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PUTIN BOASTS OF GAINS
IN UKRAINE AT ANNUAL
NEWS CONFERENCE

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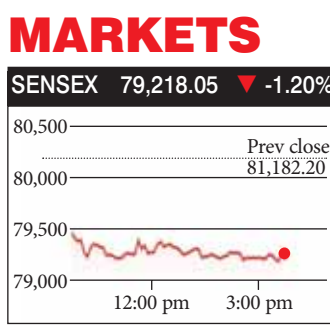


Sensex sinks below 80k



PTI ■ MUMBAI
Equity benchmark Sensex on Thursday plunged about 965 points to crash below the 80,000 level due to heavy selling in global equities after the US Federal Reserve signalled fewer rate cuts next year. Besides, deep losses in consumer durables, banking and IT stocks amid foreign fund outflows added to the gloom, analysts said. Falling for the fourth day running, the 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex tanked 964.15 points or 1.20 per cent to settle at 79,218.05. During the day, the blue-chip index cracked 1,162.12 points or 1.44 per cent to 79,020.08. As many as 2,315 stocks declined while 1,680 advanced and 100 remained unchanged on the BSE. The NSE Nifty tumbled 247.15 points or 1.02 per cent to sink

below the 24,000 mark at 23,951.70. In the past four days, the BSE benchmark tanked 2,915.07 points or 3.54 per cent and the Nifty declined 816.6 points or 3.29 per cent. "The Indian market saw a widespread decline following a global sell-off driven by the US Fed's hawkish stance on interest rates. Sectors sensitive to interest rates, such as banking and real estate, significantly bore the brunt. "However, the BoJ's decision to keep its interest rate steady, which surprised economists, aided in reducing the selling pressure. Despite this, investor caution persisted amid ongoing FII selling, with a strategic shift towards defensive sectors like pharma as evidenced by their outperformance," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.



From the 30 blue-chip pack, Infosys, Bajaj Finserv, JSW Steel, Bajaj Finance, Asian Paints, ICICI Bank, Reliance Industries, Tata Consultancy Services, Infosys, Tata Motors and Mahindra & Mahindra were the biggest laggards. On the other hand, Sun Pharma, Power Grid and Hindustan Unilever were the gainers. Markets were plundered,

tracking negative global cues as benchmark indices slipped below their psychological levels on broad-based selling after the US Fed's hawkish stance raised concerns over further rate cuts next year. Rising US bond yields have pushed global currencies, including the rupee to new lows, while renewed foreign fund outflows from domestic equities could prompt investors to turn risk averse," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said. The rupee dropped 14 paise and breached the crucial 85 level to close at an all-time low of 85.08 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday. The BSE midcap gauge declined 0.30 per cent and smallcap index dipped 0.28 per cent. Among sectoral indices, BSE Focused IT tanked 1.20 per cent, consumer durables (1.15 per cent), IT (1.13 per cent), capital goods (1.07 per cent), teck (1.05 per cent) and financial services (1.05 per cent). BSE Healthcare emerged as the only gainer. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled lower. European markets were trading in the negative territory. Wall Street ended sharply lower on Wednesday. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 1,316.81 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.08 per cent to USD 73.33 a barrel. The BSE benchmark Sensex tumbled 502.25 points or 0.62 per cent to settle at 80,182.20, taking its downtrend to the third day on Wednesday. The Nifty declined 137.15 points or 0.56 per cent to 24,198.85.



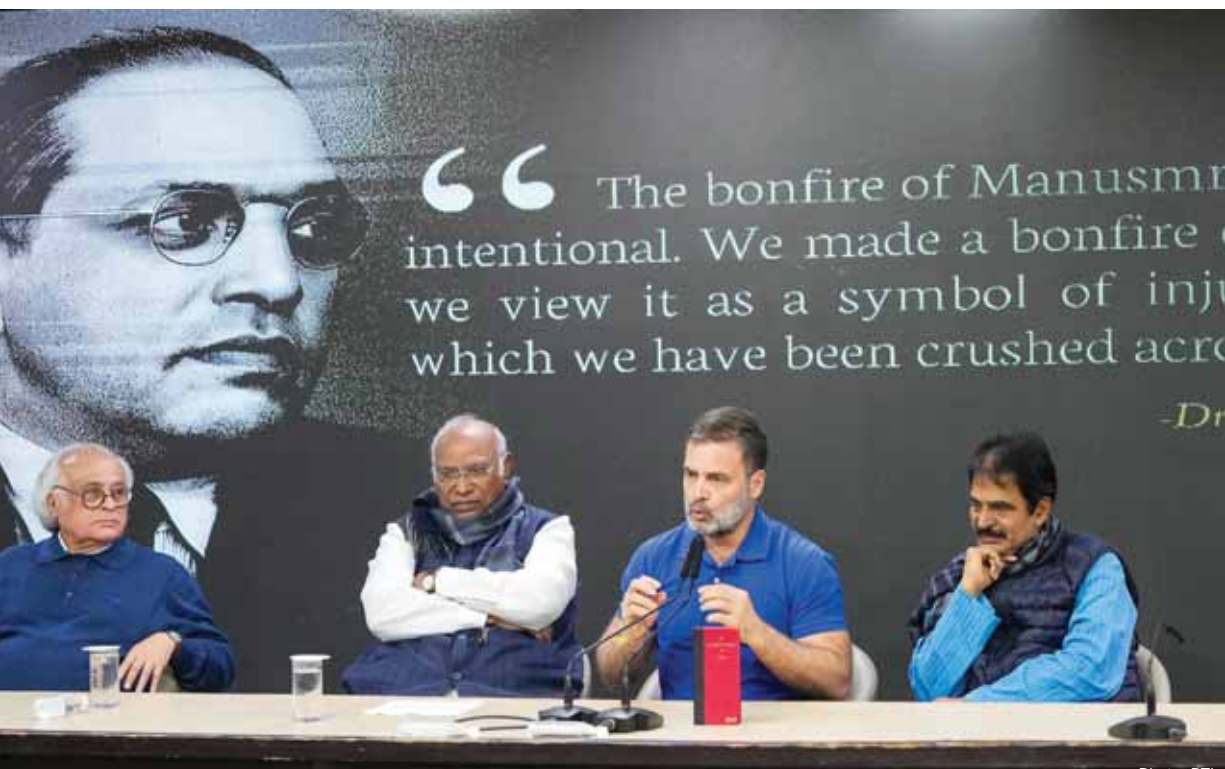
Uttar Pradesh, Haryana Govts must impose complete ban on firecrackers: SC

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI
The Supreme Court on Thursday directed the Uttar Pradesh and Haryana Governments to impose a complete ban on firecrackers until further orders. The Delhi Government has also imposed a round-the-year ban on firecrackers in the National Capital. The SC has also ordered the states falling in the National Capital Region (NCR) to constitute teams of various officials to ensure strict compliance with the anti-pollution measures under Stage IV of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP). During the hearing, Senior advocate Shadaan Farasat, appearing for the Government, conveyed this to a Bench of Justices AS Oka and AG Masih hearing the question of air pollution in the National Capital. He emphasised that for this measure to be effective, neighbouring NCR states must adopt similar bans, as firecrackers could still be brought into Delhi from those states. "We are of the view that this ban will be effective only when other states forming part of the NCR region impose similar measures. Even the state of Rajasthan has

WEATHER
AQI 451
MAX 23°C (+1)
MIN 5°C (-3)

year-round ban on firecrackers, including their manufacture, storage, sale, distribution, and use. "We direct NCR states to constitute the teams of members of police, revenue officials to monitor the implementation of GRAP IV measures. We say this that the members so created in this team will work as officers of this court. They will regularly submit reports of compliance and breaches to CAQM [Commission for Air Quality Management] so that immediate action be taken by all concerned," it directed. The Bench was hearing the case concerning the Delhi air pollution crisis. The Court has been monitoring action taken by authorities in the adjoining States to curb stubble-burning incidents, among other things. Meanwhile, in a notification issued by the Delhi government's environment department on Thursday, "There shall be a complete ban on manufacturing, storage, selling (including delivery through online marketing platforms) and bursting of all kinds of fire crackers in NCT of Delhi throughout the year with immediate effect." **Continued on page 2**

"Will run a nationwide movement on Ambedkar issue"



Congress on Thursday accused the BJP of diverting attention from the issue of Home Minister Amit Shah's "insult" to BR Ambedkar and said Shah must resign and apologise for his remarks. Addressing a joint Press conference at the AICC headquarters, Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge and former party chief Rahul Gandhi condemned Shah's remarks on Ambedkar and said they would continue to protest across the country.

"The BJP wants to divert attention from Shah's remarks on Ambedkar and that is why they are raising other issues," Kharge stated. He said they (Congress leaders) were only demanding the resignation of Home Minister Shah and were protesting "in support of our demands, but the BJP MPs blocked us from entering Parliament." "They pushed me, I lost my balance and sat down," the Congress chief said, adding that he condemns Shah's remarks

on Ambedkar. Kharge said they will run a nationwide movement on Ambedkar issue. Rahul said the Bharatiya Janata Party-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh thinking is "anti-Constitution" and "anti-Ambedkar". "The BJP is indulging in distraction. We want the apology and resignation of home minister over his remarks on Ambedkar," Gandhi said, adding that they would continue to raise their demand and the Adani issue.

"Will physical strength be used in Parliament?"



Accusing Rahul Gandhi of "pushing and shoving" its Members of Parliament at the Parliament premises, Bharatiya Janata Party said he does not deserve to be the Leader of Opposition after an "indecent and shameful" conduct. Addressing a press conference at the BJP headquarters hours after fracas unfolded during protests by the ruling, and Opposition parties, Union Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan put the blame on

Rahul for bedlam which left two MPs injured. "Rahul Gandhi does not deserve to hold the post of the Leader of Opposition," he said. Chouhan said that the party was also painted at the treatment meted out to its tribal MP from Nagaland, S Phangnon Konyah, who alleged in the Rajya Sabha that Rahul shouted at her after coming in "close proximity" that made her feel uncomfortable during a demonstration outside the Parliament's Makar Dwar.

"Will physical strength be used in Parliament? Will musclemen and goondas come to Parliament? In which direction is the Congress taking the country's democracy?" said the BJP leader, who was flanked by Union Minister Piyush Goyal and party MPs Anurag Thakur and Anil Baluni. The Agriculture Minister said people elect their leaders to Parliament hoping they will put forth issues "with facts and logic. But the Congress is changing it."

Traffic alert: Avoid Kalindi Kunj, congestion due to Delhi-Mumbai Expressway construction

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
Commuters have been creeling under massive disruptions at the busy Kalindi Kunj junction, due to the construction of the Delhi-Mumbai Expressway. The Delhi Police, in an advisory on Thursday, urged the commuters to avoid the area due to the ongoing construction of the Delhi-Mumbai Expressway, including that of a bridge at Agra Canal Road, which is expected to continue for the next couple of months. "The ongoing construction of the delhi-mumbai expressway, including the construction of a bridge at agra canal road, is expected to continue for the next couple of months. Due to

this, significant traffic congestion has been observed at Kalindi Kunj junction, especially as commuters from adjoining states pass through the area," it said. The police instructed the commuters that in light of the ongoing construction and resulting traffic disruptions, the general public is advised to plan their journeys in advance and seek alternate routes to avoid delays. They asked people travelling to avoid the area around Kalindi Kunj junction during peak hours to prevent inconvenience. Commuters travelling from Faridabad to Noida are advised to take Mathura Road and Road number-13 to bypass the congested area. Those travelling from Noida to Delhi have been advised to use the DND flyover. Public transport is highly recommended to reduce congestion on the roads and avoid roadside parking to ensure smooth traffic flow, the advisory added. A commuter took to X to express his frustration over the persistent jams in the area, stating that while the Kalindi Kunj stretch is hardly 2 km long and should not take more than five minutes to cross the bridge with moderate traffic, it takes 30 to 40 minutes to cross this tiny stretch. Another one asked others to avoid Kalindi Kunj from Noida to Delhi at all cost. Sharing the ordeal he faced to cross the stretch, he said, "It took me an hour just to cover a distance of



just 250 meters recently. They keep constructing new things to cut short duration from one place to another, however they completely forget that in that process we, the ordinary commuters, have to suffer on a daily basis," he said, adding that authorities should first plan the whole thing in a way that it doesn't hamper the day to day lives of the people. Constructed with a budget of Rs 5,500 crore, the expressway offers a new route for travel to Faridabad, Palwal, and Sohna. It is India's longest expressway project, connecting Delhi and Mumbai. The project aims to directly link the national capital Delhi with Mumbai, linking multiple economic centres across five states: Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. The eight-lane greenfield expressway spans a total length of 1,386 km, designed to reduce travel time between Delhi and Mumbai by 50 per cent, aiming for a travel duration of just 12 hours. Beyond connecting the two major cities, it is intended to improve accessibility to economic hubs such as Jaipur, Kishangarh, Ajmer, Kota, Chittorgarh, Udaipur, Bhopal, Ujjain, Indore, Ahmedabad, Vadodara, and Surat. The project commenced operations with the inauguration of its first segment between Sohna (Haryana) and Dausa (Rajasthan) by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 12 February 2023.

Accused in Sambhal case SP MP Barq now charged with power theft

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ SAMBHAL
A team from the Uttar Pradesh Electricity Department, accompanied by security forces, conducted a surprise inspection at the residence of Samajwadi Party MP Zia Ur Rehman Barq on Thursday, leading to the registration of an electricity theft case against him. Officials alleged irregularities in power usage after finding tampered electricity meters at his residence.

According to officials, two electricity meters installed at Barq's house were found tampered with during the inspection. An FIR has been lodged under Section 135 of the Electricity Act, 2003, which deals with electricity theft and unauthorized power consumption. On Thursday morning, a team from the state electricity department visited Mr. Barq's two-storey residence to inspect electricity meter readings and evaluate the load from various electrical appliances, including air condition-

ers and fans. Officials discovered that the sanctioned electricity connection was just 2 kilowatts (kW), while the actual load exceeded 16.5 kW — over eight times the permitted limit. Following the findings, the electricity department disconnected the power supply. The inspection also revealed that for the past six months, Mr. Barq's residence had accrued zero electricity bills. Newly installed smart meters recorded a power load of 5.5 kW, despite the sanctioned limit being only 2 kW.



Shrish Chandra, Additional Superintendent of Police (Sambhal), said: "The State Electricity Department has registered an FIR for electricity theft against Zia Ur Rehman Barq. During the inspection, the MP's father allegedly threatened one of the officials conducting the raid. We are gathering evidence, and another FIR related to the threat will be filed soon."

The police added that legal action would be initiated based on the findings of the investigation. "For now, the power theft case has been registered. The second FIR related to the alleged threat by the MP's father will be filed after further verification," Chandra added. Meanwhile, sources close to Barq dismissed the allegations, claiming that the residence primarily relies on solar energy and a generator, making the power theft accusation baseless. "This is a politically motivated action intended to malign the MP's image," a party representative said. Barq has been embroiled in legal troubles before. He is the prime accused in the November 24 violence that broke out during a court-

ordered survey of a mosque in Sambhal, which resulted in four deaths. Authorities have accused him of instigating the clashes through provocative speeches — a charge Barq has denied. The Uttar Pradesh Police claim Barq orchestrated the violence for political gains, but the MP has countered, alleging that the BJP is behind the conspiracy. He has approached the Allahabad High Court seeking legal protection and the quashing of FIRs related to the incident.

BJP MLAs stage protest demanding tabling of pending CAG reports

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
The BJP MLAs on Thursday staged a protest in the Delhi Assembly premises and demanded the ruling AAP to summon a special session of the House and table the pending CAG reports. Leader of Opposition Vijender Gupta claimed the AAP government has not tabled 14 reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in the Delhi Assembly despite an "assurance" to the High Court. The opposition MLAs also submitted a memorandum to Speaker Ram Niwas Goel, demanding him to convene a special Assembly session. The protesting MLAs held placards with slogans like "Vidhan Sabha ka satra bulao, CAG Report sadan me lao" (convene the Assembly session, bring the CAG reports to the floor) and "CAG Report mat dabao, Vidhan Sabha ka satra bulao" (don't suppress CAG



reports, convene assembly session). The outgoing Assembly has seven BJP MLAs. The elections to the 70-member Assembly is due to be held in February next year. Gupta accused the AAP government of "deliberately withholding" the CAG reports to hide "corruption and financial irregularities". He said that the government was "evading" its constitutional responsibilities. The BJP MLAs earlier approached the High Court seeking its order to the Delhi government for tabling the CAG reports on its performance audit.

DOTS Plus supervisor terminated within 24 hours of negligence complaint



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
As part of its ongoing 100 Days TB Campaign, aimed at screening and treating TB patients with unwavering commitment, the Delhi government's health department has taken swift and decisive action against negligence. Acting on a complaint of a school-going girl in the North District was deprived of essential TB medicines due to the carelessness of a DOTS Plus Supervisor, the Delhi government's health department has terminated the supervisor within 24 hours, sending a strong message that such lapses will not be tolerated. Also the girl was provided with all the prescribed medicines. The department reiterates its dedication to ensuring the well-being of TB patients and has implemented additional measures to prevent similar incidents in the future. This proactive approach underscores its resolve to make the 100 Days TB Campaign a success and ensure 100% intolerance regarding negligence in patient care.

DDA to convert many of its under-utilised community centres into libraries, reading rooms

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) will be converting many of its hitherto under-utilised community centres and halls as libraries and reading rooms in a move that will benefit thousands of students in particular, apart from senior citizens and residents of national Capital at large. A senior DDA official, on Thursday, said that five such community centres including one in Rajendra Nagar have already been identified and works for these community centres to be converted into modern library / reading room facilities replete with all necessary means is progressing fast. "The move comes after Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena asked DDA to provide library / reading room facilities to students, in the wake of the tragic incident of loss of three young lives due to drowning in the basement reading room of a private



coaching centre in Rajendra Nagar in July this year. Saxena, who had visited the site immediately in the aftermath of the tragedy, had met the protesting students there and assured them that he will do everything possible to address the issue of exploitative reading room facilities and charges being faced by them, at the earliest," he said. In a statement, the DDA said, "The LG had thereafter convened a meeting with the officers of DDA and asked them to identify community centres inside or close to the stu-

required furniture, a small cafeteria and a small gym. While the centre at Rajendra Nagar will serve thousands of students in the Rajendra Nagar-Patel Nagar-Karol Bagh coaching hub, the one at Adhchini will cater to the needs of students in the JNU, Katarwaria Sarai, Ber Sarai and IIT Delhi area. The Centres at Rohini, closer to North Campus, Vikaspuri and Dwarka will cater to the needs of not only the students in the vicinity, but also senior citizens, who often find space constraints deterring their basic needs. "As per directions of the LG, DDA will undertake the responsibility of civil infrastructural and furnishing of these libraries and reading rooms. Universities will be asked to run them. Books will be sourced through various sources including CSR and philanthropy while the cafeteria and gymnasium will meet the other necessary requirements of students visiting these facilities," the statement added.

BJP accuses AAP Govt of disgraceful fraud regarding DUSIB shelters

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva on Thursday accused the AAP government of a disgraceful fraud amounting to nearly Rs 250 crores regarding providing shelter homes to the poor through Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB). It is a department of the Delhi government responsible for assisting the poor and helpless by providing them with shelter homes. Sachdeva emphasized that

this is a noble humanitarian service, but a major scam is being perpetrated through the collusion of government officials and their associated MLAs. According to DUSIB's regulations, each shelter home is allocated salaries for five to six caretaking staff, depending on capacity, which is paid to contractor NGOs. However, a BJP team investigation uncovered significant fraud in this system, he said. In each shelter, payments are made for five-six caretakers,

while only two are actually present. The BJP team's investigation found three-four ghost employees in every shelter. Delhi BJP President stated that no work occurs in Arvind Kejriwal's government without brokerage, bribery, or commission. The BJP's legal team discovered that eight major NGOs are contracted for shelter home maintenance in Delhi. Most shelters employ only two-three workers, yet salaries for five-six are disbursed.



Further investigation revealed that the same staff names are registered across different shelter homes, with identical Aadhaar numbers and bank accounts. Whether it's the shelter at Delhi Gate, Lahori Gate, Turkman Gate, or Mangolpuri, a single Aadhaar card is being used to draw three-five salaries. This entire matter involves an alleged scam of approximately Rs 250 crore. We have requested an investigation by the Anti-Corruption Branch

(ACB) and have also filed a complaint with the Lokayukta, he said. We demand an investigation into the roles of former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, the concerned ministers, MLAs, DUSIB officials, and all others involved. Sachdeva mentioned that the NGOs entrusted with this responsibility are selected by the Delhi government. Currently, there is rampant corruption in every department of the Delhi government. Just yesterday, we

exposed the issue of fake caste certificates, and today, such scams have come to light, he said. He cited an example of an employee, Vijay Kumar, associated with Jyoti Samaj Seva Sansthan, who is listed as working at five different locations simultaneously, all linked to the same Aadhaar card. Five salaries are being deposited into a single account, which are then allegedly returned as commissions to leaders of the Aam Aadmi Party.

Newly commissioned INS Tushil sets sail for India from Russia's Kaliningrad

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI
More than a week after it was commissioned, INS Tushil, the latest multi-role stealth guided missile frigate of the Indian Navy, has set sail from Kaliningrad, Russia for India, marking the beginning of her maiden operational deployment. INS Tushil (F 70), which commenced its journey from Kaliningrad, Russia for India on Tuesday, was commissioned into the Indian Navy in the presence of Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh at the Yantar Shipyard in Kaliningrad, Russia on December 9. A 125 metre, 3900 ton INS Tushil is a blend of Russian and Indian cutting edge technologies and best practices in warship construction. The ship is an upgraded Krivak III class frigates of the Project 1135.6 of which, six are already



in service — three Talwar class ships, built at Baltiysky shipyard, St. Petersburg, and three follow-on Teg class ships, built at Yantar shipyard, Kaliningrad. INS Tushil, the seventh in the series, is the first of the two upgraded additional follow-on ships, the contract for which was signed in October 2016 between JSC Rosoboronexport, Indian Navy and the Government of India. INS Tushil is designed for blue water operations across the

spectrum of naval warfare in all four dimensions air, surface, underwater and electromagnetic. It is armed with a range of advanced weapons, including the jointly-developed Brahmos supersonic cruise missiles, vertically-launched Shtil Surface-to-Air Missiles with enhanced ranges, upgraded medium-range anti-air and surface gun with advanced stealth features, optically-controlled close-range rapid fire gun system, anti-sub-

25-year-old arrested from Gujarat for raping co-worker after chase of 1,500 km

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
A 25-year-old man has been arrested from Gujarat for allegedly raping his co-worker after a chase of 1500 kilometer. According to the police on Thursday, Kuldeep, who works as a welder in Bawana, befriended the victim and earned her trust on September 21. "Taking advantage of this, he allegedly gave her some intoxicating substance and raped her," the police said in a statement, adding that he also captured explicit photos and videos of the woman. "The complainant, an employee in Bagwan Pura, had been befriended by the accused while working together. Under the pretext of trust, he administered an intoxicating substance and committed sexual assault while capturing explicit photos and videos. He used

these recordings to blackmail the victim, coercing her into further physical relations," the Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime) Satish Kumar said. The police said an FIR was registered later and a team was formed to nab the accused. "On December 16, team identified Kuldeep's hideout in Gujarat's Surat. They conducted a raid and apprehended him. During the arrest, police recovered a mobile phone containing incriminating photos and videos used for blackmail and sextortion," the statement read. The accused hails from District Deoria in Uttar Pradesh, and completed his education up to the eight standards. "He has been residing in Bawana, Delhi, for the past five to six years and is currently employed as a welder in a factory in the area," the DCP stated.

Man kills co-worker at Preet Vihar eatery after hitting victim's head with dumbbell

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI
A man killed his co-worker at a food outlet in east Delhi's Preet Vihar after they had a fight resulting in the accused hitting the victim's head with a dumbbell. According to the police on Thursday, the incident occurred at a food corner, namely 'Didi Food Corner', owned by one Tripta Rastogi. According to police, they received a PCR call at Preet Vihar police station from Rastogi that two of her employees, Suraj and Prakash around 2 am got into a scuffle during which Suraj reportedly struck Prakash on the head with a dumbbell and fled. Rastogi got the call at 2:30 am about the incident and rushed to the restaurant where she found Prakash bleeding profusely. She bandaged his head with a cloth and told everyone



that treatment will be done in the morning. She rushed him to a nearby clinic and from there to Hedgewar Hospital at 10:00 am where he was declared dead. "We have registered a case of culpable homicide not amounting to murder against the accused and further investigation has been launched. A crime team inspected the scene, recovering the alleged weapon used in the attack," a senior police officer said. Police said some employees stayed overnight at the eatery, and the fight broke out over a "trivial matter."

Uttar Pradesh, Haryana Govts must impose complete ban on firecrackers...

From page 1
The Delhi Police and Revenue Department, GNCTD shall ensure implementation of the directions under their respective jurisdiction in letter and spirit. The violation of the directions issued under Section 5 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 shall be punishable under Section 15 of the said Act," the notification read. Meanwhile, Delhi and its neighboring areas like Noida, Ghaziabad, and Gurugram

Department (IMD) has issued a yellow alert for the next five days for Delhi, forecasting the persistently low visibility to continue until December 23. The IMD also indicated that the cold and fog conditions would likely worsen due to northern winds. Out of the 36 air quality monitoring stations across Delhi, 32 reported AQI levels in the 'severe plus' category, with several locations recording values exceeding 480, posing extreme health risks to residents. Alarming figures have been reported

from Anand Vihar (478), Ashok Vihar (472), Bawana (454), Burari Crossing (473), Mathura Road (467), Dr. Karni Singh Shooting Range (451), Dwarka Sector 8 (460), ITO (475), Jahangirpuri (478), and Punjabi Bagh (476). Other notable locations include Nehru Nagar (485), Rohini (470), Vikas Marg (466), and Vivek Vihar (475) while the remaining stations reported 'severe' levels. The situation in the National Capital Region (NCR) cities also remains critical, with Haryana's Faridabad at 289,

Gurugram at 370 and Uttar Pradesh's Ghaziabad at 386, Greater Noida at 351, and Noida at 366. The conditions are a result of the ongoing influence of western disturbances, which are also responsible for a drop in minimum temperatures. As per IMD, the minimum temperature in Delhi had dipped to 5°C on Thursday morning, while earlier this week, the city recorded a low of 7.4°C. Early morning visuals from areas such as Ashoka Road, Kushak Road, and Maulana Azad Road on

Thursday showed thick fog enveloping the National Capital. Moderate fog reported at Safdarjung airport. Safdarjung airport recorded lowest visibility 250m between 7 am to 7.30 am which improved thereafter becoming 300m at 8 am. Palam airport recorded lowest visibility 600 m during 7.30 am to 9 am which improved thereafter becoming 700m at 9.30 am. The ventilation index lower than 6000 m2/s with average wind speed less than 10 kmph is unfavourable for dispersion of

pollutants. The Delhi Airport, considering the situation, issued a passenger advisory in a post on X (formerly Twitter) on Thursday, requesting the passengers to contact their concerned airlines for updated flight information before travelling. "Low visibility procedures are still in progress at Delhi Airport. However, there has been no impact on flight operations. Passengers are requested to contact the airline concerned for updated flight information," the post read.

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Ruckus breaks out in MCD House as Opp accuses AAP of sheltering Rohingyas

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A ruckus broke out at the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) House on Thursday as opposition councillors staged a protest and raised slogans alleging the ruling AAP of sheltering Rohingyas and Bangladeshi immigrants.

The session, scheduled to begin at 2 pm, was yet to start as Mayor Mahesh Khichi had not arrived by 3 pm, further escalating tensions. BJP and Congress councillors stormed into the well of the House, climbed atop benches, and held placards with slogans targeting the Aam Aadmi

Party. Some placards read, "Illegal Rohingyas and Bangladeshi immigrants are AAP's friends" and "Liar Kejriwal, shame on you." Slogans like "Mayor Shahab time pe aao" and "nahi chalega, aise house nahi chalega" echoed in the hall.

The house was also adjourned for about 10 minutes even as the opposition councillors criticised the mayor's absence and demanded an apology before allowing the House to proceed.

In response, AAP councillors raised slogans like "Baba Saheb ka apmaan nahi sahege" and "Jai Bhim," tar-

getting Union Home Minister Amit Shah's recent statement in Parliament on the country's first law minister. The ruling party members accused the BJP of undermining the legacy of B R Ambedkar.

The Rohingyas and Bangladeshi immigrants issue has been a flashpoint between the ruling AAP and the opposition BJP in Delhi. Leaders from both parties have traded allegations, accusing each other of settling illegal immigrants and including them in voter lists for electoral gains.

While the proposal of doubling the parking fees was referred back, the house approved a proposal to release



Rs 25.35 crore to begin preparations for the polls ahead of the assembly elections. This includes setting up

essential facilities at over 2,500 locations across the city. A proposal in this regard, marked under urgent business, was passed in the MCD House to release the expenditure required for this as a priority payment.

"In compliance with directions from the Election Commission of India and the Chief Electoral Officer of Delhi to ensure smooth conduct of the General Elections to the Delhi Legislative Assembly, scheduled for January/February 2025, assured minimum facilities are required to be maintained," the proposal read.

According to the passed pro-

posals, the MCD is tasked with setting up approximately 13,033 polling booths at around 2,538 locations within its jurisdiction.

The total estimated expenditure for these arrangements is expected to be around Rs 25.35 crore, with each of the polling booth allocated a budget of Rs 19,450.

In addition to setting up polling stations, the MCD is responsible for ensuring provisions for ramps to facilitate PwD (Persons with Disabilities) voters and senior citizens. It will also establish model/pink polling booths in each assembly constituency as well as one PwD polling

station and one youth polling station in each district. Additional attractive features will be added to polling stations based on the local culture and specific requirements. The other provisions include setting up shaded waiting areas with seating arrangements for those accompanying voters as well as crèche facilities for the children who accompany electors.

The house also approved the construction of a bridge over Chirag Delhi drain connecting Chirag Delhi Village to Sheikh Sarai while referring back the doubling of parking fees proposal.

BJP file police complaint against Rahul accusing him of physical assault, incitement

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Alleging charges of 'attempt to murder' among others against Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi, the BJP on Thursday filed a police complaint against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, accusing him of 'physical assault and incitement' during a scuffle in Parliament premises which left two BJP MPs injured.

Vadodara BJP MP Hemang Joshi, accompanied by his party colleagues Anurag Thakur and Bansuri Swaraj and a TDP MP, visited the Parliament Street Police Station and filed the complaint. A face-off at the Parliament entry steps between the opposition and National Democratic Alliance (NDA) MPs in Parliament premises over the alleged insult to B R Ambedkar left former minister Pratap Chandra Sarangi and Mukesh Rajput injured.

Talking to reporters outside the police station, Thakur demanded a thorough investigation and an FIR under sections 109 (attempt to murder), 115 (voluntarily causing hurt), 117 (voluntarily causing grievous hurt), 125 (act of endangering life or personal safety of others), 131 (use of criminal force), 351 (criminal intimidation) and 3(5) (common



intention) of the BNS in the matter.

The Congress strongly rejected the claim, alleging that BJP MPs pushed its chief Mallikarjun Kharge and "physically manhandled" Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi. Congress also lodged a complaint in connection with the matter.

In his two-page complaint, BJP MP from Vadodara Hemang Joshi said, "At around 10, I along with Mukesh Rajput, Pratap Rao Sarangi and other large numbers of my fellow Members of Parliament belonging to the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), were peacefully demonstrating at the Makar Dwar entrance of Parliament."

He said they were protesting against the "blatant misinformation being propagated by

ical force to push Mukesh Rajput and Pratap Rao Sarangi and others who were standing on the narrow stairs at the entrance," Joshi said.

He said that as a consequence Mukesh Rajput sustained a "severe injury" to the back of his head and Sarangi to his forehead.

"My colleague, Dr. Byreddy Sabari, MP, who is also a qualified doctor, immediately provided first aid to the injured individuals. I personally witnessed the incident as I was standing next to my injured colleagues and attempted to reason with Rahul Gandhi and his accomplices," Joshi added in the complaint.

He called Gandhi's actions "deliberate, intentional, and done with malafide intention and full knowledge of the potential consequences." The BJP MP accused him not only of inciting his fellow members of the INDI Alliance to act aggressively but also directly causing physical harm to his colleagues.

"His behaviour constitutes criminal assault, incitement to his fellow companions of committing violence on the peaceful protesters, and endangerment to the lives of public representatives with common intention along with other members belonging to the opposition bloc," he said.

AAP Govt announces plans to launch the 'Mukhyamantri Swavlamban Rozgar Yojna'

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government on Thursday announced plans to launch the 'Mukhyamantri Swavlamban Rozgar Yojna', aimed at empowering small-scale industries and shopkeepers.

Under this initiative, the small-scale industries and shopkeepers will have easy access to low-interest loans of up to Rs 10 lakh, an official statement said.

The Delhi government will provide a 10 per cent subsidy to general applicants, 15 per cent to women and ex-servicemen, and 20 per cent to physically handicapped individuals and widows, it added.

The scheme is designed to offer crucial financial assistance to individual entrepreneurs, trade professionals, artisans and disadvantaged groups, including those with disabilities and widows.

The Industries Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj explained the scheme's goal is to strengthen small businesses and individuals by providing essential financial support, helping them expand their operations and generate employment opportunities.



"This initiative highlights the Delhi government's commitment to fostering economic growth and creating job opportunities at the grassroots level. The 'Mukhyamantri Swavlamban Rozgar Yojana' will empower small-scale industries and shopkeepers, making them self-reliant and contributing to the overall development of Delhi," he said.

The scheme aims to overcome the limitations of the

neers, trade professionals, artisans, physically handicapped individuals and widows.

Financial aid under this scheme will be provided as loans for projects across various sectors, including secondary industries like cottage industries, tertiary sectors such as trade, transportation, hostels and restaurants, and service sectors identified by the Delhi Khadi & Village Industries Board (KVIC).

All projects must comply with local regulations and the Delhi Master Plan. The loan amount for eligible projects is capped at Rs 10 lakh. However, applicants with outstanding or misused loans from the government or government-controlled institutions will not be eligible for this scheme.

The additional features of the scheme include loan amounts of up to Rs 10 lakh, with interest rates set at 6 per cent for loans up to Rs 5 lakh, and 7 per cent for loans between Rs 5 lakh and Rs 10 lakh. The applicants must be between the ages of 18 and 55. The loans will require security and hypothecation, facilitated through banks, with the Delhi Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) serving as the nodal agency.

VPNs, proxy servers complicating bomb threat investigations for police

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Amid the bomb threats being received by over 100 schools in the national Capital since May this year, the Delhi Police has been unable to crack the cases due to VPNs (Virtual Private Network) and proxy servers which acted as key barriers in solving cases and legal frameworks for obtaining information from these services are inadequate, leading to delays in investigations.

Since May this year, over 50 bomb threat emails have targeted not only schools but also hospitals, airports and airline companies in Delhi, but the police have yet to make any breakthroughs in these cases.

Former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal had also raised concerns over threats to schools on Wednesday and questioned the police's failure to catch the culprit. According to senior officials, the Delhi Police have written to service providers like Google, VK (known as Mail.Ru), and



Outlook.Com to obtain the IP addresses of the senders. In some cases, the police have received responses, but they have not been able to determine the exact origin. The Delhi Police have also sought the assistance of Interpol through central agencies.

"Our investigation is underway. We are working to trace the origin of the sender. While their servers or domains have been traced to European or Middle Eastern countries, the actual origin

remains unconfirmed, as the emails were sent using VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) or proxy servers," an officer said, adding that a dedicated unit of the Delhi Police Special Cell has been tasked with investigating the threat cases.

Several Delhi schools have received bomb threat emails in the past nine days, prompting security agencies to conduct checks in five separate incidents. "Though nothing suspicious has been found in

any of the threats so far, we cannot take any of them lightly. Each message was taken seriously, and thorough checks were conducted, following all security protocols," the officer said.

The officer further explained that VPN networks function like a web on the internet, where the origin is not directly connected to its server. "For example, if we are talking to each other, it's direct connectivity, but if we are connected through a VPN, our communication happens via multiple domain servers," he said.

The first case of threats to Delhi schools and hospitals was reported in May. Several other government installations, including Tihar Jail and some Union Ministry departments, also received bomb threats. In October, over 150 domestic and international flights operating from Delhi received similar bomb threat messages sent on X, where the sender had used VPN networks. Delhi airport police regis-

tered 16 separate cases and conducted investigations, but have not been able to make any breakthroughs yet. Cyber law expert and Supreme Court advocate Dr. Pavan Duggal said the problem is that India does not have a dedicated law to regulate the use of VPNs. He explained that most VPN service providers are located outside India's territorial boundaries. As a result, obtaining inputs from them becomes a significant challenge.

"Although the Information Technology Act, 2000 has been granted extraterritorial jurisdiction under Sections 1 and 75, the ground reality is that India has not been able to enforce this jurisdiction against VPN service providers located outside India," Duggal said. "Currently, cybercriminals are emboldened by the use of VPNs. They know that the legal frameworks in India are not adequate to compel VPN service providers to share information," he added.

NGT seeks response from authorities over illegal sand mining in Yamuna floodplains

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has sought a response from authorities, including the district magistrates of north Delhi and Ghaziabad, over alleged instances of illegal sand mining in the River Yamuna floodplain.

A bench of NGT Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava and expert member A Senthil Vel had taken a suo motu (on its own) cognisance of a newspaper report on the large-scale illegal mining in the floodplain between Alipur in north Delhi and Panchayara in Ghaziabad.

The district magistrates of north Delhi and Ghaziabad and the Lucknow regional office of the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, were impleaded as respondents in the case. The tribunal also impleaded member secretaries of the Delhi Pollution Control Committee, Central Pollution Control Board and Uttar



Pradesh Pollution Control Board. "Issue notice to the above respondents for filing their response/reply," it said. The news report indicated that the NGT that sand miners in the region were building makeshift roads across the river, which enabled them to transport excavators and carry out mining operations in the floodplain. The article further said these roads were often constructed by placing wooden planks and sandbags across the river bed, not authorised under any mining leases, and

caused considerable damage to the river's fragile ecosystem. In its December 16 order, allegations of the river bank being "plundered by the sand mafia" and made susceptible to large-scale encroachment were noted by the NGT.

"The matter indicates a violation of the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act. The news item raises substantial issues relating to compliance with the environmental norms," it said. The matter was posted for hearing on April 14, 2025.

LG Saxena inaugurates Children's Play Area at Baansera

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Kids and teenagers now have access to recreational facilities in a natural environment as Delhi Lt Governor (LG) Vinai Kumar Saxena on Thursday inaugurated Children's Play Area at Baansera. Spread across two hectares, the play area has been developed by Delhi Development Authority (DDA), which has also developed Baansera at the unique bamboo-theme ecological park, on the banks of Yamuna. Saxena, during his recent visits to Baansera, had asked DDA to develop Children's Play Area as large number of children visit the place every day. This play area is designed to engage children of all age group with its multiple attrac-

tions and features. The highlight of the children play area include fitness zone, which promotes physical activity, play mound and climbing wall. For those seeking adventure, the adventure trail offers a stimulating journey through various obstacles. Younger children can enjoy the sand pit, perfect for creative play, while the multi-play structure caters to a variety of activities, allowing kids to climb and explore. The spider web provides an exciting challenge for older kids to test their agility, and a charming wooden train designed for toddlers offers a safe and engaging space for younger visitors.

The design of the play zone emphasizes both fun and physical development, offer-



ing a well-rounded experience for children to explore, play, and learn in a safe and stimulating environment. Inaugurating the part, Saxena

said the children in big cities do not get much opportunities to play in a natural environment. So, it has been our endeavour to provide them



such facilities. We would continue to develop many such venues in Delhi to promote Green Delhi and Fit Delhi. Besides, he also inaugurated a

2 MW capacity Solar Power Plant in the Baansera Park to bolster the renewable energy infrastructure in the Capital. The solar park spread over

20,000 sqm area, built on a RESCO (Renewable Energy Service Company) model, will provide DDA with solar power at a fixed tariff of Rs 4.42 per unit for 25 years. The project is anticipated to generate approximately 27 lakh units of electricity annually. With zero installation and O&M cost for DDA, the project is expected to benefit nearly 144 parks under the group net metering policy. The solar park will not only contribute to the national renewable energy targets but also serve as a model for other urban development authorities to adopt clean energy solutions.

To enhance the ecological character of Yamuna floodplains and make it more people-friendly by making it

attractive as a recreational and cultural venue, the LG had laid the foundation of 'Baansera' in August 2022 and the same was developed in a record time of just six months. More than 25,000 special variety of Bamboo saplings, brought from Assam were planted here. Baansera aims at providing the people of Delhi with the much needed public spaces in the Capital on one hand, and also ensure that the rich biodiversity of the floodplain is preserved and maintained. DDA's well-known projects for restoration and rejuvenation of the floodplains of River Yamuna are being carried out as an initiative to enhance the ecological character of the floodplains and to make them accessible to the public at large.

SC questions WB on creating excess posts in teachers recruitment scam

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday questioned the West Bengal Government why it had created supernumerary posts of teachers and non-teaching staffs instead of weeding out persons who were allegedly appointed illegally.

okay create supernumerary posts?" asked the bench. "Mr Dwivedi, tell me one thing, if you find the irregularity committed, will you not throw them out first?" the CJI asked further.



absorbing the wait-listed candidates. The top court further noted it was directed that appointment letters to such wait-listed candidates should be issued in terms of the recommendation of the SSC subject to the outcome of the pending litigation before the high court.

Supreme Court asked the CBI's counsel whether the probe agency was able to ascertain the date on which the OMR data was captured. "One thing is very strange that people who are not even recommended and who have not qualified... They were issued letters," the bench observed, "it was a very serious thing".

CBSE busts 29 dummy schools enrolling non-attending students

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) conducted a series of surprise inspections at 29 schools in Delhi, Bengaluru, Varanasi, Bihar, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh to check enrolment of 'dummy' students, officials said on Thursday.

CBSE has taken these violations seriously and is in the process of issuing show-cause notices to the schools found in breach of regulations. The Board is also considering legal action against the defaulting institutions," he added.

Bilaspur, and Chhattisgarh. Scores of students preparing for engineering and medical entrance exams prefer to take admission to dummy schools so that they can focus solely on their preparations for the competitive exams.



Impeachment notice against Dhankhar rejected by RS deputy chair Harivansh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman Harivansh on Thursday dismissed the impeachment notice given by the Opposition seeking the removal of Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar while ruling it as an act of impropriety, being severely flawed and drawn in haste to mar his reputation.

The notice was moved by the opposition members under Article 67(b) of the Constitution as intention of a no-confidence motion against the Vice President of India. The deputy chairman ruled that constitutionally after the intention of the notice to bring a resolution seeking removal of Vice President has been initiated, those taking such step had to move the resolution after 14 days, with no step called for from any quarter.

pendent India". Sources said the deputy chairman has also ruled that the prejudicial intent manifested through orchestration of a coordinated media campaign, including a televised press conference initiated by the LoP and Chief whip of the Indian National Congress, main opposition party, on December 12, 2024.

Kejriwal Questions Nitish, Naidu on Amit Shah's Ambedkar Remarks

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convenor and former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday wrote to key allies of the BJP, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Andhra Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, questioning their stance on home minister Amit Shah's recent remarks about architect of Constitution, Dr BR Ambedkar.

Baba Saheb done by Amit Shah Ji?" In his letter to Naidu and Kumar, Kejriwal voiced his concern over Shah's statement in Parliament over Ambedkar. "Recently in Parliament, a statement made by the home minister of the country, Amit Shah Ji, regarding Babasaheb has left the entire nation stunned," he wrote.

He further added, "Babasaheb Ambedkar was honoured with a 'Doctor of Laws' degree by Columbia University, he authored the Indian Constitution, and he championed equal rights for the most marginalised sections of society—how did the BJP have the audacity to make such a comment about him?"

Plate cutting ceremony for new ICG vessels held in Mumbai

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Plate Cutting Ceremony for the first of the 14 Fast Patrol Vessels (FPV) and first of the six Next-Gen Offshore Patrol Vessels (NGOPV) being constructed by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Ltd. (MDL) for the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) took place in Mumbai on Thursday, defence ministry said here.

Omar Abdullah meets Amit Shah, discusses restoration of Statehood, anti-terrorism efforts

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Thursday met with Union Home Minister Amit Shah here and discussed various key issues, including an early restoration of statehood and involving the elected government in the fight against terrorism.



J&K CM Omar Abdullah arrives to meet Union Home Minister Amit Shah. PTI

governor's office and made it clear that the Centre had no role in it. "Business rules have nothing to do with the government of India. We have to decide it and the Cabinet has to approve it. The Cabinet sub-committee will finalise it and then, we will send it to the LG for approval," he said.

India reiterates concerns over violence against minorities in Bangladesh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India on Thursday said it is concerned over incidents of violence against Hindus and other minorities in Bangladesh and asserted that the primary responsibility to protect their life and liberty rests with the interim government in Dhaka.

ernment of Bangladesh on various occasions, including at the highest level," Singh said. The minister made the remarks responding to separate questions on the situation in Bangladesh. "The high commission of India in Dhaka also continues to be in regular touch with the authorities of Bangladesh with regard to the welfare of minorities," he said.

the Jeshoreshwari Kali temple at Satkhira during Durga Puja," Singh said. Following these attacks, the Bangladesh government issued instructions for providing special security, including deployment of army and Border Guards, to ensure peaceful celebrations of Durga Puja, he said.

Nadda drags ruckus over Ambedkar in Lok Sabha after Opposition corners Shah

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Thursday launched a fresh attack on the Congress over its treatment of Dr BR Ambedkar as the ruling party's president JP Nadda asked the opposition party to "stop lying".

Shah has in turn accused the Congress of distorting his remarks and has received strong support from the ruling party, including Prime Minister Modi. Nadda claimed the Congress and its rotten ecosystem have been exposed since Wednesday by all those who believe in truth, democracy and social justice.

He also highlighted the Modi government's development of the Ambedkar International Centre against the Congress' alleged neglect to make his point.

Mahayuti pays tributes to Hegdewar amidst internal disquiet over RSS legacy



Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnavis, Deputy CM Ajit Pawar and Eknath Shinde during a group photo session in Nagpur on Thursday. PTI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MUMBAI

BJP leader Chitra Wagh on Thursday said there should not be any objection if Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar visits the RSS founder's memorial as the Sangh had contributed to the victory of all Mahayuti allies. The Mahayuti, comprising the BJP, Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar's NCP, secured a landslide victory in the Maharashtra assembly elections last month by securing 230 of the 288 seats. On Thursday, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, Deputy CM Shinde, several other BJP and Shiv Sena leaders as well as some NCP legislators visited the memorial of RSS founder Dr K B Hegdewar at Reshimbagh in Nagpur during the legislature session underway in the city. After visiting the memorial, Shinde said no one can ignore the Rashtriya

Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) contribution to nation-building and that the ideologies of the Sangh Parivar and Shiv Sena are same. Ajit Pawar did not visit the memorial, though two legislators of his party went there. Speaking to reporters during her visit to Hegdewar's memorial, BJP MLC Chitra Wagh said there should not be any problem with NCP leaders, including Ajit Pawar, visiting Reshimbagh. "They (RSS) indeed have played a crucial role. Nobody can deny the contribution of the RSS in winning so many seats. The RSS not only helped the BJP candidates to win but even worked in support of its allies during the assembly polls," she said. Wagh also said it was important to embrace positive ideologies. "It is a good thing to embrace a good school of thought. Hence, I feel they (NCP leaders) will visit the RSS headquarters. The RSS worked for the

Mahayuti and made a significant contribution. Neither the NCP nor Shiv Sena can ever deny the contribution of the RSS," she added. When Shiv Sena leader Dada Bhuse was asked about Pawar skipping the visit, he said, "I am a junior party worker; I cannot comment on his decision." Everybody has the right to decide whether to visit such places or not, he said. "But it is true that the RSS definitely played a key role and helped the Mahayuti in the state polls," Bhuse added. NCP MLA Raju Karemore, who visited Hegdewar's memorial, said he went there on his own and not on the instruction of his party. "The chief whip of the BJP in the legislative assembly had circulated messages encouraging visits to the place, which prompted me to go there," he said.

Shinde claims RSS teaches selfless service and unity

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MUMBAI

Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde paid tributes at the memorial of RSS founder Dr KB Hegdewar here on Thursday and said no one can ignore the Sangh's contribution to nation-building. The ideologies of the Sangh Parivar and Shiv Sena are same, Shinde told reporters after visiting the Dr Hegdewar Smruti Mandir at Reshimbagh in Nagpur, where Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and other leaders of the ruling allies BJP and Shiv Sena also paid respects. NCP leader and Deputy CM Ajit Pawar, who outfit is also a constituent of the ruling Mahayuti, was not present, while two of his party legislators visited the memorial. The winter session of the state legislature is currently underway in Nagpur. As an organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) works selflessly, Shinde said. The Shiv Sena head further said that he earlier also visited Hegdewar's memorial and had a relation with the Sangh Parivar since childhood. "I started with a Sangh shakha and then with a Shiv Sena shakha, Shiv Sena chief Balasaheb Thackeray's ideology and Anand Dighe sahab's teachings.

Police bust call center in Gurugram for cheating US nationals, 18 arrested

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

Cyber crime team of the Gurugram police busted an illegal call centre operating at Plot No 270 Udyog Vihar Phase-2 in Gurugram on Wednesday. The call centre mostly used to cheat US nationals on the pretext of technical support by creating a fake website of an accounting company, police said on Thursday. According to the police, a team of the cyber crime police station led by ACP (cybercrime) Priyanshu Diwan raided the call centre following a tip-off. During the raid, the police arrested 18 people, including 8 women and the call centre operator, in connection with the matter and seized 17 CPUs along with other electronic gadgets. The arrested accused have been identified as Gaurav Bakshi, Debashish Chatterjee, Anmol, Kanishk, Ajeesh Mathew, Kunal, Devender Devgan, Hitesh Malik, Rohit Singh, Aryaman Thakur, Nidhi, Sita, Muskan Rajput, Bhavana, Shivani, Lahinganhath Haikip Sharon and Nagmathingcho. The police team registered a case against the accused under sections 318 (4), 319 BNS and IT Act in Police Station Cyber Crime South, Gurugram and arrested the accused as per the rules in the case. During interrogation, it was found that the accused, Gaurav Bakshi, is the operator of this call centre, and he runs this call centre along with his companions at the behest of his other partner. Bakshi used to get a salary of about Rs 1.5 lakh and his other employees used to get a salary of about Rs 30,000 per month.

"We received specific inputs that a fake call centre had cheated several US nationals on the pretext of technical support. The youths were employed at the call centre, which was being operated without a license issued by the Department of Telecommunications (DOT)," said Priyanshu Diwan, ACP (Cyber Crime). The accused was allegedly running this illegal call centre with his fellow accused since February 2024. The accused were cheating foreign nationals in the name of providing customer care service of Software Support/Accounting Support. The accused used to run ads on Google from the customer care helpline number of a famous company. When foreign nationals call on the toll-free number, the call comes to their call centre through VCL Dialer, 3CX Dialer. "The accused introduced themselves as representatives of a famous company and got remote access to the computer system of foreign nationals by getting them to download screen-sharing applications in their system. In the name of solving their problem, they used to get 200-1000 dollars from them through a payment gateway. The accused used to commit the fraud by creating a phishing website of an accounting company named Quick Books," Diwan added. "The matter is under investigation. How the accused was operating the fake call centre is part of an investigation. The involvement of other people cannot be ruled out. The culprits are on police remand for further questioning," the officer said. An FIR under relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the IT Act has been registered at the Cyber Crime South police station..

CM Himanta calls for stronger ties with Bhutan during visit

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday reiterated the commitment of ensuring that the northeastern state plays a pivotal role in strengthening the bond between India and Bhutan. Sarma made the remarks as he concluded his four-day trip to the neighbouring country on Thursday. "As Riniki and I conclude our unforgettable visit to Bhutan, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and the wonderful people of Bhutan for their warmth and generosity," Sarma wrote on X. "We return home with cherished memories, invaluable learnings and a renewed commitment to ensuring that Assam plays a pivotal role in strengthening the deep bond between Bharat and Bhutan," he added. Sarma, who was accompanied by his wife Riniki Bhuyan Sharma, was bid farewell at the airport by Bhutan's Foreign Minister DN Dhungyel.

Longest surviving Hizbul Mujahideen commander killed in Kashmir encounter

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

A joint team of security forces Thursday killed one of the longest surviving terrorist commanders belonging to the Pro-Pakistan Hizbul Mujahideen terrorist outfit along with four others during a six-hour-long fierce gunfight in the Kadder village of Behibagh area in South Kashmir's Kulgam district. Two army jawans also received injuries during the successful operation as no other collateral damage was reported from the ground zero of the encounter site. To prevent any civilian from getting trapped during the gunfight the security forces had safely evacuated local villagers to safety before killing the group of terrorists holed up inside a safe hideout. Five AK-47 rifles, 20 magazines, two grenades and other arms and ammunition have been recovered from the encounter site. Confirming the killing of a top Hizbul Mujahideen Commander Inspector General of Police, Kashmir range, VK Birdi said Hizbul Commander Farooq Ahmed Bhat, also known as Farooq Nali, a resident of Yaripora in Kulgam, was among those killed in the encounter in the Kadder area of the district. According to police records, Farooq Nali had been active since 2015 and was one of the longest-surviving terrorists. He was categorised as "A++". He played a key role in radicalizing local youth and reviving terrorist activities in South Kashmir. Addressing a press briefing after the encounter was called off Brigadier Anirudh Chauhan, Commander of 2 Sector RR said, "Five top active terrorists



Different identity documents seized from terrorists killed during the encounter on Thursday.

of Hizbul Mujahideen were neutralized in the Kadder area of Kulgam. All five terrorists were involved in many criminal and terrorist activities. The Army officer claimed Hizbul Mujahideen commander Farooq Bhat played a big role in reviving terrorism in South Kashmir. With the neutralization of these 5 terrorists, we will gain speed in eliminating terrorism in J&K. The army officer said during this operation, our two security personnel suffered bullet injuries. They are being treated at 92 Base Hospital. The army officer also acknowledged the role of the

people of Kulgam for the success of this operation..." According to police records, Farooq Bhat took control of the HM outfit after the death of Hizbul Mujahideen operational commander Saifullah in a 2020 gunbattle in Srinagar. Four other slain terrorists have been identified as Mushtaq Itoo, active since March 2020, from Mohamad Pora, Kulgam, Adil Hussain, active since August 2023, from Khandipora, Mohd Irfan, active since June 2022 from Hawoorah and Yassir Javaid Bhat from Yaripora.



SP MLAs holding portraits of BR Ambedkar arrive to attend the Winter Session of UP Assembly on Thursday. PTI

Opposition protests force abrupt end to UP Assembly Winter Session

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

For the first time since the formation of the Yogi Adityanath-led Uttar Pradesh government, the winter session of the state assembly was adjourned without the Chief Minister's customary address. The abrupt conclusion came amid continuous disruptions led by Samajwadi Party (SP) and Congress MLAs. The five-day session, which began with high expectations, was marked by persistent protests from the opposition. On the first two days, CM Yogi Adityanath addressed the House despite the commotion. However, on the third day, as he was scheduled to speak again, opposition legislators intensified their protests, forcing Assembly Speaker

Satish Mahana to adjourn proceedings till 11 a.m. on Thursday. The session resumed on Thursday morning but soon descended into chaos as SP MLAs staged a sit-in, raising slogans and holding placards. Despite the protests, Finance Minister Suresh Khanna presented the supplementary budget proposal. With the opposition refusing to engage in discussions, the budget was passed unanimously without debate. "The opposition came with the sole intention of disrupting the House," Khanna remarked, accusing the SP and Congress of stalling crucial discussions, including those on the upcoming Maha Kumbh. Adding fuel to the fire, opposition members protested against Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks in the

Rajya Sabha, which they termed disrespectful toward Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Shah had stated, "It has become a fashion to repeatedly invoke Ambedkar's name... Had you taken God's name as often, you would have attained heaven for seven lives." This comment triggered demands from the opposition for Shah's resignation. During the protests, Speaker Mahana admonished SP legislators for holding an inverted portrait of Ambedkar, questioning their sincerity toward respecting the Dalit icon. "If you cannot even hold Baba Saheb's photo straight, what respect will you show him?" he asked. With no end to the disruptions in sight, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Suresh Khanna urged the Speaker to adjourn the session indefinitely.

Navy and Coast Guard continue search and rescue efforts in Mumbai boat collision, two still missing

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

A day after the boat disaster off the Gateway of India that claimed 13 lives, the ships and aircraft of the Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard on Thursday continued their search for two persons - an adult male and a male child - who went missing after a Navy speed boat collided with a passenger ferry in the Arabian Sea. Within hours after the boat tragedy, the Indian Navy set up a Board of Inquiry into the mishap to establish the circumstances leading to the mid-sea collision and to fix the responsibility. Of the 113 persons on board both the vessels, 13 persons drowned while 98 others, including two injured, were rescued, after a Navy speed boat undergoing engine trials lost control and collided with a passenger ferry Neel Kamal off Karanja, Mumbai at 4 pm on Thursday. The ferry was carrying passengers from Gateway of India to Elephanta Island at the time of mishap.

The two missing passengers have been identified as 43-year-old Hansraj Bhati and seven-year-old Johan Mohammad Nisar Ahmed Pathan. A defence official said that Indian Navy and the Coast Guard deployed their vessels and their helicopters to search the two persons who were thrown into the waters after the mid-sea collision between a naval speed boat and a ferry in the water channel near the tiny Butcher Island oil terminal, 5 km from the Gateway of India. "Search and rescue efforts have continued throughout the intervening night of Wednesday and Thursday in the vicinity of the accident. Search and rescue operations are in progress by eight Navy craft, a naval helicopter and a Coast Guard vessel to search for the two missing persons," a defence spokesperson said. The rescued persons are still in different hospitals of Mumbai and Raigad district. While the condition of 100 is now stable. Official sources said that 57 survivors are currently in JNPA Hospital, 24 in Naval

Dockyard medical facility, 13 in INHS Sanghani (Karanja), 10 in St. George Hospital, 12 in a hospital on the mainland at Karanja and one in INHS Ashvini Hospital. Eight survivors who recovered have been discharged from different hospitals. All the persons killed in the boat disaster have been identified. Of those 13 killed in the boat tragedy, there were two minors Nidhish Rakesh Ahire (8 year-old boy from Nashik), Mahi Sairam Pavra (3-year-old girl from Dhule), five women -- Harshada Rakesh Ahire (31 years, Nashik), Shafina Ashraf Pathan (34 years from Goa), Rama Ratidevi Gupta (50 years from Palghar) and Pragnya Vinod Kamble (39 years from Navi Mumbai). Meanwhile, acting on a complaint lodged by survivor Natharam Chaudhary, the Colaba police have registered an FIR under sections 106(1), 125 (a) (b), 282, 324 (3)(5) of Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita has been registered in Colaba police station against people responsible for the tragedy.

Sawant defends self, government of graft charges in Goa Liberation Day address

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PANAJI

Chief Minister Pramod Sawant greeted people on Goa's Liberation Day on Thursday and said his government was progressing personal criticism, while overcoming personal criticism, prejudices and "tool kit of jealousy". Sawant's remarks come in the wake of a personal attack on him and his wife by the opposition leaders in connection with a cash-for-jobs scam in the state. Addressing the Goa Liberation Day function in Panaji, Sawant also said his government was working towards making the dream of the freedom fighters a reality through an all-inclusive growth. The Goa Liberation Day is celebrated on December 19

every year to mark the success of 'Operation Vijay' undertaken by the armed forces to liberate the state from the Portuguese in 1961. "We are providing a positive governance surpassing personal criticism, preconceived notions, and tool kit of jealousy," Sawant said. Notably, Pramod Sawant's wife Sulakshana Sawant filed a defamation suit against AAP leader Sanjay Singh on Tuesday in a court in North Goa. She has sought Rs 100 crore in damages from the AAP politician for allegedly naming her in the cash-for-jobs scam. The CM said, "Sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas and sabka prayas" are the hallmark of the Bharatiya Janata Party's rule in the coastal state, as he addressed a gathering comprising state

ministers, people from various sections of the society and students. Sawant further said his government was working proactively so that the state gets justice on the issue of the Mhadei river diversion through the central government authority PRAWAH. The Centre constituted the Progressive River Authority for Water and Harmony (PRAWAH) last year to enable the compliance and implementation of the award and decisions of the Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal. The Mhadei River originates in Karnataka and runs through Maharashtra into Goa, meeting the Arabian Sea near Panaji. Goa and Karnataka are locked in a dispute over the diversion of the river water.

Sawant said steps have also been taken to ensure resumption of the iron ore mining in Goa through sustainable and environment-friendly way, which will provide employment opportunities to thousands of youth living in the mineral rich belt of the state, he said. "We have also focussed on the ease of doing business, encouraging the new businesses and existing industries," the chief minister said. He said the state government was working towards women empowerment by undertaking various initiatives under the Centre's Goa State Rural Livelihood Mission and Deen Dayal Antodaya Yojana, under which the self-help groups are provided assistance for self-employment.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Clamour for caste census

While the exercise is fraught with challenges, its potential to uplift marginalised communities cannot be ignored

The demand for a caste census in India has been a recurring topic of debate, reflecting the country's complex socio-political fabric. While proponents emphasise its importance for targeted development and policy-making, critics raise concerns about its potential to exacerbate social divisions. The nuanced arguments surrounding this issue highlight both its necessity and its challenges. The caste census refers to the systematic collection of data on the caste composition of the population. India has not conducted such a comprehensive exercise since 1931, even though caste remains a significant determinant of socio-economic status in the country. Proponents of the caste census argue that it is essential for ensuring equitable development, especially for historically marginalised communities. As Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) leader Chirag Paswan points out, specific data on caste populations is critical for designing and allocating funds for community-based development schemes. Paswan's endorsement of the caste census is pragmatic. However, he also issues a cautionary note: while the government should collect such data, making it public might deepen societal divisions by reinforcing caste identities.

A caste census would provide granular data on the socio-economic conditions of various communities. This information is crucial for crafting effective affirmative action policies and welfare programmes. Historical injustices and systemic exclusion of certain communities require targeted interventions. A caste census would help identify the actual beneficiaries of reservation policies and assess whether they are achieving the intended outcomes. The Opposition, including Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, has emphasised that a caste census is a step toward realising the promise of social justice. By understanding the precise demographic composition, governments can ensure proportional representation and resource allocation. But having said that, making caste census data public could lead to heightened caste consciousness and further fragment society. India's socio-political landscape is already fraught with identity-based divisions, and the misuse of such data could deepen these fault lines. There is a legitimate fear that caste census findings might be weaponised for political gain. Instead of addressing inequities, the data could fuel caste-based mobilisations, electoral strategies and even conflicts. This aspect must be looked into and safeguarded before taking up this mammoth exercise. Besides, conducting a caste census is a massive logistical challenge. The accuracy of data collection and classification would be critical, as any errors could lead to disputes and undermine the credibility of the exercise. The caste census is essential and must be conducted, but it requires careful attention to ensure its accuracy and to address potential repercussions.

PICTALK



A person dressed as Santa Claus rows a boat as seagulls fly past, near Causeway of Tapi River in Surat

Victory Day: Bangladesh's legacy of liberation

Victory Day serves as both a celebration of freedom and a reminder of the challenges ahead in safeguarding its democratic and inclusive aspirations



SANTHOSH MATHEW

Victory Day holds profound significance for Bangladesh, marking its liberation and the triumph over the Pakistan Armed Forces in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Celebrated annually on December 16, the day symbolises the birth of a sovereign state and the culmination of a long struggle for self-determination, where India played the pivotal role of midwife in the creation of the newest state in South Asia. The Bangladesh Liberation War was not merely a conflict confined to its borders but a defining moment in the geopolitics of the region. The roots of this war were entrenched in the systemic neglect and exploitation of East Pakistan by the ruling elite of West Pakistan.

Decades of economic disparity, cultural suppression, and political disenfranchisement laid the foundation for a movement demanding autonomy, which was catalyzed by the brutal military crackdown on March 25, 1971. Operation Searchlight unleashed a reign of terror that sought to silence the aspirations of millions but instead ignited a people's resistance. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the towering leader of the Awami League, became the symbol of this resistance. His leadership united the Bengali population, and his call for independence resonated with millions who yearned for freedom. As the conflict escalated, millions of refugees poured into India, creating a humanitarian crisis of unparalleled magnitude. India's intervention under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was both a strategic and moral decision. The Indian Armed Forces, working in coordination with the Mukti Bahini, mounted a joint operation that decisively defeated the Pakistani forces within a mere 13 days. The surrender of the Pakistani military on December 16, 1971, in Dhaka is one of the most iconic moments in modern history. The image of General AAK Niazi signing the Instrument of Surrender in the presence of Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora remains etched in the collective memory of both nations. This marked not



only the liberation of Bangladesh but also a significant blow to the two-nation theory that had led to the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The emergence of Bangladesh was hailed globally, but it also underscored the complexities of international politics. The then-US President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, who had been staunch supporters of Pakistan due to Cold War dynamics, were caught off guard. Nixon's infamous remark about South Asia becoming an "international basket case" was a harsh reflection of the scepticism with which the new nation was viewed.

Yet, Bangladesh defied the odds and began its journey toward self-reliance and growth. Over the past five decades, Bangladesh has transformed remarkably, earning the moniker "the garment factory of the world." Despite initial challenges, including political instability, natural disasters, and infrastructural deficits, Bangladesh has managed to sustain an impressive growth trajectory. Today, Bangladesh stands as a significant player in South Asia, with a GDP growth rate that often outpaces its neighbours. The country's success in achieving many of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in areas such as gender



BANGLADESH DEFIED THE ODDS AND BEGAN ITS JOURNEY TOWARD SELF-RELIANCE AND GROWTH. OVER THE PAST FIVE DECADES, BANGLADESH HAS TRANSFORMED REMARKABLY, EARNING THE MONIKER "THE GARMENT FACTORY OF THE WORLD"

equality, education and healthcare, is commendable. It has become a model for other developing nations, showcasing how strategic planning and a focus on human development can lead to sustained progress. Victory Day is not just a celebration of past triumphs but also a moment to reflect on the challenges and opportunities ahead. The geopolitical landscape of South Asia has evolved significantly since 1971. While the ties with India remain strong, underpinned by historical bonds and mutual interests, Bangladesh has also embraced China's Belt and Road Initiative, balancing its foreign policy to maximise economic benefits. Victory Day also underscores the importance of remembering the sacrifices that led to Bangladesh's independence. The war claimed the lives of countless freedom fighters and civilians, whose bravery and resilience paved the way for a new nation. The liberation struggle also left deep scars, including the atrocities committed by the Pakistani military, which continue to evoke strong emotions. Efforts to bring justice through war crimes tribunals and to preserve the memory of the Liberation War are vital in honouring this legacy. As Bangladesh celebrates another Victory Day, it does so as a nation that has defied expectations and charted its path to

progress. The dreams of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Mukti Bahini have been realised in many ways, with a vibrant democracy, a thriving economy, and a resilient population. However, recent political instability has cast a shadow over Bangladesh's progress. The fall of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, after years of dominance, has left a power vacuum, fueling uncertainty and unrest. Political polarisation has deepened, and concerns over democratic backsliding have surfaced. The status of minorities, particularly Hindus and indigenous groups, remains precarious, with reports of rising communal tensions and targeted violence. Ensuring minority rights and fostering inclusivity will be critical for Bangladesh to maintain its social fabric and democratic principles. The anniversary of Victory Day is a reminder of the enduring spirit of a people who fought for their right to self-determination and emerged victorious against overwhelming odds. It is a celebration of freedom, a tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice, and a pledge to build a future worthy of their dreams. Bangladesh's story, from a war-torn newborn state to a thriving economy, stands as a beacon of hope and inspiration, not just for South Asia but for the world. (The writer is an associate professor; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

G7 FACES CRISES

Madam — The 'Group of Seven' or G7 countries are considered to be the group of the richest countries in the world. But after the Covid pandemic, their economic condition also seems to be almost in shambles. Especially three of those countries can be named here, in which political turmoil has been seen within the last 10 days. Those countries are Germany, the biggest economic power in Europe, France, the third biggest economy there, and the North American country Canada. In France, four prime ministers have been sworn in within the last one year. Emmanuel Macron's government can fall at any time. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz had announced the dismissal of Finance Minister Christian Lindner, citing breach of trust and economic policy differences. Now he himself has lost the vote of confidence. Due to which elections will be held again there in the coming February. On the other hand, Canada's Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, has resigned from her post, citing disagreement with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. She has expressed disagreement on how to respond to the tariff threat of incoming President Donald Trump. Meaning, here too the main reason for instability is 'economic and financial' problems. France has been affected by Europe's energy crisis and high interest rates, which have weakened the country. In 2024, Europe's largest economy will be stuck in recession for the second consecutive year. More and more businesses are under pressure and are suffering from falling sales, high energy costs and taxes, and Germany's overly cumbersome bureaucracy. Starting from 2022, per capita production in Canada has declined in six of the last seven quarters. Unemployment has also increased by a full percentage point compared to last year. Jang Bahadur Singh | Jamshedpur

R Ashwin retires from international cricket



Ravichandran Ashwin, India's second-highest Test wicket-taker (only behind Anil Kumble's 619 wickets), announced his retirement from international cricket at the age of 38. He expressed gratitude to his teammates and the BCCI, highlighting his fulfilling career. While he feels he still has more to offer, he'll focus on club-level cricket. Ashwin concluded his international career with 537 Test wickets, 156 ODI wickets and 72 T20I wickets. His crick-

et journey, from a fringe player in the 2011 World Cup to one of India's greatest match-winners, has been marked by trials, triumphs, and unwavering dedication. Despite overseas challenges and controversies, his innovative approach and analytical mind have solidified his place in cricketing history. The 38-year-old Ashwin, with 537 Test wickets and six centuries, will continue playing franchise cricket, notably for Chennai Super Kings in the next edition of the IPL in 2025. We should not forget that Ashwin is the man who played his cricket all through with cleverness and dignity and decided to retire cleverly and in a dignified manner too. We should not be ungrateful and miss recognising and saluting him for his immense contribution to Indian cricket after Anil Kumble hung up his boots. Love you, champion! Cricket lovers will miss you for sure! Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

has proposed a "Reciprocal Tariff" policy, signalling a new direction in global trade. Criticising the high tariff policies of countries, including India, he highlighted them as a source of inequity. Trump stated that if any country imposes tariffs on American products, the US will respond with equivalent tariffs. He specifically pointed to developing countries like India, which levy high tariffs to protect domestic industries. Using bicycles as an example, he alleged that India imposes over 100 per cent duty on American bicycles, while the US does not charge such high tariffs on Indian products. This policy, claimed to be based on reciprocity and fairness, is likely to promote protectionism, potentially destabilising the global trade system. It raises concerns about increasing trade tensions between India and the US. Higher product prices could add economic burdens on consumers and strain bilateral relations. For India, it is crucial to engage in dialogue with the US administration to maintain trade balance. This tariff

conflict will not be limited to economic impacts; it will also have far-reaching diplomatic and social consequences. R K Jain | Barwani

TABLA MAESTRO'S LEGACY

Madam — Zakir Hussain's music was intertwined with his all-encompassing love for everyone without an iota of bias or prejudice. In fact, it reminds one of a popular Kishore Kumar number, "Pyaar Baantne Chalo" (Keep spreading love), from the 1965 Hindi movie "Hum sab ustaad hain." Apart from his divine renditions on the tabla, what endeared him most to his audiences was the halo of love and humility that surrounded him. In an interview with the BBC, he once said that all his shows were sold out well in advance, not because of him, but because of the power and attraction of music. Avinash Godbole | Dewas

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Vipul Nautiyal: Chandan Mitra's calamity reporter

Whether it was crafting flawless editorial pages or recounting tales of his newsroom days, Vipul Nautiyal's legacy is one of dedication, warmth and passion for his craft

He flaunted the title "calamity reporter" with pride as he vividly narrated the story behind how Dr Chandan Mitra, editor-in-chief of The Pioneer, gave him the name. Known to friends as Nauty (that's how he spelled it) and to juniors as Vipul Sir, or Nauty Sir, I was introduced to him in August 2021, while writing a test for an editorial role at The Pioneer. I hadn't met him before, but had heard things about him — his co-workers respected him, but they feared him even more. It was my first stint in the media and I was nervous.

I was supposed to join his team and work on the Edit and Oped pages. By the time I was almost done with the test, I was looking around wondering who Mr Nautiyal could be. That was when an old-looking fellow, who was humbly dressed and had uncombed hair and a grey beard, looked at me and said: "Cheating kara du"? I laughed it off. This couldn't have been Vipul Nautiyal I had been told about. But then an HR executive arrived and my paper was handed over to him. I was interviewed and



ended up addressing this "old-looking, humbly dressed" fellow as "Vipul Sir" ever since. I learned an important lesson that day. Nevertheless, I was hired. A few weeks of working with him I realised that he was extremely honest towards his job, so much so that he made me question myself. He would reach the office sharp at 2 pm, retouch his already super-organised desk and begin the thinking work — often with a glass in his hand. He was proud of the work he did, he knew he was good. He had an impeccable eye for detail — if it was Vipul Nautiyal's page then it had to be error-free, even if nobody was going to read it, even if he hadn't been paid in months. Headlines were paid even

more attention, they had to be perfectly symmetric — a habit that I picked involuntarily. This was the Vipul effect. He once recounted an incident from his days at The Times of India, when Dr Mitra had asked him to return to The Pioneer. Later, during the exit interview at TOI, when Mr Nautiyal was asked "TOI chhod kar Pioneer kaun jata hai?" (Who leaves TOI to join Pioneer) he replied with lit-up eyes: "Jisko Chandan Mitra bulata hai." He knew how to bring the team up to speed with some flair.

A senior editor at TOI says, "Vipul Sir could beat you in a game of table tennis single-handedly, with his favourite drink in his other hand." Mr Nautiyal often mentioned that he received job offers from almost all leading media houses, except for The Indian Express, for which, he said, he waited for quite some time. In my five months of working with him, I never saw him snap at anybody — unless somebody caught him on the phone during work hours. He was known to be unpredictable at times. But he was there for his colleagues —

those who worked with him will agree. His way of getting his point across was his own. When I had to negotiate my salary while joining TOI — where he had referred me — he told me to ask for a massive raise, saying: "Purse bhaley hi HR ke paas hai, but tu journalist hai, boli tu lagayega" (Even though the purse is with HR, you are a journalist, so you will call the shots). He had more confidence in me than I had in myself. Those who teamed up with him absorbed a great deal of wisdom in all walks of life.

That's how Vipul Nautiyal was. Besides being an exceptional storyteller, he had a song, a sher or an anecdote for almost every occasion. He was a fanboy when it came to Dev Anand. He often wrote an editorial piece on Dev Sahab's birth anniversary. He was proud of the fact that he had seen Guide several times. He would often play Mohammed Rafi songs or Mehdi Hassan ghazals, lower the volume, and write the edit columns.

(The writer is a former staffer of The Pioneer; views are personal)



NEERAJ KUMAR



FIRST COLUMN

SRI LANKA-INDIA:
ON THE SAME PAGEBoth nations reiterate commitment to defence
collaboration and regional stability

KUMARDEEP BANARJEE

India strengthened its ties with its closest maritime neighbor, Sri Lanka, this week, countering the growing influence of China in the island nation. Sri Lanka's President, H.E. Mr. Anura Kumara Disanayaka, made his first bilateral visit to New Delhi following the recent presidential and parliamentary elections. Earlier this year, President Disanayaka had also visited Delhi at a time when Sri Lanka's political future, including the timing of its elections, was still uncertain. The new President came to power riding on the left-leaning party, which is known to have harboured some Anti-Indian sentiments in the past. However, New Delhi chose to bet on the relatively young Marxist leader, hoping for a sense of prudence in future. Disanayaka in the past, has managed to maintain a fine balance in Sri Lanka's bilateral relations with India and China, not trying to get caught in any crossfire.

Meanwhile, while India's military tensions with China have de-escalated in the recent past, it still chooses to be cautious. Special Representatives from India and China also met this week in Beijing, to discuss their mutual bilateral relations. It seems that with the Trump administration back in the Oval Office in January, China wants to de-escalate military tensions with countries it considers as rivals. China is aware that Trump is likely to impose tariffs on many of its exports to the US, and perhaps further tighten the transfer of high-end technology from America. It is acutely aware that, India would not join an economic dialogue unless the overarching military issues are sorted. It is against this background, that Sri Lanka's President's visit to India assumes significance. It may be recalled that China had in the past, sent spy ships



(which it calls maritime research vehicles) to Sri Lankan waters, which have raised many red flags for the Indian security agencies.

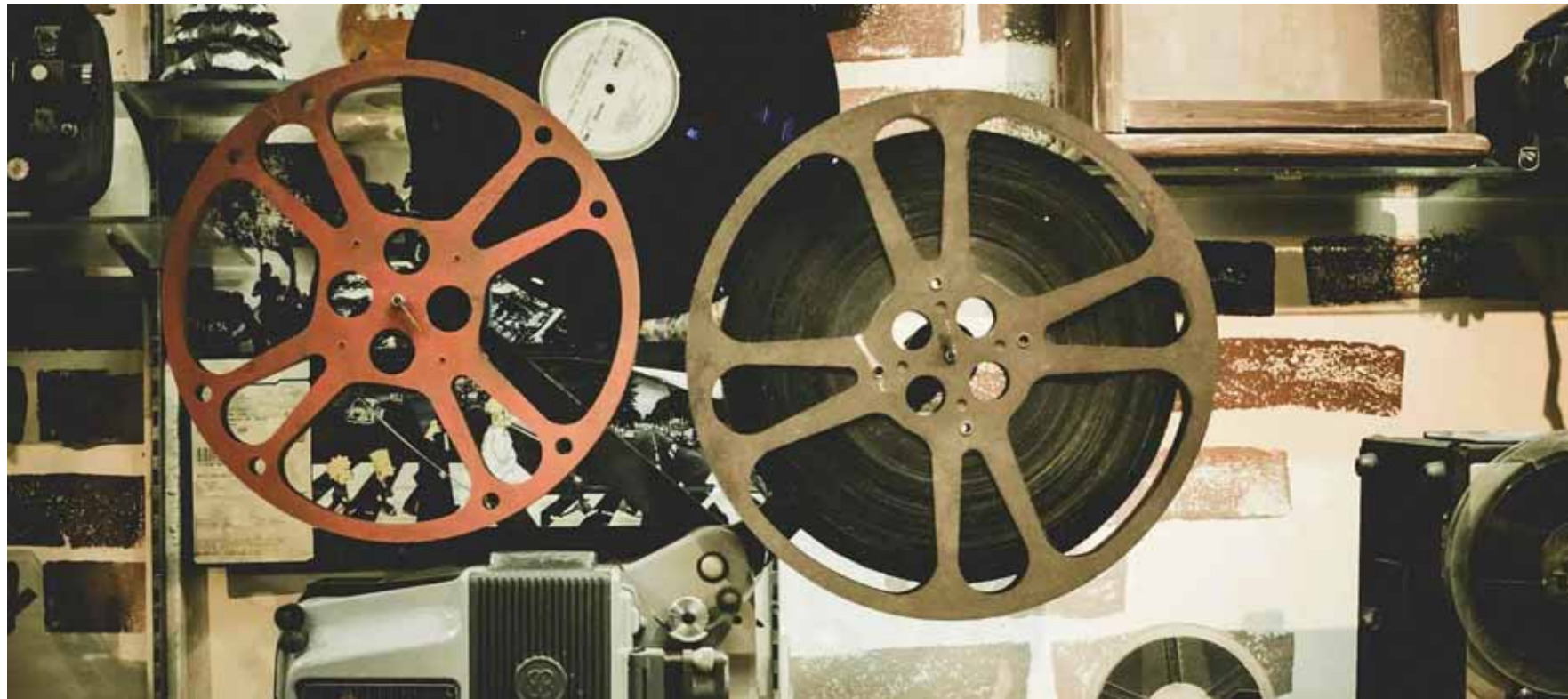
China also controls critical ports in Sri Lanka, which during any military conflict could be used for strategic purposes. Sri Lanka's President is aware of his country's dependence on China to keep its economy afloat, while, also not trying to disturb the deep bilateral partnership with India. It was heartening for policy watchers in India to note that the Sri Lankan President chose Delhi to be his port of call after getting elected and came out with some emphatic statements, regarding not allowing, their national territory to be used for any anti-India activities. The joint statement released after the President and Indian PM's meeting read "Recognising shared security interests of India and Sri Lanka, both leaders acknowledged the importance of regular dialogue based on mutual trust and transparency and giving primacy to each other's security concerns. India is Sri Lanka's closest maritime neighbour. President Disanayaka reiterated Sri Lanka's stated position of not permitting its territory to be used in any manner inimical to the security of India and towards regional stability."

Taking cognisance of India's security concerns the two nations further reiterated to "Explore the possibility of concluding a framework Agreement on Defence Cooperation; Foster cooperation in hydrography; Provision of defence platforms and assets to augment Sri Lanka's defence capabilities; Intensify collaboration through joint exercises, maritime surveillance, and defence dialogue and exchanges; Extend assistance to strengthen capabilities of Sri Lanka on disaster mitigation, relief and rehabilitation, including through training, joint exercises and sharing of best practices; and Enhance capacity building and training for Sri Lankan defence forces and conduct tailor-made training programmes, wherever required." The bedrock of this relationship is India's generous economic support to Sri Lanka without putting it through non-transparent, self-serving infrastructure loans, which has led to the loss of strategic ports for the island nation.

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

The evolution of cinema
through technologyWhether through sound, colour, digital effects, or immersive technology,
filmmakers have always sought to expand the boundaries of what is possible

CHAITYANYA K PRASAD



Beneath the flickering lights of an old projector, cinema was born—a dance of shadows and light, whispering stories into the dark.

From silent dreams projected on silver screens to the roaring worlds of colour and sound, cinema has always been a magician, conjuring entire universes with the stroke of a reel. As technology sprinkled its magic dust over time, the cinematic world transformed, evolving from simple moving pictures into immersive journeys that now wrap us in their digital embrace, where imagination knows no bounds. In the late 19th century, cinema was a purely visual experience. Films like Raja Harishchandra (1913), India's first feature film, relied entirely on visuals, as sound was not yet a part of cinematic storytelling. Globally, the Lumière brothers' early works, such as L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat (1895), left audiences mesmerised.

The technology was simple—manual cameras, mechanical projectors, and natural light. But this early era laid the foundation for the visual storytelling techniques that filmmakers would continue to refine for decades to come. The advent of sound in cinema was a game-changer. Alam Ara (1931) became India's first talkie, marking the beginning of an era where dialogue and music played a crucial role in storytelling. Globally, The Jazz Singer (1927) made similar waves, showcasing the transformative power of synchronized sound. Colour, too, began to seep into cinema's world. While Kisan Kanya (1937) was India's first colour film, it wasn't until Mughal-e-Azam (1960) and Hum Dono (1961) that colour became a truly artistic element, bringing emotional depth and grandeur to the screen.

The partially coloured Mughal-e-Azam in particular stunned audiences, giving the larger-than-life historical drama a visual vibrancy that was previously unimaginable. Ramesh Sippy's Sholay (1975) was a groundbreaking film, being the first Indian movie shot on a 70mm screen. Indian theatres were not initially equipped to accommodate this scale, but the format gave Sholay's action sequences a larger-than-life feel, adding to its epic narrative. The film also introduced enhanced stereophonic sound, a novelty in Indian cin-



THE TECHNOLOGY WAS SIMPLE—MANUAL CAMERAS, MECHANICAL PROJECTORS, AND NATURAL LIGHT. BUT THIS EARLY ERA LAID THE FOUNDATION FOR THE VISUAL STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES THAT FILMMAKERS WOULD CONTINUE TO REFINE FOR DECADES TO COME

ema. Shan (1980) followed, introducing impressive special effects such as explosions, action choreography, and stunt sequences, drawing comparisons to Western films like James Bond, with a blend of spectacle and style that had rarely been seen in India. The onset of digital technology and CGI changed the landscape of Indian cinema in the 2000s. Films like Krishna (2006) and Ra. One (2011) ushered in a new era of superhero films and futuristic themes, using advanced CGI and motion capture. Robot (2010), featuring a humanoid robot protagonist, combined impressive VFX with engaging storytelling, marking a turning point in Indian cinema's relationship with technology. As CGI became increasingly prevalent, Hollywood and Indian cinema both embraced digital effects as a core component of storytelling.

Hollywood's Jurassic Park (1993) and The Matrix (1999) showcased the immense potential of CGI. Indian films like Baahubali (2015-2017) set new standards with their breathtaking visual effects, making Indian cinema a global player in the visual effects arena. R (2022) followed suit, pushing the envelope with dynamic CGI-enhanced action scenes. Cinema is now becoming more immersive than ever. James Cameron's Avatar (2009) brought 3D to the forefront of mainstream cinema, while Indian cinema explored immersive experiences with films like Kaala (2018), which offered a 360-degree VR experience. Technologies like VR and AI are now beginning to merge with traditional filmmaking, pushing the boundaries of storytelling even further. Technological advancements have transformed both the creative and commercial aspects of cinema, allowing films to evolve into multifaceted brands. Innovations like high-definition cameras, VFX, and animation have significantly elevat-

ed the quality of filmmaking, enabling large-scale productions such as RRR and Baahubali to create immersive experiences that attract global audiences.

These technological tools have expanded the branding potential of films, positioning them as not just stories, but as global entertainment products. Furthermore, the media and entertainment sector's growth, particularly in India, reflects this shift, with theatrical revenues reaching an all-time high of INR 120 billion in 2023? The business model of cinema has expanded beyond traditional box-office revenue, thanks to digital platforms like OTT services, which offer new avenues for distribution and monetisation. These platforms provide filmmakers with the opportunity to market their films globally, turning local content into international brands. Films now capitalise on multiple revenue streams, including merchandising, digital rights, and exclusive streaming deals. Additionally, high-end multiplexes have begun focusing on premium cinematic experiences, creating "experience zones" that cater to affluent audiences and further enhance the brand identity of films?

Cinema has also become a significant platform for advertising and brand collaborations. FMCG, e-commerce, and tech companies increasingly use films for product placements and promotions, contributing to the industry's revenue. Meanwhile, Indian films are reaching wider audiences across 160 countries, thanks to advancements in content production and global distribution. This expanded global reach is turning Indian cinema into a formidable international brand, with films frequently topping global streaming charts, further proving that technological advancements are integral to both the branding and business of cinema? Recently released films like

Kalki 2898 AD and Stree 2 have pushed the envelope for Indian cinema by leveraging advanced CGI and innovative storytelling techniques. Kalki 2898 AD embraced futuristic narratives, with its visually rich depiction of a dystopian future made possible through cutting-edge visual effects, similar to global sci-fi films. Stree 2 blended horror, comedy, and CGI to craft a unique, immersive experience, further proving that Indian filmmakers are increasingly adept at balancing narrative depth with technological prowess, placing them on the global stage. From the early days of silent films to today's CGI-driven spectacles, cinema has continuously evolved with technological advancements.

Whether through sound, colour, digital effects, or immersive technology, filmmakers have always sought to expand the boundaries of what's possible. The future of cinema technology promises exciting advancements. Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are set to provide even more immersive storytelling experiences, allowing audiences to interact with cinematic worlds in unprecedented ways. Artificial intelligence (AI) is also emerging in post-production, helping streamline visual effects and editing processes. Additionally, innovations in 3D and holographic projections could redefine how we experience films in theatres and at home. Advances in sound technology, like spatial audio, will make the viewing experience more immersive, ensuring cinema continues to evolve. The cinematic journey, it seems, is far from over—technology is pushing the boundaries further, transforming both the art of storytelling and the audience.

(The writer is a former additional DG, DFF and Festival Director, IFFI; views are personal. Inputs by Zoya Ahmad and Vaishnavi Srinivasan)

Rajasthan's Golden Horizon: From cultural marvel to investment powerhouse

With the success of 'Rising Rajasthan Investment Summit 2024,' the state is poised for an economic transformation

Schandi ro aasman - translates to "Where the earth is made of gold and the sky is built with silver." This cherished folk song beautifully captures the essence of Rajasthan's Thar Desert. Today, these words remain as relevant as ever, reflecting the state's unique charm and its emergence as a hub of global investment opportunities. Rajasthan, India's largest state, is rich in minerals, endowed with vast solar and wind energy resources, and brimming with potential for investors worldwide.

The Rajasthan Government has successfully hosted the 'Rising Rajasthan Investment Summit 2024' in Jaipur this week. Throughout the event,



MOHIT TANTIA

memorandums of understanding (MOUs) totalling over Rs 35 lakh crore were signed, highlighting the immense investment potential of the state. Actually, very few places can match Rajasthan's allure. It boasts nine UNESCO World Heritage Sites, iconic palaces and forts, 320 sunny days a year, powerful winds, and expansive land. Combined with excellent law

and order and robust rail connectivity, these factors place Rajasthan in a league of its own as a destination for investment. Currently, the state is undergoing an economic transformation. The government aims to propel Rajasthan's economy from \$180 billion to \$350 billion by enhancing the Ease of Doing Business and creating employment opportunities for the youth.

Over the next five years, the administration seeks to generate one million jobs across private and public sectors, with a focus on attracting significant investments. Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma envisions Rajasthan as a pivotal player in India's economic growth. His administration is fostering a

pro-business environment across industries, recognising that Rajasthan's development is integral to achieving the vision of a "Developed India" by 2047. Rajasthan's rich natural resources, skilled workforce, and outstanding connectivity make it a magnet for investments.

Over 58 per cent of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC) and 39 per cent of the Dedicated Freight Corridor (DFC) pass through the state. This infrastructure connects Rajasthan to domestic and export markets, while its proximity to northern states and western ports ensures seamless trade access. With the third-largest national highway network and second-largest rail network in India, along with



nine inland container depots, seven airports, and an air cargo complex, Rajasthan is a logistical powerhouse. Rajasthan's investment prospects span diverse sectors: petroleum infrastructure, food processing, education, chemicals, electronic systems, automotive, electric vehicles, and renewable

energy. Traditional industries like tourism, and emerging fields like startups, also offer immense potential.

For instance, in agriculture and agro-processing, Rajasthan is a top producer of mustard, millet, guar gum, fenugreek, Isabgol, and medicinal crops. The sector contributed 29 per cent to the state's Gross State Value Added (GSVA) in 2022-23. The state also ranks second in livestock population and is a leader in spices, organic farming, and coarse wool. With these advantages, the agriculture sector presents vast opportunities in agri-food parks, warehousing, and cold chain facilities.

Rajasthan's journey from a

cultural and historical treasure to a thriving investment hub reflects its unparalleled potential and forward-looking vision. The state's abundant natural resources, excellent infrastructure, and strategic location make it an ideal destination for investors across various sectors, from renewable energy and agriculture to manufacturing and technology. With an ambitious economic transformation underway, Rajasthan's government is committed to creating a pro-business environment that will not only attract global investments but also create employment opportunities for its youth.

As the state continues to capitalise on its diverse strengths, the "Rising

Rajasthan" initiative stands as a testament to its growing prominence on the global stage.

The government's efforts, backed by strategic partnerships and forward-thinking policies, position Rajasthan as a key player in India's economic future, driving growth, prosperity, and development.

The initiative seeks to bolster Rajasthan's industries, create jobs, and amplify its economic potential, ensuring the timeless folk song "Some ri dharti jathe-ar chandi ro aasman" resonates on a global stage.

(The writer is Executive Member, National Institute for Locomotor Disabilities, Kolkata. Views expressed are personal)

Israeli airstrikes hit Yemen's capital and port city

AP ■ DUBAI

A series of intense Israeli airstrikes shook Yemen's rebel-held capital and a port city early Thursday and killed at least nine people, officials said, shortly after a Houthi missile targeted central Israel. Thursday's strikes risk further escalating conflict with the Iranian-backed Houthis, whose attacks on the Red Sea corridor have drastically impacted global shipping. The rebels have so far avoided the same level of intense military strikes that have targeted Palestinian militant group Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah, fellow members of Tehran's self-described "Axis of Resistance." Israel's military said that it conducted two waves of strikes in a pre-planned operation that began early Thursday and involved 14 fighter jets. The military said the first wave of strikes targeted Houthi infrastructure at the ports of Hodeida, Salif and the Ras Isa oil terminal on the Red Sea. Then, in a second wave of strikes, the military said its fighter jets targeted Houthi energy infrastructure in Sanaa. The Houthi-controlled satellite channel al-Masirah said that some of the strikes targeted power stations in the capital, posting videos of flames engulfing one structure, as civil defense workers doused it in water, trying to extinguish the fire. The channel, citing its correspondent in the port city of Hodeida, said that at least seven people had been killed at Salif, while another two had been killed at the Ras Isa oil terminal. Others suffered wounds at the Hodeida port as well, it said. An Israeli military statement offered no damage assessment. Rear Adm Daniel Hagari, an Israeli military spokesman, said the strikes hit energy and port infrastructure, which he alleged

the rebels "have been using in ways that effectively contributed to their military action." "I suggest the leaders of the Houthis to see, to understand and remember: Whoever raises a hand against the state of Israel, his hand will be cut off, whoever harms us — will be harmed sevenfold," Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said. Rebel-held Hodeida, about 145 kilometres southwest of Sanaa, has been key for food shipments into Yemen as its decade-long war has gone on. There's also longstanding suspicion that weapons from Iran have been transferred through the port. The strikes happened just after Israel's military said that its air force intercepted a missile launched from Yemen before it entered the country's territory. The waves of strikes on Yemen early Thursday weren't a direct response to the missile hit, said a military official, but rather a preplanned response to months of Houthi aggression. Israel's fighter jets were already in the air when the missile was launched. "Rocket and missile sirens were sounded following the possibility of falling debris from the interception," the Israeli military said. Sirens sounded near Tel Aviv and the surrounding areas, and a large explosion was heard overhead at the time. In Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv, a large piece of shrapnel from the missile collapsed a school building there, without causing any injuries. The military official said that the Houthis have fired more than 200 missiles and UAVs, or unmanned aerial vehicles, at Israel since October 7, 2023. Brig Gen Yahya Saree, a Houthi military spokesman, claimed the attack hours later in a pre-recorded video statement, saying the rebels fired two of its "Palestine" ballistic missiles at Israel.

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'Israel's restriction of water supply in Gaza amounts to acts of genocide'

AP ■ NEW YORK

Human Rights Watch on Thursday accused Israel of causing the deaths of thousands of Palestinians by systematically restricting and targeting Gaza's water supply in a campaign that amounted to "acts of genocide." The rights group was the latest among a growing number of critics to accuse Israel of genocidal acts in its war in Gaza. Israel vehemently denies the allegations, saying its war is directed at Hamas militants, not Gaza's civilians. In Thursday's report, HRW alleged that countless infants, children and adults have died from malnutrition, dehydration and illness as a result of actions by Israeli authorities over more than a year of war to deliberately cut the flow of water and electricity to Gaza, destroy infrastructure and prevent the distribution of critical supplies. "As a state policy, these acts constitute a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population. Israeli officials are therefore committing the crime against humanity of extermination," the New York-based group said. The rights group said that the "pattern of conduct" outlined in its report and statements from Israeli officials "may indicate" genocidal intent, but it did not come down definitively on one side. Under international law, proving intent is key in concluding whether the crime of genocide has been committed. Israel, founded as a refuge for Jews in the wake of the Nazi Holocaust, strenuously denies such allegations. It says Hamas is responsible for the destruction in Gaza because the group hides and operates in schools, hospitals and residential areas. It says the October 2023 Hamas attack that triggered the war — the deadliest attack on Jews since the Holocaust — amounts to genocide. "Human Rights Watch is once more spreading

its blood libels in order to promote its anti-Israel propaganda," Israel's Foreign Ministry said. It claimed Israel has worked to facilitate the flow of water and humanitarian aid into Gaza throughout the war. "Israel will continue to ensure humanitarian aid enters Gaza, in full compliance with international law," the statement said. The new report by Human Rights Watch outlined what the organisation described as an extended, methodical campaign by Israeli officials to deprive Palestinians in Gaza of water. That has drastically reduced the water supply in Gaza, from about 83 litres per person each day before the war began to between two and nine litres in the months since, the human rights group says. The World Health Organisation says people require 50 to 100 litres per day to meet basic needs and keep sickness in check. Human Rights Watch said Israeli forces deliberately razed

the solar panels that powered four of Gaza's six wastewater treatment plants and destroyed a key reservoir. The group alleged Israel also cut off electricity required to run desalination plants and other infrastructure and restricted fuel for backup generators. When the International Court of Justice issued orders in January that Israel provide Palestinians with basic services and assistance, officials ignored them, the group alleged. Human Rights Watch said its findings were based on interviews with more than 60 Palestinians, accounts from utility employees, doctors and other healthcare workers and aid workers, and analysis of satellite images, photos and video. "Doctors and nurses told Human Rights Watch that they had seen numerous infants, children, and adults die from a combination of malnutrition, dehydration, and disease," the group said.

Wisconsin school shooter had two guns, got texts from attack plot suspect

Madison (AP): The shooter who killed a student and teacher at a religious school in Wisconsin brought two guns to the school and was in contact with a man in California who authorities say was planning to attack a government building, according to authorities and court documents that became public Wednesday. Police were still investigating why the 15-year-old student at Abundant Life Christian School in Madison shot and killed a fellow student and teacher on Monday before shooting herself, Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes said. Two other students who were shot remained in critical condition on Wednesday. "We may never know what she was thinking that day, but we'll do our best to try to add or give as much information to our public as possible," Barnes said. A California judge, meanwhile, issued a restraining order Tuesday under California's gun red flag law against a 20-year-old Carlsbad man. The order requires the man to turn his guns and ammunition into police within 48 hours unless an officer asks for them sooner because he poses an immediate danger to himself and others. According to the order, the man told FBI agents that he had been messaging Natalie Rupnow, the Wisconsin shooter, about attacking a government building with a gun and explosives. The order doesn't say what building he had targeted or when he planned to launch his attack. It also doesn't detail his interactions with Rupnow except to state that the man was plotting a mass shooting with her. The student who was killed in Monday's school shooting was identified in an obituary released Wednesday as Rubi Patricia Vergara, 14, of Madison. She was a freshman at the school and "an avid reader, loved art, singing and playing keyboard in the family worship band," according to the obituary.

Gisele Pelicot speaks after ex-husband found guilty of rapes, sentenced to 20 yrs in France

AP ■ AVIGNON

Gisele Pelicot said after 51 men were all found guilty Thursday in the drugging-and-rape trial that turned her into a feminist hero that the ordeal had been "very difficult" and expressed support for other victims of sexual violence. "We share the same fight," Gisele Pelicot, 72, said in her first words after the court in the southern French city of Avignon handed down prison sentences ranging from three to 20 years in the shocking case that stunned France and spurred a national reckoning about the blight of rape culture. Gisele Pelicot — whose courage and stoicism have turned her into an internationally recognised figure and an icon for many women — said she was thinking of her grandchildren after enduring more than three months of court hearings that dealt with the nearly decade of rapes and

other abuse inflicted on her by her now ex-husband and his accomplices. "It's also for them that I led this fight," she said of her grandchildren. The court sentenced her ex-husband, Dominique Pelicot, to 20 years in prison for drugging and raping her and allowing other men to rape her while she was unconscious. The sentence was the maximum possible under French law. He was declared guilty of all charges against him. At age 72, it could mean that he spends the rest of his life in prison. He won't be eligible to ask for early release until at least two-thirds of the sentence has been served. Roger Arata, the lead judge of the court in the southern French city Avignon, told Pelicot to stand for the sentencing. After it was delivered, he sat back down and cried. Arata read out verdicts one after the other against Pelicot

and the 50 other men tried in the case. "You are therefore declared guilty of aggravated rape on the person of Gisele Pelicot," the judge said as he worked his way through names on the long list of defendants. Gisele Pelicot was seated on one side of the courtroom, facing the defendants and sometimes nodding her head as verdicts were announced. Delivering the guilty verdicts and sentences took Arata just over an hour. Dominique Pelicot's lawyer, Beatrice Zavarro, said that she would weigh a possible appeal, but also expressed hope that Gisele Pelicot would find solace in the court's rulings. "I wanted Mrs Pelicot to be able to emerge from these hearings in peace, and I think that the verdicts will contribute to this relief for Mrs Pelicot," she said. Of the 50 accused of rape, just one was acquitted but was found guilty of aggravated sexual assault.

Another man was also found guilty on the sexual assault charge that he was tried for — meaning all 51 of the defendants were found guilty in one way or another. In a side room where defendants' family members watched the proceedings on television screens, some burst into tears and gasped as the sentences were revealed. Protesters gathered outside the courthouse followed the proceedings on their phones. Some read out the verdicts and applauded as they were announced inside. Some were carrying oranges as symbolic gifts for the defendants heading to prison. Prosecutors had asked that Dominique Pelicot get the maximum penalty of 20 years and for sentences of 10 to 18 years for the others tried for rape. But the court was more lenient than prosecutors had hoped, with many sentenced to less than a decade in prison.

Macron in Mayotte to survey Cyclone Chido damage

Mamouzdou (AP): France's President Emmanuel Macron arrived Thursday to the Indian Ocean archipelago of Mayotte to survey the devastation that Cyclone Chido wrought across the French territory as thousands of people tried cope without the bare essentials such as water or electricity. "Mayotte is demolished," an airport security agent told Macron as soon as he stepped of the plane. The security agent, Assane Haloï, said small children are without water or electricity and have nowhere to go because "everything is demolished." "There's no roof, there's nothing. No water, no food, no electricity. We can't even shelter, we are all wet with our children covering ourselves with whatever we have so that we can sleep," she said, asking for emergency aid. Macron went on an helicopter for an aerial appraisal of the damage. He then headed to the hospital in Mamouzdou, Mayotte's



A boy stands amidst debris in the Kaweni slum on the outskirts of Mamouzdou in the French Indian Ocean island of Mayotte, Thursday, after Cyclone Chido. AP/PTI

capital, to meet with medical staff and patients. He will then visit a destroyed neighbourhood. French authorities said at least 31 people have died and more than 1,500 people were injured, more than 200 critically. But it's feared hundreds or even thousands of people have died after the strongest cyclone in nearly a century ripped through the French territory of Mayotte off the coast of Africa on Saturday.

The nation's debt limit expires in 2025 and Trump appears to want the issue off the table before he returns to the White House, a reasonable idea but one that typically is tough to negotiate. The last House speaker, Kevin McCarthy, worked for months with President Joe Biden to raise the debt limit. Even though they struck a bipartisan deal that cut spending in exchange for additional borrowing capacity, House Republicans said it did not go far enough, and it ended up costing McCarthy his job. Now, Trump is looking for Johnson to pass a debt ceiling extension some 48 hours before a partial government shutdown. Meanwhile, the bipartisan package that Trump rejected extended existing government programmes and services at their current operating levels for a few more months, through March 14, 2025.

Trump's demands derail govt funding plan ahead of shutdown

AP ■ WASHINGTON

President-elect Donald Trump abruptly rejected a bipartisan plan on Wednesday to prevent a Christmastime government shutdown, instead telling House Speaker Mike Johnson and Republicans to essentially renegotiate — days before a deadline when federal funding runs out. Trump's sudden entrance into the debate and new demands sent Congress spiralling as lawmakers are trying to wrap up work and head home for the holidays. It leaves Johnson scrambling to engineer a new plan before Friday's deadline to keep government open. "Republicans must GET SMART and TOUGH," Trump and Vice President-elect JD Vance said in a statement. The president-elect made an almost unrealistic proposal that combined some continuation of government funds along with a much more controversial provision to raise

the nation's debt limit — something his own party routinely rejects. "Anything else is a betrayal of our country," they wrote. Democrats decried the GOP revolt over the stopgap measure, which would have also provided some USD 100.4 billion in disaster aid to states hammered by Hurricanes Helene and Milton and other natural disasters. "House Republicans have been ordered to shut down the government and hurt everyday Americans all across this country," said House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries. Jeffries said "an agreement is an agreement," and by backing out of it, "the House Republicans "will now own any harm that is visited upon the American people." Already, the massive 1,500-page bill was on the verge of collapse, as hard right conservatives rejected the increased spending, egged on by Trump's billionaire ally Elon Musk who



rejected the plan almost as soon as it was released late on Tuesday night. Rank-and-file lawmakers complained about the extras, which included their first pay-raises in more than a decade — a shock after one of the most unproductive chaotic sessions in modern times. Even the addition of much-needed disaster aid, some USD

100.4 billion in the aftermath of hurricanes and other natural calamities that ravaged states this year, plus USD 10 billion in economic assistance for farmers failed to win over the budget-slashing GOP. A number of Republicans had been waiting for Trump to signal whether they should vote yes or no. "This should not pass," Musk posted on his social media site X in the wee hours of Wednesday. One lawmaker said office phone lines were flooded with calls from constituents. "My phone was ringing off the hook," said Rep. Andy Barr, R-Ky. "The people who elected us are listening to Elon Musk." The outcome comes as no surprise for Johnson, who like other Republican House speakers before him, has been unable to convince his majority to go along with the routine needs of federal government operations, which they would prefer to slash.

It all shows just how hard it will be for Republicans next year, as they seize control of the House, Senate and White House, to unify and lead the nation. And it underscores how much Johnson and the GOP leaders must depend on Trump's blessing to see any legislative package over the finish line. Musk, who is heading Trump's new Department of Government Efficiency, warned that "Any member of the House or Senate who votes for this outrageous spending bill deserves to be voted out in 2 years!" It is not an idle threat coming from Musk, the world's richest man, who helped bankroll Trump's victory and can easily use his America PAC to make or break political careers. Democratic Rep. Jamie Raskin of Maryland said this is the problem with "an oligarchy, a handful of wealthy people run everything and everyone is supposed to live in fear of them."

Senators from both parties were watching from across the Capitol with dismay. "Is this going to be the norm? Is this going to be how we operate?" said Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., putting the blame on Johnson. Democrats, who negotiated the final product with Johnson and Senate GOP leadership, will be expected to provide enough support to help ensure passage, as is often the case on big, bipartisan bills. "Republicans need to stop playing politics," said White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre. However, Trump's new demands on the debt limit pose a daunting test for Johnson, who has worked hard to stay close to the president-elect — even texting with Musk and DOGE co-chair Vivek Ramaswamy — only to have him turn against his hard-fought plan. Trump posted later that he was insisting on the debt ceiling: "I

Indian, US officials meet to chart next steps in space collaboration

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Officials from India and the United States have charted next steps in space collaboration, including human spaceflight, joint space exploration and a commitment to facilitating commercial partnerships between space companies to advance the shared interests in the growing space economy, the White House said on Wednesday. A meeting in this regard was held in Houston on December 17. The participants in the meeting were US Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer, Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and Indian Ambassador to the United States Vinay Kwatra. "Following President (Joe)

Biden and Prime Minister (Narendra) Modi's June 2023 commitment to work together to 'reach new frontiers across all sectors of space cooperation' and India's signing of the Artemis Accords, our two nations reached an inflection point on collaboration across civil, security and commercial space sectors," the White House said in a fact-sheet. "This includes human spaceflight, joint space exploration and a commitment to facilitating commercial partnerships between US and Indian space companies to advance our shared interests in the growing space economy," it said. As part of their visit to Houston, Finer and Campbell met with representatives from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA),

Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and space industry leaders to identify new opportunities to further strengthen the two countries' burgeoning space partnership. They also reflected on the accomplishments of the past few months and charted next steps to take the India-US partnership to the next level, including selecting two ISRO astronauts to train at the NASA's Johnson Space Centre for the first-ever joint effort between American and Indian astronauts at the International Space Station, with Axiom Space serving as the provider of the mission. The launch of the Axiom-4 mission as soon as spring 2025 will mark a significant milestone in the US-India space partnership and space exploration.

UK PM hosts Indian business chiefs to boost investments

PTI ■ LONDON

Prime Minister Keir Starmer hosted a delegation of 13 Indian companies at 10 Downing Street in London on what the British government described as a "curated visit" to enhance the bilateral partnership and boost investment flows. The visit on Wednesday follows Starmer's meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the G20 Summit last month, when the leaders committed to take forward an "ambitious" UK-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with collaboration opportunities on economic growth, security and defence, technology, climate, health, and education. According to a readout from the British High Commission in New Delhi, the Indian investors and CEOs also met



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer, left, shakes hands with the Sultan of Brunei Hajji Hassanall Bolkhiah ahead of a meeting at 10 Downing Street, London, Thursday. AP/PTI

senior Cabinet ministers to discuss job creation and growth opportunities under a proposed India-UK trade deal after Starmer had confirmed the launch of Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations early in the new year. "India is a vital partner for the UK and we have huge ambition to unlock more opportunities together, building on our already strong relationship," said Starmer, with reference to the business meeting. "I'm delighted to welcome some of India's most senior business leaders to Downing Street and to outline the UK's ambitious focus on economic growth and innovation," he said. The delegation, supported by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), discussed deepening ties with Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves and Foreign Secretary David Lammy. Meanwhile, Business

and Trade Secretary Jonathan Reynolds and minister for trade policy Douglas Alexander discussed bilateral trade, worth GBP 42 billion a year and supporting over 600,000 jobs across both economies as per UK government statistics. "As one of the most globally connected economies in the G20, the UK provides unmatched opportunities for Indian businesses to thrive. India already accounts for the second highest number of FDI projects into the UK, and this government is committed to deepening our trade and investment links with India even further," said Reynolds. "Boosting investment is a mission at the heart of this government. It was great to hear firsthand from Indian business leaders on why so many of them have given us a vote of confidence and chosen to invest here," he said.

India's EV market to reach ₹20 Lakh Crore, to create five Crore jobs by 2030

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Union minister Nitin Gadkari on Thursday said the Indian electric vehicle market potential is likely to touch Rs 20 lakh crore and will create around 5 crore jobs across the entire EV ecosystem by 2030. Addressing the 8th Catalyst Conference on Sustainability of E-Vehicle Industry - Evexpo 2024, Gadkari said estimated electric vehicles finance market size will be around Rs 4 lakh crore by 2030. "The Indian electric vehicles market potential is of Rs 20 lakh crore by 2030, creating five crore jobs across the entire EV ecosystem," he said. The road transport and highways minister said 40 per cent of air pollution in India is



because of the transport sector. "We import fossil fuels worth Rs 22 lakh crore, that is a big economic challenge. And this import of fossil fuels is creating a lot of problems in

our country," Gadkari said. According to Gadkari, the government is concentrating on green energy as 44 per cent of India's power basket is solar power. "We are giving highest priority for development of

our hydro power, then solar power, green power, particularly from biomass. And now solar power is one of the important sources for all of us," he said. The minister pointed out that

India is facing shortages of electric buses. "Our country requires one lakh electric buses but our capacity is 50,000 buses. I request all of you that this is the appropriate time that you can expand your factory," he said. Gadkari asked electric vehicle manufacturers not to compromise with the quality. He said the size of India's automobile industry was Rs 7 lakh crore when he took charge as transport minister in 2014. "Today it (the size of the automobile sector) is Rs 22 lakh crore. Our number is third in the world. We just surpassed Japan," he said. The size of the USA's automobile industry is Rs 78 lakh crore, followed by China (Rs 47 lakh crore) and India (Rs 22 lakh crore).

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari urges sugar industry to diversify into ethanol, green hydrogen

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Road, Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari on Thursday called upon the sugar industry to explore multiple avenues for diversification, including ethanol-diesel blending and green hydrogen production. Addressing the annual general meeting of the Indian Sugar and Bio-Energy Manufacturers Association (ISMA) virtually, the minister emphasised the need for setting up ethanol and CNG pumps, including through private sector participation. There is a huge potential for flex engines, ethanol-based engines, and bioCNG as alternatives to fossil fuels. Five automakers including Tata's, Suzuki, and Toyota are set to launch flex engine fuel cars in the market, he said and urged the tractor makers to start manufacturing tractors on alternative fuels. The minister suggested



examining possibilities of exporting ethanol to neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka to expand market opportunities. Bio-bitumen production using lignin and biomass sources, along with green hydrogen generation from sugar industry infrastructure, were highlighted as potential areas for expansion. He emphasised the potential of green hydrogen as an alternative fuel source and suggested using existing infrastructure in the sugar and ethanol industries to

produce green hydrogen. "I know that making sugar is not an attractive job, but at the same time, because of ethanol, CNG, hydrogen and other by-products, we can increase the productivity and profitability in the industry," he said. "The industry must focus on increasing sugarcane productivity through modern techniques like nano-fertilizers and drone spraying," the minister said. The government will also consider the industry's request for sugar exports and minimum selling price (MSP), the minister said.

Sebi introduces timelines for NFO fund deployment, eases AMC employee interest alignment rules

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Markets regulator Sebi has decided to introduce timelines for deploying funds raised through New Fund Offers (NFOs) by asset management companies (AMCs) and relaxed regulatory framework regarding the alignment of AMC employees' interests with those of unitholders. Additionally, the regulator has mandated disclosure of stress testing for all mutual fund schemes to provide greater transparency to investors.



These proposals, approved Wednesday, aimed at enhancing operational

flexibility for mutual funds while ensuring greater accountability and trust among investors. Regarding deployment timelines, Sebi said that fund managers must deploy funds collected during an NFO as per the specified asset allocation of the scheme, typically within 30 days. If funds are not deployed within the specified timeline, investors will have the option to exit the scheme without paying an exit load, through regulator said in a statement. The framework discourages

AMCs from collecting excess funds during NFOs, as investors can invest in open-ended schemes later at the prevailing Net Asset Value (NAV). "The new framework is aimed at encouraging AMCs to collect only as many funds in NFOs as can be deployed in a reasonable period of time (i.e. Ordinarily 30 days) since in the open-ended funds investors always have the option to enter the scheme at a later date at the prevailing NAV," Sebi said. "The framework provides an option to investors to

exit the scheme without exit load in case the fund manager is unable to deploy the fund within the specified timeline," it added. To address the issue of possible mis-selling in NFOs, for switch transactions, the distributor shall be entitled to the lower of the two commissions offered under the two schemes of the switch transaction, Sebi said. To facilitate ease of doing business for asset management companies' employees, Sebi has decided to relax the regulatory

framework pertaining to the 'Alignment of interest of AMC employees' with unitholders. Under this, the regulator has decided to reduce the minimum investment amount required for designated employees, reduce the frequency of disclosures related to compliance relaxed requirements for employees managing liquid funds and simplified redemption norms. Additionally, Sebi said that employees who resign will now have a reduced lock-in period for their

investments. The regulator has empowered the committee to oversee compliance by designated employees. Sandeep Bagla, CEO, TRUST MF, said that Sebi having a relook at the 'Skin in the Game' regulation is a welcome step in the right direction. The MF industry is expanding fast and needs to retain quality professionals to serve and safeguard the interests of unit holders. One needs to examine the relevance, context and effectiveness of regulations regularly," he added.

Flyzy partners with Adani Digital Labs to enhance dutyfree, Pranaam Service

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Flyzy on Wednesday announced a partnership with Adani Digital Labs, a subsidiary of the Adani Group. This strategic collaboration will enable Flyzy customers to conveniently purchase duty-free items and avail Adani Pranaam services directly through the Flyzy's dashboard. The integration is now live, offering Flyzy users the ease of accessing these premium Adani services from their devices. The signature Pranaam meet and greet services by Adani Digital Labs are designed to ensure a seamless experience, addressing key pain points for modern travellers. "We at Flyzy are always thinking of solutions that will streamline travel experience for our users. This partnership with Adani Digital Labs is also a step in that direction. Airport travel is all about convenience today and not many companies address the pain points of the travellers. By integrating Adani services with Flyzy dashboard we aim to make airport travel smoother for millions of our users," said Deepak Meena, Co-founder& CEO, Flyzy. Flyzy has disrupted the traditional B2B travel industry by redefining travel operations for its clients by ensuring transparency, profitability, and scalability.

Rupee falls 14 paise to close at all-time low of 85.08 against US dollar



PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee dropped 14 paise and breached the crucial 85 level to close at an all-time low of 85.08 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, as a hawkish stance from the US

Federal Reserve sparked a broad dollar rally. Forex traders said the Indian rupee breached the 85-mark for the first time and fell to a new record low on Thursday, as the US Federal Reserve adjusted its projections for 2025, signalling a more cautious monetary policy stance, pressuring emerging market currencies, including the Indian rupee. The US Federal Reserve cut interest rates by 25-bps to 4.5 per cent, in line with estimates. However, it signalled only two rate cuts in 2025 from its previous expectations of four rate cuts.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened on a weak note and breached the crucial 85.00 level against the greenback. It fell further to an all-time low of 85.08 against the American currency, registering a fall of 14 paise over its previous close, as dollar demand from importers, foreign fund outflows and a muted trend in domestic equities further dented investor sentiments. On Wednesday, the rupee dropped 3 paise to close at an all-time low of 84.94 against the US dollar. "We expect the rupee to trade with a negative bias on global equities following a

hawkish Fed and a strong dollar. Concerns over slowdown in the economy may further weigh on the rupee," said Anuj Choudhary - Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan. Choudhary further noted that any intervention by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) may also support the rupee. "Traders may take cues from final GDP, weekly unemployment claims, and existing home sales data from the US, USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of 84.9 to 85.25," he said. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the

greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading lower by 0.13 per cent at 107.88. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, fell 0.05 per cent to USD 73.35 per barrel in futures trade. In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex closed 964.15 points, or 1.20 per cent, down at 79,218.05 points, while Nifty settled down 247.15 points, or 1.02 per cent to 23,951.70 points. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded Rs 1,316.81 crore in the capital markets on net basis on Wednesday, according to exchange data.

Air India places order for 34 trainer aircraft

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Air India has placed an order for 34 trainer aircraft, including 31 single engine planes, for its flying training organisation in Maharashtra that is expected to come up by the second half of 2025. The order includes 31 single-engine aircraft from piper aircraft in the US and three twin-engine planes from Austria-based Diamond Aircraft, the airline said in a release on Thursday. The Flying Training Organisation (FTO) is being

set up at Belora airport in Amravati, Maharashtra. It is expected to be operational by the second half of next year post-regulatory approvals. Sunil Bhaskaran, Director of Air India's Aviation Academy, said the FTO will help in building a self-reliant ecosystem of qualified pilots for both Air India and the country's aviation industry. The Tata Group-owned airline has opened its new Aviation Training Academy in Gurugram, Haryana. Air India group is expanding its fleet and network.

Indian Oil Corporation to invest over ₹21,000 Crore in Bihar refinery expansion

PTI ■ PATNA



Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) - the nation's top oil firm - will invest over Rs 21,000 crore to expand the Barauni refinery in Bihar as well as in setting up a city gas distribution network across the state, a senior executive said on Thursday. IOC is expanding its Barauni refinery to 9 million tonnes per annum from current 6 million tonnes together with a petrochemical plant at a cost of about Rs 16,000 crore and invest another Rs 5,600 crore in setting up network to retail CNG to automobiles and piped cooking gas to households and industries in 27 cities of

Bihar, company Executive Director Suman Kumar said while speaking at the Bihar Business Connect 2024 investor summit here. "IOC is the oldest investor in Bihar, setting up the Barauni refinery in 1964.

The initial capacity was 3 million tonnes per annum which was later expanded to 6 million tonnes. Now we are expanding the capacity from 6 million tonnes to 9 million tonnes per annum.

Alongside, a 200,000 tonnes polypropylene is also being set up," he said. Polypropylene will be the raw material for the plastic industry. The expansion and PP plant is scheduled to be commissioned by 2025-end. Besides, IOC is also investing Rs 5,600 crore in setting up city gas distribution (CGD) network in 27 districts of Bihar, he said. Previously, the company, along with partners, had spent Rs 9,512 crore in revival of the Barauni fertiliser plant, starting urea production in October 2022. The plant was part of a government initiative to revive closed urea units and

increase the availability of domestically produced urea. The investments are part of the IOC's aim to become a USD 1 trillion company by 2047, he said. The USD 110 billion oil major has drawn up an aggressive capital expansion plan, proposing to invest more than Rs 2 lakh crore through the decade to expand refining capacity, petrochemical integration, allied infrastructure and renewable energy assets. With India's economy on the rise, the energy needs of the country are growing exponentially. As 'The Energy of India', the firm aims to become the nation's lead energiser, fulfilling 12.5 per cent

(1/8th) of India's energy needs by 2050, he said. Besides Barauni, the state-run refiner is expanding the Panipat Refinery from 15 million tonnes to 25 million tonnes a year and the Gujarat refinery from 13.7 million tonnes to 18 million tonnes, along with its integration to lube and petrochemical production units. While the first phase of petchem expansions at Panipat in Haryana and Paradip in Odisha is complete, the one at Gujarat refinery is scheduled for commissioning in 2024-25. Alongside, it is pursuing green initiatives, including hydrogen mobility, hydrogen transportation,

biofuels, electric mobility, solar cooktops, and minimising water footprint. Oil demand in India, the world's third-largest energy consumer, is projected to rise from 5.4 million barrels per day (bpd) in 2023 to 9.3 million bpd by 2040. Fulfilling this rising demand will require augmenting the country's refining capacity progressively, from the current 256.8 million tonnes per annum to 450 million tonnes. In addition, the country is set to add 50 GW of renewable energy capacity annually, aiming to achieve 500 gigawatts (GW) of installed renewable capacity by 2030.

Nearly half of Indian international travellers made last-minute flight bookings in 2024: report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The year 2024 witnessed a rise in spontaneous travel among Indian international travellers, with nearly half of them making last-minute plans, barely less than a week before their departure, reveals a new report. The travel report, conducted by travel-banking fintech platform Niyoo, highlights the evolving mindset of Indian travellers, who are embracing flexibility, prioritising experiences, and benefiting from streamlined travel processes. "Forty eight percent of international flight



bookings by Indians this year were made just 0-7 days before travel. This trend was supported by easier travel access, with 58

countries offering visa-free or visa-on-arrival options to Indian passport holders," reads the report findings. While many travellers

booked international flights at short notice, the report said "30 per cent of visa applications" were submitted 16-30 days before travel, implying a certain degree of preparation. Dubai, which according to the report was by far the most preferred destination for Indian travellers, attracted "45 per cent" of holidaymakers with its luxurious shopping and entertainment. The list was followed by Vietnam, known for its culture and natural beauty, which drew 15 per cent travellers. Smaller number of travellers, accounting for one per cent each, chose Oman and Japan. Pop culture also played a

significant influence on the travel choices of Indians this year. For instance, web series like "Emily in Paris" inspired many Indian women to visit France, with 30 per cent Indians choosing France as their destination, followed by the UK (29 per cent) and Singapore (26 per cent). The preferred travel destinations for Indian males were different. "Male travellers leaned towards Thailand, with 80 per cent preferring its beaches and vibrant nightlife, followed by the UAE (77 per cent) and the USA (76 per cent)," it added. Additionally, short holidays were the most popular in 2024, with "66 per cent" of

trips lasting less than seven days. The number of travellers choosing extended vacations lasting 15 days or more was recorded "17 per cent". With the increase in travel, more people also focused on safety as the report witnessed a record sale of 7,395 travel insurance policies in 2024, worth a total of Rs 43.2 crore. "Younger travellers especially prioritised protection, often choosing insurance plans ranging from Rs 50,000 to Rs 1,00,000," it added. The findings were based on the sample size of 1 million Indian international travellers.

Koelnmesse India launches ORGATEC India for workspace design and technology

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Koelnmesse India has announced the launch of ORGATEC India, the premier event for workspace design, furniture and technology, aimed at bringing global expertise to country's evolving workspace ecosystem. Slated to debut from November 4 to 6 next year, at the Jio Convention Centre, Mumbai, ORGATEC India will bring together global and local leaders to explore business opportunities, foster connections, and showcase

innovations shaping the future of workspaces. The event will showcase transformative innovations in workspace design, including sustainable building technologies, adaptive workspaces, and advanced design solutions. With Global Capability Centers reshaping the office landscape, it is projected that GCCs will lease 40-45 percent of total office space in India this year, expanding to over 1,900 centers supporting 2 million professionals by 2025, Koelnmesse India said.

UNITING ART AND PHILANTHROPY

COMING soon

KHUSHII NGO launched the Art Design Culture (ADC) Collective, a unique event combining Indian art and design with a mission to uplift communities in need. The evening also featured the launch of Rajan Kapoor's book *The Serengeti: Wild Wonders of Africa*, adding a thoughtful dimension to the celebration, writes **SAKSHI PRIYA**



In a world where art and culture come together, it's refreshing to see an event that not only celebrates creativity but also serves a greater purpose. The unveiling of the Art Design Culture (ADC) Collective, hosted by KHUSHII NGO at Bikaner House, was a perfect example of such an initiative. This special event seamlessly combined India's rich artistic traditions with the mission of supporting underprivileged communities through KHUSHII's educational and community development programs. The evening began with a gathering of art lovers, patrons and philanthropists who were eager to engage in thoughtful discussions about the role of art in society. Among the highlights of the event were the insightful conversations with celebrated personalities such as *Shabana Azmi* and *Javed Akhtar*. Their reflections on their contributions to Indian art and culture provided valuable perspectives, sparking a meaningful dialogue about the future of Indian creativity. One of the key moments of the evening was the launch of *Rajan Kapoor's The Serengeti: Wild Wonders of Africa*, a



stunning visual exploration of Africa's natural beauty. The launch was accompanied by a discussion on wildlife conservation led by *Dr. Rajiv Bhartari*, which highlighted the importance of preserving nature and the role that art can play in raising awareness about such critical issues.

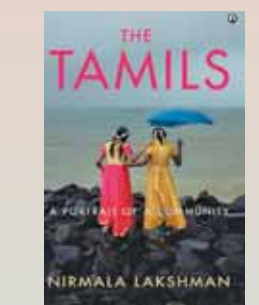
Design also took centre stage, with renowned designer *Sussanne Khan* sharing her journey in the world of design. Her inspiring words about perseverance, creativity, and pushing boundaries resonated with everyone present. The evening also featured a lively art dialogue moderated by *Rahul Kumar*, where Padma



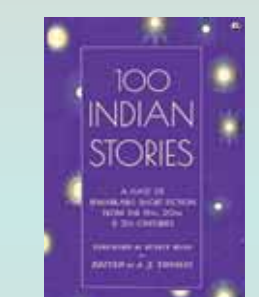
ABOUT THE BOOK
Book: The Serengeti wild wonders of Africa by Rajan Kapoor
Publisher: Niyogi Books
Price: ₹4,500

Shri awardee *Paresh Maity* and textile revivalist *Karishma Swali* discussed the evolution of Indian art over the last decade. Their conversation underscored the importance of innovation and tradition in shaping the future of Indian art. The ADC Collective isn't just a celebration of creativity; it's an opportunity to connect with the vibrant world of Indian culture while supporting a meaningful cause. The event will give the public a chance to explore a stunning collection of artworks and interact with talented Indian artisans. All proceeds from the event will go directly towards supporting KHUSHII's philanthropic work, making it an impactful experience for both art enthusiasts and those eager to contribute to a greater cause. This initiative highlights how art can be a powerful tool for social change. By combining the beauty of Indian craftsmanship with the mission of uplifting communities, the ADC Collective offers a perfect example of how culture and philanthropy can work hand in hand to create positive change.

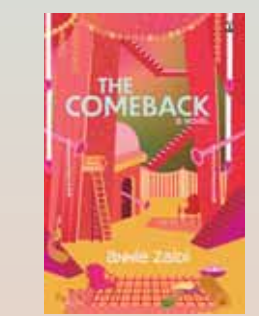
PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR



Book: The Tamils A Portrait of a Community
Author: Nirmala Lakshman
Publisher: Aleph book Company



Book: 100 Indian Stories A Feast of Remarkable Short Fiction from the 19th, 20th, and 21st Centuries
Author: Edited by A. J. Thomas.
Foreword by: Ruskin Bond
Publisher: Aleph book Company

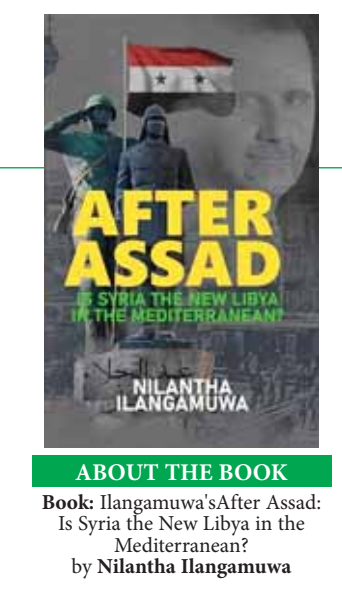


Book: The Comeback A Novel
Author: Annie Zaidi
Publisher: Aleph book Company

SHATTERED SYRIA: CHAOS AFTER ASSAD

By GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Our Regular columnist, *Nilantha Ilangamuwa's After Assad: Is Syria the New Libya in the Mediterranean?* is a compelling exploration of the geopolitical chaos unleashed by the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Independently published in 2024 and available on Amazon, the book offers a stark analysis of a nation fractured by war, foreign interference, and sectarian tensions, drawing thought-provoking parallels with Libya's disintegration post-Gaddafi. *Ilangamuwa* delves into the complex aftermath of *Assad's* collapse, illustrating how the removal of a dictator does not necessarily lead to stability or democracy. Instead, the power vacuum has given rise to militias, territorial struggles, and foreign interventions. The narrative paints a grim picture of a nation torn apart by competing agendas, with Turkey, Iran, Israel, Russia, and Western powers vying for influence, often at the expense of Syria's sovereignty and its people's welfare. This multi-layered analysis is not just a critique of these powers but a searing indictment of how global ambitions exploit fractured states. The book contextualises the Syrian conflict within a broader historical framework, tracing the roots of sectarian manipulation and authoritarian rule under the *Assad* dynasty. *Ilangamuwa* connects these factors to the current fragmentation, showing how decades of repression and inequality laid the groundwork for the present turmoil. His parallels with Libya highlight the recurring failures of external interventions, where short-term strategic goals leave behind a legacy of chaos and suffering. The human cost of this conflict is at the heart of *Ilangamuwa's* narrative. He vividly describes the destruction of key Syrian cities, the displacement of millions, and the rise of extremist factions like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. He challenges the ethical basis of foreign powers' involvement, arguing that their actions often prioritise geopolitical objectives over humanitarian considerations. The looting of Damascus following *Assad's* downfall is capturing the collapse of state authority and the pervasive violence engulfing the capital. The author's critique extends to the duplicity of international media and foreign policy actors. By juxtaposing Syria's fate with Western portrayals of regime change, *Ilangamuwa* exposes the contradictions and hypocrisies in global narratives about intervention and democracy. His insights into how powers such as the United States and Turkey manipulate proxy wars underscore the cynical exploitation of regional instability. This is not merely a political or historical study; it is also a distressing reflection on the enduring suffering of the Syrian people. *Ilangamuwa's* writing is enriched by his encounters with Syrian activists, journalists, and intellectuals, lending authenticity to his analysis. These voices, often overshadowed by dominant geopolitical discourses, remind readers of the resilience and hope that persist amidst devastation.



ABOUT THE BOOK
Book: Ilangamuwa's After Assad: Is Syria the New Libya in the Mediterranean?
by Nilantha Ilangamuwa

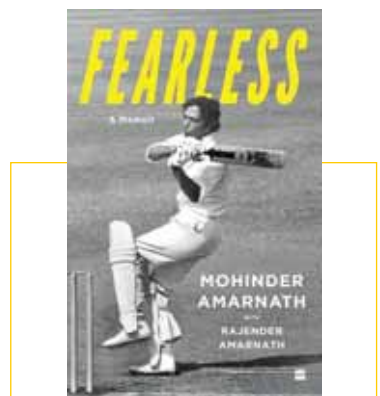
THE UNTOLD JOURNEY OF A CRICKET LEGEND

By KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

The game of cricket remains a mystery to me even in the autumn of life. My first encounter with it occurred in the 1960s when I witnessed this strange game being played at a maidan in Fort Kochi, where our teachers had taken us for a day-long excursion. The picturesque maidan had two screens made of white cloth stretched across the ends, while 'gentlemen' in white trousers and shirts played the game with bats and a ball. Sreedharan Pillai, the teacher who accompanied us, told me that it was 'cricket', a game played by royalty. Months later, I came across this game again at my school in Perumbavoor, where the royalty had assembled to play cricket. They arrived in cars such as Herald, Fiat, Vanguards, Chevrolet, and the occasional Ambassadors. One of the spectators told me that the players were from Kannan Devan Tea Estates in Munnar and shipping agents based in Kochi. Since I couldn't grasp the nuances of the game, I asked my classmate Sundararajan, son of a senior manager at Travancore Rayons, who often spoke of Pataudi, Sarbadhikari, and others. "You will not understand this game because it's played by educated and wealthy people," Sundararajan told me. In every place, there are those who are considered masters of all topics. We had Gopalakrishnan, the local tailor, who was an encyclopedia of knowledge. There was nothing he didn't know. "Arrey, you will not understand it. It's a game played by officials like engineers, adhikaris, contractors, sarvadhikaris, and vakeels," Gopal Ji ticked me off. It was years later that I heard names like Farook Engineer, Nari Contractor, Hemu Adhikari, Berry Sarvadhikari, and the occasional Smiths and Tailors who toured India! Cricket got a major boost in 1983 when India won the World Cup in England under the captaincy of Kapil Dev, the Haryana Hurricane. Alongside him, another player emerged as the darling of the masses: the unassuming Mohinder

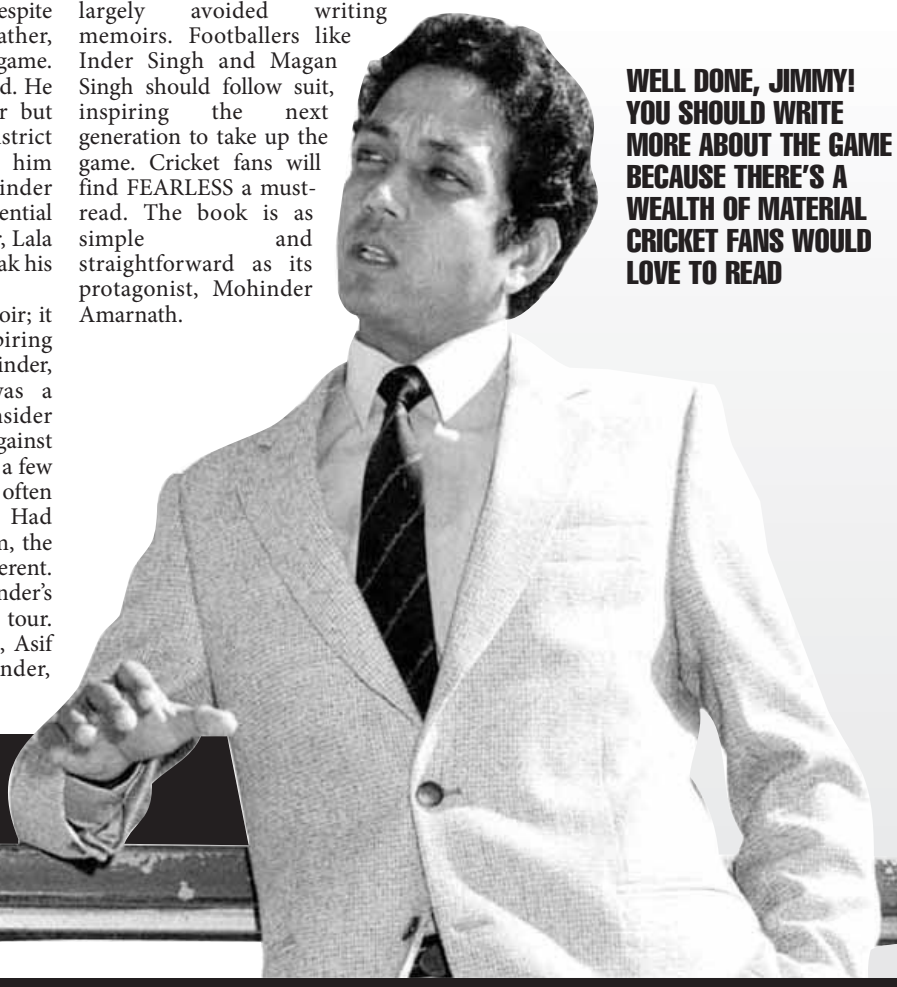
Amarnath, whose stellar performance with both bat and ball led India to triumph. Before the World Cup, Mohinder had already earned a reputation as a fantastic all-rounder, particularly in the 1977-1978 series in Australia, which is often remembered as the 'Mohinder Amarnath series.' It's shocking that such a brilliant cricketer had to spend many years in the wilderness due to the callous attitude of Indian selectors, who overlooked him despite his exceptional performances. Though he played against the touring Australian side in 1969, he was sidelined for years. The reason for this remains a mystery. After three decades of first-class cricket, Mohinder penned his memoirs, *FEARLESS*, with his younger sibling Rajinder. The three sons of legendary Lala Amarnath—Surinder, Mohinder, and Rajinder—had made their father proud with their performances, though Rajinder never made it to the national side. Despite being born to a legendary father, Mohinder had no godfathers in the game. His memoirs detail the trials he faced. He doesn't blame anyone in particular but does highlight how the Delhi District Cricket Association's actions kept him from the national team. Mohinder attributes this to the authorities' potential frustration with his outspoken father, Lala Amarnath, who didn't hesitate to speak his mind. *FEARLESS* is more than just a memoir; it offers valuable lessons for aspiring cricketers. Life wasn't easy for Mohinder, despite having a father who was a flamboyant cricketer. Critics consider Mohinder the best Indian batsman against fast bowling. Indian players, barring a few like Farook Engineer and Viswanath, often collapsed against pace bowlers. Had Mohinder been included in the team, the outcomes would likely have been different. An interesting anecdote from Mohinder's memoir involves the 1978 Pakistan tour. In the midst of a contentious series, Asif Iqbal, the Pakistani all-rounder,

approached the Indian team with an offer from Kerry Packer, the founder of World Series Cricket. Iqbal, eager to distract the Indians, sent a WSC representative with a lucrative offer, but despite Mohinder's signed contract, nothing came of it. Mohinder describes it as a strategic move to disrupt their focus before a crucial Test match. The chapter on the 1983 World Cup transports readers back in time, immersing them in the spirit of the game. There are many cricketer memoirs, but *FEARLESS* stands out as monumental. The book captures the sweat and blood of Mohinder and Surinder (who was also dropped despite impressive performances). The discrimination faced by northern players at the hands of the western zone selectors is another compelling aspect of *FEARLESS*. Indian sportsmen, unlike their cricketer counterparts, have largely avoided writing memoirs. Footballers like Inder Singh and Magan Singh should follow suit, inspiring the next generation to take up the game. Cricket fans will find *FEARLESS* a must-read. The book is as simple and straightforward as its protagonist, Mohinder Amarnath.



ABOUT THE BOOK
Book: FEARLESS - A Memoir Mohinder Amarnath with Rajinder Amarnath
Publisher: Harper Collins
Price: ₹799

WELL DONE, JIMMY! YOU SHOULD WRITE MORE ABOUT THE GAME BECAUSE THERE'S A WEALTH OF MATERIAL CRICKET FANS WOULD LOVE TO READ



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India to play its Champions Trophy matches at neutral venue

PTI ■ DUBAI

The deadlock over the hosting of next year's Champions Trophy finally ended on Thursday when the ICC announced that India will play their matches of the 50-over event at a neutral venue instead of host country Pakistan, which will get a similar arrangement for tournaments to be held in India till 2027.

The agreement will also extend to the 2028 women's T20 World Cup, which will be held in Pakistan. Although no formal announcement has been made, but India's Champions Trophy matches are likely to be held in the UAE.

"The ICC Board has approved that all matches between India and Pakistan played at ICC Events during the current rights cycle from 2024 to 2027 (which are to be hosted in India or Pakistan)

will be played at a neutral venue proposed by the tournament host," said the ICC in a statement, confirming what PTI reported on December 5.

The arrangement will also cover next year's women's World Cup in India and the T20 World Cup in 2026, to be jointly hosted by India and Sri Lanka.

"India's Champions Trophy games will most likely be played in the UAE. As far as the Women's ODI World Cup in India is concerned, the India-Pakistan game could be held in Sri Lanka," said a source.

India had refused to travel to Pakistan for the event scheduled in February-March due to security concerns. The Indians have not played in Pakistan since the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks in which 150 people were killed. The two countries' last bilateral engagement was



back in 2012. Travelling to Pakistan also requires Indian government's clearance which has remained firm on the status quo.

"The schedule for the ICC Champions Trophy 2025 is set to be confirmed soon," the ICC added.

The decision, that came after a series of back-channel talks, was on expected lines after the sport's governing body maintained prolonged silence on the contentious matter during the previous set-up led by chairman Greg Barclay.

His successor Jay Shah took charge on December 1 and all stakeholders, including the Pakistan Cricket Board, the BCCI and the broadcasters, were running out of time to organise the 50-over event that was last played in the UK in 2017.

Thursday's announcement meant it was the first major decision taken in Shah's tenure.

While BCCI's stance was always clear, the matter got stretched because of PCB's refusal to allow a "one-sided" arrangement of neutral venues. Led by Pakistan interior minister Mohsin Naqvi, the PCB was determined not to lose face in front of the local public.

PCB, which had sent its team to India for the ODI World Cup last year, had categorically opposed the hybrid model but eventually agreed to it on reciprocal grounds.

The PCB had earlier indicated that it wanted a greater share in the annual revenue cycle to accommodate the Indian demand for a hybrid model but there is no word yet on whether that has been discussed or accepted.

The tournament will feature eight teams, divided into two groups. The top two teams from each group will advance to the semifinals.



Ashwin deserved a fitting farewell: Kapil Dev

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Unable to comprehend R Ashwin's sudden decision to retire from international cricket, a shocked World Cup-winning skipper Kapil Dev says the premier off-spinner deserved a fitting farewell, ideally on home soil.

Ashwin stunned one and all by calling it quits on Wednesday, right after the Brisbane Test against Australia ended in a draw. Kapil felt Ashwin seemed unhappy with something.

"I was shocked by how one of India's greatest cricketers chose to leave the game. The disappointment among the fans was widespread, but I also saw a tinge of hurt on his face. He looked unhappy, and that was sad. He deserved much better, a fitting farewell," Kapil said in a statement to PTI.

As has been his wont, Ashwin chose to walk his own way while retiring in the middle of an important series. Kapil said he would like to hear the Tamil Nadu man's side of the story.

"He could have waited and announced his retirement on Indian soil, but I don't know why Ashwin called it a day. I would want to hear his side of the story. Give him that respect. He has played 106 Tests for the country. I don't think anyone can match his

ISL: FC Goa aim to end Mohun Bagan's unbeaten streak

PTI ■ MARGAO

FC Goa will seek to snap a rampaging Mohun Bagan Super Giant's eight-match unbeaten streak in the Indian Super League (ISL) when the two sides square off in a 12th round match here on Friday.

FC Goa, under India head coach Manolo Marquez, will also aim to improve their record against the Mariners, having lost five of their eight meetings in the ISL, including a narrow 0-1 defeat in their most recent fixture in February.

Super Giant's unbeaten run has seen them win seven and draw one of their last eight ISL games, and that has put them on top of the league leaderboard with 26 points from 11 matches, winning eight, drawing twice and losing once.

On the other hand, the Gaur



are placed fourth with 19 points from the same number of games.

Both these teams have been in equally efficient form upfront, with the Kolkata-based side netting 22 times in the competition thus far, as compared to the 21 of the Goan club.

However, the visitors have been comparatively better organised at the back, as they have conceded 10 goals as opposed to the 15 of FC Goa.

Head-to-head, FC Goa have won twice, whereas Super Giant have emerged victorious five times in the eight times these two teams have faced each other in the ISL.

FC Goa head coach Marquez admitted that the Mariners have a nice mix of international and domestic stars that make them a strong opponent.

"I feel that we are playing one of the strongest teams in the competition. Mohun Bagan have most of the top national team players, and they've spent a lot on getting good foreigners too," Marquez said.

"We need to keep fighting to win"

Super Giant head coach Jose Molina lauded his team for not giving up under any circumstance.

"The mentality of Mohun Bagan Super Giant is to fight every game till the end. We have to attack and defend well, communicate properly, but most importantly we need to keep fighting to get the win," Molina said.



Australian top-three seriously out of form, should go back to basics: Ian Healy

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

A head of the crucial Boxing Day Test against India from December 26, legendary wicketkeeper Ian Healy has pointed out the serious lack of form of the top-three Australian batters and advised them to go to the basics and perform if they want to continue in the team.

Australia made 445 in the first innings of the rain-truncated third Test at Brisbane with Travis Head and Steve Smith smashing centuries but the home team did miserably in the second innings before declaring at 89 for 7.

The match ended in a draw with the five-match Test series level at 1-1.

"I don't see them (Australia) regressing going into Melbourne, but they are out of form, they're seriously out of form," Healy told SEN Radio.

Opens Usman Khawaja, Nathan McSweeney and one-drop batter Marnus Labuschagne performed below expectations at the Gabba before Smith and Head halted the slide with centuries in the first innings.

The second innings was even worse with the top three managing just 13 runs.

"Questions have got to be asked of George Bailey: 'Can we get this form back? Are you confident that form will reemerge in our top three?' "Otherwise changes have to be made, and what suggestions might you have for us, George? That type of thing."

Healy opined that the Melbourne Test should be Klawaja, McSweeney and Labuschagne's best chance to redeem themselves and asked the trio to get back to the basics.

"The Melbourne Test is probably the least volatile wicket they'll play on and that's their best chance. But form takes a little longer than a week to turn around, and it's just not coming for them."

"They've got to get right back to basics and strip it right back. See the ball and hit it, don't care where your feet go. That's the first step, just get some clarity in your head," said Healy.

Australia must avoid defeat in Melbourne to keep their hopes alive of taking back the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

Hazlewood 'frustrated' at missing remainder of India series due to 'random' injury

PTI ■ BRISBANE

Australia fast bowler Josh Hazlewood is "frustrated" by the timing of his injury after he was ruled out of the remaining two Tests against India due to a right calf strain sustained during the drawn third match at the Gabba.

Hazlewood, who had also missed the second Test (pink-ball) in Adelaide - which Australia won by 10 wickets - due to a side strain, described the latest injury as "random".

"Just frustrating really. Ticked every box heading into the (third) Test, I could understand if it was my side again, but it was just a random calf strain," he told 7NEWS.

"It's just the timing again, they are only little 2-3 week injuries, it's just the timing of



it and missing big games is the frustrating thing."

The 33-year-old Hazlewood was sent for scans after just one over of bowling on the fourth day after hurting his right calf in the warm-up before play. The injury only turned out to be a strain, but it's expected to be serious enough to end his home Test series early.

"Obviously, do a deep dive into it and see what we can come up with... Feels pretty random," he said.

"I've had a history of sides and calves, they're probably the two things that have kept me out for the majority over the last four years."

"But yeah I sort of just keep adding another layer to the defence hopefully, get back into the gym, I've ticked a lot of boxes over the last 12 months."

Hazlewood said he does not want to rush back to action before regaining full fitness, which he is hoping to achieve by the two-match Test tour of Sri Lanka in late January and February.

"That's probably the goal, just take it as it comes over the next few weeks," he said.

"No rush to get anything in a hurry, it's just getting everything right. Probably take a few extra days here and there. Ticking things off and getting everything right."

IOC publishes manifestos of 7 candidates running to be president and lead Olympics

AP ■ GENEVA

The seven candidates running for International Olympic Committee president had their manifestos published on Thursday, and one is offering to take just half of the eight-year mandate on offer and stand again in 2029.

Sebastian Coe, the World Athletics president who turned 68 this year, pledged to embed "transformative change over the next four years" then seek re-election ahead of schedule.

Coe was among several candidates offering to give back to IOC members — who elect their president at a March 18-21 meeting near the site of Ancient Olympia

in Greece — a decisive choice in picking future host cities.

Under the hands-on presidency of Thomas Bach, who reaches his limit of 12 years in office next year, members now simply rubber-stamp a single host candidate that has worked with the IOC administration.

Two members of the Bach-chaired IOC executive board, Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr. and Prince Feisal al Hussein, joined Coe in promising to empower members to have a bigger role in the Olympic body. They also promise to raise the retirement age for members from 70 to 75 years. Members must be invited to join the exclusive IOC club and the current 111 include European and Middle East

royalty, leaders of international sports bodies, former and current Olympic athletes, politicians, diplomats, industrialists and an Oscar-winning actress.

Only IOC members can be presidential candidates and the other contenders are board member Kirsty Coventry and three more presidents of sports governing bodies: Johan Eliasch from skiing, David Lippartient from cycling, and Morninari Watanabe from gymnastics.

The manifesto releases are one of just two set-piece events in a mostly opaque campaign with strict rules to limit self-promotion and engagement with voters. Candidates will present



themselves to voters, though not take questions, at a Jan. 30 meeting at IOC headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland.

The IOC has had no female president and just nine men leading it in a 130-year history. Eight of those presidents were from Europe

and one from the United States.

Coventry, the 41-year-old sports minister of Zimbabwe, is just the second female candidate ever to run for the IOC leadership and is widely seen as Bach's preferred choice to continue his policies.

Coventry and Coe are two-time Olympic champions in swimming and track, respectively. Coe also led organizing the 2012 London Olympics.

Coe upset the IOC establishment — including some voters — this year by committing World Athletics to pay \$50,000 prize money to gold medalists in track and field at the Paris Olympics. The sport also will pay silver

and bronze medalists at the 2028 Los Angeles Summer Games.

Though not specifying prize money, Prince Feisal called for Olympic athletes to be "properly valued" while Samaranch proposed letting athletes use footage of their performances on social media channels. That would relax strict IOC rules on Olympic athletes' ability to promote themselves.

Challenges facing the IOC include picking a host for the 2036 Olympics, with India and Qatar in the mix, and looking at moving the Summer Games from its established July-August place in the modern sports calendar.

The next IOC president also must address the impact of climate change on the global sports calendar, gender issues in sports, when and how to bring Russia back fully into the Olympic Games and signing a new U.S. Broadcast deal. Long-time partner NBC's deal expires after the 2032 Brisbane Olympics and has been a foundation of Olympic revenue, which was \$7.6 billion in the 2021-24 Olympic cycle.

The IOC presidency has been limited to 12 years in anti-corruption reforms passed after the Salt Lake City bidding scandal erupted in 1999. The first term is eight years and presidents can seek a second and final term of four years.

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