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INSIDE

WORLD 8

SOUTH KOREA TO INSPECT ITS
BOEING FLEET AS IT STRUGGLES
TO FIND CAUSE OF PLANE CRASH

PUNJAB JAMS NORTH INDIA



Farmers block a road during the statewide 'bandh' called as part of their ongoing protest at Punjab borders, in Amritsar PTI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
CHANDIGARH / NEW DELHI

Life was hit across Punjab due to a 'bandh' imposed by farmers who have been agitating against the Centre for a legal guarantee of a minimum support price for their crops. Rail and road traffic was crippled and commercial establishments remained shut in several places of the State. Farmers staged 'dharnas' on several roads and highways including in Patiala, Jalandhar, Amritsar, Ferozepur, Bathinda, and Pathankot as part of their bandh call from 7 am to 4 pm, throwing commuter traffic out of gear. A call for a statewide shutdown was given over a

week ago by Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha and the Centre not acting on the farmers' demand for a legal guarantee for the MSP. The bandh was also enforced to express solidarity with farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal who has been on a fast for the last 35 days at Khanauri border protest site of farmers. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court would on December 31 examine Punjab Government's measures to provide treatment to the ailing farmer leader. A team of the Punjab Government officials on December 29 attempted to persuade the septuagenarian to take medical aid, but he declined it, fearing use of forces to oust him from the protest site.

A high-level team of Punjab Government officials had met Dallewal requesting him to accept medical treatment irrespective of the fast continuing. A vacation bench of Justices Surya Kant and Sudhanshu Dhulia would hear the matter virtually at around 11 am on December 31. On December 28, the top court came down heavily on the Punjab Government for not moving Dallewal to a hospital and doubted the intention of the agitating farmers for resisting the administration of medical aid to their ailing leader. The Bench, however, gave the State Government time till December 31 to persuade Dallewal to move him to a hospital, giving it the liberty to seek logistical support

from the Centre, if the situation warranted. The Punjab Government said it was facing a huge resistance from the protesting farmers who had encircled Dallewal and prevented him from being taken to a hospital.

On Monday, farmers observed a sit-in at Dhareri Jattan Toll Plaza which affected vehicular movement on the Patiala-Chandigarh National Highway. At Amritsar's Golden Gate, scores of farmers staged a dharna near the city's entry point. Police there assisted some stranded foreign tourists by arranging auto rickshaws for them to reach the Golden Temple.

Farmers squatted on tracks at many places, forcing the railways to cancel several trains passing through the state and short-terminated or short-originated some trains. In Ferozepur, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, and Bathinda, passengers were seen stranded at stations. In Phagwara, farmers staged a dharna near the Sugarmill Crossing on NH-44, blocking the roads leading from Phagwara towards Nakodar, Hoshiarpur, and Nawanshahr. Grain markets were shut in several places across the State. In the Mohali district, farmers staged a dharna at a few points throwing normal movement of vehicular traffic out of gear. Public transport remained off roads at several places, while most private bus operators suspended services, abiding by the bandh call. Many long-distance private buses and trucks carrying fruits and vegetables were held up due to the bandh.



COLD WORSENS THE FREEZE

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Amid the inclement weather conditions, north and northwest India would face the brunt of cold day spell over the coming days. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has also forecast 'dense to very dense' fog in northern and western parts of the country during the next two-three days. Dense fog may affect some airports, highways and railway routes in the areas of met-sub-division. According to IMD, a fresh western disturbance in north India starting January 4, expected to bring snowfall and rain. Scattered precipitation is likely in the western Himalayan region from January 1 to 3, with widespread rainfall and snowfall predicted for January 4 and 5. The entire north India was covered by a blanket of dense to very dense fog on Monday.

"Recent Satellite imagery detected fog layer over South Jammu, Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, north Rajasthan,

WEATHER

AQI	173
MAX	15°C(-5)
MIN	10.3°C(+3)

Madhya Pradesh, west and south Uttar Pradesh, south Himachal Pradesh, south Uttarakhand, southwest Bihar, west Jharkhand, north Chhattisgarh and east Gujarat," IMD wrote on X. The IMD has also predicted rain or snowfall over the 'western Himalayan region' between January 1 and January 5 due to a western disturbance. The weather department anticipated that foggy conditions would continue late at night and early in the morning across regions such as Odisha, Assam, Meghalaya, and other northeastern states until December 31. These conditions were expected to persist in Punjab, Haryana, and Chandigarh until January 1.

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN



ISRO's PSLV-C60 carrying SpaDeX and its payloads, lifts off from the first launch pad at Satish Dhawan Space Centre, in Sriharikota PTI

AAP in Election Mode

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

On a day when the imams affiliated with the Delhi Waqf Board protested outside former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's residence, demanding their overdue salaries, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Monday announced a new scheme that offers a monthly honorarium of Rs 18,000 to Hindu temple's Pujaris and Granthis of Gurudwaras if elected to the upcoming Assembly polls. In a bid to dent the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP's) Hindu's vote bank the AAP's convenor said the registration for the Pujari Granthi Samman Yojana will begin on Tuesday. He also said he would visit the Hanuman Mandir in Connaught Place on Tuesday to oversee the registration process for priests there. Registration will also be done at other temples and Gurudwaras across the city by the AAP workers, he said. During their protest the All India Imam Association claimed their monthly honorarium of Rs 18,000 (for Imams) and Rs 16,000 (for Muezzins) have been delayed for over one and a half years and accused the Delhi government of ignoring their plight. Amid a huge row over a scheme that promises a monthly stipend to



unemployed women, the announcement by Arvind Kejriwal is a continuation of his welfare schemes for the people of Delhi which has however led to serious controversies. He first announced the Sanjeevani scheme for senior citizens, then the Mahila Samman Yojana, Dr Ambedkar Samman Scholarship scheme for Dalit students and now the monthly salary scheme for priests. "Today I am making an important announcement regarding a scheme. The name of the scheme is Pujari Granthi Samman Yojana. Under this, there is a provision to give an honorarium to the priests of temples and the 'granthis' of the Gurudwara. They will be given an honorarium of about Rs 8,000 per month", Kejriwal announced while addressing a

press conference. "This is happening for the first time in the country. The priest is a class that has carried forward the rituals from generation to generation. They never paid attention to their family and we never paid attention to them," the AAP chief added. Terming Kejriwal's 'Pujari Granthi Samman Yojana' a "political stunt", the BJP claimed that no one would get even a single rupee since the latter does not have any data with him. Delhi BJP chief Veerendra Sachdeva said that Kejriwal is now a "defeated and desperate" leader who is making populist announcements daily to stay in power. Former Delhi MP Parvesh Verma claimed that Kejriwal is remembering 'Ishwar' and 'Waheguru' due to the fear of loss.

LG's New Year greetings to Delhi's Temporary Chief Minister

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Extending season's greetings to Delhi Chief Minister Atishi, Lieutenant Governor Vinay Kumar Saxena has taken the opportunity to hit out at her predecessor and AAP convenor Arvind Kejriwal for calling her a "temporary Chief Minister". In a strongly worded letter to Atishi, Lt Governor expressed his disapproval of the AAP chief referring to her as a 'temporary Chief Minister'. The letter, criticised the remark as an affront to constitutional values and the dignity of the office. Saxena described the comments as not only insulting to Atishi but also disrespectful to the President of India and himself as her representative. He emphasised the importance of maintaining a respectful level of public discourse, particularly regarding the role of the Chief Minister. "... I found this very objectionable and I was hurt by it. It was not only an insult to you, but also to your appointee, the President of India and to me as her representative" As a Lieutenant Governor, I am concerned about this level of public discourse and at the same time, I am hurt by the conversation of presenting the full-time Chief Minister of my government as a temporary Chief Minister..." reads the



letter. Taking a jibe at AAP over the announcement, the Delhi Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) shared a poster on X, showing Arvind Kejriwal controlling Atishi with strings, insinuating that he would run the Delhi government through her. In a statement Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva, stated that the letter written by the Lieutenant Governor Vinay Kumar Saxena to Chief Minister Atishi Marlena reflects the true reality of the Delhi government. He said that while political ideologies may differ, it is "at least evident that Atishi Marlena is seen carrying out administrative duties as a Chief Minister, something that has been notably absent during the almost ten-year tenure of Arvind Kejriwal, who merely functioned as a

'ribbon-cutting' Chief Minister". The LG further outlined the challenges faced by the Delhi government including the Yamuna pollution crisis, garbage management, and the poor state of infrastructure in industrial and slum areas. He slammed the AAP supremo and said, "The public characterisation of a temporary or stopgap chief minister, as articulated by Shri Kejriwal, has no constitutional basis. It is also a deplorable violation of the democratic spirit and values enshrined in the Constitution authored by Babasaheb Ambedkar". The Lieutenant Governor lauded Atishi for her approach in governance, contrasting it with her predecessor's alleged reluctance to take on administrative responsibilities. "For the first

Security upgrade for New Year's eve

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

time during my tenure, I have seen a Chief Minister actively performing the duties of the office," he wrote. Saxena had earlier offered words of praise for Atishi, calling her "a thousands times better" than her predecessor, with whom he has had several tempestuous run-ins, on legal, administrative, and governance issues, over the past months. In September, AAP leader Atishi was named as the new Chief Minister of Delhi following Kejriwal's announcement to resign from the top post after being granted interim bail for his alleged involvement in the Delhi liquor policy case. The official announcement was made by Delhi minister Gopal Rai. Notably, several other AAP leaders were in the fray to succeed Kejriwal, including Kailash Gahlot, Saurabh Bharadwaj and Gopal Rai. Atishi was elevated to the position of cabinet minister in the Delhi government after Satyender Jain and Manish Sisodia tendered their resignations last year. She, along with Saurabh Bharadwaj, were made Delhi ministers, but Atishi was given charge of 14 departments, including education, finance, planning, PWD, water, power and public relations.

Tonight, On the eve of 2025, many will party the night away, but there are some who will be on duty keeping the National Capital safe. Meet the brave hearts who will stand in the chilling cold to help ensure that the celebrations go on safely. "We do not consider this to be a conundrum at all, we are happy to serve the people so that they can celebrate the New Year without any problem and enjoy it to the fullest," were the words of police officers who will ensure that security arrangements do not fall short and crime elements do not hamper celebrations of the common people on December 31st and January 1st. Delhi Police remains on alert as people from its neighbouring states are also expected to come to Delhi for celebrations in large numbers. Delhi shares borders with Haryana and Uttar Pradesh and lies close to Rajasthan. The traffic and local police personnel say they are neither worried nor frustration remains on their faces.

Falling Sensex, Rising Rupee: Where is India headed?

The din around the falling Sensex and depreciating Rupee has been hard to miss, and understandably, human nature makes us worry when markets falter. For many investors, even those with mutual fund investments, the recent market trends might feel like storm clouds on the horizon. But markets, much like seasons, naturally cycle through growth, correction, and recovery phases. What's happening now isn't the collapse of some fear; rather, it's a moment for perspective, patience, and clarity about the underlying factors at play. The equities landscape has seen corrections in the Sensex and Nifty, particularly since September 2024, causing unease. However, it's

worth noting that these indices have been on a nine-year bull run, delivering around 9per cent growth year-to-date, even after recent declines. Much of the decline stems from significant selling by Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs), who have offloaded over Rs 1.19 lakh crore worth of equities through exchanges this year. Interestingly, while exiting the secondary market, FIIs have invested more than Rs 1.2 lakh crore in the primary market during 2024, including Rs 17,331 crore in December alone, making them net investors in India. This dual approach suggests the sell-off is more about short-term profit-booking and global fund reallocation than a loss of confidence in India's long-term growth prospects.

Global factors have also fueled this sell-off. China's aggressive stimulus measures boosted the CSI 300 index by 25per cent since the announcement, diverting significant FII flows from India. Investors, however, are closely watching to see how effectively the government can address structural economic challenges and navigate concerns of potential overvaluation in the market. Weak domestic Q2 earnings, with 44per cent of companies missing profit expectations as per an analyst report, further dampened short-term sentiment. The year 2024 was a battleground between bulls and bears, characterised by intense volatility driven by key events such as the Indian general elections, the US presidential race, and a host of geopolitical tensions, including the Israel-Iran conflict. Yet, India's



PROF. GOURAV VALLABH

macroeconomic fundamentals remain strong with high potential bank lending, 13-year low gross non-performing assets (GNPA) at 2.5 per cent as of September 2024, expected inflation easing, and robust private spending. This correction, while concerning, does not signal a structural problem. Now, let's address the Rupee, another point of concern. Over 2024, the Rupee depreciated by

around three per cent, with approximately two per cent occurring in the last quarter against the US Dollar. The Dollar is strengthening because of Donald Trump's public pronouncements favouring universal tariff hikes (more on the import of Chinese goods), mass deportation of illegal immigrants and income tax cuts. If translated into policy, these are expected to increase the US economy's inflation. As a result, the 10-year US Treasury yield, now above 4.5per cent, has made US assets more attractive, narrowing the India-US bond yield spread to ~230 basis points, its lowest level since 2006, and has halved in 2 years. All this makes capital outflows from emerging markets, including India. Although the Rupee is hitting lows against the US Dollar, its exchange rate has scaled an all-time high in real terms. The

Real Effective Exchange Rate (REER) index of the rupee touched a record of 108 in November 2024, strengthening by 4.5per cent during this calendar year. The REER measures the rupee value not only against the dollar, but against the global currencies. This was a broad dollar strengthening that reduced the attractiveness of the Indian currency, thus making it vulnerable to greater selling pressure and further depreciation. The rupee is not weakening as much as the dollar is strengthening against all currencies. The Rupee has appreciated against major currencies like the Euro, Pound, and Australian Dollar. The Euro fell from Rs 91.84 on December 31, 2023, to Rs 89.10 by December 30, 2024. Similarly, the Australian Dollar dropped from Rs 56.64 to Rs 53.33 and Swiss Franc dipped from

Rs 98.88 to Rs 94.71 over the same period. This shows the Rupee's resilience even against some of the world's strongest currencies. Despite these challenges, India's external accounts have shown resilience. The Current Account Deficit (CAD) narrowed slightly to 1.2per cent of GDP in Q2 FY25 from 1.3 per cent in the previous year. The fiscal deficit, which had ballooned to 9.2 per cent during the pandemic, is now down to 5.6 per cent. In this context, the Rupee's movements reflect global dynamics rather than intrinsic weaknesses in India's economy. Emerging market currencies, including the Brazilian Real, Indonesian Rupiah, Chinese Yuan, and Russian Ruble, also depreciated against the Dollar, reflecting the Dollar's global strength rather than specific Rupee weakness.



Punjab Bandh Paralyzes Life Across State: Over 100 Roads Blocked, 174 Trains Cancelled, Markets Shut

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Life in Punjab ground to a halt on Monday as a statewide bandh called by farmers disrupted daily life, leaving residents grappling with cancelled train services, blocked highways, and shuttered markets. The bandh, from 7 am to 4 pm, saw over 270 protest sites spring up across the State. From highways to railway tracks, farmers, supported by a wide spectrum of groups, including transport unions, employee organizations, left no stone unturned to make their voices heard in support of farmers' demands. The bandh was organized on the call given by Sanyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), Non-Political, and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha in support of farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal's 35-day long hunger strike demanding farm reforms, including legal guarantee on the Minimum Support Price (MSP), a comprehensive debt waiver for farmers, and justice for victims of the Lakhimpur Khri violence. KMM convenor and farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher described the bandh as a "resounding success", claiming that Punjabis across all walks of life stood united. The scale of the protest was unparalleled, with major arterial roads, including the Amritsar-Jalandhar, Amritsar-Jammu, and Jalandhar-Panipat highways, completely blocked by agitating farmers. The ripple effects were felt in cities and towns alike, as public transport came to a standstill, university exams were postponed, and essential supplies like fruits, vegetables, milk, and fuel faced delays. Free langars served tea and meals to protesters at several sites, reflecting the community spirit behind the agitation. Despite the chaos, farmers maintained that emergency

services and critical travelers were allowed passage. Monday's bandh underscored the farmers' determination to fight for their rights. **232 Trains Impacted, 174 Cancelled** One of the most severely impacted sectors was rail transport. Over 232 trains were disrupted, with 174 trains, including prominent services like Vande Bharat and Shatabdi Express, being cancelled. The New Delhi-Amritsar Shatabdi and Chandigarh-Kalka Shatabdi were among the casualties, leaving thousands of passengers stranded. The New Delhi-Vaishno Devi Katra Vande Bharat, a vital connection for pilgrims, also faced cancellation. Key affected routes included New Delhi-Vaishno Devi and New Delhi-Amb Andaura, with three Vande Bharat trains cancelled. Additionally, seven trains were partially cancelled, 14 regulated, and 13 rescheduled. Railways implemented short-originating and short-terminating measures for 37 trains. The office of Ferozepur Divisional Railway Manager (DRM) maintained that the number of trains affected due to the bandh is likely to go up. Major railway stations such as Jalandhar, Amritsar, and Ludhiana turned into hubs of frustration as passengers scrambled for information. The Pune-Jammu Tawi Jhelum Express was stopped at Jalandhar Cantt, while several long-distance trains were either short-terminated or diverted. The disruptions extended to freight services, compounding the economic impact. Bulk SMS alerts were sent to passengers, and additional ticket counters were set up to handle refunds. However, for many, the inconvenience was unavoidable. **Highways and Toll Plazas Blocked** Highways were another

focal point of the bandh. The Patiala-Chandigarh highway witnessed massive sit-ins at Dhareeri Jattan Toll Plaza, bringing vehicular movement to a complete standstill. In Phagwara, farmers blocked the NH-44 at the Sugar Mill crossing, cutting off access to Nakodar, Hoshiarpur, and Nawanshahr. The Behram toll plaza on the Phagwara-Banga road was also seized by protesters. At Amritsar's Golden Gate, farmers, led by Sarwan Pandher, staged a massive dharna at the city's main entry point, halting traffic. In Bathinda's Rampura Phul, the highway was blocked, affecting routes leading to Sri Ganganagar and Muktsar. Protesters in Ludhiana gathered at Ladhawal Toll Plaza, Samrala Chowk, and Khanna, disrupting the Ludhiana-Samrala road. In many locations, commuters found themselves stuck for hours. A wedding procession in Jalandhar faced an unexpected hurdle when the groom's car was stopped. Displaying resilience, the groom joined the protesters briefly, waving a farmer union flag before proceeding. **Public Transport Grinds to a Halt** Public and private bus services were largely suspended, leaving inter-city and interstate travelers stranded due to chakka jam at over 200 locations. PEPSU Road Transport Corporation (PRTC) buses were not plying on the roads, although they had announced a four-hour service shutdown from 10 am to 2 pm. PRTC Employees Union's Harkesh Kumar said that buses were not plying on the roads. Routes to and from Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Delhi were also impacted as buses avoided entering Punjab. Private transport operators echoed the sentiment, halting operations across key routes from 7 am to 4 pm. In Ambala,

commuters heading to Punjab faced overcrowded buses and long waits. Many daily commuters to cities like Chandigarh and Zirakpur struggled to find alternatives, with some turning to taxis at inflated fares. **Airfares Skyrocketed** Airfares on the Chandigarh-Delhi route skyrocketed on Monday with prices soaring nearly six times the usual rate amid the statewide Punjab Bandh. A ticket that typically costs around Rs 3,000 was being sold for up to Rs 19,000, leaving travelers stunned. Adding to the chaos, most airlines refrained from displaying booking prices for the day on online platforms, restricting ticket purchases to airport counters or official airline websites. The steep surge in fares and limited booking options compounded the frustration for those urgently needing to travel, highlighting the ripple effects of the bandh on Punjab's aviation sector. **Markets, Businesses, Malls, and Educational Institutions Shut** The bandh's impact was felt in the heart of Punjab's cities and towns as markets and even malls remained eerily silent. In Ludhiana, major hubs like Chaura Bazaar, Vishwakarma Chowk, and Gill Road saw little activity. However, some areas like Ludhiana's Chaura Bazaar attempted to remain open, leading to altercations between shopkeepers and protesters. All universities, including Punjab University-Chandigarh, Guru Nanak Dev University-Amritsar, postponed exams scheduled for the day. Government offices witnessed thin attendance, while banks remained open but largely inactive due to the absence of customers. The disruption extended to agriculture and trade. Grain

markets across Punjab were shut, and truckloads of fruits and vegetables were stranded, delaying supplies to neighbouring states. Fuel stations in several districts also closed, adding to the inconvenience for commuters. While the bandh was largely peaceful, there were sporadic instances of tension and altercations with farmers. In Ludhiana's Khanna area, a car driver allegedly attempted to run over a protesting farmer. The individual was detained and claimed that it was an accident. In Jalandhar, altercations were reported between pedestrians and farmers blocking roads. Despite these incidents, the farmer leaders ensured that emergency services and critical travelers, such as those heading to hospitals or airports, for interviews and even wedding processions, were given free passage. "Our protest is against injustice, not against ordinary citizens," said Pandher, emphasizing that the bandh was aimed at pressuring the government to address farmers' demands. **Neighbouring States Feel the Heat** The bandh's impact was not confined to Punjab. In Haryana's Ambala and Himachal Pradesh's districts bordering Punjab, transport services were disrupted as buses avoided entering Punjab. Commuters traveling between states faced detours and delays, affecting daily schedules. Traffic movement was also disrupted in Jammu and Kashmir's Lakhapur, which is considered the gateway and entry point of entire surface transport to the state of Jammu and Kashmir from outside the state. **Traders Slam Bandh, Cite Economic Losses** The statewide bandh in Punjab drew sharp criticism from the trading and industri-

al community, who highlighted its crippling impact on the state's economy. Factory owners and traders in Ludhiana, the industrial hub of Punjab, decried the disruptions caused by roadblocks and cancelled transport services, which left workers stranded and production lines stalled. "We sympathize with the farmers' demands but strongly oppose their methods, as these protests are paralyzing industries and inflicting economic losses on a state already grappling with financial challenges," said All Industries and Trade Forum convenor Badish Jindal. Many traders argued that while the farmers' plight deserves attention, the frequent bandhs and roadblocks are not only alienating allies but also jeopardizing livelihoods, supply chains, and investor confidence in Punjab's industrial sector. **Successful Punjab Bandh: Pandher** KMM convenor Pandher, addressing a press conference after the bandh, said that the residents of Punjab have extended their support to the statewide shutdown "wholeheartedly" and more than 280 blockades were installed which disrupted road and rail services in the state. "We had appealed to three crore Punjabis to support Punjab bandh. As per the information I am getting, people have supported this bandh. Since morning, almost 90-99 percent traffic was not on the roads. It means, Punjabis have extended their support to this bandh wholeheartedly. It's a successful 'Punjab Bandh'," said Pandher. "All establishments were closed. Punjabis have shown their unity today and they extended full support... Train services were also suspended and no train was entering Punjab," he said, while claiming that their strike has received strong support from transporters, employee unions, traders and religious bodies.

Commuters in Haryana face heat of Punjab Bandh

PNS ■ AMBALA/CHANDIGARH

The impact of the 'Punjab Bandh' called by farmers was felt in adjoining areas of Haryana including Ambala. The protesting farmers blocked the Ambala-Chandigarh expressway at Dappar toll plaza, hitting traffic on the key Chandigarh-Delhi highway on Monday. The agitators gathered in large numbers at the toll plaza near Gholu Majra village in Dera Bassi town of Mohali district at 7am. To avoid inconvenience to commuters, Ambala police issued a traffic advisory for those travelling on the Chandigarh-Delhi, Hisar-Chandigarh and Ambala-Chandigarh routes. Earlier, travellers were advised to take the alternative route via Panchkula, Barwala, Mullana, Yamunanagar, Radaur, Ladwa and join National Highway-44 at Pipli or at Karnal. The Ambala-Chandigarh rail section was also blocked near Lalru station in Mohali district.

(12046), New Delhi-Amb Andaura-New Delhi Vande Bharat Express (22447/48), while the Ajmer-Chandigarh-Ajmer Vande Bharat Express (20977/78) is operating till Delhi Cantt station. The Daulatpur Chowk-New Delhi Jan Shatabdi Express (12058) was short-originated at Ambala Cantt station. The Railways also partially cancelled seven trains, regulated 14 others, rescheduled 13 trains, short-originated 15 trains and short-terminated 22 trains. Officials at the Ambala division said that no train is moving beyond Ambala Cantt station due to the blockade at Lalru and Shambhu stations. Due to the disruption, passengers were left to bear the brunt of delays and cancellations in the harsh cold. Hundreds of daily commuters travelling through buses from Ambala to Chandigarh, Mohali, Patiala and other nearby cities of Punjab were thrown off stride because of the shutdown. Amrita Singh, who commutes every day from Ambala to Zirakpur for her work, was witnessed waiting for a bus at Ambala Cantt in Haryana. All buses going towards Chandigarh from Ambala were too crowded, she said. Many outsiders studying in various coaching centres in Chandigarh faced a tough time reaching their destinations. Hundreds of farmers have been protesting at the Punjab-Haryana border demanding a legal guarantee of a minimum support price (MSP) for crops.

BRIEFS

MCC decides to implement No work No pay against striking Door to Door waste collectors Chandigarh: Taking strict note of Door to Door waste collectors joining strike, the Municipal Corporation Chandigarh has decided to implement the principle of 'No work No Pay'. Accordingly, the Door to Door waste collectors who have participated in strike, their wages/ payment will be deducted for the days they will remain on strike including those who were on strike on 21.12.2024. Municipal Commissioner Amit Kumar said that reportedly a section of Door to Door waste collectors have proceeded on strike, causing disruption to the essential services provided by the Municipal Corporation Chandigarh. Despite repeated appeals to return to work, the strike continues. He said alternative arrangements are being made to maintain the continuity of services. Making an appeal to the striking employees, the Commissioner, asked them to reconsider their decision and return to work immediately. The Municipal Corporation Chandigarh is willing to engage in constructive dialogue to resolve the issues, but the strike must be called off first, he said. **56,830 youths given Govt job in Hry this year: HSSC** Chandigarh: Haryana Staff Selection Commission (HSSC) Chairman Himmat Singh on Monday said that compared to previous years, this year saw the highest number of youth being provided employment, with 56,830 selections. He further said that in the 2015, the recruitment was done on 2,780 posts, while in 2016, the recruitment was done on 2,229 posts, in 2017, recruitment was done on 8,403 posts, in 2018 recruitment was done on 20,141 posts, in 2019, recruitment was done on 34,649 posts, in 2020, recruitment was done on 8,694 posts, in 2021 recruitment was done on 3,651 posts, in 2022 recruitment was done on 16,366 posts and in 2023 recruitment was done on 838 posts. He further said that the Commission has utilized social media platforms to raise awareness among candidates and linked them with the Commission's official website. For the first time, candidates can directly contact any officer of the Commission via phone or message to register their complaints. A total of 266 cases were filed concerning the results of 24,000 recruitments announced by the Commission, and 418 cases were filed regarding the TGT exam results, on which the Commission is taking swift action. The Commission successfully conducted 28 exams in just 56 days. The remaining exams will also be conducted soon, Singh added. **Severe cold grips Punjab and Haryana** Chandigarh: Severe cold gripped Punjab and Haryana on Monday, with maximum temperatures hovering well below normal limits in the two states. A thick blanket of fog reduced visibility early in the morning at many places in the two states. In Haryana, severe cold prevailed during the day at most places. The maximum temperature in Ambala was recorded at 12 degrees Celsius, Hisar 14.5 degrees, Karnal 13.2 degrees, Rohtak 12.7 degrees, and Gurugram recorded a high of 13 degrees Celsius. In Punjab, a cold wave swept Pathankot, which recorded a high of 11 degrees Celsius while Bathinda registered a maximum of 12.4 degrees. Amritsar also shivered under biting cold during the day registering a high of 12.6 degrees Celsius while Ludhiana recorded 13.8 degrees. Patiala also braved intense chill, recording a high of 13 degrees Celsius, while Faridkot and Mohali recorded respective maximums of 11.6 degrees and 12.3 degrees. Piercing cold prevailed in Chandigarh during the day with the city recording a maximum temperature of 11.3 degrees Celsius, it's coldest day of the winter season so far, over eight notches below normal, according to the local Met office.

Haryana Chief Secy reviews crime tracking system

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Haryana Chief Secretary Vivek Joshi on Monday said that the State has consistently topped the PRAGATI Dashboard 29 times in the past 39 months, showcasing the sustained excellence and commitment of the state police force since June 2021. The portal is supervised by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) for all states and union territories. In addition, State Police has also achieved a perfect 10/10 score on the RTS dashboard for citizen services provided

through the HarSamay portal. As of December 26, 2024, Haryana Police has completed over 64,57,071 applications, processing them within the prescribed timelines. This performance has placed Haryana Police at forefront among all departments in the state, with the highest number of applications processed through the SARAL portal, Joshi said after presiding over 29th meeting of the State Apex Committee for Crime and CCTNS here in Chandigarh. In the meeting it was informed that e-Summon facility has been successfully implemented in Sirsa district which was selected for this pilot project.

Tensions Escalate at Khanauri Border as Dallewal Apprehends Eviction Fears

MONIKA MALIK ■ CHANDIGARH

The Khanauri border remained on high alert on Monday as the farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal entered the 35th day of his hunger strike, repeatedly defying Punjab Government's pleas to seek medical treatment. With the Supreme Court's December 31 deadline for his hospitalization approaching, security around the protest site has been intensified. Farmers, apprehensive of a potential eviction operation under the cover of darkness, have also reinforced their presence, determined to protect Dallewal from being forcibly removed. With time running out, tensions at Khanauri remain high. The farmers' determination to protect Dallewal and the Government's obligation to comply with judicial directives have created a deadlock. There were also reports that Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann may also visit Khanauri to meet the farmer leader. Notably, most of the Cabinet Ministers, including Harpal Singh Cheema, Aman Arora, have already visited Dallewal. Meanwhile, Dallewal has accused the state authorities of preparing to detain him, claiming that bus drivers had been

mobilized for the operation. Dallewal claimed that the drivers have refused to participate, signaling solidarity with the farmers. "Authorities are planning to detain me, and preparations to take me into custody are underway, including mobilizing bus drivers for the operation. But, they have refused to cooperate," said Dallewal in a video message. Ahead of the Supreme Court hearing scheduled for Tuesday, Dallewal made a heartfelt appeal, stating, "We are also a part of India." He urged the Central Government to address the concerns of farmers and reconsider their policies. At the same time, the Punjab Government is also facing mounting pressure from the Supreme Court to ensure Dallewal's hospital admission without resorting to force. Punjab Government's repeated efforts to persuade Dallewal to accept medical treatment have, so far, been unsuccessful. A state delegation, led by retired Additional DGP Jaskaran Singh, has made multiple visits to the protest site, urging him to accept medical aid. Despite his deteriorating health, Dallewal remained resolute, refusing to end his hunger strike until the Central Government addresses key farmer demands, including a legal guarantee for

Minimum Support Price (MSP) on crops and debt relief. Doctors have been conducting biweekly medical checks at the protest site, and while Jaskaran Singh has described Dallewal's condition as "weak but stable", concerns over his health continue to grow. The Supreme Court has expressed dissatisfaction with the State Government's handling of the situation, warning of potential contempt proceedings if the deadline is not met. Farmers at the Khanauri site have ramped up security, fearing a repeat of the November 26 operation, when police forcibly removed Dallewal from the protest site a night before he was to begin his hunger strike. Farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher has called upon youth from nearby villages to join the protest, urging vigilance against any potential eviction attempt. "We are prepared to face any consequences. This is a peaceful protest, and the Government will be held accountable if it resorts to force," Pandher declared. "Punjab Government will have to stand with three crore Punjabis. They should not attempt to conduct an (eviction) operation at the Khanauri border by taking the excuse of the court," he said. Pandher indicated that the

farmers were prepared for any eventuality. "Dallewal Saab has made it clear that he will not back down. Now, it is up to the Centre and the Punjab Government to decide whether they are willing to bear the responsibility for farmers' bloodshed," he remarked. Pandher further revealed that he had urged the youth from villages near Patiala to assemble at the Khanauri border by Sunday night, aiming to thwart any police attempts to remove Dallewal under the cover of darkness. Opposition leaders have all along been criticizing the Aam Aadmi Party led Punjab Government for its handling of the crisis. Congress leader and the Leader of Opposition in Vidhan Sabha Partap Singh Bajwa on Monday condemned the heavy police deployment around Patiala and accused the government of attempting to intimidate peaceful protesters. "Reports of a heavy police presence at Patiala Police Lines have raised serious concerns... What is the purpose of mobilizing such a large force? Is it an attempt to intimidate or harm peaceful protesters? Let me make this clear — if the Punjab Police resorts to force and any harm comes to the farmers, the responsibility will fall directly on Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann. Such an act

would be an unforgivable betrayal of the very people who elected him," he said. Bajwa further criticized Mann's failure to address the issue at the national level, asking, "Why hasn't Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann taken the initiative to approach the Prime Minister or the Home Minister to resolve this critical situation? Why is he allowing bureaucrats and police officials to take charge, instead of stepping up as the leader? The farmers' demands, particularly for a legal guarantee on MSP, are not merely state matters; they require national attention." Punjab Government, however, has maintained that it is working towards a peaceful resolution, urging the Central Government to engage with the farmers. Government officials have acknowledged the challenges, stating that they are exploring solutions that comply with the Apex Court's order while avoiding escalation. A senior official acknowledged the government's deep concerns over the potential repercussions of using force, emphasizing that the farmers needed to understand the gravity of the situation. "There is a risk of loss of lives. Farmers are stationed to protect Dallewal, and the police might be compelled to take drastic mea-

asures," the official said. Meanwhile, AAP MP Malvinder Singh Kang has strongly condemned the Central Government for its persistent inaction regarding the demands of farmers protesting at the Punjab-Haryana border. He called for immediate dialogue to address their legitimate concerns, particularly the alarming health of farmer leader Dallewal, who has been on a hunger strike for over a month. Kang emphasized that the people of Punjab are deeply concerned about Dallewal's deteriorating condition and urged the Central Government to take immediate action. "Despite several efforts by the Punjab Chief Minister and the State Government to open communication, the Centre has remained unresponsive, worsening the deadlock," he said. Also referencing the Supreme Court's recent call for dialogue with the farmers, Kang stressed that the Centre's silence is exacerbating the farmers' suffering and public distress. He appealed to the Centre to break its silence and address the farmers' issues, which have gone unresolved for too long. The Supreme Court's deadline for Dallewal's hospitalization leaves the Punjab Government with limited options. If Dallewal continues to refuse medical intervention, the state could face contempt proceedings or be forced to use police action to comply with the order. Either scenario carries significant risks, both for the government and for the farmers.

Himachal Govt plans to spend Rs. 1570 crore to revolutionize the health sector: CM Sukhu

PNS ■ SHIMLA

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu on Monday said that the State Government will revolutionize the healthcare sector with an estimated capital expenditure of Rs. 1570 crore to be spent on the procurement of state-of-art medical equipment and machineries to benefit the people of the State. In a statement, he said that annually 9.50 lakh patients are travelling out of the State for diagnostic and treatment resulting in a loss of Rs. 1350 crore of GDP per year. "This is a serious concern and the present State Government is prioritizing strengthening healthcare infrastructure in the State to save the valuable money and time of the thousands of patients," he added. Sukhu said that medical colleges are being upgraded with the facility of robotic surgery in Neurology, Oncology, orthopedics and other departments as this will reduce the workload of the doctors and would also benefit the patients receiving treatments. He said that the process for installing mod-

ern PET Scan and MRI machines in IGMC, Shimla and Dr. Rajendra Prasad Government Medical College, Tanda, district Kangra is underway and this would be dedicated shortly. He said that a Cancer Care Centre of Excellence would also be set up in Dr. Radhakrishnan Government Medical College, Hamirpur with ultramodern facilities with an estimated cost of Rs. 300 crore, adding that this facility would have State's first cyclotron machine along with the facility of radiation and nuclear medicine therapy. He said that this centre would have 150 dedicated beds for the cancer patients. Sukhu also directed to upgrade and strengthen the 69 healthcare facilities with enhanced level of care in the State by adding specialty beds and diagnostic capabilities in these hospitals. These health facilities will also be strengthened for secondary care, emergency services, equipment abilities and facility safety measures including fire fighting infrastructure and improvement in internal mobility etc.

He said that special focus would be laid to establish in-house laboratories for enhancement of diagnostic and treatment facilities at Zonal Hospitals, Regional Hospitals, District Hospitals and Community Health Centres. He said that modular operation theatres would be established in Zonal Hospitals and Civil Hospitals under this plan. He said that these measures would go a long way in preventing the migration of patients to other States for diagnostic and treatments while boosting medical tourism in the State. The Chief Minister instructed the officers to accelerate the process of upgrading the healthcare facilities in the State and said that there is no dearth of money for this and the State Government would provide additional funding if required. **Exercise for revision of BPL families list from April next year: CM** Himachal Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu on Monday presided over a review meeting of the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj department and said the exercise for revision of the list of below poverty line (BPL) fam-

ilies will commence in the state in April next year. During the meeting, he directed the officers to ensure that only genuine families appear in the BPL list and to formulate a new criteria in this regard. Sukhu instructed the department to formulate this criteria before January 5, 2025 followed by the Cabinet's approval. "The new guidelines will be shared with the general public in the Gram Sabha scheduled in January 2025," he said. The chief minister also directed to constitute a two-member committee at the sub-divisional level comprising the SDM and BDO to verify the lists of the BPL families recommended by the Gram Sabha to ensure transparency. Sukhu emphasized on a robust mechanism to identify the deserving BPL families so that they are not deprived of the benefits and said the state government is considering revision of the annual income for selecting BPL families. The chief minister said any objections against the final BPL families' list can be submitted to the respective deputy commissioner and divisional commissioner, who will have the authority to review and address these grievances. "A comprehensive website will also be launched for showcasing and home delivery of various products prepared by Women Self Help Groups, thereby strengthening the economy of the womenfolk," he added.

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Country shamed

The victim blaming and procedural lapses in the Anna University rape case underscores the urgent need for reform

The recent sexual assault case involving a 19-year-old student at Anna University has once again brought shame upon the nation, highlighting the pervasive nature of gender-based violence and the systemic failures in addressing it. The horrifying incident, compounded by the insensitivity of law enforcement, has triggered widespread outrage and calls for accountability. On December 23, Gnanasekaran allegedly raped the student on the university campus after threatening to release videos of her. The accused confined the survivor for over an hour and recorded the assault. While the Chennai Police Commissioner, A Arun, claimed swift action by apprehending the accused within 24 hours, the Madras High Court highlighted glaring lapses in the police's handling of the case. Particularly damning was the revelation that the First Information Report (FIR) published on the police website disclosed the victim's details, leading to further victim shaming and mental agony. The High Court's rebuke of the police was scathing. A Bench of Justices SM Subramanian and V Lakshminarayan criticised the language used in the FIR, terming it misogynistic and reflective of victim-blaming attitudes. Such lapses, the Court noted, breach the victim's fundamental rights under Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees dignity.

To address these lapses, the Court ordered the formation of a Special Investigation Team (SIT) comprising senior IPS officers to probe the case. It also directed the Tamil Nadu government to provide interim compensation of Rs 25 lakh to the victim and ensure her protection. The Court has rightly underscored the necessity of sensitising police personnel to handle such cases with empathy and professionalism. This case is not an isolated incident but a grim reminder of the larger problem of sexual violence that plagues India. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity, women continue to face systemic discrimination and violence. The societal tendency to blame victims, coupled with institutional apathy, exacerbates their trauma. The High Court's poignant questions — "Why can't a woman walk freely, dress as she wishes, or speak to a man without being judged?" — resonate deeply in a society still grappling with entrenched patriarchy. The Court rightly emphasised that the onus is on the State and society to protect women without perpetuating stigma or blame. The incident also exposed lapses in campus security at Anna University. The university, which allows unrestricted access to outsiders, failed to prevent the accused from entering the premises. The police's approach also came under scrutiny for prematurely ruling out the involvement of additional suspects. The Court directed the State to examine whether rules were violated during these proceedings. This tragic case underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms. Law enforcement must be trained to handle cases of sexual violence with sensitivity. The media, too, must exercise restraint in reporting such cases to avoid amplifying the victim's trauma.

PICTALK



Tourists enjoy after fresh snowfall, at Patnitop hill station in Udhampur

India's forest cover grows, but grim realities linger



KOTA SRIRAJ

While India's State of Forests Report highlights an increase in forest cover, it also raises concerns about troubling trends such as increase in forest fires and allegations of inflated data

India's State of Forests Report (ISFR) 2023, a biennial report published by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) under the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change is finally out after a delay of almost one year. The report is being hailed as a harbinger of good news as it announced an increase in India's forest and tree cover by 1,289 Sq.km. since 2021 reaching 25.17 per cent of the total geographical area in 2023, which puts India's forest cover at 7,15,342.61 sq.km. But the report also highlights some grim aspects of India's state of forests. In the recent past, the incidence of forest fires has disturbingly gone up, especially in the hill states. These fires have destroyed many hectares of dense forests thereby ruining fragile ecosystems and irreplaceable Himalayan biodiversity. The ISF report echoes the same and observes a sharp spike in forest fires especially in the mountain states of Himachal, Uttarakhand, and Jammu and Kashmir. The data collected using the Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS) presented in the report, showed that Himachal Pradesh witnessed an increase of forest fires by a stunning 1,339 per cent, while Jammu & Kashmir saw a rise in forest fire by a staggering 2,822 while Uttarakhand was relatively better off with 293 per cent rise in forest fire incidents. What the government was doing as the pristine forests turned to ashes, is a burning question. On the other hand, the report also highlighted the rapidly dwindling forest cover. Between 2003 and 2023, more than 24,000 sq km of dense forests — half the size of Punjab — have disappeared. More concerning is the fact that the loss has occurred in ecologically fragile zones such as the Western Ghats and The Nilgiris over the past decade. The Western Ghats recognised as UNESCO World Heritage Biodiversity Hotspot suffered an overall loss of 58.22 sq km in forest cover. On the other hand, the Nilgiris reported the steepest decline of 123 sq km. The report also showed a decrease of 327.30 sq km in forest cover in the northeastern region. This irre-



placeable loss of dense forests sadly was not seen as a wake-up call for the authorities even though the forest cover in the hill districts is just 40 per cent of their geographical area against the Forest Policy mandated 66.6 per cent. This is very alarming as the increased number of landslides and floods can be traced to the loss of forest cover in the hills. The maintenance of the soil health, ecological stability, and ability to counter landslides and floods depend on adequate forest cover in the hills. The biennial ISF report has since its inception in 1991 served as a reference point for the nation to assess its forest wealth and understand the problems plaguing India's afforestation efforts. But this year's report has been criticised by experts who have pointed out discrepancies and have labelled the data as "inflated." Several experts for instance have criticised the inclusion of bamboo plantations, coconut groves, and orchards among others as part of the forest cover, as these are agroforestry-related and make no meaningful contribution towards the environment. The experts opine that the inclusion of agroforestry plantations such as rubber, eucalyptus, acacia and mango, coconut, areca nut and shade trees in tea and coffee plantations has led to the inflation in



FOREST LANDS DIVERTED FOR DAMS, ROADS, RAILWAYS AND OTHER SUCH PERMANENT CONSTRUCTIONS OVER TIME ARE LOST FOREVER BUT ARE NOT DELETED FROM RECORDS, THUS INFLATING THE FIGURES. INDIA LOST 30,808 SQ KM OF OPEN AND SCRUB FORESTS ALONGSIDE 14,073 SQ KM OF MODERATELY DENSE FORESTS

the tree canopy to 1,289 sq.km. But the reality is that these categories of trees are grown for commercial purposes and are harvested in time therefore not providing any ecological value for biodiversity, wildlife conservation or acting as effective carbon sinks. Moreover, the fact that the report does not establish a correlation between forest areas or areas designated as forests in government records and forest cover also adds to the problem. Additionally, the experts also observed that the report failed to comply with the Supreme Court order in the Lafarge case which called for digitisation of forest maps, geo-referencing of Recorded Forest Areas (RFA), and documentation of diverted forest lands. The absence of these elements weakens the report's credibility. Forest lands diverted for dams, roads, railways and other such permanent constructions over time are lost forever but are not deleted from records, thus inflating the figures. India lost 30,808 sq km of open and scrub forests alongside 14,073 sq km of moderately dense forests and 1,816 sq km of dense forests to 'non-forest' uses. By the looks of it, the ISF report 2023 seems to be in a hurry to increase forest cover in India. At least on paper. This could be to do with India's target of increasing its forest and

tree cover which can absorb an additional amount of 2.5 billion to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent by 2030. The government could have done well to ensure the presentation of accurate data that was based on actual tree census and not plantations, groves, and orchards. The government should have also removed those forest lands from its database that have been permanently diverted for non-forest purposes. The ISF report has immense significance for India as it is widely used as a primary information source by the central and state governments. Additionally, forestry professionals of State Forest Departments rely on the report for the effective discharge of their responsibilities. The inputs and data provided by this report regarding forest resources of India help in the evaluation and formulation of forest-related policies, programmes, and legislation. Given the crucial role played by the ISF report, the government must revisit the recent report and ensure that the questions and doubts raised by experts are effectively addressed. The onus is on the government to keep the trust intact by releasing reports based on robust and accurate data. (The author is a policy analyst. The views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RELIEF FOR MIDDLE-CLASS

Madam — As the new year approaches, salaried employees are likely to face significant tax deductions from their salaries for the financial year 2024-2025. While taxes are deducted throughout the year, the months leading up to March 2025 will see an increased burden, further aggravating the financial challenges of India's middle class. Reduced take-home pay diminishes purchasing power, leading to decreased spending by the salaried class, which, in turn, impacts the economy. Considering these challenges, the government is reportedly exploring measures to boost consumer spending. One such measure under consideration for the financial year 2025-2026 budget is making personal income up to Rs 15 lakh per annum tax-free. Speculations suggest that the government is actively working in this direction, and the decision on tax cuts in the upcoming budget appears almost certain. Taxation is currently governed by two systems: the old tax regime (OTR) and the new tax regime (NTR). A reduction in tax liability would particularly benefit salaried employees, increasing their disposable income. This would lead to higher consumer spending, ultimately helping the economy recover from its slowdown. For the financial stability and development of middle-class families, the central government's decision to make personal income up to Rs 15 lakh per annum tax-free in the 2025-2026 budget is crucial. This move would play a vital role in ensuring better financial planning and stability for the middle class.

Dattaprasad Shirodkar | Ponda

PROFIT OVER HUMANITY

Madam — The article on caring for the stars and being careless to earth (December 30) presents worth considering arguments. The basic problem lies in the economic order in vogue in most parts of the world. The essence of the order is commodifying everything and chasing profit in every activity. In the process, small players are being gulped by the big

Koneru wins World Rapid Chess Champion



The recent chess title victory by Koneru Humpy as World Rapid Chess Champion is another feather in India's Chess success. We all know that the year 2024 has been a marvellous year for India, particularly as we successfully managed to lift so many titles in the sport of Chess. The grit and brilliance of

Indian Chess Champions has marvelled the entire world, be that the moment of India becoming the FIDE Chess Olympiad 2024 winner in Budapest, D Gukesh becoming the World Chess champion at the age of 18 in Singapore, and now Ms Koneru Humpy clinching her second FIDE World Rapid Crown in New York. This year in 2024 particularly, India spent a considerably wonderful time at the podium top stairs, enjoying many titles and trophies.

The chess prowess of Indians need no introduction today, thanks to our chess masters and grandmasters. Especially the young chess players deserve the epitome of appreciation for their wonderful game spirit, patience and sincere grit behind every move of check and mates.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

INDIA'S LIBERALISATION ARCHITECT

Madam — From being an economist of great repute to RBI Governor, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Finance Minister and then becoming Prime Minister of India, not many can walk in his shoes. When the economy was stuttering and license raj was the order of the day and there was a suffocating environment for industrialists, Dr. Manmohan Singh became the architect of liberalisation in 1991 along with late PV Narsimha Rao, who allowed our country to take a great leap forward. The Victor Hugo moment of our 1991 budget was doctored by him, which led to India emerging as an economic powerhouse. He may have been called an accidental Prime Minister but during those 10 years at the helm he did his job with aplomb under the given circumstances of compulsions of coalition politics.

Bal Govind | Noida

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

The teachers who shaped my life: Lessons beyond the classroom

For me, the journey of learning began in classrooms with inspiring teachers and extended into workplaces with exceptional bosses



SANJAY CHANDRA

We meet several people in our lives. While we learn something from each person, many teach us invaluable lessons that help us navigate the rough and tumble of the daily grind. These are the teachers who shape our lives. The earliest I remember are two school teachers from my classes 5 to 7. Miss Kumar taught us English; Miss Singh was the Arithmetic teacher.

It is no wonder that I developed a liking for the unlikeliest combination of English and Maths. Another was my mathematics teacher from classes 10 to 11. I was a favourite student, probably because I could discuss with him complex problems on the move while cycling to and from school. My love for communication and thinking on my feet were firmly entrenched in my psyche by him. In later years, I could not have navigated my professional journey but for the few outstanding bosses, I worked with. I joined my first job in a leading government manufacturing company. I stayed there for a year, only for the



training. It seemed like an extension of college except that we were now paid a salary and were expected to lead a structured office life. I opted to spend the last few months of the training in the computer department. I surprised myself. This was one of the two subjects in college in which I had secured a poor 'D' grade. I developed a computer-based inventory management system for the plant, the first in the organization. I worked diligently, probably also committing a few mistakes, confident of the support of my Bengali boss. I joined the railway services. It was an entirely different ball game. I was the head of a

maintenance shed with 1000+ staff working under me. My boss went to the shed with me for the first week. The next week, he threw me, not in the swimming pool, but in the ocean. It was training by fire. Yet, he was always there to guide and support me whenever I needed his help. The innumerable management lessons I learned in my first year were to hold me in good stead during my remaining professional journey of almost three decades. After 20 years of service with the railways, I decided to opt for retirement and join a government company. My boss was a soft-spoken Sikh gentleman. He also shared a common trait with my first railway boss. It was a complete freedom to operate. He taught me everything that he knew about a new subject. His only demands were integrity and honesty. I had no problems with that. He would fight fiercely for me with his seniors if the situation demanded. I never regretted my decision to leave the railways. I quit the government to join the pri-

ivate sector. It was a new jungle for me. The boardroom politics, criticism of a subordinate by those sitting at the head of the table in stage-managed whispers loud enough to be heard by the intended victim, and smirks by colleagues at the snub by a senior, were only a few of the goings-on I had not witnessed in the government sector. I had no hesitation in mentioning to a packed audience when asked about the reasons for the success of the government sector, 'Good bosses, who value others and mentor each individual like a teacher.' I hope that someone else remembers me as fondly. These words by an unknown author resonate with me, "I wasn't born to just teach, I was born to inspire others, to change people, and to never give up; even when faced with challenges that seem impossible." (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN OVERCOMING THE GRIP OF FEARFUL THOUGHTS

Fearful thoughts often take hold of our minds, leading to obsession with worst-case scenarios



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

We routinely become obsessed with fearful thoughts. The word obsession is defined as a persistent disturbing pre-occupation with an often unreasonable idea or feeling. We don't stop there; we think of the worst. What is the probability of that happening? But that does not prevent us from this common flaw; we do it willingly. There are several reasons for succumbing to this. We have many attachments. We are desperate for something like a good result, and a few like we shouldn't get sick. Unfortunately, these are decided by the Divine Authority based on our past 'Karmas' (deeds). We have no say in it, and they manifest at their designated times. Fortunately, they are very rarely the worst we think of. If so, life would be hellish, which it is not. This earth's planet is a place of misery (The Bhagavad Geeta 8.15) alright, but is not a concentration camp by any standard. But our imagination has no bounds.

The next big offender is a refusal to be prepared to tolerate. We want zero tolerance. Is it possible? Everything is changing like the weather. Bad 'Karmaphalas' (results of bad deeds) will manifest for sure because this is no Vaikuntha; we have most certainly a past with many bad karmas. How else are we here, not even in Heaven? We feel that we are intelligent, but hardly anyone escapes making this mistake. Yes, we are supposed to get fearful, because that protects us from acting foolishly, but excessive fear is due to faulty assessment. Due diligence is required.

The fourth offender is greed. Our desires are open-ended. Is it wise? The evidence shows that downfalls occur due to being too greedy.



But to become greedy and then fear the consequences makes zero sense. Over-stress also causes fearful thoughts, especially about health. It is better to avoid to lessen this possibility. We want to control and are unable to. We act stupidly and then fear the worst. The same problem exists in acting big, which no one can ever become; we are intrinsically small and will remain eternally so. Acting as the sole doer also evolves fearful thoughts. Giving control of our minds to fearful thoughts is making ourselves our enemies. Lord Krishna has warned about it (4.6). Similarly, intelligence is supposed to curb this tendency but, again, we find some justification in harming ourselves. This is also a sad commentary on our knowledge, about which we are so proud. A soul has severe limitations, as we realize; he must remain in the shelter of God. This is the only worthwhile solution. I am sorry to be so stern, but the proliferation of mental diseases points to it only. God controls the Creation (9.10) and He, therefore, has to guide and help to deal with it. By ourselves, we are quite helpless really. How it works? It is quite simple, but a very long drawn exercise, because this problem involves our 'svabhava' (nature). This is what I do. The moment a fearful thought crosses my mind, I pray sincerely for guidance and help, because I need to know a way out. I need exact guidance for my actions. God signals to me what I should do; He uses many ways to communicate. He helps where I fall short. Blissfully, my painful habit of fearing excessively is coming under some control. Thank God for this 'Kripa' (mercy).

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

Assessing efficacy and challenges of compensatory afforestation

With ecosystem at stake, the nation's approach to monetising and restoring nature demands careful evaluation and sustainable strategies write **BKP SINHA** and **ARVIND KUMAR JHA**

Compensatory Afforestation (CA) relates to the mitigation of environmental damage caused by the diversion of forest land for non-forestry purposes and is a mandatory requirement for obtaining clearances under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980; now Van (Sanrakshanevam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam (VSSA) 1980 and Rules. The Government of India guidelines state that normally CA must be carried out on a suitable non-forest land equal to the forest area proposed for diversion and for minimizing the adverse impact on the micro-ecology, such land should be located as near as possible to the diverted area. If suitable non-forest land is unavailable, CA may be carried out on degraded forest land equal to twice the area of the diverted forest land. The unavailability of non-forest land in a district is certified by the District Collector and in the exceptional case of its unavailability in the whole state/union territory (UT), the chief secretary has to certify accordingly and CA land may be identified preferably in a neighbouring state/UT. As regards CA, the Government of India guidelines of 2017 and 2019 emphasised compensation for loss of land by land and that of trees by trees.

They indicate that at least 1000 plants are to be planted in one hectare and in case 1000 plants are not possible to be accommodated, the balance may be planted in some other government forest identified by the state government. The states having more than 75% forest cover, however, are exempted from the task of procuring non-forest land for CA. Their CA can be taken up in states with deficient forest land/cover. As regards size, lands smaller than 5 hectares can also be accepted for CA if it is contiguous to a wildlife conservation area like National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries. Area equivalence criterion often leads to an understanding that any forest can be equated with tree plantations of any kind but the concept of Net Present Value (NPV) is additionally used to calculate the worth of diverted forests by attaching a monetary value to a whole range of goods and services provided by them. This amount is recovered from the project proponent.

The World Bank's 2002 strategy elaborates the NPV to include goods and services like wood and non-wood items, ecosystem services, support to wildlife, climate regulation, soil & water conservation and flood prevention, carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, health support systems and non-material benefits which may be spiritual, inspirational, recreational, aesthetic, educational etc. Its value thus extends far beyond economics and considering the interest of different stakeholders, the values of different components may also vary, such as the cultural significance of a tree species versus its commercial value as timber.

The January 2022 guidelines of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) have clubbed the forests of India into six Eco-classes to realize NPV instead of diverted forest land. Out of them, class I includes Tropical Wet Evergreen Forests, Tropical Semi Evergreen Forests, and Tropical Moist Deciduous Forests, while class II contains Littoral and Swamp Forests.



HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF GREAT NICOBAR ISLAND PROJECT IS WORTH A LOOK. THE RS 72,000 CRORE INVESTMENT WILL DIVERT 130.75 SQ. KM. OF FOREST LAND FOR INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT THAT INCLUDES A TRANS-SHIPMENT PORT, AN AIRPORT, A POWER PLANT, A DEFENCE BASE, AN INDUSTRIAL PARK AND A TOWNSHIP

Interestingly, the per hectare value of NPV for both these classes has been kept the same, an equality that appears surprising. It is crucial to arrive at a monetized figure for a unit of Nature/biodiversity and ensure that investing in it will offset the loss caused by diversion. Simultaneous sustainable development of biodiversity is of course a formidable challenge. Accordingly, any oversimplification of biodiversity assessment can lead to inaccuracies and undermine genuine conservation efforts.

The limitations faced in offsetting losses just through CA are amply covered by CAG reports. Unfortunately, the resource position at the world level also, despite the wrath of climate change being faced globally, shows an annual funding gap of about USD 700 billion in nature conservation. Against the above background, the proposed CA and NPV to mitigate the diversion of forest land in the 'Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island' (GNI) project is worth a look. The Rs72,000 crore investment will divert 130.75 sq. km. of forest land for infrastructure development that includes a trans-shipment port, an airport, a power plant, a defence base, an industrial park, and a township.

The project involves the felling of an estimated one million trees with habitat destruction that would also impact the life, livelihood, and forest rights of the Shompen; a particularly vulnerable hunter-and-gatherer tribal group. The MoEFCC claims to have incorporated into the project some exemplary mitigation measures, including compensatory afforestation, into the project in compliance with the provisions of the VSSA 1980 while securing India's strategic national and defence interests. Out of the total CA area of 26,000 hectares, locating 24,354 hectares in Haryana is justified by highlight-

ing that planting native species in arid landscapes and near urban areas is of greater ecological value. Talks are said to be on with the Madhya Pradesh government for situating the balanced CA area. The CA in Aravali's arid/semi-arid region, approximately 2,400 kilometres away, to compensate for the loss of pristine rainforests of Great Nicobar is a significant departure from the guideline regarding the positioning of CA land. Reportedly, the CA with ₹3000 crore's investment is expected to be mostly a revival plan to improve the soil texture and fertility and to make stone boundary walls since the proposed area already has root stock requiring just protection and supplemental planting wherever required.

Indicative of the natural limits imposed by edaphic, geographical, and climatic factors, the Forest Survey of India (FSI) 2021 report on forest status shows that the carbon stock per hectare in A&N forests is fourth highest in the country; next only to Himachal, Sikkim, and J&K while Haryana has the second lowest; next only to Delhi.

This fact does raise questions regarding the possibility and efficacy of compensating adequately Nicobar's loss of carbon stock and biomass by investing CA money in Haryana. Considering the aspect of NPV, it is worth noting that Nicobar Island forests are more like that of Malaysia and Indonesia while the Andaman Islands' flora is more akin to the species found in Myanmar, Thailand, and Northeast India. FSI's rapid biodiversity assessment in A&N islands in 2018-19 found that shrubs and herbs together were more than double the number of trees. Many species found there do not occur in mainland India. The understory and emergent layers with profuse regeneration, herbs, and

shrubs indicate a vibrant ecosystem wherein approximately half of the mammals, a third of the birds, a quarter of the reptiles, and over a tenth of flowering plants are endemic. A crucible for the habitat rights of the Shompen tribe notwithstanding, it is home to the endangered Nicobar Megapode and Leatherback Turtle, and has over twenty thousand coral reefs in its vicinity. In 1989, The UNESCO declared a significant portion of the island as a biosphere reserve. Despite such uniqueness, distinctive parameters, and ecological significance; its NPV per hectare is exactly equal to the forests in Eco-classes I and II. GIN is just one project.

An in-depth analysis of forest land diversion cases can provide, in addition to actionable issues related to limitations and risks in offsetting just through the prevalent CA and NPV model, important insights into ways to minimize harm to Nature, redeemability of loss to forest ecosystems, correct determination of NPV, efficient investments in Nature recovery and restoration initiatives, handling of habitat rights of the primitive tribes and pre-agricultural communities, and regulations needed to ensure accountability.

Nature's monetization and biodiversity markets are fast emerging as potential funding sources for conservation. Their effectiveness demands an honest valuation of diverted forests and a strict implementation of conservation strategies. The outcomes depend on those having the power to decide. Only time will tell, but the decisions made today will echo through the annals of history shaping the destiny of our country and of humanity itself.

(The writers are former PCCFs of U.P. and Maharashtra; views are personal)

Indian agriculture and climate change: Challenges and strategies

India is forging a path toward climate-resilient agriculture, leveraging innovative strategies, integrated farming practices and government-led initiatives

The agriculture and allied sectors play a central role in the sustainable growth and development of India's economy. These sectors not only ensure food and nutritional security for the country's 1.4 billion people but also contribute significantly to production, employment, and demand generation through various backward and forward linkages. While agriculture constitutes about 16% of India's GDP, it supports nearly 49% of the workforce (Economic Survey, 2018). However, with over 50% of India's cultivated land dependent on rainfed irrigation, the sector is highly vulnerable to climate variability. The ongoing challenges to sustain the natural resource base further



PRAVESH SHARMA

amplify the adverse impacts of climate change, which disproportionately affect the poor. **Challenges Posed by Climate Change on Agriculture**

1. Rainfall Variability: The increasing intra-seasonal variability of rainfall has emerged as a major concern. Rainfall patterns are becoming increasingly skewed, characterized by fewer rainy days with higher intensity. This results in sig-

nificant soil erosion and exacerbates the length of dry spells. Deviations in the hydrological cycle are contributing to extreme events, such as floods caused by intense rainfall or droughts triggered by prolonged dry spells, impacting different parts of the country.

2. Temperature Rise: Rising temperatures pose a greater threat to tropical countries like India, which already operate near the higher end of the temperature spectrum. Elevated temperatures influence various climatic factors, adversely impacting crop production. For instance, extreme heat reduces fruit setting in citrus crops and increases transpiration losses in vegetables.

3. Livestock and Poultry Impact: Climate variability also affects animal production and reproduction. Increased temperatures and higher temperature-humidity index levels lead to reduced feed intake, lower milk yields, and decreased meat and egg quality. Poultry, in particular, suffers from heat stress, resulting in thinner eggshells and increased egg breakage.

4. Pests and Diseases: Climate change influences the population, survival, and geographic distribution of pests and diseases. Rising temperatures and humidity levels create favorable conditions for pest proliferation, making control measures more challenging and unpredictable. **Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies** Adaptation to climate change involves anticipating adverse impacts and taking proactive



measures to minimize damage or leverage emerging opportunities. Given that most Indian farmers are smallholders with limited coping capacity, building resilience is key.

1. Water Resource Management: Enhancing rainwater productivity through scientific rainwater harvesting, recycling, and precision water use is essential. Improved irrigation techniques and water budgeting can mitigate the impact of erratic rainfall.

2. Integrated Farming Systems: Combining crop cultivation with livestock, fisheries, and plantations offers diverse income streams and reduces climate vulnerability. Contingency planning for alternate crops and activities based on agro-climatic conditions further strengthens resilience.

3. Technology and Innovation: Developing stress-tolerant crop varieties, conserving agro-biodiversity, and promoting resource-efficient technologies are critical. Pest forecasting models, weather-based advisories, and agricultural risk management systems should be expanded to aid farmers in decision-making.

4. Community Involvement and Education: Engaging

local communities in production system management and raising awareness about climate-resilient practices is vital. Farmers, consumers, and markets must be educated to embrace sustainable agriculture practices that align with cultural and social contexts. **Government Initiatives to Address Climate Change**

The Government of India has taken several steps to combat climate change. **National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC):** Guided by the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change, the NAPCC includes the National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA), focusing on resource conservation, soil health, integrated farming, and water-use efficiency.

National Innovations on Climate Resilient Agriculture (NICRA): This initiative provides scientific and technical guidance for sustainable agricultural development. Key Program Interventions: Policies like the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana, National Food Security Mission, and Soil Health Card Scheme aim to enhance soil health, water efficiency, and farm productivity.

District Agricultural Contingency Plans: These plans provide integrated solutions for crop, livestock, and fishery challenges arising from weather anomalies, supporting farmers during extreme conditions.

(The writer is a retired IAS officer; the views expressed are personal)

South Korean authorities seek warrant to detain impeached President Yoon in martial law probe

South Korean law enforcement officials requested a court warrant on Monday to detain impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol as they investigate whether his short-lived martial law decree on December 3 amounted to rebellion. The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, which leads a joint investigation with police and military authorities into the power grab that lasted only a few hours, confirmed it requested the warrant from the Seoul Western District Court. They plan to question Yoon on charges of abuse of authority and orchestrating a rebellion. Yoon Kap-keun, the president's lawyer, denounced the detention attempt and filed a challenge with the same court, arguing that the warrant request was invalid. He also claimed the anti-corruption agency lacked the legal authority to investigate rebellion charges. Still, he evaded answering how the legal team would respond if the court approved the warrant for the president's detention. "An incumbent president cannot be prosecuted for abuse of power," the lawyer said. "Of course, there are differing academic opinions on whether a president can be investigated for abuse of power and some assert that investigations are possible. But even when investigations are allowed, the pre-

ailing opinion is that they should be exercised with the utmost restraint." The anti-corruption agency didn't immediately respond to the lawyer's comments. Han Min-soo, spokesperson of the liberal opposition Democratic Party, called for the court to issue the warrant, saying Yoon Suk Yeol's detention would be the first step toward "ending the rebellion and restoring normalcy." The warrant request came after Yoon dodged several requests by the joint investigation team and public prosecutors to appear for questioning and also blocked searches of his offices. While Yoon has the presidential privilege of immunity from criminal prosecution, such protections don't extend to allegations of rebellion or treason. It's not clear whether the court will grant the warrant or whether Yoon can be compelled to appear for questioning. Under the country's laws, locations potentially linked to military secrets cannot be seized or searched without the consent of the person in charge, and it's unlikely that Yoon will voluntarily leave his residence if he faces detention. There are also concerns about possible clashes with Yoon's presidential security service if authorities attempt to forcibly detain him. Yoon's presidential powers were suspended after the National Assembly voted to impeach him on Dec. 14 over his imposition of martial law, which last-

ing leaders the country hasn't seen since the 1980s. In theory, the authority to investigate rebellion charges lies solely with the police, following a 2021 reform that redistributed investigative powers among law enforcement agencies and removed rebellion from the list of crimes prosecutors and the anti-corruption office could pursue. But those agencies have still been investigating rebellion accusations against Yoon, allegedly linked to charges related to abuse of power, a type of crime they are authorized to investigate. Yoon and his military leadership have been accused of attempting to block the National Assembly from voting to end martial law by sending hundreds of heavily armed troops to encircle the building. Lawmakers who managed to get in voted unanimously 190-0 to lift martial law, hours after Yoon declared it in a late-night television address. Yoon has also been accused of ordering defense counterintelligence officials to detain key politicians, including opposition leader Lee Jae-myung, National Assembly Speaker Woo Won Shik and the ex-leader of his own conservative party, Han Dong-hun, a reformist who supported investigations into corruption allegations against first lady Kim Keon Hee. Yoon has defended the martial law decree as a necessary act of governance, portraying it as a temporary warning against the liberal opposition Democratic Party, which he has described as an "anti-state" force obstructing his agenda with its majority in the National Assembly. Yoon has claimed he had no intention to paralyze the functioning of the assembly, saying that the troops were sent to maintain order, and also denied planning to arrest politicians. Yoon's claims have been denied by Kwak Jong-keun, the now-arrested comman-

PUBLIC NOTICE: Notice is hereby given to Public that I Mrs. Sunita Takkar, D/o Sh. Kundan Lal Kalra, owner of Flat No. 236 RFS Flats, Shekhi Sara, Phase - 1, New Delhi-110017 has lost the Original Registered Sale Deed entered on 06.05.2014 between Mrs. Raj Sehi and Mrs. SunitaTakkar bearing registration No. 2499, Book No. 1, Vol. No. 648 on Pages 164 to 174, with respect of Flat No. 236, RFS Flats, Shekhi Sara, Phase - 1, New Delhi - 110017. An Information Report in respect of Article/Document Lost is registered at Police Station Crime Branch, Delhi Police. All the persons are hereby informed not to carry out any transaction on the basis of said lost document. Any transaction carried out on the basis of such lost document shall be illegal and would be held void. Any person having found or in possession of the said document is requested to approach the owner Mrs. Sunita Takkar on vinitadakar@hotmail.com, +4474010190 or Advit Anand Singh at anas@delixt.com, +919117510396.

German govt seeks to downplay Musk's backing of far-right party ahead of poll

The German government on Monday sought to downplay efforts by tech entrepreneur Elon Musk to get involved in the country's general election campaign by again endorsing the far-right Alternative for Germany, or AfD, party. Musk caused uproar over the weekend after backing the AfD in an opinion piece in a major newspaper, leading to the resignation of the paper's opinion editor in protest. "Freedom of expression also includes the greatest nonsense," government spokesperson Christiane Hoffmann said, adding that should wouldn't comment further on Musk's statements. She did, however, say that "it is indeed the case for this country," Musk wrote in his translated commentary. He went on to say the far-right party "can lead the country into a future where economic prosperity, cultural integrity and technological innovation are not just wishes, but reality." The Tesla Motors CEO also wrote that his investment in Germany gave him the right to comment on the country's condition. The AfD is polling strongly, but its candidate for the top job, Alice Weidel, has no realistic chance of becoming chancellor because other parties refuse to work with the far-right party. An ally of US President-elect Donald Trump, the technology billionaire challenged in his opinion piece the party's public image.

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS CHANGE OF D.O.B I, Lakhan Lal Sharma, Father of- No. 17031273H CFN Santosh Kumar Sharma, R/O- At Kasmabad, Po- Gangapur, PS- Sultanganj, Distt- Bhagalpur, Bihar- 813213, declare that in my son's service records, my D.O.B. is wrongly written as 05/01/1955 whereas my correct D.O.B. is 05/01/1965, which may be amended accordingly. PD(1173)C

CHANGE OF NAME I, Dinesh Chauhan S/o- Lajje Ram Village- Shahpur Sector-128 Gautam Buddha Nagar, Noida, I have changed my name to Dinesh Kumar Chauhan for all future purposes. PD(1171)C

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PUBLIC NOTICE: It has been informed that original registered property documents of Mr. Shiv Shankar Gautam S/o Sunder Lal, H- No 679/1 Flat # 5B, First Floor, Noida, Deoli, Khanpur, ND- 110062 have been lost/Misplaced. If anyone finds the document please return/contact to 9953130864. NITIN BHASKAR (Advocates & Consultants) Off.: Chamber No. G-712, KKD Court, Shaladara, New Delhi-110032

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EXTENSION OF PERIODICITY OF SPECIAL TRAIN: It is notified for the extension of rail passengers that Railways have decided to extend the periodicity of the run of Train No. 05577/05578 Saharsa Jn.-Anand Vihar T.-Saharsa Jn. Garib Rath Special as per details given below:-

Table with 6 columns: Train No., From, To, Days of Run, Notified up to, Period of Extension. Rows for train 05577 and 05578.

New Okhla Industrial Development Authority Administrative Building, Sector-6, Noida, G.B. Nagar (U.P.) Website: www.noidaauthorityonline.in

Public notices for change of D.O.B, change of name, and lost documents. Includes details for Lakhan Lal Sharma, Dinesh Chauhan, and Shiv Shankar Gautam.

Public notices for lost documents and legal matters. Includes details for Shiv Shankar Gautam and Akhilgaya Solar Energy Private Limited.

NORTHERN RAILWAY E-TENDER NOTICE: Sr. Divisional Electrical Engineer/Traction Distribution, DRM's Office, State Entry Road, New Delhi for & on behalf of President of India, invites open e-tender for the under noted work:-

Table with 7 columns: Name of Work with its Location, RMITIS (Roof Mounted Infrared Thermal Imaging System) for conducting monitoring and live line thermal scanning of 25KV AC OHE systems.

Indian Overseas Bank SONIPAT BRANCH (Address : Gohana Road Opp. Om Petrol Pump, Sonipat (Haryana) Pin code-131001 Phone No. 0130-2200193 & Email id : iob2721@iob.in)

SYMBOLIC POSSESSION NOTICE (for immovable property) [Rule 8(1)]

DESCRIPTION OF THE IMMOVABLE PROPERTY: Equitable mortgage of residential plot having Property Id 35-C-282-U-122 situated at Khatwal No. 166 Killa no. 6/16(15-16) with total land of 5K-16M, marla having share of 13/464 which works out to be measuring 96 Sq.yds. i.e., situated at 4' sub internal street called Gali no. 06 near Sonipat Gas Agency/ Shiva Shiksha School Waka called Gali no. 06 within the revenue estate of Jamalpur khurd within the abadi of Dev Nagar, Sonapat and within the M.C. limit, Sonapat pin code 131001 standing in the name of Smt. Geeta who shri Praveen and same is bounded by East: House of Promila West: House of Harshi & Deepak North: Gali Rasta South: Plot of Ram Kumar

UP unveils ambitious five year export policy to boost share to 7.5 per cent: Industry Minister Gupta

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The Uttar Pradesh government is gearing up to unveil a five-year export policy to boost its share in the country's overall outward shipments to 7.5 per cent and help the state become a USD 1 trillion economy. The new export policy for 2025-30 will replace the existing five-year policy. The state government provides a host of incentives and hand-holds the exporters to push shipments from the state. Uttar Pradesh Minister for Industrial Development, Export Promotion, NRI, and Investment Promotion Nand Gopal Gupta 'Nandi' said the state government is working on the 2025-30 export policy, with a focus on enhancing export capabilities to promote overall development. "The new export policy is being



formulated with a target to increase the state's share from 4.71 per cent in 2023-24 to 7.5 per cent. This policy also aims at accelerating economic growth and job creation," Gupta said in an email interview. The focus on enhancing export

development of smooth logistics facilities in the state, hence this will boost the export from the state and contribute significantly to make the state a USD 1 trillion economy," Gupta noted. During the April-September period of the current financial year, Uttar Pradesh's share in the country's total exports was estimated at 4.89 per cent. The minister also informed that the state is already providing incentives to exporters under the Marketing Development Assistance, Gateway Port Scheme, and Air Freight Rationalisation plans. He further said that the upcoming Jewar Airport will enhance connectivity to exporters with overseas destinations. The airport will help in saving time and expenditure on freight charges. Gupta also said the one-district-

India Inc seek tax relief, fuel duty cut and job boosters in pre-budget meet

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Representatives from industry bodies sought reduction in personal income tax rates to ensure higher disposable income in the hands of the middle class, reduction in excise duty on fuel, and measures to provide impetus to employment-intensive sectors in their customary pre-Budget meeting with the Finance Minister on Monday. Industry bodies also raised the issue of dumping of excess stock by China globally, including in India, and challenges posed to food security and inflation due to the "climate emergency", during the fifth pre-Budget consultation meeting. The 2025-26 Union Budget will be presented on February 1. Apart from the finance minister, the meeting was attended by finance secretary, secretary of DIPAM (Department of Investment and Public Asset Management), Secretaries of



the Department of Economic Affairs and the Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of India, among others. Speaking to the media after the meeting, CII President Sanjiv Puri said while the Indian economy is doing very well, globally there are a lot of challenges. "We are seeing dumping of a lot of products (by China) into various parts of the world, including India. We also have the issue of climate emergency, which, besides other things, also impacts food and nutrition, (food) security and inflation. In this context we have made several suggestions and ideas". He said the CII has sought measures to provide impetus to areas that have large employment potential like garments, footwear, tourism, furniture, among others, apart from making suggestions for MSMEs and integrating India into global value chains. "From a perspective of boosting consumption, we have suggested that there be some relief provided to income tax up to a Rs 20 lakh on the marginal income tax rate so that it boosts consumption, there is more disposable income and in turn also leads to buoyancy in revenues.

Adani to sell stake in food venture Adani Wilmar, raise over USD two Billion



PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Billionaire Gautam Adani's group on Monday announced its exit from FMCG joint venture Adani Wilmar by selling its entire stake to the Singaporean partner and in the open market for an estimated over USD 2 billion in a first major deal since the US bribery indictment. In a statement, Adani Enterprises Ltd - which held 43.94 per cent stake in Fortune brand cooking oil, wheat flour and other food product maker Adani Wilmar Ltd -- said it will sell 31.06 per cent stake to Wilmar International. About 13 per cent will be sold in the open market to meet minimum public shareholding requirements. Adani will sell a 31.06 per cent stake to Wilmar for Rs 12,314 crore (share price of no more than Rs 305 apiece). Adding the share sale through OFS, the total proceeds will exceed USD 2 billion (about Rs 17,100 crore). "With this, AEL (Adani Enterprises Limited) will fully exit Adani Wilmar Ltd," it said. "Adani's nominee directors will step down from the board of Adani Wilmar Ltd." The transaction is expected to conclude before March 31, 2025. Proceeds from the stake sale

will be used to turbocharge the growth of AEL in core infrastructure businesses. With this transaction, Adani is back with a bang, removing the liquidity perception overhang. This is the first major transaction post US federal prosecutors in November charge-sheeted founder chairman Gautam Adani and his associates over a USD 265 million bribery scheme to win renewable energy supply contracts. Adani group has denied the allegations as baseless and said it will seek legal recourse. "Adani Enterprises Ltd, Adani Commodities LLP (a wholly-owned subsidiary of AEL) and Lence Pte Ltd (a wholly-owned subsidiary of Wilmar International Ltd) have entered into an agreement on December 30, 2024, pursuant to which Lence will acquire all the paid-up equity shares of Adani Wilmar Ltd held by Adani Commodities as at the date of exercise of the call option or put option, as the case maybe, in respect of a maximum of 31.06 per cent of the existing paid up equity share capital of AWL," the statement said. In addition, "it has been agreed between the parties that AEL will divest a 13 per cent share in Adani Wilmar to achieve compliance with minimum public shareholding requirements," it said without giving details. Adani Wilmar Ltd is an equal joint venture between Adani Group and Singapore-based commodity trader Wilmar. The two partners currently own a combined 87.87 per cent of Adani Wilmar, far above the maximum permissible 75 per cent.

Sebi to auction 23 properties of nine companies in February

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Sebi on Monday said it has scheduled an auction of 23 properties belonging to nine firms, such as Tower Infotech and Vibgyor Group of Companies in February, aimed to recoup funds illicitly collected from investors. Additionally, GBC Industrial Corporation, Waris Group, Pincon Group, Kolkata Weir Industries Ltd (KWIL), Annex Infrastructure India, I-core Group and MPS Group were the other firms whose properties will also be auctioned. The process for the sale of the companies' assets has been initiated by the markets



watchdog following the orders of Calcutta High Court. The properties include plots, apartments and buildings located in West Bengal. It will be auctioned at a reserve price of Rs 55 crore, according to a notice issued by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi). Justice Sailendra Prasad Talukdar has been appointed as the one-man committee for liquidating the assets of the firm and repaying the investors. The move is part of Sebi's effort to recover

investors' money. Adroit Technical Services has been engaged by Sebi to assist it in the sale of the properties. Of the 23 properties, seven each belong to Tower Infotech and Vibgyor Group, two each related to the Waris Group and GBC Industrial Corporation and the rest belong to MPS Group, I-Core Group, Annex Infrastructure India, KWIL and Pincon Group. Sebi on behalf of the committee is inviting bids for the sale of the properties from the bidders. The regulator said the auction will be auctioned online on February 6, 2025, from 11 am to 1 pm. The markets watchdog has

asked the bidders to make their own independent enquiries regarding the encumbrances, litigations, title of the properties put on auction and claims, before submitting their bid. These firms had mopped up money from investors without complying with regulatory norms. Vibgyor Allied Infrastructure had issued optionally fully convertible debentures in 2009 and raised Rs 61.76 crore. Tower Infotech had raised nearly Rs 46 crore through the issuance of non-convertible debentures and redeemable preference shares between 2005 and 2010.

Sensex drops by 451 points, Nifty ends below 23,650

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Benchmark Sensex declined by nearly 451 points on Monday due to selling in heavyweight stocks HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank and Reliance Industries, weak global trends and unabated foreign fund outflows. In a volatile trading session, the 30-share BSE barometer dropped by 450.94 points or 0.57 per cent to settle at 78,248.13. As many as 23 of its constituents closed lower while seven closed with gains. The barometer opened lower but recovered losses in the mid session to hit a high of 79,092.70. The index failed to hold onto gains in the second half due to selling in bluechips and tanked 621.94 points or 0.79 per cent to touch a low of 78,077.13. The NSE Nifty declined 168.50 points or 0.71 per cent to settle at 23,644.90 as 38 of its components fell and 11 closed higher. Among Sensex shares, Tata Motors fell the most by 2.24 per cent. Titan, Tata Steel, State Bank of India, Mahindra & Mahindra, NTPC, ICICI Bank, Maruti, HDFC Bank, Reliance Industries and Infosys were among the laggards. Zomato, Tech Mahindra, HCL Tech and IndusInd Bank were among the gainers. "The market began the week on a volatile note, ending with a loss of over half a per cent. After a flat opening, the Nifty gained ground in the first half but faced selling pressure in heavyweight stocks across sectors,

Prospects of economy expected to improve in 2025: RBI Governor

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Facing criticism from the government over the central bank prioritising inflation over growth, the new RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra on Monday said that prospects of the Indian economy are expected to improve on the back of high consumer and business confidence in 2025. "As we strive to preserve financial stability to support a higher growth path for the Indian economy, our focus remains steadfast on maintaining stability of financial institutions and, more broadly, systemic stability," Malhotra said in foreword to the Financial Stability Report. He further said that despite the global uncertainties Indian economy is expected to pick up pace in the second half of the current financial year. "Notwithstanding the



uncertainties shrouding the global macro-financial ethos as it unfolds, prospects for the Indian economy are expected to improve after the slowdown in the pace of economic activity in the first half of 2024-25. "Consumer and business confidence for the year ahead remain high and the investment scenario is brighter as corporations step into 2025 with robust balance sheets and high profitability," said Malhotra who took over as 26th Governor earlier this month. Flagging the issue of growth moderation in the first half, the Finance Ministry in its November Monthly Economic

Rupee falls four paise to close at ₹85.52 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI
The rupee dropped 4 paise to 85.52 (provisional) against the US dollar in early trade on Monday, as dollar demand from importers, foreign fund outflows and a muted trend in domestic equities dented investor sentiments. Forex traders said the rupee witnessed heavy volatility on Friday as well on Monday amid significant dollar demand linked to the expiry of December currency futures and maturing positions in the outstanding forwards. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened on a weak note and witnessed an intra-day low of 85.59 and a high of 85.43 against the American currency. The local unit settled for the day at 85.52 (provisional), registering a fall of 4 paise over its previous close.



On Friday, the rupee registered the steepest fall in almost two years to hit its lifetime intra-day low of 85.80 before a likely central bank intervention helped recover some of its losses and settled 21 paise lower at a record low of 85.48 against the US dollar. "We expect the rupee to trade with a negative bias on strength in the US dollar and month-end dollar demand from importers and oil marketing companies (OMCs).

'Silent firing' on a rise with rapid technological advancement: Report

PTI ■ MUMBAI
With rapid technological advancement, silent firing - a strategy by companies to indirectly push employees to leave their roles - has picked up pace, with 10 per cent of employers preferring layoffs for redundant positions, a report said on Monday. The report by staffing solutions and HR services provider Genius Consultants said that silent firing is often intertwined with technological advancements, with employers adopting varied strategies to navigate the evolving workplace landscape. While 79 per cent of employers interviewed said they prioritise upskilling their current workforce to adapt to technological changes, 10 per cent prefer layoffs for redundant positions, the report said. While 6 per cent resort to assigning excessive workloads to underperforming employees as a subtle means of attrition, it added. The report by Genius Consultants is based on a survey that analysed feedback



from 1,223 employers and 1,069 employees, exploring 'silent firing's implications against the backdrop of rapid technological adoption and evolving workforce dynamics. According to the report, 39 per cent of employers anticipate complete reliance on advanced technologies to minimise manual intervention five years ahead, however, 31 per cent emphasised the importance of balancing technological growth with human resource development. Nearly half of the respondents (48 per cent) opposed replacing human employees with AI, emphasising the importance of a human-centric approach to workforce management. On the other hand, 36 per cent of employers support the complete adoption of AI, reflecting a growing inclination toward automation and technological advancement, it stated. This split highlights the contrasting strategies organizations are considering as they navigate the balance between innovation and

rise of 'silent firing' and the implementation of advanced technologies have profoundly impacted their workplace experiences. When asked if they have faced sudden side-lining, exclusion, or isolation from critical projects and decision-making processes, 55 per cent of respondents confirmed that they have experienced this issue. A substantial 68 per cent of employees have experienced undue pressure from management, often citing AI and technology as benchmarks for performance, leading to workplace tension. Over 32 per cent believe their roles are becoming redundant due to technological advancements, causing delays in promotions or acknowledgement, and prompting resignation considerations, said the report. The report also found the impact of technology on employee retention, with 41 per cent of respondents admitting they are feeling compelled to quit their jobs due to automation replacing manual roles. While 52 per cent disagreed, indicating that their roles are unaffected or that they have

adapted to the technological changes. This data underscores the varied employee experiences in the face of automation, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities posed by the integration of advanced technologies in the workplace. Nearly 32 per cent of respondents have felt that their positions are becoming increasingly irrelevant due to the rising influence of artificial intelligence, and a reassuring 61 per cent have expressed confidence in the continued value and significance of their roles. "Silent firing is an emerging phenomenon that organisations must approach cautiously. While it may appear as a quick fix for managing underperformance, it risks undermining employee morale and trust. "Our survey underscores the importance of open communication, skill development, and empathy to foster a balanced workplace where both technology and human potential can coexist," Genius Consultants Chairman and Managing Director R P Yadav added.

INBRIEF

GNDU EXAMS POSTPONED, NOW ON JANUARY 12
AMRITSAR: Guru Nanak Dev University has announced that all annual and semester (theory) exams originally scheduled for Monday, December 30, have been postponed due to the Punjab shutdown.

GNDU'S PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT LEADS MENTAL HEALTH OUTREACH PROGRAMS
AMRITSAR: The Department of Psychology at Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU) is taking significant steps to address the growing mental health challenges in marginalized and underserved communities.

LAW DEPARTMENT OF GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY SETS BENCHMARK IN LEGAL INTERNSHIPS
AMRITSAR: The Law Department of Guru Nanak Dev University has witnessed remarkable growth in its internship program over the past year, showcasing its dedication to providing students with practical legal exposure.

GNDU PROFESSOR SUNIL KUMAR APPOINTED AS MEMBER OF BSF VIDWAT MANDAL
AMRITSAR: In recognition of exceptional scholarship and literary achievements, Professor Sunil Kumar, Head of the Hindi Department and Dean of the Language Faculty at Guru Nanak Dev University, has been nominated as a member of the Border Security Force (BSF) Vidwat Mandal for three years.

Magnus Carlsen returns to World Blitz Championship after FIDE allows jeans

AP ■ NEW YORK
Top-ranked chess player Magnus Carlsen is headed back to the World Blitz Championship on Monday after its governing body agreed to loosen a dress code that got him fined and denied a late-round game in another tournament for refusing to change out of jeans.

Lamenting the contretemps, International Chess Federation President Arkady Dvorkovich said in a statement Sunday that he'd let World Blitz Championship tournament officials consider allowing "appropriate jeans" with a jacket, and other "elegant minor deviations" from the dress code.

He said Carlsen's stand — which culminated in his quitting the tournament Friday — highlighted a need for more discussion "to ensure that our rules and their application reflect the evolving nature of chess as a global and accessible sport."

Carlsen, meanwhile, said in a video posted Sunday on social media that he would play — and wear jeans — in the World Blitz Championship when it begins Monday.

"I think the situation was badly mishandled on their side," the 34-



year-old Norwegian grandmaster said. But he added that he loves playing blitz — a fast-paced form of chess — and wanted fans to be able to watch, and encouraged by his discussions with the federation after Friday's showdown.

players to be comfortable, sure, but also relatively presentable."

The events began when Carlsen wore jeans and a sportcoat Friday to the Rapid World Championship, which is separate from but held in conjunction with the blitz event. The chess federation said Friday that longstanding rules prohibit jeans at those tournaments, and players are lodged nearby to make sartorial switch-ups easy if needed.

An official fined Carlsen \$200 and asked him to change pants, but he refused and wasn't paired for a ninth-round game, the federation said at the time. The organisation noted that another grandmaster, Ian Nepomniachtchi, was fined earlier in the day for wearing sports shoes, changed and continued to play.

Carlsen has said that he offered to wear something else the next day, but officials were unyielding. He said "it became a bit of a matter of principle," so he quit the rapid and blitz championships.

In the video posted Sunday, he questioned whether he had indeed broken a rule and said changing clothes would have needlessly interrupted his concentration between games. He called the punishment "unbelievably harsh."



No Indian player among nominees for ICC Women's Cricketer of the Year award

PTI ■ DUBAI
No Indian player features among the nominees for the ICC Women's Cricketer of the Year award which has Sri Lanka skipper Chamari Athapaththu and New Zealand's Amelia Kerr, among others.

The other two players nominated for the honour are Australia's Annabel Sutherland and South Africa captain Laura Wolvaardt.

"Sri Lanka's all-format captain has been producing the goods with the bat for a long time now for her country. Athapaththu is ranked among the top-10 players in the ICC Women's rankings for batters and all-rounders in ODIs as well as T20Is, proving her mettle with both bat and ball," said ICC in a release.

"A stellar year with over 1,000 runs across formats, picking up 30 wickets as well along the way has underlined her position as one of the most impactful players in women's cricket," it added.

Athapaththu made 458 runs in nine ODIs at 65.42 and claimed nine wickets while in 21 T20Is, she scored 720 runs and took 21 wickets.

Kerr has been nominated for her stellar performances, especially in New Zealand's title-winning campaign in the Women's T20 World Cup.

"Melie Kerr had a remarkable year, highlighted by leading New Zealand to their maiden Women's T20 World Cup title and setting a national record for the most Women's T20I wickets in a calendar year," the ICC said.

"Her crowning achievement came during the White Ferns' triumphant World Cup campaign, where she amassed 135 runs and claimed 15 wickets — a tournament record — culminating in their maiden Women's T20 World Cup crown."

Wolvaardt was short-listed following her highest run tally in ODIs as well as in the T20 World Cup.

"Laura Wolvaardt has been a force to reckon with for the Proteas, leading the team from the front as the all-format skipper as well as piling up runs when needed at the top of the batting order," the ICC said.

Wolvaardt scored 697 runs in 12 ODIs at 87.12 with a highest score of 184 not out, and made another 223 runs across three Tests with a highest score of 122. In nine T20Is, Wolvaardt made 673 runs at 39.58 with a highest score of 102.

Australia's Sutherland was rewarded for her knock of 210 against South Africa at Perth in the one-off Test in February. She also made 369 runs and took 13 wickets in 12 ODIs.

"The 23-year-old set new standards with a breakout year that places her among the best all-rounders in the world in the 50-over format," the ICC said.

"Sutherland became the first cricketer in women's ODI history to score back-to-back centuries while batting at No 5 or lower in the ODI series against New Zealand. Sutherland also became the second-youngest Australian to score three ODI centuries behind former captain Meg Lanning," it added.

World Blitz Championship: Koneru Humpy eyeing a grand double

PTI ■ NEW YORK
Having achieved the monumental feat of winning the World Rapid chess title for a second time, Indian stalwart Koneru Humpy would be eyeing a grand double when the FIDE World Blitz Championship commences here on Tuesday.

Humpy had on Sunday capped a wonderful year for Indian chess, defeating Irene Sukandar of Indonesia to emerge the FIDE Women's World Rapid Chess champion.

The Indian had won the event back in 2019 at Georgia and, on Sunday, became only the second player after China's Ju Wenjun to clinch the title a



second time. At stake is not just the title but a chance to win another USD 60,000 (around Rs 50 lakhs) cheque as the Blitz championship carries the same prize money as Rapid. The strong Indian contingent is geared up for the championship that will have 13 rounds in the 'Open' category and 11 in the women's section.

Another Indian, Dronavalli Harika is also a formidable force in Blitz, but the fans would be hoping for an improved performance from

R Vaishali and Divya Deshmukh, both of whom failed to impress in the Rapid event.

In the 'Open' section, Magnus Carlsen, who was disqualified from the Rapid event following a dress code saga, starts as the overwhelming favourite.

But the likes of India's R Praggnanandhaa and Arjun Erigaisi, France's Alireza Frouzja and Uzbekistan's Nodirbek Abdusattorov can all give the Norwegian a run for his money.

Erigaisi, who missed the opportunity to win the Rapid title which was won by 18 year-old Volodar Murzin of Russia, will have to fight it all over for a place in the 2026 Candidates tournament.

West Bengal, Kerala clash in blockbuster Santosh Trophy final

PTI ■ HYDERABAD
West Bengal and Kerala, two of India's finest teams with a rich history in the game, will clash in a blockbuster summit showdown of the National Football Championship for the Santosh Trophy here on Tuesday.

The two states that have rightfully earned the tags of Indian football hubs are no strangers to the pinnacle of the national championships with West Bengal gearing up for a record 47th final and Kerala standing on the verge of playing their 16th summit clash.

Both sides have shown form befitting of their stature in the tournament, winning nine of their 10 matches, while drawing one each.

Historically, Bengal have dominated at this stage, winning the tournament 32 times, while Kerala are seven-time champions.

In recent years, however, Kerala have had the edge over their eastern rivals, winning the 2017-18 and the 2021-22 titles defeating West Bengal.

History, however, has no part to play in the final on New Year's Eve, believes Bengal head coach Sanjoy Sen.

"Perhaps reaching the (Santosh Trophy) final is an achievement for other states, but that is not the case for us. It means nothing to Bengal — Zero," he exclaimed.

"Unless we win the trophy, it all counts for nothing.

"Yes, we have won the tournament 32 times in the past, but the Santosh Trophy is a much bigger tournament now in terms of the number of states that participate in it. I do not intend to downplay past achievements, but I feel that it is more difficult to win it now," said Sen. Sen's counterpart Biby Thomas Muttath echoed similar expectations from his home state.

"The Santosh Trophy is like a World Cup for us, back in Kerala. The minimum expectation is for us to reach the final, but of course, everyone wants a win," he said.

In the 10 matches so far, Kerala have scored 35 goals, while Bengal netted 27 times. The former have had a number of options for their goals, Naseeb Rahman (8), Muhammad Ajsal (9), and Sajesh E (5) leading the charts for the southern state.

But then, Kerala players are no strangers to their Bengal counterparts. There are half a dozen players in the current Kerala squad, including the semi-final hat-trick hero Muhammad Roshal PP, who ply their trade in the Kolkata CFL and are known faces in the Maidan circle.



Prolific Lille striker Jonathan David considering new contract offer

AP ■ LILLE
Jonathan David is considering a new contract from Lille and says his chances of staying at the French club are "50-50".

The 24-year-old Canada striker is enjoying his fifth season at Lille and tops the league's scoring charts with 11 goals from 15 games. He is out of contract at the end of June and has reportedly been offered a two-year contract.

"As the president (Olivier Létang) said several times, discussions are going on. We're talking but no decision has been reached," David told regional newspaper La Voix du Nord on Monday in an interview. "The door is never closed. It's 50-50."

David has netted 17 goals overall this season — including four in the Champions League and two in the qualifying rounds — to take his tally to 101 since joining in 2020.

He is one of the most sought-after strikers in Europe and Lille risks losing him for nothing if he does not sign a new deal.

Norway Chess: Top woman player Ju Wenjun confirms participation

PTI ■ STAVANGER
Women's world No.2 Ju Wenjun of China, No. 9 Anna Muzychuk of Ukraine and No. 21 Sarasadat Khademalsharieh of Spain on Monday confirmed their participation in next year's Norway Chess Women, which also has India's R. Vaishali in the fray.

The event will be held from May 26 to June 6. Vaishali, the elder sister of Grandmaster R. Praggnanandhaa and one of the rising stars in women's chess, had confirmed her participation in the prestigious tournament last month.

Wenjun is one of the most formidable figures in women's chess with a live rating of 2,563. She is the reigning four-time Women's World Rapid champion, a two-time World Rapid champion, and the reigning Norway Chess



champion in her adopted country. She finished second in both the 2018 World Rapid and Blitz Chess Championships, as well as the 2015-16 FIDE Women's Grand Prix.

The Norway tournament brings together the top male and female players in a distinctive six-player double round-robin format.

India's recently-crowned world champion D. Gukesh will take on Magnus Carlsen, the world's highest-rated player, in a highly-anticipated contest in the men's category.

In 2023, Gukesh finished third in Stavanger. Besides Gukesh, Grandmaster Arjun Erigaisi, who recently became the second Indian after the legendary Viswanathan Anand to reach the gold-standard ELO rating of 2800, will make his debut at the prestigious tournament.

Women champion. She is also only the fifth woman in history to achieve a rating above 2600, marking her place among the elite.

Muzychuk is a three-time world champion in fast chess. She clinched the Women's World Rapid Championship in 2014 and the Women's World Blitz Championship in both 2014 and 2016. Her feat of winning both the World Rapid and World Blitz Championships in the same year in 2016 places her alongside legends like Susan Polgar and Norway's Magnus Carlsen.

Sarasadat, who is originally from Iran but now represents Spain, became the national

Paulo Fonseca fired by AC Milan

AP ■ MILAN
Paulo Fonseca has been fired by AC Milan, with the club confirming the decision Monday morning after the Portuguese coach was informed following a 1-1 draw at home to Roma the previous night.

"Yes, it's true. I'm out," Fonseca told reporters when he lowered his car window as he left San Siro following Sunday's match. "That's life. ... I did everything I could."

Milan is expected to hire Sergio Conceicao, another Portuguese coach, as Fonseca's replacement. The Serie A club released a short statement confirming Fonseca's dismissal.

"AC Milan announces that Paulo Fonseca has been



relieved from his duties as head coach of the men's first team," it said. "The club extends its gratitude to Paulo for his great professionalism and wishes him the very best in his future endeavours."

Fonseca was hired in June and produced only 12 wins in 24 matches across all competitions. His last action as Milan coach was to be sent off for dissent in the first half of Sunday's match.

Milan is eighth in Serie A, trailing leaders Atalanta and Napoli by 14 points — far worse than the second place result earned under Stefano Pioli last season. Pioli left the club at the end of the campaign after a near five-

year stint that included the 2022 Serie A title.

Milan has fared better in the Champions League lately following four straight wins, including a 3-1 result at Real Madrid. The Rossoneri are in 12th place and on course to qualify for the knockout playoff round.

Fonseca was already under pressure early in the season after just one victory in his first five matches in charge but that eased following a derby victory over Inter Milan.

There were protests from fans before and during the match against Roma but the chants were mainly aimed at the club's American owners, with the supporters urging RedBird founder Gerry Cardinale to sell up.

Naomi Osaka wins her 1st match of new season

AP ■ WELLINGTON
Four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka made a winning return to the court after an almost three month absence Monday in the first round of the ASB tennis classic in Auckland, undeterred by protests outside the stadium against her Israeli opponent.

Osaka beat qualifier Lina Glushko 6-4, 6-4 in a tight contest in her first match since October when a back injury at the China Open ended her 2024 season.

All the hallmarks of Osaka's game were present Monday: the powerful serve, forceful ground-strokes particularly from the forehand side and the aggression. She looked relaxed and comfortable on court with no sign of her recent injury.

Osaka had to deal with a swirling wind on center court and with delays in play caused by the chants of a small group of protesters which were clearly audible



within the stadium. There was a longer break as Osaka was poised to serve out the first set when Glushko had to leave the court for treatment to a hip injury.

"I had no idea what the score was most of the time," Osaka said. "I just kept trying to tell myself one point at a time and trying not to get discouraged. "Thankfully it came out in my favor in

the end."

Osaka was supported at courtside by her new coach Patrick Mouratoglou who previously had a long-term association with Serena Williams.

She broke Glushko in the third game of the first set and held comfortably to win 6-4.

The second set was tighter. Osaka broke Glushko in the third game but Glushko converted her only break point of the match to level at 2-2.

Glushko held to love in the seventh game to lead 4-3 but Osaka seemed to step up at that point, held with two aces for 4-4, broke for 5-4 and held serve to love to clinch the win.

Her serve was solid throughout. She sent down seven aces and won 74 percent of first serve points. Her first serve averaged around 180kmh (111mph) and her slice around 140kmh (87mph).

"I think she's a really amazing opponent. I've never played her before," Osaka said.

