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INSIDE

WORLD 8

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



PUNJAB JAMS NORTH INDIA



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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ CHANDIGARH / NEW DELHI

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

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

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

from the Centre, if the situation warranted. The Punjab Government said it was facing a huge resistance from the protesting farmers who had encircled Dallewal and prevented him from being taken to a hospital. On Monday, farmers observed a sit-in at Dhareri Jattan Toll Plaza which affected vehicular movement on the Patiala-Chandigarh National Highway. At Amritsar's Golden Gate, scores of farmers staged a dharna near the city's entry point. Police there assisted some stranded foreign tourists by arranging auto rickshaws for them to reach the Golden Temple. Farmers squatted on tracks at many places, forcing the railways to cancel several trains passing through the state and short-terminated or short-originated some trains. In Ferozepur, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, and Bathinda, passengers were seen stranded at stations. In Phagwara, farmers staged a dharna near the Sugarmill Crossing on NH-44, blocking the roads leading from Phagwara towards Nakodar, Hoshiarpur, and Nawanshahr. Grain markets were shut in several places across the State. In the Mohali district, farmers staged a dharna at a few points throwing normal movement of vehicular traffic out of gear. Public transport remained off roads at several places, while most private bus operators suspended services, abiding by the bandh call. Many long-distance private buses and trucks carrying fruits and vegetables were held up due to the bandh.



COLD WORSENS THE FREEZE

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

WEATHER

AQI	173
MAX	15°C(-5)
MIN	10.3°C(+3)

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

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

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN



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

AAP in Election Mode

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI



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

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

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

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

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI



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

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

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

Security upgrade for New Year's eve

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

Falling Sensex, Rising Rupee: Where is India headed?

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

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

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



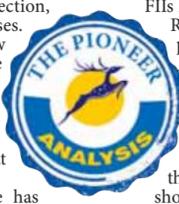
PROF. GOURAV VALLABH

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

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

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

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



New Year revelry: Bokaro City DSP warns anti-social elements

PNS : BOKARO

As the New Year approaches, residents are gearing up to celebrate with family and friends at their favorite picnic spots. However, incidents of anti-social elements openly consuming alcohol and harassing visitors at these locations have dampened the festive spirit.

Such behavior is not limited to picnic spots alone. Drunkards often gather near liquor shops, creating trouble for passersby. As



evening falls, these areas become difficult to navigate, especially for pedestrians. Addressing the issue,

City DSP Alok Ranjan issued a strict warning. He said, "Our police teams are conducting regular raids on

drunkards. There will be strict surveillance around picnic spots and liquor shops. People can celebrate their picnics fearlessly. If anyone notices such activities, they should immediately inform their nearest police station or me directly."

He further assured that the police administration is committed to taking stern action against such offenders. Under his leadership, continuous raids are being conducted in these areas, creating panic among those

engaging in such activities. Appeal from the Police Administration

The police have urged citizens to report any disturbances or troublemakers to ensure a safe and peaceful environment for New Year celebrations.

Residents are optimistic that the proactive approach of City DSP Alok Ranjan and the police will ensure security at public spaces and picnic spots, allowing everyone to welcome the New Year in a festive and worry-free atmosphere.

New Year revelry: Enhanced security and traffic arrangements in place

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

With New Year celebrations just around the corner, the district police have ramped up security measures to ensure a safe and smooth experience for revellers across the city. Alongside enhanced security arrangements, the traffic wing has made special provisions for hassle-free vehicular movement and parking near popular celebration hotspots.

Key locations like Jubilee Park and Dimna Lake will witness a significant deployment of police forces due to their popularity among picnickers and families. Other areas under the security umbrella include Sir Dorabji Tata Park near Keenan Stadium, Bhatia Park in Kadma, Hudco Lake, and Ghorabandha Theme Park in Telco.

The district police, under the supervision of SSP Kishore Kaushal, have devised a multi-layered plan to ensure public safety. The measures include:

Static Deployment: A dedicated force of 100 personnel each will be stationed at Jubilee Park and Dimna Lake from 9 AM onwards on both New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. Similar arrangements will be in place at other major parks and picnic spots.

Patrolling and Surveillance: Police will intensify patrolling across the city, with special attention to high-footfall areas. Drone cameras will be used to monitor Dimna Lake and Jubilee Park, where large crowds are expected.

Drunk Driving Checks: To curb drunk driving, random checks using breath analyzers will be conducted on roads and at picnic spots. "Our goal is to prevent alcohol-related nuisances and ensure everyone's safety," said an official.

Special Checking Posts: Fifteen strategic checkpoints will be operational from 6 PM on Monday until 2 AM on Tuesday to monitor and penalize violators.

The traffic police have also prioritized smooth vehicular movement. Adequate parking arrangements have been made close to popular celebration spots to avoid congestion. Clear signages and traffic wardens will guide motorists to designated parking areas.

Drone cameras will provide an aerial view of Jubilee Park and Dimna Lake, enabling law enforcement to monitor crowd dynamics and intervene promptly if required. "Drone surveillance adds an additional layer of security, ensuring a bird's eye view of the hotspots," the official added.

While the police are leaving no stone unturned, they have urged the public to cooperate by adhering to safety norms and avoiding reckless behavior. Families and youngsters have been advised to celebrate responsibly and prioritize safety.

The district police's proactive approach reflects their commitment to ensuring that the year-end and New Year festivities are memorable for all the right reasons. With meticulous planning and robust security measures in place, residents can look forward to a joyous and safe celebration.

Mining Task Force Meeting: Inspector show-caused for absence

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

The monthly meeting of the District Mining Task Force was convened at the Collectorate Auditorium, Jamshedpur, under the leadership of Deputy Commissioner Ananya Mittal. The meeting focused on reviewing illegal mining activities and reinforcing measures to curb them. The Deputy Commissioner instructed officials to tighten their information networks, conduct extensive checks, and undertake integrated actions involving departments such as mining, forest, transportation, pollution control, factories, and police. He emphasized that tackling illegal mining requires cohesive efforts from all relevant departments rather than isolated actions.

The Deputy Commissioner directed Sub-Divisional Officers of Dhalbhum and Ghatshila to assess actions taken by Circle Officers to prevent illegal mining, transportation, and storage. The



District Transport Officer and Motor Vehicle Inspectors were instructed to submit monthly reports in the prescribed format detailing their enforcement activities. Special attention was given to issues surrounding the Banakata Sand Ghats in Bahragora, with directives issued to pollution control officials regarding pending CTO applications.

The review of enforcement actions against illegal mining, transportation, and storage carried out in the previous month revealed the need for stricter measures.

The Deputy Commissioner directed that immediate FIRs be lodged in all cases of illegal mining and transportation. He also mandated the prompt auctioning of seized sand following due procedures. Police station in-charges were instructed to form teams and ensure swift action upon receiving reports of illegal activities from Circle Officers, District Mining Officers, or Mining Inspectors. Additionally, the Pollution Control Board was asked to identify and act against illegally operated brick kilns in the district.

The District Magistrate highlighted the need to improve the monitoring mechanism and information network to effectively counter illegal activities. Officials were urged to understand the modus operandi of illegal operators and take lawful action. In a strict move, the Factory Inspector was show-caused for being absent from the meeting without prior notice.

The meeting was attended by Divisional Forest Officer Saba Alam Ansari, ADM (Law and Order) Aniket Sachan, SDM Shatabdi Majumdar, ADC Bhagirath Prasad, District Mining Officer Satish Nayak, and Motor Vehicle Inspector Suraj Hembram, among others. Rural SP Rishabh Garg, City SP Kumar Shivashish, Circle Officers, DSPs, and station in-charges participated online.

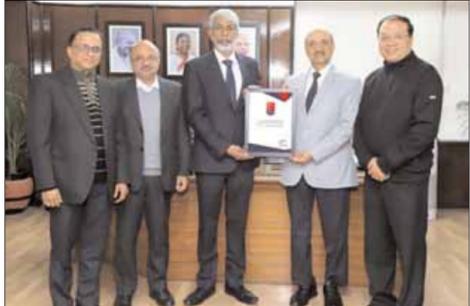
The District Mining Task Force pledged to enforce strict measures and expedite action to curb illegal mining and related activities in East Singhbhum.

SAIL earns 'Great Place to Work' Certification for second time

PNS : BOKARO

Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) has once again been recognized as a 'Great Place to Work' by the Great Place to Work Institute, India, for the period of January 2025 to January 2026. This is the second consecutive year the organization has received this global certification, reaffirming its reputation as an employee-friendly workplace.

The certification reflects SAIL's commitment to fostering a progressive work environment through innovative HR initiatives. Key programs include flexible work policies like "Work from Other than Workplace" (WoW), advanced IT and digital training in part-



nership with NASSCOM, leadership development programs with IIMs, enhanced healthcare services with Deloitte, and e-learning platforms such as LinkedIn Learning Hub

and e-Pathshala. These initiatives are designed to boost productivity, equip employees with future-ready skills, and support their overall growth. Speaking on the achieve-

ment, SAIL Chairman, Amarendu Prakash, said, "Being certified as a 'Great Place to Work' for the second year in a row reaffirms our commitment to fostering a workplace environment built on trust, collaboration, and employee empowerment. This recognition inspires us to continue striving for excellence and greater achievements."

The Great Place to Work certification is based on a rigorous evaluation process, including employee feedback and workplace culture assessments. SAIL's recognition reflects its dedication to creating a supportive and inclusive work environment, positioning it as a leading employer in the industry.

RPC, RBS Vedic Trust announce Jharkhand Journalism Awards 2024

PNS : RANCHI

Senior journalist and former Information Commissioner Bajjnath Mishra has said that just as Dadhichi donated his bones to protect his kingdom, journalists give their all to guide society. Honouring such journalists is a way of honouring society itself, he said. Mishra made these remarks on Sunday during the announcement of the Jharkhand Journalism Awards 2024 at the Ranchi Press Club. He said that this is the first time since the formation of Jharkhand that the Ranchi Press Club, in collaboration with the RBS Vedic Trust, has decided to organize the Jharkhand Journalism Awards, which is a commendable initiative. Ranchi Press Club president Surendra Soren said that awards would be presented in three categories: Lifetime Achievement Award (Rs. 31,000, shawl, and memento), Best Reporter Award (Rs. 21,000, shawl, and memento), and Best Photography Award (Rs. 21,000, shawl, and memento). Retired IAS officer Ranendra Kumar, a jury member, emphasized that the selection would be carried out with full trans-



parency. RBS Vedic Trust president Nityanand Shukla expressed his happiness at being part of the event to honour journalists. Press Club secretary Amarkant said that nominations for the Jharkhand Journalism Awards can be submitted at the Ranchi Press Club till January 15. Separate applications must be submitted for

each category. The application form can be downloaded from the Ranchi Press Club's website or obtained directly from the club. Complete applications, along with necessary documents, should be submitted to the Ranchi Press Club by January 15, 2025. Nityanand Shukla said that a seven-member jury would examine the applica-

tions and make the final decision. The jury includes senior journalists Bajjnath Mishra and Sonali Das, Ranchi University Vice Chancellor Prof. Ajit Kumar Sinha, retired IAS officer Ranendra Kumar, Ranchi Press Club president Surendra Lal Soren, General Secretary Amarkant, and Trust president Nityanand Shukla.

NH-33 mishap claims three lives, leaves two injured near Tamar

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In a heart-wrenching road mishap near the Kanchi River in the Tamar police station area, three young men from Jamshedpur lost their lives, while two others sustained grievous injuries. The tragic accident occurred on Sunday afternoon along the busy Ranchi-Tata National Highway-33, when a speeding truck rammed into two motorcycles.

The deceased have been identified as Sumit Mishra (20), Pulkit Singh (18), and Nikhil Kumar (18), all residents of Bhuiyandih under the Sitaramdera police station area in Jamshedpur. The injured, Prince Kumar and Shubham Kumar, were initially rushed to the Tamar Community Health Center

(CHC) for emergency care before being referred to Rajendra Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) in Ranchi for advanced treatment. Among them, one is reported to be in critical condition.

According to eyewitnesses, the group of friends was on their way to Jonha Falls in Ranchi for a picnic when tragedy struck. As they neared the diversion at Kanchi River, a speeding truck collided with the two bikes, killing three riders on one motorcycle instantly. The two friends on the second bike suffered serious injuries.

The incident triggered outrage among local residents, who quickly gathered at the accident site. They blocked the highway for a short time, causing disruptions to traffic on NH-33. The protest was

brought to a peaceful end within an hour following intervention by local administrative officials and assurances of action.

Tamar police station in-charge Roshan Kumar Jha confirmed that the families of the victims were informed immediately after the mishap. The police have seized the truck involved in the accident and are investigating the incident to determine further details, including whether negligence or overspeeding was a factor.

This tragic accident has left the Bhuiyandih neighbourhood in Jamshedpur in mourning. The untimely loss of three young lives has also sparked concerns about the safety of NH-33, which has long been regarded as an accident-prone stretch.

Medicant Hospital Bokaro sets new benchmarks in healthcare



R SHARMA : BOKARO

Medicant Hospital Bokaro has emerged as a trailblazer in medical science, establishing new milestones in healthcare for Jharkhand. Under the expertise of Dr. Rahul Raj, Consultant in Radiology and Interventional Radiology, the hospital has achieved two groundbreaking medical procedures, marking firsts for Bokaro and among the select few in the state.

In one notable case, a 50-year-old woman suffering from kidney stones for six

months found relief at Medicant after several failed treatments elsewhere. A CT 128 slice scan revealed a renal abscess, prompting Dr. Rahul Raj to perform a guided pigtail insertion. This minimally invasive procedure successfully drained the abscess, leading to a remarkable recovery. The patient was discharged within 24 hours, showcasing the hospital's efficiency and advanced care.

In another achievement, Medicant Hospital performed a CT coronary angiography on a patient experiencing

angina. This non-invasive diagnostic procedure eliminates the need for catheterization and prolonged observation. The patient was able to return home just ten minutes after the investigation, making it a significant step forward in patient-centric cardiac care.

These pioneering efforts highlight Medicant Hospital Bokaro's commitment to redefining healthcare standards, ensuring that state-of-the-art treatments are accessible to the people of Jharkhand.

'Refusal to grant Rajghat last rites to Manmohan Singh an insult'

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

Satnam Singh Gambhir, the East India President of the All India Sikh Students Federation, has strongly criticized the central government for denying the request of Manmohan Singh's family to perform his last rites at Rajghat. Gambhir described the refusal as a "highly reprehensible act" and called it an insult to both the former Prime Minister and the Sikh community at large.

In a statement issued earlier today, Gambhir stated that Manmohan Singh, the country's only Sikh Prime Minister, deserved to be treated with the same respect and dignity as other former Prime Ministers, particularly in light of his decade-long service to the nation. He noted that it has been a tradition to conduct the last rites of former prime ministers at Rajghat, irrespective of the duration of their tenure. He added, "While the last rites of former prime ministers with shorter tenures have been honored at Rajghat, the denial to a leader



who guided the country for 10 years is a clear disrespect."

Gambhir expressed his dismay over what he called a discriminatory act against the Sikh community. He highlighted the contributions of the Sikh community to India's growth and progress, saying, "The Sikh community has made significant sacrifices for this nation, and yet, they are

continuously discriminated against by the government." He pointed out that if such treatment could be meted out to a former Prime Minister, it reflects the broader marginalization of the Sikh community within the country.

Further condemning the government's actions, Gambhir remarked, "The central government has shown no regard for the issues of imprisoned Sikhs, the farmers, or now the Sikh Prime Minister's family. This attitude towards the Sikh community is deeply troubling and creates a sense of alienation among the minority community."

He concluded by urging the central government to respect the sentiments of Manmohan Singh's family and the Sikh community, asserting that such discriminatory actions only exacerbate divisions in the country. "The contributions of the Sikh community to India's progress cannot be overlooked, and their dignity must be upheld," he said.

Vedanta ESL Skill School felicitates first batch of trainees

PNS : BOKARO

Vedanta ESL Skill School, in collaboration with SEEDS and sponsored by NABARD, celebrated the success of its inaugural batch of Food & Beverage Service Steward trainees. During the felicitation ceremony, 30 trainees were honored for completing the NSDC-certified program, designed to empower youth with industry-standard skills and employment opportunities.

Of the 30 graduates, 25 have already secured placements with prestigious companies such as DHPL Ramoji Film City, Hyderabad, earning annual packages of Rs. 1.9 LPA. The Skill School's



commitment to providing theoretical and practical training, along with soft skills, ensures a minimum 70% placement rate for its trainees.

The event was graced by dignitaries including

Philmon Bilung, DDM NABARD, and Kunal Daripa, Head CSR, ESL. The ceremony marked a significant step in Vedanta ESL's mission to enhance employability and inspire future aspirants.

CM orders action plan for development of eco-tourism in State

'There are immense possibilities of eco-tourism in Jharkhand'

PNS : RANCHI

Chief Minister Hemant Soren has directed the officials to prepare a better action plan for the development of eco-tourism in Jharkhand. Soren today gave many important suggestions to the officials in a meeting with Chief Secretary Alka Tiwari, Secretary of Forest Environment Department Abu Bakar Siddiqui and Secretary of Tourism Department Manoj Kumar in the Jharkhand Ministry regarding the possibilities of eco-tourism in the state and to develop them.

The Chief Minister said the officials that there are immense possibilities of eco-tourism in Jharkhand.



Chief Minister Hemant Soren holds a meeting with senior officials in Ranchi on Monday. PNS

Eco-tourism should be developed in the state in such a way that along with providing employment to the local people, nature can also be preserved. The Chief Minister said that the Forest Environment Department and the Tourism Department should work with better coordination to identify those places in Jharkhand for the development of eco-tourism, where there is potential for eco-tourism.

The Chief Minister has directed the officials to focus especially on schemes promoting eco-tourism in the state. He also said that by promoting eco-tourism, the natural beauty of Jharkhand will get a distinct identity in the country and the

world. The Chief Minister directed the officials to study the eco-tourism model of other states of the country or other countries where good work has been done in the field of eco-tourism.

He also directed the officials that the Forest Department and the Tourism Department should work with commitment with the aim of giving recognition to Jharkhand on the global map in the field of tourism. The Chief Minister said that our government is committed to develop eco-tourism of international level in the state. With the development of eco-tourism, the natural heritage of Jharkhand will be preserved.

Govt to renovate pond built in less than 1 acre: Tirkey



PNS : RANCHI

Now the State Government will also renovate the pond built in less than 1 acre in Jharkhand. In the next financial year, the Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Cooperative Department has been instructed to prepare a plan regarding private ponds.

Along with this, according to the new instructions, now during the renovation of the pond, a staircase will also be constructed from one side. These instructions were given by Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Cooperative Minister Shilpi Neha Tirkey to the officials present during the surprise inspection of Kanke Krishi Bhawan.

At present, a plan is underway for the renovation of private ponds with a minimum area of 1 acre and a maximum area of 5 acres. With this scheme, a large number of small ponds of farmers are not being renovated.

Tirkey also talked about the department working towards fixing MSP of vegetables in the coming time. She said that traders from other states are coming and reducing the price of vegetables like cauliflower and cabbage, due to which local farmers have to suffer losses.

The Minister, who came for a surprise inspection, seemed angry about the workers and officers going on leave in Krishi Bhawan. She said that it is important to celebrate festivals from Christmas to New Year or other festivals, but care should be taken that it does not affect the work. "Today when I have reached here, 50 percent of the workers and officers are on leave for 15 to 20 days. The work culture of Government employees in Jharkhand is already messed up. It is necessary to improve it and by doing this we can complete the plans of the department on time," she said.

Tirkey said that along with spending the budget amount of the current financial year, everyone will have to get involved in the preparation of the budget of the next financial year.

The Minister also seemed surprised at the information given about organic farming during the surprise inspection. She asked how many people know about this. Regarding packaging, sorting and grading, he gave the example of JSLPS's Palash brand.

Tirkey said that when this can be done by other departments, then why not here. She also instructed to provide employment to 2 to 3 thousand local villagers in the high-tech nursery to be built by the Horticulture Department on 27 acres. She said that people migrate to other places for employment, in such a situation migration can be stopped by ensuring their employment in high tech nurseries.

FJCCI wants permanent solution to rent dispute of shops



FJCCI officials during a meeting in Ranchi on Monday. PNS

PNS : RANCHI

Federation of Jharkhand Chamber of Commerce and Industries corresponded with City Administrator Sandeep Singh to propose a rent settlement scheme for a permanent solution to the rent dispute of shops located at Bazaar Tand. Due to delay in resolving this problem which has been going on for years, a meeting was held in the Chamber Bhawan in which it was said that due to construction of additional structure in the shops allotted in Bazaar Tand located in Upper Market, the rate of rent, interest and fine on it has become very high due to

which this matter has become complicated. After the death of the licensee or in the event of separation of a family member, along with the transfer of the name of the shop, shopkeepers also have other difficulties, which require departmental review.

Chamber's executive member Amit Sharma said that at that time, for the purpose of increasing income, only land was allotted to the shopkeepers by the Municipal Corporation, in which the traders constructed the structure at their own expense. In the light of the order issued by the Corporation in this regard, the shopkeepers also pay tax

to the Corporation as per the construction. We are regularly receiving suggestions from such traders to solve this problem that has been going on for years. Despite the continuous efforts of the Federation, the Ranchi Municipal Corporation has not yet taken the required action in this matter, due to which the traders are under mental stress.

Chamber President Paresh Gattani said that for a permanent solution to this problem, the Municipal Corporation should take the initiative to regularize the shops by bringing a popular scheme in the form of rent solution. With this effort of the corporation, along with the solution of the years-old problem of the shopkeepers at Bazaar Tand, RMC will also get crores of rupees in the revenue head, which can be used in the welfare schemes of the government.

Chamber President Paresh Gattani, General Secretary Aditya Malhotra, Treasurer Rohit Agarwal, Joint Secretary Navjot Alang, Executive Member Amit Sharma, Shailesh Agarwal, Vice President of Ranchi Municipal Corporation Tenant Association Shankar Jha and member Arun Joshi were present in the meeting.

AQUA WORLD CARNIVAL

Sakshi becomes 'Miss Beautiful', Kartik wins Mr Hunk title



PNS : RANCHI

Programs and competitions were a hit on the fourth day of Carnival 2025 being organized by Aqua World, Machhali Ghar. Monday's main attraction was the 'Ranchi Ki Miss Beautiful' and 'Ranchi Ka Mr. Hunk' competition for young men and women. In this competition, the participants had to catwalk on the ramp. The selected participants had to answer the questions of the judges.

In this competition, the title of Miss Beautiful of Ranchi was won by Sakshi while the title of Mr. Hunk of Ranchi was won by Kartik. Other winners of the Miss Beautiful competition included Roshan and Yuvi and other winners of Mr. Hunk were Priya and Sheetal. Baby Chatterjee and Jayant Mishra were present as judges in this competition.

Earlier this morning, Best



Painting Competition and Best Tattoo Competition were also organized. After that it was Dargal Time. In Miss Bagwati, women had to catwalk on the ramp while showing off their handbags. In the 'Jhoothi Khaali Thi Kasam' competition, people were

challenged to tell the biggest lie. After this, in The Follow Up Show, Rishabh made people roll with laughter by presenting stand up comedy. A lot of participants took part in the Best Couple Dance. Couples were seen dancing to the tune of the song Tere Vaaste Falak Se Main Chand Layunga. The theme of today's outfit competition was blue. A large number of people came wearing blue clothes.

On this occasion, Aqua World Chairman Pratul Shahdev, Deputy Chairperson Dr. Vidya Jha, Carnival Incharge Lokesh Chaudhary, Deputy Incharge Abhishek Giri, Anand, Saurav, Praduma, Akash, Ayush, Khushboo, Shagun, Saumya, Piyush, Aditya, Shivesh, Prashant, Nitin, Aparajita Komal, Tanya, Sanya and all the members of the Carnival Organizing Committee were present.

5-6 degrees temperature drop likely in State



PNS : RANCHI

Clouds are looming over many parts of Jharkhand due to Western disturbance. Meteorologist Abhishek Anand said that the weather is going to clear from today. In such a situation, due to the clearing of clouds, the minimum temperature will drop by 5-6 degrees. There will be severe cold in the early morning and night.

Anand said that especially in areas like Natarhat, Gumla, Pakur and Kanke of Ranchi, there will be severe cold in the evening. Cold wave will also blow, about which one needs to be a little cautious,

he added.

The Meteorologist said that the temperature of the capital Ranchi can go up to 10 degrees Celsius. At the same time, the maximum temperature is also expected to be up to 25 degrees Celsius. At the same time, he said that for the next few days, dense fog may prevail in many districts of the state in the morning and after evening.

The Meteorological Department has issued an alert regarding this.

In the last 24 hours, the weather has been different at different places in the State. On Sunday, there was sporadic rain at some places.

Around nine mm of rain fell in Latehar. Garhwa and Daltonganj also received rain. Due to Western Disturbance, the minimum temperature is above normal.

The Meteorological Department has said that the effect of fog will be seen in seven districts in the morning and evening amid the play of clouds and fog. Dense fog may prevail in Palamu, Garhwa, Latehar, Chatra, Lohardaga, Gumla and Simdega of Jharkhand for the next few days. A warning of dense fog has been issued in these seven districts. The Meteorological Department has issued a yellow alert.



By running a campaign against illegal opium cultivation, about 14 acres in village Kuda under Saiko police station area, about 4 acres in village Gamhariya under Arki police station area, about 06 acres in village Hesahatu under Khunti police station area, about 8 acres in village Konova under Murhu police station area, about 4.55 acres in village Chapi Karamdih under Karra police station area, about 04 acres in village Hatingcholi under Maranghada police station area and about 40.55 acres of illegal opium cultivation in the district were destroyed. PNS

Gadkari asks State Govt to clear obstacles in road projects

PNS : RANCHI

Union Road Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari has written a letter to CM Hemant Soren. The letter says that in view of the obstacles in road construction, there should be a quick solution to the issues related to land acquisition and forest clearance. Instruct the Chief Secretary of the state to resolve these issues by holding a meeting with all the parties, so that the projects can be completed on time. The Union Minister has especially drawn attention to the Varanasi Kolkata Expressway. It has been said that the work of the Kudu-



Udaipura package has not started. The reason for this is the lack of forest clearance and land acquisition. Many projects are stalled

due to forest clearance, compensation and land acquisition.

The work of 15 highway projects in Jharkhand is

Marandi raises poor law and order situation

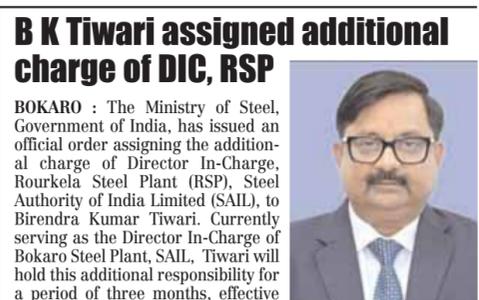
BJP state president Babul Marandi has raised questions on the deteriorating law and order situation in the state. He has written in a social media post that on an average 5 people are being murdered every day in Jharkhand. According to the data released by SCRB, 1400 people have been murdered between January and October this year. During this period, not only common people but also police officers, advocates and public representatives have been killed untimely. The graph of crime in Jharkhand is rising alarmingly.

being affected due to forest clearance. The cost of all these projects is 21 thousand 690 crores. The forest clearance problem is stuck in 172

km of the 588 km long road. There is a problem of forest clearance between Kudu to Udayapura (Lateha), Udayapura to Bhogu section

(Latehar), Bhogu to Shankha (Palamu) and Basukinath to Deoghar (Deoghar). Whereas under Varanasi Kolkata Express Way, there is a problem of forest clearance in Chatra Bypass (Chatra), Deoria to Donoreshan (Chatra - Hazaribagh), Donoreshan to Bongabhar package (Hazariabhar-Ramgarh), Bongabhar to Lepo package (Ramgarh-Bokaro), Lepo to Kamalapur package (Bokaro). Whereas under the new road project, there is a problem of forest clearance between Deoghar bypass, Gumla bypass, Keretya to Kyondpani, Kyondpani to Latra and Latra to Sithi.

Participants take part in the All India Inter School and Club Yoga Championship in Ranchi on Monday. PNS



B K Tiwari assigned additional charge of DIC, RSP

BOKARO : The Ministry of Steel, Government of India, has issued an official order assigning the additional charge of Director In-Charge, Rourkela Steel Plant (RSP), Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL), to Birendra Kumar Tiwari. Currently serving as the Director In-Charge of Bokaro Steel Plant, SAIL, Tiwari will hold this additional responsibility for a period of three months, effective from January 1, 2025, to March 31, 2025. This arrangement will continue until a regular appointment to the position is made, or until further orders, whichever is earlier. The order was issued with the approval of the competent authority and highlights Tiwari's trusted leadership within SAIL's operations.



Workshop on CSR at CMPDI

CMPDI organised a one-day workshop on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) at its HQs, Ranchi on Monday for the CMPDI CSR Apex committee members and RI level Sub-Committee members to review and assess the impact of CSR activities done by CMPDI in the last decade. Mandatory provisions of CSR under section 135 of the Companies act, 2013 became effective from 01.04. 2014. Manoj Kumar, CMD, CMPDI; Shankar Nagachari, Director (Tech/CRD); Ajay Kumar, Director (Tech/P&D); Achyut Ghatak, Director (Tech/RD&T); R.K. Mahapatra, GM (HRD/CSR) and other Sr. Officials were present on this occasion. In this workshop, interactive sessions were conducted on "CSR Project Identification, implementation, best practices and emerging trends" and "CSR rules/audits/responsibilities".



BJP attacks Rahul Gandhi for New Year trip, Congress Responds

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Launching a scathing attack on the Congress, the BJP on Monday alleged that Rahul Gandhi "exploited" former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh's death for his "expedient politics" and flew to Vietnam to ring in the New Year while the country is mourning his demise. The Congress hit back and asked when will the "Sanghis stop this 'take diversion' politics." "While the country is mourning Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh's demise, Rahul Gandhi has flown to Vietnam to ring in the new year," BJP's IT cell head Amit Malviya said in a social media post. Rahul Gandhi politicised and exploited Dr Singh's death for his expedient politics but his contempt for him is unmissable, he charged. "The Gandhis and the Congress hate Sikhs. Never forget that Indra Gandhi desecrated the Darbar Sahib," Malviya added. Reacting sharply, Congress leader Manickam Tagore responded saying when will the Sanghis stop this 'take diversion' politics?" He alleged that the way Prime Minister Narendra Modi denied Dr Singh a place for cremation on the Yamuna banks and his ministers cornered his family was "shameful." "If Gandhi travels privately, why does it bother you?" he asked Malviya and said "Get well in New year".

Defence Exports Hit ₹ 21,000 Crore: Defence Minister

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said on Monday India's defence exports have crossed a record Rs 21,000 crore from Rs 2,000 crore a decade ago. Addressing officers at the Army War College (AWC) in more than two-centuries-old Mhow Cantonment, Singh said a target has been set to achieve defence exports of Rs 50,000 crore by 2029. He said mastering frontier technologies is the need of the hour in the constantly evolving times, noting that military training centres are playing a crucial role in equipping and readying soldiers to deal with future challenges. "Our defence exports, which were around Rs 2,000 crore a decade ago, have crossed the record figure of Rs 21,000 crore today. We have set an export target of Rs 50,000 crore by 2029," the defence minister said. He also said Made-in-India equipment is being exported to other countries. Rajnath mentioned radical changes in warfare in his speech, saying that unconventional methods like information warfare, Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based warfare, proxy warfare, electromagnetic warfare, space warfare, and cyber-attacks are posing a big challenge. He stressed the need for the military to be well-trained and equipped to fight off such attacks and lauded training centres in Mhow for their valuable contributions. The defence minister commended the training centres for constantly improving their training curriculum as per changing times, and striving to make the personnel fighting fit for every kind of challenge. Rajnath said the Modi government is committed to strengthening integration and jointness among the three services. "In the times to come, the armed forces will be able to face challenges together in a better and more efficient way," he added. The defence minister said high-level training is provided to officers of all wings in the Mhow Cantonment. He appealed to



Defence Minister Rajnath Singh during his visit at the Army War College, at Mhow, in Indore district of Madhya Pradesh. **PTI**

officers to explore the possibility of promoting integration through training in areas such as weapons training in Infantry School; AI and communication technology in Military College of Telecommunication Engineering (MCTE), and leadership - junior and senior command in AWC. Rajnath Singh said some officers will work as defence attaches in the future, and they should strive to secure national interests at the global level. "When you take up this post of defence attaches, you should imbibe the government's vision of 'aatmanirbhar Bharat'. Only through self-reliance can India strengthen its defence capabilities and gain more respect on the world stage," he added. The defence minister is on a two-day visit to Madhya Pradesh since Sunday. He said the government is committed to making India one of the strongest economic and military powers in the world. "Economic prosperity is possible only when full attention is paid to security. Similarly, the security system will be robust only when the economy is strong. Both complement each other," he added.

At AWC, the defence minister was briefed by commandant Lt Gen H S Sahi on the role and significance of the institute towards training and empowering military leaders for war-fighting across the spectrum of conflict. The defence minister was also briefed upon the significant steps in training methodology through jointness in multi-domain operations, infusion of technology in training curriculum and exchange programmes being undertaken with academia, universities and industries along with training of CAPF officers, a release stated. He was also apprised about the global footprints of the institute achieved through training the officers from friendly countries and contributing immensely towards military diplomacy. Chief of the Army Staff General Upendra Dwivedi and other senior officials of the Army were present on the occasion. The defence minister laid a wreath and paid homage to brave-hearts at the Infantry Memorial. Earlier in the day, the defence minister and General Dwivedi offered prayers at the famous Mahakaleshwar temple in Ujjain city.

Film industry praises PM Modi's WAVES summit 2025 initiative

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Akshay Kumar, Anil Kapoor, Ekta Kapoor, Praseon Joshi and Sunjay Dutt were among personalities from the Indian film industry who praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the WAVES Summit 2025, an initiative aimed at making India a hub of global creation. In his monthly radio address Mann Ki Baat, the prime minister on Sunday announced that India will host the World Audio Visual Entertainment Summit (WAVES) for the first time between February five and nine in New Delhi. The official social media page of the Prime Minister also shared a post about the upcoming

event which was reposted by many celebrities on the microblogging platform. In his address, Modi compared WAVES to global events like the World Economic Forum in Davos, adding the leaders from the media and entertainment industry as well as creative minds from across the globe will gather in Delhi for the Summit. He also urged all stakeholders in the entertainment and creative industries to actively participate in the WAVES. Actor Akshay Kumar termed WAVES Summit 2025 as a "wonderful idea". "Now this is PM @narendramodi ji's vision towards promoting the Media & Entertainment sector... Waves 2025 summit will hopefully be a fabulous global forum to have the entire entertainment industry

come and grow together," he wrote. Anil Kapoor said Modi's visionary leadership continues to inspire. "The #WAVES2025 summit is a groundbreaking step towards making India the global hub for film and entertainment. Looking forward to seeing the world come together to celebrate creativity and collaboration #MannKiBaat," the actor added. "Excited to witness India become a global hub for film and entertainment. Looking forward to contributing to this landmark initiative," said producer Ekta Kapoor. Praseon Joshi, CBFC head and lyricist-writer, said WAVES Summit 2025 will put the "spotlight on India's content industry & its vast potential".

Baghpat doctor kills man to fake his death, escape loan repayment; arrested

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

In a chilling attempt to evade loan repayments, a Unani doctor from Baghpat, Dr. Mubarik, allegedly orchestrated his own "death" by burning a youth alive in a car. Inspired by a TV show, he meticulously planned the act to clear his debts amounting to Rs 20-25 lakh. The police, however, apprehended him after his plan unraveled due to a crucial mistake. Disclosing the details of the case, Superintendent of Police (SP) Abhimanyu Manglik said: On December 23, Jabbar Ali of Bijopura reported a burned car near a canal bridge, containing a charred body. Later, on December 26, Gulzar, a resident of Khanalampura, filed a missing person report for his nephew Sonu (31), a resident of Yamunanagar, who had been missing since December 22. During the investigation, it

was revealed that Dr. Mubarik, overwhelmed by debt, had devised this heinous plan after watching a TV show "Crime Petrol". Six months earlier, he had purchased two cars and two bikes on finance, taken out a Rs 10 lakh personal loan, and acquired Rs 5 lakh in insurance. Additionally, he owed Rs 9 lakh to his neighbor Masood, alias Leelu, for a land deal and had borrowed lakhs more from others. Dr. Mubarik bought a second-hand Maruti 800 car for Rs 26,000 a month ago to execute his plan. He needed a body that matched his physical characteristics. After failing to procure a body, he befriended Sonu, a worker at his brother-in-law's factory, who bore a striking resemblance to him. On December 22, Mubarik invited Sonu to a roadside eatery, where they drank together. He spiked Sonu's drink with sedatives, render-

ing him unconscious. The doctor then drove Sonu to a secluded spot near the canal, removed his chain, doused the car with petrol, and set it ablaze with Sonu inside. His intent was to fake his death, allowing his wife to claim ₹5 lakh in insurance and secure a death certificate to absolve the ₹10 lakh personal loan. However, Dr. Mubarik's scheme failed when he returned to the crime scene on December 27 to check if the car had burned completely. Acting on a tip-off, the police detained him for questioning. Upon interrogation, Mubarik confessed to the crime, revealing his meticulous planning inspired by a crime show episode he watched multiple times. Dr. Mubarik has been arrested, and further investigations are underway. The incident has shocked the local community, shedding light on the lengths some individuals go to escape financial burdens.

Kerala BJP chief K Surendran in quandary over Annamalai's public flogging

KUMAR CHELLAPAN ■ KOCHI

The anguish expressed by Tamil Nadu BJP chief K Annamalai by flogging himself in public over the ever increasing incidents of rape in the DMK ruled State has put his Kerala counterpart K Surendran in a major quandary. Annamalai's action was a fall out of a girl student getting sexually assaulted in a gruesome manner in the Anna University campus and also the charges by Annamalai that the incidents of rapes happening in the State are

shooting up in an unprecedented manner under the DMK regime. Annamalai's anguish drew instant response from Governor R N Ravi on Saturday as he made an unscheduled visit to the university campus and interacted with students as well as the authorities. A late evening release by Raj Bhavan said the Governor expressed his concern over the attack on girl students and instructed the university administrative staff to beef up the security arrangements in the campus.

The Tamil Nadu BJP chief, himself a former officer of the Indian Police Service, also declared that he would not wear footwears till the DMK Government was removed from power. Though the DMK leaders and ministers ridiculed Annamalai for his decision terming the same as theatrics, public response to his swear has rattled the State administration. But neighboring Kerala, where the BJP is struggling to get a mooring, has been interesting. Annamalai's self-inflicted torture by flogging has earned wide

appreciation from all walks of life. "He is trying to establish the BJP as a formidable force in the Dravida Land. His actions speak a lot and I will not be surprised to see the Hindutva party emerge as an alternative to the DMK and the AIADMK which is getting disintegrated fast under Edappadi Palaniswami, the reigning chief of Tamil Nadu BJP," said P Sujathan, author and political critic. Many in Kerala want Surendran also to undertake a self flogging a la Annamalai style and stop wearing footwears till the ruling

CPI(M)-led government is ousted from power in a democratic manner. "The present BJP leadership in Kerala is hand in glove with certain national leaders and they have not done anything to make the party an alternative force to the CPI(M) and the Congress. The BJP leaders in the State have resorted to attacking the minority community members, especially the Christmas Carols to send a message that the saffron brigade is an exclusive Hindu party," said Jaiby Kuruvithadam, a BJP leader based in Muvattupuzha.

AIIMS joins AI hype, to invest ₹300 Crore

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, has also joined the artificial Intelligence (AI) bandwagon with Director Dr M Srinivas on Monday at a meeting held here revealing that plans are afoot to invest more than Rs 300 crore in AI by developing digital infrastructure, introducing innovative solutions that enhance patient care, streamline operations, and improve health outcomes. According to various studies, 79 per cent of healthcare organisations are presently utilising AI technology. At the meet, leaders in healthcare, technology, and policy shared insights into how AI is poised to bridge critical gaps in health communication, making information more accessible, reliable, and patient-centric. "AI is revolutionising everything from patient care to health communication," said Dr Srinivas, indicating AIIMS' commitment to integrating cutting-

edge technology into healthcare, furthering its mission to revolutionise medical practices and healthcare delivery. "We are investing over Rs 300 crore in digital infrastructure to ensure that every stakeholder - patients, doctors, and researchers -- benefits from this innovation. By integrating AI, we can improve efficiency, reduce delays, and enable world-class research," he added. The experts at AIIMS also stressed the need to bridge the gap of misinformation by delivering accurate, easily understandable, and personalised healthcare information via AI to people across diverse demographics. Dr Srinivas also emphasised that leveraging AI to simplify and disseminate health information will empower patients and improve their engagement with healthcare systems, ultimately leading to better health outcomes. "A good health system isn't reliant on individuals. AI can play a vital role in making healthcare more accurate, com-

passionate, and equitable," Dr Kavita Narayan, Senior Technical Advisor, HRH for Health Systems at the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. "To truly make a difference, we must integrate technology thoughtfully and ensure collaboration between policymakers, technologists, and healthcare providers," she added. The experts also caution against overdependence on technology at the expense of human connection. KP Kochhar, Professor and Head of the Physiology Department at AIIMS, felt that there was a need to balance innovation with empathy in healthcare. "While AI can enhance precision and efficiency, we must preserve the human touch in healthcare. Compassion and technology must work together to create systems that prioritise the well-being of patients," Kochhar said, adding that AI in healthcare is a game changer, especially for a diverse and populous countries like India.

TN leads in third gender voters, but low participation

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

More people enrolled themselves in the voters' list for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in the 'third gender' category but only 27 per cent of them turned up at the polling stations, according to Election Commission data. According to the data issued by the poll authority last week, 48,194 people were eligible to vote as third gender elector in 2024, compared to 39,075 in 2019 -- an increase of 23.5 per cent over the five-year period. But only 13,058 of them actually exercised their franchise, which comes to 27 per cent of the total registered third gender electors. As per the data, Tamil Nadu had the highest number of registered third gender elector - 8,467. But only 2,709 cast vote.

'Can't ignore speeches to brainwash youth': Delhi HC rejects appeal in UAPA case

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Speeches to brainwash innocent youth and recruiting them for illegal acts against the country cannot be completely washed away in the absence of a specific terrorist act, the Delhi High Court has said and dismissed the plea of a terror case accused. A bench of Justices Prathiba M Singh and Amit Sharma made the observation while rejecting the plea of Mohd Abdul Rehman, an alleged associate of Al-Qaida's Indian outfit, against his conviction and seven-year-five-month jail term by a trial court under the anti-terror UAPA law. "Speeches which are given to brainwash innocent youth coupled with attempts to recruit them for committing unlawful and illegal acts against the country cannot be completely washed away on the ground that no specific terrorist act has

been committed," it said. The appellant argued though he was held guilty of indulging in preparatory acts for the commission of a terrorist act and recruiting persons for terrorist act, there was no evidence to show he committed such acts. The bench, however, said the terms terrorist act had a wide definition, enough to include "indulging in conspiracy with terrorist organisations and associated with persons who are rendering support to terrorist organisations", whereas the identification or existence of a specific act of terror was not required for punishment under the provisions. The High Court upheld the trial court conviction verdict, observing evidence to show he was in close connection with the other accused who were a part of a larger network. The network was said to be carrying out inflammatory speeches, dis-

seminating material, having links with Pakistan-based organisations and travelling there for secret meetings, recruiting persons for terrorist acts, collecting funds to help such travels and other activities fanning hatred against the country and its political leaders, among other things. "In conspiracies of this nature specific covert acts would not be required but secretive and clandestine support to declared terrorist organisations would also be sufficient. The evidence and the testimonies which have been recorded in the present case clearly disclose association with terrorist organisations for commission of conspiracy for committing a terrorist act. The appeal is, accordingly, dismissed," the bench ruled. The court said the planning to execute terrorist acts could extend over years and Section 18 of UAPA aimed to address

such a preparation, even when a specific terrorist act was not identified. It said it was "common knowledge" that terrorist organisations like Al-Qaida in the Indian subcontinent functioned in an extremely secretive manner and its associates often left no trail of evidence. In February 2023, the trial court convicted the appellant and other accused persons for conspiracy to commit acts that constituted preparation towards commission of some terrorist act. The trial court considered the evidence that indicated the existence of a conspiracy to commit a terrorist act, including their illegal travel to Pakistan, inflammatory speeches, various passports by creating false and fabricated documents. The State said the material showed appellant's ideology professed violence against the country and the Prime Minister.

Muslim forum says no to Rushdie ban, calls for intellectual defense

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Opposing the Muslim organisations calling for reban of Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses", the Indian Muslims for Secular Democracy (IMSD) on Monday urged the Muslims to remember iconic social reformer Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's teachings and to "fight words with words" instead of resorting to book bans or burnings. The renewed sale of Rushdie's book, which has returned to Indian bookshelves 36 years after it was banned by the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1988, has been strongly condemned by some Muslim organisations.

"IMSD calls upon Muslims to recall the views expressed by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan well over a century ago. In his time, he staunchly opposed Muslims who made a bonfire of books they did not like, or demanded its ban by the authorities," the IMSD said in a statement. "His advice was simple. Fight words with words if the book in question is worthy of a reasoned critique. Burning or banning such books implies that Muslims are incapable of an intellectual and moral defense of their faith. If the book (cartoon, play, film) is nothing but a gratuitous, salacious or malicious attack on Islam or its Prophet, his suggestion was: ignore it," the statement added. The IMSD's statement is

endorsed by 42 eminent citizens, including civil rights activist Teesta Setalvad, oral historian Sohail Hashmi, poet-scientist Gauhar Raza, acclaimed theatre director Feroz Abbas Khan and documentary film-maker Shama Zaidi, among others. Earlier in November, the Delhi High Court closed proceedings on a plea challenging the Rajiv Gandhi government's ban on the book's import. The High Court stated the failure of officials to present the relevant notification from October 5, 1988 led to the assumption that the notification did not exist. To buttress their point, the Muslim forum gave the example of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) founder Sir



Salman Rushdie holds a copy of the newly-published novel "The Satanic Verses", during a speech in Arlington, Virginia on March 24, 1992. India was one of the first countries to ban the book's import and sale, citing concerns over its content being offensive to the Muslim community. **PTI**

Syed Ahmad Khan's approach to counter English writer William Muir's controversial book in 1861 where he allegedly made disparaging remarks against Prophet Mohammad. "In response, Sir Syed travelled to London to study the books and journals that Muir had relied on and eight years later published a reasoned critique debunking Muir's work," the statement said. The IMSD said Sir Syed's advice to his fellow Muslims long ago is 'the more relevant in today's new India' where "minorities are daily targets of Hindutva's hate politics". "Any ill-advised or hotheaded response to the publication of Satanic Verses -- a book not many Muslims are likely to have read earlier or will read

now -- will only provide more fodder to the Muslim-baiters. Besides, it will only give free publicity to the very book they want banished," it added. Underlining the Constitution of India guarantees the right to freedom of speech along with penal action against hate speech, the statement said that Muslims, or anyone else, have the right to be offended by a book, cartoon, play or film and are within their right to invoke existing provisions of criminal law to seek redressal of their grievance. However, no one has the right to "silence the offender. A fatwa, firman or call to kill Salman Rushdie, as also the demand for a ban on Satanic Verses amounts to just that: silencing the offender," it explained.

UP Govt invites CMs, Governors of all States for Mahakumbh 2025

AI-enabled cameras, RFID wristbands and mobile app tracking will be used to track headcount of the pilgrims: Minister

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Uttar Pradesh government will invite the President, Vice President, Prime Minister, and the chief ministers and governors of all states, among host of other dignitaries, for the Maha Kumbh Mela which is set to begin from January 13. The mega religious event, which is held every 12 years, will continue for 45 days in Prayagraj. More than 40 crore devotees from all over the world are expected to attend the mega event. State Finance Minister Suresh Khanna said at a roadshow in the national capital on Monday that invites are being sent to the governors the chief minister of all states, including those ruled by non-NDA parties. "We have invited Lieutenant Governor of Delhi Vinai Kumar Saxena and will be meeting Delhi Chief Minister Atishi as well," he said at the event.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath met President Droupadi Murmu in New Delhi on Sunday and invited her to attend the Maha Kumbh. Adityanath also extended invitations to Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinay Kumar Saxena for the grand event. As part of the invitation, the Chief Minister presented the dignitaries with special gifts, including a symbol featuring the Mahakumbh 2025 logo, a 'kalash' (sacred urn), literature related to the event, a New Year table calendar and a diary. The Uttar Pradesh chief minister reached New Delhi on Saturday and met former President Ram Nath Kovind, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, BJP National President and Union Health Minister Jagat Prakash Nadda, and Mizoram Governor General VK Singh. Each of them received person-

alised invitations and mementos related to the Mahakumbh. On Sunday, Yogi expressed gratitude to the dignitaries for their time through a post on his official handle on social media, sharing photographs of the meetings. With the event just weeks away, the Uttar Pradesh government has intensified efforts to invite dignitaries and the general public from across the country, with the chief minister and his cabinet ministers personally leading the outreach campaigns in different states. Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday described the upcoming 'Maha Kumbh' as the "Maha Kumbh of unity" as he asked people to return from the grand religious congregation with a resolve to banish hate and division from society. Speaking in his monthly 'Mann ki Baat' broadcast, Modi said, "Maha Kumbh ka sandesh ek ho pura desh (Message from the Maha Kumbh should be that the entire country must be united)." He added, "Ganga ki



aviral dhara, na bante samaj hamara" (Like the uninterrupted flow of Ganga, let our society remain one). Noting the diversity of people visiting the mammoth congregation, he said there is no other example of such a sight of unity in diversity. "Maha Kumbh's speciality lies not just in its vastness but also in its diversity," he said. Artificial intelligence-enabled cameras, RFID wristbands and mobile app tracking are among the methods that will be used to track headcount of the pilgrims attending the Maha Kumbh. Sharing details of the arrangements being made for the event, Khanna said the headcount of pilgrims attending the Maha Kumbh will be efficiently managed using advanced technology. "The first method is attribute

based search, where tracking will be conducted using person attribute search cameras. The second method involves RFID wristbands, which will be provided to the pilgrims. Through these wristbands, entry and exit times will be tracked using RFID readers," Khanna said at a roadshow here. "The third method is mobile app tracking, where with the consent of pilgrims, their location will be tracked through GPS using a mobile application," he added. The minister said the government is gearing up for a divine, grand and digital Maha Kumbh. "The preparations include the launch of a dedicated website and app, an AI-powered chatbot in 11 languages, QR-based passes for people and vehicles, a multilingual digital lost and found centre, ICT monitoring for cleanliness and tents, software for land and facility allocation, multilingual digital signage (VMD), an automated ration supply system, drone-based surveillance and disaster man-

agement, live software for monitoring 530 projects, an inventory tracking system and integration of all locations on Google maps," he added. Khanna said the arrangements have been made to ensure the tourists do not face parking issues. "In this regard, 101 smart parking facilities have been created, capable of accommodating up to five lakh vehicles daily. The parking area spans 1867.04 hectares, which is 763.75 hectares larger compared to the 1103.29 hectares allocated for parking in 2019. These parking facilities will be monitored through the Integrated Command Centre," he added. Meanwhile, in compliance with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's instructions to ensure a 'digital' and 'cyber safe' Maha Kumbh, Uttar Pradesh Police has formulated a strategy to protect the devotees from cyber frauds. "We have prepared a multi-dimensional strategy to fight cybercrime during the Maha

Kumbh. Apart from police officers, we have also roped in cyber experts from specialised institutions like IIT-Kanpur. Acting on the complaints received, police have already arrested some cyber frauds," Director General of Police (DGP), Prashant Kumar, said. "We will also launch a comprehensive awareness campaign to protect the devotees from cybercrime during the event," he added. A meeting of cyber experts and top police officials was held recently at the Integrated Command and Control Centre in Lucknow which discussed various issues concerning cybercrime, the DGP said. Held in hybrid mode under the chairmanship of Additional Director General of Police (Prayagraj Zone), Bhanu Bhaskar, the meeting was attended by professors from IIT-Kanpur, ADGP (cyber crime), Prayagraj police commissioner, IG (Prayagraj range), and cyber experts, among others.

Bitter-sweet 2024 for BJP in Uttar Pradesh

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

For the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Uttar Pradesh, 2024 will be remembered as a year of mixed fortunes. The party witnessed a significant decline in its Lok Sabha tally, dropping from 62 seats in 2019 to 32. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) also saw a reduction, with its total seats in the state falling from 64 to 36. This dip diminished Uttar Pradesh's commanding presence in national politics. For the first time in his political career spanning from Chief Minister to Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, MP from Varanasi, had to head a coalition government where the BJP lacked an absolute majority. The year marked a historic moment for the BJP, as it became the second-largest party in Uttar Pradesh after a decade. The setback was particularly poignant, as the party even lost the Faizabad (Ayodhya) seat—a symbolic constituency given its connection to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Political analysts saw this loss as a wake-up call for the party, emphasizing the need for recalibrating its electoral strategy. However, the BJP managed to end the year on a high note by securing seven out of nine seats in the



state assembly by-elections. This victory allowed the party to regain its position as the leading political force in Uttar Pradesh, offering a glimmer of hope amid a challenging year. The year began with optimism for the BJP, bolstered by the consecration ceremony of Ramlala at his birthplace in Ayodhya. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's role as the main host for the event was a defining moment. For the first time in independent India, a Prime Minister publicly aligned with the sentiments of the country's majority community. The unprecedented nature of this move was underscored by comparisons to the objections

raised by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, during the re-establishment of the Somnath temple. Nehru had refrained from attending the event and even discouraged the President from participating. In stark contrast, Modi's presence at the Ramlala consecration symbolized a revolutionary shift in the political narrative. This event generated immense enthusiasm among the BJP cadre and supporters, creating an atmosphere where Modi's slogan of crossing 400 seats in the Lok Sabha seemed achievable. Yet, the electoral reality fell short of these expectations, with the party's reduced tally

signaling the need for introspection. The assembly by-elections later in the year proved to be a turning point. Under the leadership of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the BJP reclaimed its dominance by winning seven out of nine contested seats. The Chief Minister's hands-on approach, including direct communication with party workers and meticulous planning for each constituency, played a pivotal role in this success. "The by-election results reflect not just Yogi Adityanath's administrative acumen but also his ability to galvanize the organization in challenging

times," said a senior BJP leader. The results served as a testament to Adityanath's leadership and offered a morale boost for the party as it looked ahead to 2025. From an organizational perspective, 2024 was a year of learning for the BJP. The party faced criticism for its inability to translate Modi's popularity into votes across all regions of Uttar Pradesh. "The year taught us valuable lessons about complacency and the importance of grassroots engagement," admitted a BJP strategist. "It's a reminder that even a strong leader's appeal needs to be complemented by robust on-ground efforts." As the party charts its course for the future, the setbacks of 2024 are being viewed as opportunities for recalibration. The BJP's ability to turn defeat into a rallying cry will define its trajectory in the coming years. While 2024 ended on a mixed note for the BJP, the year's experiences have set the stage for a reinvigorated approach to Uttar Pradesh's complex political landscape. The party's ability to adapt, strategize, and rebuild will determine whether it can reclaim its former dominance in the state. For now, 2024 stands as a year of introspection, resilience, and hard-earned lessons for the BJP in Uttar Pradesh.

Kerala BJP cadres want party leader to undergo flogging a la Annamalai

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ CHENNAI/KOCHI

The anguish expressed by Tamil Nadu BJP chief K Annamalai by flogging himself in public over the ever increasing incidents of rape in the DMK ruled State has put his Kerala counterpart K Surendran in a major quandary. Annamalai's action was a fall out of a girl student getting sexually assaulted in a gruesome manner in the Anna University campus and also the charges by Annamalai that the incidents of rapes happening in the State are shooting up in an unprecedented manner under the DMK regime. Annamalai's anguish drew instant response from Governor R N Ravi on Saturday as he made an unscheduled visit to the university campus and interacted with students as well as the authorities. A late evening release by Raj Bhavan said the Governor expressed his concern over the attack on girl students and instructed the university administrative staff to beef up the security arrangements in the campus. The Tamil Nadu BJP chief, himself a former officer of the Indian Police Service, also declared that he would not wear footwear till the DMK

Government was removed from power. Though the DMK leaders and ministers ridiculed Annamalai for his decision terming the same as theatrics, public response to his swear has rattled the State administration. But neighboring Kerala, where the BJP is struggling to get a mooring, has been interesting. Annamalai's self-inflicted torture by flogging has earned wide appreciation from all walks of life. "He is trying to establish the BJP as a formidable force in the Dravida Land. His actions speak a lot and I will not be surprised to see the Hindutva party emerge as an alternative to the DMK and the AIADMK which is getting disintegrated fast under Edappadi Palaniswami, the reigning chief of Tamil Nadu BJP," said P Sujathan, author and political critic. Many in Kerala want Surendran also to undertake a self flogging a la Annamalai style and stop wearing footwear till the ruling CPI(M)-led government is ousted from power in a democratic manner. "The present BJP leadership in Kerala is hand in glove with certain national leaders and they have not done anything to make the party an alternative force to the CPI(M) and the Congress.

The BJP leaders in the State have resorted to attacking the minority community members, especially the Christmas Carols to send a message that the saffron brigade is an exclusive Hindu party," said Jaiby Kuruvithadam, a BJP leader based in Muvattupuzha. Sudheer Damodaran, a political commentator, said that Surendran can revive the BJP in the State by following the footsteps of Annamalai. "People in the State are waiting for a third force to emerge in the political landscape as it is known all over Kerala that the CPI(M) and the Congress are the two sides of the same coin," said Damodaran. Meanwhile the SNDP, the platform of the powerful Eezhava community in Kerala have made its displeasure public. There is no point in continuing our alliance with the BJP as it has ignored our interests while appointing Governors and chiefs of other Constitutional institutions. The Congress under Ramesh Chennithala is certain to perform well in the coming months," said Vellappilli Natesan, general secretary of SNDP. The NDA led by the BJP is almost certain to see a realignment of forces in the coming days if the words of Natesan are any indication.

Didi finally lands at Sandeshkhali, slams BJP and LF

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Monday launched a scathing attack on the BJP and the Left for spending money to spread canards against her Government even as she landed at Sandeshkhali for the first time after the all-women movement against land grab and mass rape that hit the national headlines last year. Some 'mischievous' people had been playing 'a game of money and money only... they were intentionally misleading the people of this area... But as lies cannot last forever they have failed in their dirty mission and the people of Sandeshkhali particularly the women have come in large number to this meeting." Banerjee told a massive gathering even as she promised a number of projects. "I request the people of Sandeshkhali not to fall in the trap of the mischievous people... the BJP has plenty of money and they spend these in misinformation campaign... my message is to the mothers and sisters of Sandeshkhali to avoid those bad people... you could see things. With your eyes how some people resorted to disinformation but finally nothing came out... please don't go anywhere if someone asks you to. It's your right to get the benefits of Government schemes," Banerjee said asking the women not to go anywhere. "The Government will come at your doorstep with Duare Sarkar," one of her patent schemes via which the Government functionaries hold regional camps to address people's problems.



Sandeshkhali hit the national headlines for several weeks last year when the local women came out in hordes against strong arm tactics of local Trinamool Congress strongman Sheikh Shahjehan whose men allegedly physically exploited women and grabbed their lands to convert them into fisheries. Post Sandeshkhali incident the State Government was repeatedly indicted by the National Commissions for Women and Scheduled Tribes. Subsequently Shahjehan, also accused of other crimes like multi-crore ration scam --- along with the jailed Food Minister Jyotipriya Mullick --- was arrested by the Central Bureau of Investigation and has since been in jail. While there was a common refrain among the people against the Chief Minister for not visiting once this Sunderbans islands in North 24 Parganas off Basirhat, Banerjee's visit tended to impact the local women many of whom said they were willing to once again repose faith in her. This even as Banerjee asked the people to forget and leave behind the past incidents and move forward. "I want you to forget all that is past and proceed forwards... I want Sandeshkhali to tank among the

best... a girl from Sandeshkhali to top the board exams... someone from here to become an IPS or IAS officer... This is not a place for riots and violence. We want peace," Banerjee said before announcing a plethora of Government projects. Even as the locals requested the construction of a bridge joining the riverine islands with the mainland Banerjee said, "infrastructure projects like bridges require significant funding. I am noting your request, but we need to arrange the necessary resources... as you all know that the Centre provides us with nothing... they have stopped all the funds for rural development and I have to manage from my own resources." Aware that the Left had been quite active in the region Banerjee attacked the CPI(M) too saying, "BJP and Left have joined hands to malign the Government... while the BJP spends their ill-gotten money to mislead the people and ignite violence the CPI(M) is a party that talks big having forgotten their bloody past... they are a party of skeletons that killed people and buried them... so never believe them." Reacting to Banerjee's charges local face of the movement Rekha Patra who even unsuccessfully contested on a BJP ticket in this year's parliamentary elections said, "Didi has missed the bus... the people who have come... have been forcibly brought here... had she come the last year when the women were in trouble they would have definitely hugged her... but now they hate her and she will never be welcome here."

Farmers' bandh in Punjab cripples commuter traffic; rail, bus services suspended

PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

Life was hit across Punjab due to a bandh imposed by farmers who have been agitating against the Centre for a legal guarantee of a minimum support price for their crops. Rail and road traffic was crippled and commercial establishments remained shut in several places of the state. Farmers staged 'dharnas' on several roads and highways including in Patiala, Jalandhar, Amritsar, Ferozepur, Bathinda, and Pathankot as part of their bandh call from 7 am to 4 pm, throwing commuter traffic out of gear. A call for a statewide shutdown was given over a week ago by Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha over the Centre not acting on the farmers' demand for a legal guarantee for the MSP. The bandh was also enforced to express solidarity with farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal who has been on a fast for the last 35 days at Khanauri border protest site of farmers. Farmers observed a sit-in at Dhareeri Jattan Toll Plaza which affected vehicular movement on the Patiala-Chandigarh National Highway. At Amritsar's Golden Gate, scores of farmers staged a dharna near the city's entry point. Police there assisted some stranded foreign tourists by arranging auto rickshaws for them to reach the Golden Temple. Farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher told reporters in Amritsar that emergency and other essential services were allowed to operate.



He said anyone travelling to the airport to catch a flight anyone going to attend a job interview, or anyone needing to attend a wedding, was being allowed to go. In some places, commuters were seen arguing with the protesting farmers blocking the roads. "All establishments are closed. Punjabis have shown their unity today and they are extending full support," Pandher, however, claimed. "We are seeing a successful bandh. Train services are also completely suspended and no train is entering Punjab," he said. Pandher also claimed their strike has received strong support from transporters, employee unions, traders and religious bodies. Farmers squatted on tracks at many places, forcing the rail-ways to cancel several trains passing through the state and short-terminated or short-originated some trains. In Ferozepur, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, and Bathinda, passengers were seen stranded at stations. A cancer patient from Gujarat was stranded at a train

station in Ferozepur. His wife said they had to go to Himachal Pradesh to get some medicines for him, but with train services hit, they were left in a lurch. In Phagwara, farmers staged a dharna near the Sugarmill Crossing on NH-44, blocking the roads leading from Phagwara towards Nakodar, Hoshiarpur, and Nawanshahr. A dharna was also staged at Behram toll plaza on Phagwara-Banga road. Grain markets were shut in several places across the state. In the Mohali district, farmers staged a dharna at a few points throwing normal movement of vehicular traffic out of gear. Public transport remained off roads at several places, while most private bus operators suspended services abiding by the bandh call. Many long-distance private buses and trucks carrying fruits and vegetables were held up due to the bandh. In the Ludhiana district, markets like Chaura Bazar, Saban Bazar, Vishwakarma Chowk, Gill Road and Sarabha Nagar had few shops open. The city's main bus stand was completely bereft of any traffic.

Gurugram Traffic Police issued 13.66 lakh challans till 28 December

PARVESH SHARMA ■ NEW DELHI

In a significant crackdown on traffic violators, the Gurugram Traffic Police issued 13.66 lakh challans amounting to Rs 15.17 crore till 28 December 2024. Under the leadership of Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) Virender Vij, the department issued such huge number of challans, marking one of the most successful operations in 2024. These fines include 1,74,073 challans for the wrong side, 1,49,462 challans for wrong parking, 694 challans for under-age driving, 2,15,390 challans for not wearing helmet, 27,439 challans for not wearing a seat belt, 25,968 challans for drink and drive, 17,122 challans for over speeding, 10,894 challans for signal jump, 10,967 challans for black film, 4,231 challans for using a mobile phone, 13,330 for triple riding, 33,107 without a number plate, 1,475 challans for illegal siren and 60,466 challans were issued for wrong lane driving. "The operation was part of a larger special campaign launched across all traffic zones to target violators and reckless drivers. The traffic department is also strictly enforcing various provisions of the Motor Vehicles Act to maintain law and order on the roads," Vij said. Apart from this, a special campaign was also conducted against the drivers who did not give way to the ambulance and



162 vehicles were challaned. Meanwhile, a total of 333 vehicles were impounded under NGT in the year 2024, out of which 108 are diesel and 225 are petrol vehicles. Apart from this, the Gurugram Police also identify the places with black spots and remove them. In 2024, 05 black spots were also resolved/removed by Gurugram Police. In 2023, a total of 494 people died in 1172 road accidents. Which decreased to 448 people dying in 1019 road accidents in the year 2024. Due to this, road accidents have reduced by more than 13 per cent. Gurugram Police has been monitoring traffic movement with the help of drones and fined those who change lanes/drive. Apart from this, with the help of drones. In 2024, a total of 45 green corridors were given by the Traffic Police Gurugram. Out of which 9 were given for ambulances and 36 for NSG/Army and Air Force. Under the rules of GRAP-4, checkpoints were set up by Gurugram Traffic Police on all Delhi borders, and during this time, more than 7,000 vehicles violating GRAP-4 rules were challaned.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Country shamed

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

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

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



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

The teachers who shaped my life: Lessons beyond the classroom

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

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

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



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

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



SANJAY CHANDRA

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

India's forest cover grows, but grim realities linger



KOTA SRIRAJ

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

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



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



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

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

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RELIEF FOR MIDDLE-CLASS

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

PROFIT OVER HUMANITY

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

Koneru wins World Rapid Chess Champion



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

Indian Chess Champions has marvelled the entire world, be that the moment of India becoming the FIDE Chess Olympiad 2024 winner in Budapest, D Gukesh becoming the World Chess champion at the age of 18 in Singapore, and now Ms Koneru Humpy clinching her second FIDE World Rapid Crown in New York. This year in 2024 particularly, India spent a considerably wonderful time at the podium top stairs, enjoying many titles and trophies. The chess prowess of Indians need no introduction today, thanks to our chess masters and grandmasters. Especially the young chess players deserve the epitome of appreciation for their wonderful game spirit, patience and sincere grit behind every move of check and mates. Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

INDIA'S LIBERALISATION ARCHITECT

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

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur



FIRST COLUMN OVERCOMING THE GRIP OF FEARFUL THOUGHTS

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



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

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

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

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



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

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

Assessing efficacy and challenges of compensatory afforestation

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indian agriculture and climate change: Challenges and strategies

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

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



PRAVESH SHARMA

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

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

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

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

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

4. Pests and Diseases: Climate change influences the population, survival, and geographic distribution of pests and diseases. Rising temperatures and humidity levels create favorable conditions for pest proliferation, making control measures more challenging and unpredictable.

Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies
Adaptation to climate change involves anticipating adverse impacts and taking proactive



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

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

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

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

4. Community Involvement and Education: Engaging

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

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

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

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

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

South Korea to inspect its Boeing fleet as it struggles to find cause of plane crash

AP ■ SEOUL

South Korean officials said Monday they will conduct safety inspections of all Boeing 737-800 aircraft operated by the country's airlines, as they struggle to determine what caused a plane crash that killed 179 people a day earlier. Sunday's crash, the country's worst aviation disaster in decades, triggered an outpouring of national sympathy. Many people worry how effectively the South Korean government will handle the disaster as it grapples with a leadership vacuum following the recent successive impeachments of President Yoon Suk Yeol and Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, the country's top two officials, amid political tumult caused by Yoon's brief imposition of martial law earlier this month. New acting President Choi Sang-mok on Monday presided over a task force meeting on the crash and instructed authorities to conduct an emergency review of the country's aircraft operation systems. "The essence of a responsible response would be renovating the aviation safety systems on the whole to prevent recurrences of similar incidents and building a safer Republic of South Korea," said Choi, who is also deputy prime minister and finance minister. The Boeing 737-800 plane

operated by South Korean budget airline Jeju Air aborted its first landing attempt for reasons that aren't immediately clear. Then, during its second landing attempt, it received a bird strike warning from the ground control center before its pilot issued a distress signal. The plane landed without its front landing gear deployed, overshot the runway, slammed into a concrete fence and burst into a fireball. Alan Price, a former chief pilot at Delta Air Lines and now a consultant, said the Boeing 737-800 is a "proven airplane" that belongs to the different class of aircraft than the Boeing 737 Max jetliner that was linked to fatal crashes in 2018 and 2019. But South Korea's Transport Ministry said Monday it plans to conduct safety inspections of all of the 101 Boeing 737-800 jetliners operated by the country's airlines as well as a broader review into safety standards at Jeju Air, which operates 39 of those planes. Senior ministry official Joo Jong-wan said representatives from the US National Transportation Safety Board and Boeing were expected to arrive in South Korea on Monday to participate in the investigation. Ministry officials also said they will look into whether the Muan airport's localizer — a concrete fence housing a set of antennas designed to guide



aircraft safely during landings — should have been made with lighter materials that would break more easily upon impact. Joo said the ministry has determined that similar concrete structures are in other domestic airports, including in Jeju Island and the southern cities of Yeosu and Pohang, as well as airports in the United States, Spain and South Africa. Video of the crash indicated that the pilots did not deploy flaps or slats to slow the aircraft, suggesting a possible hydraulic failure, and did not manually lower the landing gear, suggesting they did not have time, said John Cox, a retired airline pilot and CEO of Safety Operating Systems in

St. Petersburg, Florida. Despite that, the jetliner was under control and traveling in a straight line, and damage and injuries likely would have been minimized if not for the barrier being so close to the runway, Cox said. Other observers said the videos showed the plane was suffering from suspected engine trouble but the landing gear malfunction was likely a direct reason for the crash. They said there wouldn't likely be a link between the landing gear problem and the suspected engine issue. Earlier Monday, another Boeing 737-800 plane operated by Jeju Air returned to Seoul's Gimpo International Airport shortly after takeoff when the pilot



Buddhist monks (above) pray for the victims of a plane which skidded off a runway and burst into flames (left), at a memorial altar at Muan sport park in Muan, South Korea, on Monday.

detected a landing gear issue. Song Kyung-hoon, a Jeju Air executive, said the issue was resolved through communication with a land-based equipment center, but the pilot decided to return to Gimpo as a precautionary measure. Joo said officials were reviewing whether there might have been communication problems between air traffic controllers and the pilot. "Our current understanding is that, at some point during the go-around process, communica-

tion became somewhat ineffective or was interrupted, ahead of the landing and impact," he said. Ministry officials said Monday the plane's flight data and cockpit audio recorders were moved to a research center at Gimpo airport ahead of their analysis. Ministry officials earlier said it would take months to complete the investigation of the crash. The Muan crash is South Korea's deadliest aviation disaster since 1997, when a Korean Airlines plane

crashed in Guam, killing 228 people on board. The crash left many South Koreans shocked and ashamed, with the government announcing a seven-day national mourning period through Jan. 4. Some questioned whether the crash involved safety or regulatory issues, such as a 2022 Halloween crash in Seoul that killed 160 people and a 2014 ferry sinking that killed 304 people. The Transport Ministry said authorities have

identified 146 bodies and are collecting DNA and fingerprint samples from the other 33. Park Han Shin, a representative of the bereaved families, said they were told that the bodies were so badly damaged that officials need time before returning them to their families. "I demand that the government mobilize more personnel to return our brothers and family members as intact as possible more swiftly," he said, choking down tears. The crash was yet more major news for South Koreans already reeling from a political crisis set off by Yoon's martial law decree, which brought hundreds of troops into Seoul streets and revived traumatic memories of past military rule in the 1970-80s. The political tumult resulted in the opposition-controlled National Assembly impeaching Yoon and Han. The safety minister stepped down and the police chief was arrested over their roles in the martial law enforcement. The absence of top officials responsible for managing disasters has led to concerns. "We are deeply worried whether the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters really can handle the disaster," the mass-circulation JoongAng Ilbo newspaper said in an editorial Monday.

Shehbaz, Nawaz Sharif criticised for not offering condolences on Manmohan Singh's demise

PTI ■ LAHORE

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's decision of not offering condolences on the passing of former India premier Manmohan Singh was severely criticised on social media. Singh, who was born in Gah village in Chakwal district of Pakistan's Punjab and served as prime minister from 2004 to 2014, died in New Delhi last Thursday aged 92. While condolence messages poured in from around the world, neither Shehbaz Sharif nor his elder brother and three-time former prime minister Nawaz Sharif chose to offer any words on his demise. Ironically, only Pakistan Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar offered his condolences. Contrary to this, Shehbaz Sharif and other top func-

tionaries of the Pakistan government wasted no time to offer condolences on the passing of former US president Jimmy Carter. They issued condolence messages on X, which is banned by the Shehbaz Sharif government to control dissenting voices of jailed former premier Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party on social media. "Neither Shahbaz nor Nawaz Sharif have yet offered a public condolence on the loss of Manmohan Singh. There was a message from Ishaq Dar. Still, it's perplexing. They were contemporaries, had some similar economic views, and shared a desire for better India-Pakistan relations," Wilson Centre South Asia Institute Director Michael Kugelman said on X on Sunday. He further said: "I

really don't see so much at stake with India-Pak ties now that the Sharifs feel something could be lost if they upset Modi. Also not sure I see Modi being bothered if they do say something about Singh. It's all a bit odd!" Pakistani author and expert on military affairs Ayesha Siddiqi sarcastically said on X: "Seems they — the Sharif brothers — don't want to annoy Modi, or maybe typical PMLN (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz) that whoever is gone is gone and so done and dusted with." Pakistani journalist Ammara Ahmad said: "It has never happened before. This means that Pakistan and India have no diplomatic ties. Though they negotiated the Kartarpur corridor again this year. I can't imagine what prompted this decision. I have yet to find a press release even. Very lowly

and uncouth." Mona Farooq Ahmad, an overseas citizen of Pakistan, said on Monday: "This level of pettiness is unprecedented. In the past, leaders have always set politics aside for such moments. Their silence is truly intriguing and disappointing. It's a missed chance to show humanity and statesmanship." Amer Mirza said on X: "These individuals — Shehbaz and Nawaz — are neither serious politicians nor statesmen. We cannot hold any expectation of dignified conduct or due protocol. They are a family consumed with sustaining their ill-gotten privilege under the dark auspices of the military junta. They neither have time nor respect for the people. They are little men in big offices." Dar on Friday said he was saddened by the passing of Singh who "played a

notable role in improving India-Pakistan ties." "Saddened by the passing of Dr. Manmohan Singh, former Prime Minister of India. Born in a village in Pakistan's Chakwal district, Singh was a distinguished economist and political leader. He will be remembered for his wisdom and gentle demeanour," Dar said in a post on X. "Beyond his remarkable achievements in the field of economics, Dr. Singh demonstrated a commitment to promoting regional peace. His approach to regional issues reflected his belief that mutual understanding, dialogue and cooperation were essential for collective progress. He played a notable role in improving Pakistan-India bilateral relations during his tenure as Prime Minister," Dar said.

Missing Indian student's body found in Scotland river

PTI ■ LONDON

The body of a 22-year-old Indian student missing since earlier this month has been found in a river in Scotland and her family has been informed while formal identification is awaited. Santra Saju from Kerala was enrolled at the Heriot-Watt University in the Scottish capital of Edinburgh. Police Scotland said in a statement over the weekend that they were made aware of a body in a river near Newbridge, a village near Edinburgh. "Around 11.55 am on Friday, December 27, 2024, police were made aware of a body found in the water near to Newbridge," Police Scotland said. "Formal identification has still to take place however the family of Santra Saju, 22,

has been informed. The death is not believed to be suspicious," the police said. The statement added that a report will be sent to the Procurator Fiscal, Scotland's prosecution service and death investigation body. Saju was last caught on CCTV at an Asda supermarket store in Almondvale, Livingston, on December 6 evening. An urgent missing person's appeal was issued by the police, describing Saju as being around 5 feet 6 inches in height, of Indian ethnicity, slim build, with short black hair. She was wearing a black jacket with a fur-lined hood, beige furry earmuffs and a black facemask. Enquiries also revealed she had a black rucksack in her possession. The police appeal encouraged anyone who may recognise her to

come forward with any information. Inspector Alison Lawrie from Corstorphine Police Station said in a statement at the time: "We now know that Santra picked up a black and white shopper style bag from an address in Burnvale on Friday evening, but she did not have it when she entered the supermarket. "The bag is distinctive and someone may remember seeing her carrying it. We are continuing to review CCTV footage and have released images of Santra from the supermarket in the hope that someone recognises her. Extensive enquiries are being carried out in an effort to trace her." Her friends and family had said the disappearance was out of character and had become very worried for her safety.

Taliban to close all NGOs employing Afghan women

AP ■ KABUL

The Taliban say they will close all national and foreign non-governmental groups in Afghanistan employing women. It comes two years after they told NGOs to suspend the employment of Afghan women, allegedly because they didn't wear the Islamic headscarf correctly. In a letter published on X Sunday night, the Economy Ministry warned that failure to comply with the latest order would lead to NGOs losing their license to operate in Afghanistan. The ministry said it was responsible for the registration, coordination, leadership and supervision of all activities carried out by national and foreign organisa-

tions. The government was once again ordering the stoppage of all female work in institutions not controlled by the Taliban, according to the letter. "In case of lack of cooperation, all activities of that institution will be cancelled and the activity license of that institution, granted by the ministry, will also be cancelled." It's the Taliban's latest attempt to control or intervene in NGO activity. Earlier this month, the UN Security Council heard that an increasing proportion of female Afghan humanitarian workers were prevented from doing their work even though relief work remains essential. According to Tom Fletcher, a

senior UN official, the proportion of humanitarian organisations reporting that their female or male staff were stopped by the Taliban's morality police has also increased. The Taliban deny they are stopping aid agencies from carrying out their work or interfering with their activities. They have already barred women from many jobs and most public spaces, and also excluded them from education beyond sixth grade. In another development, the Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada has ordered that buildings should not have windows looking into places where a woman might sit or stand. According to a four-clause decree posted on X late Saturday, the

order applies to new buildings as well as existing ones. Windows should not overlook or look into areas like yards or kitchens. Where a window looks into such a space then the person responsible for that property must find a way to obscure this view to "remove harm," by installing a wall, fence or screen. Municipalities and other authorities must supervise the construction of new buildings to avoid installing windows that look into or over residential properties, the decree added. A spokesman for the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing was not immediately available for comment on Akhundzada's instructions.

Bangkok hotel fire kills 3 foreigners

AP ■ BANGKOK

A fire broke out at a hotel near Bangkok's Khao San Road, a popular tourist destination, killing three foreigners and injuring several other people, Thai police said Monday. The three who died in the fire on Sunday night were all foreign tourists, Police Colonel Saenong Saengmanee told The Associated Press. One was found dead at the scene and the other two died after being transported to the hospital. Police later identified the dead as a Brazilian woman, a Ukrainian man and an American man. Four people were hospitalised, of whom one was in critical condition.

The fire erupted on the 5th floor of the six-story Ember Hotel, police said. Khao San Road is a popular backpacker street in the Thai capital that's also known for its lively nightlife. The flames were eventually contained and the cause of the blaze is under investigation. Seventy-five people were staying at the hotel at the time of the fire. Sreekanth Kolamala, a 37-year-old Indian national who lives in Singapore and was in Thailand on vacation, witnessed the rescue operation and said that firefighters "broke the glass over there to try to pull people out." Sanga Ruangwattanakul, the president of the Khao San Road Business

Association, stood outside The Ember Hotel on Monday, looking at the damage. He said 20,000 people were expected at a New Year's Eve countdown event on Tuesday night. "Now everybody's scared about what happened and they're scared it will affect the event tomorrow. But definitely there's no worry because we already had a meeting with the police station and we have over 150 police and district staff to cover on Khao San Road for security," he said. Bangkok Governor Chadchart Sittipunt also emphasized the importance of safety following the incident, especially as New Year's Eve approaches, with fireworks and other celebrations planned across the city.

Syria's long-ruling Baath party faces collapse

AP ■ DAMASCUS

A few days after insurgents in Syria overthrew President Bashar Assad, his ruling Baath party announced it was freezing its activities, marking a stunning change in fortunes for the political group that had ruled for more than six decades. Many members of the party's leadership have gone into hiding and some have fled the country. In a symbolic move, Syria's new rulers have turned the former party headquarters in Damascus into a center where former members of the army and security forces line up to register their names and hand over their weapons. Calls are on the rise to officially dissolve the Arab Socialist Baath Party that had ruled Syria since 1963. Many Syrians — including former party members — say its rule damaged relations with other Arab countries and aided in the spread of corruption that brought the war-torn nation to

its knees. "The party should not only be dissolved, it should go to hell," said Mohammed Hussein Ali, 64, who worked for a state oil company and was a party member for decades until he quit at the start of Syria's anti-government uprising in 2011 that turned into civil war. He never left the country and said he is happy the Baath rule is over. An official with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, the group that led the insurgent offensive that overthrew Assad, said no official decision has been made on what to do with the Baath party. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly about the matter, noted that HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa has said that officials who committed crimes against the Syrian people over the past decades will be brought to justice and hinted that they include party members. The Baath party, whose aim

was to unify Arab states in one nation, was founded by two Syrian Arab nationalists, Michel Aflaq and Salaheddine Bitar, in 1947 and at one point ruled two Arab countries, Iraq and Syria. A rivalry developed between the Syrian branch under Assad and his late father, Hafez, and the one in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, who was removed from power by a US-led invasion in 2003. In Syria, the Baath party became inextricably associated with the Assad family, which took power in 1970. For decades, the family used the party and its pan-Arab ideology to control the country. Many senior military jobs were held by members of the family's minority Alawite sect, and party membership was used as a cover to give it a nationalist rather than a sectarian nature. A former soldier and decades-long Baath party member who came to party headquarters to cut his military ties, Abdul-Rahman Ali, said he had no

idea it was founded by Aflaq and Bitar. He had always thought that Hafez Assad was the founder. "I am happy. We have been liberated from fear," said Ali, 43. "Even the walls had ears. We didn't dare express opinions with anyone." He was referring to the dreaded security and intelligence agencies that detained and tortured people who expressed criticism of Assad or government officials. Many Syrians were required to join the Baath Vanguard, the party's youth branch, while in elementary school, where Arab nationalist and socialist ideology was emphasized. It was difficult for people who were not party members to get government jobs or join the army or the security and intelligence services. In 2012, a year after Syria's uprising began, a paragraph of the constitution stating that the Baath party was the leader of the nation and society was abolished, in a move aimed to appease the public's demand for

political reforms. In practice, however, the party remained in control, with members holding majority seats in parliament and government. Another former soldier, who gave only his first name, Ghadir, out of fear of reprisals as a member of the Alawite sect, said he came from a poor family and joined the party so he could enter the military for a stable income. "You could not take any job if you were not a Baathist," he said. While few are mourning the party's fall in Syria, some are concerned that the Sunni majority that now controls the country could carry out a purge similar to the one in Iraq after Saddam's fall. A de-Baathification committee was formed in Iraq and its main job was purging Saddam loyalists from government and military institutions. The Sunni minority considered it a means of sectarian score-settling by Iraq's Shiite majority. The Sunni resentment and disenfranchisement that followed helped to

drive the rise of extremist groups in the country including al-Qaida and the Islamic State in Iraq. In Syria, a Baath party statement issued three days after Assad's fall called on all members to hand their weapons and public cars to the new authorities. On Dec. 24, party member and former army colonel Mohammed Merhi was among hundreds who lined up at the former party headquarters and handed over weapons. Merhi said the Baath party should be given another opportunity because its principles are good but were exploited over decades. But he said he might want to join another party if Syria becomes a multiparty democracy in the future. He handed over his Soviet Makarov pistol and received a document saying he can now move freely in the country after reconciling with the new authorities. "I want to become again a normal Syrian citizen and work to build a new Syria," he said.

66 killed as truck plunges into river in south Ethiopia

AP ■ ADDIS ABABA

At least 66 people have died and many more injured as a truck plunged into a river in southern Ethiopia, a hospital director said Monday. The accident took place Sunday when an old, overcrowded truck that was contracted by wedding guests fell off the Gelan Bridge, where villagers said traffic crashes have happened before. The medical director at Bona General Hospital in the southern Sidama region, Lemma Lagide, told The Associated Press on Monday that 64 people died on site and two others at the hospital. He said those patients in need of more sophisticated critical care were transferred to a bigger hospital in Hawassa. Delays in rescue efforts in the remote village were blamed for the high number of casualties. Villagers said they tried to save people from the raging

river only with sticks. A villager, Serak Boko, told AP that moments before the accident, music was blasting out of the truck and people dressed in suits were dancing and waving. It is common for people in rural Ethiopia to hire trucks instead of buses to transport them to social events like weddings because they are more affordable and carry many people. Most of those on the truck were men because they are culturally required to escort the bride from her home to the groom's house. "The area always has regular accidents around the river as it is poorly constructed," said resident Fasil Atara, referring to the road lacking bumps and warnings. With desolate infrastructure and overcrowded public transportation, Ethiopia has had similar accidents in the past. In August, 38 people died after a bus rolled over in Amhara region.

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

Sebi to auction 23 properties of nine companies in February

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



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

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

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

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

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

Prospects of economy expected to improve in 2025: RBI Governor

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



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

Review had raised concerns that the possibility that structural factors may also have contributed to the slowdown in H1 should not be ruled out. India recorded a slowdown in GDP growth to a seven-quarter low of 5.4 per cent for the second quarter ended September 2024. For the first half, the GDP growth stood at 6 per cent. Slowdown in growth and moderation in inflation are building case for RBI to slash policy rate in its upcoming Monetary Policy Committee meeting. Malhotra further said that financial sector regulators in India too are intensifying reforms and sharpening their surveillance against the backdrop of the soundness of the financial system bolstered by robust earnings, low levels of impaired assets and strong capital buffers, as this report highlights.

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

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



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

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

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



from 1,223 employers and 1,069 employees, exploring 'silent firing's implications against the backdrop of rapid technological adoption and evolving workforce dynamics. According to the report, 39 per cent of employers anticipate complete reliance on advanced technologies to minimise manual intervention five years ahead, however, 31 per cent emphasised the importance of balancing technological growth with human resource development. Nearly half of the

respondents (48 per cent) opposed replacing human employees with AI, emphasising the importance of a human-centric approach to workforce management. On the other hand, 36 per cent of employers support the complete adoption of AI, reflecting a growing inclination toward automation and technological advancement, it stated. This split highlights the contrasting strategies organizations are considering as they navigate the balance between innovation and

human capital, added the report. Despite advancements, 52 per cent of employers believe manual intervention remains indispensable, underscoring the enduring importance of human contributions in the workplace, it said. Silent firing remains contentious, with 34 per cent rejecting it entirely, while 28 per cent use it frequently and 29 per cent occasionally, citing improved efficiency and professional growth opportunities as justifications, it added. Meanwhile, from the employees' perspective, the

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

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

INBRIEF

- GNDU EXAMS POSTPONED, NOW ON JANUARY 12**
AMRITSAR: Guru Nanak Dev University has announced that all annual and semester (theory) exams originally scheduled for Monday, December 30, have been postponed due to the Punjab shutdown.
- GNDU'S PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT LEADS MENTAL HEALTH OUTREACH PROGRAMS**
AMRITSAR: The Department of Psychology at Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU) is taking significant steps to address the growing mental health challenges in marginalized and underserved communities.
- LAW DEPARTMENT OF GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY SETS BENCHMARK IN LEGAL INTERNSHIPS**
AMRITSAR: The Law Department of Guru Nanak Dev University has witnessed remarkable growth in its internship program over the past year, showcasing its dedication to providing students with practical legal exposure.
- GNDU PROFESSOR SUNIL KUMAR APPOINTED AS MEMBER OF BSF VIDWAT MANDAL**
AMRITSAR: In recognition of exceptional scholarship and literary achievements, Professor Sunil Kumar, Head of the Hindi Department and Dean of the Language Faculty at Guru Nanak Dev University, has been nominated as a member of the Border Security Force (BSF) Vidwat Mandal for three years.



Magnus Carlsen returns to World Blitz Championship after FIDE allows jeans

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

World Blitz Championship: Koneru Humpy eyeing a grand double

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

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

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



second time. At stake is not just the title but a chance to win another USD 60,000 (around Rs 50 lakhs) cheque as the Blitz championship carries the same prize money as Rapid.

The strong Indian contingent is geared up for the championship that will have 13 rounds in the 'Open' category and 11 in the women's section.

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

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

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

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

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

West Bengal, Kerala clash in blockbuster Santosh Trophy final

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, we have won the tournament 32 times in the past, but the Santosh Trophy is a much bigger tournament now in terms of the number of states that participate in it. I do not intend to downplay past achievements, but I feel that it is more difficult to win it now," said Sen.

Sen's counterpart Biby Thomas Muttath echoed similar expectations from his home state.

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

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

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



Prolific Lille striker Jonathan David considering new contract offer

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

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

"As the president (Olivier Létang) said several times, discussions are going on. We're talking but no decision has been reached," David told regional newspaper La Voix du Nord on Monday in an interview.

"The door is never closed. It's 50-50." David has netted 17 goals overall this season — including four in the Champions League and two in the qualifying rounds — to take his tally to 101 since joining in 2020.

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

Norway Chess: Top woman player Ju Wenjun confirms participation

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

The event will be held from May 26 to June 6.

Vaishali, the elder sister of Grandmaster R. Praggnanandhaa and one of the rising stars in women's chess, had confirmed her participation in the prestigious tournament last month.

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



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

Muzychuk is a three-time world champion in fast chess. She clinched the Women's World Rapid Championship in 2014 and the Women's World Blitz Championship in

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

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

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

In 2023, Gukesh finished third in Stavanger.

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

Paulo Fonseca fired by AC Milan

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

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

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

"AC Milan announces that Paulo Fonseca has been



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

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

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

year stint that included the 2022 Serie A title.

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

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

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

Naomi Osaka wins her 1st match of new season

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

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

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

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



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

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

the end."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Australia beat India by 184 runs in fourth Test

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

India slumped to a demoralising 184-run loss to Australia in the fourth Test here on Monday with contemporary greats Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli failing to come good yet again, signalling that their walk towards the exit door is not too far. Chasing a near improbable target of 340, both Rohit (9 off 40 balls) and Kohli (5) failed to battle their technical frailties and mental cobwebs as India lost seven wickets for 34 runs in just 20.4 overs in the final session to be all out for 155 in 79.1 overs. Australian captain Pat Cummins (3/28 in 18 overs) was superb as usual and Scott Boland was also magnificent (3/39 in 16 overs) in his every spell. Nathan Lyon (2/37 in 20.1 overs) took advantage of variable bounce while Mitchell Starc (1/25 in 16 overs) got the prized scalp of Kohli. This was after an 88-run fourth-wicket stand between Yashasvi Jaiswal and Rishabh Pant. "Pretty disappointing. We wanted

to fight but we could not do it," a dejected Rohit said in the post-match presentation. "We tried everything but they fought hard. We did not grab our chances," he conceded. Australia now lead the series 2-1 and unless India draw level in Sydney, a third successive World Test Championship final could become a distant dream. Even to retain the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, India would need to post a win. Save Jaiswal (84, 208 balls), whose controversial caught-behind in which the third umpire overruled technology to adjudge him out, none of the other batters performed well enough to save the team. "They batted well in the middle session. We knew that we had to get one breakthrough and anything can happen and that proved to be the case. "We had plenty of runs to play with, we had plenty of fielders with the helmet around," a beaming Cummins, who was also adjudged player of the match for his haul of



six wickets, said in the presentation ceremony. The art of saving Test matches has slowly become extinct but India would have depended on their two

senior-most players, who are also fighting to save their legacy and reputation built over nearly two decades. In case of Rishabh Pant, it was one

bad shot too many after a full session in which he concentrated. He got a rank long hop from Travis Head but after a 103-ball vigil, it all came to a naught.

Even Jaiswal's guts and grit couldn't prevent a once highly-rated, but currently a trifle over-rated, Indian batting line-up from implosion with over-the-hill seniors and young superstars unable to handle the pressure. The defeat could have severe repercussions as there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel for skipper Rohit. As for Kohli, despite all his white-ball exploits, the problems outside the off-stump will stick out like a sore thumb. For Rohit, his ultra-defensive approach in the opening slot, is causing India to stare down the barrel with alarming regularity. Rohit did all the hard work during the first hour before opposition skipper Cummins got his bunny for the 10th time in Test matches. Kohli could never control his urge of playing the cover drive again and was caught at first slip after Mitchell Starc pushed one across with the angle. Rahul was out without troubling the scorers after getting a second good ball in the game.

Rohit's decision to bat up the order backfired and it also tinkered with Rahul's mindset despite him being perfectly fine opening the innings. The captaincy was pedestrian as he let the game drift on occasions and there were lot of phases that led to India's defeat but none more telling than the final wicket partnership between Scott Boland and Nathan Lyon where the target went out of reach on Sunday. Save Jasprit Bumrah, who once again toiled manfully for 50 overs and took nine wickets, and find-of-the-series Nitish Reddy, who scored a gritty hundred, there are no positives to be taken from this defeat. The batting, save for the second innings in the opening Perth Test, has been absolutely below par and India won't be doing themselves any favours if they have walking wickets at the top of the order. The team is going through a tough transition and it is now time that their feisty head coach Gautam Gambhir shows some spark along with chairman of selectors Ajit Agarkar.



Seniors like Rohit, Kohli haven't really contributed: Gavaskar

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

The legendary Sunil Gavaskar on Monday lashed out at senior players such as Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli for letting the team down and blamed the Indian top-order for losing the Boxing Day Test against Australia here. Set a target of 340 on the final day of the fourth Test, the Indian batters, with the exception of Yashasvi Jaiswal (84), faltered yet again to lose the match by 184 runs and trail 1-2 in the five-match series. "It all depends on the selectors. The contributions that were expected have not come. It is the top-order which has to contribute, if the top-order is not contributing, why blame the lower-order. "The seniors have not really made the contribution that they should have, all that they had to do was bat out today and live to fight another day in Sydney," Gavaskar told India Today. "It's just that the top-order didn't contribute and that is the reason India found itself in this position." While Gavaskar praised Jaiswal for his gritty knock, the batting great once again was not impressed by Rishabh Pant's shot selection, which opened the floodgates for Australia. Joining hands at 33 for 3, Jaiswal and Pant looked to have settled down, taking India to 121 in the post-lunch session, before a rash shot from Pant set the team back. "Yes, absolutely around tea time when Rishabh

Pant and Yashasvi Jaiswal had batted through the post-lunch session, it certainly looked India could achieve a draw because it was a matter of batting for another hour really without losing a wicket, and Australia would have then given up," Gavaskar said. "The whole idea was try and take into the mandatory overs and if around the mandatory overs India had just lost maybe four wickets then Australia, after a couple of overs, would have asked to shake hands but that didn't happen." As Pant got a long hop from Travis Head after a 103-ball vigil, during which he shared 84 runs for the fourth wicket with Jaiswal, he hit it straight to Mitchell Marsh at in the deep in search of a six. "...The issue is you know there is this shot called sixer in cricket and which is like a drug. Once you hit a couple of sixes, then you think that's a real a high because once you hit the ball cleanly of the middle of the bat and it goes into the stands, there is no better feeling for a batter. Sixer is a different feeling and it's a drug, it gets into your system," Gavaskar said. "The difference between a boundary and a six is just two runs but the risk percentage is 100 per cent. Boundary is hit along the ground no risk at all, a six is attempted with the ball up in the air and if you don't time it, if it hits the toe of your bat, it can go up and you can be out caught."

New Zealand beats Sri Lanka by 45 runs in second T20

AP ■ MOUNT MAUNGANUI

Sri Lanka again fell short in a Stough run chase as New Zealand won the second Twenty20 international by 45 runs Monday to take an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series. The tourists were edged by eight runs chasing 172-8 in the first match two days ago and again faltered late while chasing New Zealand's 186-5 on Monday. Sri Lanka was all out for 141 in 19.1 overs. "It's really important to finish the game, no matter how it started," Sri Lanka captain Charith Asalanka said. "The way you finish is the most important thing. In the first game we were almost there to win and again we're disappointed." Once again, Jacob Duffy was New Zealand's key bowler, dismissing opener Pathum Nissanka for 37 and returning



to remove Kusal Perera for 48 when both batters looked well placed to steer Sri Lanka to victory. Nissanka made 96 in the first match in a 120-run opening partnership with Kusal Mendis before Duffy turned that match in New Zealand's favor when he took three wickets in four balls, including Mendis, to stifle the Sri Lanka chase. He took 4-15 Monday to once

again stand out as the difference between the teams. After dismissing Nissanka, Duffy produced a superb yorker to remove Perera in the 16th over when Sri Lanka was 127-4 and still in with a good chance. He then removed Wanindu Hasaranga (1) and Maheesh Theekshana (0) in the space of three balls in the 18th over as the Sri Lanka tail again failed to fire.

Matt Henry took two wickets with consecutive balls in the 19th over before Zak Foulkes finished off the Sri Lanka innings with five balls remaining. New Zealand depended on a century partnership between Daryl Mitchell and Michael Bracewell to post a competitive total in the first match. It produced a more balanced batting effort Monday to reach a testing total on a tricky pitch which sometimes skidded, sometimes held up and provided a batting challenge. A strong wind across the Bay Oval also made hitting to one side of the ground difficult and gave an edge to the bowlers. Tim Robinson made 41 from 34 balls at the top of the New Zealand innings, hitting three fours and two sixes to impart early momentum while Rachin Ravindra failed again and was out for 1.

Jaiswal's caught-behind dismissal sparks controversy

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

India opener Yashasvi Jaiswal's incontinent dismissal sparked a controversy on the final day of the fourth Test against Australia here on Monday, as third umpire Saikat Sharfuddoula ruled him out despite no edge being registered on the Snicko. Jaiswal, who was batting on 84, miscued a hook off pacer Pat Cummins' short-pitched, down the leg delivery, and the batter was initially given not out by on-field umpire Joel Wilson after Australia appealed for a caught-behind dismissal. However, upon review, third umpire Saikat adjudged that there was a deflection off Jaiswal's gloves/bat based on the visual evidence. Saikat overruled the Snicko, which showed no spike, leading to chants of "cheater, cheater" around the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Jaiswal was ousted after playing a solid 84 off 208 deliveries. At one stage, he seemed to steer India to a draw before the visitors lost wickets in clusters in their chase of 340, eventually going down by 184 runs.



The left-hander argued with the on-field umpires over the decision before walking back. "In my view the decision was out. The third umpire did make the correct decision in the end," Former ICC Elite Panel umpire Simon Taufel told Channel 7. "With the technology protocols, we do have a hierarchy of redundancy and when the umpire sees a clear deflection off the bat there is no need to go any further and use any other form of

technology to prove the case. "The clear deflection is conclusive evidence. In this particular case what we have seen from the third umpire, is they've used a secondary form of technology, which for whatever reason hasn't shown the same conclusive evidence of audio to back up the clear deflection. "In the end the third umpire did the right thing and went back to the clear deflection and overturned the umpire field. So, in my view correct decision made," he added. This incident follows a similar controversy in the opening Test in Perth, where opener KL Rahul's dismissal sparked a debate. After on-field umpire Richard Kettleborough had ruled in Rahul's favour following Australia's appeal, the home team used DRS to challenge the decision. Third umpire Richard Illingworth had overturned the call despite not having the benefit of a split-screen view which would have given him a clearer picture of whether the Mitchell Starc delivery actually grazed the bat or the snicko responded to a hit on the pads.



Mentally disturbing, we fell short in finding ways to win: Rohit Sharma

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Indian skipper Rohit Sharma on Monday said the 184-run drubbing at the hands of Australia in the fourth Test here is "mentally disturbing", conceding that his team failed to fight in the match. India will now head to Sydney for the fifth and final Test trailing 1-2 in the five-match Border-Gavaskar Trophy. The series finale begins on January 3. "It is mentally disturbing when you can't do what you have come to do," Rohit, whose own poor form has been under the scanner, told reporters after the game. "It is pretty disappointing. There are ways to win games and we fell short in finding ways to win the game here. We wanted to fight till the end and unfortunately we couldn't do it," he said in the post-match presentation ceremony. Australia were struggling at 90 for six in their second innings with the overall lead yet to touch 200 on Sunday but managed to make it a 340-run target for the visitors. Rohit admitted his team could not exploit the favourable situation. "We had Australia 90 for 6. We know things can get tough, but we want to play tough cricket from hard situations. But we were not good enough. I went back to my room and thought about what else we could have done as a team," Rohit said. "But we threw everything we

had, they fought hard, especially that last-wicket partnership, which probably cost us the game there," he added. Rohit said the team wanted to have a go at the target despite its daunting nature. "We knew 340 wasn't going to be easy. We tried to set a platform and keep wickets in hand for the last two sessions, but they bowled perfectly as well. We wanted to go for the target, but we didn't set the platform from our side," he noted. The Mumbaier lauded Nitish Kumar Reddy for making a fine hundred during the first innings, and hoped the youngster will climb the ladder. "He's coming here for the first time, these conditions can get really tough, but he showed great character, solid technique as well. "He's got everything to be successful at this level, I hope he goes from strength to strength, and he's got all the backing from the team as well," he said. The 37-year-old also patted pacer Jasprit Bumrah for leading the Indian bowling attack almost singlehandedly. "Absolutely brilliant, We've been watching him for so many years now, coming here and getting the job done. He's not a statistical person. "He just wants to play for the country and do well for the team, but unfortunately he's not got a lot of support from the other side," he added.

India's peerless fast bowler Jasprit Bumrah nominated for ICC Cricketer of the Year award

PTI ■ DUBAI

Operating at a level rarely seen in the game before, India's peerless fast bowler Jasprit Bumrah was on Monday nominated for the ICC Men's Cricketer of the Year award and also featured in the list for the best player in the Test format. Bumrah, who has left the Australian batters scrambling for survival with his incredible display of fast bowling in the ongoing five-match series Down Under, has been nominated for the top award, named after legendary West Indies all-rounder Sir Garfield Sobers, alongside England's prolific duo of Joe Root and Harry Brook, with swashbuckling

Australian batter Travis Head completing the list. Besides Bumrah, who has been at the top of his game throughout 2024, Root, Brook and Sri Lanka's Kamindu Mendis featured in the list for the ICC Test Cricketer of the Year award. Bumrah has been the best bowler in Test cricket in 2024 with 71 wickets from 13 matches at an average of 14.92 and a strike rate of 30.16, the best figures for any bowler. The right-arm pacer has also been the top bowler in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy with 30 wickets in a mere four Tests. "Having returned to the Test arena following his recovery from a recurring back injury in 2023, Bumrah dominated

the bowling charts in 2024. Featuring across 13 Tests in the calendar year, Bumrah delivered his best-ever annual tally — 71 wickets — finishing the year with more Test wickets than any of his counterparts," the ICC said on its website. "Be it the pace-conducive conditions in South Africa and Australia, or tougher conditions for quicks at home, Bumrah was equally impressive through the year. However, it was on India's tour of Australia that the pace spearhead produced his magnum opus," it added. The ICC rated Bumrah's match-defining spells at Perth, to guide India to a 295-run win, among his most memorable performances



along with his dominating show in T20 World Cup. "Bumrah nabbed 15 wickets from eight outings —

including a couple in the final against South Africa — as India went unbeaten at the 2024 T20 World Cup," the

ICC said. Head was nominated after finishing as the leading run-scorer of the T20 World Cup and being at the forefront of Australian batting in Tests. "Typifying an aggressive brand of batting, the southpaw brandished runs at a brisk rate in the shortest format, and finished among the leading run-getters at ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2024. In the Test arena, Head was vital to Australia's push for defending their ICC World Test Championship title," the ICC said. England mainstay Root has been the most dominant batter in the year, amassing 1,556 runs from 17 Tests at 55.57. The 34-year-old crossed the 1,000-run mark in

a calendar year for the fifth time in his career while scoring six tons and five fifties. The game's global governing body said, "Across 17 Tests, Joe Root compiled his second-best annual run-tally in Tests — second only to his 1,708 runs from 2021. It was also the fifth instance of Root scoring over 1,000 Test runs in a calendar year." "With six Test hundreds to go alongside five half-centuries, Root was a consistent performer for England — both home and away. His impressive run with the bat saw Root amass joint-fifth highest tons in Tests (36) alongside Rahul Dravid," it added. The ICC recalled Root's

career-best 262 against Pakistan at Multan, also his sixth double century in Tests, and termed it one of his best efforts. Root's compatriot Brook is also in the list of four shortlisted players after scoring 1,100 runs from 12 Tests at 55.00 with four centuries and three fifties. Brook is fourth in the list of highest run-scorers in 2024 behind table-topper Root, India's Yashasvi Jaiswal (1,478 runs at 54.74) and England's Ben Duckett (1,149 runs at 37.06). "A flagbearer of England's quickfire brand of batting, Harry Brook emerged as a breakthrough performer in the longest format," the ICC said.