.57), who was also named in the ICC

all-star team. Williamson was also one of the stand-out performers in 2024 as he accumulated 1,013 runs in 2024 at an outstanding average of 59.58, making him the sixth-highest run-scorer of the year. Sri Lanka's Kamindu Mendis also figured in the team after his 1,049 runs in 2024 at an extraordinary average of 74.92. Cummins led his team to series victories against the West Indies, New Zealand, and most notably India. He took 37 wickets in 2024 at an average of 24.02 and scored 306 runs, averaging 23.53. ICC Test Team of the Year 2024: Pat Cummins (c) (Australia), Yashasvi Jaiswal (India), Ben Duckett (England), Kane Williamson (New Zealand), Joe Root (England), Harry Brook (England), Kamindu Mendis (Sri Lanka), Jamie Smith (wk) (England), Ravindra Jadeja (India), Matt Henry (New Zealand), Jasprit Bumrah (India).

Zverev in Australian Open final as injured Djokovic left

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Spectators booed an injured Novak Djokovic as he left the court in Rod Laver Arena after quitting one set into his Australian Open semifinal against Alexander Zverev on Friday. Dealing with a what he said was a torn muscle, Djokovic lost the opener 7-6 (5) when he put a forehand volley into the net, then began shaking his head and immediately walked over to shake Zverev's hand. The 37-year-old Djokovic packed up his equipment and walked off toward the locker room, pausing to respond to the jeers by giving two thumbs-up. At his news conference, Djokovic said the pain in his taped left leg was "getting worse and worse." He hurt it during his quarterfinal victory over Carlos Alcaraz on Tuesday night. "I knew," Djokovic said, "even if I won the first set, it was going to be a huge uphill battle for me." He was bidding for an 11th



championship at the Australian Open and record 25th Grand Slam title overall. But this is the second time in the past four major tournaments he was unable to finish because of an injury: He withdrew from last year's French Open before the quarterfinals because he tore the meniscus in his right knee during a match. Djokovic underwent surgery in Paris and, less than two months later, reached the final at Wimbledon, then won a gold medal for Serbia at the Paris Olympics. The number two-seeded

Zverev reached his first title match at Melbourne Park and on Sunday will face the winner of Friday's second semifinal between number one Jannik Sinner of Italy, the defending champion, and number 21 Ben Shelton of the United States. Zverev, a 27-year-old German, is a two-time runner-up at other major tournaments, losing finals in five sets at the 2020 U.S. Open and 2024 French Open. "My goal is still to compete with the big guys and to compete for these kind of tournaments and try to win them," Zverev said.

"For that, I need to get better. I need to improve on the court. I need to improve physically." During his on-court interview, Zverev pleaded with the fans not to give Djokovic a hard time. "I know that everybody paid for tickets and everybody wants to see hopefully a great five-set match," he said. "But you've got to understand - Novak Djokovic is somebody that has given this sport, for the past 20 years, absolutely everything of his life." The only set of Djokovic vs. Zverev lasted one hour, 21 minutes and included 19 points that lasted nine strokes or more apiece. The first four games alone lasted 31 minutes, slowed both by the lengthy baseline exchanges and Djokovic's deliberate pacing between points, taking the 25-second serve clock down to - and occasionally slightly beyond - the full allotment. The match was grueling - and would have been even without dealing with a leg problem that initially became an issue late in the first set against Alcaraz.

Smriti Mandhana, Deepti Sharma in ICC women's ODI Team of the Year



PTI ■ DUBAI

Star batter Smriti Mandhana and all-rounder Deepti Sharma were on Friday named in the ICC women's ODI Team of the Year 2024 but none of their male counterparts found a place in the men's side that was dominated by Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The women's all-star team

has three players from England, two Australians, two South Africans and one each from Sri Lanka and West Indies, besides the two Indians. South African batter Laura Wolvaardt, who scored 697 runs in 12 matches in 2024, was named captain of the ICC team. The men were, however, absent from the ICC XI and that can be attributed to lack

of ODI engagements for the country last year. India played only three ODIs -- an away series against Sri Lanka --, losing two of them while the third one ended in a tie. The 28-year-old Mandhana accumulated 747 runs in 13 matches to be the highest run-scorer in women's ODIs in 2024. She is also in the running for the ICC Women's ODI Cricketer of the Year award. In the home series against South Africa, Mandhana was in sublime form, beginning with back-to-back centuries in the first two ODIs. She narrowly missed a third consecutive ton, falling for 90, though her remarkable tally of 343 runs in the series earned her the Player-of-the-Series award. Mandhana had a shaky start in the first two ODIs against New Zealand in October, but ended the series on a high note with a brilliant century in the final match. With this

hundred, Mandhana became the most prolific century-maker for India in the Women's 50-over format. Deepti scored 186 runs and took 24 wickets in 13 matches in a fine all-round show in 2024. Sub-continent shines in Men's all-star line-up The men's all-star ODI team announced by the ICC features four players from Sri Lanka, three each from Pakistan and Afghanistan and one from the West Indies. Sri Lanka captain Charith Asalanka was named skipper of the ICC team as well for his stupendous batting through the year. In his 16 ODI appearances in 2024, Asalanka scored 605 runs at an average of 50.2 including a century and four fifties. Sri Lanka played 18 ODIs in the year gone by, the highest among all teams, and won 12 of them.

U-19 Women's T20 World Cup: Pakistan, Nepal win fourth place play-off matches

PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR

Pakistan and Nepal were hardly tested on way to winning their fourth-place play-off matches in the ICC Women's U-19 T20 World Cup here on Friday. Pakistan, riding on young pacer Haniah Ahmer's four-wicket haul, crushed Samoa by 52 runs while Nepal got the better of Malaysia by seven wickets in a low-scoring match. Put into bat, Pakistan scored 136/8 with Maham Anees and Fatima Khan scoring 28 and 25 respectively. Norah Salima was the most successful Samoa bowler taking three wickets for 20 runs. Right-arm pacer Haniah then unsettled the Samoan batters, returning with excellent figures of 4/20, while Quratulain Ahsen (2/13) and



Fatima Khan (2/19) were the other wicket-takers as Samoa were all out for 84 in 18.5 overs. Malaysia were off to an inauspicious start with Nepal striking off the very first ball to dismiss Nur Aliya Binti Mohd Hairun for a duck. The team could not recover from the early loss and folded



up for 45 runs with skipper Puja Mahato (4/9) and Rachana Chaudhary (3/5) emerging as the most successful bowlers. In reply Nepal reached 47/3 in 11 overs to complete a seven-wicket victory with Mahato scoring 23 runs. Left-arm spinner Suabika Manivannan took all three wickets.

Indian GM P Iniyam wins title in Malaysia

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Grandmaster Iniyam Panneerselvam clinched the ninth Johor International Open chess tournament title in Malaysia with a dominating performance. The 22-year-old from Erode in Tamil Nadu accumulated 8.5 points in nine games. He finished 1.5 points ahead of his nearest rival, winning against four International Masters and one Grandmaster. The nine-round tournament, which ended on Thursday, had 84 participants from eight countries, out of which 24 were titled players. In fact, at the end of the penultimate round where he beat Indonesian IM Nayaka Buddhidharma, Iniyam had already secured the title as he



was 1.5 points ahead in the points table. Iniyam beat Vietnamese GM Nguyen Van Huy in the final round in an impressive performance. Indian IM VS Raahul and Chinese IM Li Bo finished second and third respectively. Iniyam, who had won the Chennai Open earlier in January, secured 15 rating points from the title win.

Rohit Sharma shows some spark but falls for 28 on Ranji Trophy return

PTI ■ MUMBAI

He pulled Umar Nazir for a trademark six, effortlessly lofted Auqib Nabi and Yuvraj Singh for a couple of more hits over the ropes to give a glimpse of his absolute best. But eventually, a fifty on Ranji comeback was not meant to be for India captain Rohit Sharma who fell for 28 here on Friday. Playing his first game for Mumbai in domestic red-ball cricket in nearly a decade, Rohit's first day on the field was a disaster with the 37-year-old falling for a 19-ball 3 in the opening hour of the Ranji Trophy clash against Jammu Kashmir. But on Friday, Rohit gave a far better account of himself to notch up a fluent 28, his best in first-class cricket since a 52 in the second innings of the

Bengaluru Test against New Zealand last year. It indeed has been that long for Rohit, who has since scored 0, 8, 18, 11, 3, 6, 3 and 9 in subsequent outings against New Zealand and Australia. Back then in mid-October, India were cemented on top of the World Test Championship points table and the house was in complete order for the national side. But it all came crumbling down following defeats to New Zealand and Australia which forced Indian superstars to play domestic cricket. On Friday, he looked for a big one but it wasn't to happen. Rohit's knock of 28 was mixed with hits and misses in the initial stages, which all began with a tough dropped chance by Nazir in the fourth over

when he could not grab a return catch on his follow through. Rohit immediately responded with a pull shot for a six over the square leg. A thick outside edge then flew between the fielder at gully and second slip, and on the final ball Rohit flashed hard and wide to put the ball away for another four on the off-side. Dropped on one, Rohit had raced to 21 off 11 balls at one stage but he remained cautious mostly, even though there were a few times he was beaten. With comparatively no moisture on the second day wicket here at the BKC, J&K bowlers also had to work hard to keep it tight but could not stop Rohit from freeing up his arms for a total of three sixes and two fours.

India keeps eye on Shami's fitness, looks to extend lead against England

PTI ■ CHENNAI

Unruffled by the lingering fitness concerns surrounding Mohammed Shami, the well-oiled machine that is India's T20 team will be eyeing an encore of its opening game performance against a stunned England in the second game of a five-match series, here on Saturday. India lead the rubber 1-0 after a facile seven-wicket victory at the Eden Gardens on Wednesday. The hosts would certainly want to see Shami in action but his inclusion in the eleven, as things stand now, will depend on further evaluation of his fitness. The 34-year-old was expected to feature in the first game and he was actively involved in the nets too, but his comeback was postponed possibly because the management wanted to take a deeper look at his readiness. However, India did not miss Shami much in Kolkata where pacer Arshdeep Singh, with the

new ball, and spinner Varun Chakravarty, in the middle phase, wrecked England, producing impressive spells. The Chepauk spin The Eden pitch had enough help for both quicks and their slower colleagues but the corresponding 22-yard trampoline here could offer more assistance to the spinners, as it often has been the case in the past. India would not be complaining whatever be the nature of the track. The home side boasts of quality and variety in a line-up consisting Varun, vice-captain Axar Patel and Ravi Bishnoi. From England's perspective, they would require much better contributions from experienced spinners Adil Rashid and Liam Livingstone to challenge the Indians. Apart from pacer Jofra Archer, none of the other English bowlers could survive the onslaught of Abhishek Sharma and the mini cameo of Sanju



Samson in the first match. Sanju-Abhishek pair on a roll Since coming together in the T20s last year, Samson and Abhishek have had considerable success, often

giving India a flying start. The desired double-barrel firing has been occasional, but at least one of them has produced the goods rather consistently.

In Kolkata, Abhishek hurt England with a brutal knock, striking at over 230. Samson has three hundreds in the last six innings, and it would not be unrealistic to imagine

these two as the first-choice openers once India hit the road to next year's T20 World Cup at home. They also offer that rare right-hand-left-hand combination at

the top. Here too, the Indian openers will have to give their side a solid start considering the tricky nature of the pitch. England too will hope for a fiery start from their openers to clinch early momentum, as Phil Salt and Ben Duckett jointly made just four runs off seven balls. Time for Surya to shine It's not a matter of grave concern yet but skipper Suryakumar Yadav will be mindful of the fact that he has just two fifties in the previous 11 innings after the T20 World Cup final last year. Further distilled, the stats will show that he has made no significant contributions in the last three matches, including a three-ball duck at Kolkata. But such things often get papered over when the team is on a roll as the reigning T20 World Champions have steamrolled Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and South Africa in their last three assignments.

But he would not want to miss the party for long and will be eyeing a fruitful outing here. Team combination India might not ring in many major changes considering the series is just one-match old, and if Shami is indeed fit to make his international comeback since the 2023 World Cup final, then Nitish Kumar Reddy could make way for him. Keeping in mind the character of Chepauk pitch, two-time world champions England might look to reinforce the spin department, adding young leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed. The visitors have made one like-for-like change to the side by bringing in right-arm pacer Brydon Carse for Gus Atkinson. They have also added another wicketkeeper -- Jamie Smith- to the 12-player squad. His addition has been forced by Jacob Bethell's illness. He might make the playing XI if Bethell does not recover in time.