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MONEY 10
CABINET APPROVES CHANGES
TO LHDC TO INCLUDE GENERIC
VETERINARY MEDICINES

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TRUMP VOWS TO TARIFF INDIA BACK Canada slams US trade war

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■
NEW YORK/WASHINGTON

US President Donald Trump criticised the high tariffs charged by India and other countries, terming them as "very unfair" and announced reciprocal tariffs from April 2 on nations that impose levies on American goods. Trump made these remarks in an address to the Joint Session of the Congress on Tuesday. It was the first address of his second term in the White House. On January 20, Trump was sworn in as the 47th President of the US. "If you don't make your

product in America, however, under the Trump administration, you will pay a tariff and in some cases, a rather large one," Trump said. "Other countries have used tariffs against us for decades and now it's our turn to start using them against those other countries. On average, the European Union, China, Brazil, India, Mexico and Canada - have you heard of them? And countless other nations charge us tremendously higher tariffs than we charge them," Trump said. "It's very unfair. India charges us auto tariffs higher than 100 per cent." In February, President



President Donald Trump gestures as he addresses a joint session of Congress at the Capitol in Washington. PTI

Trump said that his administration would "soon" impose reciprocal tariffs on countries such as India and China, reiterating what he had said during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US capital last month. Trump has made it clear to Prime Minister Modi that India will not be spared from Washington's reciprocal tariffs and emphasised that "nobody can argue with me" on tariff structure. "China's average tariff on our products is twice what we charge them. And South Korea's average tariff is four times higher. Think of that. Four times higher. And we give so much help militarily

and in so many other ways to South Korea. But that's what happens. This is happening by friend and foe," Trump said. "We've been ripped off for decades by nearly every country on earth, and we will not let that happen any longer," Trump said. "Whatever they tariff us, other countries, we will tariff them. That's reciprocal, back and forth," Trump said amid applause from Republican lawmakers. **Continued on page 8**

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■
TORONTO

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Tuesday called American tariffs "very dumb" and said that US President Donald Trump is appeasing Russia while launching a trade war against Canada. In a news conference, Trudeau said that Canada would plaster retaliatory tariffs on more than \$100 Billion of American goods in response to Trump's tariffs. "Today the United States launched a trade war against Canada, their closest partner and ally, their closest friend. At the same time, they are talking about working positively with Russia, appeasing Vladimir Putin, a lying, murderous dictator. Make that make sense," a visibly angry Trudeau said. Trump imposed tariffs against Washington's three biggest trading partners, drawing immediate retaliation from Mexico, Canada and China and sending financial markets into a tailspin. Just after midnight, Trump put 25 per cent taxes, or tariffs, on Mexican and Canadian imports, though he limited the levy to 10 per cent on Canadian energy. "What he wants to see is a total collapse of the Canadian economy because that will make it easier to annex us," Trudeau said. "That is never going to happen. We will never be the 51st state." Trudeau addressed Trump directly by his first name. "I want to speak directly to one

specific American, Donald," Trudeau said. "It's not in my habit to agree with the Wall Street Journal, but Donald, they point out that even though you're a very smart guy, this is a very dumb thing to do." Later Tuesday, US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick said the US would likely meet Canada and Mexico "in the middle", with an announcement coming as soon as Wednesday. Lutnick told Fox Business News that the tariffs would not be passed, but that Trump would reach a compromise. "I think he's going to figure out, you do more, and I'll meet you in the middle in some way," Lutnick said. A senior government official said Trudeau told the premiers of Canada's provinces in a call Tuesday afternoon that he hopes to speak to Trump on Wednesday. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to speak publicly about the call. In a post on Truth Social earlier Tuesday, Trump said: "Please explain to Governor Trudeau, of Canada, that when he puts on a Retaliatory Tariff on the US, our Reciprocal Tariff will immediately increase by a like amount!" Trump has threatened Canada's sovereignty, provoking anger in the country. Canadian hockey fans have been booing the American national anthem at recent NHL and NBA games. Trudeau channelled the betrayal that many Canadians are feeling. **Continued on page 8**

CBI Bofors next CBI signals rail to haul promotion system

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has sent a judicial request to the United States (US) seeking information from private investigator Michael Hershman, who had expressed willingness to share with Indian agencies crucial details about the Rs 64-Crore Bofors bribery scandal of the 1980s, officials said Wednesday. Hershman, head of the Fairfax Group, visited India in 2017 to attend a conference of private detectives. During his stay, Hershman appeared on various platforms, alleging that the investigation into the scam was derailed by the then Congress government and stated he was willing to share details with the CBI. He had claimed in an interview that he was appointed by the Union Finance Ministry in 1986 for investigation of violation of currency control laws and money laundering by Indians abroad and tracking of such assets outside

India and some of them pertained to the Bofors deal. The CBI also approached the Finance Ministry seeking documents pertaining to engagement of Hershman and if any report was submitted by him but the records of that time could not be furnished to the agency. The agency took note of Hershman's claims in several investigations and announced in 2017 that the matter would be investigated according to due process. The need for Letters Rotatory arose because letters and reminders to the US authorities on November 8, 2023, December 21, 2023, May 13, 2024, and August 14, 2024, did not yield any information. A Letter Rotatory is a written request sent by the court of one country to the court of another country to obtain assistance in the investigation or prosecution of a criminal matter. The requests to the Interpol also did not yield any outcome. **Continued on page 8**

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

After several rail officials were nabbed in a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) trap pertaining to cases related to jobs, promotions in the Indian Railway networks, the Railway Board in a high level meeting on Wednesday decided that all departmental promotion examinations for the 13 Lakh rail employees will be done by the Railway Recruitment Board (RRB) via centralised examination through Computer Based Test (CBT) aptitude. Sources in the railways said all zonal railways will have to prepare a calendar for the examination and all examinations will be conducted on the basis of a calendar only. "This has been decided after a long experience of transparent, fair, and highly appreciated examinations conducted by RRB in recent years," sources said. **Continued on page 8**



A day earlier in a massive crackdown the CBI arrested 26 railway officials, including a senior divisional electrical engineer of East Central Railway for allegedly leaking papers of a departmental examination and seized ₹1.17 crore cash during its raids. The railway officials were arrested on Monday night for allegedly leaking papers of

examination for the elevation to posts of chief loco pilot at Mughal Sarai, the agency said, adding the exam was to be conducted on Tuesday. The arrest came just a fortnight after the central probe agency arrested five railway officers, including two of the Indian Railway Personnel Service (IRPS) posted in Vadodara Division, for alleged bribery in favouring candidates in departmental examination, officials said on Wednesday. As of now, there used to be internal vacancies and promotions were 'fixed', which had a huge nexus from top officers to other stakeholders, making it a huge racket and cartelisation for the stakeholders. The decision was taken after the days' meeting reviewed how the RRB is used to conduct examination without any complaints, with all the transparency. **Continued on page 8**

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Naxal as maid nabbed

The Delhi police Crime Branch has arrested a 23-year-old woman Naxal operative from Jharkhand, who had been living in the national capital and working as a domestic helper under a false identity, from Pitampura area of outer Delhi. The accused, identified as "R", had been residing in Pitampura since 2020 and was taken into custody following a crime branch operation based on secret intelligence. Originally, a resident of Village Kudaburu in West Simbhum district of Jharkhand, she was wanted in connection with multiple police encounters and was booked under various sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), Arms Act, Explosives Act, and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, according to Delhi Police. On March 26, 2023, a non-bailable warrant was issued against her by a court in Jharkhand. The alleged Naxalite arrived in Delhi in 2020 and after assuming a false identity took up work as a domestic helper in Noida and various parts of Delhi, eventually settling in

Pitampura. "Based on months of surveillance and intelligence gathering, the crime branch received credible information about the presence of a Maoist extremist in the National Capital Region (NCR)," Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime) Vikram Singh said. The officer further said that on March 4, the team carried out a raid in Maharana Pratap Enclave, Pitampura, resulting in the arrest of the Naxalite. The accused was born into a farming family and was recruited into the CPI (Maoist) faction at the age of 10. "She received intensive training for five years at a camp led by a commander named Ramesh in Jharkhand's Kolhan forest. The training covered handling sophisticated weapons such as INSAS rifles, SLRs, LMGs, hand grenades and .303 rifles," DCP said. In 2016, she joined the CPI (Maoist) extremist group led by Ramesh, whose camp was situated in the hills of the Kolhan forest. At the time, the camp accommodated 300-450 individuals, including 40-50



women, 4-5 children of her age. Her involvement in Naxal activities began when she was 10-years-old. She joined the notorious Naxalite camp Bhakpa Maovadi Ugarvadi Jeevan Kandula. During her time there, she underwent a rigorous and intense training regimen for five years, where she was groomed as a trained Naxalite. Between 2018 and 2020, she actively participated in three encounters with the Jharkhand Police -- first in Kolhan (2018), then in Porahat (2019), and later in Sonua (2020) alongside her company commander, Jeevan

cleaner in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, and various parts of Delhi. She settled in the Pitampura area, where she remained undetected, living discreetly. Multiple FIRs were registered against her at Sonua Police Station, Jharkhand, under serious charges, including criminal conspiracy, attempt to murder, and waging war against the state. She will be produced before the court for further legal proceedings. The arrestee is wanted in case FIR No. 19 dated 11.04.2020, registered under Section 147/148/149/307/353/120B/121/121-A Indian Penal Code, 1860, read with Section 25(1A)/25(1B)(a)/35 Arms Act, read with Section 3/4/17 Explosive Act, read with Section 10/13 Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, Police Station Sonua, Jharkhand. On 26.03.2023, the court of SDJM (P), Chaibasa, Jharkhand, issued a Non-Bailable Warrant for the arrest of the lady accused (R). Accused arrestee "R" has been booked by way of Kalandara under Section 41.1 Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 read with Section 35(1)(C) Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita 2023. **Continued on page 8**

Senior IPS daughter into gold smuggling

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ BENGALURU

The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) on Wednesday said that the gold bars seized from Kannada actress Ranya Rao at the Kempegowda International Airport were valued at ₹12.56 Crore. Rao is the stepdaughter of senior IPS officer Ramachandra Rao, a senior police official said. The DGP-rank officer is currently serving as the Chairman and Managing Director of the Karnataka State Police Housing and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited. Her father Rao said he was not aware of daughter's activities. "She got married four months ago and hasn't visited us since. We are unaware of her or her husband's business dealings. This has come as a huge shock and disappointment. The law will take its course," said Rao, adding "she has let us down." The total seizure in the case stood at ₹17.29 Crore, including assets worth Rs 4.73 Crore, marking a significant blow to organised gold smuggling networks. According to DRI officials, the 14.2 kg haul is one of the largest gold seizures at Bengaluru airport in recent times. In a statement, the Ministry of Finance said the DRI successfully intercepted a passenger carrying foreign-origin gold bars worth ₹12.56 crore at the Kempegowda International Airport, Bengaluru. "Acting on specific intelligence, DRI officers intercepted an Indian woman, aged around 33, who had arrived from Dubai to Bengaluru on an Emirates flight on March 3. Upon examination, gold bars weighing 14.2 kg were



found ingeniously concealed on her person," the statement read. According to the Ministry, the contraband, valued at Rs 12.56 crore, was seized under the provisions of the Customs Act, 1962. "Following the interception, DRI officers searched her residence on Lavelle Road, Bengaluru, where she lives with her husband. The search led to the seizure of gold jewellery worth Rs 2.06 Crore and Indian currency amounting to Rs 2.67 Crore," the statement added. The 32 year old actress was charged under the anti-smuggling provisions of the Customs Act, 1962, and remanded to 14 days of judicial custody. **Continued on page 8**

China raises stakes for India, US

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ BEIJING

China on Wednesday announced a 7.2 per cent increase of its national defence budget totalling to \$249 billion this year amid its hectic efforts to modernise armed forces, including fast paced development of warships and new generation fighter jets. The planned defence expenditure for the country is 1.784665 Trillion yuan (about \$249 billion) this year, according to a draft budget report submitted to China's Parliament by Premier Li Qiang, state-run Xinhua news agency reported. Last year, China increased its defence budget by 7.2 per cent to about \$232 Billion (1.67 Trillion yuan). China has the world's second-largest military budget after the US whose latest defence spending amounted to over \$890 Billion as proposed by President Donald Trump. The Chinese defence spending is amounted to



Chinese President Xi Jinping applauds during the opening session of the National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China. PTI

three times that of India's \$681,210 Crore (\$78.8 Billion). China's defence budget figures are viewed by critics with scepticism in the light of massive military modernisation, including building aircraft carriers, rapid construction of advanced naval ships and modern stealth aircraft being

national defence and military development. Li emphasised on the Chinese President Xi Jinping's core leadership of the ruling Communist Party as well as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the military follow the party leadership. Xi is also the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) which is the overall high command of the military. "We will stay committed to the Party's absolute leadership over the people's armed forces, thoroughly implement the system of ultimate responsibility resting with the chairman of the Central Military Commission, continue improving the political conduct of the military," he said. The Chinese military functioned under the leadership of the Communist Party unlike the armed forces of other countries which functioned under the government. **Continued on page 8**

KASHMIR IN WHITE



Tourists visit Pahalgam after fresh snowfall, in Anantnag district of South Kashmir. PTI

Elusive for 90 days, stray tiger captured

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Forest officials captured a stray tiger in Rehmankhara on Wednesday, following 90 days of intense surveillance that began on December 12, 2024. The elusive tiger had kept the department on edge for three months, with no strategy proving effective until now. The tiger was tranquillised at 6:09 pm after a two-hour operation by the Forest department.

A large crowd gathered to witness the operation, and once subdued, the tiger was transported to the Awadh Forest Range. Villagers celebrated the successful capture with immense relief.

According to reports, the tiger had been resting near the Mithanagar Pulia when the forest team surrounded and tranquillised it. After the first dart was fired, the tiger fled 700 metres, crossing a railway track before reaching the Jugauli forest. Dated a second time, the big cat fell unconscious. Dr Nasir, who was positioned on an elephant, administered the tranquilliser.

DFO, Awadh, Sitanshu Pandey, stated that the darting was successful because the tracking teams had been monitoring the tiger since early morning.

"The teams anticipated the tiger would be resting near Mithanagar Pulia, and that strategy ultimately worked," he explained. The tiger, weighing 200 kg and estimated to be five years old, had been responsible for 25 kills since it first strayed into Rehmankhara. Just hours before its capture, it had made a kill again. Over the past months, the tiger had terrorised 60 villages within a 20-

km radius, making the Central Institute for Subtropical Horticulture its primary territory. Though it moved close to the river, it generally kept its distance from humans. More than 100 personnel were involved in the operation, including officials such as the DFOs of Lakhimpur Kheri, Sitapur, and Awadh, as well as rangers, SDOs, and veterinarians from the Kanpur and Lucknow Zoos.



Forest Minister Arun Kumar Saxena congratulated the team, highlighting that one of the key successes of this operation was that the tiger had not killed any humans.

Chief Wildlife Warden Anuradha Vermuri added that the tiger was currently under observation, and a decision regarding its future would be made soon. The DFO (Awadh) confirmed that the tiger would most likely be released into the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve.

Two killed as car runs over 4 men sleeping on divider

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Two Nepalese individuals were killed, and two others were injured after a high-speed vehicle (Tata Sumo) ran them over while they were sleeping on a divider. The accident occurred around 1 am on Tuesday on Nadwa Road in the Hasanganj police station area. According to ADCP (Central) Manisha Singh, the vehicle lost control after one of its tyres burst, causing the SUV to veer onto the divider. Eyewitnesses reported that the car was travelling at a speed exceeding 100 km/h when the incident took place. The vehicle finally came to a stop after crashing into an iron pole.

The victims, who were sleeping on the roadside divider, were trapped under the vehicle after the crash. Hearing their screams, nearby residents rushed to the scene and pulled the injured out. The police arrived and took the victims to KGMU Trauma Centre, where doctors declared two of them dead.

The driver of the vehicle fled the scene after the crash. According to witnesses, four young men were in the vehicle at the time of the accident. Once the car stopped, all four individuals got out and ran away. One of the suspects was briefly caught by the public but managed to escape during the confusion.

One of the injured, Rajesh Soni, a catering worker from Kapilvastu, Nepal, told the police that the victims, all from the same area, had been sleeping at the spot for several days after working in wedding catering and other temporary jobs. Ashish Tandon, a local rickshaw-puller, was the first to reach the scene and immediately informed the police. He also helped transport the injured to the hospital. Witness Raju confirmed that the car had been travelling at a high speed and noted that all four individuals in the vehicle fled the scene after the crash. The police are currently working to identify the driver. Hasanganj Inspector DK Singh confirmed that the car was registered under the name of Sheikh Ullah Ali from Aminabad.

"We are using CCTV footage and the car's number plate to identify the driver. We are also investigating whether the driver was under the influence of alcohol at the time of the accident," Singh said. The spokesperson further confirmed that the tyre burst was the primary cause of the crash. "Eyewitnesses report that the vehicle was travelling at high speed when the tyre burst, causing it to veer off course and run over the people on the roadside. Local residents responded quickly, rescuing the trapped individuals and contacting the police," the spokesperson added. Meanwhile, a dispute over

dancing to chartbuster tunes played by a DJ at a wedding in Mohanlalganj turned violent when the bridegroom's brother-in-law and his nephew were allegedly attacked and held hostage by members of the bride's family. Victim Rakesh Kumar said he had gone to Gaura village on Monday for the wedding procession of his cousin's brother-in-law, Dharmendra. The procession, which had come from the Maurawan police station area, took a violent turn when Rakesh's nephew, Akash, got into an argument with the bride's relatives while dancing. Saurabh, Rammilan, Pawan, Atul, and Nitin allegedly beat up Akash. When Rakesh intervened, they assaulted him as well. It was alleged that the attackers then dragged Rakesh to their house, where they locked him up and beat him with sticks and iron rods before throwing him out in a bloody state. His family rushed him to the hospital. Rakesh alleged that when he went to the police station on Tuesday morning to file a complaint, officers made him wait for hours. A case was registered only in the evening after he altered his original complaint.

Inspector Amar Singh said a case had been filed against the accused under various sections, including assault, and that a search was underway to apprehend them.

Govt revamping Sangam into year-round global tourist hub

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The extraordinary turnout prompted the Maha Kumbh administration to develop a new roadmap for the Sangam area in the post-fair phase.

Given the steady influx of devotees, the administration has initiated plans to revamp Sangam and its surroundings with improved facilities.

According to ADM, Mela, Vivek Chaturvedi, the infrastructure established during the Maha Kumbh will remain in place until the next Ardh Kumbh in 2031.

"Facilities such as lighting, water ATMs, checked walkways, parking areas, police presence, mobile toilets, changing rooms, and more will continue to serve devotees. Additionally, round-the-clock services, including taxi facilities and food courts, will be introduced with support from a new budget allocation," he said. Chaturvedi also revealed plans to introduce regular aarti ceremonies at the concrete ghats, inspired by the tradition at Varanasi's ghats, to further enhance the spiritual experience for devotees.

The Maha Kumbh has helped shape a powerful triangle of spiritual tourism, connecting Kumbh City, Ayodhya, and Kashi. The continuous flow of devotees, especially after the third and final Amrit Snan on Basant Panchami and even following Mahashivratri, reflects the deep spiritual sentiment of

Maha Kumbh helps boatman earn ₹30 crore in 45 days

Lucknow (PNS): Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath highlighted the remarkable journey of a boatman family from Prayagraj during the UP Assembly's budget session. Many success stories emerged in the 45-day spiritual confluence, but the one that stood out was that of Pintu Mahara, a boatman from the Arail area of Prayagraj, who earned Rs 30 crore in 45 days. Pintu's life took a dramatic turn with one bold decision. Anticipating a massive influx of devotees, he expanded his fleet from 60 to 130 boats ahead of the Maha Kumbh. His success is not an isolated case; the Maha Kumbh brought prosperity to thousands of boatman families, many of whom, after repaying

their loans, are now leading comfortable lives as 'lakh-patis'. Pintu Mahara recalls operating a boat during the Kumbh, organised by the Yogi government in 2019. Based on that experience, he anticipated an even larger influx of devotees for this year's Maha Kumbh. He expanded his family's fleet by purchasing 70 additional boats, bringing the total to 130. This strategic move proved highly rewarding, generating substantial earnings that secured his family's future for generations. For Pintu's mother, Shuklavati Devi, the transformation is a blessing. Recalling the hardships after her husband's demise, she said the Maha Kumbh proved to be a saviour for the family.

Sanatan Dharma. Vijaykant, a visitor from Delhi, shared that he took a holy dip during the Amrit Kaal of Maha Kumbh and returned with the same devotion, even as the crowds began to thin.

Similarly, Shashikant Madeshiya from Damoh, Madhya Pradesh, expressed that the waters of Triveni Sangam hold the same sanctity for him, even after the event concluded.

Efforts to track the number of tourists visiting the Sangam

area began last year. The various temple corridors developed within the city during the Mahakumbh are expected to become new tourist attractions, ensuring a steady flow of visitors year-round.

The overwhelming response to the Hanuman Mandir Corridor and Akshay Vat Corridor near Sangam suggests that a "mini Maha Kumbh" atmosphere will persist throughout the year, further solidifying Prayagraj as a centre for spiritual tourism.

Live-in partner booked for murder after Zomato employee found dead

Lucknow (PNS): The family of Ashish Mishra, a computer operator at food delivery company Zomato, has filed a murder case against four individuals, including his live-in partner, following his suspicious death here.

Ashish, who was found dead under mysterious circumstances on January 9 at RML Hospital, was reportedly found hanging, and his family suspected foul play.

Ashish, originally from Raiwala Hariharpur in Dehradun, had been living with his live-in partner in a rented accommodation in Sector 9, Indiranagar, for the past two and a half years.

At around 8:30 pm on January 9, he called his mother, Vijay Laxmi, and informed her that he no longer wished to marry his live-in partner. Later that night, the family received the shocking news that Ashish had suddenly fallen ill. When relatives arrived at RML Hospital, they discovered his body. Ashish's family, however, raised doubts about the circumstances surrounding his death. They

noticed marks of strangulation on his neck, which they believe indicates he was murdered. In response to a complaint filed by his mother, the police have initiated a murder investigation.

According to Vijay Laxmi, Ashish and his live-in partner had been in a relationship since they met in Haridwar two and a half years ago. The couple had plans to marry on February 15.

The police have registered a case of murder against Ashish's live-in partner, her brother from Visheshwarganj, Bahraich, her brother-in-law, and her sister. The post-mortem report confirmed that Ashish died by hanging, but the family is unconvinced and insists on further investigation. The police stated, "Legal action will be taken after a thorough investigation based on the evidence related to the incident." The investigation is ongoing, and authorities are working to gather more evidence to determine the exact circumstances surrounding Ashish's death.

Five Lucknow Regional Centre students awarded gold medals

Lucknow (PNS): Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) hosted its 38th Convocation on Wednesday. Besides the main ceremony which took place at IGNOU's campus in Maidan Garhi, New Delhi, the convocation was held across 39 regional centres, where students who completed their masters and bachelors programmes were awarded degrees.

In Lucknow, the ceremony was conducted at the Conference Hall of IGNOU Regional Centre. Five students who achieved the top rank in their respective programmes were awarded gold medals. Among these, three students—Animesh Barua (MA in Political Science), Nidhi Agarwal (Bachelors in Business Administration, Retail), and Sana Fatima (MA in Urdu)—were presented with gold medals at the Regional Centre in Lucknow. The remaining two students received their gold medals at the main function in New Delhi. Additionally, 351 students received their degrees in person at the Regional Centre in Lucknow.



Vice-Chancellor of Dr Ram Manohar Lohiya National Law University, Prof Amar Pal Singh, who was the guest of honour, delivered the convocation address.

He congratulated the degree recipients, stating that they were stepping into a new era, filled with immense opportunities, challenges, and a myriad of social and economic complexities. He emphasised that they must use the knowledge, wisdom, and skills they have gained to navigate these challenges. He encouraged the graduates to apply their education to the betterment of society. Prof Singh also praised IGNOU's efforts to democra-

Beniwal appointed BSP's national coordinator

Lucknow (PNS): The Bahujan Samaj Party on Wednesday appointed Randhir Beniwal as its national coordinator after Mayawati's brother and the party's national vice-president Anand Kumar expressed a desire to hold one post at a time.

Kumar was recently given the additional responsibility of national coordinator. Mayawati had even announced the decision in a recent post on X.

However, Kumar expressed his wish to hold only one post in the interest of the party and his request was accepted. "Keeping in mind the interests of the party and the movement, Anand Kumar, who has been selflessly serving the BSP for a long time, expressed his wish to work in only one post. His decision is welcome," Mayawati wrote on X.

With Kumar not accepting the responsibility, Randhir Beniwal has been appointed to the post, she said. "Now, Rajya Sabha MP Ramji Gautam and Randhir Beniwal will jointly serve as BSP's national coordinators, working directly under my guidance to handle responsibilities in various states," Mayawati said on X.

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CLASSIFIEDS

NOTICE

I have changed my name from RAMU TO RAMU VERMA S/O MUNNI LAL R/O P- 63, GAUTAM BUDHHA MAHAVIDYALAY BINGAWAN KANPUR for future purpose

NOTICE

my correct name is Rajendra Prasad S/o Bansh Lal R/o Dhodyahi Malwa Fatehpur Nagar which is mentioned, voter id card khatoni bank passbook R C copy by mistake aadhar card no. 9555 0075 9269 my name is mentioned as satendra which is my household name In future I will be known Rajendra prasad I have completed all legal formalities regarding the above by me

NOTICE

There is an error in my father's name in the my passport where it is recorded as Mohd.Mehdi Hasan, actual name is Mehdi Hasan in the future, Mohd.Rizwan S/O Mehdi Hasan R/O 226/209 - A,Makhdoom Nagar Jajmau, Kanpur

NOTICE

This is inform that I Mohammad Aman S/O Mohammad Raju R/O D-94, Defence Colony, Jajmau, Kanpur. That by mistake my Mother name Shanno Begum has been registered in the school records, which is wrong. The correct name is Sanno Begum. Now she would be known & recognise by this name only.

NOTICE

Notify to all general public that I, Sushma Singh, aged about 56 years, W/o Late Vijay Kumar, H.No. C 120, Harihar Nagar, PO-Gazipur, Lucknow-16, have evicted to my son Sumit Priyadarshi (daughter-in-law Archana & children born to them) from all my movable & immovable properties from today itself. In future, I will not be responsible for any of their conduct, transactions or actions.

NOTICE

I, Navin kumar Valecha son of Sri. Mansa Ram resident of 45, Patelnagar Yojna, Near Sector-8, Indiranagar Lucknow- 226016, My name in My Son's Pulkit Valecha Academic Records is Naveen Valecha, but my correct and actual name is Navin Kumar Valecha. So, I have changed my name from Navin Valecha to Navin Kumar Valecha. My name should be mentioned as Navin Kumar Valecha in all the records.

NOTICE

Atul Kumar Pandey S/o Suresh Kumar Pandey, J-322, Gujaini, Udyog nagar, Kanpur Nagar U.P. 208022 changed my name from Atul Kumar to Atul Kumar Pandey vide Affidavit dated 04/03/2025 sworn before Notary Balram Yadav at Kanpur. Henceforth, I shall be known as Atul Kumar Pandey for all purposes.

NOTICE

I hereby declare that in my daughter's Aadhar Card her name is wrongly registered as SAAVRI MEHROTRA which is incorrect. The correct name of my daughter is RABHYA MEHROTRA which is registered in her educational documents. Hence, in future the name of my daughter will be known and written as RABHYA MEHROTRA only. Gaurav Mehrotra S/O Late Naveen Kumar Mehrotra R/O 838, Lalbagh, Tehseel and District-Sitapur

NOTICE

I have changed my name from Dipika Bharti (incorrect) to Dipika Bharti (correct) for all future purposes. Dipika Bharti D/o Mr. Hori Lal R/o Khambhapur road, Joniha chauraha post Abunagar District Fatehpur (U.P.)

NOTICE

Due to mistake my son's (IYAANSH SINGH) Father Name written in school records as RITESH KUMAR BHARTI Whereas the correct name is REETESH KUMAR BHARTI. Please Correct accordingly. REETESH KUMAR BHARTI R/O A-1125/1 INDIRA NAGAR LUCKNOW.

NOTICE

It is informed that I am working as a Naik in the Indian Army. My wife's domestic name is recorded as Ritu Tiwari in my Indian Army service record, whereas my wife's educational certificate and Aadhaar card mention Neerja Devi daughter of Govind Narayan. Both the names Neerja Devi and Ritu Tiwari belong to my wife and my father-in-law's domestic name is Rambabu Pandey and my father-in-law's educational certificate mentions Govind Narayan. Both the names belong to my father-in-law. According to the educational certificate, the name of my wife and father-in-law should be recorded as Neerja Devi D/o Govind Narayan in the departmental records. Pankaj Kumar S/o Arun Kumar resident of village Kotra Makarandpur Pargana and Tehsil Ghatampur District Kanpur Nagar Uttar Pradesh

NOTICE

I RUPESH NANJAN (ARMY NO. JC857197 F/O VILLAGE & POST SISWA PATNA EAST CHAMPARAN BIHAR - 845432 DO AFFIRM THAT IN MY ARMY SERVICE RECORD MY MOTHER S NAME WAS WRONGLY ENTERED AS UWRBSHE CORRECT NAME URWASHI DEVI VIDE AFFIDAVIT DTD. 01 MARCH 2025 BEFORE KANPUR COURTS ONLY.

'Nearly 50% cancer patients require pain medication'

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

A training session on the use of pain-relieving medicines was held for nursing officers at the radiotherapy department of King George's Medical University (KGMU) on Wednesday.

Doctors reported that approximately 50 to 55 per cent of cancer patients experience pain.

"Painkillers are commonly used for these patients, but sometimes normal medications do not alleviate the pain. However, if the pain is treated scientifically, not only will the patient find relief, but it will also cause less harm to their body," a senior doctor explained.

Dr Sarita from the anaesthesia department noted that morphine should be used with caution. "It is effective for cancer patients, but there is a risk of addiction. Its dosage must be carefully controlled. The dosage required for oral medication is three times that of the intravenous form," she said. Doctors also emphasised the importance of compassionate communication with patients as part of their treatment.

"Do not engage in unnecessary conversations just to make the patient happy with sweet words, nor should you reveal harsh truths. Controlled communication makes the treatment more positive. For instance, telling the patient that we are using the best

available medical options for them and hoping for good results can boost morale and help them complete their treatment," said the doctor. Dr Sarita further pointed out that pain medications can harm the kidneys. "In cases of kidney disease, pain medications can cause kidney damage, which can be life-threatening," she added. Additionally, wound care was discussed during the training. "Cancer wounds should be prevented from rupturing. This significantly improves the patient's quality of life. Avoid wearing any collars or clothing that rub against the wound; this small precaution can help prevent the wound from bursting," she explained.

Mohaans township set for launch by May-end

Lucknow (PNS): Vice-Chairman of the Lucknow Development Authority, Prathamesh Kumar, expressed satisfaction over the significant progress of civil work on the Mohaan Hi-Tech Urban Township Project, located on Sultanpur Road. During a meeting on Wednesday to review the project's development, the VC highlighted that 80 per cent of the work related to infrastructure and basic amenities has been completed. He emphasised that the project is on track to be

launched within the set deadline, which is expected by the end of May this year. The VC further noted that the development authority has reserved 15 per cent of the total land for the Lower Income Group (LIG) category, allowing them to build their homes. To date, 11.5 per cent of these plots have been demarcated. Additionally, 12 per cent of land has been allocated to the Economically Weaker Section (EWS), with 10 per cent of the work completed for this category

as well. These figures were shared after a four-day inspection of the site. For LIG plots, each plot will cover 60 square metres, while the EWS category will have 50 square metre plots. The project will be divided into eight sectors—Akasha, Aditya, Alok, Adarsh, Ashish, Amod, Alekh, and Ashbasha. Each sector will offer a mix of residential plots, catering to various income groups, including LIG, EWS, Middle Income Group (MIG), and High Income Group (HIG).

SHOW CAUSE NOTICE

You, Shri JC-311191A Ex Sub Maj/IE (Civ) Singan Yadav, S/o Shri Jaga Yadav, resident of Pathak Puram Colony, Lane No. 4, Post - Dr BBA University, Raibareilly Road, Distt-Lucknow (U.P), Pin-226025 (Present Address) and Vill-Kalwari, Post- Bhimpura No 1, Tehsil-Bethhara Road, Distt-Daulla, State - Uttar Pradesh, Pin-221716 (Permanent Home Address) newly appointed under DCRE as Junior Engineer (Civil) on 15 Jan 2024 in the office of GE Panaji and subsequently posted to ACE B/R Madgaon sub-division. You have been found absent from duty without any intimation or application w/e f 25 Jan 2024 to till date. You were directed vide GE Panaji Final Show Cause Notice letter No 119/121/EIC dt 01 Feb 2025 and letter No 119/42/EIC dt 23 Feb 024 to join duty immediately but no response was received from your end. Whereas, consequent upon approaching the Office of the Supdt of Police authorities, Kalwari, Bhimpura No 1, Bethhara Road, Ballia, Uttar Pradesh, Pin- 221716 by GE Panaji vide letter No. 119/60/EIC dt 15 Apr 2024 and 119/55/EIC dt 03 Jun 2024 to inform about your whereabouts, no replies has been received till date. AND, Whereas, it was informed to you vide show cause notice issued under mentioned under reference that you will be suspended from government service in case you fail to join the duty by 20 Feb 2025 and disciplinary action will be initiated against you under CSC (Conduct) Rules 1964. AND, consequent upon non-joining by you at your duty place by 20 Feb 2025. You are hereby given last chance to join your duty and appear before the Head of the Department Le Garrison Engineer Panaji within 30 days after the publication of this show cause notice, failing which ex-parte decision will be taken and you will be terminated/dismitted from government service. Sd/- (Kumar Archit, IDSE) Garrison Engineer Panaji

THE PUNJAB STATE COOPERATIVE MILK PRODUCERS FEDERATION LTD.
SCO 153-155, SECTOR 34-A, CHANDIGARH-160022, EPABX NO. 0172-5041812,66

Notice Inviting Tender www.verka.coop

e tenders are hereby invited for the purchase and supply of following items:-

Sr. No.	Name of Work/Item	Period/Tentative Qty
1.	For Verka Patiala Dairy Security services provider.	01.04.2025 to 31.03.2026
2.	For Verka Ferozepur Dairy Hiring of insulated vehicles for supply of packed milk and milk products on for one year for trip period of tender contract one year (on trip basis).	2.5 to 3.0 MT 3.5 to 4.0 MT

NOTE:
1. For complete details regarding above tender (NTT), please visit our website i.e. www.verka.coop & e Tendering portal i.e. eproc.punjab.gov.in.
2. Compendium, if any, will be uploaded on website only.

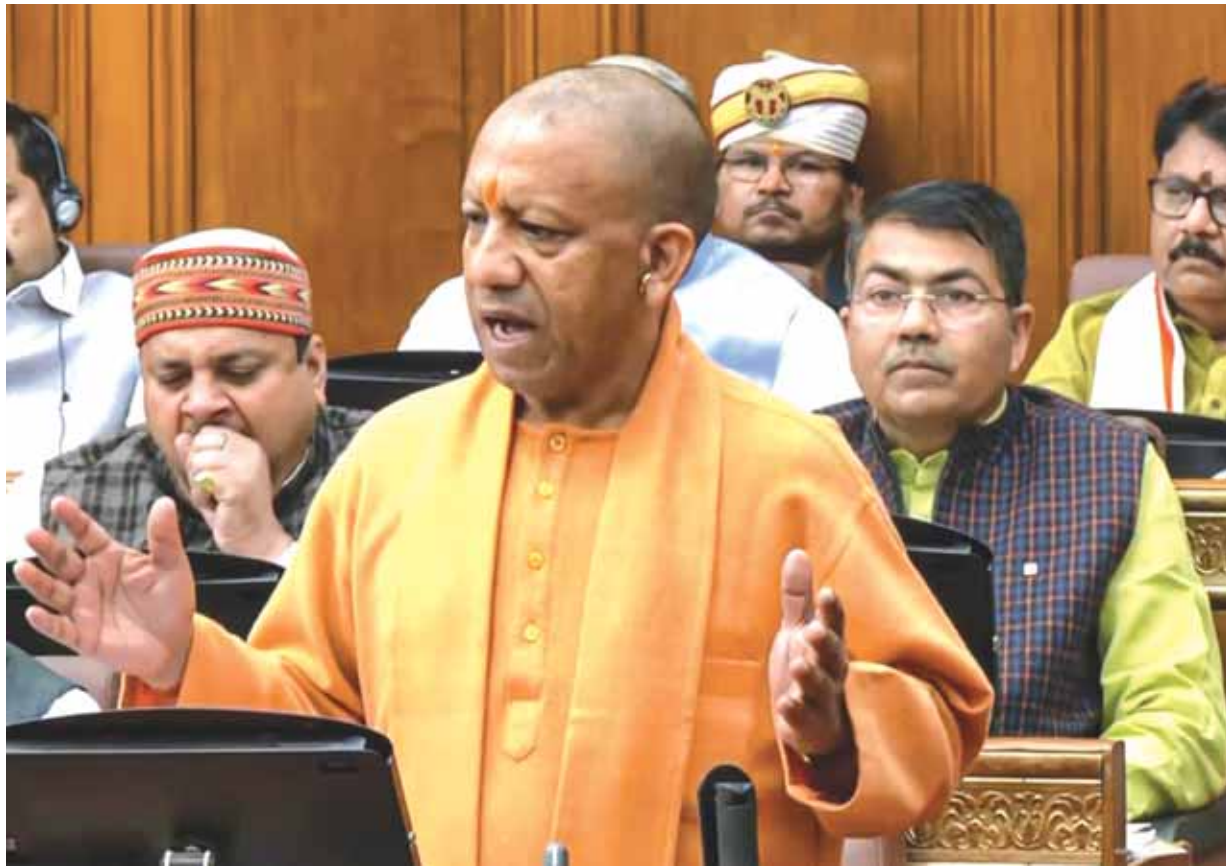
NA/12/28467/2023/42232 Dated CHD :- 3/5/2025 Dy. General Manager (Purchase)

Expel Abu Azmi from SP, bring him to UP: Yogi

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday asked the Samajwadi Party to take a stand on the controversial remarks made by one of its leaders and Maharashtra MLA Abu Azmi, demanding that the party must expel him for glorifying Mughal ruler Aurangzeb. Adityanath also asked the Samajwadi Party (SP) to bring Azmi to UP and said "Uttar Pradesh knows well how to take care of such people." "You (SP) must decide your position (on the Abu Azmi row)," Adityanath said in the Legislative Council following which the Samajwadi Party members started making remarks. Hitting back, he said, "Make an official announcement and expel that wretched person from your party. Then send him to Uttar Pradesh and we will take care of the rest." Escalating his attack, Adityanath said, "A person, who feels ashamed of the legacy of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, but considers Aurangzeb his hero, does he even have the right to live in India?" The chief minister further accused the Samajwadi Party of double standards. "On one hand, you criticise the Kumbh and on the other, you glorify Aurangzeb—a ruthless, fanatical ruler who destroyed temples and crushed India's faith. What is stopping you from taking action against this leader?" he asked. Adityanath insisted that the Samajwadi Party must publicly

condemn the statements and expel the leader responsible. "Why is the Samajwadi Party not disowning him? SP should immediately denounce his remarks and remove him from the party," he asserted. Issuing a direct challenge, Adityanath said, "Either call him to a public gathering and make him clarify or send him to Uttar Pradesh. We do not take long to deal with such people here." The chief minister slammed the Samajwadi Party, accusing it of glorifying Aurangzeb while disregarding India's cultural and spiritual heritage. "It is unfortunate that the Samajwadi Party considers Aurangzeb as its ideal. Even Aurangzeb's father, Shah Jahan, wrote in his autobiography that he wished no one would ever have such a wretched son," Adityanath said in the Legislative Council. His scathing attack comes amid an ongoing controversy in Maharashtra over Azmi's remarks. Azmi was on Wednesday suspended from the Maharashtra Assembly till the end of the ongoing Budget Session over his remarks eulogising Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. The chief minister criticised the Samajwadi Party's deviation from the principles of socialist leader Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, who upheld India's cultural unity despite being a political rival of the Congress. "I want to tell my friends in the Samajwadi Party—even if you do not take pride in India's heritage, at least follow



Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath speaks in the state Legislative Council during the Budget session of UP Assembly in Lucknow on Wednesday. PTI

the ideology of the leader whose name you use for political gain," Adityanath said. Quoting Dr Lohia, Adityanath added, "Lohia believed that India stands on three pillars—Lord Ram, Lord Krishna and Lord Shiva. As long as Indians revere these great figures, no

power in the world can stop India from remaining India." The chief minister alleged the Samajwadi Party's purpose now seems to be to oppose India's cultural traditions. "Today the Samajwadi Party has strayed so far from Lohia's ideology that attacking the leg-

acies of Lord Ram, Lord Krishna and Lord Shiva has become its primary goal," he said. Referring to Aurangzeb's reign, the chief minister said, "Aurangzeb imprisoned his own father Shah Jahan in Agra Fort, depriving him of water and left him to suffer." "If the Samajwadi Party

feels proud of Aurangzeb, they should visit a library in Patna and read Shah Jahan's autobiography where he laments that even a Hindu son is better than Aurangzeb because a Hindu serves his elderly parents in their lifetime, performs their last rites with devotion, and

Akhilesh slams Abu Azmi's suspension

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav on Wednesday reacted sharply to the suspension of party MLA Abu Azmi from the Maharashtra Assembly over his recent controversial remarks praising Mughal ruler Aurangzeb. In a post on X, Akhilesh slammed the action against Abu Azmi, saying, "If the basis of suspension starts getting influenced by ideology, then what difference will remain between freedom of expression and slavery." Defending the SP MLA, he said, "Whether it is our MLAs or MPs, their fearless wisdom is unmatched. If some people think that by 'suspension' one can put a rein on the tongue of truth,

then this is the childishness of their negative thinking." "Today's free-thinking says, we don't want BJP!," he added. In a video statement released by his office, Azmi asserted he had not said anything wrong, but retracted the remark, which he made outside the assembly, to ensure the House functions. "Still, I was suspended," he said. Azmi, state president of Maharashtra unit of the Samajwadi Party, had said that during Aurangzeb's reign, India's border reached Afghanistan and Burma (Myanmar). His comments rocked both houses of the state legislature on Tuesday, with members of the ruling side demanding his suspension and that he be booked for treason.

CM: SP obstacle in infrastructure development, law & order

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath highlighted the achievements of his government while launching a sharp attack on the opposition Samajwadi Party. Labelling the SP as an obstacle to infrastructure development and law and order, he asserted that his government had steered the state towards progress through robust policies and effective governance. Presenting comprehensive details of the agriculture, investment, electricity, and farmers' welfare initiatives in the UP Legislative Council on Wednesday, he remarked that, due to reforms aimed at enhancing the ease of doing business, UP, once seen as a barrier to the nation's growth, has now transformed into a key driver of the country's economy. The chief minister said that his government has successfully secured investments worth Rs 15 lakh crore out of the Rs 45 lakh crore in MoUs signed. Citing examples such as the Rs

15,000 crore investment in Gorakhpur and the development of a freight village in Varanasi, he emphasised that robust infrastructure and a secure law and order environment are vital for such progress—areas where, according to him, the SP has been a significant hindrance. Discussing his government's 33 sector-specific policies, as well as initiatives like the Vishwakarma Shram Samman Yojana and the One District One Product (ODOP) scheme, Chief Minister Yogi stated that these efforts have given Uttar Pradesh a distinct identity. He also mentioned projects such as the Mega Integrated Textile Park between Lucknow and Haridoi and the Sant Kabir Textile Park across 10 districts. Additionally, he highlighted that Uttar Pradesh has become the first state in the country to provide insurance coverage of Rs 5 lakh for 96 lakh MSME units. Criticising the power management during the SP government's tenure, Yogi remarked that they had left Uttar

Pradesh in darkness. He pointed out that if a transformer failed, people had to wait for weeks and even collect donations to fix it. In contrast, he highlighted that the state's power consumption has now reached approximately 33 megawatts, with the government ensuring an uninterrupted electricity supply to all districts, tehsils, cities, and villages without bias. He also mentioned that Ayodhya is being developed as a solar city, and 17 municipal corporations are being integrated with solar energy. Chief Minister Yogi said that Uttar Pradesh is number one in food grain production and the agricultural growth rate has reached 14%. Under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, 28.58 lakh farmers got insurance, of which 9.33 lakh got compensation of Rs 495.41 crore. Also, he mentioned the sugar-cane price payment of Rs 2.73 lakh crore and the increased capacity of 119 sugar mills. He said that Uttar Pradesh ranks first in the country, producing 400 lakh tonnes of vegetables.

Food grain productivity has increased from 27.25 quintals per hectare to 30.51 quintals per hectare. He said, "Oilseed production registered a growth of 128%. Paddy and wheat procurement has also increased three to five times." Yogi said that his government will set up canteens and rest houses in the mandis in the name of Mata Shabri for the Annadata farmers. He also talked about setting up a seed park in Lucknow in honour of Chaudhary Charan Singh for 251 crores. Yogi also took a swipe at the opposition, accusing them of abandoning cattle on roads after milking them and then blaming the government. He detailed his government's initiatives and informed that 60,713 cow shelters had been established to accommodate 12.5 lakh cows. Additionally, under the Nirashrit Govansh Sahyog Yojana, 1.63 lakh cows have been entrusted to 1.05 lakh cattle rearers. For this purpose, the government has allocated a budget of Rs 2,000 crore.

'Unemployment rate was 17% during SP rule, now it's 3%

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath addressed the issue of unemployment during the Legislative Council session, taking a direct swipe at the leader of opposition. He questioned the Samajwadi Party's governance, pointing out that during its tenure, the unemployment rate stood at 17%, whereas today it has dropped to 3%, a clear indication that employment opportunities have significantly increased. Highlighting Uttar Pradesh's vast potential, CM Yogi stated, "Employment-related programmes are being implemented at various levels. UP is a state with infinite possibilities. It boasts the best agricultural land, a strong MSME sector, abundant water resources, a well-connected rail network, the largest population, and the highest youth power. Where do you intend to take a state with such advantages?" Taking a dig at the SP's misgovernance, he reminded that under their rule, farmers were driven to suicide, youth migrated for jobs, and law and order

Opp failed to honour Ambedkar, other Dalit leaders, says Yogi

Lucknow (PNS): Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath slammed the opposition, accusing them of failing to honour Dr BR Ambedkar and other Dalit and backward leaders, despite their claims of protecting the Constitution. Highlighting the BJP-led double-engine government's commitment to Ambedkar's legacy, CM Yogi, while participating in the budget discussion in the UP Vidhan Sabha on Wednesday, stated, "Our government has taken several historic initiatives, including the construction of the Ambedkar International Centre and the establishment of Panch Teerth. We have also decided that all hostels to be built for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students in every district of the state will be named after Baba Saheb Ambedkar." The chief minister emphasised that this year marks the 'Amrit Mahotsav' of India's Constitution.

under the double-engine government, UP has achieved excellent connectivity via water, land, and air. He recalled that Uttar Pradesh was once considered a landlocked state, limiting its export potential, but under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Waterways-1 was launched between Haldia and Varanasi, opening new avenues for trade and logistics. Highlighting the state's strategic connectivity advantage, CM

Yogi emphasised that the junction of the Eastern and Western Freight Corridors is located in UP, further strengthening its industrial and logistical framework. Discussing UP's expressway dominance, the CM stated that with the completion of the Ganga Expressway, 55% of the country's expressways will be in UP. The state already boasts the largest rail network, the most metro cities, India's first rapid rail system, and the 12-lane expressway between Delhi and Meerut. The chief minister stated that to enhance industrial investment and strengthen logistics, the government has established the Inland Waterway Authority. He further announced that the budget includes provisions for new expressways, with funds allocated for the construction of an expressway connecting the Ganga Expressway to the Agra-Lucknow Expressway via Farrukhabad. He further announced a Rs 700 crore budgetary provision for the construction of two bridges in Prayagraj, including a Signature Bridge in Naini and another parallel to the Shastri Bridge.

UP Assembly tightening vehicle entry rules

PTI/PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Uttar Pradesh Assembly is tightening vehicle entry regulations and mirroring the security framework of Parliament to curb the misuse of fraudulent passes, Assembly Speaker Satish Mahana said on Wednesday. Following the conclusion of Question Hour, Mahana said that unauthorised duplicate vehicle passes were being created and misused, posing a serious security threat. He emphasised that the issuance and proper use of vehicle passes were the responsibility of all members, as any breach could have grave implications. "It has come to our notice that fake vehicle passes are being created by tampering with those issued by the Assembly Secretariat. This is a serious security concern, and the matter has been referred to the state's purchasing department for investigation," Mahana said. He urged all members to cooperate in strengthening the system and ensuring that passes are used strictly in accordance with the guidelines. Mahana cited a recent incident where a vehicle that did not belong to a legislator was found with an Assembly-issued pass and was apprehended. He also mentioned that police had flagged instances of misuse of a member's vehicle pass within the Assembly premises, leading to a formal notification to the concerned legislator. Further concerns arose as reports indicated that several legislators' associates and party workers were using these passes, which is entirely inappropriate. Mahana clarified that each MLA is permitted passes for only two vehicles and instructed the Assembly Secretariat to impose stricter regulations on any additional passes. "In Parliament, the number of vehicle passes issued is fixed, and no additional passes are granted to MPs beyond that limit. The same protocol will now be enforced in the UP Assembly to prevent any security lapses," he added. To modernise the system, Mahana announced that RFID-enabled passes would be introduced for members' vehicles by the end of April. Once the new system is in place, all manually issued and older vehicle passes will be

Gutkha, pan masala banned

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Assembly Speaker Satish Mahana on Wednesday announced a ban on gutkha and pan masala within the Assembly premises. The announcement came a day after Mahana expressed his displeasure over an incident where a member was caught on camera spitting pan masala inside the Assembly premises during the House proceedings on Tuesday morning. The speaker had reportedly asked staff members to clean the mess. Mahana, however, had not named the MLA but said he knew who it was. Expressing strong disapproval, the speaker had reminded all members of their responsibility towards cleanliness as lawmakers elected by the public. After the Question Hour on Wednesday, Mahana announced, "With immediate effect, the use of pan masala and gutkha is banned inside the Assembly premises." "Anyone, including employees, officials or any other individuals, found consuming gutkha or pan masala within the Assembly premises will be fined Rs 1,000. Necessary action will be taken in accordance with the rules," he added. Some members present in the Assembly suggested that the fine amount should be increased due to inflation. Responding in a light-hearted manner, Mahana quipped, "Note down the names of those honourable members demanding a higher fine. If they are caught spitting, we will charge them extra." His remarks sparked laughter among the Assembly members.

invalidated. Mahana also urged Assembly Secretariat officials to strictly adhere to the defined limit on vehicle passes and not issue any beyond the permitted number. For associates or party workers requiring vehicle entry, he

advised them to approach the Secretariat administration for appropriate authorisation instead of misusing legislators' passes. Additionally, the new digital personal passes for legislators have already been created, but several members have yet to collect them. He requested all legislators to obtain their digital pass from the ID card office, as previously issued personal passes will soon be invalidated.

YOGI SAYS GOVT COMMITTED TO ADVANCING KEY SECTORS

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday reiterated his government's commitment to advancing key sectors such as education, healthcare, employment, and infrastructure to ensure Uttar Pradesh's development. Speaking during the legislative council's budget discussion, he outlined significant provisions in the budget aimed at equipping the youth with employment-oriented education and fostering sustainable growth across the state.

UP ASSEMBLY ADJOURNED SINE DIE

The first session of 2025 of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly was adjourned indefinitely on Wednesday. The total time period in the proceedings of the House was 72 hours and 56 minutes. In the session of ten sub-sessions, the time period without adjournment was 69 hours 20 minutes. While the proceedings of the House were adjourned for 03 hours 36 minutes. According to a statement, at the end of the session, Assembly Speaker Satish Mahana expressed his gratitude to leaders of all the parties. Parliamentary Affairs Minister Suresh Kumar Khanna said that whatever promise members make in their area in the House, they must fulfil it, otherwise it will reduce their credibility. He said that MLAs should go to the library and study. The more information you have, the better you will be able to put your point, he added. Leader of Opposition Mata Prasad Pandey expressed his gratitude to the Speaker and said the new technology has helped MLAs in the proceedings of the Assembly.

Yogi questions opposition's understanding of economics

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath presented a comprehensive overview of Uttar Pradesh's state budget, detailing its economic impact and development goals. Speaking in the Legislative Council on Wednesday, he emphasised that the budget aims to transform the state, progressing from Antyodaya to an advanced economy, from ease of living to ease of doing business, and from agriculture to the welfare of the poor. The Rs 8,08,736 crore budget is designed to empower women, promote self-reliance through education, and harness faith for economic growth. CM Yogi also took a swipe at the opposition, questioning their understanding of economics, stating, "This is a subject beyond your comprehension." He highlighted Uttar Pradesh's economic growth, pointing out that in 2023-24, while India's GDP grew by 9.6%, Uttar Pradesh's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) surged by 11.6%, indicating a robust economic momentum. The chief minister emphasised that the state's budget is two and a half times larger than in 2016-17, and 10% higher than in 2024-25. This growth in the budget signifies the government's commitment to accelerating development. He stressed that the expanded budget is not merely an increase in expenditure but a strategic investment to ensure development reaches every corner of the state.

A major focus of the budget, according to CM Yogi, is capital investment. He said that Rs 2,25,000 crore has been allocated for capital expenditure, which is crucial for speeding up development. This strategic move has already contributed to doubling the state's per capita income since 2016-17, he added. Addressing the opposition's concerns about the expanding budget, CM Yogi pointed out that while expenditure has increased, the fiscal deficit has been kept under control, showcasing financial discipline. The state's fiscal deficit remains below 3%, at 2.97% of the GSDP, even without imposing new taxes in the last eight years. "Instead, VAT on diesel and petrol was reduced, easing the financial burden on the people," he remarked. He also claimed that corruption has been eliminated, allowing funds to be allocated properly for development. CM Yogi highlighted the state's improved financial management, noting that the practice of Personal Ledger Accounts (PLAs) had been abolished. "Now, there is no shortage of funds for development," he stated, referencing the past era when only a small fraction of funds were allocated for large schemes. He further criticised the previous Samajwadi Party government for leaving the state in financial disarray, forcing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to spend significant resources to clean up

the mess. Transparency has been a key feature of the current administration, CM Yogi continued, with a structured process in place to ensure timely project completion. Citing a report from NITI Aayog, he mentioned that Uttar Pradesh is ranked among the top states in financial discipline. Despite having a population of 25 crore, Uttar Pradesh is now a revenue-surplus state, he added. CM Yogi noted that in the past, the state struggled to attract investments, but today, banks are lining up to finance projects. This shift in perception demonstrates the state's growing economic stature, he added, urging the opposition to apologise for their past actions that hindered the state's progress. The CM also pointed out the state's improving fiscal health, referencing reports from the Reserve Bank of India. Uttar Pradesh's share in national tax collections increased from 9.9% in 2022-23 to 11.6% in 2024-25, reflecting the state's growing economic contribution. Highlighting the state's digital transformation, CM Yogi stated that UP is leading in digital transactions and Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) implementation, ensuring transparency and seamless financial assistance. He also noted the state's success in attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), further solidifying its position as an economic powerhouse.

DM: Prompt disposal of public complaints top govt priority

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

District Magistrate S Rajalingam said quality and prompt disposal of public complaints during 'Janta Darshan' (public hearing) is the top priority of the government. While listening to the problems of the complainants who came to 'Janta Darshan' on Wednesday, he directed the officials concerned to get them resolved in a timely and qualitative manner.

He instructed the officials that the complainants coming to the public hearing should be heard in a respectful manner. All officers must be present in their offices during public hearing. Earlier, while reviewing the implementation of investment proposals received by the district at the meeting of the District Udyog Bandhu Committee held in the Collectorate auditorium, the district magistrate directed the Electricity department and Uttar Pradesh State Industrial Development Authority (UPSIDA) to take timely action as per the rules. In the course of



DM S Rajalingam listening to a complaint of a person in Varanasi on Wednesday

tehsil-wise review regarding stopping the operation of illegal brick kilns, the district magistrate directed the Regional Officer, UP Pollution Control Board to issue RC and impose penalty on brick kilns that continue to operate despite closure order and SDMs and assistant police commissioners concerned to ensure compliance of closure order in mutual coordination.

Regarding the review of Nivesh Mitra portal, when the deputy commissioner of Industries informed that five cases are pending after the deadline, the DM directed the department concerned to dispose of cases immediately. To resolve the problem of encroachment in Industrial Estate, Chandpur, joint action was directed to be taken with representatives of Revenue, Police and Industry

departments and industrial organisations. He directed the officers concerned to initiate the process of shifting the dispensary of Employees' State Insurance Corporation from Manduadih to Industrial Estate Chandpur.

Regarding the transfer of connections of weavers, permanent disconnection of electricity, the representative of Weavers Association expressed satisfaction over progress in this matter after the last meeting and expected similar cooperation from the Electricity department in future as well. In this meeting, additional commissioner of police, additional deputy commissioner of police, SDMs Sadar, Rajatalab and Pindra, lead bank manager, additional municipal commissioner, assistant municipal commissioner, officers of departments concerned, investors, deputy commissioner of Industries, key office-bearers of industrial organisations, Udyam Mitra, zonal consultant, assistant commissioner of industries etc were present.

Knp Metro completes installation of fire safety equipment at 5 underground stns

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

Key systems, including tunnel ventilation, environmental control, third rail and AFC gates, have all been successfully installed at the five stations between Chunniganj and Kanpur Central. In a significant milestone, Kanpur Metro has now also completed the installation of all fire safety equipment at its five underground stations.

Before launching passenger services from Motijheel to Kanpur Central, it is essential to meet all fire safety regulations and standards. With this in mind, fire-fighting systems, including fire pumps, hydrants, hose reels and other essential equipment, have been fully installed in the underground section between Chunniganj and Kanpur Central, ensuring readiness for any emergency. In recognition of these comprehensive fire safety measures, Uttar Pradesh Fire Services has recently issued No Objection Certificates (NOCs) for all five stations. Prior to granting the NOCs, the fire services conducted a thorough inspection



Kanpur Metro completes installation of fire safety system at all five underground stations from Motijheel to Kanpur Central.

of critical equipment, such as fire alarms, smoke detectors and portable fire extinguishers. The Tunnel Ventilation System (TVS), a critical component for fire safety, acts as the "lungs" of underground stations during emergencies such as fires. In the event of a fire, tunnel ventilation fans control smoke movement

facilitating safe passenger evacuation. This essential system has been fully installed at all stations from Chunniganj to Kanpur Central. Managing Director of Uttar Pradesh Metro Rail Corporation Limited (UPMRC) Sushil Kumar visited the under-construction stations in Kanpur to review the progress of ongoing works

across various departments. During his visit, he said, "We have ensured full compliance with fire safety regulations at every stage. The stations are equipped with tunnel ventilation systems, fire exit passages, and wide staircases. In addition to the fire-fighting system in the tunnel, cross passages have been constructed for added safety. Fire alarms, smoke detectors, fire pumps, hydrants, sprinklers and hose reels have all been installed to detect and address any fire-related emergencies. Passenger safety remains our top priority at UPMRC."

Regarding the expansion of passenger services, the MD said, "The Kanpur Metro team is preparing for the upcoming Metro Rail Safety Commissioner (CMRS) inspection, which is a key step before extending passenger services from Motijheel to Kanpur Central. A four-member CMRS team recently visited Kanpur from Delhi to assess the stations. Once the CMRS approval is received, passenger services will be fully launched from Motijheel to Kanpur Central."

Landmark achievement in dental rehabilitation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

In a landmark achievement in dental rehabilitation, Professor of Prosthodontics, Crown and Bridge at the Faculty of Dental Sciences, Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Romesh Soni has successfully restored chewing efficiency and speech in a patient who suffered extensive jawbone loss due to mucormycosis, a rare but severe fungal infection that surged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The patient underwent extensive surgical resection of the maxilla a year ago as part of treatment for mucormycosis. This life-saving procedure resulted in the com-

plete loss of the maxilla, leading to significant functional and aesthetic challenges. Post-surgery, the patient experienced persistent nasal regurgitation, impaired speech, difficulty eating solid foods and a significant alteration in facial appearance, all of which severely impacted quality of life. Seeking to restore oral function, improve speech, regain ability to eat comfortably and enhance aesthetics, the patient opted for quad zygomatic implant treatment as a critical step toward recovery and improved well-being. "Mucormycosis had caused significant bone destruction, leaving conventional implant

solutions unsuitable," explained Prof Soni and added that the quad zygoma implant technique allowed us to bypass the need for bone grafting and create a solid base for the prosthesis. After one year, Prof Soni and his team - Dr Priyank Rai, Dr Stanzin, Dr Snigdha and Dr Nachammai, have placed four zygomatic implants. The complex procedure involved anchoring implants into the cheekbones to provide a stable foundation for a full arch prosthesis in a patient with inadequate upper jawbone. After months of healing, the prosthetic phase of the treatment was successfully completed.

Utilising the support of the quad zygomatic implants, a custom metal framework was fabricated, incorporating neodymium magnets. The opposing poles of the magnets were embedded within the prosthesis, creating a magnet-retained system to enhance retention. This innovative approach provided the patient with improved stability and functionality of the prosthesis, significantly enhancing their ability to speak, eat and regain confidence in their appearance. The patient expressed deep gratitude and said, "After battling mucormycosis and losing the ability to eat and speak

properly, I never imagined I could regain normalcy. Dr HC Baranwal (Dean, Faculty of Dental Sciences IMS-BHU Varanasi) highlighted the importance of this achievement and said, "This case underscores the critical role of advanced dental techniques in addressing the long-term consequences of COVID-19-related complications. It is immensely rewarding to see the patient's improved quality of life." This case serves as a beacon of hope for patients affected by mucormycosis, demonstrating the potential for full functional recovery through advanced prosthodontic.

PCME flags off 'prabhat pheri'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

A 'prabhat pheri' on 'Safety And Health - Essential for Developed India' was organised under 54th National Safety Week at Banaras Locomotive Works (BLW) on Wednesday in which members of Bharat Scouts and Guides, St John's Ambulance Brigade, Civil Defence, Railway Protection Force (RPF) and safety officers also participated. The rally started from Kundan Loco and passed through Surya Sarovar, residential colonies in BLW and Central Market and concluded near the Basketball Ground located in Cinema Complex. The employees and officers took part in the 'prabhat pheri'



enthusiastically with slogans and messages related to safety awareness. The 'prabhat pheri' was flagged off by Principal (PCME) Mechanical Engineer (Vivek Sheel. Chief Mechanical Service Engineer Neeraj Jain, Chief Safety Officer SB Patel, Chief Quality Assurance Manager Ram Janm Chaubey,

Deputy Chief Safety Officer KK Patel, Public Relations Officer (PRO) Rajesh Kumar, Employee Council member Sanjay Kumar, safety officers and employees of various departments were present. In other programmes, street plays, training on fire fighting and personal protective equipment for safety awareness, safety oath, safety quiz and prize distribution programmes were organised among the employees of the workshop premises loco division. The workshop employees participated in it with great enthusiasm. A painting competition was organised with the aim of promoting safety awareness among the children of the BLW family.

Students demonstrate innovation through models, presentations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

The Innovation and Incubation Cell, Christ Church College, organised "Yantra 2025: Unleashing Emerging Innovation" at Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan auditorium on Wednesday. This programme aims to motivate students to foster and support development of new ideas, technologies or businesses by providing entrepreneurs with necessary resources like funding, mentorship, workspace and training, ultimately helping them transform their innovative concepts into viable products or services for the market. It seeks to prepare students for the changing landscape of the economy and the need to become not just job-seekers, but job-creators and job-givers also. The programme started with the lighting of the lamp, followed by welcoming of the guests. The thematic description was given by Convenor, Innovation and Incubation Cell, Prof Manish Kapoor. He said since the inception of the cell in 2022, the college has promoted the innovation, incubation, and entrepreneurship



The Start-up Mela organised at Christ Church College on Wednesday.

(IIC) culture. It has therefore developed the idea for the cell and established it to encourage innovation in the college and streamlines the process to develop an inclusive and supportive environment for research and its development. With the changing environment promoting innovation in the 21st century, its relevant demands and difficulties in meeting them, the cell has made a number of moves to emphasise the significance of innovation, incubation and entrepreneurship. The students have shown a lot of enthusiasm and initiative for the activities of the cell as they recognise that

generating new business ideas and modifying existing ones for new situations and conditions is the requirement of the present time. Secretary, College Governing Body and Principal, Prof Joseph Daniel, said that the college aims to promote technology, science and management-based entrepreneurship among its students and faculties and thereby facilitate practical application of knowledge for development of demand-based ideas and innovations that benefit society. This will develop entrepreneurial attitude in students and faculty by incorporating it within the academic framework. Assistant Director, FFDC, Kannauj, Dr Bhakti V Shukla, who was the chief guest on the occasion, opined that the college must create a pre-incubation platform to nurture ideas to facilitate technological inventions and business enterprises by providing pre-seed financial support, infrastructures and resources. This will create an environment that converts college students into job-creators by providing motivation and end-to-end support.

It will also empower students to file patents for their innovations and ideas. This session was followed by a panel discussion on the topic "Incubation in Kanpur and nearby places: Challenges and Opportunities". The panellists were Prof Amitabha Bandopadhyay, KENT Chair for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, BSBE, IIT Kanpur, and Amit Tandon, entrepreneur. The moderator was Prof Manish Kapoor, Convenor, Innovation and Incubation Cell. The discussion revolved around opportunities like access to mentorship, networking with industry leaders and a supportive environment for early-stage start-ups to develop their ideas and challenges including securing funding, navigating complex regulatory landscapes and ensuring sustainability and growth of the incubation programme itself. It was followed by a "Start-up Mela". The students showcased their innovativeness through models and presentations. The vote of thanks was proposed by Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Christ Church College, Dr Shweta Mishra.

Two killed in road mishap

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

Two cousins were killed when an unidentified vehicle hit their bike on Lucknow-Kanpur national highway in Unnao late on Tuesday evening. They were identified as Govind (35) and Surendra (40), residents of Kotwali Sadar area of Unnao. They were returning after attending an engagement ceremony in a relative's house in Hoshiyar Nagar. The speeding unidentified vehicle hit them from behind near bypass bridge and threw them on the street. On getting information, the cops from Dahi police station rushed to the spot and sent the injured to the district hospital where they were declared dead by the doctors. Police sent the bodies for an autopsy. The deceased were labourers. Police examined the CCTV footage of nearby areas. Meanwhile five buses suddenly caught fire in Kunj Vihar of Yashoda Nagar locality under Naubasta police area on Tuesday night. The fire was brought under control after around one hour. Chief Fire Officer (CFO) Deepak Sharma said cause of incident could not be ascertained.

Banaras stn awarded best clean station trophy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

General Manager (GM) of North Eastern Railway (NER) Saumya Mathur honoured one officer and 13 employees of Varanasi division for their excellent and commendable work in the field of safety, security, punctuality, accident prevention, enhancement in rail revenue and development of infrastructure by presenting Vishist Rail Seva Award and one officer and four employees with Star Performer Award medals and citation at the 69th Rail Week Award Distribution Ceremony-2025 organised at Gorakhpur Railway auditorium on Tuesday. The GM also presented the Inter-Divisional Commercial Efficiency Shield, Inter-Divisional Engineering Efficiency Shield, Inter-Divisional Medical Efficiency Shield, Inter-Divisional Public Relations Efficiency Shield, Inter-Divisional Mechanical (passenger and goods coach) Efficiency Shield, Inter-Divisional Official Language Efficiency Shield, Inter-Divisional Safety Efficiency



DRM (Varanasi) VK Srivastava receiving a shield from NER GM Saumya Mathur in Gorakhpur on Tuesday.

Shield, Inter-Divisional Security Efficiency Shield, Inter-Divisional Solar Energy Efficiency Shield and Best Innovative Efficiency Shield to Divisional Railway Manager (Varanasi) Vineet Kumar Srivastava and branch officers for doing excellent work in various fields. Apart from this, Varanasi division's Banaras station (A and A1 category) received the trophy of the best clean station, Mau Coaching Depot received the Best Passenger Goods Coach Depot Shield and All-round Efficiency Shield jointly with

Lucknow division and Cleanliness Commercial Efficiency Shield jointly with Izzatnagar division. Cultural programmes were also organised by the artistes of NER Kala Samiti. In this ceremony, principal chiefs of NER headquarters, DRMs Vineet Kumar Srivastava (Varanasi), Gaurav Agrawal (Lucknow) and Bina Sinha (Izzatnagar) along with senior officers of headquarters and all the three divisions, family members of awardees and other railway employees were present.

Publicity vehicles flagged off for success of Lok Adalat

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

To make the upcoming National Lok Adalat to be held on March 8 a success, publicity vehicles were flagged off by District Judge/Chairman, District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) Sanjeev Pandey from the District Court premises here on Wednesday. On the occasion, the District Judge said through publicity vehicles the general public will be made aware of the upcoming National Lok Adalat to ensure the maximum settlement of cases. On the occasion Chairman of Permanent Lok Adalat Santram, PO of Motor Claims Accident Tribunal Ashwini Kumar Dubey, Chief Justice Family Court Harendra Bahadur Singh, Nodal Incharge of National Lok Adalat/Additional District Judge SC/ST Act Anil Kumar

Pancham, Secretary of DLSA/ Additional District Judge Vijay Kumar Vishwakarma, Additional District Judge First Ravindra Kumar Srivastava and other judicial officers of the district were present. SPECIAL LECTURES: On second day of 59th Annual Conference of The Indian Econometric Society (TIES), two special lectures were delivered in Banaras Hindu University (BHU) here on Tuesday. Prof K Narayana, IIT-Bombay delivered a lecture on 'Socio-Economic Impact of Climate Change: Lessons from India' and was chaired by Prof S Mahendra Dev. Another special lecture was delivered by Dr V Marisetty, IIM-Vishakhapatnam on Financial Market and Artificial Intelligence. Further, in a panel discussion, economists as Prof T Patnaik, Chief Economists of

NSE and Prof S Dey of Multi Commodity Exchange (MCE), Bombay, explained various dimensions related to 'Recent Developments on Stocks and Commodity Markets'. Speaking on climate change, Prof Narayan highlighted that distortions in present climate change is outcome of both production and consumption. Excessive carbon emission is outcome of production while waste materials are outcome of consumption. He stressed that Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) must be focal target for policy makers in order to reduce the menace of climate change. In addition, eight technical sessions were held during the day in which about 48 papers dealing with various aspects of theoretical/empirical econometrics were presented by scholars from various parts of the country.

Vibrant display of creativity at 'Spandan'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The atmosphere in Banaras Hindu University (BHU) was filled with a different kind of energy on Tuesday, the second day of the inter-faculty youth festival, 'Spandan'. The canvas of the campus transformed into a vibrant display of students' creativity, a symphony of youthful expression. The melodies of group songs filled the air, mingling with quiet concentration of painters bringing their vision to life. Spandan's second day was a testament to the artistic soul of BHU, a celebration of the boundless talent residing within its walls, further cementing its reputation as a premier celebration of youth talent. The audience at the Pt Omkar Nath Thakur auditorium were spellbound when the participants tapped their fingers on the tabla. In another competition, the audience was mesmerised by melodious



sounds of sitar, violin and flute. In it a total of 13 participants displayed the rhythmic skills of their breath and fingers. In another genre of literature, the English debate competition, when the students started presenting their views on the topic 'Foreign universities in India will benefit higher education' in Dr Karan Singh Hall, Physical Education department, the audience and the jury became deeply engaged. In the English poetry competition held in the same hall, a total of 17 participants took part. The topic of the poem was 'Youth, Maha Kumbh and weather.' "The

only thing that is constant in life is change, just like the weather", when Ruhani recited this line, the entire hall echoed with thunderous applause. The experts of colours, brush and pencil showed their skills in cartoon, rangoli, on-the-spot painting and collage of fine arts. Cartooning and collage were organised in the exhibition hall of the Faculty of Visual Arts. In cartooning, a total of 16 participants showed their sharpness of pencil and brush on the topic 'Clean India and Developed India' whereas 13 participants displayed their art in the collage competition

organised on the topic of 'Maha Kumbh'. Apart from this, rangoli competition was organised in Swatantrata Bhawan and on-the-spot painting competition in Malaviya Bhawan. The theme of the rangoli was 'Spandan'. To make the rangoli, the participants used marble dust, abir and colours. As many as 18 students participated in on-the-spot painting on the topic 'Vishwanath Temple and Ganga Ghat of Varanasi'. The Agricultural Sciences' Shatabdi Bhawan and KN Udupa auditorium resonated with a vibrant mix of musical performances. Students showcased their talents, delivering culturally rich Indian group songs, including traditional and patriotic pieces, alongside globally popular Western vocal solos featuring contemporary hits and beat-boxing. This event highlighted the students' wide-ranging musical interests and fostered a dynamic

cultural exchange within the academic setting. The Malaviya Moolya Anusheelan Kendra became a vibrant stage for artistic expression, where social narratives unfolded through skit. Students presented short skits on social issues, mainly focusing on problems faced by poor farmers, the changing family setup, muddled marriages and corruption. A few topics were, 'Parivar ki badalti paribhasha', 'Bhrashtachar', 'Samaj ke do pehlu' etc. In the Amphitheatre ground of BHU, students transformed pressing issues into mesmerising choreographies, their movements painting vivid pictures of a 'blind society', the delicate balance of the 'five elements of life' and urgent need for 'women safety' among other social themes. The audience watched in awe as creative dance programmes further explored these issues, weaving poignant stories through fluid motions.

Government approves ₹6,811 Crore ropeway projects in Uttarakhand

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The government on Wednesday approved two ropeway projects in Uttarakhand — Sonprayag to Kedarnath and Govindghat to Hemkund Sahib Ji — at a total cost of ₹6,811 Crore to help significantly reduce the travel time to the pilgrimage sites and boost tourism. The construction of these two ambitious projects is likely to be completed in four to six years. The two ropeways will be constructed under the National Ropeways Development Programme — Parvatmala Pariyojana. The decisions of the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA), chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, were announced by Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw. The Sonprayag to Kedarnath ropeway is planned to be developed in public-private partnership and will be based on the most advanced Tri-cable Detachable Gondola technology having the capacity to carry 1,800 passengers per hour per direction (PPHPD), which could ferry 18,000 passengers per day.

Vaishnaw informed that the 12.4-km ropeway project from Govindghat to Hemkund Sahib Ji too will be developed on Design, Build, Finance, Operate, and Transfer (DBFOT) mode at a total capital cost of ₹2,730.13 Crore. Currently, the journey to the Hemkund Sahib Ji is a challenging 21-km uphill trek from Govindghat and is covered on foot, by ponies or using palanquins. The proposed ropeway is planned to provide convenience to pilgrims visiting the Hemkund Sahib Ji and the tourists visiting the Valley of Flowers, and will ensure all-weather last-mile connectivity between Govindghat and Hemkund Sahib Ji. The journey to the Kedarnath temple is a challenging 16-km uphill trek from Gaurikund and is currently covered on foot, ponies, palanquins and helicopter. The proposed ropeway is planned to provide convenience to pilgrims visiting the temple and ensure all-weather connectivity between Sonprayag and Kedarnath. "The ropeway project will be a boon to the pilgrims visiting Kedarnath as it would provide an

environment-friendly, comfortable and fast connectivity and reduce travel time in one direction from about eight to nine hours to about 36 minutes," an official release said. The minister said 23 Lakh pilgrims visited Kedarnath shrine last year and the number is expected to rise to 36 Lakhs, with the ropeway project. The Hemkund Sahib Ji proposed ropeway would provide convenience to pilgrims and tourists visiting the Valley of Flowers. It will ensure all-weather last mile connectivity between Govindghat and Hemkund Sahib Ji. This ropeway is also planned to be developed in public-private partnership and will be based on Monocable Detachable Gondola (MDG) from Govindghat to Ghangaria (10.55 km), seamlessly integrated with the most advanced Tricable Detachable Gondola (3S) technology from Ghangaria to Hemkund Sahib Ji (1.85 km) with the capacity to carry 1,100 passengers per hour per direction (PPHPD) and could ferry 11,000 passengers per day. Vaishnaw informed that 1.77 lakh people went to Hemkund Sahib Ji last year.

The ropeway is expected to increase the number of people visiting there by 10 times. Kedarnath is one of the 12 sacred Jyotirlingas situated at an elevation of 3,583 m (11,968 ft) in the Rudrapur district of Uttarakhand. The temple is open for pilgrims for about six to seven months in a year from Akshaya Tritiya (April-May) to Diwali (October-November) and is visited by about 20 Lakh pilgrims annually during the season. Hemkund Sahib Ji is a highly revered pilgrimage site situated at an elevation of 15,000 ft in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. The Gurudwara established at the holy site is open for about 5 months in a year between May and September and is visited by about 1.5 to 2 lakh pilgrims annually. It is believed that Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the 10th Guru of Sikhs, meditated at the site. It is also famous as the meditation ground for Lord Rama's brother Lakshmana. The trek to Hemkund Sahib Ji also serves as the gateway to the famous Valley of Flowers, a national park recognised as the UNESCO World Heritage site, located in the pristine Garhwal Himalayas.

'Mangalsutra' jibe turning true: Kcharge slams Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress President Mallikarjun Kcharge on Wednesday attacked Prime Minister Narendra Modi over rise in gold loans and said his remarks during the Lok Sabha polls campaign about 'stealing of mangalsutras' have come true with women forced to mortgage their gold ornaments under his rule. Citing media reports, Kcharge claimed that between 2019 and 2024, four crore women mortgaged their gold and took a loan of ₹4.7 Lakh Crore. In 2024, 38 per cent of the total loans taken by women are from gold loans, he said. In February 2025, RBI data showed that gold loans increased by a whopping 71.3 per cent in a year, the Congress chief said. "Narendra Modi ji, you had talked about 'stealing of mangalsutras'. That has now come true. In your rule, women have been forced to mortgage their gold ornaments. First you made women's 'stri-dhan' disappear by i m p l e m e n t i n g demonetisation, now due to inflation and falling household savings, they are forced to mortgage their



Congress President Mallikarjun Kcharge

Pioneer photo

most valuable thing — their jewelry," Kcharge said in his post in Hindi on X. During the Lok Sabha polls campaign last year, Modi had alleged that the Congress will take away 'mangalsutras' and redistribute the wealth of the people. Kcharge alleged that the Modi government has worsened the condition of the economy so much that middle class families who buy two-wheelers are now unable to repay their loans. In view of rising loan defaults, two-wheeler financiers are cutting down on lending for the first time

since 2019, he claimed. He said 75 per cent of people buy two-wheelers on loan so that they can repay it slowly, but the financial crunch is so severe that as compared to last year, loans worth about ₹2 Lakh Crore are still outstanding till September 2024, which has increased by ₹40,000 Crore in a year. Two-wheeler sales have declined by six per cent in February 2025, Kcharge added. "Recession, financial crunch and reduction in spending capacity — this is the essence of the economy you run," Kcharge said, hitting out at the prime minister.

'Hindu awakening' on agenda of RSS top body meeting

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

An analysis of the prevailing scenario in the country, including the issue of 'Hindu awakening', is on the agenda of a three-day meeting of the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha, the highest decision-making body of the RSS, that is scheduled to begin in Bengaluru from March 21. The meeting will also prepare a framework of various programmes and campaigns to be taken up this year and review the progress made on the work that was expected to be completed in the run-up to the centenary year of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the organisation said in a statement. The RSS will complete 100 years of its foundation on Vijayadashami (Dussehra) this year. In a statement, Akhil Bharatiya Prachar Pramukh of the RSS Sunil Ambekar said the meeting of the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha will be held in Bengaluru from March 21 to March 23. The meeting will be held on the premises of the Janseva Vidya Kendra located at Channanahalli. Ambekar said the annual report of the RSS for 2024-25 will be discussed at the meeting. "Along with the critical analysis on it, reporting on special initiatives (of the Sangh) will also be done at the meeting," he said, adding, "In addition to the issue of Hindu awakening, an analysis of the current scenario of the country, including a discussion on the follow-up activities, is also included in the agenda of the baithak." Ambekar said the meeting will review the progress made on the work expected to be done in the run-up to the completion of 100 years of the RSS on Vijayadashami. "A framework of various programmes, events and campaigns will be prepared at the meeting," he said.

India to be \$5 Trillion economy soon, says Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said that the day is not far when India will turn a \$5 trillion economy as he urged all stakeholders to invest in people, economy, and innovation to create jobs and boost growth. Speaking in a post-Budget webinar on employment, Modi said the government has provided skill training to 3 crore youth since 2014 and decided to upgrade 1,000 ITIs and set up five centres of excellence. Referring to an IMF report of February 2025, Modi noted that between 2015 and 2025, India grew by 66 per cent, making the country a \$ 3.8 trillion economy. Observing that the country's growth surpassed that of several major economies, he said "the day is not far when



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses post-budget webinar on boosting job creation

PTI

India will become a \$ 5 trillion economy." He also stressed the importance of making right investments in the right direction to continue expanding the economy. Modi underlined the critical

role of implementing budget announcements in achieving this vision and acknowledged the significant contributions of all stakeholders. He stated that capacity building and talent nurturing

act as the foundation stone for national development and in the next phase of growth, greater investment in these sectors is essential. "The vision of 'investment in people' stands on three pillars - education, healthcare, and skill development," he said adding that today, India's education system is undergoing a transformation. He said this year's Budget serves as a blueprint for India's future, and that investments have been prioritized equally across infrastructure, industries, people, economy, and innovation. Modi highlighted the PM Internship Scheme that was launched to provide new opportunities and practical skills to youth. "We must ensure that businesses at every scale actively participate in this scheme. In this year's Budget, we announced 10,000

additional medical seats, with a target of adding 75,000 seats in the medical field over the next 5 years." Modi also talked about the government's decision to give infrastructure status to the tourism sector, saying that it will generate jobs for youth. He urged industry to invest in the healthcare sector and also talked about the potential of medical tourism to create jobs. Modi also emphasised the establishment of daycare cancer centres and the development of digital healthcare infrastructure to ensure quality healthcare reaches the last mile. Modi highlighted that the tourism sector has the potential to contribute up to 10 per cent to India's GDP and create employment opportunities for crores of youth. "50 destinations across the country will be developed with a focus on tourism," said

the Prime Minister adding that granting infrastructure status to hotels in these destinations will enhance ease of tourism and boost local employment. Highlighting the expansion of the Mudra Yojana to support homestays, Modi also stressed on initiatives like 'Heal in India' and 'Land of the Buddha' to attract global tourists. "Efforts are being made to establish India as a global tourism and wellness hub." "To cater to a larger population, planned urbanisation is essential. We have decided to allocate ₹1 lakh crore to the Urban Challenge Fund. The private sector, especially the real estate industry, must focus on planned urbanisation," he said. The government has given importance to skill development at par with the infrastructure sector, he added.

AI, he said could contribute lakhs of crores to the economy. "In this direction, we have allocated ₹500 Crore for AI-driven education and research in the budget." He also stated that India will set up National Large Language Model for development of AI capacity. "India has become the third-largest startup ecosystem in the world," said the Prime Minister, adding that several measures have been introduced in this budget to promote startups. He mentioned the approval of a ₹1 Lakh Crore corpus fund to boost research and innovation. This will increase investments in emerging sectors. Modi noted the provision of 10,000 research fellowships at ITIs and IISc, which will foster research and provide opportunities for talented youth.

Rahul vows to fight for railway porters' rights amid financial hardships

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Drawing attention to the financial difficulties faced by railway porters, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday said they risked their lives to help people during the stampede at the New Delhi Railway Station last month and yet their voice was not being heard. The former Congress president, who posted on his YouTube channel a video of his recent interaction with porters at the New Delhi railway station, asserted that he would fight for their rights. Gandhi also urged people to share suggestions on the 'Awaz Bharat Ki' portal to improve crowd management and strengthen security. "We will listen to the voice



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi during a meeting in New Delhi

PTI

of India!" he said on X. The increasing number of stampedes at railway stations and other public places is a matter of great concern, Gandhi said, noting that many innocent people lose their lives or get injured in such incidents. "We need to think together about how to prevent such

tragedies," he said. In his post accompanying the video of his interaction with porters, Gandhi said, "A few days ago, I reached New Delhi Railway Station and met the porter brothers there again. During the interaction, they told me how everyone together made every possible effort

to save people's lives on the day of the stampede." "Whether it was trying to remove people from the crowd, ensuring that the injured reached the ambulance and administration, or taking out the bodies of the dead - using their physical abilities, handcarts or spending money from their own pockets, they helped the passengers in every way," the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha said. Gandhi thanked them for saving many lives and helping in the relief work during the stampede at the station on February 15. At least 18 people were killed in the incident at the New Delhi Railway Station, which was witnessing a surge of passengers waiting to board trains for Prayagraj.

Court discharges ex-Chhattisgarh CM Baghel in 2017 sleaze CD case

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ RAIPUR

A special CBI court here has discharged senior Congress leader and former Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel in a 2017 alleged sex CD case purportedly featuring a former BJP minister, citing lack of evidence, his lawyer said. Special Magistrate (CBI), Raipur, Bhupesh Kumar Basant considered Baghel's discharge application and granted him relief on Tuesday, noting there was no sufficient evidence to prove the allegations levelled against him in the chargesheet filed in the case, senior counsel Manish Datt told PTI. The court noted no case is

made out against the 63-year-old Congress leader, the counsel said, adding the order copy will be made available on Wednesday. Elated over the development, Baghel, who stepped down as CM after the Congress lost the 2023 assembly polls, took to X and posted "Satyamev Jayate" (truth alone triumphs). A discharge application is a request to end a criminal case before the trial begins. A court may allow such a plea if it finds lack of sufficient evidence to proceed against the accused. State Congress communication wing head Sushil Anand Shukla also hailed the CBI court's ruling.

Engineer Rashid, seeks custody parole

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Jailed Jammu and Kashmir JMP Engineer Rashid on Wednesday sought custody parole to attend the upcoming Parliament session, claiming he was not a security threat. Rashid's counsel made the submission before additional sessions judge Chandier Jit Singh, who reserved the verdict for March 7 after hearing arguments on the plea. The plea seeking Rashid's interim bail or custody parole was filed by advocate Vikhyat Oberoi on February 27, following which the court sought the National Investigation Agency's (NIAs) response on March 3. The counsel previously argued that Rashid was seeking custody parole being a parliamentarian and needed to attend the upcoming session to fulfil his public duty. Custody parole entails a prisoner being escorted by armed police personnel to the place of visit. Oberoi said the Delhi High Court had granted custody parole for two days enabling Rashid to attend the parliamentary sessions. Referring to Rashid's submission of questions on the functioning of J&K departments in Parliament, the lawyer said, "I have put in questions for all those departments. And I am therefore requesting debates on all those questions. I completely abide by the ruling of the high court (that its order of custody parole will not be treated as a precedent)...I am only trying to argue that in the face of the evidence, I am not a security threat." He argued Rashid as a parliamentarian represented

45 per cent of Kashmir and so he could be allowed to represent his constituency. "I am only requesting that he (Rashid) needs to go to Parliament for the people. It is not my condition. It is not my contention that it is the fundamental right of my client to attend Parliament. It is my summation that it is a fundamental duty to attend it," the counsel said. The NIA counsel opposed the submission and said being a parliamentarian, did not entitle a person exceptions from the effect of detention. "Today, he is a person who is an MP (seeking custody parole on grounds of fulfilling his duty). Tomorrow, a doctor may be saying that I am accused of an offence, but I need to conduct surgery to save the lives of people and that my patients are waiting? Can he conduct surgery?... So any person may say that I have to perform my duty, I have to discharge my function..." the NIAs counsel argued. Sheikh Abdul Rashid, known as Engineer Rashid, defeated Chief Minister Omar Abdullah in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls in Baramulla. Rashid's regular bail application is currently pending before the court. The second part of Parliament's budget session would begin on March 10 and end on April 4. The judge on September 10 granted interim bail to Rashid to enable him to campaign for the assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir. Rashid surrendered in Tihar Jail on October 27. He has been lodged in Tihar jail since 2019 after he was arrested by the NIA under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in a 2017 terror funding case.

Delhi HC orders Centre, state to register marriages in three months

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday ordered the Centre and Delhi government to comply with the Supreme Court's directions over compulsory registration of marriages in three months. A bench of Chief Justice Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya and Justice Tushar Rao Gedela said it was "pathetic and appalling" that the 2006 apex court order, asking all marriages to be compulsorily registered irrespective of faith, was not yet implemented by the authorities. "This is pathetic actually. It is appalling as to how you are not implementing the order of the Supreme Court," it added. The high court also issued notice to both governments on a petition seeking

direction to the Ministry of Home Affairs to prepare rules for a centralised database of marriage registration. The Supreme Court, in February 2006, ruled that all marriages, irrespective of their religion, be compulsorily registered and directed the Centre and all states to frame and notify rules for this within three months. Pursuant to the top court's directions, the Delhi government issued an order on April 21, 2014 containing certain provisions for compulsory registration of marriage. The order is known as "Delhi (Compulsory Registration of Marriage) order, 2014. However, various deficiencies and lacunae were pointed out in the rules by the petitioner, who said the state and the Central governments were informed about it.



Delhi High Court

Pioneer photo

Petitioner Aakash Goel said in the absence of an appropriate legislation as desired by the Supreme Court in the 2006 judgment, the mechanism available for registration of marriages was not only inadequate and caused hardship to people seeking registration, but it

also did not fulfil the object of compulsory registration of marriages. "We call upon the ministry concerned of the Government of India and the Delhi Government to look into the matter and take appropriate steps which will be warranted in law and also

for ensuring the directions issued by the Supreme Court are complied with," the bench said. Granting three months' time, the bench asked for the decisions of the Centre and the state government in terms of its order to be filed before the next hearing on July 9. When the Delhi government counsel said it had framed rules in line with the apex court's directions, the bench said the rules were only executive in nature. "There has to be an enactment as per the directions of the Supreme Court... You have to respond to the needs of people and frame rules for smooth registration of marriage. That's the need of the hour. These are not the things which should come to the court," it added. The plea has sought a direction to the Ministry of

Home Affairs to prepare rules for a centralised database of marriage as "dis-aggregate state-wide databases" do not help achieve the objective of the Supreme Court judgment as a person can easily marry and register in Delhi, while being already married and registered in another state. It also sought directions to the Centre to maintain the centralised database and make it available in advance to citizens so that correct whereabouts of families were known while giving a go-ahead for a wedding. The petition also sought a direction for modifying certain clauses of the Delhi Compulsory Registration of Marriages Order, 2014 to allow online registration of marriages with the virtual presence of a married couple and witness before the authorities concerned.



Beginning of a trade war

What began as a threat by Trump is now a full blown trade war as Canada, China and Mexico retaliate the US tariffs

The trade war initiated by President Trump against China, Canada, and Mexico has set off a chain reaction of retaliatory measures, creating uncertainty in global markets and posing risks to economic stability. While the administration aims to address specific national concerns through these tariffs, the broader implications suggest potential harm to both the US and global economies. As the situation evolves, careful consideration of the long-term consequences is essential to mitigate adverse effects on world trade. As promised by him in his campaign President Donald Trump launched a bold series of tariffs aimed at imports from China, Canada, and Mexico, a move that significantly escalated global trade tensions and set off a swift chain reaction of retaliatory measures. The president signed executive orders that imposed a 25% tariff on all goods from Mexico and Canada, and a 10% tariff on Chinese imports. The administration argued that these measures were necessary to tackle issues related to illegal immigration and drug trafficking to protect American industries. In an effort to minimize any disruptive effects, an additional 10% tariff was applied to Canadian energy exports, including electricity, natural gas, and oil.



The response from the targeted countries was swift and forceful. Beijing retaliated by announcing tariffs of up to 15% on key U.S. agricultural products such as chicken, pork, soy, and beef, while also expanding restrictions on U.S. businesses. In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau countered with 25% tariffs on \$155 billion worth of American goods. Similarly, Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum imposed retaliatory tariffs against the United States, criticizing the unilateral decision and warning of its adverse effects on both national and foreign companies operating in Mexico. Analysts have warned that the tariffs could significantly hinder economic growth, with projections suggesting a contraction of 2.8% in U.S. GDP. The increased tariffs were also expected to drive up consumer prices, adding to existing inflationary pressures and potentially prolonging periods of high interest rates. Global markets reacted negatively, with major U.S. stock indexes and shares in the automotive sector experiencing notable declines. Industries reliant on international supply chains, particularly the automotive sector, braced for production delays and increased costs as a result of these disruptions. The Trump administration maintained that these tariffs were a necessary tool to pressure foreign nations into addressing issues like drug trafficking and to incentivize domestic production. But the reality is different. The tariffs could ultimately have a net negative effect on the U.S. economy by driving up prices, reducing output, and dampening employment growth. In the unfolding saga of international trade, while the US administration's objective remains focused on addressing pressing national concerns, the broader consequences of this trade war hint at potential long-term harm for both the U.S. and the global economy.

Balancing growth and conservation

Large-scale dredging and resource extraction projects at Kerala's Quilon Fish Bank have sparked concerns over marine biodiversity loss and ecological stability

India's ambitious Blue Economy vision is reshaping the way the country engages with its vast marine resources. At the heart of this transformation is Kerala, with the Quilon Fish Bank emerging as a crucial player in sustainable fisheries. However, recent concerns over large-scale dredging, resource extraction, and the long-term impact on marine biodiversity have raised important questions about balancing economic growth with ecological stability.

The Quilon Fish Bank, known for its rich biodiversity and high productivity, is among India's most significant fishing grounds. Spread across Kollam and Alappuzha districts, this region is a vital breeding ground for numerous fish species and shrimp. Kerala's fisherfolk have long depended on these waters for their livelihood, making sustainable fisheries management crucial for the state's economy and food security.

However, recent developments, such as the planned dredging of 242 square kilometres of the seabed in Kollam, have sparked widespread concern. Reports indicate that India's Geological Survey has identified 7.45 billion tonnes of sand in Kerala's coastal and offshore areas. While the government sees this as an opportunity for economic development, local communities fear it may lead to habitat destruction, loss of fish stocks, and increased coastal erosion. The controversial dredging project is part of a larger Blue Economy initiative aimed at tapping into the ocean's resources for economic growth.

While this approach has potential, questions remain about its long-term sustainability and impact on Kerala's delicate marine ecosystem. The Blue Economy concept emphasizes responsible and sustainable use of marine resources to drive economic progress. India, with its vast coastline and rich maritime heritage, has identified the Blue Economy as a critical driver of growth in the 21st century. The government's policy framework seeks to integrate economic growth with environmental conservation.

While large-scale resource extraction, such as sand mining and deep-sea fishing, forms part of this vision, efforts are also being made to minimize ecological disruption. Scientific research, eco-friendly technologies, and strict regulations are being implemented to ensure sustainability.

One of the key objectives of India's Blue Economy plan is to modernize the fisheries



sector. Investments in advanced fishing infrastructure, cold storage facilities, and alternative livelihood programs, such as seaweed farming and mariculture, are providing fishermen with new income opportunities. These initiatives aim to reduce dependence on overfished species and promote a more balanced marine ecosystem. Despite the promising aspects of the Blue Economy, concerns remain about its impact on marine biodiversity.

ing not just marine species but also the livelihoods of thousands of fishing families. Experts warn that Kerala's geographical location-between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats-makes it particularly vulnerable to environmental degradation.

To address these concerns, the government has been expanding Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to safeguard critical habitats. These conservation zones play a vital role

India refine its own Blue Economy strategy. Kerala's government has also taken steps to enhance coastal resilience. Large-scale coastal protection projects, such as artificial reefs and mangrove restoration, are being undertaken to mitigate the impact of erosion and habitat loss. However, these efforts need stronger support from the central government to ensure long-term effectiveness. The future of the Quilon Fish Bank and Kerala's fisheries sector hinges on finding a middle ground between economic growth and environmental sustainability. While resource extraction and development projects are necessary for progress, they must be undertaken with strict environmental safeguards.

A multi-stakeholder approach involving the government, local fishing communities, environmentalists, and global experts is essential. Policymakers must prioritize scientific research and ecological impact assessments before approving large-scale marine projects. Empowering local communities with alternative livelihood options, enhancing conservation efforts, and enforcing stricter regulations on resource extraction can help ensure a sustainable future for Kerala's fisheries. India's Blue Economy vision holds immense promise, but its success will ultimately depend on how well it balances development with ecological responsibility.

(The writer is associate professor at Centre For South Asian Studies; views are personal)

THE QUILON FISH BANK IS A PRIME EXAMPLE OF THIS DILEMMA. DREDGING AND SAND MINING, WHILE ECONOMICALLY LUCRATIVE, HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO DISRUPT FISH BREEDING CYCLES, ALTER OCEAN CURRENTS, AND INCREASE VULNERABILITY TO COASTAL EROSION

The Quilon Fish Bank is a prime example of this dilemma. Dredging and sand mining, while economically lucrative, have the potential to disrupt fish breeding cycles, alter ocean currents, and increase vulnerability to coastal erosion. The fragile balance of Kerala's coastal ecosystem is already under stress due to climate change and unregulated fishing practices.

Further extraction of marine resources could push it to a tipping point, endanger-

in replenishing fish stocks and maintaining biodiversity. Additionally, advanced monitoring systems are being introduced to track fish migration patterns and regulate fishing activities, ensuring long-term marine health.

Countries like Norway, Japan, and Australia have successfully implemented sustainable fisheries policies that balance economic interests with conservation. Learning from these models can help

PIC TALK



A squirrel perches on a branch of red-silk cotton tree while feeding on flowers in New Delhi. PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

When yesterday's children return as tomorrow's hope

SECOND Opinion



ASHA IYER KUMAR

Time flies. A whole lifetime can sometimes feel like a fleeting frame in the vast reel of existence. Few things make me more aware of this than watching children grow. I have no children of my own to mark the passing years with each birthday they celebrate, but as a mentor and educator, I have been surrounded by young minds in various stages of becoming. I have watched them transition from wide-eyed learners to self-assured adults, carving out their place in the world. Yesterday, one of my earliest students visited me with his fiancée and parents, carrying wedding invitations, gifts, and a bouquet of memories from a time when he was just a six-year-old in shorts and tees. His visit felt like the culmination of a week steeped in nostalgia—a week in which I found myself thinking of all my past students, reaching out to some to check on their progress and well-being.

I was astonished at how they had grown—some still scaling academic heights with degrees and doctorates, others, like the one who visited me, embracing both career and companionship, settling into the rhythms of love and domestication. Not all seem set to become super achievers. Some were slow starters who gained momentum in the later years, some who were primed to blaze the trail, falling short in the end game. As I sat across from my former student, now a confident young professional with clear eyes and measured words, I found

The rise in youth crime in Kerala is a stark reminder of the challenges this generation faces. Where did we go wrong, and how can we build resilience alongside success?

myself reflecting on the delicate threads that connect our journeys to the broader tapestry of societal evolution.

They carry with them innovative solutions to problems we have long considered intractable. They approach challenges with a fluidity and adaptability that my generation often struggles to comprehend. Their apparent detachment from traditional structures is not apathy, but rather a reconfiguration of priorities, a reshaping of engagement that might prove transformative for our world. Yet this hopeful vision is not with-



out its shadows. The recent surge in youth-involved drug cases and violent crimes in Kerala sends tremors through our collective conscience. Young people, barely past adolescence, find themselves entangled in webs of addiction, exploitation, and criminality that threaten to define their entire existence. The

juxtaposition is jarring—young minds full of promise alongside peers whose potential is squandered in the pursuit of momentary escape or misguided power. This stark contrast forces us to confront uncomfortable questions about the environments we create, the values we embody, and the support systems we provide for our youth. Where exactly have we faltered? Perhaps in our haste to prepare children for success, we have neglected to equip them for struggle.

In our eagerness to protect them from hardship, we may have inadvertently shielded them from the very experiences that build resilience. In our focus on academic achievement, we might have overlooked the cultivation of emotional intelligence and moral courage. It's hard to put a finger on the fault lines that have caused the fractures. In the face of these complex challenges, I find solace in the knowledge that those who have passed through my classroom have largely become contributors to society rather than detractors from it. This is not entirely to my credit. Countless factors shape a person's trajectory, but I take quiet pride in having played some role in their formation. To have contributed, even modestly, to the development of honest, thoughtful, and capable individuals is perhaps the greatest measure of success in a mentor's life. Our purpose in this world is not measured by personal achievements or accolades, but by the lives we touch, the potential we help nurture, and the humanity we help foster.

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

Letters to the Editor

Textile industry needs support

Madam — Apropos of the article 'Export Potentials of Punjab ...' (March 5), presents an interesting reading. But the trend in the country remains different. Only slogans galore and solutions are nil. The second largest provider of employment is the cotton industry in India. The direct employment it provides is around 40 million. Besides this, there are micro units and allied feeding industries providing employment to many more millions. The cotton business has been suffering for years due to various internal as well as external factors. In the same way, the spinning mills also feel suffocating due to various factors. Declining exports, unviable cotton prices, growing costs of manufacturing, and a number of such factors are quoted to be disturbing the functioning of mills. It is a pity that a good number of mills are closing their operations, throwing millions of workers out of their jobs, besides their due negative impacts on export earnings.

The industry, with debt-funded capex, finds it too difficult to manage the show anymore. Actually, in most of the mills, the number of permanent workers availing themselves of employee-related benefits is too low, and the vast section of the workforce is made up of contract, outsourced, casual, contingent, and barrack segments, who are paid too little and do not avail themselves of any benefits meant for permanent workers. In spite of such huge savings from the labour component, the mills are closing down due to various reasons that the governments

can alone resolve. For example, the cost of power is felt to be unviable. Export subsidies need to be provided. In the absence of required intervention from the state or the Union governments, a good number of mills are already closed, and many are nearing closure. It is said even banks are not inclined to advance these industries anymore. It is time to attend to this segment as a priority, as slogans are not a solution.

A G RAJMOHAN | ANANTAPUR

Lasting peace in Manipur

Madam— Apropos of the editorial 'A fresh start or fleeting relief?' (March 4), it is very apparent that the Union Government's efforts and monitoring of Manipur ethnic violence for quite a long time are bearing fruit and steadily succeeding for normalcy. Unless the roots of the ethnic violence and secessionist underground activities are identified and addressed, the violence may erupt again. Drug trafficking, opium cultivation, missionaries' separatist activities, and foreign intervention from across the border must be handled iron-handedly.

The arms and ammunition snatched by warring outfits from the police and paramilitary forces should be recovered, and no mercy should be shown to those who attacked police and armed forces. The Parliament should approve the extension of the President's rule, and rather, Manipur should be directly ruled by the Centre as a Union Territory until complete normalcy is restored. The neighbouring states of Manipur should not feel the heat and face the consequences

of ethnic violence in Manipur. The opposition parties should work in unison with the Union Government in resolving Manipur violence and restoring peace.

VISHAL MAYUR | TUMAKURU

Supreme Court warns influencers

Madam — The Supreme Court's call for regulating digital content to uphold morality while protecting free speech is crucial. The rise of social media influencers like Ranveer Allahbadia has raised serious concerns about the unchecked spread of vulgarity under the guise of free expression. His content, deemed obscene by many, is a clear example of why stricter guidelines are necessary. While free speech is a fundamental right, it does not give anyone a license to propagate content that corrupts young minds and disrespects societal values.

The court's decision to allow Allahbadia to resume his show was not well received. Although it imposed moral restrictions on incoming content, individuals engaging in vulgarity should be banned for at least a year. This would make them aware of the mistakes they have made in reality shows, ensuring that they feel the consequences of their actions. Such punishment should serve as a lesson for future generations to refrain from committing similar acts. The influence of such YouTubers extends to millions, and their impact on impressionable audiences cannot be ignored. The government must implement robust regulations to ensure that digital platforms maintain ethical standards.

VINOD JOHRI | DELHI

INDIA BEATS AUSTRALIA



The other back-to-back victory of Team India in the ICC Champions Trophy semifinals against Australia has filled Indians with extreme aspiration of becoming champions. We are just a step away from the dream of becoming champions. The last time Team India lifted the Champions trophy was in 2013. Despite Australia giving a challenging chaser score of 264 runs to India, the partnership by the batting order, bowling, and fielding has made India win by four wickets. Now that India has made a glittering entry to the finals of the ICC Champions Trophy for the third time, let us all make figures crossed for the victory of

India in the finals as well. Now that the Indian cricket team has done their hat trick of three successive entries in the finals, let's pray that India will lift the trophy by naming the third title to her name as Champions.

It's time for all eyes to be on Dubai International Stadium for the thrilling final match. We really wish to see Rohit Sharma's squad turn champions. Cricket fever will be in full swing on the upcoming Sunday to thrill the whole world of cricket lovers. We are hopeful for India to make the podium finishes with the trophy in hand and joy in the eyes.

KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR



FIRST COLUMN

AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI



Understanding God and the Guru

A true guru recognises his limitations, serving only as a guide who connects disciples to the divine



We must understand the distinction between these fundamental entities in our lives. First, let me enumerate some commonly known qualities of God. He is omnipotent. This word is defined as having unlimited power. Only God fits this description. Is He not the Creator of innumerable galaxies? Similarly, God is omniscient. This word is defined as knowing everything. Who else except God fits this description? How much can a mere mortal know?

Albert Einstein famously said, "The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know." Then, God is omnipresent too. This word is defined as being present everywhere at the same time. And God is one and we are many. Lord Krishna states, "An eternal soul is My part only" (The Bhagavad-Geeta 15.7). Let us see how a genuine guru fares in these characteristics. He knows that whatever he has learnt in terms of spiritual knowledge, oratory skills, etc., is due to God's empowerment. God is much pleased by preaching amongst devotees. A genuine guru realizes that the source of his knowledge is God only. As regards omnipresence, a genuine guru humbly accepts that he is severely limited in being present with his disciples. Additionally, a genuine guru never claims any similarity with God except being part of God. Because God is completely different from us.

A genuine guru knows this fact more than others, who are not so knowledgeable. Being an incarnation of God never crosses his mind, because he knows that God incarnates for specific purposes. A guru's role is extremely limited. It is just to help get his disciples connected with God. And he strictly avoids attracting them to himself personally. Adi Shankaracharya is the role model for him, who preached "bhaja govindam". Now I will take up the famous verse, which is, "guru brahma, guru vishnu, guru devo maheshvara, guru sakshat parambrahma tasmai shri gurave namah."

Can any mere mortal claim to be Brahma or Vishnu or Mahadeva, never mind all three of them? It is ludicrous to even imagine. These are manifestations of God, not some ordinary entities; they are eternal, whereas we are subject to repeated birth and death till liberated. So what is the meaning of this verse? It is simply that whatever a guru speaks has sanction from God; he is not deviating from His instructions. He is simply conveying the essence of His teachings.

That is how he represents God. A genuine guru ensures that he protects his disciples from any harm by his inappropriate actions. He does not promise anything more than helping them to establish a good connection with God. He tries to become a role model for taking shelter from God because that is how all can benefit. He knows that he cannot give anything more.

20 He is aware of his severe limitations in this regard. He guides his disciples to get connected to God such that they can get what all God can give. (9.25) The conclusion is to seek help from a genuine guru, who can help in progressing in our eternal journey. And we should never get side-tracked by hopes of easy gains, because there are none. We have to deserve all that we hope to get including liberation by our efforts, not someone else's.

A genuine guru knows this fact and never leaves any doubt in the minds of those who trust him. He thus gets respect from his disciples, which he richly deserves. Additionally, some disciples may serve him personally and some may donate so that the guru can maintain himself.

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

A model of stability from China

While Western democracies struggle with internal gridlock, economic and stagnation, China's governance model continues to chart a course of long-term strategic vision



The Financial Times recently published an article on the question of who will succeed Xi Jinping. But perhaps the real question is not one of succession but of continuity—of how a governance model rooted in long-term vision, pragmatic adaptability, and national rejuvenation sustains itself beyond the tenure of any single leader. Unlike Western portrayals, often laden with exaggerated spectres from 'debt traps' to 'authoritarianism', there are profound lessons to be drawn from China's trajectory—especially as Western democracies now find themselves gasping for air in the suffocating embrace of their contradictions. "Democracy is a failed joke," Ai Weiwei, the Chinese contemporary artist, remarked in a recent interview with The Independent—and perhaps never has this assertion been more starkly evident than in the shambolic decline of the liberal order. Governance, once regarded as the solemn responsibility of those entrusted with the future of their nations, has in the West deteriorated into little more than a revolving spectacle of populist theatre, corporate capture, and institutional paralysis. It is within this continuum that China now prepares to convene its most pivotal political gathering of the year—the Two Sessions.

The third session of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC) and the third session of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), scheduled to commence on 4 and 5 March respectively, are not mere ritualistic formalities but the very engine of governance in a system defined by strategic foresight rather than short-term electoral expedience. The Western world, entrapped in the myopia of its dysfunction, looks upon this grand assembly with bewilderment, unable to comprehend a system where efficiency supersedes obstruction and where governance is an instrument of civilisation rather than a battleground of perpetual paralysis.

As Beijing convenes these pivotal sessions, it does so with a purpose that far surpasses the partisan gridlock that has crippled Washington under Trump and reduced Brussels, under Ursula von der Leyen's leadership, to a stage of waning relevance. History does not bestow hegemony upon the indolent. It is earned through foresight, discipline, and a genuine commitment to civilisation's progress. The Western model, long heralded as the apex of governance, is now fraying



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

resolve. "The path of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the only correct path for building a modern socialist country," Xi Jinping declared in his report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017. What have the last few decades illuminated since China's opening up? "Reform and opening up is the key

at the seams, consumed by internal strife, economic stagnation, and an ever-widening gulf between the governed and their rulers. Meanwhile, the Chinese model, grounded in the philosophical profundity of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, marches forward with unparalleled resolve.

"The path of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the only correct path for building a modern socialist country," Xi Jinping declared in his report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017. What have the last few decades illuminated since China's opening up? "Reform and opening up is the key

definitive proclamation for a new global paradigm—one where dialogue supplants discord and where stability is not held hostage to the whims of declining empires. The very existence of Western diplomacy has been predicated upon coercion, economic subjugation, and military adventurism. China, by contrast, has demonstrated that genuine global leadership lies not in the proliferation of conflict, but in its resolution. This year's Two Sessions will reaffirm Beijing's role as an indispensable mediator of international crises, bringing adversaries to the negotiating table in a manner that the West, mired in its moral hypocrisy, has repeatedly failed to achieve. Consider the diplomatic masterstroke that saw China facilitate a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia—two historical adversaries long ensnared in the machinations of Western interventionism. This ethos extends to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, where China,

to the Western penchant for war profiteering. While NATO expands its influence under the guise of security, China constructs bridges of diplomacy, demonstrating that true global leadership lies not in fuelling divisions but in fostering dialogue. But China's vision does not stop at terrestrial affairs.

This year's Two Sessions will be held at the next frontier of human progress—space—becomes a new high-tech battlefield. While Western nations hoard technological advancements for geopolitical leverage, China has advanced an inclusive vision of cosmic exploration. The construction of the Tiangong space station, the pioneering lunar projects, and the Mars exploration programme are not mere scientific endeavours; they are emblematic of a civilisation that aspires not merely for national greatness but for the collective progress of humanity.

The essence of the Two Sessions lies in the articulation of a governing philosophy rooted in long-term vision, adaptability, and the pursuit of collective progress. It is not governance dictated by ephemeral political cycles but by a civilisation's deeper consciousness—one that understands its historical responsibility not only to itself but to the broader trajectory of human development. In an era where artificial intelligence and artificial general intelligence are reshaping economies, governance, and even social structures, China does not see these advancements as instruments of control or geopolitical leverage but as elements of a broader mission: ensuring that technological evolution remains a force for human cohesion rather than fragmentation. What China has proven is that reform is not an event; it is the flow of history recognising its potential. Simultaneously, the shifting currents of global trade, exacerbated by protectionist measures and economic fragmentation, have reinforced the necessity of an alternative economic logic—one not shackled to the fluctuations of political expediency but rooted in the principle of enduring equilibrium.

True strength is not found in dominance, but in resilience—the ability to absorb, adapt, and outlast. This defines China's approach to trade tensions: rather than engaging in tit-for-tat economic skirmishes, the focus is on structural reinforcement—building self-sufficiency in critical sectors while ensuring that economic interdependence remains a mechanism of stability rather than vulnerability. (The writer is a journalist and a policy analyst. Views expressed are personal)

WHILE WESTERN ECONOMIES DROWN IN INFLATIONARY QUAGMIRES AND INSTITUTIONAL CRISES, CHINA HAS CHARTED A PATH OF ECONOMIC REJUVENATION THROUGH INDUSTRIAL UPGRADING, AND THE INDOMITABLE PURSUIT OF TECHNOLOGICAL SELF-RELIANCE

choice that determines the fate of contemporary China," Deng Xiaoping once asserted. This ethos continues to guide China, as the nation refines its developmental trajectory with an adaptability that the West, bound by ideological rigidity, can scarcely fathom. China is not merely asserting its presence but reshaping the very contours of the global order. The Two Sessions have highlighted the profundity of China's economic strategy—one that is not predicated on the ephemeral illusions of speculative capitalism but on tangible infrastructural and technological advancement. While Western economies drown in inflationary quagmires and institutional crises, China has charted a path of economic rejuvenation through high-quality development, industrial upgrading, and the indomitable pursuit of technological self-reliance.

Yet the significance of the Two Sessions transcends economic imperatives. It is also a

in defiance of Western inertia, has actively pursued dialogue among Palestinian factions. The hypocrisy of the liberal order is laid bare when the so-called torchbearers of democracy selectively disregard the suffering of those who do not fit within their geopolitical calculus.

Beijing, undeterred by such duplicity, has asserted itself as an honest broker of peace, proving that a multipolar world is not an abstraction but an unfolding reality. Even in the maelstrom of the Ukraine conflict, where Western powers have inflamed tensions rather than defused them, China's peace proposal has emerged as the only substantive roadmap towards de-escalation.

President Xi Jinping has consistently emphasised that "confrontation, sanctions, and pressure will not solve the problem... what is needed is a mindset of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security," resonating ever more powerfully in contrast

Healthcare divide: How tier-II and III cities are transforming medical access

Investments in advanced medical technology and government initiatives like Ayushman Bharat are making healthcare more accessible in tier II and III cities

Healthcare facilities in tier-II and III cities have long struggled with the disparity between affordability and accessibility of quality healthcare services. These cities often lack well-equipped medical centres, forcing patients to travel to nearby metropolitan areas for advanced treatment. The shortage of trained medical professionals further exacerbates the problem.

The doctor-to-patient ratio in these cities remains significantly below the WHO-recommended standard of 1:1,000, often reaching alarming ratios such as 1:25,000. One of the major factors behind this situation is the concentration of healthcare resources in metropolitan areas. Government hospitals in smaller cities often grapple with overcrowding, long waiting lines, and outdated infrastructure. Meanwhile, private hospitals that offer advanced treatments are often unaffordable for the majority of the population. This leaves patients with limited options, pushing them to seek care in distant metro cities.

However, in recent years, several hospitals in tier-II cities have made significant strides in bridging this gap. The emergence of well-equipped hospitals outside major metropolitan areas is proving to be a game-changer for patients who previously had to travel long distances for treatment. Health Institutions like Subharti Hospital in Meerut exemplify how tier-II cities are evolving to provide comprehensive and affordable healthcare not only under



KRISHNAMURTHY

the Ayushman Bharat Mission but also for uninsured patients, reducing dependence on metropolitan hospitals.

Ayushman Bharat and Affordability

One of the biggest challenges in tier-II and III cities is making advanced healthcare both available and affordable.

Many private hospitals offer high-end treatment facilities, but their pricing structures make them inaccessible to a significant portion of the population.

To address this issue, some hospitals are designing cost-effective treatment models that prioritize patient affordability without compromising on quality. Additionally, government schemes and insurance programs such as Ayushman Bharat-PMJAY need to be further expanded and better implemented in these regions. Many eligible patients are unaware of their entitlements under schemes like PMJAY, leading to underutilization of available resources. Increased awareness and streamlined implementation of such initiatives can make a significant difference in ensuring financial accessibility to quality healthcare.

Advancements in Medical Technology

Traditionally, hospitals in non-metro areas have



been perceived as lacking advanced infrastructure and specialized treatment options. However, this perception is gradually changing.

Many healthcare institutions such as Subharti Hospital in Meerut are now investing in cutting-edge medical technology, including advanced imaging facilities such as digital PET scans, high-resolution MRI and CT scans, and modern oncology treatment options like chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

The availability of these services locally is significantly reducing the burden on patients who would otherwise have to commute to larger cities.

A breakthrough in Meerut is the introduction of comprehensive treatment centres, particularly in fields like oncology. Cancer patients, for example, often face logistical and financial challenges when forced to visit different hospitals for diagnosis, surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy.

The integration of these services under one roof in tier-II cities is improving patient outcomes and reducing treatment delays. Subharti Hospital, for instance, has emerged as a reliable healthcare provider in Western Uttar Pradesh, offering a full spectrum of oncology services in a single location, saving patients valuable time and resources.

The Road Ahead

Ensuring quality healthcare in tier-II and III cities requires a multi-pronged approach that includes expanding medical infrastructure, ensuring equitable resource distribution, increasing investment in medical education to address the shortage of trained professionals, and encouraging partnerships to enhance healthcare accessibility. As healthcare in India evolves, tier-II and III cities are poised to play a crucial role in expanding medical access beyond metropolitan areas.

Continuous efforts are needed to overcome existing challenges and create a healthcare system that is truly inclusive and accessible to all. With a focused approach towards affordability, accessibility, and technological advancements, the future of healthcare in non-metro regions holds immense potential. By addressing these challenges head-on, tier-II and III cities can become the next frontier in India's healthcare transformation.

(The writer is the Deputy Medical Superintendent of Subharti Hospital, Meerut. Views expressed are personal)

AI trainer under lens, pilots grounded

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI:

Air India (AI) on Wednesday terminated the services of a trainer pilot for lapses, while it removed 10 other pilots -- who underwent training under the trainer pilot -- from flying duties pending an investigation. The AI management's action against the trainer pilot came after a whistle-blower alleged that a simulator trainer pilot had failed to properly discharge his duties during recurrent simulator training for pilots. "A detailed investigation was conducted and, following a review of the evidence, the allegation was corroborated. Accordingly, the said trainer pilot's services are being terminated," an AI statement said.

"As a precaution, ten pilots who underwent recurrent training under the trainer pilot have been removed from flying duties pending further investigation," the statement said. As per the complaint, the simulator trainer pilot did not perform his duties during the regular training sessions for pilots, though the details of exact nature of the purported lapses were not immediately available. Air India had in the past faced action from the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) for failing to report certain incidents and non-disclosures. After initiating action against its trainer pilot and taking off 10 other pilots from the flying duties, Air India has

voluntarily reported the matter to the DGCA as part of our voluntary disclosure practice, and has commended the whistle-blower for stepping forward. It may be recalled that the Tata Group took over loss-making Air India from the Government in January 2022. In a statement, Air India said that it had implemented the Tata Code of Conduct to establish clear behavioural expectations and accelerate cultural change to that of a Tata Group company. "This included comprehensive training for all employees on Tata's ethos and ethics-related policies, such as anti-bribery, anti-corruption and whistleblowing, among others," it added. "An Apex Ethics Committee

led by senior management oversees efforts to foster a culture with zero tolerance for unethical behaviour. Extensive awareness campaigns are regularly conducted to reinforce expectations," AI statement said. According to AI, a structured process for capturing allegations, conducting investigations and enforcing strict consequences was also introduced. These are logged and investigated by an experienced team, independent of external interference. The airline said that under this process, in 2024 alone more than 30 Air India employees have been terminated for various ethical breaches, with numerous others receiving other disciplinary action.

SP MLA Abu Asim Azmi suspended from Maharashtra state Assembly

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In a significant development that came a day after he came in a severe flak from members of both the Houses of the Maharashtra Legislature, Samajwadi Party MLA Abu Asim Azmi was on Wednesday suspended from the State Legislative Assembly for the entire budget session for eulogising Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Parliamentary Affairs Minister Chandrakant Patil moved a motion seeking suspension of Azmi, a four-time MLA, for the remainder of the ongoing budget session. During the discussion that followed, senior ruling BJP MLA Sudhir Mungantiwar upped the ante and rooted for the termination of Azmi's membership. Later, Speaker Rahul Narwekar put the motion seeking Azmi's suspension moved by Patil to voice vote which was adopted unanimously by the House. Following the adoption of the motion, the SP MLA will remain suspended till the remainder of the budget session which will end on March 26. Earlier, speaking on the motion seeking suspension of Azmi from the House, Patil said that the Samajwadi Party MLA had described Aurangzeb as "an able administrator" and made an objectionable remark about Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, son of iconic Maratha warrior Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. "In the process, Azmi tarnished the image of the State Assembly.

Taking serious cognisance of his questionable remarks, Azmi should be suspended from the House till the last day of the ongoing Assembly session," the minister said. "My suspension is nothing but injustice done not just to me but to the millions of people whom I represent... I would like to ask the government whether two types of laws are followed in the state? One law for Abu Azmi and another law for Prashant Koratkar and Rahul Sholapurkar," Azmi said in a video post on X. "I have said whatever historians and writers have claimed about Aurangzeb Rahmatullah Ali... I have not made any derogatory comments about Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Sambhaji Maharaj. But still, if anyone has been hurt by my statement, then I take back my words, my statement," Azmi said. Azmi said that his side should have been heard before ordering his suspension. "I will approach the Speaker for remedy. I will also explore avenues where I can get justice," he said. Azmi's suspension from the Maharashtra Assembly evoked strong reactions -- both in his defence and against him. Slamming the Maharashtra Assembly's decision to suspend Azmi, former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav wrote on X, he said: "If the basis of suspension starts getting influenced by ideology, then what difference will remain between freedom of

expression and slavery?" In his defence of Azmi, Azmi said: "Whether it is our MLAs or MPs, their fearless wisdom is unmatched. If some people think that by 'suspension' one can put a rein on the tongue of truth, then this is the childishness of their negative thinking. Today's free thinking person says, 'we don't want BJP!'" Uttar Pradesh chief minister and BJP leader Yogi Adityanath said: "I want to tell Samajwadi Party leaders that they believe in the thoughts of the person in whose name you do politics. Today, the Samajwadi Party is moving away from the principles of Dr Ram Manohar Lohia. They have made Aurangzeb their idol.... Remove that person from (Samajwadi) party and send him to UP, we will provide him necessary treatment.... The person who feels ashamed about the heritage of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, instead of taking pride and considers Aurangzeb as his idol, does he have the right to stay in our country?" "On one hand, you keep blaming Mahakumbh; on the other hand, you praise a person like Aurangzeb, who destroyed the temples of the country. Why can't you control that MLA of yours? Why didn't you condemn his statement?," Adityanath said. In the heated debate that took place in both the Houses of the Maharashtra Legislature on Tuesday, Shinde dubbed Azmi as a descendant of Aurangzeb. Members in both the Houses came down heavily on the

controversial Mughal emperor who, they said, tortured Sambhaji Maharaj and brutally killed him. Maharashtra deputy Chief Minister and Shiv Sena chief Eknath Shinde led the attack on Azmi both the State Assembly and Council. The members claimed Azmi was a descendant of Aurangzeb, who tortured Maratha king Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj and brutally killed him. Deputy Chief Minister and Shiv Sena head Eknath Shinde led the attack on Azmi both in the legislative council and assembly. Speaking in the Upper House, Shinde said: "Abu Azmi is purposely insulting Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and (his son) Chhatrapati Sambhaji. Sambhaji's Maharaj's bravery and Aurangzeb's cruelty will give goose-bumps to people." "Aurangzeb tortured Sambhaji Maharaj in an inhuman way. Abu Azmi referred to Aurangzeb as an able administrator who built temples but he razed Kashi Vishveshwar temple. The Mughal emperor not only killed Hindus but also people from other religions," Shinde said. "Aurangzeb lost even after he won, but Sambhaji, through his bravery, won even after his sacrifice. He (Aurangzeb) was a demon. Even a true Muslim will not forgive the progeny of traitors. It is wrong to eulogise Aurangzeb," Shinde said, as he demanded the termination of the membership of Azmi whom he called a "traitor".

Amarnath yatra to start on July 3

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAMMU

The 38-day annual pilgrimage to the holy cave shrine of Shri Amarnath ji in South Kashmir is all set to commence from July 3. According to an official spokesperson, the decision to this effect was taken at the 48th board meeting of Shri Amarnath Ji Shrine Board (SASB) under the chairmanship of Lt Governor Manoj Sinha at Raj Bhawan in Jammu. "This year, the yatra will commence on July 3, simultaneously from both the routes -- the Pahalgam track in Anantnag district and Baltal in Ganderbal district, and it will culminate on August 9 on

Raksha Bandhan," the spokesperson said. He said the meeting was attended by members of the shrine board which proposed various measures and interventions to further improve the facilities and services for the devotees. Considering the likely increased inflow of pilgrims for the Amarnath Yatra, the meeting discussed measures for the enhancement of lodgement capacity at centres in Jammu, Srinagar and other locations, operationalization of yatri facilitation centres for e-KYC, issuance of RFID cards, on-spot registration of pilgrims at number of locations including Nowgam and Katra railway stations, the spokesperson said. He said it was further

discussed that these facilities must also be suitably enhanced at Baltal, Pahalgam, Nunwan, and Pantha Chowk Srinagar, as per the requirement. Reviewing the progress achieved on various ongoing works undertaken by the line departments, the LG stressed on the need for ensuring adequate arrangements and requisite amenities at various locations enroute the yatra. He also called for increasing capacity at Yatri Niwas, Pantha Chowk, Srinagar, the spokesperson said. The spokesperson said decongestion measures at holy cave and lower holy cave among others were also deliberated in detail in the meeting.

CBI signals rail to haul...

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"From 2015 to till date more than seven Crores candidates have been examined through computer based tests without any paper leakage, impersonation, remote log-in, and use of spy devices," explained a railway board official. The process involves selection of exam conducting agency through an open tender will have to go strict auditing checklist for all the available facilities like toilet outside not allowed, 100 percent CCTV coverage and recording to be done two hours pre-exam and one hour post exams. The SOPs involves IP based CCTV surveillance for better resolution, reliable and uninterrupted connection; isolation from commercial and other residential area. "All mouse and key clicks to be recorded with time stamp for audit purpose. Information about city of exam to be disclosed 10 days before the actual date of examination while venue/centre of examination has to be made available only four days before the exam. Exam centre will be allotted through a computerized and randomised generation avoiding manual intervention," said the official. The conducting team and the exam centre personnel will get the information about the candidate just two hours before the examination. The board decided that the question paper has to be in highly encrypted form (256-bit encryption) and last minute decryption will happen only when the candidate actually logs in. Finally multiple layers of invigilation will monitor the entire exercise to make it fool proof.

Gurugram signs MoU with Maruti to improve traffic management

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ GURUGRAM

The Gurugram Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) has signed an MoU with Maruti Suzuki India Ltd (MDIL) and Utkrish Society for Safe Haryana, to further strengthen effective traffic management as well as increase safety on the city roads. The objective of this project is to eliminate/reduce manual intervention in traffic enforcement and challan system, reduce traffic violations, accidents and fatalities by implementation of ITMS and strengthen enforcement of traffic rules as well as induce behavioral change of road commuters through traffic enforcement. GMDA has already completed Phase 1 of the CCTV project

wherein 1200 cameras at 218 junctions in Gurugram and Manesar areas have already been installed. These camera feeds are monitored round the clock by police department for city surveillance & traffic management. MSIL will further install 400 CCTV cameras equipped ITMS technologies which would include hardware and software for Red Light Violation Detection System (RLVDS), Speed Violation Detection System (SVDS), Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR), helmet detection, wrong side driving detection, Electronic Challan System at multiple junctions of various road stretches in the City and ensure its integration with GMDA command and control center to monitor the traffic in the city. Additionally, Utkrish Society

for Safe Haryana, is a non-profit initiative of Haryana State Police set up with an aim to foster public-private partnership on the subject of safety, between the Haryana Police and the industry in the state, with road safety being one of the focus areas. The Haryana State Police is responsible for the maintenance of law and order for the entire City including road traffic management as well as for the improvement of road safety in the City. The Gurugram Police works in

coordination with GMDA, Municipal Corporation of Gurugram (MCG), Public Works Department, Haryana, National Highways Authority of India etc., and is responsible for traffic enforcement as well as investigation and data collection of road crashes within the City. "GMDA, MSIL and Utkrish Society will collaboratively work towards intensifying improved traffic management systems in Gurugram," said said P.K. Aggrawal, Consultant, Smart City Division, GMDA.

CBI Bofors next

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The CBI got a green signal from the Union Home Ministry on sending the LR to the US on January 14 this year. The agency informed the Special Court, which cleared the LR application of the CBI on February 11. "It is requested that in order to collect both documentary as well as oral evidence, for ascertaining the fact relating to the claims made by Michael Hershman, in the above-mentioned interview, it is necessary to conduct investigation in the United States of America," a special court had noted while clearing the CBI's application for the

issuance of the LRs. The CBI had registered the case in 1990, three years after a Swedish radio channel had alleged that bribes were paid by Bofors to politicians and defence officials of India to clinch the deal. The allegations created a big scandal for the then Rajiv Gandhi-led Union government and have been used by rival parties to target the Congress. The Bofors Scam pertains to allegations of a Rs 64-crore bribe in a Rs 1,437-crore deal with Swedish firm Bofors for the supply of 400 155mm field Howitzers. The CBI filed the chargesheets in 1999 and 2000. The Delhi High Court had exonerated Rajiv Gandhi in

2004, nearly 13 years after he was assassinated by the LTTE in a suicide attack. In 2005, the Delhi High Court quashed all charges against the remaining accused noting that the CBI failed to prove that the money transferred by Bofors to various agents by Italian businessman Ottavio Quattrocchi was meant to be paid as a bribe to public servants in India. The CBI appealed against the 2005 decision in the apex court in 2018 but it was dismissed on the grounds of delay. The Supreme Court, however, allowed it to raise all the points in an appeal filed by advocate Ajay Aggarwal in 2005.

China raises stakes for India, US

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"We will stay committed to the Party's absolute leadership over the people's armed forces, thoroughly implement the system of ultimate responsibility resting with the chairman of the Central Military Commission, continue improving the political conduct of the military," he said. The Chinese military functioned under the leadership of the Communist Party unlike the armed forces of other countries which functioned under the government. "We will step up military training and combat readiness, speed up the development of new combat capabilities, and establish a framework of modern

military theories with Chinese characteristics, so as to firmly safeguard China's sovereignty, security, and development interests," Li said in his work report submitted to the NPC. On Tuesday, Lou Qinjian, spokesperson for the NPC, defended China's increasing defence expenditure, saying that "peace needs to be safeguarded with strength". Since 2016, China's annual defence spending has maintained single-digit growth for nine years in a row, he said, adding that China's defence expenditure as a share of GDP has been kept under 1.5 per cent for many years. In his budget speech, Li said China will complete the tasks laid down in the 14th Five-Year Plan for strengthening

the military, intensify the implementation of major defence-related projects, and move faster to develop the network information system. The government will also promote military-civilian reforms, refine the framework and layout of defence-related science, technology, he said. "We in government at every level will provide strong support for the development of national defence and the armed forces and refine the mechanisms for strengthening mutual support between civilian sectors and the military, so as to consolidate and strengthen the rock-solid unity between the military and the people," he said.

Canada slams US trade war

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"Canadians are hurt. Canadians are angry. We are going to choose to not go on vacation in Florida," Trudeau said. "We are going to choose to try and buy Canadian products ... And yeah we're probably going to keep booing the American anthem." The premier of Ontario, Canada's most populous province, said that he would issue a 25 per cent export tax on electricity sold to the US and may later cut it off completely if the American tariffs persist. Ontario

powered 1.5 million homes in the US in 2023 in Michigan, New York and Minnesota. Ontario Premier Doug Ford also told The Associated Press that he would stop the sale of nickel and rare minerals to the US. Ontario and other provinces already began removing American liquor brands from government store shelves. The Liquor Control Board of Ontario sells nearly USD 1 billion Canadian dollars (USD 687 million) worth of American wine, beer, spirits and seltzers every year. A government official said

Lutnick called Ford after Ford's press conference and asked him to stand down. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to speak publicly about the call, said Ford told the US commerce secretary he'll go harder. The official said Lutnick told Ford that Trudeau's "very dumb" comment and comments by other Canadian officials were not helpful, but said Lutnick seemed to acknowledge the tariffs are a part of negotiation toward a trade deal.

Senior IPS daughter into gold smuggling

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According to the Ministry, the contraband, valued at Rs 12.56 crore, was seized under the provisions of the Customs Act, 1962. "Following the interception, DRI officers searched her residence on Lavelle Road, Bengaluru, where she lives

with her husband. The search led to the seizure of gold jewellery worth Rs 2.06 Crore and Indian currency amounting to Rs 2.67 Crore," the statement added. The 32 year old actress was charged under the anti-smuggling provisions of the Customs Act, 1962, and remanded to 14 days of judicial custody.

Naxal as maid nabbed

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She joined the notorious Naxalite camp Bhakpa Maovadi Ugarvadi Jeevan Kandulna. During her time there, she underwent a rigorous and intense training regimen for five years, where she was groomed as a trained Naxalite.

and began working as a house cleaner in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, and various parts of Delhi. She settled in the Pitampura area, where she remained undetected, living discreetly. Multiple FIRs were registered against her at Sonua Police Station, Jharkhand, under serious charges, including criminal conspiracy, attempt to murder, and waging war against the state. She will be produced before the court for further legal proceedings. The arrestee is wanted in case FIR No. 19 dated 11.04.2020, registered under Section 147/148/149/307/353/120B/1 21/121-A Indian Penal Code, 1860, read with Section 25(1A)/25(1B)(a)/35 Arms Act, read with Section 3/4/17 Explosive Act, read with Section 10/13 Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, Police Station Sonua, Jharkhand. On 26.03.2023, the court of SDJM (P), Chaibasa, Jharkhand, issued a Non-Bailable Warrant for the arrest of the lady accused (R). Accused arrestee "R" has been booked by way of Kalandara under Section 41.1 of Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 read with Section 35(1)(C) Bharatiya Nararik Suraksha Sanhita 2023.

TRUMP VOWS TO TARIFF INDIA BACK

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"Whatever they tax us, we will tax them. If they do non-monetary tariffs to keep us out of their market, then we will do non-monetary barriers to keep them out of our market. There's a lot of that too. They don't even allow us in their market. We will take in trillions and trillions of dollars and create jobs like we have never seen before," Trump said. He added that "I did it with China, and I did it with others and the Biden administration couldn't do anything about it because it was so much money they couldn't do anything about it."

He added that the US has very large deficits with both Mexico and Canada. "But even more importantly, they have allowedentanyl to come into our country at levels never seen before, killing hundreds of thousands of our citizens and many very young, beautiful people, destroying families. Nobody's ever seen anything like it. They are in effect receiving subsidies of hundreds of billions of dollars. We pay subsidies to Canada and to Mexico of hundreds of billions of dollars. And the United States will not be doing that any longer. We are not going to do it any longer." Trump is implementing a 25

per cent additional tariff on imports from Canada and Mexico and a 10 per cent additional tariff on imports from China. In a retaliatory action, Canada said that effective March 4, 2025, it is imposing 25 per cent tariffs on USD 30 billion in goods imported from the United States. Mexico said it will announce reciprocal action on Sunday. China also announced it will impose additional tariffs of up to 15 per cent on imports of key US farm products. In the past, Trump has called India "tariff king" and a "big abuser". Last month, during a joint press conference with Prime Minister Modi in the

White House, Trump had said that India has "been very strong on tariffs", and "I don't blame them, necessarily, but it's a different way of doing business. It's very hard to sell into India because they have trade barriers, very strong tariffs." Trump had noted that as a signal of good faith, Modi had recently announced the reductions to India's "unfair, very strong tariffs" that limit US access into the Indian market very strongly. "And really, it's a big problem, I must say. India imposes a 30 to 40 to 60 and even 70 per cent tariff on so many of the goods and, in some cases, far more than that. As an

example, a 70 per cent tariff on US cars going into India, which makes it pretty much impossible to sell those cars." Trump had said that the US trade deficit with India is almost USD 100 billion, and Modi and he agreed that "we'll begin negotiations to address the long-running disparities that should have been taken care of over the last four years -- but they didn't do that -- in the US-India trading relationship, with the goal of signing an agreement." "And we want -- really, we want a certain level playing field, which we really think we're entitled to, and he does also, in fairness, so we're

going to work on that very hard," Trump said. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal is in Washington for trade talks with his US counterpart Howard Lutnick. As per US estimates, the US total goods trade with India was an estimated USD 129.2 billion in 2024. The US goods exports to India in 2024 were USD 41.8 billion, up 3.4 per cent (USD 1.4 billion) from 2023. US goods imports from India totalled USD 87.4 billion in 2024, up 4.5 per cent (USD 3.7 billion) from 2023. The US goods trade deficit with India was USD 45.7 billion in 2024, a 5.4 per cent increase (USD 2.4 billion) over 2023.

Ukraine ready to come to negotiating table: Trump

PTI ■ NEW YORK/WASHINGTON

US President Donald Trump said he has received "strong signals" from Russia that it is ready for peace and that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has written to him saying his country is ready to come to the negotiating table and also sign an agreement on minerals and security.

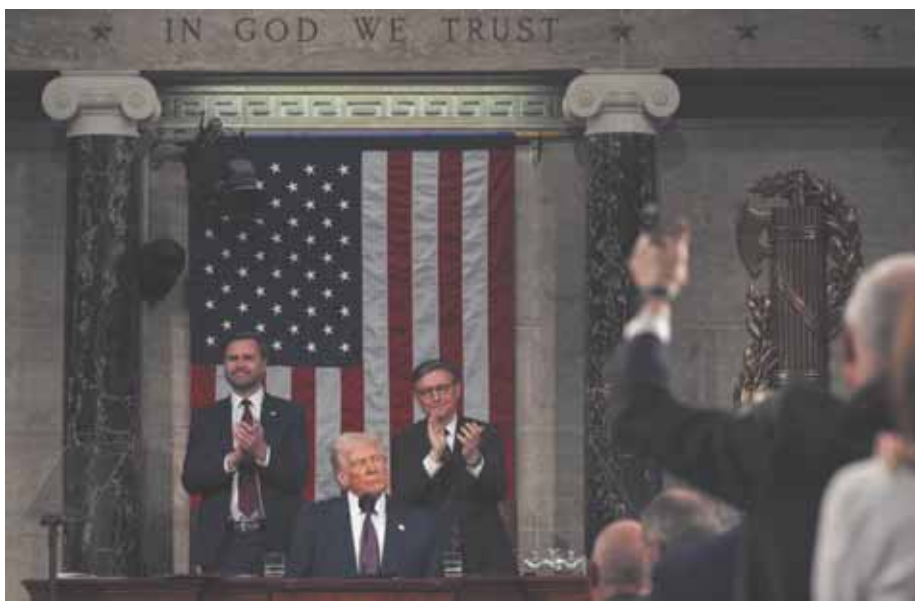
Trump made these remarks Tuesday night in an address to the Joint Session of Congress, the first of his second term in the White House.

"I'm also working tirelessly to end the savage conflict in Ukraine. Millions of Ukrainians and Russians have been needlessly killed or wounded in this horrific and brutal conflict with no end in sight," Trump said.

He told Congress that on Tuesday, he received an "important letter" from Zelenskyy, in which he said that "Ukraine is ready to come to the negotiating table as soon as possible to bring lasting peace closer. Nobody wants peace more than the Ukrainians," Zelenskyy wrote in the letter, Trump said.

Trump said that Zelenskyy went on to write in the letter that his team and him "stand ready to work under President Trump's strong leadership to get a peace that lasts. We do really value how much America has done to help Ukraine, maintain its sovereignty and independence. Regarding the agreement on minerals and security, Ukraine is ready to sign it at any time that is convenient for you."

Trump said he appreciates the letter and added that "simultaneously we've had serious discussions with Russia and I've received strong signals that they are ready for peace.



President Donald Trump addresses a joint session of Congress at the Capitol in Washington on Tuesday.

AP/PTI

Wouldn't that be beautiful? Wouldn't that be beautiful?" he said amid applause.

"... It's time to stop this madness. It's time to halt the killing. It's time to end the senseless war. If you want to end wars, you have to talk to both sides," Trump said. In a post on X, hours before Trump's address to Congress, Zelenskyy said Ukraine is "ready to work fast to end the war, and the first stages could be the release of prisoners and truce in the sky — ban on missiles, long-ranged drones, bombs on energy and other civilian infrastructure — and truce in the sea immediately, if Russia will do the same. Then we want to move very fast through all next stages and to work with the US to agree a strong final deal."

Zelenskyy said that Ukraine really does value how much America has done to help Ukraine maintain its sovereignty and independence. "And we remember the

moment when things changed when President Trump provided Ukraine with Javelins. We are grateful for this."

In the post, Zelenskyy also referred to the disastrous meeting between him and Trump in the Oval Office last week and said "Our meeting in Washington, at the White House on Friday, did not go the way it was supposed to be. It is regrettable that it happened this way. It is time to make things right. We would like future cooperation and communication to be constructive."

Trump said that the United States has sent hundreds of billions of dollars to support Ukraine's defence with no security, with no anything and asked lawmakers if they want to keep it going for another five years.

Trump said that more than 2,000 people are being killed every single week in the conflict that is now in its third year. "They are Russian young peo-

ple, they're Ukrainian young people. They're not Americans, but I want it to stop," Trump said. Trump added that meanwhile, Europe has sadly spent more money buying Russian oil and gas than they've spent on defending Ukraine, by far.

"Think of that. They've spent more buying Russian oil and gas than they have defending. We've spent perhaps USD 350 billion, like taking candy from a baby. That's what happened. And they've spent USD 100 billion. What a difference that is. And we have an ocean separating us, and they don't. But we're getting along very well with them and lots of good things are happening," he said.

"Biden has authorised more money in this fight than Europe has spent by billions and billions of dollars. It's hard to believe that they wouldn't have stopped it and said at some point. Come on, let's equalise. You've got to be equal to us. That didn't happen," he

said. A day before Zelenskyy wrote to Trump about Ukraine being ready to come to the negotiating table, the US President had temporarily suspended, with immediate effect, the delivery of all American military aid to Ukraine.

A report in The New York Times had quoted a senior administration official as saying that Trump had temporarily suspended the delivery of all US military aid to Ukraine and that the order takes effect immediately, affecting "more than USD 1 billion in arms and ammunition in the pipeline and on order."

This setback for Ukraine had come just days after Trump and Vice President J D Vance had a heated verbal exchange in the Oval Office with Zelenskyy, who was visiting the White House last Friday, and the two countries were all set to sign a rare mineral deal. But talks between Trump and Zelenskyy unravelled in a stunning exchange that played out in front of the global media.

Vance told the Ukrainian leader, "I think it's disrespectful for you to come to the Oval Office to try to litigate this in front of the American media... you should be thanking the president for trying to bring you into this conference."

As the conversation grew heated, Trump said to Zelenskyy "You're gambling with the lives of millions of people. You're gambling with World War Three. You're gambling with World War Three, and what you're doing is very disrespectful to the country, this country that's backed you far more than a lot of people say they should." Trump and Vance also criticised Zelenskyy for not being grateful enough for the support that the US had given so far to Ukraine in its war with Russia.

Island is ours, says Greenland PM in defiance of message from Trump

AP ■ NUUK (GREENLAND)

Greenland's prime minister declared on Wednesday that "Greenland is ours" and cannot be taken or bought in defiance of a message from US President Donald Trump, who said his administration supported the Arctic island's right of self-determination — but added that the United States will acquire the territory "one way or another".

Greenlandic Prime Minister Múte Bourup Egede said the island's citizens are not American nor Danish because they are Greenlandic. The United States needs to understand that, he wrote in a post in Greenlandic and Danish on Facebook Wednesday.

The future of Greenland will be decided by its people, he wrote.

His post came hours after Trump made a direct appeal to Greenlanders in a speech to Congress on Tuesday, a week before islanders head to the polls for parliamentary elections.

"We strongly support your right to determine your own future, and if you choose, we welcome you into the United States of America," Trump said. "We will keep you safe. We will make you rich. And together we will take Greenland to heights like you have never thought possible before," he added.

But Trump also said his administration was "working with everybody involved to try to get it," referring to his wishes to acquire Greenland

from Denmark, a longtime US ally.

"We need it really for international world security. And I think we're going to get it. One way or the other, we're going to get it," Trump said. Many in Greenland, a vast and mineral-rich island that is a semi-autonomous territory of Denmark, are worried and offended by Trump's threats to seize control of homeland.

Asked about Trump's comments, Denmark's foreign minister said Wednesday he did not think Greenlanders wanted to separate from Denmark in order to instead become "an integrated part of America".

Lars Lokke Rasmussen sought to strike an optimistic tone, saying he believed that Trump's reference to respecting Greenlanders' right to self-determination was "the most important part of that speech".

"I'm very optimistic about what will be a Greenlandic decision about this. They want to loosen their ties to Denmark, we're working on that, to have a more equal relationship," the minister said during a trip to Finland.

Lokke added that it was important that next week's parliamentary elections are free and fair "without any kind of international intervention". Greenlanders will head to the polls Tuesday. Trump's recent comments about taking over the island have ignited unprecedented interest in full independence from Denmark, which has become a key issue during campaign season.

Gaza ceasefire deal looks doomed

THE CONVERSATION ■ DUBLIN

When Israel signed a ceasefire deal with Hamas in Gaza on January 15, the agreement was structured in three phases.

Phase one, a six-week period in which Hamas would release hostages in return for Israel releasing Palestinians detained in its jails, ended on March 1. The shaky deal has held for the full six weeks — just. At one point Hamas threatened to halt the exchange of hostages when it said Israel was breaching the terms of the deal.

The Netanyahu government responded — with US backing — by threatening to end the ceasefire in mid-February, saying that Hamas was not living up to its side of the deal.

The hostage releases have continued, although Israelis have been shocked and angered at the condition of some of the hostages after 17 months in captivity. Hamas has also taken advantage of the world's gaze

during hostage releases to stage large parades of its fully armed fighters. On March 1, as stage one of the deal was due to end, Benjamin Netanyahu ordered a full blockade of humanitarian aid entering Gaza. Middle East expert, Scott Lucas, answered our questions as to what is happening and how this situation may play out.

Why has Israel decided to block humanitarian aid to Gaza? The Netanyahu government's blocking of humanitarian aid to Gaza's population is part of a scheme to avoid a phase two of the ceasefire, while putting pressure on Hamas to extend phase one.

That would allow the Israeli government to pursue the return of the remaining 59 hostages, alive or dead, held by Hamas while avoiding the requirements of phase two — notably the withdrawal of the Israeli military from Gaza and the restoration of a Palestinian government in Gaza.

Of course, those who will pay

the cost are more than 2.2 million Gazans, around 90 per cent of whom have been displaced amid 17 months of mass killing. But Israel's leaders are counting on that causing little concern, or at least significant action, by the international community.

Wasn't the ceasefire deal dictated by a timetable? Phase one of the agreement stipulated that discussions for a phase two to begin within 14 days of implementation, which would have been about the start of February.

But the Netanyahu government reportedly sent mediators to Qatar without the authority to discuss phase two, only to ensure that hostage releases continued.

The limit of its cooperation has been sending representatives to Egypt and conferring with Donald Trump's Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff, with current discussions suggesting little prospect of agreeing phase two.

Demonstrators across 50 states unify a disparate opposition to Trump, his agenda

AP ■ ATLANTA

As Donald Trump prepared Tuesday to address a joint session of Congress, protest groups gathered at parks, statehouses and other public grounds across the country to assail his presidency as dangerous and un-American.

The rallies and marches — set in motion by the fledgling 50501 Movement, a volunteer-driven group organised in the weeks after Trump's inauguration — mark the latest attempt at national resistance to the hardened support of Trump's "Make America Great Again" base and the success it has had in reshaping the Republican Party in the president's populist image.

Yet some early scenes Tuesday

vividly demonstrated the difficulty Democrats, progressives and everyday citizens face in marshalling a tangible response to Trump and the swift, sweeping actions of his second administration. Protesters have so many things to push back against — from tariffs to Trump's reset on the war in Ukraine to the aggressive and sometimes legally dubious actions of the Department of Government Efficiency and its leader, billionaire Elon Musk, that it's hard to know what to focus on.

"There are so many things to fight, but I hope by being here we are starting some conversations," said Sara Grummer-Strawn, who held a sign declaring "So Much Wrong, So Little Space," followed by a small-

print litany of topics from Ukraine and tariffs to potential education cuts to the denial of climate and vaccine science.

Around her in Atlanta were hundreds of people marching and chanting about a range of Trump initiatives. There were Palestinian flags and Ukrainian flags, along with signs bemoaning Trump ending military aid to Ukraine as it fights off the invading Russian troops of Vladimir Putin.

Trump was called a fascist, a "Russian asset," "Putin's Puppet" and "Wannabe King," among other, more profane monikers. One signed implored "Punch Nazis," reflecting an increasingly common effort to compare Trump's presidency to Nazi Germany. Musk was a frequent target of

mockery and ire. But there were also appeals for transgender rights, abortion rights and diversity. One understated sign appealed simply, "Save Our Parks." Events were scheduled throughout the day in all 50 states, including later gatherings on the West Coast and in Hawaii.

In Austin, Texas, those gathered at the statehouse leaned in to support Ukraine. Pops of yellow — a nod to the colors of Ukraine's national flag — dotted the crowd as protesters affixed sunflowers to their hair, hats and clothing. The Texas crowd, which numbered in the hundreds, eventually made its way through downtown, chanting, "Hey hey, ho ho, Donald Trump has got to go."

"I think protests can be impact-

ful," said Carol Goodwin, an Austin resident active in the local advocacy scene. "I think these smaller protests are valuable for the people who come to express their frustrations, and I think this movement will grow over time."

For some participants, Tuesday recalled 50501's first day of national action on February 5 — or the many women's marches in 2017, at the outset of Trump's first term. But for many others, it was a new step in their engagement.

Goodwin said she was compelled to come out after the Oval Office exchange between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy last week. She also cited Trump's tariffs against Canada and Mexico.

French PM flays US for pause in aid

AP ■ PARIS

France's prime minister decried the US pause on providing military aid to Ukraine as "unbearable" on Tuesday, describing it as tantamount to abandoning Ukrainians and allowing for a possible victory by Russia.

"The word suspension' fools no one," Prime Minister François Bayrou said, addressing French senators and mounting what was his second sharp criticism of the administration of US President Donald Trump in as many days. "The suspension in war of assistance to an aggressed country signifies that the aggressed country is being abandoned and that one accepts — or hopes — that its aggressor wins," he said. "It's obviously unbearable," Bayrou said. The French premier, a close ally of President Emmanuel Macron, also argued against strong pressure that the White House is exerting on Ukraine to quickly negotiate an end to the fighting. Bayrou said that Ukraine needs to keep fighting for its very survival.

Pak mourns death of 18 in suicide bombings

AP ■ PESHAWAR

A city in northwestern Pakistan held funeral prayers and observed a day of mourning on Wednesday, after a twin suicide bombing targeted a military base there the evening before and killed 18 people, including five soldiers. A militant group linked with the Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the bombing in Bannu on Tuesday evening, which also left 42 wounded, some of them critically. It was the latest in a spate of violence, including suicide bombings, that has hit the country in recent days.

The attack unfolded with two suicide bombers first blowing themselves up to breach the wall surrounding the base. Most of the local residents were breaking their daylong fast during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan or praying at a nearby mosque.

The powerful blasts tore through walls and ripped off roofs and also severely damaged the mosque. After the explosions, other attackers stormed the compound and set

off a firefight with the troops. A statement from the army's media department on Wednesday said five soldiers and 16 militants were killed. It said the suicide bombers "rammed two explosive-laden vehicles into the perimeter wall" at the base.

Gunshots could still be heard early Wednesday as security forces combed through the area, looking to clear it of any militants involved in the attack. At the scene of the bombings, a mechanical digger was clearing away rubble where homes used to stand, and debris-covered prayer mats lay crumpled on the mosque floor.

A day of mourning was being observed, said Bannu community elder Alam Khan, and joint funeral prayers were held later in the day for the victims at a sports complex in the area. "All education institutions are closed," Khan said. "Most shops are also shut. Rescue workers have completed their operation by recovering the bodies of three deceased worshippers who were trapped under the collapsed roof of the mosque."

Kremlin says Ukrainian law bans Zelenskyy from talks with Putin

AP ■ MOSCOW

A Ukrainian decree from 2022 ruling out negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin raises the question of who could sit at the table in potential peace talks aimed at ending their three-year war, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy "is still legally prohibited from negotiating with the Russian side," Peskov noted during his daily conference call with reporters. He said it was "positive" that Zelenskyy expressed readiness

Tuesday to negotiate peace with Russia as soon as possible. "But the details have not changed yet," Peskov added, apparently referring to the Ukrainian decree.

Neither Ukrainian nor Western officials have recently mentioned the September 2022 presidential decree, signed seven months after Russia's cross-border invasion, in the context of US President Donald Trump's efforts to stop the fighting.

The Trump administration on Monday suspended its crucial military aid to Ukraine as the United States sought to pressure Zelenskyy into negotiating

an end to the war. It wasn't immediately clear whether the support would resume after Zelenskyy's seeming effort to placate Trump.

Ukrainian forces are toiling to slow advances by the bigger Russian army along the 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line, especially in the eastern Donetsk region. The Russian onslaught, which has been costly for its troops, hasn't yet brought a strategically significant breakthrough for the Kremlin. The war of attrition has killed tens of thousands of soldiers and more than 12,000 Ukrainian civilians.

Zelenskyy, French President

Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer could travel together to Washington, the French government spokesperson said Wednesday.

"It is envisaged that President Macron could eventually travel again to Washington with President Zelenskyy and his British counterpart," spokesperson Sophie Primas told reporters. She did not elaborate.

Macron was due to give a televised address to the nation later Wednesday about what he called the "great uncertainty" in global affairs.

The three leaders travelled sep-

arately to Washington last week for meetings with Trump.

In the early months of the war, Zelenskyy repeatedly called for a personal meeting with Putin but was rebuffed. After the Kremlin's decision in September 2022 to illegally annex four regions of Ukraine — Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia — Zelenskyy enacted a decree declaring that holding negotiations with Putin had become impossible.

The decree enacted a decision by Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council to bolster Ukrainian defences and seek more weapons from the country's Western allies.

AI pioneers who channeled 'hedonistic' machines awarded

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Teaching machines in the way that animal trainers mold the behaviour of dogs or horses has been an important method for developing artificial intelligence and one that was recognised Wednesday with the top computer science award.

Two pioneers in the field of reinforcement learning, Andrew Barto and Richard Sutton, are the winners of this year's A M Turing Award, the tech world's equivalent of the Nobel Prize.

Research that Barto, 76, and Sutton, 67, began in the late 1970s paved the way for some of the past decade's AI breakthroughs. At the heart of their work was channeling so-called "hedonistic" machines that could continuously adapt their behaviour in response to positive signals.

Reinforcement learning is what led a Google computer programme to beat the world's best human players of the ancient Chinese board game Go in 2016 and 2017. It's also been a key technique in improving popular AI tools like ChatGPT, optimising financial trading and helping a robotic hand solve a Rubik's Cube. But Barto said the field was "not fashionable" when he and his doctoral student, Sutton,

began crafting their theories and algorithms at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

"We were kind of in the wilderness," Barto said in an interview with The Associated Press. "Which is why it's so gratifying to receive this award, to see this becoming more recognised as something relevant and interesting. In the early days, it was not."

Google sponsors the annual USD 1 million prize, which was announced Wednesday by the Association for Computing Machinery.

Barto, now retired from the University of Massachusetts, and Sutton, a longtime professor at Canada's University of Alberta, aren't the first AI pioneers to win the award named after British mathematician, codebreaker and early AI thinker Alan Turing. But their research has directly sought to answer Turing's 1947 call for a machine that "can learn from experience" — which Sutton describes as "arguably the essential idea of reinforcement learning."

In particular, they borrowed from ideas in psychology and neuroscience about the way that pleasure-seeking neurons respond to rewards or punishment. In one landmark paper published in the early 1980s, Barto and Sutton set their new approach on a specific task in a simulated world: balance a pole on a moving cart to keep it from falling. The two computer sci-

entists later co-authored a widely used textbook on reinforcement learning.

"The tools they developed remain a central pillar of the AI boom and have rendered major advances, attracted legions of young researchers, and driven billions of dollars in investments," said Google's chief scientist Jeff Dean in a written statement.

In a joint interview with the AP, Barto and Sutton didn't always agree on how to evaluate



the risks of AI agents that are constantly seeking to improve themselves. They also distinguished their work from the branch of generative AI technology that is currently in fashion — the large language models behind chatbots made by OpenAI, Google and other tech giants that mimic human writing and other media. "The big choice is, do you try to learn from people's data, or do you try to learn from an (AI) agent's own life and its own experience?" Sutton said.

Sutton has dismissed what he describes as overblown concerns about AI's threat to humanity, while Barto disagreed and said "You have to be cognizant of potential unexpected consequences."

Barto, retired for 14 years, describes himself as a Ludite, while Sutton is embracing a future he expects to have beings of greater intelligence than current humans — an idea sometimes known as post-humanism.

"People are machines. They're amazing, wonderful machines," but they are also not the "end product" and could work better, Sutton said. "It's intrinsically a part of the AI enterprise," Sutton said. "We're trying to understand ourselves and, of course, to make things that can work even better. Maybe to become such things."

NASA's two stuck astronauts closing in on their return

AP ■ CAPE CANAVERAL

NASA's two stuck astronauts are just a few weeks away from finally returning to Earth after nine months in space.

Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams have to wait until their replacements arrive at the International Space Station next week before they can check out later this month.

They'll be joined on their SpaceX ride home by two astronauts who launched by themselves in September alongside two empty seats.

During a news conference Tuesday, Wilmore said that while politics is part of life, it did not play into his and Williams' return, moved up a couple weeks thanks to a change in SpaceX capsules. President Donald Trump and SpaceX's Elon Musk said at the end of January that they want-

ed to accelerate the astronauts' return, blaming the previous administration.

But Williams, in response to a question, did take issue with Musk's recent call to dump the space station in two years, rather than waiting until NASA's projected deorbit in 2031. She noted all the scientific research being performed at the orbiting lab.

"This place is ticking. It's just really amazing, so I would say we're actually in our prime right now," said Williams, a three-time space station resident. "I would think that right now is probably not the right time to say quit, call it quits." Williams said she can't wait to be reunited with her Labrador retrievers. The hardest part about the unexpected extended stay, she added, was the wait by their families back home.

Cabinet approves changes to LHDC to include generic veterinary medicines

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ NEW DELHI

The Cabinet on Wednesday approved changes to the ₹3,880 Crore Livestock Health and Disease Control Programme (LHDC) to include the distribution of high-quality and affordable generic veterinary medicines to farmers.

The total budget provided for the Livestock Health and Disease Control Programme (LHDCP) was ₹3,880 Crore for 2024-25 and 2025-26.

"A decision related to livestock health has been taken in the Cabinet. High-quality medicines will be provided under the Pashu Aushadhi component of the scheme," I and B Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said after the Union Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi.



Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw briefs on union cabinet decisions PTI

Pashu Aushadhi is the new component added to the LHDCP scheme, an official statement said. The minister said Pashu Aushadhi would be similar to Jan Aushadhi Yojana. The generic veterinary medicines will be distributed through

PM Kisan Samridhi Kendras and Cooperatives. Vaishnaw said traditional knowledge of veterinary medicines will also be revived and documented as part of the scheme. The Cabinet approved a provision of ₹75 Crore from

the total budget allocation for supplying good quality and affordable generic veterinary medicine and an incentive for sale of medicines under Pashu Aushadhi component.

The scheme has three components — National Animal Disease Control Programme (NADCP), Livestock Health and Disease Control (LH and DC) and Pashu Aushadhi. Livestock Health and Disease Control Programme focuses on the prevention of diseases like Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), Brucellosis, Peste des Petits Ruminants (PPR), Cerebrospinal Fluid (CSF), Lumpy Skin Disease, etc. through immunisation. The scheme also supports door-step delivery of livestock health care and improving the availability of generic veterinary medicine. The minister stated that nine

states are ready to be declared as FMD-free zones. These states include: Punjab, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Gujarat and Maharashtra. India is the world's largest milk producer. Being FMD-free and having a systematic and well-documented vaccination programme will help in the export of milk and milk products in a significant way and improve farmers' income, he added. The LHDCP will help in the prevention and control of livestock diseases through vaccination, surveillance and upgradation of healthcare facilities. Also, the scheme will improve productivity, generate employment, encourage entrepreneurship in rural areas and prevent economic losses of farmers due to disease burden.

Ad break: Pepsi pokes Coke with 'anytime' over 'half time'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ NEW DELHI

The never-ending hilarious ad war between beverage majors Coca-Cola and PepsiCo has taken off this season with PepsiCo's 'anytime' jibe at its bigger rival Coca-Cola's 'half time' campaign. Replying to arch rival Coca-Cola's 'half time' campaign for the ICC Champions Trophy 2025, PepsiCo came out with a full-page newspaper advertisement flipping the script with 'anytime' campaign with a direct hit on the cola major trying to grab the consumers' eyeball. In its 'half time' campaign rolled out a month back across TV and digital platforms, the market leader sought to promote the idea of refreshing during pause times with a chilled soft drink. However, PepsiCo with its witty 'anytime' tag line kicked off the summer campaign with a message that why wait for a

particular moment when every moment is better with a Pepsi in hand. Pepsi in its latest ad has listed life's best moments - first time, thirst time, day time, play time, class time, pass time, crunch time, lunch time, chill time, one more time, dinner time, winner time, down time, town time, we time, me time - to enjoy the drink. It has fondly brought back the days of humour and cheekiness in creative marketing. This also attracted comments on the social media platforms, where people fondly remembered the 1996 ad war, when Pepsi had launched its ad campaign titled 'Nothing Official About It'. PepsiCo had lost the official beverage sponsorship rights to Coca-Cola in the 1996 Cricket World Cup, which was jointly hosted by India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Following that, PepsiCo came with the famous 'nothing official about it' campaign

starring cricket icons Sachin Tendulkar, Vinod Kambli, and Mohammed Azharuddin. "For those who remember, 'Nothing Official About It' wasn't just a campaign - it was a cultural moment. A take from the brand that turned into an obsession amongst the audience, proving that sometimes, not trying too hard is exactly the winning move. And now, decades later, Pepsi seems to be channelling that same effortless confidence," said PepsiCo in a statement. When asked, Rediffusion Chairman Sandeep Goyal said: "Now they joust but they don't go for knock-outs." "Colas were once the most exciting and engaging category in FMCG. Over the years, many more categories have grabbed consumer attention and have got consumers engaged and involved. So colas are not centre stage any longer to the same extent as maybe half a century ago," he said.

BSES launches drone pilot training for Army veterans



Pioneer Photo

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In a landmark initiative reflecting its unwavering commitment to the welfare of India's armed forces personnel, BSES, in collaboration with the Army Welfare Placement Office (AWPO) has launched a transformative drone pilot training and placement program. This pioneering initiative is designed to empower ex-servicemen, those retiring within six months and Veer Naaris with cutting-edge skills, opening doors to rewarding careers in the rapidly expanding drone sector.

Recognising the immense potential of this high-growth industry and the unique challenges faced by veterans transitioning to civilian life, this program aims to bridge the gap between military service and civilian employment through comprehensive, industry-specific training and robust placement support. The drone pilot training and placement program is a forward-looking initiative designed to equip 250 veterans and 50 Veer Naaris over a three-year period with specialised drone operation skills. This program opens pathways to careers in agriculture, infrastructure

development, security, logistics, and more within the burgeoning drone industry. Being conducted in small, focused batches of around 20 participants, the program offers an intensive 14-day curriculum covering both theoretical knowledge and hands-on practical experience. Trainees will gain expertise in flight operations, payload management, data analysis, and regulatory compliance, using advanced drone models such as White Hawk, Spidex, Nakshay, and Bhiman. Certified instructors from the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) will deliver the training, culminating in the awarding of the mandatory Remote Pilot Certificate (RPC) for commercial drone operations in India. Moreover, entrepreneurship support is embedded within the program, offering specialized sessions on setting up drone-based businesses, regulatory compliance, and business development. Participants will benefit from offline internships, enhancing real-world readiness, with job opportunities. The initiative is being coordinated by NGO partner 'Sahayog care for You'.

IACC hosts conference on women empowerment

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Indo-American Chamber of Commerce (IACC) successfully hosted a thought-provoking conference on Women Empowerment in New Delhi under the theme "Celebrating Womanhood: Empower, Educate, Elevate." The event brought together distinguished leaders and advocates, emphasising the necessity of empowering women to drive societal progress. While speaking at the conference Mridula Pradhan, Chairperson of Vikas Foundation Trust, emphasised the dignity and respect of women, quoting a Sanskrit shloka: "Where women are respected, divine blessings follow." She advocated for true gender equality, urging that the slogan 'Beti-Beta Ek Saman' must be implemented in all spheres of life. Pradhan also stressed the importance of protecting women's rights, particularly reproductive rights. Former Union Minister Smriti Irani addressed the gathering, highlighting the strength of Indian women in overcoming challenges, particularly during the pandemic. She noted that the Narendra Modi



Pioneer Photo

government has taken significant steps toward financial inclusion for women by providing bank accounts and loans, which women have successfully leveraged, leading to low non-performing assets. However, she pointed out that "the digital world remains biased against women, and addressing this challenge is crucial." Dr Mallika Nadda, Chairperson of Special Olympics Bharat, reaffirmed that "Women's rights are non-negotiable, and their dignity must be protected at all costs." She emphasised the additional challenges faced by physically

challenged women and called for prioritising their inclusion and support. Dr Upasana Arora, Conference Chair, Executive Council Member of IACC, and Managing Director of Yashoda Super Specialty Hospitals, underscored the pivotal role of women in societal transformation. She stated, "Empowerment of women is essential for social upliftment. Women who are empowered must extend support to those who are not, creating opportunities for excellence. When women are empowered, society as a whole is empowered." Dr Atul Chauhan, Regional

President of IACC and Chancellor of Amity University, in his inaugural address, called upon all attendees to actively participate in the mission of women's empowerment, echoing the sentiment that "Women have to be empowered to dream." Dr Lalit Bhasin, Past National President of IACC, provided a compelling perspective, asserting that Indian women have always been powerful. "When we say 'empower women,' we imply that someone else has to do it. However, Indian women have historically shaped societies with their resilience and determination," he remarked. The conference culminated in an awards ceremony celebrating exceptional women leaders who have made remarkable contributions across various sectors: The 'Women Leader of the Year' award was bagged by Dr Amit Chauhan, chairperson, Amity Group of Schools, while the 'Excellence in Educational Leadership' award was given to Charu Modi, director, Godfrey Phillips India Limited. The 'Leadership in Gender Equality and Advocacy' award was given to Nina Gupta, managing partner, Bhasin and Co Advocates.

Centre imposes import curbs on platinum alloy

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ NEW DELHI

The government on Wednesday imposed import curbs on platinum alloy with less than 99 per cent purity to curb illicit imports of this precious metal blended with significant amounts of gold. Importers of such platinum alloys are now required to obtain import authorisation from the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) for the inbound shipments. The decision follows cases where this alloy blended with significant amounts of gold was imported to exploit the tariff differential between gold and platinum. "Import policy of platinum is revised from free to restricted except for platinum alloy of 99 per cent or more purity by weight of platinum," the DGFT said in a notification. To ensure a smooth supply of platinum for jewellery manufacturing and industrial use, the government allows the unrestricted import of platinum alloy with 99 per cent or higher purity of platinum.

CAG K Sanjay Murthy meets 16th Finance Commission in Bhopal

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), K Sanjay Murthy, met with the 16th Finance Commission chaired by Dr Arvind Panagariya on Wednesday in Bhopal. According to a release issued by the CAG, the high-level consultation formed a critical part of the Commission's ongoing assessment of the financial landscape of the Centre and states. The deliberations mainly focused on three key areas: Union and State Finances, Local Bodies, and Public Sector Enterprises (PSEs), among others. The Union, the states, local bodies and the PSEs are under the audit of the CAG. In addition, the CAG also maintains the accounts of the states. The CAG shared various audit findings for Union and states in various sectors, the fiscal challenges and stress points, including the gap between expenditure and non-debt receipts for the Union and states combined. The key areas of concern include a decline in the state own tax revenue (SOTR) buoyancy of the States and varying levels of SOTR and non-tax revenue of the States, which underscore the need for more robust revenue collection mechanisms. The CAG drew attention to the need for regular reporting of the Off Budget Borrowings, meeting the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) targets and the taking into account post audit liabilities computed by the CAG in his reports. This could be a crucial source of information for Finance Commission while examining the extent of fiscal consolidation for the Union

and the States. "The CAG's presentation drew attention to untapped revenue sources. Notably, areas such as stamp duty, registration fees, and state excise collections have been identified as having substantial potential for enhanced fiscal performance. Recommendations in this regard include regular updates to market value guidelines, improved classification of property types, and the adoption of modern technology such as sensor-based systems and QR codes to minimise revenue leakages and improve data accuracy," according to the release. In the realm of Goods and Services Tax (GST) administration, the CAG has also proposed several reforms aimed at widening the tax base and enhancing transparency. Suggested measures include the integration of unregistered goods and service providers into the GST framework via automated data collection and real-time information systems, along with improvised taxpayer verification processes. These initiatives are expected to not only streamline the tax collection process but also ensure more accurate apportionment of inter-state tax flows. The CAG gave a strong emphasis on the need to standardise accounting practices at all tiers of the government for transparent and ready availability of comparable fiscal information. The presentation called for the harmonisation of object heads of expenditure and adoption of a uniform six-tier classification system by state governments without deviations. It was also highlighted that, as an immediate measure, harmonisation of local bodies accounts with Central and state accounts may be attempted in top 100 cities. Such steps would facilitate the seamless

consolidation of fiscal data and strengthen transparency in public financial management, thereby empowering policymakers with clearer insights into both revenue and expenditure. An important highlight of the discussion was the endorsement of good practices, like that involving the establishment of a budget stabilisation Fund by jurisdictions with surplus revenues. "A key component of the meeting is centered on the financial management of local bodies. The CAG shared insights from performance audits across numerous urban local bodies and Panchayati Raj Institutions, pointing out issues such as incomplete devolution of functions, heavy dependence on Central and State grants, and low levels of own-source revenue," it said. "In this regard, recommendations included integrating local body use of Integrated Financial Management System (IFMS) for onboarding the payment or fund transfer made by the states to the urban local bodies (ULB) and the rural local bodies (RLB) and streamlining accounting practices to ensure consistent and transparent financial reporting at the grassroots level. Need for development of specifically suited system for the processing of the transactions of the ULBs or RLBs and their accounts was suggested, which can be incentivised by the FC," it added. Additionally, the presentation addressed the lack of oversight of State Public Sector Enterprises in submission of their Annual Accounts, urging corrective measures to address persistent losses and inefficiencies, and recommending a close monitoring of disinvestment strategies.

IRFC expands funding beyond Indian Railways



IRFC board of directors unveil Navratna status with CMD and CEO Manoj Kumar Dubey in center Pioneer Photo

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Railway Finance Corporation (IRFC), which earned Navratna status from the government, on Wednesday said that with this recognition, it can go beyond its present funding activities to the needs of the Indian railways to all other companies operating in the whole rail eco-system. Interacting with the media persons to update the future plans after being awarded the Navratna status, IRFC CMD and CEO Manoj Kumar Dubey said the company, which was funding to the Indian Railways, has now got wider legroom to finance all other companies and activities which come under the rail logistics eco-system. On March 3, 2025, the government approved the

upgradation of IRCTC and IRFC to Navratna Central Public Sector Enterprises. Dubey said that his company will have several edges as compared to his competitors when it comes to bidding for railway-linked projects because the IRFC maintains very low expenses, has access to cheap raw material (loan) and it wants a margin of over 40 paise, a margin it gets from the Railways currently. He informed that the firm has funded ₹5 Lakh Crore to the Indian Railways till date, however, the Railways hasn't taken any loan from it for the past two years. "As and when the railways require money, it has to come to us and that business is always assured to us. Apart from that, what we have embarked upon is anything back and forth linkage with the railways we wish to fund," Dubey said. "We have found that in our gamut of systems others are funding with a big margin of 200 and 250 basis points. Think over a scenario that I am funding with anything between 40 bps to 150 bps and the kind of yield it will give to my bottomline," he added. Dubey banked upon the company's zero NPA status. "Out of all the three government financial institutions — the Rural Electrification Corporation (REC), Power Finance Corporation (PFC) and IRFC - that can issue 54EC bonds (capital gain bonds), our nil NPA status makes us safest among all," he said. A statement from the company said that it has already secured funding for 20 BOBR (Bogie Open Bottom Rapid discharge railway wagon) rakes for NTPC worth ₹700 Crore and was recently declared the lowest bidder to finance a Rs 3190 Crore loan for PatratuVidyut Utpadan Nigam Limited (PVUNL), a subsidiary of NTPC. "Additionally, NTPC

Renewable Energy Limited (NTPC REL), a wholly owned subsidiary of NTPC Green Energy Limited (NTPC GEL), has accepted IRFC's bid for ₹7600 Crore for a Rupee Term Loan (RTL) against its Request for Proposal," the press note said. "IRFC is also actively exploring opportunities to fund rolling stock requirements for Indian Railways customers, container train operators, renewable energy needs of Indian Railways, Metro Rail Projects, port rail connectivity and PPP projects sanctioned by Indian Railways," it added. Dubey said that IRFC has played a key role in funding nearly 80 per cent of Indian Railways Locos, coaches and wagons, including the Vande Bharat Express trains. At present, nearly 86 per cent of the company is owned by the Ministry of Railways and nearly 13 per cent by all diverse shareholders in the country as well as overseas, he added.

of where the data lives," said Arvind Nithrakashyap, chief technology officer and co-founder of Rubrik. "We are seamlessly integrating new technologies across the world's major cloud platforms, SaaS offerings, and on-premises so our customers can better detect compromised data, enhance the speed of identifying affected data, and accelerate the discovery of clean entry points," he added. "The timing is critical, as leading Indian enterprises accelerate their cloud adoption, they also see cyber-risk and realise the urgent need for cyber-resilience," said Ashish Gupta, managing director India and head of engineering, Rubrik India.

Brewers association allege excise rules not uniform in Karnataka

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

pointing towards increasing amount of arbitrariness in beer regulations in Karnataka, the Brewers Association of India (BAI) has said the State Government while dealing with the applications of rounding off of the declared price (DP) was favouring some companies. The Karnataka government introduced the concept of rounding off of the DP (declared price) to nearest Rs 5 was introduced, while the application of one beer supplier, viz, M's Som Breweries and Distillers which applied with an upward price revision got approved without due documentary substantiation,

the plea of BAI members were put on hold, the BAI, the apex body of the beer industry, which represents India's largest beer makers such as the AB InBev, Carlsberg, and United Breweries (a Heineken company), said in its representation to the State government. "As a result, our member companies, which are the biggest investors and contributors to government revenues in the state, feel greatly aggrieved and discriminated against," said that letter and demanded the State government to ensure level playing field for all beer suppliers in Karnataka. BAI has demanded that applications of its members should also be

cleared with respect to rounding off in the DP where there is no consequent change in the MRP. Highlighting the biasness in implementation of excise rules, the BAI has stated that "this is against the ethos of fair competition and will do more harm than good in the long run for the industry, the government revenues, the consumers, local economy and investment in the state". According to BAI Director General Vinod Giri, "in recent times we have been witnessing increasing amount of arbitrariness in beer regulation in the state which is threatening the industry growth as is evident from the recent trends in beer sales in the state."

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PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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Rubrik unveils new capabilities to enhance cyber resilience

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In its ongoing commitment to deliver comprehensive cyber resiliency, Rubrik on Wednesday announced significant innovations designed to enhance protection for cloud, SaaS, and on-premises environments. The innovations aim to provide customers with even more ability to anticipate breaches, detect potential threats, and recover with speed and efficiency no matter where their data lives. "Cyber criminals will not stop innovating, and neither will we. Our utmost priority is the security, safety, and appropriate accessibility of our customer's data, regardless

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PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In its ongoing commitment to deliver comprehensive cyber resiliency, Rubrik on Wednesday announced significant innovations designed to enhance protection for cloud, SaaS, and on-premises environments. The innovations aim to provide customers with even more ability to anticipate breaches, detect potential threats, and recover with speed and efficiency no matter where their data lives. "Cyber criminals will not stop innovating, and neither will we. Our utmost priority is the security, safety, and appropriate accessibility of our customer's data, regardless

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Real Madrid defeats Atletico 2-1 in Champions League

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ MADRID

A superb goal from Brahim Diaz helped Real Madrid maintain its dominance of the Madrid derby on Europe's biggest stage with a 2-1 victory over bitter rival Atletico in the first leg of their Champions League last 16 tie on Tuesday. Atletico has been beaten by the record 15-time European champion in both Champions League final matchups and has won only three of 11 meetings with their city rivals in UEFA competitions.

Also Tuesday, Arsenal made a massive step toward a quarterfinal spot with a 7-1 win at PSV Eindhoven. It was the biggest victory in an away match in the knockout stage of the Champions League, UEFA said.

"It's a massive result away from home in a competition that we love, that we miss for so many years," Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta said. "Today is a really special night for us."

On a good night for Premier League teams, Aston Villa won 3-1 at Club Brugge, and Borussia Dortmund drew 1-1 with Lille.

A tense encounter in the Spanish capital was decided by a moment of individual brilliance. Diaz scored the winner for Real Madrid after squeezing past a couple of Atletico players and curling a low strike into the far corner in the 55th minute. Diego Simeone's team could not change the script after losing its finals to Madrid in 2014 and 2016. It was also eliminated the other two times they faced off in the knockout rounds



— in the 2015 quarterfinals and 2017 semifinals. Playing at home at Santiago Bernabeu stadium, Real Madrid took the lead on its first chance through a great goal from Rodrygo. After being picked up down the flank, he cut inside the box, was too fast for defenders and beautifully curled the ball into the back of the net. "It stemmed from a nice ball from Fede Valverde," Rodrygo said. "He absolutely read my movement and put the ball in behind the man covering me. I made a little dribble inside and then smashed it off my left."

Atletico patiently waited for an opportunity. It came in the 32nd minute and Julian Alvarez seized it with a spectacular strike. The forward collected the ball down the left, cut inside the box and curled the ball past Thibaut Courtois for his seventh goal in the tournament this season. "I leave with the feeling that we competed well," Atletico coach Diego Simeone said. "We could have done more in terms of the goals we conceded. We must continue with this rhythm for the second leg, which will be tough and difficult, and in which we will have the support of our fans." Gunners romp to emphatic win

Arsenal, which returned to the Champions League after a six-year absence last season, got off a shaky start and Jurrien Timber scored against the run of the play with a header at the far post, just after PSV hit the woodwork. The London team never looked back after that and led 3-0 at the half-hour mark. Seventeen-year-old Ethan Nwaneri doubled the lead in the 21st after his teammates combined well in the area to set him up. Mikel Merino then made the most of the confusion in the box to make it 3-0 after PSV repeatedly failed to clear the ball.

A silly foul from Thomas Partey on Luuk de Jong in the box gave PSV some hope before halftime and Noa Lang converted.

But PSV crumbled once back from the locker room. Arsenal captain Martin Odegaard scored twice, with Leandro Trossard and Riccardo Calafiori adding more luster to the win.

Dortmund held

Last season's runner-up Borussia Dortmund is evenly matched with Lille ahead of the second leg after Hakon Arnar Haraldsson's goal salvaged a 1-1 draw for the French team.

Dortmund led thanks to Karim Adeyemi's low shot from outside the box in the 22nd minute, but Canada forward Jonathan David sliced open the Dortmund defense with a through ball in the 68th for Haraldsson to level the score.

Aston Villa wins away

Aston Villa shook off its poor away form, and it was largely due to an own goal from a rival player.

A turning point came in the 82nd minute when Club Brugge defender Brandon Mechele beat his own goalkeeper with the teams tied 1-1. Mechele slid to stop a cross from Morgan Rogers, only to deflect into the back of the net.

Before that, the Belgian side had looked solid, enjoyed most of the possession and created the best chances in the second half. Looking demoralized, the hosts then conceded a late penalty that was converted by substitute Marco Asensio.



WPL: UP Warriorz to face Mumbai Indians

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ LUCKNOW

Time is running out for UP Warriorz, who face a must-win situation against Mumbai Indians in their Women's Premier League match here on Thursday. With their playoff hopes hanging by a thread, the Warriorz must bounce back from back-to-back defeats to stay in contention.

It was a disappointing homecoming for the Warriorz, who were comprehensively beaten by Gujarat Giants at the Ekana Stadium in their previous fixture.

The 81-run defeat not only pushed them to the bottom of the points table but also dented their net run rate. Now, with just a couple of games left, they must avoid a third consecutive defeat that could all but end their campaign.

The first-ever WPL match in Lucknow saw Beth Mooney producing a batting masterclass, guiding Gujarat Giants to 186/5, the third-highest total this season.

On a pitch that played true and offered value for shots, the Warriorz's batting unit however failed miserably, raising serious concerns about their approach and execution. UP Warriorz have been struggling to settle on a stable batting order. Their latest experiment — pushing Georgia Voll to No. 3 — backfired, as they collapsed to 48/6 inside 10 overs, with only one batter from the top six reaching double digits.

Despite the collective failure, Chinelle Henry stood tall yet again. The West Indian all-rounder's aggressive 14-ball 28 helped UPW limp past 100 before they were bowled out for 105. Henry, who has been their standout batter this season, has amassed 138 runs at an average of 34.50 and a staggering strike rate of 209-plus, highlighting her ability to score quickly even in difficult situations.

Given the ongoing struggles at the top, UP Warriorz might consider restoring Voll to her preferred opening role — a position where she flourished in the Women's Big Bash League. Grace Harris, who has shown glimpses of form, will be crucial in the middle order. The Aussie's experience and power-hitting could provide the much-needed balance, especially in crunch moments. Additionally, skipper Deepti Sharma, who has been quiet with the bat since her 39-run knock against Gujarat, will need to step up and deliver a captain's innings. Unlike their struggling opponents, Mumbai Indians find themselves in a relatively better position. Placed third on the table with six points, they remain in contention to top the standings and secure a direct spot in the final. In the WPL format, the top-placed team qualifies directly for the final, while the second and third-placed teams battle in an Eliminator to determine the other finalist. With three matches remaining for them, the inaugural edition champions in 2023, MI, have a realistic chance of leapfrogging to the top, but they cannot afford another slipup, having lost to table-toppers Delhi Capitals in their previous outing, where their batting failed to click to be restricted to a modest 123/9. India skipper Harmanpreet Kaur looked promising but failed to convert her start, falling for 22 off 16 balls, while Nat Sciver-Brunt struggled for fluency, managing just 18 off 22 balls. The English all-rounder, however, remains a key figure in MI's campaign, having already scored 272 runs from five matches, including three fifties, at a strike rate of 147-plus. Incidentally, Sciver-Brunt had hammered an unbeaten 75 against UP Warriorz in the first leg, and her ability to anchor the innings while accelerating at will will make her a major threat once again.



A Sharath announces retirement

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ CHENNAI

Indian table tennis legend A Sharath Kamal will hang up his racket and the iconic bandana later this month, having stayed at the top of his game for more than 22 years and resisting the temptation of lasting another Olympic cycle at the ripe old age of 42.

In his own words, life has come full circle for one of India's finest athletes who will say goodbye to professional table tennis in front of his friends and family in Chennai, where the WTT (World Table Tennis) Star Contender and his swansong will be staged from March 25 to 30.

Sharath's contribution to the game goes beyond the staggering numbers, including seven gold medals at the Commonwealth Games, two path-breaking bronze medals at the Asian Games and five appearances at the Summer Olympics.

Paris last year was easily the highlight for him as an Olympian, having received the honour of carrying India's flag at the opening ceremony. The results did not go his way in the French capital but considering his fitness and ranking (he remains India's highest ranked player at no. 42), Sharath decided to carry on for another season and take it from there.

Another Commonwealth Games and Asian Games are on the horizon but Sharath has

had enough. "Not saying I am letting it go completely, but this is certainly the end for us on the big tables, in front of the big crowds. Time to give my bandana and racket some rest," he said. "Grateful beyond words for all the joy, for all the love, for all the pain, for all the lessons, and for all the people this sport has given me."

For the better of the past two decades, Sharath inspired the younger generation to take up the sport before Manika Batra emerged to share that responsibility. Sharath not only lifted the profile of the sport, he announced the arrival of Indian table tennis on the global stage and made his presence felt against the all-conquering Chinese and other Asian giants including Japan and South Korea.

His booming forehand made his opponents nervous and over time, he continued to evolve and developed an equally lethal backhand. Kamlesh Mehta, an Arjuna awardee and another fine player to have come out of India, listed out the reason for Sharath's longevity in the game. "The game has changed so much in the last 20 years. When he started, he was not doing the backhand banana flick. He had to learn that banana flick and strengthen his backhand. He was able to make those changes, learn new things and put it in his game. That's the

reason he could sustain himself for so long," Mehta told PTT. As an elite athlete, Sharath had his share of ups and downs. The hip and hamstring injury he suffered during the 2015 World Championships was a major setback in his career. "Many people had written him off after that injury but he came back stronger," recalled Mehta. Some of Indian table tennis' best results coincided with the twilight of Sharath's career. With Sharath now having the support of a formidable bench strength, India were able to stun Japan for a bronze medal at the 2018 Asian Games. Fellow Chennai resident G Sathiyam was the architect of that famous win.

Another unthinkable happened when he and Manika teamed up to land a historic mixed doubles bronze in Jakarta. Even Sharath did not see it coming on the highly competitive continental stage. There was no stopping him as he entered his 40s, bullish about his returns at what was going to be his final appearance at the Commonwealth Games.

Ahead of the 2022 edition in Birmingham, he had to work doubly hard to maintain his fitness as his battered and bruised body was not responding to the zeal of a teenager. With an unprecedented three gold medals, he surpassed his own expectations.

India to perform better in Special Olympics World Winter Games, says Mandaviya

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ NEW DELHI

Union Sports Minister Manuskh Mandaviya on Wednesday expressed the confidence that India would surpass its highest-ever gold-medal tally when the country's athletes compete in the Special Olympics World Winter Games, scheduled in Turin, Italy from March 7 till 17.

India is sending a strong 49-member contingent including 30 special athletes for the Winter Games, which were last held in 2017 in Austria where the country won 73 medals, including 37 gold.

The athletes will compete in six disciplines comprising alpine skiing, cross-country skiing, floorball, short speed skating, snow boarding and snow shoeing. "I am seeing tremendous enthusiasm among these athletes. During the last edition of the Special Olympics World Winter



Games, India won 37 gold medals, and this time I am confident we will perform even better," said Mandaviya during a sendoff function held at the Dhyani Chand National Stadium. "I really salute the parents of these athletes and Special Olympics Bharat, who have helped them reach this level. These athletes are very special to us, because what they are doing not everyone can do," the minister added. "You are an inspiration for the whole country." The Sports Authority of India (SAI) provided 11 national coaching camps for these

athletes in various Indian cities including Chandigarh, Narkanda, New Delhi, Gwalior, Noida and Gurgaon to help them prepare well. Additionally, SAI provided equipment support for training and competition. The ministry has also sanctioned money towards airfare, boarding and lodging for the participation of contingent in Games. Mallika Nadda, the president of Special Olympics Bharat, commended the ministry for increasing the prize money for athletes winning medals in Special Olympics World Games.

Cindy Ngamba set for a pro debut on all-female fight card

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ LONDON

Something stood out to Cindy Ngamba as she glanced around when Friday's all-female boxing event was first announced. So many world championship belts. Ngamba wants one of her own.

"I saw Natasha Jonas and Lauren Price and Caroline Dubois with their belts, and I remember saying Oh, that looks nice, I would love to have one of them," she said. Achieving goals is kind of Ngamba's thing. At the Paris Games, she became the first athlete competing as a refugee to earn a medal when she took bronze in the middleweight category. A decade ago the Cameroon—

born Ngamba thought she was about to be deported from Britain. Now she's set to make her professional debut at Royal Albert Hall. She's facing veteran Kirstie Bavington in a super welterweight bout in London as part of an all-female card headlined by the Jonas vs. Price welterweight world title unification fight.

"I can see it, that dream of me having a belt and being the world champion," Ngamba told The Associated Press, "but at the same time you have to be in the present and you have to make sure you get the job done."

The 26-year-old Ngamba tries not to think ahead too much. That's because she knows circumstances can change so quickly. Ngamba had arrived in Britain



at age 11 — her father and siblings live here, too — in Bolton, just north of Manchester, and set about learning English and trying to fit in. She picked up boxing at age 15, and it became an escape from the stress of worrying about her residency status. She described being arrested as

a teenager while checking in at an immigration center in Manchester. "My case was still pending. I applied and they rejected it. When they reject your case, you have to go and re-apply again. I was in a situation where even though I was re-applying every time, they

could have arrested me at any moment," she said. "I visualized that they could arrest me in the street or in my house, in school or with my friends. I never knew it was going to be at an immigration center where I usually (went) every weekend."

Worried she would be deported, she thought to herself: "I have no one in Cameroon, no family in Cameroon. Who is going to take care of me?"

She was held overnight at a detention facility in London before being released. Ngamba, who came out as gay when she was 18, eventually won her case and was given refugee status. Same-sex relations in Cameroon can result in prison sentences of five years in the country.

LeBron James becomes first to score 50,000 combined points in NBA

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ LOS ANGELES

LeBron James is well on his way to rewriting every previous definition of basketball longevity, and the 40-year-old star is now racking up numbers the NBA has never seen before.

James became the first player to score 50,000 combined points in the regular season and postseason on Tuesday night, surpassing the mark with a 3-pointer early in the first quarter of the Los Angeles Lakers' 136-115 win over New Orleans. James finished with 34 points against the Pelicans in his toppling another milestone in his unprecedented career.

"I mean, that's a lot of points," James said afterward, rubbing his beard in wonder. "Obviously, the first thing that comes to mind is

where I'm from. Picking up the game when I was a little kid and having a love for the sport, and hoping that someday I'd be able to play at the highest level. I've been able to do that and really enjoy my career. So it's definitely an honor. It's pretty cool to see that."

James already is the top scorer in NBA history in both the regular season and the playoffs. Maintaining a spectacular level of play midway through his record-tying 22nd season, he is pulling away from the other greats of the game: Lakers great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who played 20 seasons, is a now-distant second with 44,149 combined points.

James got his milestone 3-pointer off an assist by Luka Doncic, a trivia tidbit that pleased both superstars. Doncic's arrival in



last month's seismic trade with the Dallas Mavericks has invigorated both James and the Lakers, who look like

championship contenders with a seven-game winning streak and 17 victories in their last 20 games.

"It's amazing, watching him do this stuff at this age," said Doncic, who had 30 points, 15 assists and eight rebounds against New Orleans. "It's just unbelievable, that 50K points. I can't even explain how insane that is. He might get to 70K. You never know."

The Lakers recognized the milestone at the next timeout, with public address announcer Lawrence Tanter saying: "Ladies and gentlemen, we all have just witnessed history." James acknowledged the standing ovation with several waves from the bench.

James is tied with Vince Carter for the most seasons played in NBA history. But while nearly every other NBA player who lasted to his late 30s finished at a fraction of his peak powers, James' game shows no signs of

decline in his 40s. He was named the NBA's Western conference player of the month earlier Tuesday after he averaged 29.3 points, 10.5 rebounds, 6.9 assists and 1.2 steals in February while playing more than 35 minutes per game for the Lakers, who went 9-2 to surge into second place in the West. With their victory over the Pelicans, the Lakers improved to 11-2 since acquiring Doncic.

James has played in 1,548 regular-season games, trailing only Robert Parish (1,611) and Abdul-Jabbar (1,560). If he stays healthy and elects to return for a record 23rd season, he will likely surpass Parish next winter. James has also played in 287 postseason games, the most in NBA history. He became the league's career playoff scoring leader on May 25, 2017, when he

surpassed Michael Jordan's total of 5,987 during the Cleveland Cavaliers' Eastern Conference finals game at Boston.

James then became the top scorer in regular-season history on Feb. 7, 2023, when he topped Abdul-Jabbar's record of 38,387 points during the Lakers' game against Oklahoma City. James' prolific scoring is due in large part to his metronomic consistency. With his performance against the Pelicans, he has scored at least 10 points in 1,278 consecutive games since Jan. 6, 2007 — by far the longest such streak in NBA history.

James' player of the month award for February was his 41st, extending his own league record. He is also the oldest player to win the award, surpassing a 37-year-old Karl Malone in November 2000.

Smith announces retirement from ODI cricket

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ DUBAI

Australia's stand-in skipper Steve Smith on Wednesday announced his retirement from ODI cricket following his team's four-wicket loss to India in the Champions Trophy (CT) semifinal here but the star batter will continue to play Tests and T20 Internationals. The 35-year-old, who was leading the world champion side in the absence of an injured Pat Cummins, informed his teammates after the match that he would be stepping away from the 50-over format with immediate effect.

Reflecting on his decision, Smith said it was the right time to step aside as Australia builds itself for the 2027 ODI World Cup. "It has been a great ride, and I have loved every minute of it," Smith said. "There have been so many amazing times and wonderful memories. Winning two World Cups was a great highlight along with the many fantastic team-mates who shared the journey," he added



in a media release shared by Cricket Australia. A key member of Australia's victorious 2015 and 2023 ICC World Cup-winning teams, Smith was named Australia's men's ODI Player of the Year in 2015 and 2021 and earned a place in the ICC men's ODI Team of the Year in 2015. He took over the ODI captaincy in 2015 and, fittingly, led the side one last time in his final match. "Now is a great opportunity

for people to start preparing for the 2027 World Cup so it feels like the right time to make way," he said. The veteran of 170 ODIs said Test cricket remains a priority and he is looking forward to the World Test Championship Final in June. "I feel I still have a lot to contribute on that stage," he said. "Now is a great opportunity for people to start preparing for the 2027 World Cup, so it

feels like the right time to make way," he added. Smith leaves behind a stellar ODI legacy built over a period of more than 15 years, since making his debut as a leg-spinning all-rounder against the West Indies in 2010. Over the years, he transformed into one of Australia's most dependable batters, accumulating 5,800 runs at an average of 43.28, including 12 centuries and 35 half-centuries. He also

chipped in with 28 wickets at 34.67.

Tributes pour in from CA Tributes poured in for the star with CA chief executive Todd Greenberg and chairman of selectors George Bailey hailing Smith's immense contribution to Australian cricket. "Congratulations to Steve on an amazing One Day International career during which he has made a vast contribution to Australia's performances in the 50-over format," stated Greenberg. "Right up until his final ODI innings Steve exhibited an incredible ability to accumulate runs in all conditions and his astute leadership has been crucial in the team's ongoing success including the 2015 and 2023 ICC World Cup victories. "We're fortunate Steve still has much to offer in the Test and T20 arenas and I look forward to witnessing the next stage of one of cricket's great careers," Greenberg added. Bailey echoed the sentiment. "We fully understand and support Steve's decision to retire from One Day International cricket.

We still have not played perfect game: Gambhir

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ DUBAI

Not the one to be easily pleased, India head coach Gautam Gambhir said his team is still searching for that "perfect game" despite entering the Champions Trophy (CT) final with an all-win record and he is hopeful that it would come in the summit clash on Sunday. India trounced Australia by four wickets in the first semifinal here on Tuesday, with senior batter Virat Kohli making a well-paced 84. "See, in international sport, you want to keep improving. You don't say that you've ticked all the boxes. We still haven't played a perfect game. I will never be satisfied with the performances," Gambhir said in the post-match press conference. Gambhir hoped that India can produce that "perfect game" in the Champions Trophy title clash on March 9. "We still have one more game to go. Hopefully, we can play a perfect game. We want to keep



improving, we want to be ruthless on the cricket field but absolutely humble off the field as well," he added. India have taken some bold calls such as playing four spinners, promoting Axar Patel to No.5 and pushing down KL Rahul to No. 6 to suit the team's needs. It may look illogical from outside but for Gambhir they were minor pieces in the grand plans of keeping the players "out of the comfort zone" to extract the best out of them.

"I think cricket is all about being out of your comfort zone, and that is how you grow. If everyone is in their comfort zone, then there is stagnation. So, I believe, and you've seen the results. I know you guys will keep going back to 3-1 in Australia. "But everyone in the dressing room is staying out of the comfort zone be it the coaching staff, be it the players and hopefully we continue to do what is important for Indian cricket," he said.



Praggnanandhaa draws with Shankland in Prague Masters

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ PRAAGUE

Grandmasters R Praggnanandhaa and Aravindh Chithambaram continued to remain in joint lead after drawing their sixth-round games in the Prague Masters Chess tournament here. Praggnanandhaa was held to a draw by Sam Shankland of the United States, while Aravindh split the point with Quang Leim of Vietnam to be on four points out of a possible six, on a day when all the games were drawn for the first time in the tournament. Praggnanandhaa and Aravindh continued to be followed by top seed Wei Yi of China, Anish Giri of Holland, Vincent Keymer of Germany and Quang Leim, all of whom are on three points apiece. Another half-point behind are the Czech duo of Nguyen Thai Dai Van and David Navara, Gurel Ediz of Turkey and Shankland. With three more rounds to come, Praggnanandhaa holds the edge over Aravindh as he is set to play the next two games with white pieces. Aravindh, on the other hand, has only one game with white left. The seventh round will be crucial for Praggnanandhaa as he takes on Wei Yi, while Aravindh will meet Anish, who has drawn all his games so far. Praggnanandhaa was under pressure for some time in the middle game against his American opponent, who played white. The opening featured a regular Italian game and Shankland threw

open the position with a knight sacrifice on the king side. Soon after, Praggnanandhaa had to part with one of his rooks for a minor piece, and what resulted was a very complex position. Navigating between better and equal thereon, the Indian allowed Shankland to go for a forced repetition and the game was drawn after 43 moves. Playing white, Aravindh faced the Queen's gambit declined – one of the most classical setup for decades now – and had his forces around the centre right from the very go. However, as the game progressed, Quang Leim remained impregnable, and by the 19th move itself the players had exchanged as many as three minor pieces and two pawns. The pawn structure took a small turn when Aravindh decided to part with his last bishop for a knight but black had nothing to worry about. The players soon arrived at a rook-and-pawns endgame where the draw was a just result after 32 moves. In the Challengers section, the fortunes of Divya Deshmukh did not change as she suffered another defeat and was pushed to the sole last spot among 10 players. Vaclav Finel defeated Divya in a rook-and-minor-piece endgame leaving the Indian on 1.5 points. Jonas Buhl Bjerre of Denmark regained the joint lead by beating MarcAndria Maurizzi of France. The Dane shares the top spot with Nodirbek Yakubboev of Uzbekistan.

Sreesanth backs India to win Champions Trophy final

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ DUBAI

Team India simply looks unstoppable, exuding confidence, energy and dominance and World Cup-winning former India pacer Sreesanth feels no side can stand in their way in the Champions Trophy final on Sunday. The Rohit Sharma-led side trounced reigning world champions Australia by four wickets in the first semifinal here on Tuesday to make it four wins out of four in the ICC showpiece. They now await the winners of New Zealand and South Africa for the Sunday's summit clash. "Doesn't matter who the opponents are in the final – India are going to win," the 2007 T20 World Cup and 2011 ODI World Cup winner told PTI Video. "There is so much positive energy. They are playing some wonderful cricket. The way



Virat Kohli anchoring the chase, the way Shreyas Iyer has stepped up – let's just keep our fingers crossed." Sreesanth also emphasised the importance of staying grounded. "Let's be humble in our process. That's what Mahi bhai (MS Dhoni) used to say – one of the best captains I've played with. "Even Sourav Ganguly used to say the same. Dada always used to say, let's be humble and trust the process. That's exactly what the Indian team

is doing... Gautam (Gambhir) bhai is doing a great job," he observed. Mohammad Shami, returning after a 14-month injury layoff, has once again emerged as India's leading wicket-taker in a world tournament, claiming eight wickets. He shares the top spot with New Zealand's Matt Henry, both having taken eight wickets. Shami was the highest wicket-taker in the 2023 World Cup, with 24 wickets, where India finished as runners-up to Australia. That tournament

marked his last appearance before the injury layoff. "Shami 'one of the biggest fighters. I remember seeing him bowl at the nets. I used to tell him, 'Shami, you will go a long way', and I like it a lot because of the way he has upgraded himself. "Playing for the country, forgetting the past, looking ahead, even after coming back from injury and doing well, getting the wicket in the first over... Sreesanth also believes India's domination in world cricket has well and truly arrived. "Absolutely, there's no doubt that India will dominate world cricket for years to come. The talent pipeline is incredible – from domestic cricket to Under-19 tournaments to women's cricket, the system is flourishing. We have to thank the BCCI and Jay Shah for building such a strong foundation. The support system, the sponsorships, the structure – India are well ahead of the rest of the world."

Ravindra, Williamson lead NZ to 50-run win, set up clash with India

PTI ■ LAHORE

Rachin Ravindra and Kane Williamson struck commanding centuries as New Zealand hammered South Africa by 50 runs in a high-scoring semifinal to set up a summit clash with India in the Champions Trophy, here on Wednesday. Ravindra played a brilliant knock of 108 runs off 101 balls, laced with 13 fours and a six, while Williamson struck 102 off 94 balls, including 10 fours and two sixes, after skipper Mitchell Santner opted to bat. Daryl Mitchell (49 not out off 27 balls) and Michael Bracewell (16 off 12 balls) then capitalized on the solid foundation, adding 112 runs in the final 10 overs to power New Zealand to a massive total of 362/6 – the highest score in Champions Trophy history. Only twice has a higher target been successfully chased in ODIs – both by South Africa – but this time it was not to be as the Proteas were restricted to 312 for 9 in pursuit of the record target, despite a scintillating century from David Miller (100 not out off 67 balls) and fighting fifties by Rassie van der Dussen (69) and skipper Temba Bavuma (56). Santner (3/43) was the most successful New Zealand bowler, as he, along with the other spinners – Michael Bracewell (1/53), Glenn Phillips (2/27) and Ravindra (1/20) – tightened the screws in the middle overs. New Zealand will now face former champions India in the final on Sunday in Dubai. Wednesday's semifinal marked the end of Champions Trophy matches in Pakistan. Chasing 363 for a win, South Africa lost Ryan Rickelton early for 17, but Bavuma, who initially struggled, found his rhythm and shared a vital 105-run partnership with van der Dussen, with the duo bringing up the team century in the 18th over. However, New Zealand skipper Santner's three-wicket burst derailed the chase.

The left-arm spinner first broke the stand by removing Bavuma in the 23rd over, before producing a beauty to clean up van der Dussen. Santner then had the dangerous Heinrich Klaasen (3) holed out to Matt Henry. Ravindra then dismissed Aiden Markram (31) with a caught-and-bowled effort, leaving South Africa at 189 for 5 in the 33rd over. Wiaan Mulder (8), Marco Jansen (3) and Keshav Maharaj (1) followed in quick succession before Miller put up a top-class show with 10 fours and four sixes to reach his hundred in the last ball of the South African run chase. Earlier, opting to bat, New Zealand built a strong opening stand of 48 between Ravindra and Will Young (21), before the latter was dismissed by Lungi Ngidi (3/72) in the eighth over. Ravindra and Williamson then shared 164 runs for the second wicket as the Kiwis crossed 250 in the 40th over. Ravindra, looking in complete control, played exquisite pull shots and back-foot drives on his way to his second century of this Champions Trophy, following his 112 against Bangladesh. This was his fifth hundred in an ICC tournament, having also scored three centuries in the 2023 World Cup in India. Williamson, despite early jitters, batted calmly to bring up his 15th ODI century and his fourth against South Africa. He has now scored hundreds in his last three ODIs against the Proteas. The right-left combination of Ravindra and Williamson proved difficult for the South African bowlers. All-rounder Wiaan Mulder was forced off with a strain after bowling six overs for 48 runs and one wicket. Ravindra was caught by Heinrich Klaasen off the bowling of Kagiso Rabada (2/70), while Williamson mistimed a ramp shot to be caught by Ngidi off Mulder. Mitchell then struck four fours and one six in his 37-ball knock, while Phillips blasted six fours and a six in 27 balls to swell the total.

Playing fearless cricket has worked for me: Rahane

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ MUMBAI

Kolkata Knight Riders captain Ajinkya Rahane has credited his success in the Indian Premier League and domestic T20s to playing "fearless cricket" while remaining calm. The 36-year-old topped the batting charts in the previous edition of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy with 469 runs, including five half-centuries, at a strike rate of 164.56. His aggressive approach also paid off in the IPL where he was the batting mainstay for Chennai Super Kings in the

last two editions. "It was always about being an anchor and the others would play around me. (But the) last 2-3 years, it's always about playing with freedom, fearless cricket and go out and back my game," Rahane, the brand ambassador of Skillhub Online Games Federation, said here on Tuesday. "I am trying to do that (play fearless cricket) but it's (also) about following my processes and routines and staying loyal and truthful to the game." Rahane, who led Mumbai into the Ranji Trophy semifinal and scored 467 runs, said he would carry the confidence from domestic

cricket into the upcoming edition of the IPL. "For me, personally, batting-wise I am doing really well. Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy was really good for me, I had a really good domestic season. So, I am really confident about myself," he said. "It is just about staying in the moment, staying calm and keep backing myself, not to think too much ahead and not to think about the past. It's always about improving and enjoying my game," he added. Rahane felt that India's victory in the Champions Trophy semifinal in Dubai on Tuesday could also be attributed to the side not

dwelling into the past record against Australia in the knockouts of ICC tournaments. Before Rohit Sharma's side won the match by four wickets, India had never beaten Australia in the knockouts of ICC tournaments since the quarterfinal of the 2011 World Cup in India. India had lost to Australia in the 2015 Cricket World Cup semifinal, the 2023 World Cup final and the 2023 World Test Championship final. "Very happy that India has won the semifinal against Australia and have entered the final. I want to

congratulate the team and I am sure they will do well in the final," Rahane said. "What happened in the past is gone, the team must be thinking about the present and their aim was to beat Australia... To beat them in the semifinal. "Obviously, what has happened in the past keeps playing on the mind but, as a cricketer, your mind is always in the moment, in the present, to do well in that game to win the match," Rahane said. Rahane, who has been appointed KKR captain ahead of the upcoming IPL season, said he would like the defending IPL champions to keep it simple.

"Our team is really good, everyone is playing really well. We had a camp in Mumbai, all the domestic players were here but international players are also playing which is really good," he said. "We won the championship last year but again this year it is about starting from the scratch, starting from zero. T20 is a funny format and IPL is a challenging tournament. "I am happy and humbled to be captain of the KKR team. We would like to keep it simple, take one game at a time and stay in the moment and enjoy the format," Rahane added.

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