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Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra greets Samajwadi Party MP Jaya Bachchan during INDIA bloc MPs' protest against Home Minister Amit Shah over his remarks related to Dr BR Ambedkar, at Vijay Chowk. Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

Bitter Winter Session comes to a stormy end

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

The Winter Session of the Parliament came to an end on Friday as it was adjourned sine die, but not before an unprecedented verbal spat, bitterness between the Ruling and Opposition members, and less productivity of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. However the Session also saw the gamechanger simultaneous polls Bill being tabled. The Parliament this session witnessed a low point of alleged pushing and shoving amidst rival parties' Members

of Parliament (MPs) that left two Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) members hospitalised, and leading to an FIR against Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi. The acrimony forced the Opposition parties to move a motion of no-confidence against the Vice President and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar, which was, however, dismissed by the Upper House Deputy Chairman Harivansh. Unrelenting protests peaked and ranged from the Adani controversy to Sambhal and then to the demand of sacking of Home Minister Amit Shah for his remarks on Dr BR

Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution. The Parliament also saw a four-day debate on the constitutional journey of India, which began on a high pitched note of talks on Ambedkar's legacy pertaining to the Constitution, which saw Prime Minister Narendra Modi's participation. However, the debate ended with a speech by Home Minister Amit Shah in Rajya Sabha, creating flutters and sparking protests across the country for his remarks on Baba Saheb which both the ruling parties and Opposition parties have made attempts to capitalise on.

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11 killed in LPG tanker-truck collision on Jaipur-Ajmer highway

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAIPUR

At least 11 people were killed and about 35 injured after an LPG tanker collided with a truck on Friday here sparking a massive fireball. It turned a stretch of the Jaipur-Ajmer highway into an inferno and nearly 40 vehicles were gutted. President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Rajasthan Governor Haribhau Bagade, Chief Minister Bhajanlal Sharma and his predecessor Ashok Gehlot expressed grief over the loss of lives in the crash.



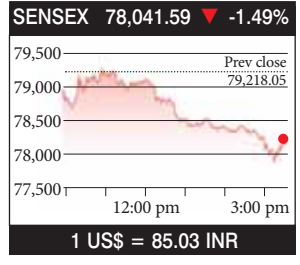
Firefighters at the site of the accident after a truck loaded with a chemical collided with some other vehicles and caught fire on the Jaipur-Ajmer Highway. PTI

The Rajasthan government announced financial assistance of Rs five lakh to the next of kin of the deceased and Rs one lakh for the injured. In a social media post, Modi announced an ex gratia of Rs two lakh from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund to the next of kin of the deceased and Rs 50,000 to the injured.

President Murmu said the news of the loss of lives in the Jaipur gas tanker accident was very painful and offered her condolences to the families of the deceased. "The news of the death of many people due to a road accident in Jaipur is very painful. I pray to God for peace to the departed souls. My deepest condolences to their families! I pray that the injured get well soon," she said in a social media post in Hindi. Expressing grief over the loss of lives, Prime Minister Modi spoke to the Chief Minister to enquire about the incident and assured him of all possible support.

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MARKETS



DND flyway will remain toll-free: SC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday ruled that the Delhi-Noida-Direct (DND) flyway will be toll-free as it dismissed a plea by a private firm challenging the 2016 decision of the Allahabad High Court order asking it to stop collecting toll from commuters. The decision will benefit lakhs of people who commute daily on the flyway. A Bench of Justices Surya Kant and Ujjal Bhuyan held that awarding a contract to private firm Noida Toll Bridge Company Ltd (NTBCL) to collect toll from commuters plying on the DND flyway was unjust, unfair and arbitrary. "There is no reason for the collection of user or toll fee to continue. We hold that the agreement (for toll collection) is invalid," the bench said. It pulled up the NOIDA authority for delegating toll collection to private firm NTBCL, which did not have any prior experience and said it has resulted in unjust enrichment.

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Delhi pollution is 43 times over WHO limit



Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

Delhi continued to be the most polluted place in India - for the fifth consecutive day - with the overall air quality of the national capital continuing to be in the "severe" category. According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) data, Delhi's overall 24-hour average air quality index (AQI) was 429 (severe) at 4 pm on Friday. The air pollution in Delhi was over 17 times the limit prescribed by the World Health Organisation (WHO), in the morning which rose to 43 times in the evening, according to official data. The overall level of PM2.5 (a chief pollutant) in Delhi was 255.3 micrograms per cubic meter.

WEATHER

AQI 429
MAX 23.3°C(+1)
MIN 7.5°C(-1)

PM Modi leaves for Kuwait today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two-day visit to Kuwait beginning Saturday will help in opening a new chapter in bilateral ties, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Friday. The visit would help develop a more dynamic partnership between the two countries, it said. The MEA said India was looking at boosting ties in a range of areas including defence and trade. Modi is paying the visit at the invitation of Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, it said. During the visit, Modi will hold discussions with the leadership of Kuwait and also interact with the Indian community. The last Indian PM to visit Kuwait was Indira Gandhi in 1981.



The Indian community is the largest expatriate community in Kuwait. India is among its top trading partners, with bilateral trade valued at USD 10.47 billion in the financial year 2023-24. Kuwait is India's sixth largest crude supplier, meeting 3 per cent of the country's energy needs. Indian exports to Kuwait reached USD 2 Billion for the first time, while investments by the Kuwait Investment Authority in India exceed USD 10 Billion. India and Kuwait have enjoyed traditionally friendly relations, with links dating back to pre-oil Kuwait when maritime trade with India was the backbone of its economy. Kuwait's economy revolved around its fine harbour and maritime activities which included ship building, pearl diving, fishing and voyages to India on wooden dhows carrying dates, Arabian horses and pearls that were traded for wood, cereals, clothes and spices, according to people tracking the ties between the two nations.

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NIA raids multiple locations, in five States

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Friday searched multiple locations in five States in connection with a case relating to attempts at revival of the banned CPI (Maoist) outfit, according to an official statement. Extensive searches were conducted at the premises of suspects at two locations in Patiala and Sri Muktsar Sahib districts of Punjab, four locations in Manesar and Gurgaon districts of Haryana, two locations in New Delhi, and one location each in Patna district of Bihar and Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh, it said. The suspects whose premises were searched were believed to be involved in propagating the ideology of CPI (Maoist) and the revival of its northern regional bureau wing through various frontal organisations. The searches led to the seizure

of digital devices, including mobile phones, pen drives/hard disks, laptops and memory cards, SIM cards and other incriminating documents related to naxalism, said the statement issued by the NIA. The searches were conducted in a case that relates to attempts by CPI (Maoist) leaders, cadres, sympathisers and over-ground workers (OGWs) to renege the outfit's decrepit influence in the NRB region, comprising Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh. The NIA's investigations have revealed that long-time associates and other OGWs of the outfit were being provided funds from the eastern regional bureau, especially from Jharkhand, to recruit cadres and raise the front organisation in the northern states, the statement said.

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Be mindful of public comments, MEA tells Bangladesh officials

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India has lodged a strong protest with Dhaka over certain controversial comments by a key aide of Bangladesh's interim government Mahfuj Alam. In a now-deleted Facebook post, Alam said India should recognise the uprising that forced the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to resign. In a related issue, Lok Sabha was informed that a total of 2,200 cases of violence against Hindus and other minorities have been reported in Bangladesh this year till December 8, and India's expectation is Dhaka will take necessary measures to ensure their safety, the government said on Friday. As regards controversial comments, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said "We have registered our strong protest on this issue with the Bangladesh side. We understand that the post being referred to has reportedly been taken down. We would like to remind all concerned to be mindful of their public comments." He said "While India has repeatedly signalled interest in fostering relations with the



File photo: PTI

people and the interim government of Bangladesh, such comments underline the need for responsibility in public articulation." New Delhi on Thursday expressed concern at incidents of violence targeting Hindus and other minorities in Bangladesh and said the interim government in Dhaka has the primary responsibility of protecting their life and liberty. Minister of state for external affairs, Kirti Vardhan Singh, made the comments in Rajya Sabha less than a fortnight after foreign secretary Vikram Misri visited Bangladesh and conveyed India's concerns on the issue to members of the caretaker administration against minorities, Singh said. "India's concerns regarding the need to ensure the safety and protection of Hindus and

all other minority communities in Bangladesh have been conveyed and reiterated to the authorities of the interim government of Bangladesh on various occasions, including at the highest level," he added. In a related issue, Rajya Sabha was informed that a total of 2,200 cases of violence against Hindus and other minorities have been reported in Bangladesh this year till December 8, and India's expectation is Dhaka will take necessary measures to ensure their safety, the government said on Friday. Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh gave the information in a written response to a query in Rajya Sabha, citing data from minority and human rights organisations.

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Three-day state mourning for Om Prakash Chautala

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH/NEW DELHI

Om Prakash Chautala, a prominent Jat leader and former Haryana Chief minister whose career was marked by dizzying highs and rock bottoms, including stints in jail, died on Friday. He was 89. A party spokesperson said Chautala had hiccups in the morning and collapsed in his house. He was rushed to a hospital, where he died. The eldest son of former deputy prime minister Devi Lal, the five-time chief minister headed the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), a party founded by his father. Tributes for Chautala poured in from across the political spectrum, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressing anguish at his passing and Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader Sukhbir Singh Badal describing it as a "huge personal loss". The Haryana government declared a three-day state mourning from Friday. It has also declared Saturday, when his funeral will be held, as a public holiday. "He (Chautala) was active in the state politics for many years and strove constantly to advance the work of Devi Lal," Modi said. Although Chautala, born into an influential political family on January 1, 1935, in Chautala



Photo: PTI

village, could never match the stature of his father who was known as a messiah of farmers, he was known for his sharp political acumen and wit despite not being well-educated. While serving his 10-year prison term, Chautala was released from Delhi's Tihar jail in July 2021. He was already out on parole at the time. He was sent to Tihar jail again in May 2022 after being awarded a four-year sentence in a disproportionate assets case. At 87, he became the oldest inmate. In August 2002, Delhi High Court suspended the sentence.

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Heavy snowfall, shabdeg, and kangris... 'Chillai Kalan', begins in J and K

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid the persistent dry and cold weather, the Jammu and Kashmir region is ready to face the 40-day-long harshest winter period of 'Chillai Kalan', beginning from the intervening night of December 20 and December 21. This period of Chillai Kalan, which begins with Winter Solstice spans from December 21 to January 31, marks the apex of Kashmir's severe winter. Chillai Kalan is also known as 'Shahenshah-e-zamistan.' Chilla-i Kalan is a Persian term which means "major cold" while the intense cold conditions are known as 'Jaada' in North and East India. During Chillai Kalan, the chilling cold increases further, while heavy snowfall and temperatures well below freezing point cause water

bodies and even water taps in homes to freeze. In this 40-day period, nights are chilly and day temperatures are in single digits. The winter games at the skiing resort of Gulmarg are held during this period. During Chillai Kalan, many Kashmiri families prepare 'Shabdeg' on the first day of 'Chillai Kalan'. Meat is slow cooked with turnips and spices in an earthen vessel during the night intervening December 20-21, to mark the onset of the coldest phase of the season. During its 40 days, the Chillai Kalan leaves no chance to put people through the most difficult of hardships. Generally, however, due to the icy winds in Chillai Kalan, the entire valley is gripped by severe cold. The ongoing cold wave is said to reach its peak with



Kashmir's mountains covered in snow for weeks, and the famous Dal Lake also reaching freezing point until the end of January.

Kashmir's winter pans out in three stages starting with a 40-day intense period from December 21 (locally called Chillai Kalan)

followed by 20 more days which are less intense (Chillai Khurd) and then 10 days of mild cold (Chillai Bache). Chillai-Kalan is the 40-day period of harsh winter in Kashmir that begins December 21 and ends on January 31. According to meteorological reports, this year's Chillai Kalan will begin with a cold wave, and temperatures are expected to dip significantly across the Kashmir Valley. The Meteorological Department has also predicted that there could be light to moderate snowfall in the coming days, especially in the higher reaches of the valley. The plains are likely to experience a drop in temperature, which may cause frost. Srinagar recorded a minimum temperature of minus 6.2 degrees Celsius, slightly down

from minus 6 degrees Celsius the previous night. According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), in South Kashmir, Pahalgam, which also serves as one of the base camps for the annual Amarnath Yatra, registered a low of minus 8.2 degrees Celsius, down from the previous night's minus 6.8 degrees Celsius. It said Gulmarg, a tourist spot popular for skiing, logged a minimum of minus six degrees Celsius, a degree down from the previous night. A hamlet on the outskirts of Pampore town, Konibal, was the coldest weather station in the valley as the minimum settled at the low of minus 9.2 degrees Celsius, the office said.

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SC asks Centre to file fresh report on 1984 anti-Sikh riots trials

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday directed the Centre to file a fresh status report within two weeks on the status of trials in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. A bench comprising Justices Abhay S Oka and Augustine George Masih asked additional solicitor general Aishwarya Bhati to file an affidavit and permitted the petitioners in the case to file detailed objections. During the hearing, Bhati said recommendations of the special investigation team, set up by the top court, were carried out. A counsel appearing for one of the petitioners submitted there were some glaring instances in the SIT report and said 500 cases were clubbed in one FIR and the investigating officer could not probe them. "There were many instances where 498 cases were clubbed in one FIR and IO had to investigate all of them. Initially when the hearing began, the court felt that it should be confined to Delhi only. But we have done nothing about other states. We have given examples of Kanpur, Bokaro, etc., nothing has happened," he said.

The top court assured it will look into all these aspects. Delhi witnessed large-scale violence and killings of persons from the Sikh community following former PM Indira Gandhi's assassination by her bodyguards in 1984 and the cases stemming from the incident have seen some major twists and turns 40 years on. According to the Nanavati Commission Report, there were a total 587 FIRs registered in Delhi in relation to 1984 riots that witnessed 2,733 people being killed. Of the total, the police shut about 240 cases as "untraced" and about 250 cases resulted in acquittals. However, it was only in May 2023 that the central probe agency the CBI filed a chargesheet against Congress leader Jagdish Tytler for his alleged role in the killings of three people on November 1, 1984. The CBI alleged Tytler "incited, instigated and provoked the mob assembled at Pul Bangash Gurdwara Azad Market area in the national capital on November 1, 1984. The incident resulted in the burning down of the gurdwara and killing of Thakur Singh, Badal Singh and Guru Charan Singh.

Delhi LG interacts with 500+ school principals and teachers, discusses NEP, mental health



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena on Friday interacted with scores of principals and teachers of more than 5,000 private schools in the national Capital, discussing issues like bomb threats, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and mental health of students among others. He took to X and shared, "In the series of #Samvaad@RajNiwas today, had the privilege of engaging and interacting with over 500 principals/ teachers

representing over 5000 private schools of Delhi that cater to lakhs of students. We discussed pressing issues like the challenges in implementation of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, mental health of students, teacher training, government apathy, and transportation and infrastructure constraints." He added, "Was glad to share with the audience that steps have already been initiated to address the FAR issue for additional classrooms. While concerns about recent bomb

crimes were raised by the teachers, at the same time they also appreciated the role of the police in handling these situations seamlessly and expeditiously." The Delhi LG shared that the idea of early-stage R&D for students as suggested by the teachers is intriguing and worth exploring. "However, we must guard against societal segmentation in education and ensure that interests of all segments of society are addressed. It is time to be vigilant and vocal for the rights of our students, teachers & the entire education fraternity," he said.

HM highlights strategic importance of Siliguri corridor

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

In a significant development Union Minister Amit Shah on Friday emphasized the importance of Siliguri corridor in Darjeeling district of North Bengal calling it "very important" insofar as it connected the North East to the rest of the country. "Siliguri corridor is very important. It connects the Northeast states, and SSB's alertness helps us to protect the region," the Home Minister speaking at the 61st Raising Day celebrations of the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) in Siliguri said lauding the role of the paramilitary group in safeguarding the India borders with friendly nations like Nepal and Bhutan and its contribution to combating Naxalism in Bihar and Jharkhand. Saying that SSB's pivotal role had helped counter the naxalite menace Shah said that "Bihar and Jharkhand are now free from the Naxal movement because of the efforts of SSB." Shah's presence at Siliguri corridor and his statement assumes importance in the backdrop of worsening situation in Bangladesh since the ouster of former Prime Minister Sk Hasina from power in that country. Also called Chicken's Neck the Siliguri corridor is thus called because it is a narrow stretch of land of about 60 kilometres in length and almost 22 kilometres in width --- even tapering to 17 kilometres in certain places --- skirted on two sides by Nepal and Bangladesh. Saying that SSB's role in preventing illegal border activities had been commendable Shah said a time had come when there was a need of high degree of alertness along the border to deal with the trans-border anti-social elements. "The time has come to find the anti-social elements who are illegally using open fencing," along the international border he said. Earlier, paying tribute to the brave soldiers of the force Shah in a post on X, wrote "on the foundation day of the Sashastra Seema Bal, I pay my tribute to all the immortal martyrs of the Force and extend my best wishes on the Foundation Day to all the personnel and their families."

Three-day state mourning for Om Prakash...

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According to an INLD statement, Chautala passed his Class 10 and Class 12 exams while in jail. He was 82 when he scored first division marks in his Class 12 examination. His clearing of the Class 10 exam was an inspiration for the Bollywood film "Dasvi". During his political career, Chautala raised his voice against the anti-people policies of ruling governments and went to jail several times. He also spent 19 months in jail during the Emergency, it said. During the past few years, Chautala made efforts to form a third front, meeting his old associates Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and former prime minister HD Deve Gowda. The efforts, however, did not yield a result.

Heavy snowfall, shabdeg, and kangris...

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The minimum temperature in Qazigund, the gateway to Kashmir, was minus 7.6 degrees Celsius, minus 6.5 degrees Celsius in Kupwara in north Kashmir and minus 5.8 degrees in Kokernag of south Kashmir minus, the weather department said. The meteorological department has predicted a mainly dry weather till December 26 with a possibility of light snowfall in higher reaches of the Valley on the night of December 21-22. As the harsh winter period begins, the demand for 'Kangri' (earthen fire pot filled with charcoal) has risen sharply as the residents prepare to face the bone-chilling cold. People stock eatables and other essential commodities for the period as the national highway often closes due to heavy snowfall.

DND flyway will remain toll-free: SC

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The Bench said NOIDA overstepped its authority by delegating the powers to NTBCL to collect or levy fees and it has led the general public to part with hundreds of crores of rupees. The High Court, in October 2016, had ruled that there will be no toll collected henceforth from those using the 9.2 km-long, eight-lane DND flyway. The order was passed as the High Court allowed a PIL by the Federation of Noida Residents' Welfare Association. The PIL, filed in 2012, had challenged the "levy and collection of toll in the name of user fee by the Noida Toll Bridge Company". In an over 100-page judgment, the high court had held, "the user fee which is being levied/realised is not supported by the legal provisions relied upon by the Concessionaire (Noida Toll Bridge Company), Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services (promoter and developer of the project) and the Noida Authority." It had said the "right to levy and collect user fee from the commuters as conferred upon the Concessionaire under the concession agreement suffers from excessive delegation and is contrary to the provisions of the UP Industrial Development Act".

PM Modi leaves for Kuwait today

From page 1

The Indian Rupee remained legal tender in Kuwait until 1961, a symbol of the enduring economic and cultural ties. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were formally established in 1961, with India initially represented by a trade commissioner. Emir Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Jabar Al Sabah came on a private visit to India in July 2017. The last high-level visit from either side was that of the prime minister of Kuwait to India in 2013.

NIA raids multiple locations, in five States

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Further investigations have revealed that several front organisations and student wings had been tasked with identifying suitable recruits to work as underground cadres to wage war against the government of India and to commit violent naxal and terror acts, it added.

Be mindful of public comments...

From page 1

In Pakistan, the number of cases of violence against Hindus and other minorities in Pakistan this year stood at "112 till October 2024," he said. The corresponding figures for 2022 were 47 in Bangladesh and 241 in Pakistan, while in 2023 the figures were 302 in Bangladesh and 103 in Pakistan, according to the data he shared. The minister said the Indian government has urged "Pakistan to take steps to prevent religious intolerance, sectarian violence, systemic persecution and attacks on minority communities and ensure their safety, security, and well-being." He added,

"India continues to highlight the plight of minorities in Pakistan at appropriate international fora." Cases of violence against Hindus and other minorities in other neighbouring countries (except Pakistan and Bangladesh) are "nil," the minister said. Singh was asked about the total number of cases of violence against Hindus and other minorities reported in neighbouring countries during the last three years, country-wise and year-wise; and the steps taken or proposed to be taken by the ministry to protect minorities, including diplomatic interventions and relief measures. The Union minister in his

response also said the "government has taken serious note of these incidents and shared its concerns with the government of Bangladesh." "India's expectation is that Bangladesh will take all necessary measures to ensure safety and welfare of Hindus and other minorities. The same was also reiterated during the visit of the Foreign Secretary to Bangladesh on December 9, 2024," he added. The High Commission of India in Dhaka "continues to monitor the situation" related to the minorities in Bangladesh "closely", the Minister of State for External Affairs said. "The primary responsibility for the protection of life and

liberty of all citizens, including minorities, rests with the government of the country concerned," he said. Ties between India and Bangladesh came under severe strain after deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina was forced to leave the country in the face of a massive anti-government protest in August. Nobel Peace laureate Muhammad Yunus came to power days after Hasina took shelter in India. He heads Bangladesh's interim government as its Chief Advisor. Relations between the two nations deteriorated further in recent weeks over attacks on the Hindus and the arrest of Hindu monk Chinmoy Krishna Das.

Bitter Winter Session comes to an end

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The bitterness between both sides was palpable by the fact that Lok Sabha was adjourned sine die within three minutes of its resumption, and without the valedictory message by Speaker Om Birla. As the Speaker had banned protest within the premises of Parliament, members resorted to verbal spats and sloganeering in the Lok Sabha, forcing Birla to adjourn the House. The Lok Sabha's productivity was nearly 58 per cent, according to its secretariat, a far cry from days when it hovered around 100 per cent and even beyond. The Rajya Sabha, however,

agreed to let Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar read out his valedictory remarks before adjourning the House sine die. In his concluding remarks, Dhankhar called upon parties to rise above political differences and restore the sanctity of parliamentary discourse, striking a note of balance amid opposition's charge that he has often been partisan. He said the House effectively functioned for just 43 hours and 27 minutes with a productivity of merely 40.03 percent during the Winter Session that began on November 25. Later at a Press conference, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju laid the blame at the door of the

Opposition, especially the Congress, saying their continuous protest despite an earlier agreement to allow Parliament to run was the principal reason behind the low productivity. During this Session, five Bills were introduced in Lok Sabha, which passed four of them. The Rajya Sabha passed three bills. A special Session was also held in the 'Samvidhan Sadan' to commemorate the Constitution Day on November 26. During the debate Prime Minister Narendra Modi attacked Congress, especially the Nehru-Gandhi family, for its "mutilation" of constitutional values but then Opposition parties

seized on a couple of sentences of Amit Shah's reply to accuse him of insulting Ambedkar and launched protests inside and outside Parliament. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) MPs led counter protests, accusing the Congress of slighting Ambedkar and ignoring his legacy during its long decades in power. While the Opposition INDIA Bloc was a divided house with its members such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Trinamool Congress (TMC) disagreeing with the prominence given to the Adani issue by the Congress. However, they rallied together over Shah's comments.

11 killed in LPG tanker-truck collision on Jaipur-Ajmer highway

From page 1

Modi said in a social media post, "Deeply saddened by the loss of lives in the accident on Jaipur-Ajmer highway in Rajasthan. Condolences to those who lost their loved ones. May the injured recover soon. The local administration is assisting those affected." Union Home Minister Shah spoke to Chief Minister Sharma. Describing the accident as extremely sad, Shah said the local administration is working to provide treatment to the injured. "The road accident in Jaipur, Rajasthan is extremely sad. I express my deepest condolences to the families of

those who lost their lives in this accident. I spoke to the Chief Minister Mr. @BhajanlalBjp in this regard. The local administration is working to provide immediate treatment to the injured. I wish for the speedy recovery of the injured," he wrote in a social media post in Hindi. Of the about 35 people injured, nearly half are "very critical", Rajasthan Health Minister Gajendra Singh Khimsar said. Jaipur Police Commissioner Biju George Joseph, who was at the crash site with several officers of his department, said an outlet nozzle of the LPG tanker was damaged in the collision, leading to a gas leak that caused the blaze. The crash occurred around 5.45

am, when it was still dark, in front of a school, according to officials. "Vehicles behind the tanker were engulfed in flames. Other vehicles coming from the opposite directions also caught fire and the vehicles collided," he said. The gas leak also spread the fire in a flash, leaving no scope for those in nearby vehicles to come out. People were seen rushing and taking off clothes engulfed in flames. The injured were rushed to the SMS hospital in Jaipur in more than 25 ambulances. Dr Deepak Maheshwari, principal of the SMS Medical College, said eight people have died. He said 43 people were brought to the hospital. Five of

them were pronounced dead and three succumbed to injuries during treatment, he said, adding that seven people are on ventilator support. Officials at the spot indicated that the casualty count may go up. Police suspect some people could not get out of their vehicles in time and got burnt. Earlier in the day, eyewitnesses reported spotting flames from nearly a kilometre away as thick black smoke filled the sky and ambulances and fire brigade vehicles rushed towards the crash zone. A school van driver on his way to pick up students recounted with horror the sight of a man engulfed in flames on the road.

The crash initially affected a nearly 300-metre stretch of the highway, leading to a long queue of vehicles. The traffic congestion grew rapidly with time and by the afternoon, choked the arterial road and traffic had to be diverted to alternative routes. Authorities cleared the highway of the burnt vehicles to resume vehicular movement. After news of the accident spread, Chief Minister Sharma and Khimsar rushed to the SMS hospital. Sharma spoke to administration officials and doctors and issued directions to ensure proper treatment was facilitated. He also visited the accident site and spoke to police officials. "I visited the hospital as soon

as I got news of the incident. This is a very unfortunate incident. Instructions have been given to ensure proper treatment and other arrangements," he told reporters at the crash site. Khimsar told reporters at the hospital that all doctors, resident doctors and nursing staff of the medical facility have been called in to manage the situation and another ward opened to accommodate patients. A 'green corridor' was set up from the accident site to the SMS hospital, he added. An official said a private sleeper bus headed for Jaipur from Rajsamand was behind the gas tanker when the accident occurred and efforts were underway to find the

details about the passengers on board. A fire department official said, "A few fire tenders from Mansarovar were rushed to the spot based on primary information, but later more were sent from other stations as well." A team from the regional transport office also reached the spot to investigate the incident and Forensic Science Laboratory teams collected evidence. Local people complained of itching in the eyes and breathing problems due to the smoke. Some said a few birds were found dead nearby. A pipe factory along the highway suffered damage in the incident. Rajasthan Deputy Chief Minister Prem Chand Bairwa

and Minister of State for Home Jawahar Singh Bedham also reached the accident site, while state Congress chief Govind Singh Dotasra and several BJP and Congress MLAs visited the hospital. Jaipur Police has issued helpline numbers 9166347551, 8764688431 and 7300363636 for people to get in touch for inquiries or relevant information. Speaking to reporters near the hospital, Dotasra said, "Many of the injured are critical. Such incidents should not happen and for this, governments should make arrangements." He said the government should form a high-level committee and take concrete action so that such incidents are not repeated.

BJP shortlists candidates for Delhi as manifesto campaign gains momentum

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP's state election committee formed for the upcoming Delhi Assembly polls has shortlisted the names of around 225-230 potential candidates for the total 70 seats. The panel headed by Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva met for over four hours on Thursday to screen the names of suitable candidates from among a list of over 700 compiled by the Central observers, said a top party leader associated with the exercise. "The election committee shortlisted 3-4 names of potential candidates on each of the 70 seats. These names will be further discussed and shortlisted in the next meeting of the committee likely to be held on Saturday," he said. The names of the candidates are likely to be declared next week after the list of shortlisted candidates is discussed by the BJP's central election committee, he added. The BJP is slow in completing the candidate selection process even as its main rival and ruling Aam Aadmi party (AAP) has already announced all its candidates. The Congress too has declared its candidates on 21 seats so far. "Unlike those parties where one leader or a group of leaders call the shots, the BJP follows an established decentralised process of

candidates selection giving every worker a chance to stake his claim for the party tickets," said the party leader. In the names shortlisted so far, several senior leaders of Delhi BJP, prominent faces of other parties who recently switched sides and the sitting party MLAs have emerged as the front runner contenders for the ticket, he said. Sources in the party claimed that the names of former MP Parvash Verma from New Delhi and Sachdeva's names were shortlisted for the election tickets. Verma, the son of former Delhi chief minister Sahib Singh Verma, has already claimed that he was asked by the party to prepare from New Delhi seat. There is buzz over Sachdeva likely to be fielded from either of the constituencies, including Patparganj, Krishna Nagar or Kasturba Nagar. Sources also claimed that some senior leaders, who failed to win from their constituencies in the 2020 Assembly polls, were also in the race. The BJP won just eight seats in the 2020 polls. A few of its current seven MLAs might be dropped this time, hinted the sources. The leaders like Arvinder Singh Lovely, Raj Kumar Chauhan, Kailash Gahlot and Raj Kumar Anand, who recently joined the BJP, are also in active consideration, they said.

BJP promises aspirational manifesto ahead of polls

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP's manifesto for the upcoming Delhi assembly polls in February next year will not be comprehensive but will also embody aspirations, MP and convener of Delhi BJP's election 2025 manifesto committee Ramvir Singh Bidhuri said here on Friday. This manifesto, under the slogan "Sarkar Badlo Delhi Badlo," will be presented to the public. According to Bidhuri, till Thursday evening, the party had received a total of 1,04,322 suggestions, which is evidence of significant public participation. They have received over 40,000 suggestions to date: 3,259 via email and 36,742 via WhatsApp. Announcing this in a news conference, he shared that the state BJP president, along with

senior party leaders, has formed a manifesto committee that also includes young leaders. This committee has held six meetings so far and listed numerous issues. However, the committee members decided that the manifesto should reflect the aspirations of the people. To achieve this, the BJP conducted extensive dialogues with different sections of society over a three-week period. He said the party has understood public issues through these discussions and will soon consolidate the findings. The senior members of the manifesto committee will prepare and present the BJP's 2025 election manifesto. Bidhuri stated that they had launched an email ID and WhatsApp number to collect suggestions.



UP Police bomb disposal squad arrives at the Lotus Valley School, Noida following a bomb threat.

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Sixth bomb hoax in 11 days disrupts schools in Delhi, Noida, Faridabad

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Making it the sixth incident in 11 days, several schools across the national Capital and its adjoining regions including Noida and Faridabad on Friday received bomb threats via mail, which has been found to be from the United States of America (USA). According to police sources, during the investigation it was revealed that the e-mail from which the threat has been received has been sent from the USA as it is linked with a mobile number from there. A senior police officer said that the contents of the emails are similar to the accused threatening to blow up schools if he doesn't receive 50,000 US dollars. However, the bomb threat later turned out to be a hoax. Over 50 threats have been wreaking havoc since May, disrupting the education of children and creating a sense of fear among the parents. Several schools including two in Dwarka, one each in outer Delhi and South Delhi received bomb threats on Friday. "We received a call regarding the bomb threat at 5:02 am from DPS, Dwarka, in Sector 23," the Delhi Fire Services (DFS) official. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Dwarka) Ankit Singh said, "In the wee hours of December 20, PCR calls and information at 4 AM and 7:56 AM respectively regarding bomb threats in schools were received at Dwarka North police station and Jaffarpur Kalan police station respectively." "In response, local police, PCRs, and fire-brigade

reached the schools. The school staff apprised that they had received e-mails each from unknown sources regarding the bomb threat. School premises were checked by local police and BDTs. After checking, nothing suspicious was found and it was all hoax," he added. Similar threats were also received in Air Force Bal Bharti School in Lodi Road, Vishal Bharti in Paschim Vihar and Ekta Model School in Najafgarh, which turned to hoaxes. "At some places, students were asked not to come to school, while others switched to online classes after receiving the threat," an officer said. These threats to blow up the school, bomb squad and dog squad also reached Noida as a threatening mail was received at Lotus Valley International School in Sector 126 in Noida on Friday morning. "The manager there informed the Noida Police about it. As soon as the information was received, the police reached the spot. During this, the bomb squad and dog squad conducted a search operation in the entire school, but nothing was found there. However, the children were sent home keeping in mind their safety," an officer said. Police said that an email was received on the school mail at 12 o'clock late night and was read by the principal in the morning reached the school at around 8:00 am in the morning. "The search operation continued for about two hours in the school. Necessary legal action is being taken by investigating the email," an officer stated. Similar hoax e-mail was also received in DPS Faridabad.

NDMC to host Winter Rose Show in Chanakyapuri this weekend

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) in association with India Rose Society will organize the Winter Rose Show this weekend (December 21-22) at India - Africa Friendship Rose Garden in Chanakyapuri, New Delhi. Large number of Institutes and individuals both local and outside will participate in the rose show for exhibiting their best blooms as well as blooming potted plants, a statement by the civic body on Friday said. In the two days event participants from different organisations like NDMC, TERI, CPWD, PGI Chandigarh, IARI-PUSA etc are displaying their exhibits in different classes. The display of roses in pots and cut flowers of different types of roses i.e. Hybrid Tea, Floribunda, Miniature, Polyantha etc are the main attraction of the show. In addition to this painting competition among the students from NDMC Schools,

value-added rose products, artistic bouquets, garlands, Ikebana etc are also the part of display/ activities in the show. The show will be inaugurated on Saturday at 12:30 PM and the best judged entries will be felicitated with the prizes on Sunday at four PM. NDMC urged the people to visit the show from one pm to five pm on Saturday and 10 am to five om on Sunday. Rose lovers commence their activities in their rose gardens or potted rose plants on terrace, balconies, or any available sunny space with change of weather in October. The plants are judiciously pruned followed by controlled feeding and preventive or remedial spraying against various maladies. The flower beds start to give their first and probably the best flush of blooms in December. The show will be a visual treat for rose loving people as it is a chance to see large varieties of rose blooms vying with each other in vases as well as in pots.

Mahender Choudhary will contest Mehrauli for AAP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Facing criticism, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Friday replaced its Mehrauli candidate Naresh Yadav, convicted last month in the Quran desecration case, with Mahender Choudhary for the upcoming Delhi Assembly polls. Yadav, the sitting MLA from Mehrauli, was convicted by a Punjab court with two-year sentence in the 2016 Quran desecration case. Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national general secretary (organisation) Sandeep Pathak issued the party's fifth list and named Choudhary as the candidate from Mehrauli seat. Earlier in the day, Yadav said in a post on X that he met AAP

convener Arvind Kejriwal to inform him about his decision not to contest the polls till he is acquitted by the court in the case against him. Yadav said that he joined the AAP impressed by Kejriwal's honesty and received a lot from the party. The AAP has already announced all its candidates for the elections to the 70-member Delhi Assembly due to be held in February next year. Earlier on June 24, 2016, torn pages of the Quran were found scattered on a road in Malerkotla in Punjab. This led to violence and burning of vehicles by an angry mob. Four persons, including Yadav, were arrested in the case. Yadav was acquitted in the sacrilege case in March 2021 by a lower court.

BJP accuses AAP of contempt over CAG reports

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Leader of the Opposition in the Delhi Assembly, Vijender Gupta, has accused the Delhi government of contempt of the High Court by failing to present the Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) reports to the Speaker of the Assembly. Gupta stated that during a hearing on a petition filed by BJP MLAs about the presentation of CAG reports in the Assembly, Delhi government lawyers assured the court that the reports had been received by the government and would be sent to the Assembly Speaker within two to three days. This assurance was also mentioned in the High Court's December 16 judgment. Despite this assurance, Gupta pointed out that the government has not yet sent the 14 CAG reports to the Speaker, even after four days have passed. The Assembly

Speaker has confirmed that the reports have not been received. Gupta criticised the government, claiming it has reached the height of dishonesty by misleading even the judiciary. He stated, "A government that can lie to the High Court cannot be trusted to speak the truth to the citizens of Delhi." Gupta alleged that the Aam Aadmi Party government, in power for the past 10 years, has indulged in rampant corruption in every department. To conceal these corrupt practices, the government is evading its responsibilities and refusing to table the 14 CAG reports in the Assembly. Gupta reiterated that the opposition will intensify its movement to compel the government to present these reports in the Assembly. He emphasised that the citizens of Delhi deserve to know how their tax money has been spent and in what areas.

Delhi HC to hear Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam pleas on Jan 7

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court will on January 7, 2025, hear the bail pleas of activists Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam and others accused in a UAPA case connected to February 2020 riots. A bench of Justices Navin Chawla and Shalinder Kaur deferred the hearing after the

Delhi police counsel said the case would be argued by additional solicitor general S V Raju, who was unavailable on Friday. "How do we adjourn bail matters like this? Last time also these were heard by a bench and released," the bench said. The court said it would hear the matter on the very first of its reopening post the winter break.

Delhi Police reunites 311 missing people with their families

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Police has reunited 311 missing people, including children with their families under its operation 'Milap' since January 2024, an official said on Friday. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Shahdara) Prashant Gautam said that 311 individ-

uals, including 118 minor girls, 86 minor boys, and 107 adults, were rescued. Among the rescued people, 183 were from Shahdara while 128 were traced to other districts of Delhi and across India, the officer said. He said that 274 people were rescued from Delhi, followed by 20 people in Uttar Pradesh and four from Bihar.

Police transfers Rahul Gandhi assault case to Crime Branch

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A day after Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was booked in connection with a scuffle on the Parliament premises leaving two BJP MPs injured, the Delhi Police on Friday has transferred the high-profile case to the Crime Branch from the local police. According to police sources, they are likely to record the statements of the two injured MPs on Friday and may also call the opposition leader for questioning. "The Delhi Police was also likely to write to the Parliament secretariat, seeking access to CCTV footage of the area where the alleged incident occurred," the source said. A case under sections 115 (voluntarily causing hurt), 117 (voluntarily causing grievous hurt), 125 (act of endangering life or personal safety of others), 131 (use of criminal force), 351 (criminal intimidation) and 3(5) (common intention) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita was registered at the Parliament Street police station on Thursday. Gandhi was booked hours after the BJP filed a complaint, accusing him of physical "assault and incitement" during the



NDA MPs file a complaint at the Parliament Street Police station in connection with a scuffle between political parties at the Parliament complex, in New Delhi, Thursday.

PTI

scuffle in which its two MPs Pratap Chandra Sarangi and Mukesh Rajput were injured. According to a police source, officials may call Rahul Gandhi for questioning and also record the statements of other MPs who witnessed the incident. The source said a team of police officials may also meet Sarangi and Rajput at the hospital and record their statements for further investigations. The reports of their medical certificates

will be collected, he said. On Thursday, BJP MP Hemang Joshi, accompanied by party colleagues Anurag Thakur and Bansuri Swaraj, visited the Parliament Street police station and filed the complaint. The Congress strongly rejected the claim, alleging that BJP MPs pushed its chief Mallikarjun Kharge and 'physically man-handled' Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi. The Congress also lodged a complaint in connection with the matter.

Kejriwal accuses BJP of targeting Purvanchali voters as Rohingyas and Bangladeshis, deleting their names from voter rolls

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

AAP supremo and former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Friday accused BJP chief JP Nadda of equating Purvanchalis with Rohingyas and Bangladeshi people, and admitting deletion of their votes in Delhi ahead of the upcoming Assembly polls. Taking a dig at the BJP for not announcing its chief ministerial face for the Delhi Assembly polls due in February, Kejriwal called the saffron party a "wedding party without a groom". "They should tell the name. It's a right of the people to know," he said addressing a press conference. Kejriwal accused the BJP of hatching a conspiracy to get the names of Purvanchalis in Delhi deleted from the voters list because they supported the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the elections. "BJP president JP Nadda openly admitted in Parliament deletion of names of Purvanchalis, Rohingyas and Bangladeshis. The Purvanchalis are called Rohingyas. How can those who came from UP and Bihar to Delhi and were settled here for 30-40 years be



AAP National Convener Arvind Kejriwal with party MP Sanjay Singh during a press conference.

-Ranjana Dimri

called Rohingya or Bangladeshi" he asked. Arvind Kejriwal affirmed, "As we all know, a voter card is essential not only for voting but also for accessing several government services. By targeting voter cards, BJP is effectively depriving Purvanchalis of basic services and benefits."

Kejriwal said the AAP workers will go door to door across Delhi to tell the Purvanchali people about the BJP's "conspiracy". AAP's Rajya Sabha MP from Delhi and a Purvanchali face of the party, Sanjay Singh, will undertake "Ratri Pravas" (night stays) at Purvanchali dominated areas of the city to expose the BJP's

"well planned conspiracy", he said. The issue of deletion of votes in Delhi was raised in Parliament by Singh earlier this week. Nadda claimed the names of Bangladeshis and Rohingyas are being removed from the voters' list following the process laid down in the Constitution and asked the AAP if it was winning with their votes. Singh claimed that BJP workers had submitted applications to delete the names of Hindu voters under false pretences of labelling them as "Rohingyas" and "Bangladeshi infiltrators". Meanwhile, Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva called Arvind Kejriwal an expert at 'changing both his face and his statements' according to the situation. "Today, he is trying to show himself as a supporter of Purvanchali people, but they have not forgotten his statement of September 30, 2019, when he said, 'Biharis come to Delhi with a 500-rupee ticket, get 5 lakh worth of free treatment, and leave,'" he said. "People from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Haryana have not forgotten that Arvind Kejriwal has repeatedly stated that Delhi's border hospitals and schools are under heavy pressure from outsiders," he added.

Nursery admissions for 2025-26 conclude in the Capital, first lists to be released in January

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Nursery admissions for the 2025-26 academic session in around 1,741 private schools in Delhi concluded on Friday. The Delhi government's Directorate of Education (DoE), in a circular on November 12, announced that the last date to submit registration forms was December 20. The first general admission lists will be published on January 17, 2025. Pratika Gupta, principal of Sovereign School, Rohini, said, "This year, we received more than 2,000 registrations for nursery admissions, which is quite satisfactory and exceeds last year's numbers." Chairperson of Gitarattan Global School, R N Jindal, said the school received approximately 1,000 registrations for nursery admissions. The DoE has directed schools to upload details of all selected applicants by January 1, 2025. Manisha Sharma, principal of Venkateshwar School, Dwarka, said, "We have received around 3,600 nursery registrations this year, which is a significant increase compared to previous years." Private schools are required to reserve 25 per

cent of their seats for students from the Economically Weaker Section (EWS), Disadvantaged Groups (DG), and children with disabilities. Separate admission lists will be published for these categories, as per the circular. The DoE has also specified age limits for admissions. As of March 31, 2025, children must be at least three years old for nursery, four years for KG, and five years for Class 1. The upper age limits are under four years for nursery, under five years for KG, and under six years for Class 1. The second list of selected students, along with the marks allotted, will be released on February 3, 2025. Subsequent admission lists, if any, will be published on February 26, 2025. The circular said parents can approach school heads with admission-related queries from January 18 to January 27, 2025, after the release of first list and after the second list published, parent visit schools from February 5 to February 11. The admission process, including parent visits for queries and marks allotment, will conclude on February 14, 2025.

States demand higher allocations, special packages, and borrowing flexibility in pre-Budget meeting

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



The Budget for 2025-26 is slated to be presented in Parliament on February 1, 2025. Finance ministers of all states attended Friday's meeting with Sitharaman here. Several states demanded increase in allocations for the 50 years interest-free loan scheme, sources said, adding

they also requested for more flexibility in the Special Assistance for Capital Investment (SASCI) scheme under this category. In the Budget for 2024-25, Sitharaman had hiked the allocations for interest-free loans to states for capital expenditure, enabling states to spend more on

infrastructure and specified reforms. The allocation was increased to Rs 1.5 lakh crore from Rs 1.10 lakh crore disbursed in 2023-24. With regard to road and rail infrastructure, sources said, states highlighted the need for state-specific road development projects and railway projects. They also

sought an increase in the honorarium being paid to Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers. Some states asked the central government to bear a larger share of land acquisition costs for projects, the sources added. Fiscally stressed states like Punjab and Kerala sought special financial packages.

Their demands included more loans, grants, and borrowing flexibility. Sources said states emphasised the need for additional funding for disaster relief and pressed for more allocation for the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF). Kerala Finance Minister K N Balagopal in his speech said the Centre has to recognise that fiscal consolidation achieved through restrictions in government expenditure may not necessarily be a desirable outcome. "We reiterate that fiscal consolidation targets should not compromise sustainable growth. Instead, state governments should be empowered to fulfil their expenditure commitments and implement macroeconomic policies that drive faster national economic growth," Balagopal said.

Center raises MSP for copra by ₹420

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The government on Friday announced an increase in the minimum support price (MSP) for copra by up to Rs 420 to Rs 12,100 per quintal for 2025 with a budget outlay of Rs 855 crore. A decision in this regard was taken by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The MSP for 'milling copra' has been increased by Rs 420 to Rs 11,582 per quintal, while for 'ball copra' by Rs 100 to Rs 12,100 per quintal for 2025, Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said. The total financial implication would be Rs 855 crore. The minister said the MSP has been fixed 50 per cent higher than the cost of production. A higher MSP will not only ensure better remunerative returns to the coconut growers but also incentivize

farmers to expand copra production to meet the growing demand for coconut products both domestically and internationally. In order to provide remunerative prices to the cultivators, Government had announced in the Union Budget of 2018-19, that MSP of all the mandated crops will be fixed at levels of at least 1.5 times of all India weighted average cost of production. National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd. (NAFED) and National Cooperative Consumers' Federation (NCCF) will continue to act as Central Nodal Agencies (CNAs) for procurement of copra and de-husked coconut under Price Support Scheme (PSS). Copra production remains the highest in Karnataka with 32.7 per cent share in overall country's production, followed by Tamil Nadu 25.7 per cent,

India boosts self-reliance in weapon production with ₹7,628.70 Crore contract



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Guns for the Indian Army under Buy (Indian) category at a total cost of Rs 7,628.70 crore. The contract was signed by senior officials of the Ministry and representatives of L&T in the presence of Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh. The procurement of K9 VAJRA-T will catalyse the artillery modernisation and enhance overall operational readiness of the Indian Army. This versatile artillery gun, with its cross-country mobility, will play a pivotal role in enhancing the firepower of the Indian Army, enabling deeper strike with precision and its lethal firepower will bolster the

capability of artillery in all terrains. The gun being equipped with cutting-edge technology is capable of delivering long-range lethal fires with high accuracy and higher rate of fire and will be able to operate in sub-zero temperature in high-altitude areas to its full potential. The project will generate an employment of more than nine lakh man-days over a period of four years and encourage active participation of various Indian industries including MSMEs. The project will be a proud flag-bearer of 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' in consonance with the 'Make-in-India' initiative.

Delhi youth Congress protests over FIR against Rahul Gandhi, demands Amit Shah's resignation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Youth Congress held a protest here on Friday over the FIR against Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi and detention of Indian Youth Congress president Uday Bhanu Chib in Assam. According to a statement, several Youth Congress workers joined this protest under the leadership of Delhi Youth Congress president Akshay Lakra. They burnt Union Home Minister Amit Shah's effigy and demanded his resignation over his remarks on Baba Saheb Ambedkar in the Rajya Sabha. They also raised slogans against the Central government. The protest took place outside the Youth



Congress office, where the Delhi Police stopped everyone by barricading, it

said. Delhi Police on Thursday registered an FIR against

Gandhi accusing him of "physical assault and incitement" during a scuffle in Parliament premises. A face-off between the opposition and the ruling NDA MPs in Parliament premises over the alleged insult to Ambedkar left former minister Pratap Chandra Sarangi and BJP MP Mukesh Rajput injured. Lakra said they oppose the dictatorship being done by the Central government. The BJP is filing baseless FIR against Rahul Gandhi because the truth of the BJP has come in front of the country, he added. Lakra said they are doing such things to divert the country's attention. The Constitution is the gift of Ambedkar. India will not tolerate his insult and hence

Shah will have to resign from the post of Home Minister, he demanded. Lakra further said the BJP government in Assam has taken Chib into preventive custody since Friday morning and demanded that he should be released as soon as possible otherwise they will continue to raise their voice in this manner. Chib was put in "preventive detention" by the Assam Police since Friday morning ahead of a protest over the death of a party worker two days ago. Earlier on Wednesday, Congress activist Mridul Islam died during a 'Raj Bhawan Chalo' programme against a host of issues, including unrest in Manipur and bribery charges against the Adani Group.

SC leaves decision on hospitalisation of hunger-striking farmer leader to Punjab government

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



approach the court, if a need arose. The bench said 70-year-old Dallelwal could be moved to the makeshift hospital setup

within 700 metre of the protest site at Khanauri border between Punjab and Haryana. Punjab advocate general Gurminder Singh

gave an undertaking of the chief secretary on the medical condition of the farmer leader and said forcefully moving him from where he was stationed could cause him trauma and aggravate the situation. The bench said the authorities efforts to persuade him to move to the hospital. The bench during the hearing earlier asked the Punjab government to give an undertaking on Dallelwal's health condition and on moving him to the nearby facility for a round-the-clock monitoring. Singh informed the bench on December 19 the Dallelwal cooperated and

underwent several tests, including ECG and blood examination. He said Dallelwal's health condition appeared to be stable for now. The bench on December 19 referred to civil rights activist Irom Sharmila continuing her protest for more than a decade under medical supervision and asked the Punjab government to convince Dallelwal for a health examination. It had pulled up the state for not running medical tests on Dallelwal. Dallelwal has been on an indefinite fast at the Khanauri border since November 26 to press the Centre to accept the agitating farmers' demands,

including a legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP) for crops. Farmers under the banner of Samyukta Kisan Morcha (non-political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha have been camping at Shambhu and Khanauri border points between Punjab and Haryana since February 13 after their march to Delhi was stopped by the security forces. The Haryana Government set up the barricades on the Ambala-New Delhi National Highway in February after it was announced that the farmers would march to Delhi in support of their demands, including legal guarantee of MSP for their produce.

JD(U) leaders accuse Kejriwal of ignoring dalit representation, corruption taint



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Janata Dal (United) on Friday accused Aam Aadmi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal of not giving representation to Dalits and backward classes, and said a leader tainted with corruption charges has no right to give suggestions to someone like Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. The attack on the former Delhi chief minister from two key JD(U) leaders, Union minister Lalan Singh and Sanjay Jha, came a day after Kejriwal wrote a letter to Kumar asking him to "deeply reflect" on Union Home Minister Amit Shah's alleged insulting comments for B R Ambedkar. Kejriwal had written a similar letter to another key BJP ally, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu. Jha responded to the AAP leader by writing he did not send a single leader from the Dalit and backward castes to the Rajya Sabha and accusing him of backtracking on his promise of picking a Dalit deputy chief minister in Punjab. Jha asked if the AAP leader could not find anyone from these classes to replace him as Delhi chief minister when he resigned and cited Kumar's choice of Dalit leader Jitan Ram Manjhi to take him place in 2014. Kejriwal has had links with an organisation known for its stand against reservation, joined hands with the Congress after swearing to never ally with it, hates people from Bihar and poorvanchal as is clear from their poor living conditions in the national capital, he alleged. Singh told reporters that Kejriwal had no right to question the JD(U) president and took a swipe at him over his incarceration in jail in a corruption case after entering politics through an anti-corruption movement headed by veteran activist Anna Hazare. He then

dumped Hazare, the Union minister said, adding, "A corrupt person has no right to offer advice to Nitish Kumar who was a Union minister and is now chief minister for so many years and still can not be accused of any misconduct." Sharing the letters on social media, Kejriwal said people feel that those who love Ambedkar can not support the BJP that "insulted" the architect of India's Constitution, and asked Kumar and Naidu to ponder over it. Shah's remark on Babasaheb was not only "disrespectful" but also revealed the BJP's perspective towards him and the Constitution, the AAP leader said in the letters to the two chief ministers. "The statement made by Shah in Parliament regarding Babasaheb has left the entire nation stunned. His remark that 'chanting Ambedkar-Ambedkar has become a fashion these days' is not only disrespectful but also reveals the BJP's perspective towards Babasaheb and our Constitution," Kejriwal wrote. JD(U) leaders strongly defended Shah, saying he only exposed the Congress' insult of Ambedkar, an iconic figure, especially among Dalits. "The home minister threw light on those pages of history which you and the leader of your alliance Rahul Gandhi do not want to see. Shah told the country as to how a hurt Ambedkar had to resign from Nehru's Cabinet due to neglect of Dalits and women. I can understand that you and your alliance leader Rahul Gandhi would not have liked such a discussion at all," Jha wrote in the letter. The Congress was in power in Bihar till 1990 and enjoyed its fruits later till 2005 in alliance with the RJD but it was Kumar who gave reservation to Dalits and extremely backward classes in local bodies, he added.

10 Crore rural women mobilised into 90.87 Lakh self-help groups under DAY-NRLM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

21.54 lakh, he said. So far, DAY-NRLM has supported the establishment of 1,245 women-owned producer enterprises/farmer producer companies, covering around 15 lakh women members. Further, 1.78 lakh producer groups have been promoted covering 32 lakhs women members. DAY-NRLM provides funds to create a resource in perpetuity for the community institutions to strengthen their institutional and financial management capacity and build their track record to attract mainstream bank finance. These include Revolving Fund of Rs 20,000 to Rs 30,000 per SHG and Community Investment Fund up to Rs 2.50 lakh per SHG. The total amount of Capitalisation Support (Revolving Fund and

Community Investment Fund) provided is Rs 48,290 crore. He said that in order to reduce the effective cost of bank credit to women SHGs, DAY-NRLM provides interest subvention to SHGs on loans from banks. In response to another question, the Minister said that the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP), a sub-scheme under DAY-NRLM, supports the SHG women or their family members to set up small enterprises. SVEP has so far supported 3.13 lakh rural enterprises. Elaborating on the SHG women's engagement, the Pemmasani said that they are deployed as Banking Correspondents Sakhis, improving access to banking services, including deposits, credit, remittances, pensions and insurance.

Maldives speaker to visit India with parliamentary delegation from February 10-14

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India on Friday said the Speaker of People's Republic of Maldives accompanied by a parliamentary delegation will visit the country from February 10-14 next year. Minister of State for External Affairs Pabitra Margherita informed the Lok Sabha in a written response to a query. He was asked whether a number of parliamentary exchanges have been conducted by the government recently in alignment with the emphasis on the 'Neighbourhood First' Policy adopted in the recent years. The query also sought details of all parliamentary exchanges held in the recent years with special reference

to the People's Majlis of Maldives. "In keeping with the objectives of the 'Neighbourhood First' Policy for enhancing people to people relations, regular parliamentary exchanges with our neighbouring countries have been taking place over the years," he said. In his response, he also shared details of the recent parliamentary exchanges with the Maldives. "At the invitation of Hon'ble Speaker of Lok Sabha, Speaker of People's Republic of Maldives accompanied by a parliamentary delegation will visit India from 10-14 February 2025," the minister said. He informed the Lower

House that the Lok Sabha Speaker visited Maldives from September 1-4 in 2019; and the Speaker of Maldives visited India in December 2019, in April 2022 and in August 2022. Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu had visited India in October this year and held "extensive" talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He had said in joint press conference after meeting Modi that the ties between the Maldives and India are "centuries-old, as evident throughout our histories". Besides, Margherita said, an 11-member Sri Lankan parliamentary delegation led by the Speaker visited India from December 16-20 in 2023.

Over 14,000 Janaushadhi kendras opened across India to provide affordable medicines

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

300 surgical devices have been brought under its ambit, including cardiovascular, anti-cancer, anti-diabetic drugs. The PMBJP scheme was launched by the government to set up dedicated outlets known as PMBJKs to provide quality generic medicines at affordable prices. On the progress made under the National Programme for Prevention and Control of cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and stroke in the country, Nadda said non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are

diagnosed and treated at various levels in health care facilities. The treatment in government hospitals is either free or highly subsidised for the poor and needy. Treatment of major NCDs are also available under the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB PMJAY). This scheme provides health cover of Rs. 5 lakh per family per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalisation to approximately 55 crore beneficiaries corresponding to 12.37 crore families constituting the bottom 40

per cent of India's population. The Centre has also recently approved health coverage for all senior citizens of the age 70 years and above irrespective of their income under PMJAY, Nadda said. Nadda said the latest ABPM-JAY package provides cashless healthcare services related to 1,961 procedures across 27 specialties. These treatments are available at a network of more than 29,929 hospitals empanelled under the scheme, Nadda said. Affordable Medicines and

Reliable Implants for Treatment (AMRIT), an initiative launched by the Union Health Ministry aims to provide affordable medicines for treatment of cancer, cardiovascular and other diseases. As on November 30, 2024 there are 218 AMRIT pharmacies spread across 29 states and Union Territories, selling more than 6,500 drugs (including cardiovascular, cancer, diabetes, stents, etc), implants, surgical disposables and other consumables at a significant discounts up to 50 per cent

on market rates, Nadda said. The Centre implements the strengthening of tertiary cancer care centres facilities scheme in order to enhance the facilities for cancer care at tertiary level. The National Health Mission provides support for improvement in health infrastructure, availability of adequate human resources to health facilities, to improve availability and accessibility to quality health care especially for the underserved and marginalised groups in rural areas, Nadda informed.

Time ripe to launch new phase of self-reliance in defence production: President

PTI ■ HYDERABAD
President Droupadi Murmu on Friday said the time is now ripe for launching a new phase of self-reliance in defence production by manufacturing technologically advanced equipment within the country. Speaking after awarding the President's Colours to the College of Defence Management (CDM) here, she said the Union Government has taken several measures to enhance indigenous capabilities of the defence industry. Through initiatives such as Make in India, Ease of Doing Business and development of defence industrial corridors, the government is encouraging Indian and foreign investors to invest in the

defence sector, she said. With emphasis on indigenization, many defence products have been identified for domestic manufacturing and will not be imported. "The time is now ripe for launching a new phase of self-reliance by manufacturing technologically advanced equipment within India," she said. The officers of the defence forces are expected to wholeheartedly contribute towards achieving self-reliance and realizing the vision of Atmanirbhar (self-reliant) Bharat, she said. In the field of defence modernization, India is focusing on a holistic approach that includes upgrading its conventional forces and embracing cutting-edge technolo-



gies, including artificial intelligence, drones, cyber warfare capabilities, and space defence technologies. Noting that India is focusing on building strategic defence partnerships at the global level, she said, through multilateral economic and military frameworks and engagements, India's influence in regional and global defence discussions has grown significantly. By focusing on self-reliance, technological advancement, and strategic collaborations, India is not only securing its borders but also contributing to global peace and stability, the President said. As the country moves forward, India's defence sector should continue to evolve and adapt, thereby ensuring that

the nation remains a source of strength, resilience, and cooperation in an increasingly interconnected and complex world. The armed forces personnel need to keep themselves updated with the latest technological developments as well as changing operational dynamics, Murmu added. "The wars are fought beyond the battlefields. We are today witnessing psychological warfare. I urge you all to constantly evolve with time and strive for excellence in the rapidly changing security landscape," she said. India's enhanced defence management capability will help strengthen diplomatic and military partnerships and increase defence exports, she said. It will also help India in

maintaining a proactive stance in global security forums. The senior strategic leadership in Indian defence will play an important role in positioning India as a major player in the international arena, responding proactively to global security threats, she said. She expressed confidence the collective efforts and individual excellence of the officers will help in realizing India's vision of becoming a developed nation by 2047. Expressing happiness to see women officers, the President said she has been encouraging and appreciating women officers at various events of defence services. They are an inspiration for all the other women and young girls who dare to dream, she said.

Congress launching Priyanka, not INDIA says TMC

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA
The Indian National Democratic Inclusive Alliance continued to lose clout as the Trinamool Congress fired more salvos at the Congress for failing to provide direction to the anti-BJP movement contending that its main goal was not to pull down the BJP but to launch Priyanka Gandhi in the national politics. Attacking the Congress Sudip Bandopadhyay --- a senior Lok Sabha member of the TMC which most of the time kept aloof from the INDIA huddle in the Winter Session of Parliament --- on Friday said that "the Congress has repeatedly failed to play its role as a principal opposition party ... which was very much evident in the Winter Session also."

Minister Amit Shah the TMC leader charged the Congress with "political bossism." He said instead of consulting all the parties the Janpath was imposing its will on the INDIA constituents. "It all looked very disorganized ... They would not hold discussions with the alliance partners ... before a programme ... they only expect the constituents to blindly follow what the Congress does ... this is not acceptable," he said. The Congress was "always imposing its decision on the others instead of taking all the parties along with it ... it has clearly failed in providing a leadership to the INDIA alliance," he said wondering how a party with a narrow mindset to pitchfork its own leaders could expect success. "They are only working towards projecting Priyanka Gandhi as a leader instead of organizing the opposition parties ... they have always



been taking decisions independently ... this is the reason why they failed in floor coordination and cut a sorry figure ... TMC with self respecting party is clear in its views that Congress has failed to provide leadership," he said refusing to link a previous claim by Trinamool general secretary Abhishek Banerjee that a time had come when Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee should be allowed to lead the INDIA. Abhishek who is also the nephew of the Chief Minister

said that considering the fact that the "TMC led by Mamata Banerjee is the only party in INDIA alliance that has defeated BJP, Congress and the Left," she made the natural choice to lead the opposition alliance. "She is the seniormost leader ... being supported by many veteran national leaders ... she has been a seven-time MP, Union Minister ... three time Chief Minister ... she is the best candidate for the job," the junior Banerjee had said days after another party MP Sagarika Ghose batted for the Bengal Chief Minister. Senior TMC MP Kalyan Banerjee too said that the Congress needed to understand that under its leadership, the INDIA bloc had failed adding "if Mamata Banerjee becomes the leader, it will be much better. The alliance needs a leader... Mamata Banerjee knows how to fight political battles. Congress should set aside its

ego. Congress removed Mamata Banerjee from its fold due to its ego, and now look at how Mamata Banerjee is doing politics." Meanwhile, senior CPI(M) leader and party's central committee member Sujan Chakraborty dismissed Sudip Bandopadhyay's statement saying it did not merit any attention. "The Left parties have always been telling that Mamata Banerjee is both inside the INDIA and outside it ... she is inside it in order to sabotage it and help the BJP ... this is because the BJP is its only savior from the hands of agencies ... or else who can explain why little breakthrough has been achieved in Sharada, Narada and other scams including teachers' recruitment, health scams worth thousands of crores if not a lakh crore ... Mamata Banerjee and its TMC has been doing what their bosses in the BJP tells them to do."

ASI surveys ancient wells and temples in Sambhal city

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ SAMBHAL

A four-member team from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) conducted a detailed survey of 19 ancient wells and five pilgrimage sites in and around Sambhal city on Friday. The team, arriving from Lucknow at around 6 am, collected samples from the ancient Shiva temple at Khaggu Sarai, including from a well located within its premises, for carbon dating. The survey, carried out from 6 am to 3:30 pm, aimed to determine the historical age of these sites. District Magistrate Dr. Rajendra Pansia said, "Following a request from the district administration, the ASI team arrived for a comprehensive assessment. Their findings will guide future restoration and preservation efforts." The initiative traces back to December 14, when Sambhal



Sub-Divisional Magistrate Vandana Mishra wrote to the Director of the Archaeological Directorate, requesting a survey of ancient pilgrimage sites and wells in the area. The letter highlighted the cultural and historical significance of the sites, emphasizing the need for expert evaluation. "The wells and temples hold immense historical value. Establishing their antiquity through scientific methods like

carbon dating will strengthen our preservation efforts," said a senior official associated with the survey. With the survey now completed, the ASI team is expected to submit a detailed report in the coming weeks. Local authorities hope the findings will not only illuminate the historical legacy of Sambhal but also support heritage conservation initiatives and boost cultural tourism in the region.

Arunachal Minister expresses concern over declining livestock numbers in State

PTI ■ ITANAGAR

Arunachal Pradesh animal husbandry minister Gabriel D. Murmu on Friday expressed concern over the state's declining livestock numbers and milk productivity and urged department officials to work sincerely to reverse the trend. "The current situation is discouraging, with per capita milk availability dropping significantly. We must work sincerely to change this," he said while chairing a review meeting at the civil secretariat. The minister, who also holds charge of veterinary and dairy development departments, emphasised the importance of data-driven development plans and directed officials to ensure accurate data collection for the livestock census and vaccination programmes, according to an official statement. The meeting was convened to review the progress of the 21st Quinquennial Livestock Census and the fourth round of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) vaccination, among other critical issues. Wangsu stressed the need for accurate data collection and timely reporting, urging district officers to ensure the efficient completion of the census and vaccination coverage. "Without correct data, we cannot effectively address challenges or secure necessary resources," he said. The minister also directed the



department to speed up the setting up of dairy cooperative societies (DCS) and identify dairy farmers for targeted interventions. "Every new development plan must align with a comprehensive master plan to ensure efficiency and sustainability," he added. He also stressed strict adherence to the vaccination schedules under the National Animal Disease Control Program (NADCP) to achieve 100 per cent coverage by mid-January. Wangsu emphasised the importance of sero-surveillance and sero-monitoring and urged district officers to follow protocols set by ICAR-NIVEDI (National Institute of Veterinary Epidemiology and Disease Informatics). He called for increased awareness and outreach, urging district officers to organise training sessions and camps with NGOs, self-help groups, and livestock societies. "Building strong relationships with livestock owners is key to the suc-

cess of our programmes," he said. District Veterinary Officers (DVOs) presented progress reports on the livestock census, FMD vaccination, disease monitoring, and programmes such as the National Livestock Mission (NLM) and Atma Nirbhar Pashu Palan Yojana (ANPPY). They also highlighted challenges like manpower shortages, logistical issues, and infrastructure gaps. Acknowledging these challenges, Wangsu assured officials that the state government is committed to revamping the livestock and dairy sector under Chief Minister Pema Khandu's vision. "The Pema 3.0 government is focused on enhancing the animal husbandry sector. We are preparing an action plan, but success depends on accurate data and collective effort. Let us elevate Arunachal Pradesh as a model state in livestock management and animal health," he said.

Judicial probe ordered into Parbhani violence, sarpanch killing at Beed district

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

After four days of ruckus in the Maharashtra Legislature on the two issues, chief minister Devendra Fadnavis on Friday ordered separate judicial inquiries into the violence over the the desecration of replica of Constitution at the statue of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar at Parbhani and the brutal kidnapping-murder of a Sarpanch in the Beed district. Fadnavis made an announcement to this effect, while responding to a debate on the two incidents in the State Assembly. It may be recalled that a day after a glass-encased replica of the Indian Constitution was vandalised by some miscreants near Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's statue located outside the local railway station, protesters resorted to large-scale violence, arson and stone-pelting, amid a bandh called by the Ambedkarite activists on December 11. One of the accused, Somnath Suryawanshi, who was arrested in case of the violence, died in the judicial custody on 15 December. Suryawanshi hailed from the Wadar community. On December 9, Sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh of Massejeog village in Beed district was kidnapped and murdered brutally. Following the incident, the police arrest-



ed NCP (AP) activist Vishnu Chate, who was expelled from his party immediately afterwards. Chate was earlier allegedly involved in an extortion case of Rs. 3 crore. The police have found a link between the extortion case involving a windmill company and the Sarpanch murder case. In the previous (extortion) case lodged by the local windmill company, one of the accused was Walimiki Karad, who is alleged to have been linked to a senior NCP (AP) minister Dhananjay Munde. Acknowledging the prevalence of lawlessness in Beed and attempts to create an atmosphere of anarchy in Beed, Fadnavis said that the State government would initiate a 'cleansing process' to protect the local industrialists from harassment. Fadnavis said that Karad and his accomplices had been booked for extortion of Rs 2 crore and will be charged under Maharashtra Control of

Organised Crime Act, 1999 in the Beed sarpanch murder case. "We have decided to transfer the Beed Superintendent of Police. A Special Investigation Team has already been constituted under the inspector general of police to probe the killing incident. In addition, a judicial probe will be held to fix responsibility and suggest ways to cleanse the lawlessness being witnessed in Beed district. The report of the probe is expected in six months," the chief minister said. Condemning the large-scale violence at Parbhani, Fadnavis said: "The violence is unacceptable. The police have arrested the culprit - a person named Pawar - in connection with the desecration of the replica of the Indian constitution. The culprit is a mentally challenged person. The police have found medical records to confirm his condition and there was no criminal act behind his act of vandalising the replica of the Indian constitution." The chief minister said that a judicial probe will be conducted into the large-scale violence, arson and stone-throwing that took place after the desecration and the death of an arrested person in judicial custody. "Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar is not limited to any caste. He belongs to all," Fadnavis said.

Congress MLAs stage protest in MP on Assembly premises

PNS ■ BHOPAL

Amid a nationwide uproar over the Ambedkar row, Congress MLAs in Madhya Pradesh staged a protest on the Assembly premises on Friday, holding copies of the Indian Constitution. The demonstration, led by Leader of Opposition in the State Assembly Umang Singh, witnessed Congress legislators dressed in blue stoles as a mark of respect to Bhimrao Ambedkar. The protest took place near Mahatma Gandhi's statue at the Assembly premises. This move was seen as an expression of solidarity with the Congress central leadership, which held a similar demonstration at the Parliament premises a day earlier. During the protest, the Congress MLAs raised slogans such as 'Ambedkar Ka Apman, Nahi Sahega Hindustan' (India will not tolerate Ambedkar's insult), criticizing what they termed as the BJP's attempts to denigrate Ambedkar. Umang Singh accused the BJP of insulting Ambedkar during parliamentary proceedings and alleged that Delhi Police had lodged false cases against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi at the behest of the ruling party. He stated, "First, BJP



leaders insulted Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in Parliament, and when Congress leaders protested, fake charges were imposed on our leader Rahul Gandhi. This is unacceptable." The controversy intensified on Thursday when Rahul Gandhi, along with Congress MPs, staged a protest at Parliament, leading to a heated confrontation between ruling and opposition members. The clash escalated into a physical altercation, resulting in injuries on both sides. A 70-year-old BJP MP from Balasore, Odisha, reportedly fell and sustained a head injury during the scuffle and was admitted to a hospital. Congress, on the other hand, claimed that party president Mallikarjun Kharge collapsed during the incident. Later, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju alleged that Rahul Gandhi and some Congress MPs "physically assaulted" BJP legislators during their protest outside the Parliament gate.

From gold to silver Ramlala's temple in Ayodhya receives record donations

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ AYODHYA

The Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust in Ayodhya has witnessed an unprecedented surge in donations, collecting approximately ₹183 crore from April to October 2024. This includes ₹78 crore from direct contributions and ₹105 crore in bank interest. On average, 70,000 to 80,000 devotees visit Ramlala's temple daily, with numbers doubling on weekends and tripling during major festivals. Monthly donations have reached ₹10 crore through various channels, including offerings in the temple's hundi

(donation box), counters, RTGS, cheques, and online transfers. International devotees have also contributed about ₹11 crore so far. The temple has received a substantial amount of gold and silver from devotees. Over the past four years, offerings have totaled 940 kg of silver and 20 kg of gold during the last fiscal year (March 2023 to April 2024). In the current financial year, from April to October, devotees have donated 7.29 kg of gold and 170 kg of silver. According to a temple trust member: "The devotion we witness is overwhelming. People come with their entire families to offer what they



can, from coins to precious metals. It is a reflection of deep faith and shared purpose." To ensure authenticity, the Government of India's Security Printing and Minting Corporation is tasked with verifying the quality of these donations at its Hyderabad facility. Temple administrator Suresh Mishra added, "We follow strict protocols to maintain transparency. Every donation, big or small, is meticulously accounted for." The trust has also been actively expanding the Ram Janmabhoomi complex, purchasing about 37 acres of land over the past four years at a cost of ₹328 crore. Recent

acquisitions between August and October alone amounted to over ₹29 crore for more than two acres. Trust member Anil Mishra shared, "The land acquisitions are crucial for accommodating the ever-growing number of devotees. The aim is to create a spiritual and serene environment that enhances the overall pilgrimage experience." According to trust sources, these acquisitions aim to accommodate the increasing number of pilgrims and ensure smooth temple operations. The Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust remains committed to enhancing visitor experiences

as the temple's grand inauguration approaches. Meanwhile, the construction of the 161-foot-high Ram temple's spire commenced recently and is expected to be completed in four months. Additionally, seven other temples in the complex, dedicated to seven sages, are anticipated to be completed within the same timeframe. The trust has also received significant contributions from international devotees, reflecting the global significance of the temple. Efforts are underway to ensure that the temple complex is ready to accommodate the influx of pilgrims expected during the grand inauguration.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

An abhorrible practice

The SC's observation on witchcraft practices is a timely reminder that women still face humiliation under various pretexts

In a landmark observation, the Supreme Court of India recently described the victimisation of women under accusations of witchcraft as a 'blot on the constitutional spirit.' The case before the apex court, involving egregious acts of abuse and violence against women in Bihar's Champaran district, has brought the spotlight on the persistent issue of witch-hunting in the country. The court's remarks emphasise the urgent need to eradicate such practices that undermine the dignity, equality and human rights enshrined in the Constitution of India. The bench, comprising Justices CT Ravikumar and Sanjay Karol, was dealing with a petition concerning a disturbing incident that occurred in early 2020. Women were publicly assaulted, disrobed, and accused of witchcraft. One of the accused individuals, Lakshmi Devi, along with others, faced charges for these heinous acts. Reportedly there was police apathy towards the victim. The apex court expressed its shock and dismay at the brutality of the acts and the apparent indifference of the legal machinery.



Such incidents, the court observed, are a direct affront to the dignity and rights of women, particularly in rural areas where equality remains a distant goal. The court highlighted the role of superstition, patriarchy, and social control in perpetuating witch-hunting practices. It called for the eradication of these regressive beliefs, which often target vulnerable women such as widows and the elderly. Indeed, such practices stand in stark opposition to the scientific temper mandated by the Constitution. Unfortunately these are not isolated cases but are rampant in rural India. The Constitution of India guarantees justice, liberty, equality and dignity for all citizens. Practices like witch-hunting undermine these principles and perpetuate a culture of discrimination and violence against women. What is more shocking is the apathy of the government in such cases who are equal partners in crime. The court reiterated that the responsibility of investigating and adjudicating authorities is heightened in cases involving violations of human dignity. The Supreme Court also criticised the state for not challenging the High Court's non-speaking order, which granted a stay on the proceedings. The bench's observations underscore the need for a multi-pronged approach to address witch-hunting. This includes strengthening laws to explicitly criminalise witch-hunting and ensuring stringent punishment for perpetrators. Besides, promoting scientific temper and educating communities about the illegality and immorality of witch-hunting. But most important is establishing support mechanisms for survivors, including legal aid, rehabilitation, and psychological counseling. The government machinery also need to be sensitised in dealing with such cases. The Supreme Court's remarks serve as a clarion call to address the deep-seated issues of superstition and patriarchy that enable witch-hunting. The victimisation of women under such baseless allegations is not merely a social evil but a constitutional failure.

Practices like witch-hunting undermine these principles and perpetuate a culture of discrimination and violence against women. What is more shocking is the apathy of the government in such cases who are equal partners in crime. The court reiterated that the responsibility of investigating and adjudicating authorities is heightened in cases involving violations of human dignity. The Supreme Court also criticised the state for not challenging the High Court's non-speaking order, which granted a stay on the proceedings. The bench's observations underscore the need for a multi-pronged approach to address witch-hunting. This includes strengthening laws to explicitly criminalise witch-hunting and ensuring stringent punishment for perpetrators. Besides, promoting scientific temper and educating communities about the illegality and immorality of witch-hunting. But most important is establishing support mechanisms for survivors, including legal aid, rehabilitation, and psychological counseling. The government machinery also need to be sensitised in dealing with such cases. The Supreme Court's remarks serve as a clarion call to address the deep-seated issues of superstition and patriarchy that enable witch-hunting. The victimisation of women under such baseless allegations is not merely a social evil but a constitutional failure.

PICTALK



Elephants inside an enclosure at Alipore Zoological Garden in Kolkata

PTI

The key to tackling food security and climate change

Climate-Smart Agriculture emerges as a transformative solution, combining sustainable practices with strategies to mitigate emissions and secure food systems

The demand for food is steadily increasing due to dietary changes and the growing global population. Currently, approximately 690 million people or 8.9 per cent of the world's population suffer from hunger. By 2050, the world will need to produce nearly 70 per cent more food to sustain an estimated 9 billion people, which makes food security an increasingly critical challenge. Climate change further exacerbates this problem, intensifying the environmental impacts of food production. Agriculture, while essential, is also a major contributor to the climate crisis, generating between 19 per cent and 29 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Economic losses from natural disasters are also rising globally, and the agriculture sector is particularly vulnerable. According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), disaster-affected nations experienced direct economic losses of \$2,908 billion between 1998 and 2017, with climate-related calamities accounting for 77 per cent of these losses. In recent years, the impacts



of climate change on agriculture have become more pronounced. For example, India is projected to experience up to a 9 per cent reduction in key crop yields nationwide between 2010 and 2039 due to climate change. Regional impacts could be even more severe, with potential losses of up to 35 per cent for rice, 20 per cent for wheat, 50 per cent for sorghum, 13 per cent for barley, and 60 per cent for maize. Climate change adversely affects food production and supply chains while accelerating the degradation of already fragile ecosystems. To counter these challenges, it is imperative to adopt Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) practices, which aim to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change on agriculture while sustainably enhancing productivity and income. CSA integrates sustainable agri-

cultural practices and rural development goals, contributing to broader objectives like better environmental management and hunger reduction, as outlined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). **Climate-Smart Agriculture Practices in India:** India is actively adopting Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) practices to combat climate change's impact on agriculture. These include conservation agriculture techniques like zero-tillage to boost yields and reduce emissions, agroforestry to enhance biodiversity and resilience, and precision farming technologies such as GPS and GIS to optimise resources. Water management strategies like drip irrigation improve efficiency, while efficient livestock management boosts revenue and product quality. Solar power is increasingly used for irrigation, reducing reliance on fossil fuels. Practices such as crop diversification, rotation with legumes, and the cultivation of climate-resilient varieties enhance sustainability, while integrated pest management and crop residue management minimise chemical use and pollution, ensuring

long-term agricultural and environmental health. **Challenges to Climate-Smart Agriculture in India:** Despite its numerous benefits, the adoption of CSA practices in India faces several challenges. **Climate Variability:** Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and diminishing water resources threaten to lower crop productivity by 10-40 per cent by the end of the century. **Rising sea levels, cyclones, and storm surges** endanger agricultural lands, especially in regions like the Sundarbans, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. **High Costs:** Implementing CSA methods often involves significant financial investment, which can deter farmers. **Policy and Regulatory Barriers:** Inadequate policies and restrictive regulations hinder widespread CSA adoption. The adoption of climate-smart agriculture is no longer optional but an urgent necessity.

(The writer is Assistant Professor Agronomy, College of Agriculture & Environmental Technology, Surajmal University, Kichha, Uttarakhand; views are personal)



HIMANSHU VERMA

How the Places of Worship Act (1991) is being dealt with at present is due to many not being aware of how and why the Act came about. Evidently, the then Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao (1991-96) in his heart of hearts was a staunch Hindu. He was anxious to contribute to help solving the then existing—or festering—problem at Ayodhya. Most developments that took place at the Janmasthan on December 6, 1992, spoke of Rao's silent participation in the cause of Ram Lalla.

The most clinching evidence of the Prime Minister's contribution was indicated by the facts when I left Ayodhya on that momentous day. It was 5:45 pm; all the three domes of the Babri edifice had been brought down. All the ten walls were still standing and so was the rest of the structure. Soon after we sat in our car to proceed to Lucknow, my companions and I heard on the transistor radio that the Uttar Pradesh government of then chief minister Kalyan Singh had been dismissed by the Centre, and Governor's rule imposed. That meant whatever was done thereafter was the handiwork directed by someone at the Centre. At the Centre, even the then-home secretary Madhav Godbole is on record saying that he did not know a thing about what was happening and had learnt about it only through the radio and television.

This author has not met nor knows anyone who has claimed that he has seen even a photograph of the edifice walls without their domes. At 10 pm that very night, PM Narasimha Rao addressed the nation on television, wherein he assured the people of India that he would rebuild the Babri Masjid as soon as possible. This gave the impression that the entire edifice had been destroyed. The walls were tall and thick as was the style of the architecture of the 16th century. The chabutara around the walls was also solid and tall, apart from being large. Even the domes, which had been the most vulnerable part of the structure,



took selected men of the Uttar Pradesh Public Works Department (PWD) to bring them down, an endeavour that began in the morning and lasted till 4:30 pm when the last dome fell. I came to know that they were men of the PWD, from two of the five photographers whose cameras had been smashed and they beaten up and left with bleeding faces. The photographers thought they were obliging the karsevaks, whereas for government servants, being photographed would have cost them their jobs.

A lady IPS officer who was second-in-command at Ayodhya on that day, in answer to my query told me later that the police had instructions not to intervene unless lives were in danger; presumably, not property. She assured me that there were 15,000 paramilitary personnel in readiness at Faizabad, just 4 km away. Incidentally, she added there were consummate numbers of bulldozers in the nearby vicinity, along with their operators. Evidently, all these preparations were deployed to see the end of the Babri edifice over the next 60 hours. Indeed, an enormous thing to accomplish, in such a short time. All this happened under Central rule. To restate, the Kalyan Singh government was nowhere in power after 5:45



EVIDENTLY, THESE AFGHANS HAD BROUGHT SOME ARCHITECTS WITH THEM, WHO BUILT A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF BUILDINGS, INCLUDING MOSQUES

pm on December 6. It is only after being aware of these facts can one appreciate the need for the Places of Worship Act. PM Rao, being a Congressman, had to preserve his 'secular' image.

The above-mentioned legislation implies how much the Rao government cared to protect the character of every place of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947. Ayodhya had to be the exception as it was then an object of litigation in the Supreme Court of India. Normally, while legislating, it is taken for granted that anything sub judice has its own rules. But Ayodhya was clearly brought under a provision of being excluded from the ambit of the Act, presumably because it was sub judice. Nevertheless, it was specifically kept out; in fact, it was a separate clause if the Act. Consequently, when being dealt with in the courts, never was Ayodhya, particularly the Janmasthan, mentioned even once in the context of the Places of Act.

The thrust of this submission is that this act need not be taken seriously. What this statement means is that a legitimate difference must be made between genuine places of worship and those edifices or structures that are the outcome of dacoity. There are edifices that were either directly con-



PRAFULL GORADIA

verted from temples to mosques like the Adhai Din Ka Jhopda, about a furlong away from Ajmer Sharif. Three temples were confined into one within 60 hours, or two-and-a-half days, so that the invader Mohammad Ghori would be able to pray there on his return from the decisive Second Battle of Tarain in 1192 AD. There was no time to erase the Hindu structure. The pristine design has survived till this day. There are many such examples until the Lodi Dynasty conquered north India. Evidently, these Afghans had brought some architects with them, who built a significant number of buildings, including mosques. How can the courts refuse to hear and try a case when someone petitions against daylight dacoity of a temple, which is either converted immediately like the one described above in Ajmer, or brought down and rebuilt like the Jama Masjid in Ahmedabad? Surely, dacoities can't be condoned out of hand? On the other hand, genuine cases of mosques having become victims of Hindu mischief can be kept out of the courts under the Places of Worship Act.

(The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OPPOSITION TARGETS AMIT SHAH

Madam — The Opposition claimed Home Minister Amit Shah had insulted B.R. Ambedkar. Accusing the Congress Party of opportunism, Shah charged then-Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru with belittling Ambedkar, asserting that his resignation from the Cabinet would have no effect on the government. Shah also pointed out that when Ambedkar contested a Lok Sabha by-election in Bombay, the Congress not only fielded a candidate against him but Nehru personally campaigned to ensure Ambedkar's defeat. Amit Shah hammered home the point about Congress singing paeans to Ambedkar only after it suffered multiple drubbings in elections, remarking the party now opportunistically chanting, "Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar... itna naam Bhagwan ka lete toh janmo tak swarg mil jata." The Opposition seized upon this admittedly poorly framed sentence to accuse Shah of insulting Ambedkar. Of course, this interpretation was far from the truth. Nevertheless, Shah's clumsy construction provided the Opposition with an opportunity to embarrass him. Shah's response during Tuesday's debate was a trenchant critique of the Congress Party. This frontal assault left Congress members squirming, with only feeble attempts to counter Shah's barbs. The Congress's lip service to Ambedkar continues to find few takers.

N Sadasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

DEBATE ON SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS

Madam — The proposal of holding simultaneous elections is fraught with a lack of clarity in its implementation and practicality for a country as vast and diverse as its expanse. The proposal has several loopholes, like midterm polls and the President's rule, and there is a lack of consideration for regional parties as well. Primarily, the proposal fails to address how precisely the central government plans to hold simultaneous elec-

Revamp education system



The article 'From Kothari to NEP' presents a good analysis. No doubt, there is a conscious attempt made to undermine Indian education with long-term planning to subjugate the youth to be religiously oriented instead of scientifically and technologically excellent sections. The NEP has no provision to improve the standard of education and make it globally competitive. Still, the cream churned out migrants to countries abroad in search of fabulous pack-

ages and incentivised talent recognition. Medical colleges are growing in number, but the standard suffers due to insufficient expert teaching professionals, and focus has shifted to pecuniary aspects rather than imparting knowledge. Privatisation of education has its toll in terms of knowledge and employability, besides denying the aspiring poor its accessibility. The government coming up with programmes to part with skills to graduated youth is a clear example of this fact. The avaricious private players are producing marks without knowledge and degrees without employable skills. Astrology is a subject that could be learnt by anyone at any time and anywhere but need not be a part of the curriculum in university. Therefore, there is a dire need to study the whole system and make education an objective one rather than a tool to hasten the process of communalisation.

A G Rajmohan | Rampur

tions for the nation's 96.88 crore voters at the same time, as such a gargantuan exercise will be practically challenging to execute considering India's demography. Also, conducting all the elections in the same year becomes a major federal issue because it would force current state legislatures to shorten or lengthen their terms to make the election dates coincide with the national deadline. The attempt to impose an artificial cycle of elections and restrict electoral choice compromises the spirit of democracy, which is a direct threat to the constitutional recognition of India as a democratic republic. A rushed and ill-conceived policy can produce unprecedented challenges to the polity of the nation.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

IMPOSE BAN ON FIRECRACKERS

Madam — In the recent verdict, the Supreme Court of India, instructed the Uttar Pradesh as well as the Haryana government to impose the blanket ban on the firecrackers in order to tackle the

menace of air pollution. Today, depleting air quality is among the biggest troubles for the majority of Indian cities. But the million-dollar question is, does such a blanket ban really work to control the air pollution problem in the Indian cities? Often the things that are banned officially were black-marketed unofficially. This is the actual reality of almost everything banned so far, be it crackers, liquor, or anything else. The extent of air pollution is so huge that even anti-pollution measures like Stage IV of GRAP failed to meet the very commitment. The behavioural changing approach is the need of the hour; more and more awareness has to be established in this regard along with more and more ecological improvement initiatives for tackling this very menace of depleting air quality. Let's us all walk the talk with respect to the circular economy and sustainable practices to improve nature in a real sense.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

UNLOCKING LIFE'S TRUE POTENTIAL

Embracing faith, cultivating humility and awakening spiritual awareness can elevate life



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

I am well and truly surprised that good people don't turn to God more actively than doing some rituals, going to a religious place participating in some festivals, etc. They probably are not realising what they are missing. God is ever so keen to take us in His team. He needs lots of us either to act as His 'nimitta' (instrument) as Arjuna was for a specific purpose or just be active mediums. Good people are best placed to be mediums for God's bounties to be given to other good people. They form the bulk of people, who support the working of the Creation. And they are amply rewarded for their 'karmas' (acts). For example, farmers are crucial for keeping humanity well-fed. Teachers are crucial for educating the masses.

Parents keep the Creation going by giving birth to children and then rearing them till they can be useful citizens. Doctors look after the health of people. Workers take the load of manual requirements of humanity. Good officers fulfil the administrative requirements of our societies. Priests enable us to be in contact with God. I can go on with policemen, shopkeepers, bankers, etc. They all benefit by doing so. Why aren't these actively pursuing a good connection with God? They can gain much more.

The first reason has to be a lack of faith due to widespread ignorance. The common man, even the educated class, is helplessly unaware of all the benefits one can gain by taking shelter from God,



who owns everything. We get attracted to the richest, the most powerful, the very famous, etc., but ignore the real owner of all, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God. To top it all, God controls everything. The richest normally try to accumulate more, and many have some money to give to charity, but God has everything to give; you just have to become deserving.

The second reason has to be the overinflated ego of practically everyone. It is hard to accept that God is too big to comprehend and we are too small to accept. But that is reality. By closing our eyes like a duck we don't do ourselves any favour. And we remain sitting ducks against 'karmaphalas', which surely manifest and cause havoc in the lives of all, barring a few, who have taken shelter in God. The third reason is keeping poor company.

Who do we like to spend time with? Those who criticise one and all and who can tell jokes of the kind you know. Public image is another handicap. Only the losers turn to God. We don't have to; we will manage. Surely, this management ends in painful death only. Devotees of God and their lives on a high and are assured of better birth also. Then spiritual activities do not enthuse; they appear so childish. We would rather be grown-ups and be subservient to fellow beings, who are likely to exploit us as much as possible. So we don't get started and lose out.

This article is an open invitation to fence sitters if they chance to read it. I will cite a few amazing benefits if one does that. There will be great cleaning of the self both internally and externally. Such are the powers of spiritual activities. One will become dutiful and most likely begin to live by dharma. One will not limit oneself just to knowing spiritual truths but will also implement them in life. If a painter knows how to paint and does not paint, what is he or she likely to gain? The Creation has been designed to smoothen the lives of devotees.

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

Philippines: The broken promise of democracy



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

The resurgence of the Marcoses, the entrenchment of the Aquinos, and the dominance of families like the Dutertes show the enduring grip of oligarchy



The 1987 Philippine Constitution, crafted in the aftermath of the 1986 People Power Revolution, was supposed to mark the dawn of a new democratic era. The ousting of Ferdinand Marcos Sr., after decades of corruption, repression, and dynastic rule, was a victory for the Filipino people, or so they were told. Yet, the Constitution, supposedly a tool for dismantling the oppressive old order, contains a glaring, unimplemented clause: Article II, Section 26, which bans political dynasties. Nearly four decades later, this promise remains a cruel joke, the prohibition nothing more than a symbol of a nation shackled by its feudal past. Political dynasties thrive unabated, and the Philippines remains trapped in a cycle of oligarchy, where power is passed down like a family heirloom, not earned through democratic means. The rise of Corazon Aquino, the "hero" of People Power, has proven to be a double-edged sword.

While she restored democracy in name, she failed to eradicate the dynastic forces that had long plagued the country. Instead of dismantling the Marcos empire and the dynasties that thrived in its wake, Aquino's presidency paved the way for a new set of ruling families to stake their claim on the throne. The irony is staggering: Aquino, the symbol of resistance to Marcos, was unable to disarm the very forces that helped prop up the dictatorship. Her administration's failure to enact meaningful reform paved the way for the Marcos family's return to power, with Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.'s rise in 2022 exposing the unyielding grip of dynastic politics, illuminating the eternal truth behind the words of José Rizal, a true revolutionary executed by the Spanish in Manila: "The Filipino is not a slave of the Spanish Government. He is a slave of his own people." The Marcoses, who plundered billions from the nation's coffers, are not the only ones to have manipulated the system to their advantage.

Under Cory Aquino, the promise of land reform was shattered, epitomised by the Mendiola Massacre of 1987, where farmers demanding land reform were gunned down. The Aquino family, despite their image as the champions of democracy, have blood on their hands, betraying the very



THE IRONY IS STAGGERING: AQUINO, THE SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE TO MARCOS, WAS UNABLE TO DISARM THE VERY FORCES THAT HELPED PROP UP THE DICTATORSHIP. HER ADMINISTRATION'S FAILURE TO ENACT MEANINGFUL REFORM PAVED THE WAY FOR THE MARCOS FAMILY'S RETURN TO POWER

people they claim to defend. The hypocrisy of the political elite is staggering, with families like the Marcoses and the Aquinos using their histories of violence and corruption as stepping stones to further entrench their power. But the Aquino-Marcos rivalry is only the tip of the iceberg. In Mindanao, the Duterte family's hold on power predates Rodrigo Duterte's presidency, with a history of death squad killings and iron-fisted rule. As mayor of Davao City, Duterte ruled with an iron fist, silencing dissent and using extrajudicial executions to rid the streets of perceived enemies.

His presidency, marked by a brutal war on drugs that left thousands dead, further entrenched the dynastic system, where political power is synonymous with violence and impunity. Duterte's rise to the highest office in the land was not a victory for the people, but for a political family that used populist rhetoric to cloak its real agenda: maintaining a stranglehold on power.

The Macapagal-Arroyo family, meanwhile, turned corruption into an art form. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's presidency was marred by scandal after scandal—from the "Hello Garci" election fraud to the NBN-ZTE broadband deal, which saw billions in kickbacks siphoned off to the ruling elite. Despite the overwhelming evidence of corruption, she escaped any lasting accountability, a reflection of the Philippines' toxic political culture where the powerful are above the law.

Like so many others, she found ways to use the machinery of the state to protect her interests. The brutality of the Philippines' political system is not just figurative. The 2009 Maguindanao Massacre, orchestrated by the Ampatuan clan, remains the deadliest attack on journalists in history. Fifty-eight people, including 32 journalists,

were slaughtered in cold blood in a bid to eliminate electoral competition.

And yet, despite the horrific nature of the crime, justice has been slow and incomplete, as political dynasties use their influence to shield themselves from the consequences of their actions. In regions like Cebu and Ilocos Norte, political dynasties such as the Osmeñas, Garcias, and Fariñases manipulate elections and use their wealth to maintain control, treating public office as their domain. This cycle of violence and impunity, where the ruling class prioritises their interests, extends to the economic realm, with families like the villagers growing their wealth through political power. The system persists due to cultural deference to family authority, weak institutions, and pervasive poverty, with voters often coerced into supporting the very dynasties that sustain their suffering.

Foreign powers, particularly the United States, have long been complicit in this system. During the Marcos era, the US provided crucial support to a regime known for its human rights abuses, all in the name of anti-communism. This foreign patronage emboldened the Marcoses and set a dangerous precedent for other dynasties, who continued to seek validation and support from foreign powers. The interplay between domestic power struggles and international interests further deepens the fractures within the Philippines, exacerbating the country's internal divisions.

The Philippines' educational system, which fails to foster critical thinking or civic engagement, ensures that the cycle of dynastic rule will continue. Schools produce citizens ill-equipped to challenge the status quo, while the media, often co-opted by powerful families, serves to protect the interests of the elite. Social media, too, has become a tool for dynasties to spread propaganda, rehabilitate their tarnished images,

and silence critics.

The current political spectacle centred around Vice President Sara Duterte's public threats against President Marcos, is a stark reminder of how fragile the Philippines' democracy truly is. The alliance between the Marcoses and the Dutertes, forged during the 2022 election, is now on the brink of collapse. What once seemed like a partnership between the North and south's ruling classes has devolved into a bitter feud, exposing the cracks in a political system built on corruption, nepotism, and violence.

This is not a battle for the people's interests, but a struggle for control between two families, each vying for supremacy in a system that has failed its citizens. This feud is not just political—it has geopolitical ramifications. Marcos' pivot towards the US and his opposition to China's claims in the South China Sea have reignited regional tensions, while Duterte's pro-China stance during his presidency deepened divides within the Filipino elite.

This divergence in foreign policy has intensified the rift between the Marcos and Duterte families, as they seek to align themselves with opposing global powers.

The Philippines, caught between these imperial rivalries, faces not only internal political decay but external pressures that threaten to destabilise the nation further. As the midterm elections approach, this dynastic battle threatens to unravel whatever semblance of governance remains. Marcos seeks to consolidate power, while Sara Duterte faces the looming threat of impeachment. Yet, the Duterte family's influence, particularly in Mindanao, ensures that this battle will not stay within the confines of parliament. The streets could erupt, worsening societal divides.

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

Patent risks: Key strategies for businesses amid rising litigation costs

Businesses today must adopt proactive strategies like Freedom-to-Operate searches and patent liability insurance to mitigate risks and protect their innovations

In November 2024, a US jury ruled in favour of Netlist, a company specialising in computer memory and storage solutions, ordering Samsung to pay \$118 million in damages for willfully infringing Netlist's patented technology. This follows an earlier verdict in April 2024, where another jury found Samsung guilty of similar patent infringements, awarding \$303 million to Netlist. Together, these penalties amount to \$421 million—an extraordinary sum that could destabilise even the most established organisations. In India, the Delhi High Court recently delivered a landmark judgment favoring the plaintiff, Antenna Inc., in a patent infringement case against Mobi Antenna Technologies.



AMIT SINGH

The court issued a permanent injunction against the defendant and ordered them to pay damages of USD 26.04 million (INR 216 crores) to compensate for the plaintiff's loss of profits due to the infringement. **Protecting Intellectual Property:** A recent American survey highlights the substantial financial commitment of research-based organisations in the pharmaceutical sector. The annual R&D budget in

this industry often runs into hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars. The cost of developing a new drug ranges from \$314 million to \$4.46 billion, depending on the therapeutic area and assumptions used in data modeling. These figures emphasise the immense investments required in R&D, making intellectual property (IP) protection and preemptive strategies essential. In contrast, R&D expenditures in non-pharmaceutical sectors are generally lower. However, extensive patenting is increasingly common, posing risks for companies introducing new processes or products without adequate precautions. A company might unknowingly infringe on a competitor's patent, leading to unforeseen and costly litigation.

Patent disputes can result in significant delays, financial losses, and reputational damage, even when unintentional. **Escalating Costs of Patent Litigation:** The median cost of litigating a patent lawsuit through trial ranges from \$600,000 for cases with less than \$1 million at stake to \$3.625 million for cases involving over \$25 million. Similar trends are observed in India, where litigation and settlement costs are substantial. Sometimes, defendants find themselves embroiled in patent litigation due to unintentional or inadvertent infringement. In such cases, the defendants are essentially victims, underscoring the need for safeguards to prevent unnecessary legal disputes. Tools to Mitigate Patent



Infringement Risks: **Patent Liability Insurance** One effective safeguard against the financial risks of unintended patent infringement is patent liability insurance. This insurance, provided by specialised firms, helps cover legal expenses and damages arising from unintentional infringement. While popular in several countries, its adoption is

steadily growing in India. **Freedom-to-Operate (FTO)** Another cost-effective tool to minimise patent infringement risks is a Freedom-to-Operate (FTO) search. This process evaluates whether a new product or process infringes on existing patents, enabling informed business decisions and reducing the likelihood of legal disputes. Many companies conduct FTO searches before initiating new R&D projects to mitigate financial and reputational risks. An FTO search involves analysing granted and pending patents to form a techno-legal opinion on whether a product, process, or service infringes existing IP rights. These searches can be conducted using free databases provided by intellectual property offices,

with directories available on the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) website. **When Patents Block Freedom to Operate** If an FTO search reveals conflicting patents, companies have several options: 1. Licensing Agreements: Companies can negotiate licensing or purchase patent rights to gain access to the necessary technology. 2. Patent Pools: Collaborative agreements among companies in the same technological field allow shared access to patents, resolving disputes and controlling costs, especially for essential products like medicines. 3. Designing Around: Companies can modify existing processes or products to avoid infringement.

Steps to Minimise Litigation Risks: Regardless of the strategy chosen, it is crucial for companies to address patent infringement risks early in the research and commercialization process. Proactive measures such as in-licensing, cross-licensing, patent pooling, and designing around can help avoid future disputes. A systematic FTO search before launching a new product is indispensable for minimizing infringement risks. While an FTO search cannot completely eliminate the possibility of litigation due to limitations in patent databases and search expertise, it significantly reduces potential threats. *(The writer is deputy controller of patents and designs, Kolkata.; views are personal)*

Pakistan's ballistic missile programme emerging threat to US: White House

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Asserting that Pakistan's developing sophisticated missile technology will give it the capability to strike targets well beyond South Asia, including in the US, a top White House official said on Thursday that the Asian country's actions are an emerging threat to the United States.

Such a remark by the top White House official comes a day after the US slapped sanctions on four Pakistani entities, including the state-owned flagship aerospace and defence agency — National Development Complex (NDC) — on charges of them contributing to Pakistan's ballistic-missile programme.

The other three entities are Akhtar and Sons Private Limited, Affiliates International and Rockside Enterprise. All three are based in Karachi. Based in Islamabad, the NDC is responsible for the ballistic-missile programme. It has worked to acquire items to advance Pakistan's long-range ballistic missile programme.

"As a result, the (Joe) Biden

administration has implemented a series of steps to contend with further development of long-range missile systems. Over the last year, we have issued three rounds of sanctions against non-Pakistani entities that have provided support to Pakistan's ballistic-missile programme," Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer told a think-tank here. "And yesterday, we issued sanctions directly against Pakistan's state-owned National Development Complex, which the United States assesses is involved in the development and production of Pakistan's long-range ballistic missiles, the first time we have sanctioned a Pakistani state-owned enterprise tied to missile development," he said.

"Simply put, we are going to keep the pressure on Pakistan regarding its long-range missile programme, even as we also continue to seek diplomatic resolutions to address our concerns," Finer said in his remarks at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a top American think-tank.

In his remarks, Finer said

recently, Pakistan has developed increasingly sophisticated missile technology, from long-range ballistic missile systems to equipment that would enable the testing of significantly larger rocket motors.

"If these trend lines continue, Pakistan will have the capability to strike targets well beyond South Asia, including in the United States, raising real questions about Pakistan's intentions," he said.

The list of countries that possess both nuclear weapons and the missile capability to directly reach the US homeland is very small, and they tend to be adversarial towards the United States — Russia, North Korea and China — Finer observed. "So candidly, it is hard for us to see Pakistan's actions as anything other than an emerging threat to the United States. Now, leaders across our administration, myself included, have raised these concerns repeatedly with senior Pakistani officials," he said.

"We have been a longtime partner with Pakistan on development, on counter-terrorism and other security issues,

including quite sensitive issues. We have provided support to Islamabad during difficult times and we continue to desire a cooperative relationship in these areas of shared interest," Finer added.

"That makes us question even more why Pakistan will be motivated to develop a capability that could be used against us. Unfortunately, it is our sense that Pakistan has failed to take these concerns and, frankly, the concerns of others in the international community seriously and continues to advance these capabilities," he said.

"Just looking at a map and looking at ranges, we believe that this is fundamentally focused on us," Finer said in response to a question.

"I think that is an inescapable conclusion based on the information that we have got and that is why this is of such great concern because the United States cannot, will not simply sit back and watch the development of this capability that we believe could pose a threat ultimately down the road," Finer said.

AP ■ KYIV

Russian missiles target Kyiv after Ukraine fires US-made missiles across the border

A Russian ballistic missile attack on Ukraine's capital Kyiv early Friday killed at least one person and injured nine others, officials said. Moscow claimed it was in response to a Ukrainian strike on Russian soil using American-made weapons.

At least three loud blasts were heard in Kyiv shortly before sunrise. Ukraine's air force said it intercepted five Iskander short-range ballistic missiles fired at the city. The attack knocked out heating to 630 residential buildings, 16 medical facilities, and 30 schools and kindergartens, the city administration said, and falling missile debris caused damage and sparked fires in three districts.

"We ask citizens to immediately respond to reports of ballistic attack threats, because there is very little time to find shelter," the air force said.

During the almost three years since the war began, Russia has regularly bombarded civilian areas of Ukraine, often in an attempt to cripple the power grid and unnerve Ukrainians. Meanwhile Ukraine, struggling to hold back Russia's bigger army on the front line, has attempted to strike Russian infrastructure supporting the country's war effort.

The Russian Ministry of Defence said the strike was in response to a Ukrainian missile attack on Russia's Rostov border region two days earlier. That attack used six American-made Army Tactical Missile System, known as ATACMS, missiles and four Storm Shadow air-launched missiles provided by the United Kingdom, it said.

That day, Ukraine claimed to



In this photo provided by the Ukrainian Emergency Service, firefighters work on the site of a damaged building after a Russian missile attack in Kyiv, Ukraine on Friday.

have targeted a Rostov oil refinery as part of its campaign to strike Russian infrastructure supporting the country's war effort. The use of Western-supplied weapons to strike Russia has angered the Kremlin. Ukraine fired several American-supplied longer-range missiles into Russia for the first time on November 19 after Washington eased restrictions on their use.

That development prompted Russia to use a new hyperson-

ic missile, called Oreshnik, for the first time. President Vladimir Putin suggested the missile could be used to target government buildings in Kyiv, though there have been no reports of an Oreshnik being used for a second time.

Answering the Ukrainian attack on Rostov on Wednesday, the Defence Ministry said it carried out a group strike with "high-precision, long-range weapons" on the command centre of Ukraine's military intelligence

agency and another location where it said Ukraine's Neptune missile systems are designed and produced.

The attack also targeted Ukrainian ground-based cruise missile systems and US-made Patriot air defence systems, the Defence Ministry said.

"The objectives of the strike have been achieved. All objects are hit," the defence ministry said in a Telegram post. Its claims could not immediately be verified.

India-US defence relationship advancing in terrific, exciting ways: Pentagon

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The defence relationship between India and the US is accelerating and advancing in terrific and exciting ways, the Pentagon has said amidst the transition from the Joe Biden administration to that of President-elect Donald Trump.

"The US-India defence relationship stands on its own. It is accelerating and advancing in terrific and exciting ways, both as it relates to defence industrial base cooperation as well as operational cooperation across the services," Ely Ratner, Assistant Secretary of Defence for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, told

reporters at a news conference here.

"It (the India-US defence ties) is a continuing growth area, even as the India-China relationship waxes and wanes," Ratner said in response to a question.

India has been accorded the status of the Major Defence Partnership by the United States. Biden administration officials have described the defence ties as one of the key pillars of this relationship.

In October, India concluded an agreement with the US for the procurement of 31 General Atomics MQ-9B (16 Sky Guardian and 15 Sea Guardian) remotely-piloted aircraft and their associated

equipment, which will enhance the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities of India's armed forces across all domains.

India and the US concluded the Security of Supply Arrangement (SOSA) this year, enhancing the mutual supply of defence goods and services.

During their meeting in September, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Biden committed to advancing ongoing discussions on aligning their respective defence procurement systems to further enable the reciprocal supply of defence goods and services.

8 dead as speedboat carrying migrants capsizes

AP ■ ATHENS

A speedboat carrying migrants capsized Friday morning off the eastern Greek island of Rhodes, leaving eight dead, Greek authorities said. The coast guard said the incident occurred while the speedboat was carrying out "dangerous maneuvers" to try and evade a patrol vessel, causing migrants to fall into the sea. Eighteen of the migrants were rescued. Rescue workers on three coast guard vessels and a helicopter were working near the resort area of Afantou Beach in the northeast of the island. It was unclear whether other passengers were missing, authorities said.

Eight of the survivors have been hospitalized, local officials said, with one of them in critical condition, according to state-run television.

Rhodes, one of several large Greek islands located near the coast of Turkey, is on a busy illegal smuggling route in the eastern Mediterranean.

At the main port of the island, police and ambulance workers held up sheets of gray tarp as the recovered bodies were carried into an ambulance.

It was the second deadly incident involving migrants in the past week, as authorities in Athens brace for a spike in arrivals as a result of wars in the Middle East. Seven migrants were killed and dozens are believed to be missing after a boat partially sank south of the island of Crete over the weekend — one of four rescue operations during which more than 200 migrants were rescued.

The search south of Crete around the tiny island of Gavdos was called off Wednesday.

UN General Assembly asks court to say what Israel needs to provide in Gaza

AP ■ UNITED NATIONS

The UN General Assembly approved a resolution on Thursday asking the UN's highest court to state what Israel's obligations are in Gaza and the West Bank to provide humanitarian assistance essential for the survival of Palestinian civilians.

The vote on the Norwegian-sponsored resolution seeking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice was 137-12, with 22 abstentions. The United States, Israel's closest ally, voted against the resolution.

Resolutions in the 193-member

General Assembly are not legally binding, though they do reflect world opinion.

It follows the ICJ's condemnation of Israel's rule over lands it captured 57 years ago. In a non-binding opinion in July, the court said Israel's presence in the occupied Palestinian territories is unlawful and called on Israel to end its occupation and halt settlement construction immediately.

Thursday's resolution also follows Israeli laws passed in late October, which take effect in 90 days, that effectively ban the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, known as UNRWA, from operating in the

Palestinian territories.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has stressed that no other UN agency can take on the UNRWA's role and a UN spokesman reiterated on Thursday that under international law, as the occupying power, Israel would be responsible for fulfilling the basic needs of Palestinians if the UNRWA is banned.

Norway's deputy foreign minister, Andreas Kravik, told reporters that the international community has a responsibility to react to tens of thousands of deaths in Gaza and virtually the entire population experiencing

acute hunger, and some near famine.

He said many countries, the UN and its agencies, and aid organisations are ready to step up their humanitarian efforts but the problem is "there is a lack of access".

Israel's UN Ambassador Danny Danon told the assembly before the vote that its members were debating "the same recycled nonsense, where all that matters is attacking Israel and challenge its right to protect its citizens".

"This time the Palestinians are using a new tool in this diplomatic circus: the International Court of Justice," he said.

Chinese national charged with acting as Beijing's agent in local California poll

AP ■ WASHINGTON

A Chinese national was arrested on Thursday on charges of acting as an illegal agent for Beijing when serving as the campaign manager for an unnamed politician elected to a city council in Southern California two years ago.

The arrest of Yaoning "Mike" Sun, 64, came at a time of rising concerns that the Chinese government has cultivated a network of operatives to influence local elections in the US to install politicians who are friendly to Beijing and can help promote Chinese interests.

According to a complaint filed on Tuesday in the US District Court for the Central District of California, Sun is accused of conspiring with Chen Jun, who was sentenced to 20 months last month for acting as an illegal agent of the Chinese government.

Chen, 71, also a Chinese national, pleaded guilty in July to using Chinese money to

bribe federal agents to undermine the anti-Beijing spiritual group Falun Gong. The charge against Sun shows that Chen also conspired to interfere with local elections.

It was not immediately clear if Sun had a lawyer who could speak on his behalf.

Sun was instructed by Chen to write up a report in 2023 to recount to Chinese officials how they helped the local politician get elected, according to the affidavit. Subsequent writings between the two men described the city councilperson as a "new political star" and included a request for USD 80,000 to fund more pro-Beijing activities in the United States, according to the court documents.

Chen asked Sun to list all the mainstream American politicians the city councilperson was familiar with and told Sun that it would be "very effective to elevate" the status of the councilperson in China.

"This case is yet another example of a very disturbing trend:

the People's Republic of China is seeking to influence foreign and domestic policy in the United States," Martin Estrada, US attorney for the Central District of California, said in a call with reporters. "To do so, government officials in China are seeking to help get elected individuals who they see as being friendly to Chinese foreign policy."

The councilperson is not named in court papers. Yaoning Sun is listed as a campaign treasurer for Arcadia city council candidate Eileen Wang on a campaign statement filing stamped in February 2022, according to records on the city's website. In filings later in 2022, another individual is listed as the treasurer, the records show.

Wang ran for election to the city council in 2022 and won. She ran a tutoring services company in the city about 15 miles (24 kilometres) northeast of Los Angeles and has participated in numerous community groups, according to her biography on the city's website.

Venezuelan opp member leaves Argentine diplomatic compound

AP ■ MEXICO CITY

One of the six members of Venezuela's political opposition who have been sheltering for nine months in the Argentine diplomatic compound in the capital, Caracas, abandoned the premises Thursday.

Two people familiar with the situation at the facility confirmed to The Associated Press that Fernando Martinez left the

ambassador's residence and was home. The people spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

The conditions under which Martinez left the compound were not immediately clear.

Since late November, the group has denounced the constant presence outside the residence of Venezuelan intelligence service agents and police. It has also accused the government of President Nicolas Maduro of

cutting electricity and water services.

The government has denied the allegations.

Those who remain at the Argentine ambassador's home include the campaign manager and communications director of opposition powerhouse Maria Corina Machado. The government of President Javier Milei allowed them into the compound in March after authorities loyal to the ruling

party issued warrants for their arrest, accusing them of promoting alleged acts of violence to destabilize the country.

Martinez was involved in a parallel government that the opposition created after Maduro's widely considered sham reelection in 2018 and participated in negotiations between the opposition and the government. He was minister of communications and transportation in the 1990s.

Tabla maestro Zakir Hussain laid to rest in San Francisco

PTI ■ NEW YORK

Zakir Hussain was laid to rest on Thursday at a San Francisco cemetery as renowned percussionist A Sivamani and other artists performed on their drums at a little distance away in a tribute to the tabla maestro.

Hussain, one of the world's most accomplished percussionists, died at a San Francisco hospital on Monday due to complications arising from idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a lung disease. He was 73. He was laid to rest at the Fernwood cemetery in San Francisco on Thursday.

Hundreds of his admirers gathered at Hussain's funeral to pay their last respects. Sivamani and several other musicians played drums at a little distance away to pay him a tribute.

Sivamani told PTI Video, "Rhythm is God, that is you

Zakir bhai. I learned a lot in our journey from 1982 till now. Every moment you are here with us in the rhythm. Every time I hit the rhythm, you are there. We love you Zakir Bhai. Have a lovely journey. Please give my pranam to all the masters."

Hussain, the son of the legendary tabla player Alla Rakha, revolutionised the instrument, taking it beyond the limits of classical music to other forms, including jazz and Western classical.

The celebrated musician, one of India's most well-known, received four Grammy Awards in his career spanning six decades, including three at the 66th Grammy Awards earlier this year. Hussain is survived by his wife Antonia Minnecola and daughters Anisa Qureshi and Isabella Qureshi.

Hussain received the Padma Shri in 1988, the Padma

Bhushan in 2002, and the Padma Vibhushan in 2023.

In his career spanning six decades, the musician worked with several renowned international and Indian artists, but it was his 1973 musical project with English guitarist John McLaughlin, violinist L Shankar, and percussionist TH 'Vikku' Vinayakram that brought together Indian classical and elements of jazz in a fusion hitherto unknown.

Sivamani after Hussain's death in a Facebook post said he would go to San Francisco to see him for the last time.

"No Zakir Bhai, you cannot leave us like this. This is just unbelievable...I'm on the way to San Francisco. I want to see you... one last time...I want to hold your hands... my brother, my Guru... I'm devastated...life will never be the same again," Sivamani had said.

Messages of condolence poured

in on social media as the news of Hussain's demise spread.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi called him a true genius who revolutionised the world of Indian classical music.

Grammy winner musician Ricky Kej remembered Hussain for his "immense humility, approachable nature."

"One of the greatest musicians and personalities India has ever produced. Along with being the best himself, Zakirji was known for...being responsible for the careers of numerous musicians, who are now forces to reckon with themselves. He was a treasure trove of skill and knowledge and always shared and encouraged the entire music community through collaborations and his actions. His legacy will live on forever, and his influence will be felt for generations. He left us too soon," Kej had written on X after his demise.



Percussionist A Sivamani performs during the funeral of Tabla maestro Zakir Hussain at Fernwood Cemetery in San Francisco, US, on Thursday.

Six entities pay ₹ 3.49 crore to settle front-running trade case with Sebi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Six entities, including Samir Kothari and Jitendra N Kewalramani, has settled with Sebi in a case pertaining to the suspected front-running of trades by paying ₹ 3.49 crore towards settlement charges.

The other entities that settled the matter with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) are Kuntal Goel, Jitendra N Kewalramani HUF, Dipika J Kewalramani and Pallavi Shailesh Nayak, Sebi said in the order on Thursday.

Apart from the settlement amount, Sebi's committee placed other conditions to settle the case.

These included disgorgement of unlawful gain totalling ₹2.06 crore along with 12 per cent interest per

annum from the date of the impugned transaction to the date of filing of the settlement application for disgorgement to be paid by Samir Kothari, Kuntal Goel and Jitendra N Kewalramani.

Also, the six entities will voluntarily be debarred themselves from the securities markets for six months.

The order came after Sebi received four separate settlement applications from the applicants in March 2024, proposing to settle the instant proceedings through a settlement order "without admitting or denying the allegations".

"It is hereby ordered that the proceedings initiated against the applicants, vide show cause notice dated January 24, 2024, is disposed of," Sebi's Chief General Manager



Santosh Shukla said in the settlement order. Sebi conducted an investigation to ascertain whether there was any violation of the provisions of PFUTP (Prohibition of Fraudulent and Unfair Trade Practices) rules by certain entities during the period from January 2021 to October 2022.

Pursuant to the investigation, a common show cause notice dated January 24, 2024, was issued to certain entities, including the applicants.

The SCN alleged that the applicants and other notices were consistently placing orders ahead of Bharat Kanaiyalal Sheth Family Trust, Ravi Kanaiyalal Sheth Family Trust and Arjun Discretionary Trust (collectively referred to as the Big Clients) in the equity (cash) segment of NSE and were squaring off the same.

Further, Jitendra, who was the authorised person of Angel One was, directly or indirectly, in possession of the details of the impending orders to be placed by the big clients.

Accordingly, during the investigation period front running trades were allegedly executed by him in his own trading account and the trading accounts of certain entities, including the applicants (except Kuntal Goel and Samir Kothari), who were all related/associated to him during the probe period.

Sebi also alleged that Jitendra was connected to Kothari through an employer-employee relationship, while Kuntal, who possessed the information of the impending trades of the big client is connected to Samir Kothari by way of frequent calls leading to Jitendra having access to the non-public-information-of-the-impending orders of the big clients.

The rest of the notices/ applicants were, directly or indi-

rectly, in possession of the details of the impending orders to be placed on behalf of the big clients, through Jitendra, who then placed orders in clients' accounts to generate abnormal profits.

Therefore, the regulator alleged that the notices have contravened the PFUTP norms.

Thereafter, the applicants filed revised settlement terms which were approved by Sebi's High Powered Advisory Committee (HPAC).

Apart from remitting the disgorgement amount, individually, Jitendra N Kewalramani paid ₹ 64.29 lakh, while Kuntal paid ₹ 55.90 lakh, and ₹57.20 lakh each paid by Kothari, Jitendra N Kewalramani HUF, Dipika J Kewalramani and Pallavi Shailesh Nayak.

Sensex tanks 1,176 points, Nifty falls below 23,600 level

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty plunged about 1.5 per cent on Friday, taking their downtrend to the fifth straight session, due to risk aversion in the global markets after the hawkish stance of the US Federal Reserve.

The 30-share BSE benchmark tumbled 1,176.46 points or 1.49 per cent to settle at 78,041.59. During the day, it slumped 1,343.46 points or 1.69 per cent to 77,874.59.

The NSE Nifty tanked 364.20 points or 1.52 per cent to 23,587.50. From the 30 blue-chip Sensex pack, Tech Mahindra, IndusInd Bank, Axis Bank, Mahindra & Mahindra, Tata Motors, Larsen & Toubro, State Bank of India, Tata Consultancy Services, UltraTech Cement and Reliance Industries were the biggest laggards.



In contrast, JSW Steel, Nestle and Titan were the gainers. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled lower.

Equity markets in Europe were trading in the negative territory. Wall Street ended on a mixed note on Thursday. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 4,224.92 crore on Thursday, according to

Bihar has potential to become major growth engine: Minister

PTI ■ PATNA

Bihar Industries and Tourism Minister Nitish Mishra on Friday asserted that the state is poised to play a key role in the country's growth engine, as he announced a record Rs 1.8 lakh crore investments across sectors, more than triple the amount received at its maiden investor meet last year.

Detailing the investment proposals received at the end of the two-day 'Bihar Business Connect 2024' investor summit, Mishra said several memorandums of understanding (MoUs) entailing investment of over Rs 1.8 lakh crore have been signed. Sun Petrochemicals will invest Rs 36,700 crore in renewable energy, including pump hydro and solar plants. Adani Group is looking to invest Rs 20,000 crore in setting up an ultra-supercritical thermal power plant. Besides, the group also announced investment towards expanding the cement capacity as well as in



the warehousing and logistics sector.

At the summit, leading companies such as NHPC (Rs 5,500 crore for renewable energy sector), SLMG Beverages (Rs 3,000 crore for food processing sector), Shree Cements (Rs 800 crore in general manufacturing category), and Haldiram Snacks Pvt Ltd (Rs 300 crore for food processing sector) also inked MoUs with the state.

"The state government is committed to develop Bihar into a major destination for investment in the country. I express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who participated and became a part of this new journey of Bihar... I am fully confident that Bihar has the potential to become a major growth engine of the country. We signed MoUs

with different investors worth Rs 1.80 lakh crore in different sectors... It's a huge achievement for Bihar," Mishra said.

"Our Prime Minister Narendra Modi has already said that Bihar is advancing... We are moving ahead strongly in that direction," he asserted.

Speaking on the occasion, Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Kumar Sinha said Bihar is the "land of history and future of the country".

"After Independence, large investments were made in Jamshepur (which was then a part of united Bihar) and Rohtas. Bihar has always been providing an industrial base," Sinha said.

"Today, Bihar is also working in the field of exploration of heavy mines and minerals... In Jamui and Rohtas, Gaya and Jehanabad," he added.

Bihar Chief Minister, Nitish Kumar, who was scheduled to address the concluding day of the summit, could not attend the event due to illness, officials said.

The state's Energy Minister Bijendra Prasad Yadav, however, read out a message on behalf of the CM.

"The Bihar government has made several policies for development of industries. It is a matter of happiness that now you (investors) are working towards the development of Bihar. I am confident that people of the state will receive the benefits of the environment that is being created for industrial development in the state," the chief minister's message said.

Bandana Preyashi, Secretary, Industries Department, said compared to last year, the state received significantly more investment proposals in the 2024 summit.

"Last year, the sum was Rs 53,000 crore. Investments will be made in food processing and general manufacturing, health, information technology, logistics, plastics and rubber, real estate, renewable energy, textiles, leather and hospitality and skill development sectors," she said.

HC upholds award of tender to Adani Group to redevelop Dharavi slums

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In what came as a big relief to the Adani group, the Bombay High Court on Friday dismissed a petition filed by UAE-based Seclink Technologies challenging the Maharashtra government's decision to cancel its 2019 bid for the redevelopment of Dharavi slums and issue a fresh tender in 2022.

"There was no arbitrariness, unreasonableness or perversity in the decision of awarding the contract," a HC division bench of justices DK Upadhyaya and Justice Amit Borkar noted as it dismissed a petition filed by UAE-based Seclink Technologies Corporation, which has challenged the Maharashtra government's decision to award the contract to Adani Properties Pvt Ltd.

The dismissal of Seclink's peti-

tion should be seen in the context that the Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP) figured prominently during the 2024 Lok Sabha and State Assembly polls as it was a major bone of contention between the BJP-led MahaYuti and the Congress-led Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA). The Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena, which is a part of the Opposition MVA, had announced that if elected to power, it would cancel the DRP contract awarded to the Adani group.

It may be recalled that M/s Seclink Technologies had emerged as the highest bidder for the project in 2018, but the tender was scrapped in 2019 by the Maharashtra government which initiated a fresh tender process in 2022 with modified conditions for the redevelopment project.

Seclink had originally won the bid for the Dharavi redevelop-



ment project in 2019, surpassing Adani's bid of Rs 4,539 crore. However, in 2022, the Eknath Shinde-led MahaYuti government decided to include 45 acres of railway land in the project for slum rehabilitation, which was not part of the original proposal.

The state government sought

advice from Advocate General Ashutosh Kumbhakoni on ways to accommodate the costs of acquiring the railway land. Kumbhakoni recommended a new tender to reflect the changes.

Consequently, the Maharashtra government cancelled the 2019 tender and launched a fresh

bidding process in 2022.

On its part, Seclink argued that the inclusion of railway land had already been accounted for in the original 2019 tender, as the bid map included nearly 90 acres of railway land.

Questioning the government's rationale behind cancelling the bid, Seclink argued that the

market tender terms were designed to exclude them and benefit Adani. Seclink further stated that it suffered a financial loss of Rs 8,424 crore due to the cancellation of its bid.

Defending its decision to cancel the earlier tender awarded to Seclink, the Maharashtra government told the high court that the revised conditions were not arbitrary but had been developed after careful consideration of the changed economic landscape.

The state government argued that the financial and economic conditions had shifted significantly between 2019 and 2022, influenced by factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, fluctuations in the Rupee-USD exchange rate, interest rate volatility, and an overall high-risk investor environment.

The State government also argued that these changes necessitated adjustments to the

project's terms, ensuring the development was financially viable and aligned with the larger public interest.

While rejecting the contentions made by Seclink that the revised tender was "tailor made" to suit a particular firm of the private conglomerate, noting three bidders had participated in the process, the HC bench said: "The petition lacks force and hence stands dismissed".

"As far as the submissions made on behalf of the petitioner that tender conditions were tailor-made to suit a particular tenderer, we may observe that in response to the fresh tender three bidders had participated out of which two bids were found to be technically qualified. Meaning thereby, at least two bidders fulfilled the technical conditions and therefore, since there were more than two bidders in the field who participated out of

which two technically qualified, it cannot be said that the tender conditions were tailor-made so as to suit only a particular bidder," the HC bench noted.

Senior Advocate Virendra Tulzapurkar with advocates Mandar Soman, Suraj Iyer, Jenil Shah, Devendra Ailawadi, Mani Thevar, Anuj Singh and Abhishek Karnik instructed by Ganesh and Co appeared for the petitioner. Senior Advocate Milind Sathe with Additional Government Pleaders Jyoti Chavan, Atul Vanarse and advocates Bhushan Deshmukh, Aditya Mhase appeared for the State. Senior Advocate Ravindra Kadam with Senior Advocate Vikram Nankani, Zal Andhyarajina and advocates Rohan Kadam, Karan Bhide, Rati Patni, Kathleen Lobo, Vikrant Dere instructed by Wadia Ghandy & Co appeared for Adani Properties.

CREDAI urges Central Govt to reconsider 18% GST on FSI charges

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW

The Confederation of Real Estate Developers' Associations of India (CREDAI) has urged the Central Government to reconsider its proposal to impose an 18% Goods and Services Tax (GST) on Floor Space Index (FSI) and additional FSI charges paid to local authorities for real estate projects.

CREDAI warned that the move could escalate housing prices by approximately 10% across India, disrupting housing affordability and project viability.

CREDAI emphasized that applying GST on FSI charges would significantly increase construction costs, especially if imposed retrospectively. Developers could face hefty financial liabilities, potentially stalling ongoing projects and jeopardizing homebuyers' investments. Even a prospective implementation could hinder the government's 'Housing for All' mission by making affordable housing economically unviable.

"FSI charges constitute a sig-



nificant portion of project costs," said Boman Irani, President of CREDAI National. "The proposal to impose 18% GST on these charges could destabilize the real estate sector, leading to increased housing prices and delayed project deliveries. We urge the government to exempt FSI charges from GST."

CREDAI cited legal provisions supporting its stance. According to Notifications 14/2017 and 12/2017 under the GST Act, services provided by Central, State, or local authorities related to functions listed in Article 243W of the Constitution—such as urban planning and land regulation—are exempt from GST. The twelfth schedule of the Constitution explicitly includes

urban planning, land-use regulation, and slum improvement among municipal functions, reinforcing the industry's claim that FSI charges should remain outside the GST's scope.

The association also highlighted that developers cannot claim Input Tax Credit (ITC) on GST paid for such charges, causing double taxation and further inflating housing costs. This, in turn, would adversely impact the purchasing power of middle-class homebuyers, who make up 70% of the housing market.

CREDAI has appealed to the Central Government to maintain the current exemption on FSI charges. The association warned that imposing GST could create a cascading effect, reducing housing supply and demand while affecting economic growth linked to the real estate sector.

"The government must maintain the current status quo," Irani stressed. "Any retrospective or prospective GST levy could destabilize the sector, delay project completions, and compromise homeownership dreams for millions of Indians."

Gold dips ₹170 to ₹78,130 per 10 gm; silver plunges ₹1,850

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices extended the slide for the third straight session and fell ₹ 170 to Rs 78,130 per 10 grams in the national capital on Friday amid selling by jewellers and stockists, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity ended at Rs 78,300 per 10 grams on Thursday.

Silver prices plunged ₹ 1,850 to ₹ 88,150 per kg due to reduced offtake by industrial units and coin makers. The white metal closed at ₹ 90,000 per kg in the previous session.

The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity went lower by ₹ 170 to ₹ 77,730 per 10 grams against the previous close of ₹ 77,900 per 10 grams.

Traders attributed the fall in yellow metal prices to lacklustre demand from local jewellers.

In futures trade on the MCX, gold contracts for February delivery rose ₹ 50 or 0.07 per cent to trade at ₹ 75,701 per 10 grams on Friday.

"Gold witnessed minor buy-



ing as the USD 2,600-level on Comex acted as a temporary support, alongside ₹ 75,500 in the domestic MCX market. The momentum remains volatile due to uncertainties surrounding the interest rate cycle.

"Although the Fed decided to keep rates lower, its projections indicated fewer rate cuts going forward, which has maintained pressure on gold prices for the past two days," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst of Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities, said.

Meanwhile, silver futures contracts for March delivery slumped ₹ 647 or 0.74 per cent to ₹ 86,540 per kg on the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX).

Globally, Comex gold futures advanced USD 13.10 to USD 2,621.20 per ounce.

"Market players will watch the core Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) prices index data due later today, and more selling will be witnessed in precious metals counters if the actual figure comes above estimates," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst - Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

According to Kotak Securities, Comex gold futures saw some recovery and traded near USD 2,620 per ounce on Friday, but headed for weekly decline as investors reassessed interest rate expectations following the US Federal Reserve's latest decision.

Despite a rate cut, Fed Chair Powell's emphasis on continued inflation progress tempered expectations for further easing. Resilient economic data, including upwardly revised consumer spending, further weakened the case for imminent rate cuts, the brokerage firm said.

Silver quoted 0.41 per cent lower at 29.29 per ounce in the overseas market.

Rupee recovers from all-time low, gains 10 paise to 85.03 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee saw some recovery from its all-time low level and appreciated 10 paise to close at 85.03 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday, on softening of the US dollar index and a potential intervention by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

Forex traders said the rupee is likely to remain in a weakening mode due to significant dollar demand. The Dollar Index (DXY) is expected to remain elevated, with resistance near the 110 level in the near-term amid a reduced likelihood of significant Fed rate cuts in 2025.

The Federal Reserve cut rates by 25 basis points on Wednesday, but its forward guidance for 2025 has softened, with expectations reduced from four rate cuts to just two.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 85.07 against the greenback. During the day it witnessed an intraday high of 84.95 and a low of 85.12 before ending the session at 85.03 (provisional) against dollar, higher by 10



paise over its previous close.

On Thursday, the rupee depreciated 19 paise and breached the crucial 85 level to close at a fresh all-time low of 85.13 against the US dollar.

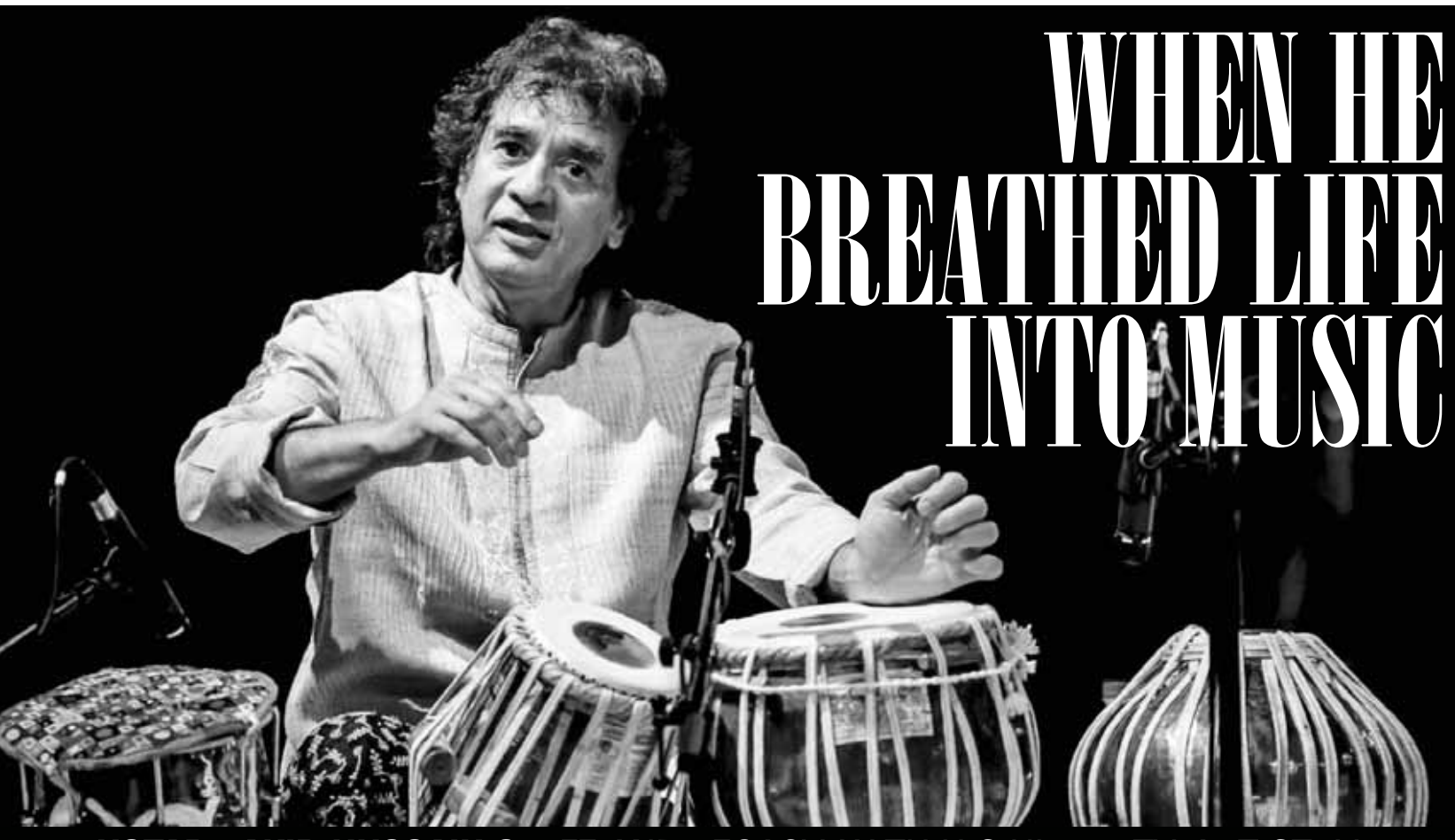
Traders said the rupee recovered from lower levels in the latter half of the day on softening of the US dollar index and a potential intervention by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). A decline in crude oil prices also supported the rupee at lower levels.

"We expect the rupee to trade with a negative bias on weak domestic markets and overall strength in the US dollar amid a hawkish Fed and improved US economy," Anuj Choudhary - Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said.



It would be wrong to say that I – like many other admirers of *Ustad Zakir Hussain* – am not shocked and mourning the demise of the maestro on December 15, 2024. But while there are countless messages on social media from those who are offering their tributes and remembering the maestro's greatness, it is a moment to also remember *Zakir Hussain* for his humility despite his multiple accolades and achievements. I must also convincingly add that it would further be wrong to say that the world of 'taal' and 'rhythm' fell silent on December 15, 2024, as *Ustad Zakir Hussain* breathed his last in San Francisco at 73, leaving behind an unparalleled legacy in the realm of music. For decades, his hands transformed the tabla from a classical Indian percussion instrument into a universal language, one that bridged the East and the West, traditional and contemporary, music and magic. It can, however, be said that while the 'taals' and 'taranas' seem momentarily muted, *Zakir Hussain's* music continues to echo in the hearts of millions.

Born on March 9, 1951, in Mumbai, *Zakir Hussain* was the son of *Ustad Alla Rakha*, another tabla virtuoso. From a young age, *Zakir* was destined for greatness, showing an uncanny ability to master the intricacies of rhythm. His music wasn't just a recital of beats – it was a dialogue, a dance, a spiritual experience. Even as a child prodigy, he bore the weight of his father's towering legacy with grace, eventually shaping his own path and taking 'tabla' to a realm previously unimaginable.



WHEN HE BREATHED LIFE INTO MUSIC

USTAD ZAKIR HUSSAIN'S LIFE AND LEGACY, WITH HIS HUMILITY, ARTISTRY, AND DEEP CONNECTION TO TRADITION, WILL CONTINUE TO INSPIRE

REDEFINING THE TABLA

Zakir Hussain revolutionised the art of tabla playing, elevating it from its conventional role as a supporting instrument to a soloist's pride of place on the world stage. With a profound understanding of tradition and heritage, he seamlessly blended his technical virtuosity with creative improvisation, crafting performances that transcended genres and boundaries. His hands moved like poetry, crafting rhythmic patterns so intricate and yet so accessible that even the untrained ear could sense the brilliance of his craft.

His collaborations with artists across the globe are a testament to his genius. With guitarist *John McLaughlin*, he co-founded the band 'Shakti', a pioneering force in fusion music that blended Indian classical music with jazz and rock. His work with *Mickey Hart* of the 'Grateful

Dead' in 'Planet Drum' brought Indian percussion to global prominence, winning a Grammy for Best World Music Album in 1992. He had the remarkable ability to connect disparate musical traditions, forging symphonies that spoke to the universal spirit of humanity. Whether performing with *Ravi Shankar* in a sitar-tabla 'jugalbandi' or jamming with *Yo-Yo Ma's* 'Silk Road Ensemble', he approached each with reverence and curiosity, breaking barriers without ever diluting the essence of the tabla.

WHAT PARAMPARA (LINEAGE) MEANT FOR THE USTAD

Despite his global persona, *Zakir Hussain* remained deeply rooted in Indian musical traditions. His performances were steeped in the wisdom of centuries, carrying forward the parampara (lineage) of the Punjab gharana while infusing it with his own

innovations. He viewed the tabla as not just an instrument but a storyteller, capable of expressing every shade of human emotion – from the ecstatic to the meditative. His renditions of complex 'talas' ('teental', 'jhaptal', and 'rupak tal') revealed his mastery of rhythm and timing, yet what set him apart was his ability to infuse each beat with life and soul. Even as he experimented with cross-cultural sounds, *Zakir Hussain* never let the tabla lose its identity. He saw fusion as a dialogue rather than a compromise, where traditions could coexist and enrich one another.

In his lecture-demonstrations, *Zakir Hussain* often spoke about the spiritual dimension of music. For him, the tabla was a medium of devotion and transcendence, a way to connect with the divine. It is this depth of understanding that lent his performances an ethereal quality, leaving audiences spellbound.



A LESSON IN HUMILITY

Zakir Hussain's fame was unparalleled, yet his humility remained his most endearing quality. Despite receiving countless accolades, including the Padma Vibhushan, Padma Bhushan, Padma Shri, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award,

Kalidas Samman, the United States National Heritage Fellowship, and the Grammy Awards, he carried himself with the grace and simplicity of a true artist. He was equally at ease performing in the grandest concert halls of the world and in intimate 'baithaks' (gatherings). He often attributed his success to his gurus, his parents, and his fellow musicians, never once allowing his stature to overshadow his respect for the art form. "I am just a student," he would say, even as the world hailed him as a master. He viewed music, like life, as a journey rather than a destination and won the love and admiration of millions of fans worldwide. His recordings, whether solo albums like *Making Music* or collaborations like *Friday Night* in San Francisco, remain timeless treasures. *Zakir Hussain's* artistry lies in his unparalleled ability to create magic through jugalbandis with luminaries of Indian classical music. His tabla became

a dynamic companion, engaging in profound musical dialogues with *Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia's* flute, *Ustad Amjad Ali Khan's* sarod, *Pandit Shivkumar Sharma's* santoor, *L. Subramaniam's* violin, and *Ustad Bismillah Khan's* shehnai. These collaborations celebrated the interplay of rhythm and melody, captivating audiences with performances that evoked joy, wonder, and reverence. *Zakir Hussain* also collaborated with maestros like *Ustad Ali Akbar Khan* (sarod), creating harmonies that bridged the spiritual and the artistic. In recent years, he extended his genius to a new generation, performing with *Niladri Kumar* (electric sitar), *Rakesh Chaurasia* (flute), and *Kala Ramnath* (violin), proving his tabla transcends time and tradition. These jugalbandis were not mere performances but soulful exchanges, transforming the stage into a realm of divine musical ecstasy. *Zakir Hussain's* tabla seamlessly complemented the soul-stirring renditions of legends like *Pandit Bhimsen Joshi*, *Kishori Amonkar*, *Pt. Birju Maharaj*, and *Pt. Rajan-Sajan Mishra*. With *Pandit Jasraj*, his intricate rhythmic patterns enriched majestic 'khyal' performances, blending melody and rhythm to captivate audiences. Equally remarkable were his collaborations with *Girija Devi*, *Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna*, *Pt. Ajoy Chakraborty*, and *Ustad Rashid Khan*, where his tabla brought depth to 'thumris', 'kritis', and other 'gayaki angas', enhancing their emotive essence. With humility and brilliance, he elevated vocal accompaniment and the rhythmic artistry of 'ghungroos', setting unparalleled standards in the interplay of rhythm and melody.

LEGENDS NEVER DIE

And as we remember the legend, it was he who transformed the tabla into an instrument of infinite possibilities, inspiring countless musicians to explore its depths. His students, many of whom are now torchbearers of the art form, continue to carry forward his teachings, ensuring that the rhythms he created will never fade. In the words of the maestro himself: "Music is a prayer. It's a conversation with the universe. It's infinite, just like the spirit of the human soul." Wah Ustad... Wah...! We will never miss saying this. Farewell.

— *Rajdeep Pathak, Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti*



ART OF SELF-REFLECTION

Anupam Sud's exhibition explores human vulnerability through powerful printmaking techniques, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**



Walking into *Anupam Sud: The Journey A Full Circle* at the *Palette Art Gallery* is like stepping into the mind of an artist who has spent decades exploring the intricacies of human existence. Her works don't just hang on the walls; they resonate, confront, and invite contemplation. This exhibition, spanning five decades of her artistic practice, feels less like a retrospective and more like a conversation, a dialogue between past and present, and invite contemplation. This exhibition, spanning five decades of her artistic practice, feels less like a retrospective and more like a conversation, a dialogue between past and present,



deliberate, layered with meaning and emotion. Her figures, often placed in sparse, almost theatrical compositions, seem to ask questions rather than offer answers. Who are we beneath our constructed identities? What does it mean to be human in a society that often feels fractured and disconnected? What sets *Sud* apart is her mastery of technique, but even more so her willingness to push its boundaries. From

her early etchings to her recent pandemic-era print collages, there's a sense of fearless experimentation. She refers to her process as embracing the "controlled accident," and this philosophy permeates her art. It's not just about precision but about allowing the unexpected to shape her work, a balance of discipline and spontaneity. Perhaps most striking is how her art reflects her lived experience. Her portrayal of urban life, the complex roles

PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR



A THEATRICAL FEAST OF LAUGHTER

A lively three-day journey of laughter and theatre, where comedy and powerful performances sparked joy, reflection and unforgettable connections, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

"Laughter is the shortest distance between two people," and nowhere was this more evident than at the *Hasya Rang Utsav*. Over three unforgettable days, the festival brought together the joy of stand-up comedy and the depth of theatre, reminding audiences of the transformative power of humour. From belly-aching laughter to moments of quiet reflection, this celebration of wit and performance art left an indelible mark on everyone who attended.

The festival began with a bang, as the ever-charming *Sunil Pal* took to the stage. Known for his effortless humour and relatable anecdotes, *Pal* had the audience in stitches with his clever observations on daily life. His performance was a shared experience, as the laughter rippled through the crowd, breaking barriers and setting the tone for the days ahead. The evening continued with *Charandas Chor*, *Habib Tanvir's* iconic satire brought to life under the direction of *Rajesh Tiwari*. This story of a thief with an unusual moral compass combined folk music, rich storytelling, and a sharp critique of human hypocrisy, leaving the audience both entertained and



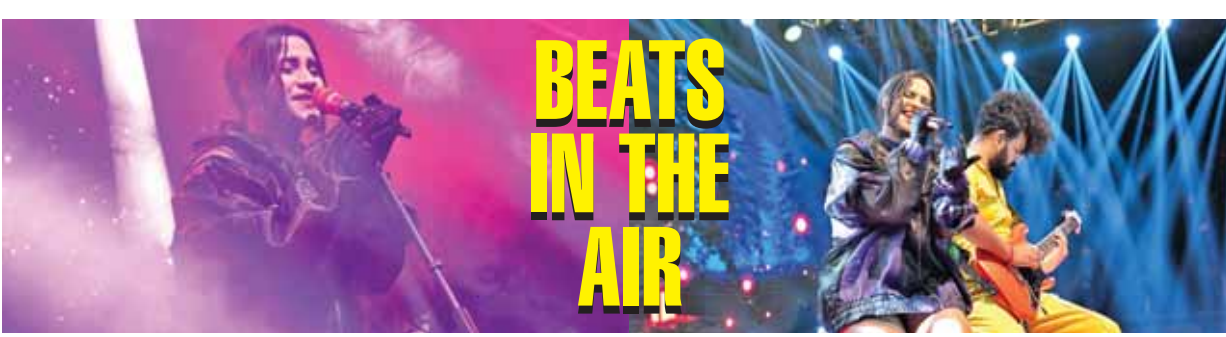
contemplative. Day two brought the unstoppable energy of *Ehsaan Qureshi*, whose rhythmic comedy and sharp wit had the crowd



roaring with laughter. His ability to find humour in the smallest details made every punchline resonate deeply. The evening continued with *Ghar Ka Na Ghat Ka*, written by *Jaywardhan Singh* and directed by *J.P. Singh*. Tackling the societal obsession with male heirs, the play used humour to hold a mirror to deeply rooted traditions. Witty dialogues and relatable characters made the satire both hilarious and thought-provoking. The festival's grand finale was nothing short of spectacular. *VIP*, a comedian with an infectious stage presence, swept the audience off their feet with his quick humour and high-energy act. The night concluded with *Bank Manager*, a masterful adaptation of *Anton Chekhov's* works, directed by *Shyam Kumar*. With its clever exploration of human absurdities and comic misunderstandings, the play was a fitting end to this laughter-filled journey.

The *Hasya Rang Utsav* captured the essence of how humour can connect, heal, and spark reflection, leaving its mark on both the audience's hearts and minds. It was a celebration of life, its complexities, and the joy of shared moments of laughter.

PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR



BEATS IN THE AIR

By **TEAM VIVA**

Music has the extraordinary ability to bring people together, and this was beautifully evident at a recent concert in New Delhi. Held at *ibis New Delhi Aerocity*, the event brought music enthusiasts under one roof for an unforgettable evening of melody, rhythm, and connection.

The spotlight of the evening was on *Nikhita Gandhi*, who delivered a mesmerising performance that kept the

audience enthralled. With her soulful voice and dynamic stage presence, she performed some of her most beloved tracks, including the hauntingly beautiful "Qaafirana." The setlist also featured chart-topping numbers like "Raabta," "Burj Khalifa," and "Do You Love Me," each song showcasing her versatility and leaving the audience in wonder. The concert was more than just a musical performance, it was an experience. The thoughtfully curated ambience, combined with delectable food and warm

hospitality, enhanced the joy of the evening. Every detail, from the stage design to the sound quality, contributed to making the night both intimate and exhilarating. As the final chords faded into the night, the crowd departed with beaming faces, humming tunes that stayed long after the concert ended. It was a remarkable evening, a celebration of music and human connection that will be cherished for a long time to come.

PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR

Teenage sensation Konstas called up for Boxing Day Tests, McSweeney dropped

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Teenage sensation Sam Konstas was handed a maiden call up as Australia on Friday dropped rookie opener Nathan McSweeney for the final two Test matches of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy against India.

The 19-year-old is set to become Australia's youngest Test batting debutant in over 70 years.

If Konstas, who turned 19 on October 2, is selected in the playing XI in the Boxing Day Test, he would become Australia's youngest Test debutant since captain Pat Cummins, who was 18 years and 193 days old when he made his debut against South Africa in Johannesburg in 2011.

The teenager would also become the youngest specialist batter to debut for Australia since Ian Craig when he played against South Africa at the MCG in 1953 aged 17 years 239 days.

Konstas' inclusion follows a series of disappointing performances from the Australian top order in the first three Tests especially McSweeney.

The 25-year-old, who made his Test debut in the series-opener in Perth, failed to score a single half century and could only manage scores of 10, 0, 39, 10 not out, 9 and 4 in his six innings and was dismissed by Indian pace Jasprit Bumrah spearhead four times.

Konstas had been in the reckoning to partner experienced Usman Khawaja after grabbing the attention of Cricket Australia's selection committee following his twin Sheffield Shield centuries for New South Wales.

He had scored an unbeaten 73 at the MCG against India A while notching up a ton (107) in the Prime Ministers XI pink ball game against India in Canberra.

"Sam gets a call up to the Test squad for the first time. His style of batting offers a point of difference and we look



forward to watching his game develop further," Australian Chair of Selectors George Bailey said.

"We remain confident Nathan has the ability and temperament to succeed at Test level in the future. It was a difficult decision to leave him out. "It has clearly been a challenge at the top of the order for batters throughout the series and we want to provide the option of a different line up for the next two matches," he added.

Konstas' inclusion follows a warning from former pacer Merv Hughes, who cautioned selectors against making any changes to the batting lineup for the Boxing Day Test.

The former selector said it would have been a "panic call" move from Australia to add Konstas in the squad.

"Now it would almost be a panic call to me... Just stay calm. They drew the last Test. The last two Tests have been a draw and a win, so what is there to panic about," Hughes had told 'The Courier Mail'.

Konstas had said earlier this week, "It would be a dream come true (playing the Boxing Day Test)."

"Maybe I'd get a little nervous before the game, but I've worked really hard for that. Hopefully, it happens one day, but we'll see."

Pacer Jhye Richardson has also been included in the 15-member squad in place of Josh Hazlewood, who has been ruled out due to a calf injury.

Richardson, who himself has overcome a series of injuries, has not featured in a Test match since his three appearances during the 2021-22 Ashes series.

"In the absence of Josh Hazlewood, Jhye provides further options in the fast bowling space. It has been pleasing to see his successful return throughout the early part of the domestic summer," Bailey said.

Speedster Sean Abbott is also back in the squad for the remaining two games while uncapped Tasmania all-rounder Beau Webster, who was added ahead of the second Test in Adelaide, retains his place in the 15-member group.

Australia squad for 4th and 5th Test

Pat Cummins (c), Sean Abbott, Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Travis Head (vc), Josh Inglis, Usman Khawaja, Sam Konstas, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Jhye Richardson, Steve Smith (vc), Mitchell Starc, Beau Webster.



Tough task awaits Chennaiyin FC against Mumbai City

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Seeking to bridge the gap with the top six, visiting Chennaiyin FC will have their task cut out when they take on fancied hosts Mumbai City FC in their Indian Super League match here on Saturday.

The Islanders have an impressive record against Chennaiyin FC, being unbeaten in their last nine ISL meetings.

Mumbai have won and drawn twice in their last five matches, and are currently occupying the seventh spot with 17 points from 11 games.

Chennaiyin FC are ninth in the table, having garnered 15 points from 12 matches but their previous five outings have seen them succumb to a loss thrice.

Neither of them are too far off the sixth-placed Jamshedpur FC, who have 18 points from 10 matches.

The Petr Kratky-coached team have struggled offensively, scoring the fourth-least goals in the season (14) so far, whereas the Marina Machans better them in this metric with 17 strikes.

Mumbai City have fared better at the back, keeping the third-most clean sheets (4) in the league, conceding only 13 goals, as opposed to the 18 of the Chennaiyin FC.

Mumbai City FC have not conceded in their last three ISL games. If they manage another clean sheet, it will mark their longest streak since 2018. Interestingly,

Ashwin's desire to evolve all the time made him stand out: Shastri

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Ravichandran Ashwin's constant drive to evolve and excel in his craft, coupled with his focus on self-improvement rather than being concerned about the opponents made him stand out, says former India coach Ravi Shastri.

The 38-year-old surprised the cricketing world by announcing his retirement in the middle of the Test series against Australia after the end of the third Test in Brisbane on Wednesday.

"What stands out for me was his wanting to evolve all the time. He wasn't the kind of guy satisfied as to where he started," Shastri said on 'The ICC Review'.

"For me it was his guile, wanting to excel in his craft and (especially) in the last two-three years the way he got the ball to the way, gave it a rip and got it to dip on the batsman with drift made him stand out," Shastri said.

Known for his relentless drive to develop his game, Ashwin consistently worked on new deliveries and refined his action, even in the later stages of his career.

"He wanted new tricks to be learned. He pursued it, practiced hard at it and continued to look for new things as his career progressed, to keep up with the times," Shastri said.

"His legacy will be of being a terrific match-winner, a fabulous record, 537 sticks. I mean anyone over 500 (in Test cricket) is special."

Ashwin, who made his debut in 2011 against the West Indies, quickly cemented his place in India's Test side. He retired as India's second-highest wicket-taker with 765 scalps, including 537 in Tests.

Ashwin and fellow spinner Ravindra Jadeja often bowled in tandem, leading India to numerous victories. Shastri felt the "spin twins" played a role in each other's success.

"And for him to do it in his span and the way he has done it, especially when it came to bowling in the last four or five years, I think in India, along with Jadeja, I think they were a terrific pair, the real spin twins."

"They complemented each other well and they spurred each other on, so I would say a lot of Jadeja's wickets in the last five-six years have come because of Ashwin and vice-versa."

Shastri highlighted that Ashwin's nearly identical record against left and right handed batters -- 269 wickets against right-handers and 268 against left-handers -- demonstrated just how versatile and effective the spinner was, regardless of the opponent or their playing style.

"You look at his record against right-handers, against left-handers, it's pretty much similar, you know, which says it all. It didn't matter to him who he was bowling against. He was up for it," he added.



Tottenham beats Manchester United 4-3 in the English League Cup

AP ■ LONDON

Son Heung-min scored a spectacular goal directly from a corner to fire Tottenham into the English League Cup semifinals in a thrilling 4-3 win over Manchester United.

Spurs will play Premier League leader Liverpool for a place in the final, and Arsenal was drawn against Newcastle in the other last-four matchup.

Son's strike in the 88th-minute at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium came as Spurs tried to hold off a dramatic comeback from United, having led 3-0 in the second half.

United had pulled it back to 3-2 and was pushing for an equalizer when Son whipped in a curling right-footed shot past goalkeeper Altay Bayindir.

"Obviously we made it harder than it should have been, for sure," Tottenham manager Ange Postecoglou said and added, "Are you not entertained?"

United's players complained Bayindir had been fouled by Tottenham's Lucas Bergvall as Son's shot flew past him.

Replays appeared to show contact between the two, but with no VAR at this stage of the competition, there was no chance of a review.

Jonny Evans scored again for United in stoppage time, but Spurs held on for the win that had looked all but certain shortly after halftime.

Having gone ahead through Dominic Solanke's goal from close range in the 15th, Tottenham took control after the break.

Dejan Kulusevski doubled the lead a minute after the restart and Solanke fired in his second in the 54th.

United head coach Ruben Amorim made a triple substitution -- bringing on Joshua Zirkzee, Amad Diallo and Kobbie Mainoo.

It quickly had an impact with Zirkzee forcing Fraser Forster into a flying save and then capitalizing on a loose pass by the Tottenham goalkeeper to make it 3-1.

Forster was guilty of another mistake in the 70th when his attempted clearance was closed down by Diallo and ricocheted over the line.

United increased the pressure, but Son's unlikely goal gave Spurs a cushion again -- and it proved to be the decisive strike after Evans' late header reduced the deficit again.

"I know the studio (punditry team) is probably going into meltdown over my lack of tactics," Postecoglou said.

India storm into U19 Women's T20 Asia Cup final

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

Rampaging India extended their unbeaten run at the U19 Women's T20 Asia Cup as they reached the final with a four-wicket win over Sri Lanka in their last Super Four contest here Friday.

Aayushi Shukla emerged the wrecker-in-chief with a four-wicket haul as the left-arm spinner conceded only 10 runs in her four overs to help India restrict Sri Lanka to 98 for nine after skipper Niki Prasad opted to bowl.

Parunika Sisodia, who also bowls left-arm spin, chipped in with two scalps.

Such was India's domination that only two Sri Lankan batters -- Sumudu Nisansala (21) and captain Manudi Nanayakkara (33) -- could manage double-digit scores.

The Lankan top-order fared poorly with Sanjana Kavindi (9) and Hiruni Hansika (2) staying together for a mere 12 balls.

A 22-run fifth-wicket stand between Nanayakkara and Nisansala was the best for the Lankans. They raised hopes of a rival but the latter's run out punctured all their hopes.

India did not have the best of starts with opener Ishwari Asware running herself out in the third ball of the chase without bothering the scorer.

Left-arm spinner Chamodi Praboda (3/16) led the Sri



India should have a hard approach against West Indies in ODIs: Richa Ghosh

PTI ■ NAVI MUMBAI

Wicketkeeper-batter Richa Ghosh has urged the Indian women's team not to take the foot off the pedal after their T20I series victory, but to adopt a more aggressive approach when they face West Indies in the upcoming three ODIs.

Ghosh smashed a world record-equaling fastest fifty, reaching the milestone in just 18 balls. The 21-year-old, who scored 54 off 21 balls, including five sixes and three fours, joining an exclusive club, that features New Zealand's Sophie Devine and Australia's Phoebe Litchfield. Her innings helped India pile

on 217 runs in the third T20I on Thursday.

"We will look to carry the momentum and approach the ODI series and not go easy, our approach should be much harder. It is a new ground and we will try to assess the situations first and plan accordingly," Ghosh told the media here after India won the series 2-1.

Ghosh said she always has had the mindset to play aggressively.

"The mindset (to play aggressively) is there in every game which comes from the practice sessions. If we have done something in the practice session, it feels easier to do it in a match. I had prepared in that manner and that helped me," she said.

"I have always loved power hitting. I have also seen my father hit big shots. I have worked hard on my fitness and in the practice sessions," Ghosh added.

Ghosh also credited her experiences in the Women's Big Bash League and Women's Premier League for her exploits with the bat.

"I spoke with Sophie Devine and Deandra Dottin during the WBBL and WPL. I have also discussed a lot about hitting with Harry di (Harmanpreet Kaur), she is also one of the finest hitters," she said.

The wicketkeeper-batter said



India wanted to put their ODI series loss to Australia behind and start afresh.

"We wanted to forget the past and start afresh. We had come into this game to give our absolute best and not worry about the result and everyone gave their best," she said.

Hayley Matthews rued the West Indies were not good enough in execution but said her side has a lot of positives to carry forward.

"It just probably came down to execution again today. Like I said, we had really strong plans, but India also went back and obviously did some homework as well. Kudos to the way their players came out and batted," Matthews said

after India recorded their highest-ever total of 217/4 in the format. With stand-in India skipper Smriti Mandhana hitting consecutive fifties to notch scores of 54, 62 and 77 in the series, Matthews picked her innings in the final T20I as her best.

"Smriti obviously had a great series, but her knock today to me was probably the best one," she said.

"Having to bowl at Richa at the end was quite difficult as well. You felt almost as if you didn't land it on a penny. It was going to be pretty hard to stop her from scoring," Matthews added.

With the official attendance claiming to be in excess of 47,200 for the final T20I -- the official capacity of DY Patil Stadium is 45,000 -- Matthews said it was the reason she loves playing in India.

"Yeah, it was great to see. I have experienced massive Mumbai close before playing down here in the WPL. Obviously, when I am down here playing, usually they're on my side in that tournament," she said.

"It is pretty crazy going up against it when they're cheering for the opposition, 100 per cent. I love playing in India for that reason. There's so many people that are into the women's game and want to come out and watch and support," she added.