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## Delhi Govt depts disown AAP's Mahila Samman Yojana, Sanjeevani schemes

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

In an unprecedented move, two departments of Delhi Government have released public notices and disowned the registration process started by Chief Minister Atishi and former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for two schemes announced by the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the National Capital. The Delhi government's Health and Family Welfare department and Women and Child Development department on Wednesday issued public notices disowning the existence of schemes, Mahila Samman Yojana and Sanjeevani Yojana and cautioned citizens against falling for "misleading schemes" launched by the AAP.

Meanwhile, Chief Minister Atishi has stated that strict administrative action will be taken against two officers who released public notices to disown the registration process started by her and former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal for two schemes. The officers in question are a joint director of the Department of Women and Child Development and the special secretary of the Health and Family Welfare Department.

Atishi, addressing a press conference at the AAP headquarters, strongly condemned the notices, claiming that the officers were under pressure from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). She insisted that the public notices were false and part of a larger conspiracy by the BJP to undermine the AAP's initiatives, which had gained significant public support. She added that the party would take legal action, including a Delhi Police inquiry, against the officers for issuing misleading statements. During the press conference, Atishi also shared an official notification from the Cabinet that approved the Rs 1,000 allowance for women under the Mahila Samman



Delhi Chief Minister Atishi and AAP National Convener Arvind Kejriwal during a press conference. Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

Yojana, reaffirming the legitimacy of the scheme. The fresh controversy will add another dimension to the ongoing tussle between the AAP and the bureaucracy, with accusations flying between parties. The move underlines the tenuous relationship between the bureaucracy and the elected Delhi Government after an amendment to the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) Act, the services department comes under the control of the Lieutenant Governor.

The latest flashpoint, which comes weeks ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls, sparked a slugfest between the AAP and BJP leaders. The BJP has accused the ruling party of duping people, since the two schemes have not been approved yet. The Department of Women and Child Development (WCD), in a public notice in newspapers, has said the Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana does not exist and has not been approved by the Delhi government. It has urged

citizens to refrain from sharing personal information with individuals or groups claiming association with this "fake scheme", as it could result in identity theft or financial fraud. "As, if and when such a scheme is notified, the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD), GNCTD, will launch a digital portal for eligible individuals to submit their applications online as per the approved guidelines. The eligibility conditions and modalities will be clearly notified by the department as and when it happens. It is emphasised that since no such scheme exists, the question of physical forms / applications for the registration under this non-existent scheme does not arise," it said, adding that any individual collecting forms or information in the name of this scheme is "fraudulent and without any authority". The department has warned that sharing personal information in the public domain may lead to people falling prey to cybercrime.

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## Vajpayee's Ken-Betwa interlinking vision sees light on his centenary

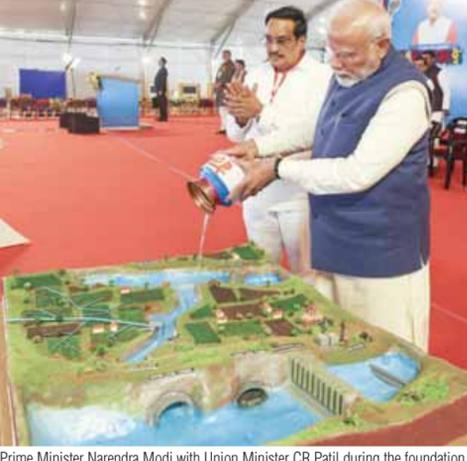
PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/KHAJURAHO (MP)

The ambitious first of its kind interlinking of the Ken-Betwa River as desired by former Prime Minister late Atal Bihari Vajpayee two decades ago, finally kicked started with the foundation stone laying by PM Narendra Modi on Wednesday which also marked the birth anniversary of the political stalwart Bharat Ratna Vajpayee.

The Vajpayee government had proposed river linking as a solution for irrigation needs as well as for dealing with floods. Modi laid the foundation stone of the Rs 44,600 crore Ken-Betwa River Link Project at Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh and said the river linking will open new doors of prosperity and happiness in the Bundelkhand region.

Union Water Resources Minister C R Patil and Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav handed over two kalash (urns) containing water from Betwa and Ken rivers, respectively, to Modi, who poured it over a model of the project to launch the river linking work.

As per the initial estimation of the project, nearly 44 lakh people in 10 districts of Madhya Pradesh and 21 lakh in Uttar Pradesh will get drinking water under the project. Nearly 7.18 lakh agricultural families in 2,000 villages will benefit from the project, which will also generate 103 MW of



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Union Minister CR Patil during the foundation stone laying ceremony of Ken-Betwa River Linking Project, in Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh. PTI

hydropower and 27 MW of solar energy, officials involved in the project said. Addressing the event Modi said that in the 21st century, only the nations with adequate and well-managed water resources can advance. "The major challenge of the 21st century is water security. In the 21st century only those countries who have adequate water resources with proper management will move forward," he said.

The PM also released a commemorative stamp and a coin in the memory of Vajpayee. Modi also performed 'bhumi puja' or ground-breaking ceremony for the construction of 1,153 Atal Gram Sewa Sadans costing Rs 437 crore at the Khajuraho program.

Under the Ken Betwa project, a 77-metre high and 2.13 kilometres long Daudhan dam and two tunnels (upper level 1.9 km and lower level 1.1 km) will be constructed on the Ken river in the Panna Tiger Reserve. The dam will store 2,853 million cubic metres of water, the chief minister said.

The surplus Ken water will be transferred to the Betwa river through the 221-km-long link canal from Daudhan dam, providing irrigation and drinking water facilities in both the states, he said.

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The wreckage of Azerbaijan Airlines Embraer 190 jets on the ground near the airport of Aktau, Kazakhstan. AP/PTI

## Over 30 dead in Azerbaijani airliner crash

AP ■ MOSCOW

An Azerbaijani airliner with 67 people onboard crashed Wednesday in the Kazakhstani city of Aktau, leaving at least 32 survivors, according to officials. More than 30 people are likely dead.

Kazakhstan's Emergency Ministry said in a Telegram statement that those on board included five crew. At least 29 have been hospitalised, the ministry told Russia's state news agency RIA Novosti. Russian news agency Interfax quoted medical workers as saying that four bodies have been recovered and emergency workers at the scene as saying that both pilots, according to a preliminary assessment, died in the crash. The Embraer 190 aircraft made an emergency landing three kilometres from the city, Azerbaijan Airlines said earlier.

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**WEATHER**

|     |             |
|-----|-------------|
| AQI | 336         |
| MAX | 22.4°C (+2) |
| MIN | 8.4°C (+1)  |

## ED investigating some Canadian colleges, Indian entities in human trafficking case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Tuesday said it is investigating the "involvement" of some Canadian colleges and a few Indian entities in a money laundering case linked to the trafficking of Indians into the United States from the Canada border. The investigation is linked to the death of a four-member Indian family, hailing from Dingucha village of Gujarat. The four died of extreme cold while trying to illegally cross the Canada-US border on January 19, 2022.

The ED took cognisance of an Ahmedabad Police FIR against Bhavesh Ashokbhai Patel, who emerged as the main accused in the matter, and a few others, to file a complaint under the criminal sections of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Patel and others have "hatched a well-planned conspiracy to send people (Indians) to the USA through Canada via illegal channels thereby committing the offence of human trafficking," it said.

The agency had earlier found that as part of the racket, the accused "arranged" admission for people, desirous of going to



the US illegally, in colleges and universities based in Canada. A Canadian student visa was applied for such people and once they reached that country, instead of joining the college, they "illegally" crossed the US-Canada border and never joined the Canadian college, the agency said in a statement. "In view of this, the fee received by colleges based in Canada was remitted back to the individuals' account," said ED, adding that Indians were "lured" into the racket and charged between Rs 55 and Rs 60 lakh per person, according to the ED.

The agency said it undertook fresh searches in this case on December 10 and December 19 at eight locations in Mumbai, Nagpur, Gandhinagar and Vadodara. It was found, the ED said, two

"entities", one based in Mumbai and the other in Nagpur, entered into an "agreement" for admission of Indians in universities based in foreign countries on a commission basis. The agency said the latest searches found that about 25,000 students are being referred by one entity and more than 10,000 students by the other to various colleges based outside India every year. "Further, it is gathered that there are around 1,700 agents/partners based in Gujarat and around 3,500 agents/partners of other entities all over India out of which around 800 are active. It is further revealed that around 112 colleges based in Canada have entered into an agreement with one entity and more than 150 with another entity. Their involvement in the instant case is under investigation," the ED said.

The agency suspects that out of the total 262 such colleges in Canada, a few, which are geographically located near the Canada-US border, are involved in the trafficking of Indian nationals. The ED said it froze bank deposits worth Rs 19 lakh, some "incriminating" documents and digital devices, and seized two vehicles in connection with its probe.

## UP man self-immolates near Sansad Bhavan

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

In a shocking incident, a man in his early 30s tried to immolate himself on Wednesday afternoon opposite the high security zone Sansad Bhavan premises, the police recovered a singed note from the victim, identified as Jitendra. It hints at Uttar Pradesh's government's inaction in a case relating to the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe Act.

An official of the Delhi Fire Service said that a call regarding the incident near the Railway Bhawan opposite the Sansad Bhavan was received at around 3.35 pm on Wednesday, and a fire tender was pressed into service.

The security personnel deployed near Sansad Bhavan rushed the man identified as Jitendra, a resident of Baghpat in Uttar Pradesh, to the Ram Manohar Lohia (RML) Hospital. "He set himself on fire at the roundabout near Rail Bhawan. The local police and railway police along with some people immediately extinguished the fire and the person was sent to the hospital," an official statement said.

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## Ready to spar on Boxing Day: India fret on Rohit's batting position

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Divine intervention and a wagging tail might have lifted India's sagging spirits in Brisbane but an out-of-form skipper Rohit Sharma's batting position will be in focus against a dangerous Australia bracing to deliver the knockout punch in the 'Boxing Day' Test starting here on Thursday. The Indian skipper was the last to hit the nets on Christmas eve and there is speculation doing rounds that he could replace the team's most assured opener, KL Rahul, at the top of the order. If that happens, Rahul will come in at No. 3 while Shubman Gill could either play in the middle order or make way for a Dhruv Jurel in the playing eleven. The series is currently locked 1-1. The Indian skipper stopped batting in the middle order after being elevated to the opening slot back in 2019. But he chose to come down in Adelaide and Brisbane to accommodate



an in-form Rahul and first-Test centurion Yashasvi Jaiswal.

match press conference, he was borderline irritated. "Let's not worry about that. I think who bats where, we should be discussing that within ourselves and I shouldn't be answering this question in every press conference," the skipper just about held his composure.

Both captains feel that 1-1 after three games is a fair reflection of the competition between the sides but things can quickly change at the MCG. The rain-affected draw at the Gabba was like a soothing balm for India after the Pink Test debacle in Adelaide.

But now, India are back at one of their favourite Australian venues where they have remained undefeated in Tests since the 2014 series. The last two (2018-19 and 2020-21) of the three Tests (other being 2014-15) resulted in Indian wins where solid batting played its part.

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# Katra protests intensify after crackdown

Mohit Kandhari ■ Jammu

Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Sangarsh Samiti Wednesday intensified its ongoing agitation after local police authorities launched a fresh crackdown against the senior samiti members leading the protest during the three-day long bandh call given against the 250 crore ropeway project connecting Tarakote Marg to Sanjhi Chhat, which leads to the cave shrine nestled in the Trikuta Hills. At least 18 members of the Sangarsh Samiti were detained by the police while they were leading the protest march on Wednesday. The Sangarsh Samiti is expected to further intensify the stir ahead of the New Year celebrations by closing down the hotels/restaurants and guest houses. However, the final decision

is yet to be taken. On day one of the 72-hour-long bandh call the entire Katra township witnessed a complete shutdown up to Banganga, the starting point of the 13 km-long serpentine trek to the cave shrine. Hundreds of shops along the trek also remained closed in support of their demand to scrap the ropeway project. The transport facilities including auto rickshaws remained off the roads posing hardships to pilgrims. At several places, the pilgrims reaching Katra were seen struggling to locate an eatery serving fresh food and snacks. At present the pilgrims accommodated in the hotels are being served food. Till late evening no headway was achieved by the local administration in diffusing the volatile situation. Earlier, the situation took an ugly turn

after a protest march was stopped by the local police authorities from approaching the bus stand area. Sangarsh Samiti leaders Bhupinder Singh and Sohan Chand along with several other protesters were detained by the police and shifted to an undisclosed location. To contain the protesters the police also ordered lathicharge. In response the protesters raised slogans against the Shrine Board and the administration, accusing them of adopting a wrong approach to handle the crisis situation. Speaking to the media Bhupinder Singh alleged that the government was derailing the issue and forcing the people of Katra to come on the roads. "We are demanding the shelving of this project to save the jobs of thousands of people. Instead of holding talks with us, as

promised by the administration, they are using police to detain us. This is unfortunate", he said. Former minister Jugal Kishore criticised the "use of force" against the protesters. "We strongly condemn the administration's move to use force against peaceful demonstrators. Their actions are aimed at disturbing the situation in Katra, which is unacceptable," Kishore told reporters. He accused the administration of avoiding dialogue. "Instead of holding discussions, they are aggravating the situation," he said. Last month, the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board announced plans to install the ropeway to facilitate access to the temple for senior citizens, children, and others who find it challenging to trek the 13-km-long path to the cave shrine.

# Controversy over 'Dareng Toh Mareng' posters in Prayagraj

Biswajeet Banerjee ■ Prayagraj

As the countdown to the 2025 Maha Kumbh begins, political temperatures are rising alongside preparations for the grand event. Controversy has erupted over posters bearing the slogan "Dareng Toh Mareng" (If You Fear, You Die) that have appeared in several locations across Prayagraj.



The slogan comes in the wake of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's earlier remark, "Batenge Toh Katenge" (If We Divide, We Perish). The Maha Kumbh, set to commence on Pausa Purnima (January 13, 2025), is drawing national and international attention. However, these provocative posters, attributed to Jagadguru Ramanandacharya, founder of the Vaishnava South Peeth in Nanij Dham, have sparked a heated debate. Prominently displayed near the Nag Vasuki temple and other areas in the Kumbh region, the posters bear the image of the spiritual leader alongside the contentious slogan, potentially setting the stage for another political and social controversy. This is not the first time Jagadguru Ramanandacharya has employed such methods to make bold statements. Ahead of the 2019 Kumbh, he had displayed posters advocating for the construction of the Ram Temple, a demand that resonated widely in the region. The new "Dareng Toh Mareng" posters, however, have introduced a sharper edge to the ongoing discourse around religious and social

unity. The controversy finds its roots in Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's August 26 speech in Agra during Krishna Janmashtami, where he warned against internal divisions, stating, "If we divide, we perish." He linked the slogan to the plight of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh following the August 5 military coup, cautioning against similar mistakes in India. His remarks, later endorsed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on October 5, have since become a rallying cry for his supporters. With millions of devotees and tourists expected to attend the month-long Maha Kumbh, such slogans and controversies may overshadow preparations and lead to a political faceoff. Authorities are keeping a close watch on the situation to ensure the spiritual sanctity of the event is preserved amidst the growing polarization. As the date for the Maha Kumbh nears, Prayagraj is preparing to welcome the world to one of the largest religious gatherings. However, the challenges posed by these political and ideological clashes could test the administration's ability to balance tradition with modern-day sensitivities.

# Bus falls into gorge, four dead, 23 injured

PNS ■ Nainital

Four people, including a woman and a child, died and 23 were injured after a roadways bus fell into a 1,500 ft deep gorge in Bhimtal's Saldi area on Wednesday. The roadways bus with 27 people on board, including the driver and the conductor, was coming from Pithoragarh, Kumaon Commissioner Deepak Rawat told reporters. Four deaths have been confirmed. The injured have been brought in ambulances to Sushila Tiwari Hospital in Haldwani, he said. "The locals were the first to learn about the incident as is often the case. Even I came to know about it from locals," Rawat said. Most of the injured are in the general ward but some of them are also likely to be shifted to the ICU, he said. The vehicle plunged into a 1,500 ft deep gorge, Bhowali Circle Officer Sumit Pandey



said. The injured were first rushed to the Community Health Centre in Bhimtal from where they were referred to higher centres. Some of them are in critical condition. Relief and rescue operations were launched with the help of locals, he said. It was difficult for the fire department and SDRF teams to pull the bodies and the injured

# Vineet Joshi appointed Education secretary

PNS ■ New Delhi

Manipur Chief Secretary Vineet Joshi has been appointed as the Higher Education secretary. A 1992 batch IAS officer, Joshi was appointed Manipur chief secretary in May last year. He was then serving as the additional secretary in the Department of Higher Education under the Education Ministry and also had a stint at CBSE. Senior bureaucrat Arunish Chawla has been appointed the revenue secretary as part of a top-level bureaucratic reshuffle effected by the Centre on Wednesday. Chawla, a 1992 batch Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer of the Bihar cadre, is currently the Pharmaceuticals Secretary. He has been appointed Secretary,

Department of Revenue, Ministry of Finance, according to a personnel ministry order. The post of Revenue Secretary fell vacant after incumbent Sanjay Malhotra was appointed the governor of the RBI earlier this month. Chawla will continue to hold the additional charge of Secretary, Ministry of Culture till the appointment of a regular incumbent, it said. While Unique Identification Authority of India, will be the new pharmaceuticals secretary in place of Chawla, textiles secretary Rachna Shah has been appointed Secretary of the Department of Personnel and Training, the order said. Senior officer Sanjay Sethi, who is currently serving in his cadre state Maharashtra, will be the new secretary of the National Commission for Minorities.

# Delhi Police has arrested 114 hardened criminals in 2024

Staff Reporter ■ New Delhi

Delhi Police's Crime Branch arrested a total of 114 hardened criminals in 2024, including 40 parole jumpers, 40 wanted offenders in 2024. According to police on Wednesday, the other arrested criminals included 18 interim bail jumpers, nine proclaimed offenders, four carrying a reward on their head and three non-bailable warrant evaders. The Crime Branch is a dedicated unit of Delhi Police focused on apprehending hardened criminals and solving difficult cases registered at police stations. "A year of tireless effort, the Crime Branch adopted a multifaceted approach and traditional intelligence methods. With the use of technical surveillance, and informant networks, various dedicated teams traced and captured offenders who had evaded arrest for years," said Special Commissioner of Police Devesh Chandra Srivastava.

# Governance reforms must begin at the grassroots level: Jitendra

PNS ■ New Delhi

Union Minister Jitendra Singh on Wednesday said that the governance reforms must begin at the grassroots level to bring about long-lasting and meaningful change. In a significant step towards strengthening grassroots governance, he launched the 'Viksit Panchayat Karmayogi' initiative on Good Governance Day, celebrated every year to mark the birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The initiative, which is part of the broader 'Prashasan Gaon Ki Aur' campaign, aims to enhance the capacity and competence of Panchayati Raj Institutions



(PRIs) by equipping elected representatives and officials with the tools and knowledge required for effective governance and participatory planning, said Singh, the Minister of State for Personnel. He emphasised "that governance reforms must begin at the grassroots to bring about long-lasting and meaningful change as well as to fill up the capacity gaps". Piloted in Odisha,

Assam, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh, the initiative leverages e-learning platforms, AI-powered chatbots, and mobile apps to bridge knowledge gaps and enhance service delivery, Singh said. He said that this program aligns with the government's broader mission to decentralise governance and foster participatory decision-making at the grassroots level.

# Over 30 dead in Azerbaijani airliner crash

From page 1

Kazakhstan's Emergency Ministry initially said 25 people survived the crash, later revising that number to 27, 28, and then 29 as the search and rescue operation continued at the site of the crash, bringing the supposed death toll down. The Prosecutor General's Office in Azerbaijan later reported that at least 32 people survived the crash, adding that the number wasn't final. The number of survivors could mean that over 30 people may be dead. The plane was originally scheduled to travel from the Azerbaijani capital of Baku to the Russian city of Grozny in the North Caucasus. According to Azerbaijan Airlines, 37 passengers were

Azerbaijani citizens. There were also 16 Russian nationals, six Kazakhstan and three Kyrgyzstan citizens, it said. RIA Novosti quoted Russia's civil aviation authority, Rosaviatsia, as saying that preliminary information showed that the pilot had chosen to divert to Aktau after a bird strike on the aircraft led to "an emergency situation on board". Mobile phone footage circulating online appeared to show the aircraft making a steep descent before smashing into the ground in a fireball. Other footage showed part of its fuselage ripped away from the wings and the rest of the aircraft, lying upside down in the grass. The footage corresponded to the plane's

colors and its registration number. Some of the videos posted on social media showed survivors dragging fellow passengers away from the wreckage of the plane. Flight-tracking data from FlightRadar24.com showed the aircraft making what appeared to be a figure-eight once near the airport in Aktau, its altitude moving up and down substantially over the last minutes of the flight before impacting the ground. FlightRadar24 separately said in an online post that the aircraft had faced "strong GPS jamming" which "made the aircraft transmit bad ADS-B data", referring to the information that allows flight-tracking websites to follow planes in flight. Russia has been blamed in the past

for jamming GPS transmissions in the wider region. Embraer did not immediately respond to a request for comment early Wednesday morning. In a statement, Azerbaijan Airlines said it would keep members of the public updated and changed its social media banners to solid black. Azerbaijan's state news agency, Azertac, said that an official delegation consisting of Azerbaijan's emergency situations minister, the country's deputy general prosecutor, and the vice president of Azerbaijan Airlines had been dispatched to Aktau to conduct an "on-site investigation". Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev, who had been traveling to St Petersburg,

# Delhi Govt depts disown Mahila Samman Yojana, Sanjeevani schemes

From page 1

In a public notice, the health department has said that it does not have "any such supposed Sanjeevani scheme in existence". It added that it had not authorised anyone to collect personal data from elderly citizens and was not providing any card. The department said any individual or political party collecting such forms under the name of this scheme is "fraudulent and without any authority". "If a person/entity calls you or visits you with the promise to provide benefit of free treatment under this supposed non-existent scheme or provide you some "Health/Sanjeevani Scheme Card in this regard, then you are hereby advised to: (1) not believe in any promise of free treatment under the supposed non-existent "Sanjeevani scheme" (2) not to provide any personal detail to anybody claiming to provide benefits under the scheme (3) not to affix your signature or thumbprint on any document unknowingly." The department has said it will not be responsible for any liabilities or frauds arising out of such "unscrupulous activities". Under the Mahila Samman Yojana, modelled on Maharashtra's Ladi Behna Yojana that helped the BJP retain power in the state, eligible women will receive a monthly stipend of Rs 1,000. Kejrival has promised that the amount will be increased to Rs 2,100 if the AAP is re-elected. The Sanjeevani Yojana promises free healthcare for Delhi residents aged 60 and above. The

scheme will cover medical expenses of senior citizens in both Government and private hospitals. This comes after AAP leaders, including Chief Minister Atishi and party convener Arvind Kejriwal, visited several areas and launched doorstep registration for Sanjeevani Yojana and Mahila Samman Yojana. The AAP has also come out with an Artificial Intelligence ad with Arvind Kejriwal in a Santa Claus avatar. Shortly after the notices, Kejrival launched a veiled attack at the BJP, saying it was rattled by the AAP's announcement of welfare initiatives like the Mahila Samman Yojana and the Sanjeevani Yojana. "They have planned to arrest Atishi in the next few days in a fabricated case. Before that, raids will be conducted on senior AAP leaders," Kejrival tweeted. In a post on X, Kejrival also claimed that AAP leaders would be raided in a bid to derail the AAP's governance agenda. BJP leaders were quick to hit out at the party over the newspaper ads, with Manoj Tiwari cautioning people to be careful as the AAP could siphon off their money. "We are astonished. Arvind Kejrival is getting documents signed by people at many places, and the health department is giving advertisements that no such proposal was passed, no agreement happened. Atishi is the Chief Minister, she should answer," Tiwari said. Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva accused Kejrival of committing

"digital fraud" by promoting a non-existent scheme. "There is an AAP Government in Delhi, and their own department is issuing a warning to the public that no such scheme exists. Arvind Kejrival is cheating the people of Delhi. This is Atishi vs Arvind Kejrival," Sachdeva said. According to AAP sources, 1.5 lakh people have been registered for the Sanjeevani scheme so far and 13 lakh women for Mahila Samman Yojana. A team of 3,000 AAP workers are carrying out the doorstep registrations with a target of 5 lakh registrations daily, the sources said. The departments' notices play out against the backdrop of the power tussle between Delhi's elected Government and the Centre. The principal secretaries of all Delhi departments report to the Chief Secretary, a central Government appointee. This, in effect, means that the AAP Government has no control over Delhi officers, an issue it has repeatedly raised in its 10-year rule in the National Capital. The Supreme Court ruled last year that the Delhi Government would control the services in the capital, but the Centre brought an ordinance and then an Act to overturn this. This Act established the National Capital Civil Services Authority, comprising the Chief Minister, Delhi Chief Secretary and Principal Home Secretary. This Authority makes recommendations to Delhi's Lieutenant Governor on officials' transfers and postings and disciplinary matters.



# AAP councillors join BJP

Staff Reporter ■ New Delhi

Aam Aadmi Party's councillor from Ghadoli Priyanka Gautam joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Wednesday along with her supporters, a statement said. Dharmaev Singh, a former councillor from south Delhi and a leader of the Gujjar community, also joined the BJP on Wednesday. Union Minister of State Harsh Malhotra said that Delhi had a Chief Minister who swore never to enter politics. Yet after entering

politics, he swore to avoid luxuries like bungalows, security, and official vehicles. However, now he has constructed a palace for himself and has only cheated the people of Delhi, Malhotra alleged.

# Ready to spar on Boxing Day: India fret on Rohit's batting position

From page 1

But this line-up, with three young mavericks (Yashasvi Jaiswal, Rishabh Pant and Shubman Gill), one confident opener (KL Rahul) and a couple of ageing stalwarts (Virat Kohli and Rohit) hasn't looked very assured. They will have to put up their best show against a home team which isn't exactly a runaway favourite either but has shown tremendous resilience. For under-fire

Rohit, it is his own reputation as a Test batter that is at stake while Kohli will need to channelise the inner champion in him which lit up the MCG skyline with the most talked about sixes in his T20 career. Those sixes required flair, the situation now will warrant loads of patience when Pat Cummins and Mitchell Starc tease him with that probing line outside the off stump. For Rohit, the equation is as simple as it gets. Win the next

two Tests and likely head into a potentially memorable swansong at the Lord's in June. A captain has to score and even without an injured Josh Hazlewood, Australia would be a handful with local hero Scott Boland ready to bowl those uncompromising hard lengths. Jaiswal, Gill and Pant would like to live up to their own expectations and go into the game with an uncluttered mindset as expected by their skipper. For the hosts, all eyes will be on teenage sensation Sam Konstas, billed as one for the future with an attacking game to match Jasprit Bumrah. Konstas would do well to know that Bumrah has already put brakes on his pre-deceener Nathan McSwaney's career. The other good news for Australia is that the marauding Travis Head is fully fit and raring to go at Melbourne which is certain to increase the creases on Rohit's forehead.

Head had an extended session on Wednesday where he appeared for a fitness test and then looked in good touch at the nets. With scores of 89, 140 and 152, the Indian bowlers need some special plans to counter their main threat. Temperature is predicted to be close to 40 degrees followed by an equally hot second day, which is why the role of an extra spinner is being seriously looked into by the team management. But if

one looks at teams in recent Tests at MCG, the option for a second specialist spinner has never looked viable. The pitches at MCG, over the years, don't have too many cracks but could offer variable bounce which Nathan Lyon has used to the fullest in the past. But then Lyon, as a finger spinner, is in a different league compared to a relatively inexperienced Washington Sundar. The question is where does one fit in Washington?

Dropping Nitish Reddy could just be a very poor move. Will they trade a seamer like Akash Deep specifically looking at conditions? Looks unlikely unless it's a like-for-like fast bowler taking that slot. Rohit will have a lot on his plate as skipper and more as batter if he goes back to the top. TEAMS: INDIA: Rohit Sharma (captain), KL Rahul, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Rishabh Pant (wk), Ravindra Jadeja, Nitish

Reddy, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj, Akash Deep, Washington Sundar, Prasad Krishna, Harshit Rana, Tanush Kotian, Sarfaraz Khan, Abhimanyu Easwaran, Dhruv Jurel, Devdutt Padikkal. AUSTRALIA (XI): Pat Cummins (captain), Usman Khawaja, Sam Konstas, Marcus Labuschagne, Steve Smith, Travis Head, Mitchell Marsh, Alex Carey (wk), Mitchell Starc and Scott Boland.

# CM Atishi may be arrested in 'fake case' at BJP's behest: Kejriwal

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal claimed on Wednesday that Delhi Chief Minister Atishi may be arrested in a "fake" case by the central investigative agencies at the behest of the BJP. Addressing a press conference, Kejriwal, who was flanked by Atishi, said, "We got to know from our sources that a meeting was held and investigative agencies have been ordered by the BJP to arrest CM Atishi in a fake case." The BJP is trying to distract AAP from campaigning for assembly polls, he alleged. AAP convener said, "A few days ago, we received information from our sources that

a meeting was held between the Enforcement Directorate (ED), Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), and Income Tax departments. In this meeting, orders were given from higher ups to somehow fabricate a false case and arrest Delhi's Chief Minister, Atishi." Taking full responsibility of his claims, he said, "These agencies have been directed from above to frame Atishi in some fabricated case and arrest her. They have also been instructed to conduct raids on all senior leaders of the AAP before arresting Atishi, in the coming days." He claimed that raids will be conducted on him, former Deputy Chief Minister Manish



Sisodia, AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh, Delhi Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj, former Delhi Minister Satyendar Jain, and Atishi. "Their goal is to distract us from our election preparations and campaigning and to entangle us in other matters," he said. "We came to know that they are preparing a fake case on Atishi in the transport department, and they want to halt the scheme of free bus rides for women," the AAP chief said. "I will not let the scheme of free bus rides for women stop till I am alive," Kejriwal, who is out on bail in a case related to excise policy 'scam', asserted. He further added that the public does not like this kind

of politics. "Ask for votes based on your work. Tell the people what you have achieved in Delhi over the last ten years and what you plan to do in the future. Simply putting people in jail or abusing them won't earn you votes," he asserted. Kejriwal further alleged that for years, such plots have been hatched, "dragging us into fabricated cases and imprisoning us, but the people will give a fitting reply to this". The people do not like this kind of politics and the BJP should tell the people of Delhi what they have done in the city over the last 10 years and what they plan to do in the future, the party said in a statement.

Further, Atishi expressed her faith in the justice system of this country. "Just as all our senior party leaders who were falsely implicated were eventually granted bail after the truth came out, I am confident that truth will prevail again," she said. The senior AAP leaders said to the BJP that by filing false cases against us, they are attempting to block the essential services for the people of Delhi. "Whether it's trying to stop the free bus travel for women through a case against me, or filing cases against schools, the electricity department, or Mohalla Clinics, the people of Delhi are closely watching," she added.

## BJP hits out at AAP Government, accuses Kejriwal, Atishi of political fraud

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP on Wednesday hit out at the AAP government and charged Arvind Kejriwal and Atishi of political fraud. This accusation came in the backdrop of controversy surrounding Sanjeevani health scheme and Mahila Samman scheme promising a monthly allowance to women. Addressing a joint conference, state BJP president Virendra Sachdeva and Leader of Opposition in the Assembly Vijender Gupta said the AAP government stands exposed in the eyes of the public. The BJP also claimed the ruling party is writhing like someone caught in the act of committing wrongdoing or theft. Delhi BJP President said that Kejriwal should apologize to the people of Delhi for the fake Mahila Samman and Sanjeevani schemes.

Sachdeva remarked that after returning from jail, Kejriwal had to resign as the Chief Minister of Delhi and began to see his defeat in the upcoming assembly elections. At this point, he started announcing schemes that were entirely fictional and lacked any ground implementation. The state BJP chief highlighted that for the first time in 12 years of power, a government promised to fix erroneous electricity and water bills, ensure the supply of clean water instead of dirty water, and repair broken roads — but only after being re-elected to power. When these false promises began to fail, Kejriwal tried repackaging his previously announced Mahila Samman Scheme, but it is not working. After deceiving women in Punjab with the same scheme, Kejriwal tried to sell the dream of Rs 2,100 per month to women in Delhi, Sachdeva

said. The Delhi BJP President added that while BJP MPs were fighting in the Delhi High Court for the implementation of the Ayushman Bharat scheme in Delhi, Kejriwal opposed it. Instead, he sold another dream by promising to implement the "Sanjeevani Scheme" for senior citizens after the elections. He concluded that instead of launching a fake Mahila Samman Scheme, the Delhi government should have learned from states like Madhya Pradesh and Haryana and implemented the Ayushman Bharat scheme in Punjab and 32 other states. For the first time in history, the Chief Minister and the ruling party are spreading false schemes after 12 years in power, and ultimately, to prevent the public from being misled, officials had to fulfill their duty and issue a "public warning" to make the public

aware, the BJP charged. Leader of the Opposition in the Delhi Assembly, Vijender Gupta, said the Kejriwal government has once again been exposed. Today, the revelation from the public notification of the Delhi government has used a word — "fraud." Gupta referred to his letter written to Chief Minister Atishi on November four, saying that the AAP government had promised to give Rs one thousand rupees to each person in Delhi before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections and had them fill out forms, saying that they would provide one thousand rupees to all applicants starting in April. However, as soon as the elections ended, the AAP government's promise was forgotten, and they did not give a single penny. Gupta appealed to people whose money is being withdrawn after providing OTP to contact the BJP, promising to help get their money back.

## Forming alliance with AAP for 2024 LS polls was 'mistake', says Congress

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Congress on Wednesday launched an attack on AAP and former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal with senior party leader and AICC treasurer Ajay Maken labeled the AAP national convener as anti-national, saying forming an alliance with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections was a 'mistake' on Congress's part, which now needs to be rectified. Releasing a 12-point 'white paper' titled 'Mauka Mauka, Har Baar Dhoka' against the AAP government, Maken lashed out at Kejriwal, saying his party came to power riding on the Janlokpal agitation but has failed to set up the anti-corruption ombudsman. Addressing a press conference, AICC treasurer Maken lashed out at Kejriwal and said, "If there is one word to describe former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal here then it



would be Farziwal." "If anyone is the king of fraud in the entire country then it is Kejriwal and that is why we have come here with a white paper on the Kejriwal government and also on the BJP government at the Centre," Maken said. Maken said that forming an alliance with AAP was a 'mistake' that should be rectified, and said, "I feel that today the plight of Delhi and that the Congress got weakened here is only because of the fact that we supported AAP for 40 days in 2013." Maken lashed out at Kejriwal,

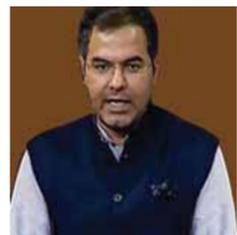
saying his party came to power riding on the Janlokpal agitation but has failed to set up the anti-corruption ombudsman. "If there is one word to describe former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal here then it would be Farziwal," he said while releasing the white paper titled 'Mauka Mauka, Har Baar Dhoka'. "If anyone is the king of fraud in the entire country then it is Kejriwal and that is why we have come here with a white paper on the Kejriwal government and also on the BJP government at the Centre," Maken said. Maken, elaborating on the 12 main points in the White Paper, said that while thousands of people fled Delhi in agony during the Covid-19 pandemic, BJP built the Central Vista and Kejriwal constructed his "Sheesh Mahal"; Rs 1780 crore budget allocation of old age pension were allowed to lapse as the Central Government allocated only Rs 1800 per pensioner instead of Rs 2000,

and Kejriwal Government refused to add the rest Rs 200, and thus allowed the budgeted amount to lapse, though the best option would have been to pay the Rs 1800 per pensioner given by the Centre. Maken questioned why the Janlokpal had not been formed even in Punjab. "If LG is not allowing you here, then make it in Punjab. Who is stopping you? You have a full-fledged government there, why don't you make it there? This is just an excuse. The party (AAP) was formed 10 years ago in the name of Janlokpal, now they have forgotten it," he said. They also used to say that they would make Delhi like London. "They have made the national capital number 1 in pollution," he said. Along with Maken, and AICC Delhi in-charge Qazi Mohd Nizamuddin, Delhi Congress president Devender Yadav, co-incharges Danish Abrar and Sukhwinder Singh Danny were also present.

## BJP offering Rs 1,100 to women from slum areas in New Delhi, alleges CM Atishi

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The political slugfest between the AAP and the BJP intensified in Delhi on Wednesday as the Chief Minister Atishi alleged that the BJP was offering Rs 1,100 to women from slum areas in the New Delhi constituency, and that the cash distribution took place at the residence of former BJP MP Parvesh Sahib Singh Verma. However, Verma has rejected the charge and said the Rashtriya Swabhiman Sanstha, formed by his father and former Delhi Chief Minister Sahib Singh Verma 25 years ago, was behind the scheme to provide monthly financial assistance of Rs 1,100 to poor women. In a statement, Verma said the 'Rashtriya Swabhiman' was behind the scheme to provide monthly financial assistance



of Rs 1,100 to women from poor sections of society. Taking a dig at AAP, Verma also said that at least he was "not distributing liquor like Arvind Kejriwal". Earlier, addressing a press conference, Atishi alleged that "Rs 1,100 each was given to women from slum clusters at former BJP MP Parvesh Verma's residence at Windsor Place, and their voter ID details were noted down." "I urge the Enforcement Directorate (ED), the Central

Bureau of Investigation (CBI), and the Delhi Police to raid Parvesh Verma's residence. There is credible information that crores of rupees in cash are still lying there. If these agencies act now, the truth about BJP's unethical practices will be exposed to the entire country," she said, adding that the AAP will make formal complaints to the police and the election commission and demanded Verma's arrest. The controversy escalated when AAP leaders, including MP Saurabh Bharadwaj, slammed Verma and the BJP for allegedly using the tactic of vote-buying. Verma, a former West Delhi BJP MP, had earlier claimed that he was asked by senior party leaders to start preparations for contesting from the New Delhi Assembly segment.

## Delhi Govt received 84,765 pollution complaints this year via Green Delhi app

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi government has received 84,765 complaints related to pollution through its Green Delhi App so far this year. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), the Public Works Department (PWD), and the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) are the civic agencies handling the bulk of the grievances. The MCD accounted for the highest number of complaints at 54,878, of which 46,279 (84.33 per cent) have been resolved, while 8,599 remain pending. The PWD received 12,327 complaints, resolving 10,803 (87.64 per cent) and leaving 1,524 unresolved. The DDA registered 4,795 complaints, addressing 4,424 (92.26 per cent) with 371 still pending.

## DMRC celebrates its 22nd anniversary of commencement of passenger operations

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

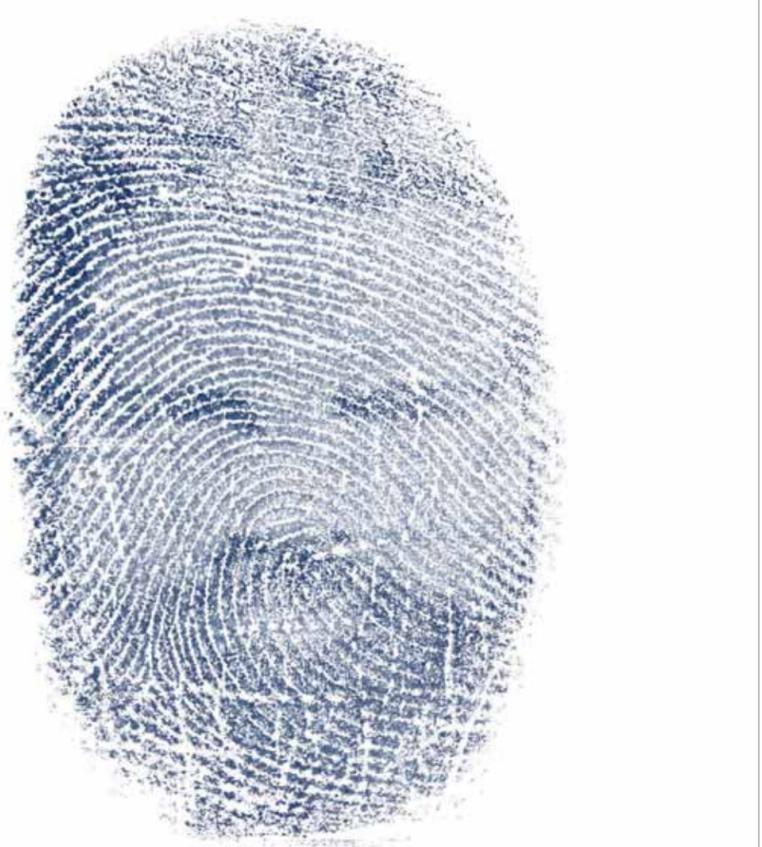
The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) on Wednesday celebrated its 22nd anniversary of the commencement of its passenger operations. It was on December 24, 2002 that the first Delhi Metro train, TS-01, was flagged off by then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, introducing a new era of modern public transport in Delhi NCR. The TS-01 train, which started DMRC's journey, has carved a legacy of its own in bringing modern public transport to Delhi. Commissioned in 2002, TS-01 began as a 4-coach train but has been upgraded over the years to meet growing passenger demand, and expanded to six coaches in 2014 and further to eight coaches in 2023. Over its 22-year journey, TS-01 has been a symbol of reliability and efficiency, covering approximately 27 lakh kilometers, safely transporting over 5.4 crore passengers, and executing an impressive 23 lakh door operations. Manufactured by the MRM Consortium in South Korea,



the train was transported to Kolkata by ship and then to Delhi via the Indian Railways network. Its advanced propulsion system has not only ensured smooth operations but also contributed to environmental sustainability by regenerating approximately 40% of the total power consumed through regenerative braking. To ensure smooth operations and passenger safety, TS-01 has undergone two major overhauls/upgrades by DMRC's expert maintenance teams. As a result, TS-01 has consistently maintained a Mean Distance Between Failures (MDBF) of

84,000 kilometers, significantly exceeding the contractual requirement of 40,000 kilometers. To keep up with modern standards, TS-01 has recently undergone a mid-life refurbishment to provide passengers with enhanced features and comfort. The upgrades include advanced passenger systems such as real-time route maps, safety videos, CCTV for added security, and emergency alarms for convenience. The doors have been refurbished, and a new fire detection system has been installed to boost safety. For passenger

comfort, mobile and laptop charging outlets have also been added, along with a fresh interior and exterior repainting to improve aesthetics. As a proud testimony of DMRC's impeccable maintenance mechanism and upkeep schedule, train TS-01 continues to operate passenger services even today on the Red Line as the first among equals from Delhi Metro's ever expanding fleet of over 350 train sets. The train was also in operation on Wednesday and to celebrate this special occasion, it was decorated with flowers and a commemorative banner. As DMRC celebrates its 22nd anniversary, it also reflects on a year of record achievements, including the highest-ever single-day passenger journeys of 78.67 lakh recorded on November 18. With significant advancements in digital ticketing, technological upgrades, and ongoing Phase-IV expansions, DMRC is leading in its mission to transform urban transportation and enhance the quality of life of the residents of Delhi NCR.



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# PM Modi, President Murmu join prayer ceremony to pay tributes to Vajpayee on birth centenary

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI /IMPHAL  
/BHUBANESWAR/LUCKNOW

President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi were among the dignitaries who joined a prayer ceremony at the memorial of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Wednesday to pay tributes to him on his birth centenary. Union ministers, including Amit Shah and J P Nadda, besides BJP allies such as Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and Union ministers Lalan Singh of the JD(U) and Jitendra Ram Manjhi of HAM(S) paid homage to the BJP stalwart at 'Sadaiv Atal'.

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankar and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla besides the members of Vajpayee's adopted family were also present. Prime Minister Modi said in a social media post the impact

of how Vajpayee preserved constitutional values and gave new direction and momentum to the country will remain forever. Union Home Minister Shah in his tributes said his dedication towards good governance and public welfare will continue to guide future generations. After paying tributes to Vajpayee at his memorial, 'Sadaiv Atal', here, Shah said Vajpayee ushered in a new era of development and good governance in the country with his dedication towards ideology and value-based politics. "Atal ji's dedication towards good governance and public welfare will continue to guide future generations," the minister said in a social media post in Hindi. He said Vajpayee made cultural nationalism a work culture and always kept the country's security and public welfare paramount. "Atal ji

will continue to guide the countrymen on the path of national service till eternity like the Pole Star," Shah said. In his tributes, Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh said the former Prime Minister's principles and teachings have inspired the building of a robust economy for this nation. Singh said in a social media post "Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji has been a pivotal figure in shaping India's diplomacy and national security, while continuing to serve as a source of guidance and wisdom to all of us.. "His principles and teachings have inspired the building of a robust economy for this nation, serving as an enduring source of motivation for the generations to come" Singh added.. Singh in another post also extended his greetings on the occasion of Good Governance Day.



He said "This day, observed in honour of the birth anniversary of former PM and Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee Ji, reminds us of the importance of transparent, accountable, and people-centric governance. Let us reaffirm our dedication to building a state where governance empowers every citizen and paves the way for a brighter future."

Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi and his predecessor and BJD leader Naveen Patnaik on Wednesday paid tributes to former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The Odisha government's Information and Public Relations (I&PR) Department, in a message, termed Vajpayee as 'Vikas Purush' and said the state

scaled new heights under his leadership. The government recounted some major developmental projects, including the establishment of AIIMS Bhubaneswar, an oil refinery at Paradip and creation of the East Coast Railway (ECoR) division with its headquarters in Bhubaneswar, undertaken during the tenure of the former Prime Minister. The construction of 400 km of highways in Odisha under the Golden Quadrilateral project, and road network of more than 18,000 km (PMSY) to connect the unconnected stand testament to the eponym 'Vikas Purush', it said. On the occasion of Good Governance Day, the people of Odisha pay heartfelt tribute to Vajpayee, the architect of administrative excellence, it added. In a social media, Chief Minister Majhi paid tributes

to the former prime minister and extended heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to everyone on the occasion of Good Governance Day. Several senior political leaders from Odisha, including Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, Union Minister for Tribal Affairs Jual Oram, and state BJP president Manmohan Samal paid respects to Vajpayee on his birth centenary. "Humble tributes to former Prime Minister of India, #AtalBihariVajpayee on his birth anniversary. #Atal ji was a distinguished statesman, outstanding parliamentarian, a renowned poet and orator. His contribution to the nation building will continue to inspire," former chief minister Naveen Patnaik wrote in a social media post. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said Vajpayee's good governance and foresight gave India a new direction in the

field of roads, telecom and rural development. Elaborating on the definition of good governance, Rajnath Singh said it is one where every person's needs are fulfilled, he feels safe and has the opportunity to express his views. "This was Atal ji's vision, which is being carried forward by Prime Minister Narendra Modi today," Singh said addressing the birth centenary celebrations of Vajpayee with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in Lucknow. The leaders paid floral tributes to the statue of the former prime minister in Lok Bhavan. Vajpayee's birth anniversary is observed as 'Good Governance' Day. The defence minister also praised Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on the issue of law and order and the implementation of welfare schemes.

## Row over Waqf land: Karnataka State officials to appear before Parliamentary Panel

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

Amid a row over Waqf land in Karnataka, officials from the state government are scheduled to appear before the parliamentary panel examining the Waqf Amendment Bill on Thursday. The Joint Committee on the Waqf Amendment Bill, chaired by BJP member Jagadambika Pal, is scheduled to hear views from representatives of the governments of Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Delhi in sittings spread over two days beginning Thursday. Delhi's Food and Supply Minister Imran Hussain is also scheduled to address the committee on Friday, followed by the recording of evidence by the representatives of the Delhi government. The deposition of officials from the Congress-led Karnataka government comes in the wake of a row over claims by BJP leaders that over 1,500 acres of land belonging to farmers in the state were being taken over by



the Waqf board. Pal had visited Karnataka and interacted with the farmers who had received notices from the state government regarding encroachment over properties belonging to the Waqf Board. The committee had also written to state governments seeking details of Waqf properties occupied by them in an unauthorised manner as per the Sachar panel report. The UPA government constituted the Sachar Committee in 2005 to study the social, economic and educational

## CRPF has done a commendable job in tackling Naxalism, says Shah

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday said the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) has done a commendable job in tackling Naxalism and restoring peace and stability in the Northeastern states and Jammu and Kashmir. Shah also said the CRPF is playing an important role in ensuring internal security and peace in the country, according to an official statement. The home minister said this while visiting the CRPF headquarters where he met senior officers of the force, including its Director General Anish Dayal Singh, it said. During the visit, Shah had a comprehensive review of the operations and administrative efficiency of the world's largest paramilitary force. The CRPF has done a commendable job in tackling Naxalism and restoring peace and stability in the Northeastern states and Jammu and Kashmir, he said. The CRPF chief apprised the



home minister about the various welfare schemes being implemented for the families of martyred jawans of the force, including compassionate appointments in the CRPF. Shah emphasised the importance of promoting Hindi in the daily functioning of the force to strengthen linguistic unity. Along with emphasising the use of more and more 'Shri Ann' (Millets) for better health of the soldiers, the home minister also called upon the soldiers to extract the benefits of Ayurveda and

## PM Modi greets people on Christmas

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted people on Christmas on Wednesday. He said in a social media post, "Wishing you all a Merry Christmas. May the teachings of Lord Jesus Christ show everyone the path of peace and prosperity." Nadda added that he prayed for happiness and well-being of all fellow countrymen. He said, "May our nation continue to progress on the path of development, guided by the mantra of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas, and reach our destination of Viksit Bharat 2047 with the contribution of all Indians. Wishing you all a Merry Christmas!"



Bishop's Conference of India headquarters and the Sacred Heart Cathedral Church here on Christmas. He said in a social media post, "As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, let us also celebrate the spirit of giving, the pursuit of peace, the power of hope, and how we as a nation can embrace and amplify the values of love, compassion and harmony." Nadda added that he prayed for happiness and well-being of all fellow countrymen. He said, "May our nation continue to progress on the path of development, guided by the mantra of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas, and reach our destination of Viksit Bharat 2047 with the contribution of all Indians. Wishing you all a Merry Christmas!"

## Governance reforms must begin at grassroots level to bring about lasting change, says Jitendra

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

Union Minister Jitendra Singh on Wednesday said that the governance reforms must begin at the grassroots level to bring about long-lasting and meaningful change. In a significant step towards strengthening grassroots governance, he launched the 'Viksit Panchayat Karmayogi' initiative on Good Governance Day, celebrated every year to mark birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The initiative, which is part of the broader 'Prashasan Gaon Ki Aur' campaign, aims to enhance the capacity and competence of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) by equipping elected representatives and officials with the tools and knowledge required for effective governance and par-

ticipatory planning, said Singh, the Minister of State for Personnel. He emphasised "that governance reforms must begin at the grassroots to bring about long-lasting and meaningful change as well as to fill up the capacity gaps". Piloted in Odisha, Assam, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh, the initiative leverages e-learning platforms, AI-powered chatbots, and mobile apps to bridge knowledge gaps and enhance service delivery, Singh said. He said that this program aligns with the government's broader mission to decentralise governance and foster participatory decision-making at the grassroots level. The initiative is expected to create scalable models of citizen-centric governance, enabling PRIs to drive equitable and sustainable development across rural India, according to a Personnel

Ministry statement. The minister also launched a series of transformative initiatives on the occasion of the Good Governance Day. The first initiative unveiled by Singh was the launch of a new dashboard on the iGOT (integrated government online training) Karmayogi platform, along with the milestone introduction of the 1600th e-learning course. The enhanced dashboard is designed to empower ministries, departments, and state administrators with advanced tools to monitor user registrations, course completions, and overall progress in capacity-building efforts. With customisable views and robust data filtration capabilities, the dashboard provides detailed insights to improve decision-making and optimize training initiatives, the statement said. Additionally, the introduction

of the 1600th course on the platform underscores the government's commitment to fostering a diverse and comprehensive learning ecosystem, it said. The minister also launched CPGRAMS (Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System) Annual Report 2024. As the world's largest citizen interface platform, CPGRAMS has redefined grievance redressal by integrating advanced technologies, multilingual support, and comprehensive tracking mechanisms. The CPGRAMS allows citizens to raise grievances against government departments online. The report showcases key achievements, including the resolution of over 25 lakh grievances annually and the implementation of the Grievance Redressal Assessment and Index (GRAI), the statement said.

## Potato plants naturally produce SGAs, which are harmful if humans consume them

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

Did you know that potato plants naturally produce chemicals called steroidal glycoalkaloids (SGAs), which are found in high quantities in the green parts of the potato peels and in the sprouting areas? While these compounds help the plants protect themselves from insects, these are harmful in case consumed by humans. Now, scientists have discovered a way to remove these toxic compounds from potatoes, making them safer to eat and easier to store. This breakthrough could reduce food waste and enhance crop farming in space and other extreme environments. "These compounds are critical for plants to ward off insects, but they make certain parts of these crops inedible," said Adam Jozwiak, a UCR molec-



ular biochemist who led the study. "Now that we've uncovered the biosynthetic pathway, we can potentially create plants that produce these compounds only in the leaves while keeping the edible parts safe." Sunlight can induce the production of SGAs in potato tubers—the part of the potato plant that is eaten—even after they've been harvested. By identifying a key genetic mechanism in SGA production, UC Riverside researchers may be able to reduce potatoes' toxic-

ity while preserving the plants' natural defenses. Removing SGAs from potatoes will also make them easier to store and transport in open air. The research, published in Science, focuses on a protein called "GAME15," which plays a key role in directing the plant's production of SGAs. This protein acts both as an enzyme and a scaffold, organizing other enzymes into a "conversion factory" that efficiently produces SGAs while preventing toxic compounds from leaking into other parts of plant cells, where they would cause damage. By engineering plants to control when and where SGAs are produced—such as in the leaves but not in the potatoes themselves—the researchers envision crops that can be stored without the risk of toxicity from sunlight exposure. "You could store the potatoes in

your kitchen and not worry about exposure to the sun, which makes them produce more SGAs. Then, you could eat them whenever you want, reducing food waste," Jozwiak said. Additionally, the findings could enable the use of other plant parts, such as leaves, for food in limited-space environments like space missions or vertical farming systems. "For space farming, where every part of a plant may need to be edible, these findings are especially promising," Jozwiak added. "Our work demonstrates that plants have evolved ingenious ways to balance growth, reproduction, and defense," Jozwiak said. This research involved scientists from the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel, as well as Kobe University, the RIKEN Center for Sustainable Resource Science, and Osaka University in Japan.

# NDA leaders meet at BJP president Nadda's residence

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

Amid heightened attacks from the Congress and the INDIA bloc over Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on B.R. Ambedkar, National Democratic Alliance (NDA) leaders met here at BJP president J P Nadda's residence on Wednesday on the birth centenary of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. According to sources, Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP president J P Nadda discussed the constitutional issues raised by the Congress party in detail during the meeting with NDA leaders. Sources said the BJP's central message to its allies was clear: the NDA must present a unified front to neutralise the Opposition's attacks effectively. Notably absent from the meeting were Bihar Chief

Minister Nitish Kumar and Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. The JD(U) was represented by Union Minister Rajiv Ranjan, also known as Lalan Singh, while the Shiv Sena sent Union MoS Prataprao Ganpatrao Jadhav. Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) president and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, Union Civil Aviation Minister Ram Mohan Naidu Kinjarapu, and Union ministers from various NDA constituents such as Apna Dal (S) president Anupriya Patel, and JD(S) leader H D Kumaraswamy, were present. Bihar's Hindustani Awam Morcha (S) leader Jitan Ram Manjhi, also a minister in the Modi government, Rashtriya Lok Morcha (RLM) president Upendra Kushwaha, a Rajya Sabha MP, and Thushar



Vellappally, president of Bharath Dharmma Jana Sena, were also present at the meeting. "Attended the NDA leaders' meeting in New Delhi today. Under the visionary leadership of PM Narendra Modi, India is achieving unprecedented milestones and has positioned itself as a global superpower," Nadda said in a

post on X after the meeting. "The NDA government remains steadfast in its pursuit of the vision of 'Viksit Bharat@2047', ensuring a brighter and more prosperous future for all," he added. During the discussions, Shah reportedly reflected on recent political developments, particularly lessons drawn from the Winter Session of Parliament. He accused the Congress of historically disregarding Ambedkar's legacy while now attempting to appropriate it for political gain. He underscored the need for the BJP and its allies to respond robustly and in unison to such manoeuvres. Uttar Pradesh's NISHAD Party chief Sanjay Nishad said it was an "informal" meeting of the NDA leaders on the occasion of the birth centenary of Vajpayee. "Our future strategy is to move for-

ward together. We have to show unity in all the upcoming elections... Everyone congratulated (the BJP leaders) in the meeting for the victory in Haryana and Maharashtra assembly polls," he told reporters when asked about the meeting. Nishad said the meeting also discussed coalition strategy to ensure that "all the work" done by Prime Minister Modi reaches the ground and "promises made to people during elections" are fulfilled. The issue of giving reservation to the fishing community was also raised at the meeting, he said. "I gave 30-37 page evidence on the issue of giving reservation to the fishing community since it was a poll promise. They will call (us) after a week and discuss it," Nishad said. Asked if issue of Shah's remarks on Ambedkar

came up at the meeting, the NISHAD Party chief said, "... We have come for people's welfare. How to get success in that, energy needs to be spent on that." "There is no need to respond to their narrative and negative thoughts," he added in an apparent reference to the Congress and other opposition parties who are up in arms against Shah over his remarks. Though there was no official word on the agenda of the meeting, sources said good governance and political issues were discussed. The NDA meeting comes amid the alliance's focus on simultaneous elections, with all constituents lending support to the proposal. A Joint Committee of Parliament, constituted to scrutinise two bills for simultaneous polls, is expected to meet on January 8.

# Suspense grips as unidentified vehicle rams ambulance carrying suspected terrorists' bodies

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ RAMPUR

Suspense looms large over a mysterious accident late Tuesday night on the Rampur bypass, where an unidentified vehicle rammed into an ambulance transporting the bodies of three suspected terrorists of the 'Khalistan Zindabad Force'. The terrorists had been killed in a dramatic encounter in Pilibhit just days earlier.

The collision occurred as the ambulance was en route to Punjab with the bodies of the suspected militants, who were allegedly involved in a grenade attack on a police post in Gurdaspur. While no injuries were reported, the ambulance sustained significant damage, forcing the authorities to transfer the bodies to another vehicle. Rampur Superintendent of Police Vidyasagar Mishra described the incident as "highly unusual" and said the circumstances are being closely investigated. "As soon as we received information



about the accident, our teams rushed to the site. The damaged ambulance was removed, and the bodies were safely shifted to another vehicle," Mishra stated. The police remain perplexed about the motive behind the collision, with no clear leads on the identity of the vehicle or its driver. Officers on the case have not ruled out the possibility of sabotage. "We cannot ignore any angle,

including deliberate interference by elements seeking to disrupt the transportation process. Given the high-profile nature of the deceased, the possibility of a planned attempt to tamper with evidence or create chaos cannot be dismissed," said a senior police officer on condition of anonymity. The Punjab Police, which had collaborated with Uttar

Pradesh Police in neutralizing the suspected terrorists in Pilibhit's Purnapur, is now coordinating on the investigation into this incident. Sources suggest the possibility of local sympathizers of the 'Khalistan Zindabad Force' being involved, though no concrete evidence has yet emerged. The three militants killed in the encounter had been wanted for orchestrating the grenade attack in Gurdaspur, which left the security establishment on high alert. Their deaths had been seen as a major breakthrough, but this accident has cast a shadow of doubt over what should have been a straightforward process. Witnesses have reportedly provided conflicting accounts of the collision, further deepening the mystery. "It happened so suddenly. The vehicle came out of nowhere and hit the ambulance before speeding

away. It didn't seem like an accident," said one eyewitness who was near the scene. Both Rampur Police and Punjab Police have launched separate inquiries, but the lack of CCTV footage on the bypass and the absence of a vehicle registration number are hampering progress. "This incident raises more questions than answers," admitted a senior investigator. "Was it a coincidence, or was it a calculated move to unsettle the ongoing case? The answers will determine whether we are dealing with a road accident or something far more sinister." As the investigation unfolds, the police are tightening security around the transportation of high-profile detainees and evidence. Meanwhile, the incident has left locals and officials on edge, with fears that the shadow of Khalistani extremism could once again be looming in the region.

# Snowfall closes 226 roads in Himachal Pradesh, disrupts power supply amid freezing temperatures

PTI ■ SHIMLA

A total of 226 roads, including three national highways, were closed in Himachal Pradesh following snowfall in several districts, officials said on Wednesday. People shivered under piercing cold wave conditions as minimum temperatures dropped by a few notches in Jot, which received 10 cm of snow in the past 24 hours, followed by Khadralla (5 cm), Pooh (2 cm), Sangla (1.2 cm) and Keylong (1 cm). Tabo in the Lahaul and Spiti district was the coldest place in Himachal Pradesh, recording a night temperature of minus 10.6 degrees Celsius. A total of 226 roads, including three national highways including Attari and Leh, Sanj to Aut in Kullu district, Khab Sangam in Kinnaur district, and Gramphoo in Lahaul and Spiti district were closed for traffic, officials said. According to the state emergency operation center, a maximum of 123 roads were closed in Shimla district, 36 in Lahaul and Spiti and 25 in Kullu. Additionally, 173



transformers were disrupted, affecting power supply across the state. The hopes of locals and tourists to experience a white Christmas in the Queen of Hills, Shimla, were dashed as the city was greeted by bright sunshine on Wednesday morning. Bhuntar received 9.7 mm of rain, Rampur 9.4 mm, Shimla 8.4 mm, Bajaura 8 mm, Seobagh 7.2 mm, Manali 7 mm, Gohar 6 mm, Mandi 5.4 mm, and Jubbarhatti 3.8 mm, the Met office reported. The Met office has predicted rain and snow at isolated places in some parts of the state, particularly in Shimla, from Friday evening to Sunday

afternoon, with precipitation expected to peak on Saturday. An intense cold wave persisted in Mandi, Manali, Chamba, Una, Hamirpur, and Sundernagar, while dense and moderate fog was observed in Sundernagar and Mandi, respectively, the Met office said. The weather office has issued an 'orange' warning for severe cold in Bilaspur, Una, Hamirpur, and Mandi on Wednesday and a 'yellow' warning for dense fog over parts of the Bhakra Dam reservoir area and the Balh Valley in Mandi on Thursday and Sunday.

# UP to soon unveil new five-year export policy: UP industrial development minister Nand Gopal Gupta



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW/NEW DELHI

The Yogi Adityanath-led Uttar Pradesh government will soon unveil a new export policy for 2025-30 as the State aims to significantly increase its share in India's outward shipments and create more employment opportunities. Under the 2020-2025 export policy, the state government provides comprehensive hand-holding support to the exporters. In an interview to The Pioneer, Uttar Pradesh minister for industrial development, export

promotion, NRI, and investment promotion Nand Gopal Gupta "Nandi" informed that the state government is working on a new five-year export policy and extensive consultations with different stakeholders are being held. "We are working on unveiling an ambitious Export Policy for 2025-30 to boost the state's contribution to India's exports," the Minister said. In FY 2023-24 state's share in India's total export was 4.71 per cent. In the first two quarters (April-September) of the current financial year, Uttar Pradesh's share in country's total export was estimated at 4.89 per cent. "Our focus on enhancing export capabilities will propel UP towards becoming a USD 1 trillion economy, driving revenue and fostering development. The Yogi government remains committed to transforming Uttar Pradesh into India's most prosperous state," Gupta said. He said

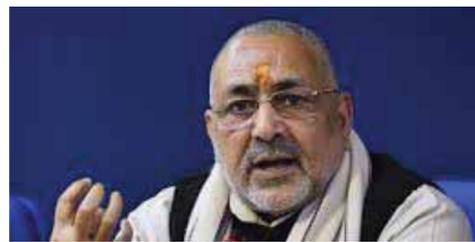
operationalisation of the Jewar Airport will further help exports from the state. It will save time and save expenditure on freight charges. To promote export-oriented industries, the Government of Uttar Pradesh has ensured development of adequate infrastructural facilities in the state. It is to be noted here that the state has the largest rail network in the country, 38 per cent of the expressways, 4 international airports, 9 domestic airports and 7 under-construction airports along with Jewar Airport which is due to be operational very soon. The Minister informed that the government is providing financial assistance to the exporters through various schemes, including Marketing Development Assistance, Gateway Port Scheme and Air Freight rationalization schemes. Uttar Pradesh has also started organising International Trade Show (UPITS) since 2023 through

which it is providing global marketing exposure and business to the exporters by conducting B2B sessions. Besides the government is also providing international marketing exposure to exporters from the state by participating in various international trade shows organised by the central government like IITF and Bharat Tex. Minister Gupta emphasised the state government has adopted export as well as investment friendly policies along with a focus on the development of better logistics facilities in the state. All these initiatives will help in increasing exports from the state and help Uttar Pradesh become a USD One trillion economy. India's total exports (merchandise and services combined) during April-November 2024 was estimated at USD 536.25 billion, a growth of 7.61 per cent from USD 498.33 billion in the year ago period.

# Giriraj Singh bats for Bharat Ratna for Bihar CM Nitish Kumar and Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik

PTI ■ BEGUSARAI/PATNA

Union minister Giriraj Singh on Wednesday said the highest civilian honour, Bharat Ratna, should be conferred upon Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and former CM of Odisha, Naveen Patnaik. The outspoken BJP leader expressed the sentiment in Begusarai, his Lok Sabha constituency, lavishing praise on Kumar, a current ally, and Patnaik, a former alliance partner whom the saffron party ousted from power earlier this year. "Bihar was known for decrepit roads, schools and buildings until the ascent to power of Nitish Kumar, who took the state to new heights. Likewise, Naveen Patnaik served Odisha for so many years. Leaders like them deserve the highest honour, like Bharat Ratna," he said. Widely perceived as a detractor of Kumar in Bihar's political circles, Singh also asserted that "mischief" of RJD supreme Lalu Prasad notwithstanding, the NDA was looking forward



to contesting the upcoming assembly polls under the JD(U) supremo's leadership. Notably, the avrment comes in the backdrop of attempts by the RJD, which has aligned with the JD(U) twice, to fish in the NDA's troubled waters. On Tuesday, Prasad's son and heir apparent Tejashwi Yadav had alleged, "The BJP has assumed control of the chief minister's office. Four close aides of Kumar, of whom two are in Delhi, are in touch with the BJP leadership. Amit Shah is clearly at work." The young leader had made the remark in the backdrop of Shah's reluctance to affirm, at an event hosted by a private

news channel, that Kumar will be the NDA's face for assembly polls in Bihar. This has led to speculations in a section of the media that the BJP might push for a strategy in Bihar, where assembly polls are due in less than a year, similar to the one adopted in Maharashtra. In the Maharashtra assembly polls held last month, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde was not projected as the NDA's face. After the NDA's landslide victory, the BJP, which emerged as the largest constituent, muscled its way through and Devendra Fadnis became the new chief minister.

# Security agencies hunt for local helpers of Khalistani terrorists in Terai region

PTI ■ BAREILLY/UP

Following the encounter of three Khalistan Zindabad Force (KZF) terrorists in Pilibhit, security agencies are intensifying their search for their local helpers in the Terai region. Three suspected Khalistani terrorists allegedly involved in the grenade attack in Gurdaspur were killed in an encounter with police in Pilibhit early Monday, with Punjab's Director General of Police Gaurav Yadav terming it as a major breakthrough against a Pakistan-sponsored terror module. Bareilly Range IG Rakesh Singh said the police and intelligence agencies are on high alert following the threats. "Investigations are underway, and security measures have been intensified in the border areas. "Action will be taken against anyone who is found to have helped the terror elements," he said. The success in Pilibhit comes after three blasts which took place in different districts of Punjab this month. The gunfight between members of the KZF and a joint team of Uttar Pradesh Police and Punjab Police took place in Purnapur area of Pilibhit after three module members opened fire at the police party. Following the encounter, a police case was filed here on Tuesday after a video turned up on X showing a person making threats to spread terror during the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, an officer said. "On December 24, a video was shared on various handles on social media platform (X) in which a person was using objectionable words against Hindu religion.

# Mandala pooja at Sabarimala Temple to take place on December 26

PTI ■ KOTTAYAM

The mandala pooja, a key ritual marking the conclusion of the first phase of the annual pilgrimage to the Sabarimala Lord Ayyappa Temple, will take place on December 26. The ritual will be carried out between noon and 12.30 pm on the day by temple tantri (head priest) Kandararu Rajeevaru, Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) President P S Prasanth said in a press conference here on Tuesday. The ceremonial "thankanki" procession, commenced from the Aranmula Parthasarathi Temple in Pathanamthitta on

Sunday, would reach Pamba by Wednesday afternoon, he said. The procession will first be welcomed by Devaswom Minister V N Vasavan at Pamba, and then received by the TDB President and members at the Sannidhanam (temple complex) in the evening. Later, the "thankanki," the sacred attire, would be draped on the idol of the presiding deity before the "aarathi." After the mandala pooja and the "neyyabhishekam," the portals of the Lord Ayyappa temple would be closed by 11 pm on December 26, marking the culmination of the first leg of the annual pilgrimage, he said.

The Sabarimala would be reopened on December 30 evening for Makaravilakku festivities, Prashant said, adding, the ritual would be held on January 14. As part of crowd management, the virtual queue bookings have been limited to 50,000 and 60,000 for events on December 25 and 26. The cap is also in line with a high court directive, according to which, the spot bookings must be limited to 5,000 on both days, the TDB president said. The number of virtual queue bookings on January 13 and 14 as part of the Makaravilakku festivities has been fixed at 50,000 and 40,000, he said.

# Tsunami survivor Sowmya finds new joy 20 years later, becomes mother after overcoming unimaginable loss

PTI ■ CHENNAI

The inefaceable scars of the tragic loss of their close blood relations still haunt the survivors 20 years after the tsunami struck on the fateful morning of December 26, 2004. Sowmya, one of the survivors, who was rescued in Nagapattinam district that bore the brunt of the giant tidal wave killing 6,065 people, has become a mother of a girl child now. Like several other children orphaned by the tsunami, she accepted the harsh reality and showed resilience to overcome the crisis and live. She was four years old when

the tsunami hit the coast, massively destroying property and lives. Sowmya later became the goddaughter of IAS official Dr J Radhakrishnan and completed her BA in Economics. Radhakrishnan solemnised her marriage with K Subash, a technician, in 2022. In October this year, she became a mother of a girl child. "It is heartwarming to see our goddaughter grow up and become a mother. Our family felt blessed," Radhakrishnan, currently Additional Chief Secretary, Cooperative Department said.

He was joined by his wife Krithika and son Dr R Arvind and Nagapattinam district collector P Akash, in showering blessings and gifts on Sowmya at her foster home in the district. Meena, rescued as a toddler, and Sowmya were among the 40 child survivors who grew up in the Annai Sathya Government Children's Home. They came together and celebrated their reunion on December 22, ahead of the 20th anniversary of the tsunami. Among them, Tamilarsi Vijayabalan, now 35, who is BSc in IT, and also holds MCA degree, is working as a teacher at the

Annai Sathya Government Children's Home established post-tsunami to take care of 100 children. The home located in Samanthanpettai near Nagapattinam now takes care of victims of abuse and child marriage. Radhakrishnan was then posted as collector to oversee the relief and rehabilitation activities in Nagapattinam district. Apart from Radhakrishnan and his family, Collector Akash, district Child Protection Officer V Ezhilarasi and Juvenile Justice Board member M Malarvizhi too lauded the survivors who displayed resilience.

# Survey report on Sambhal's Jama Masjid-Harihar Mandir dispute likely to be submitted in January

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ SAMBHAL

The Court Commissioner, Ramesh Singh Raghav, is expected to submit the survey report concerning the claim that Sambhal's Jama Masjid was originally the Harihar Mandir. The report will likely be filed in a sealed envelope in the first week of January 2025, according to sources. The survey report, which is said to be nearly complete, is expected to be submitted on either January 2 or 3. The matter came to light after a lawsuit was filed on November 19, 2024, in the court of Civil Judge (Senior Division), Sambhal, by Kaila Devi Temple's Mahant Rishiraj Giri, advocate Harishankar Jain, and six



other petitioners. The suit claimed that the Shahi Jama Masjid was originally the Harihar Mandir. On the same day, advocate Ramesh Singh Raghav was appointed as the Court Commissioner and directed to conduct a survey of the site under heavy security and in the presence of senior district officials. On

November 24, when the Court Commissioner attempted to conduct a second survey under the protection of the District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police, violent clashes erupted, resulting in the deaths of five individuals and injuries to several police personnel. Following the incident, the report, initially due on November 29, was delayed, and a 10-day extension was granted by the court. The submission was further postponed to December 9 due to the Court Commissioner citing health issues and requesting additional time to finalize the report. This led to objections from the Jama Masjid's legal

counsel, Shakeel Warsi, who opposed the repeated extensions. Court Commissioner Raghav stated that with the court scheduled to reopen on January 1, the survey report is nearly ready and will be submitted in a sealed envelope by January 2 or 3, 2025. "The report is almost complete. Once the court resumes after its week-long recess, we plan to submit it promptly," said Raghav. The case, which has already seen significant tension and loss of life, is being closely monitored for its potential to further escalate communal sensitivities in the region. Authorities are maintaining heightened security as the legal process unfolds.

# Haryana CM Nayab Singh Saini stresses importance of sensitivity and empathy in governance on Atal Bihari Vajpayee's birth anniversary

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

On the occasion of the birth anniversary of Bharat Ratna awardee and former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Haryana Chief Minister, Nayab Singh Saini, addressed the State-level Governance Day programme in Gurugram on Wednesday. During the event, Saini emphasized the importance of sensitivity and empathy in government administration, urging officers to view their roles as an opportunity to uplift society and ease the hardships of the common people. The Chief Minister urged the officers to view each case with compassion, stating that when someone approaches their office with a problem,

they should not simply see it as a piece of paper. Instead, they should recognize it as a symbol of the individual's pain and hardship. He said that if we can understand the story behind that paper, we will have truly succeeded in our efforts towards good governance. The Chief Minister also paid tribute to Bharat Ratna awardees Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya and Atal Bihari Vajpayee on their birth anniversaries, reflecting on their monumental contributions to the nation. He said that today's day is not only a memorable occasion for all of us, but it also inspires us to strengthen our commitment towards building a better and more empowered nation. He said that Atal Bihari

Vajpayee's leadership was truly transformative for India. His vision and policies were pivotal in shaping the country's progress on both domestic and international fronts. His leadership laid the foundation for the India we see today, and it is this vision of a 'Viksit Bharat' that Prime Minister Sh. Narendra Modi is dedicated to realizing. The Chief Minister said that when our government assumed the responsibility of public service in 2014, we launched a campaign of governance reform, transitioning from good governance (Sushasan) to service (Sewa). He said that the success of such a campaign depends on Niyat (intent), Nishtha (commitment), and Niti (policy). For good

governance, he said, there must be a genuine intention to serve, and the policies must be designed in a way that leaves no room for corruption. On the strength of Niyat, Nishtha, and Niti, our government is successfully realizing the true essence of good governance, said Nayab Singh Saini. Government has successfully completed the journey toward good governance by embracing various e-governance initiatives. The Chief Minister said that in a bid to curb irregularities in land registration, the government has introduced the online issuance of No Objection Certificates (NOCs) from various departments, boards, and corporations, which are required during registration.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Extradition dilemma

Bangladesh's request to extradite Sheikh Hasina raises critical questions about India's role as a key player in South Asian politics

Bangladesh has formally requested India to extradite former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who fled to India following her ouster on August 5, 2024. The request, conveyed through a diplomatic "note verbale," places India in a delicate position, requiring a careful balancing of international law, bilateral relations, and regional stability. This article explores the background of the situation, the implications of such an extradition, and the options available to India. Sheikh Hasina, a towering figure in Bangladeshi politics and leader of the Awami League, was ousted from power after a student-led movement erupted into nationwide protests. Despite the government meeting the protesters' demands, unrest persisted, which Hasina claims was orchestrated by Muhammad Yunus, Chief Adviser to Bangladesh's interim government. The protests culminated in her removal from power, prompting her to flee to India. The diplomatic note issued by Bangladesh's interim government reflects its intention to bring Sheikh Hasina back to face accountability or to address the political turmoil she left behind.



India and Bangladesh share a complex relationship shaped by historical ties, mutual interests, and occasional tensions. Extraditing Sheikh Hasina could be seen as India's support for the interim government, potentially straining ties with the Awami League, one of Bangladesh's major political forces. The political crisis in Bangladesh has already created ripples in South Asia. Any decision by India regarding the extradition could influence the region's political dynamics, including relations with other South Asian nations. Sheikh Hasina's safety and the fairness of any trial

are also suspect as she might face attrition upon her return. India would need to weigh these concerns against its international obligations under extradition treaties and agreements. How India handles this case may affect India's stance as a regional power and its commitment to democratic principles. India could provide asylum to Sheikh Hasina, citing humanitarian grounds or concerns about the fairness of legal proceedings in Bangladesh. This would align with India's historical role as a refuge for political exiles but might antagonise the interim Bangladeshi government. India could agree to extradite Hasina with conditions ensuring her safety, fair trial, and adherence to international legal norms. Such a move might help India maintain its relations with both the interim government and Hasina's supporters. India can also delay the extradition while engaging diplomatically with Bangladesh to seek a mutually acceptable solution. This would allow India to assess the evolving political situation and minimize potential fallout. While India's decision will undoubtedly influence India-Bangladesh relations, its impact will also resonate across the region. India must weigh its options carefully, prioritising both the immediate political implications and its long-term vision for South Asian stability.

### PICTALK



The Jakhu Temple and its premises covered with snow after fresh snowfall, in Shimla

PTI

## ONOP: A bold reform or a political gamble?

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi pushes forward with his vision of 'One Nation, One Poll' the nation waits to see whether this proposal will unite or divide



KALYANI SHANKAR

The introduction of a controversial bill, 'One Nation One Poll,' has created more controversy than acceptance. The BJP has been talking about it but introduced it, which has been sent to the joint select committee of the Parliament. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in a hurry to fulfil the BJP's unfinished agenda. He had already opened the Ayodhya temple and got the revocation of Article 370 of the Constitution, which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir. This long-awaited bill aims to streamline the electoral process for 28 states and eight union territories, with an electorate of nearly a billion voters. The bill has triggered widespread debate, significant interest, and Opposition from various parties.

Though momentum is building for simultaneous elections, some questions need answers. They include whether Modi has the required two-thirds majority to pass the bill in Parliament. Is there a political consensus? Will the Opposition come on board? Is the timing of the bill right? Most Opposition parties reject the idea of simultaneous polls. They include the Congress, the Left parties, the Trinamool Congress, and regional and smaller parties. They reject it mainly to settle political scores and apprehension that they may benefit the BJP. Former President Ram Nath Kovind chaired a nine-member committee recommending simultaneous polls last year, labelling it a 'game changer'. Thirty-two parties supported the concept, and 15 rejected it. The panel also advised that the Centre form a panel to oversee the implementation of this proposal. Also, there should be a joint electoral roll for all elections so that voters will use the same list for national, state, and local polls. Over the years, elections have become a standard feature, but the 'One Nation, One Poll' bill has the potential to reshape our election process. Proponents of the bill argue that it could



significantly reduce campaign costs, alleviate the strain on administrative resources, and streamline governance. This could ultimately benefit the public by reducing the frequency of elections, a prospect that should inspire optimism. Elections in India are held at different levels. The first is panchayat, followed by the district level, the state assembly level, and finally, the national level. They happen at different times, and the government wants to streamline the system. Interestingly, the idea of simultaneous polls is not new. Historically, it was a synchronised poll from 1952 to 1967. The premature dismissal of various governments and the consequential dissolution of Assemblies led to staggered polls. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dismissed many Opposition-ruled state governments. The most important thing is that the BJP needs the support of the allies and friendly parties. In the recent 2024 polls, the BJP was 40 short of a majority in the house and could form the government only with the help of JD (U) and Telugu Desam. Most opposing parties reject simultaneous polls, including Congress, the Left parties,



HISTORICALLY, IT WAS A SYNCHRONISED POLL FROM 1952 TO 1967. THE PREMATURE DISMISSAL OF VARIOUS GOVERNMENTS AND THE CONSEQUENTIAL DISSOLUTION OF ASSEMBLIES LED TO STAGGARD POLLS

the Trinamool Congress, and regional and smaller parties. Even in the BJP, 20 MPs were absent while the bill was introduced. The Kovind panel also suggested having the votes in two parts. The first will be for Lok Sabha and Assembly votes, and the second for local groups. The bill faces significant constitutional, legal, and political challenges. The Kovind panel suggests amending Articles 83 and 172 to allow simultaneous elections. However, the BJP lacks the two-thirds majority for this amendment, and the Constitution needs clarification on concurrent polls. The potential impact on the federal structure of the country and the logistical challenges of conducting simultaneous elections for a billion voters are crucial factors to consider. Prime Minister Modi's main challenge is to gather enough support in Parliament. At the same time, the government must build political consensus and persuade the Opposition to agree. The Opposition has rejected simultaneous polls, fearing it might benefit the BJP. The 15 opposing parties hold 205 MPs, while Modi needs 362 votes to proceed.

A legal framework for simultaneous elections is essential to address mid-term government collapses and central political manoeuvring. The one nation, one poll approach reduces waste and election frequency, so the Opposition should consider it carefully and present any alternative proposals for public discussion. The One Nation One poll has been one of the poll promises of the BJP. Some core issues have already been addressed, such as the revocation of Article 370 and the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. In his third term, Modi wants to finish the unfinished agenda. Modi presents this legislation with a clear strategy: Whether he succeeds or not, he benefits. If the bill gets passed, it will be an advantage for the BJP government. If it fails, he can claim that he tried to enact reform but faced Opposition obstruction. Despite potential delays, it's important to debate the bill, as election spending ultimately comes from taxpayers' money. Now that the bill has been sent to a joint select committee, we must wait for its report. (The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### TRUMP'S ACQUISITION PLANS

Madam — Trump is on a shopping spree to buy Canada, the Panama Canal and Greenland, desiring to make Canada its 51st state with Trudeau as its governor. He wants the gifted Panama Canal back to his country. The Panama president has, however, expressed his disagreement with both his conditions, thereby creating another contentious issue ready to be dealt with in the near future. He is also eyeing Greenland to gain its strategic advantage for monitoring the missiles launched from Russia and China on the US and alternatively using it as a launching pad for the US missiles on them. Greenland being rich in minerals like uranium is another factor for its advantage to the US. More so, the greatest island on this planet is not green but mostly ice-filled, comprising glaciers that create many new waterways on its melting due to global warming each year, giving a wider area for its exploration.

He is also creating a powerful force by enriching it with the recruitment of capitalists like Elon Musk and AI experts in his cabinet to act as resources for implementing his future plans. Indian brain drain forms a substantial part of his team, like Sriram Ramakrishnan, the AI expert, and such other talents that India has lost to another country at its cost for its inability to identify and hold them at the appropriate time. If this happens, the demography will start taking a new shape, and interrelation equations of friends and foes will change. India needs to withhold its talent by stopping its brain drain at any cost by providing them better than what they get abroad to discourage their move to foreign lands. However, the unpredictable nature of Donald Trump will keep the world guessing with fingers crossed till it actually happens in reality after he takes over as president, as for all you know, he may suddenly say one day "I was just joking."

R S Narula | Patiala

#### Shyam Benegal passes away at 90



The sad demise of legendary filmmaker and stalwart of Indian cinema Shyam Benegal at the age of 90 is an irreparable loss for both the cinema and the society. His historic contribution to parallel cinema will be written in golden words in the history of Indian cinema. He was the vanguard of the movement

of realistic and issue-based filmmaking, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. His directorial debut movie, 'Ankur,' in 1974 itself was a landmark in Indian cinema. Along with his timeless movies, he launched the careers of many highly accomplished actors, including Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi. Besides his contribution to cinema, Shyam Benegal was a man of great values who never hesitated to speak his mind. Despite his ideological differences with the right wing and the Modi government, he opposed returning national awards as a mark of protest against the alleged increase in intolerance in India. He, himself a two-time chairman of FTII, did not support the strike of students of the institute against the appointment of TV actor Gajendra Chauhan as its chairman.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

office bearer of the Mumbai Cricket Association, "Shaw is his own enemy"

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

#### CONCERN OVER SHAMI'S FITNESS

Madam — The team India has been endeavouring for over a period to gain the ground, where it's seen the bowlers and batters are totally at sea. Then, everyone wishing for Shami's comeback, which can drastically strengthen the tie of the team, especially the bowling attack, as he showcased his back-to-back top-notch performance in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, leading bowling length effectively. But once again, BCCI's update about his fitness, that he has been deemed not fit for selection in the remaining two tests due to concern over left knee swelling, has ruined countless hopes. Our wishes for his speedy recovery and the team's unparalleled persistence to heal up the millions' fresh wounded hearts.

Jakir Hussain | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

## Lessons from yesterday: Reflections that shape a lifetime

The past is a treasure trove of memories and lessons, each shaping who we are and guiding us into the future

The past shapes our present. The present is past the next moment, to make way for the future. We are left with fond memories. These memories also teach us invaluable lessons. I was prone to my share of mischief as a child for which I would get scolded by my parents. At such times, I was assured of a haven hiding behind my grandmother. She was impartial to both sides as she counselled my parents to be more indulgent and taught us to be well-behaved. I remember another afternoon. I returned from school excited about my outstanding results in the examinations. Unmindful of my mother's much-needed siesta, I woke her up. Still groggy, she hugged and blessed me, before continuing with her interrupted sleep. That one spontaneous gesture was my reward which would continue to inspire me throughout my life. My father usually rested and slept on Sunday afternoons. We tried not to disturb his sleep. One day, we might have been noisier than usual and ended up soundly thrashed by our father. I wit-



nessed a different facet of my father's personality later in the evening, as he gently expressed his regret for the outburst. I would remember in times to come that there was no shame in accepting if I was wrong. I remember the day I met the young girl who became my wife and life partner in the next few months. After the initial heady days, we buckled up to the serious business of making a life together. We have been married for 40 years. These have not been easy decades faced with the harsh realities of life. We never give up, whatever the setbacks. We continue to strive towards the common goal of leading a happy and contented life together. It is easier to face challenges and find solutions as a team. Another nostalgic memory is

from a long-ago holiday to the beach town of Puri. Our guest house was a couple of hundred meters from the beach. Our daughters were much younger. I was, and continue to be, a protective father, worrying about their safety. That one day, I sat on the veranda, fondly looking at the two children playing with sand on the beach. Their innocent efforts, many of which were unsuccessful, to mould a work of art out of the slippery sand, taught me not to give up. My mother kept a copy of Ramcharitmanas in her prayer corner. I read somewhere that you could find a solution to any problem in the epic. All you had to do was open any page, and the top line would help you find ways to tackle your most pressing

issue. I also tried it sometimes. I remember that a simple reading of the lines was not enough. What mattered was the action plan that I arrived at based on my interpretation, and the determination with which I pursued. Fair play, guiding the team members, impartiality, giving undivided time to team members however busy one might be, empathy, working for the team, pride in the performance of the team members, and out-of-box thinking, were only a few of the invaluable lessons that my experiences taught me. They have stood me in good stead through the rough and tumble of life. The words of psychiatrist, Abraham Twerski would resonate with many, "Ruminating about the past will get you nowhere. So go ahead and learn from the past whatever you can, and then put it behind you. Remember, there is nothing you can do to change it, but you can use its lessons to improve your future." (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA



## FIRST COLUMN

## THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MANTRAS

The Divya Chikitsa Mantras stand out as a remarkable system for channelising divine energy



ASHWANI GURU JI

You might have heard of Sanjeevani Vidya given by Guru Shukracharya, which could bring back the dead to life, or of a certain herb called Sanjeevani buti, which brought back Lakshman to life. You may have also heard of the Madhu Vidya or Brahmadeviya as possessed by Sage Dadhichi which could enable one to attain immortality, or the Chyawanprasha prepared by the Ashvini Kumars to restore the youth of Sage Chyawan.

These are not tales or works of fiction, the Vedic rishis were masters of Creation, the human body being a microscopic part of that. The proof that these were not fiction lies in the fact that most of the modern scientific discoveries have come from the Vedic shastras. You may visit www.dhyanfoundation.com to know which scientific discovery has come from which shastra. While most of the ancient Vedic healing sciences are lost in the dust of kaliyuga and most herbs have become extinct, a fraction of them still can be accessed and even that fraction is enough



to achieve amazing results. Divya Chikitsa Mantras as detailed in Sanatan Kriya is one such gem from the treasure trove of Vedic gyan. Divya Chikitsa Mantras use sound and vibrations to bring about the desired effect and changes in your body.

When done right their healing and transformational effects are apparent for all to see. A combination of 7 mantras they work to unplug certain nadis (energy channels) and awaken specific centres, to channelise the force of divine energies for a practitioner. It is said that the body of a deva resides in the mantra. This has been practically experienced by each one who has attended a yagya at Dhyan Ashram where complete forms of the deities were invoked through specific chants manifested in the Yagya Agni. For the mantra to bear fruit, it has to be received from a Guru who is Siddha in the mantra, in line with the ancient Guru Shishya Parampara. Guru channelises the force of the respective deity in the mantra and also imparts the dhvani (correct pronunciation) of the mantra. The efficacy of a Vedic mantra depends on the correctness of its chant; faulty pronunciation of even a single syllable changes the entire meaning.

Taittiriya Samhita narrates the story of Tvashta in this regard. Tvashta performed a sacrifice to destroy Indra. He used the mantra, 'indrashatru' to manifest his thought. However, he placed a lofty note on the word 'Indra' instead of 'shatru' because of which the meaning of the word changed from 'slayer of indra' to 'the one who will be slain by indra' and thus the son, Vrutra, so born to him was defeated by Indra, just because of a pronunciation defect. To quote from Panini Shiksha, a mantra devoid of the correct vowels (svar) and consonants (varna) is faulty and does not convey its intended meaning. It is like a verbal thunderbolt that harms the one who is chanting, as had happened in the case of erroneous pronunciation of the word, Indrashatru. The Vedic seers had mastered this incredible science of sound in the form of mantras, they were well aware of the high degree of specificity and precision that is required to harness the power of sound.

Shiksha, one of the six vendangas, deals with the science of proper pronunciation of words and laws of euphony. Volumes have been written on Shiksha by Panini, Yadnyavalkya and Vasishtha. Shatpath Brahman states that every alphabet of a word possesses some kind of strength and explains the secret of every alphabet. Therefore it is important that one partakes the vidya of mantras from a Guru. Reading from books /internet or hearing on television/social media and starting self-practice may have detrimental effects if the chant is not proper.

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

## State budgets on the brink: RBI sounds alarm



UTTAM GUPTA

With outstanding debts exceeding the prudential threshold, the RBI urges states to adopt "next-generation" fiscal rules to ensure sustainable financial management

According to a report on 'State Finances: A Study of Budgets of 2024-25' released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on December 19, 2024, the consolidated gross fiscal deficit (GFD) of all State governments was contained within 3 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) during the financial years (FY) 2022-23 and 2023-24. For 2024-25, their GFD has been budgeted at 3.2 per cent of GDP. They have complied with the stipulation under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003 which requires them to keep it within the 3 per cent cap. But, the good news ends here. The report reveals that the total outstanding liabilities of States were 28.5 per cent of the GDP in March 2024. Though lower than the peak of 31 per cent reached as of March-end 2021, it remained significantly above the prudential debt-GDP ratio of 20 per cent mandated for the states under the Act.

Another measure of how a State government is managing its budget is its revenue expenditure (RE) about capital outlay (CO). While, the RE being on items such as salaries, wages, pension bills, subsidies etc essentially goes towards non-asset creating spending, CO results in the generation of capital assets thereby providing a foundation for income stream over some time. Greater emphasis on the latter is considered fiscally prudent whereas more of the former can lead to fiscal destabilisation. The record of many states on this crucial parameter is disconcerting. For all states, the total expenditure increased from around Rs 3428,000 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 5760,000 crore during 2024-25 (budget estimate). As regards RE, it increased from Rs 3018,000 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 4840,000 crore in 2024-25. The CO increased from Rs 410,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 920,000 crore during 2024-25. These numbers yield a ratio of RE to CO or RECO of 5.2 (4840,000/920,000).

In several states, the RECO is much higher than even this national average. For instance, in Punjab, at 17.1 it is more than three times followed by Puducherry (14.1), Kerala (10.6) and Delhi (10.3). There are some better-performing states too such as Manipur having the best ratio (2.4), followed by Gujarat (2.9) and Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh (3.1). However, the abnormally high RECO of other states pushes up the national average. **How does it compare with the Centre?** The total expenditure of the Central Government increased from Rs 3042,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 4820,000 crore during 2024-25. Of this, the RE increased from Rs 2603,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 3709,000 crore during 2024-25. On the other hand, its CO increased from Rs 439,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 1111,000 crore during 2024-25. So, RECO for the Centre is 3.3 in 2024-25 (3709,000/1111000) against 5.2 for the States.

Barring a couple of good performers like Gujarat which is doing even better than the Centre, most of the states have been reckless in their revenue



BARRING A COUPLE OF GOOD PERFORMERS LIKE GUJARAT WHICH IS DOING EVEN BETTER THAN THE CENTRE, MOST OF THE STATES HAVE BEEN RECKLESS IN THEIR REVENUE SPENDING AND THAT INCLUDES A SHARP RISE IN EXPENDITURE ON SUBSIDIES

spending and that includes a sharp rise in expenditure on subsidies. Since 2018-19, subsidies given by the states have grown 2.5 times to over Rs 470,000 crore being the budget estimate for FY 2024-25). The RBI cites farm loan waivers, free or subsidised services like electricity, transport, gas cylinders, and cash transfers to farmers, youth and women as key areas of incipient stress. It suggests that states need to adopt "next-generation" fiscal rules, time-bound glide paths for fiscal consolidation, and rein in subsidies and freebies so that it doesn't crowd out more productive expenditures. Such exhortations have been made umpteen times in the past not just by the RBI but also by several committees set by the government on 'expenditure reforms' from time to time. Now, we have more jargon like "next-generation" fiscal rules to convey the same message with greater intensity.

The RBI posits these rules as "combining the medium-term fiscal sustainability objective with short-term flexibility allowing state governments more maneuverability in dealing with exogenous economic shocks". The banking regulator goes on "these will involve inter alia, the use of data analytics, including machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI); improved data transparency and disclosure practices; and strengthening the institution of State Finance Commissions to deliver public services more effectively and scale up social and physical infrastructure." Put simply, the RBI expects the State governments to not just bring about policy reforms and refinements to better target welfare schemes - focusing primarily on the poor

sections of the society but also to galvanise the administrative machinery and institutions to deliver benefits efficiently and prevent misuse/diversion by making the best use of technology interventions.

**Do the States understand?** The answer is a categorical 'no'. Forget a finely crafted system desired by the RBI and government committees, most of the states have put in place crude and non-transparent subsidy regimes call them freebies - a jargon for "something given free of charge" - all aimed at alluring voters and winning elections. The political parties have sought to cover under 'something' literally everything that touches the life of a person. It includes free food, free health, free education, free LPG cylinder, free laptops, free transport, state support for marriage, and pilgrimage for the elderly; it's an unending list.

In the last couple of years, the freebies promised by them have become more brazen with parties coming out with 'cash transfers' to the account of voters. Such schemes mostly directed at women have won elections for the concerned parties in elections held during 2023 and 2024 in Madhya Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Haryana. The parties compete with each other in offering more. A common refrain is 'Who will promise more?'

Look at this. In the budget for 2024-25, Delhi finance minister Atishi announced the Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana (MMSY) under which, the AAP government will give Rs 1000 per month to all the women

above the age of 18 in the national capital. Now, ex-Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has increased the amount to Rs 2100 per month. In response, the BJP has reportedly promised a still higher cash transfer of Rs 2500 per month. Let us be clear. Unlike 'normal' budget expenses which are planned and backed by well-orchestrated efforts to garner revenue, additional financial liabilities imposed by the freebies promised in the election manifesto affect the budgetary position of the State in a totally 'uncontrolled' and 'unplanned' manner. Moreover, these freebies don't have a sunset date meaning they will continue to be given 'eternally' - no matter which party rules. This is the surest invitation to fiscal catastrophe. Take the case of Delhi.

Already, without the MMSY, the financial position of the Delhi government has come to such a pass that CM Atishi has recently forwarded a request to the Centre seeking a loan of Rs 10,000 crore from the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF). Now, if AAP were to come to power yet again, MMSY @Rs 2100 a month would cost the exchequer an additional Rs 17,000 crore per annum.

Since 2018-19, state subsidies have grown 2.5 times to over Rs 470,000 crore (2024-25), courtesy freebies cult. This will increase exponentially, destabilising State budgets, and making a mockery of the much-touted fiscal consolidation drive. The Supreme Court has on several occasions observed that 'freebies are bad'. Will it force parliamentarians to enact a law to curb them?

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

## Festive cheer meets smart choices: Navigating the real estate boom of 2024

By evaluating long-term financial goals, buyers can turn festive opportunities into lasting investments

With the festive season ongoing in full swing, there is a surge in consumer spending. This time is often marked by a flurry of purchases fuelled by tradition and sentiment. While the allure of buying a home can be particularly enticing during this festive period, buyers must approach such decisions with careful consideration. They must look beyond the festive fervour and reflect on key aspects that can guide them to make informed decisions.

**Decoding Festive Demand** As per a report 'Unravelling the Trends Shaping India's Real Estate Market in 2024' by CBRE, from January to September, the luxury housing category collectively constituted 16 per cent of the overall



RAHUL MEHROTRA

housing demand. This growth has spurred developers to launch new projects, resulting in the category representing 19 per cent of the total new launches during the first nine months of 2024. This trend is only going to grow further spurred by the festive season as buyers are investing in end-products that

offer better amenities such as club-house, larger living spaces, and modern facilities. Metro cities, in particular, have seen a wave of new project launches by developers this year, catering to various buyer segments.

While luxury properties grab headlines, the affordable housing sector remains the backbone of India's real estate market as this is where buyers purchasing their first home find the most value. Having said that, many first-time homebuyers are compelled to buy a property given the abundant promotional offers and incentives provided by realtors. It is so because the festive season spurs confidence as it often coincides with salary increments, bonuses, and a general uptick in eco-

nomical activity. However, buyers much before they scout for a property, should evaluate the long-term aspects. Questions such as - "Can I support paying the EMI?" or "Is it the right approach" may seem overwhelming at first, but assessing one's worth is very crucial at this stage.

**Interest Rate Matters** The interest rate set by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is a huge factor in deciding other crucial interest rates. The repo rate is unchanged for the 10th consecutive time, and this implies that the Equated Monthly Installments (EMIs) are likely to remain manageable. Further to this, I believe there would be a pickup in demand for housing loans as the festive season progresses. Recent data from the RBI



reveals a remarkable 40 per cent increase in home loan deployment, highlighting the diminishing gap between monthly rents and EMIs. Additionally, 80 per cent of aspiring homeowners preferred home loans as the top choice for property acquisition this year.

Typically, possessions and property deliveries are scheduled in the latter half of November, aligning perfectly with the festive momentum. In addition to stable interest rates and EMIs, the array of offers and discounts available during the festive season can be another key factor of consid-

eration. However, it's essential to look for transparent offers that can help avoid hidden fees and unexpected costs. One should seek out reduced processing fees, flexible repayment plans, cashback schemes, and opportunities for negotiation that can make the festive season an advantageous time to invest.

**What Should Buyers And Investors Do?**

Investors and buyers must focus on long-term value by evaluating their income and cash flows to ensure manageable EMIs. The festive season can be an opportunity to reduce upfront costs and select properties in developing areas with strong amenities and connectivity for better appreciation. The predictability in EMI

outflows coupled with festive discounts can make the dream of homeownership more achievable. First-time buyers, particularly in the affordable housing segment, must rely on loans to bridge the financial gap as well as look for special offers and discounts.

While festive discounts are great, buyers should align their decisions with pragmatic goals rather than being swayed by just sentiment. Buying a property during a festive season is certainly the start of a prosperous journey, but to truly benefit, one needs to have a stable financial plan - whether it's the first home or adding to one's portfolio.

(The writer is MD & CEO, RHD FCL; views are personal)

# Israel, Hamas accuse each other of complicating ceasefire efforts as they inch closer to deal

AP ■ JERUSALEM

Israel and Hamas accused each other of complicating ceasefire efforts on Wednesday, as the two sides inch closer to a deal that could wind down the 14-month war in Gaza. The two sides appear closer than they have been in months to reaching an agreement that would bring home dozens of hostages being held in Gaza. However, talks have come close before, only to collapse. Although Israel and Hamas have expressed optimism that progress was being made toward a deal, sticking points remain over the exchange of hostages for Palestinian prisoners and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza, people involved in the talks say. On Wednesday, Hamas accused Israel of introducing new conditions related to the withdrawal from Gaza, the prisoners and the return of displaced people, which it said was delaying the deal. Israel's government accused Hamas of

renegeing on renegeing on understandings that have already been reached." Still, both sides said discussions are ongoing. Israel's negotiating team, which includes members from its intelligence agencies and the military, returned from Qatar Tuesday evening for internal consultations, following a week of what it called "significant negotiations". During its October 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel, Hamas and other groups took about 250 people hostage and brought them to Gaza. A previous truce in November 2023 freed more than 100 hostages, while others have been rescued or their remains have been recovered over the past year. Israel says about 100 hostages remain in Gaza - at least a third of whom it believes were killed during the October 7 attack or died in captivity. Sporadic talks have taken place for a year, but in recent weeks there's been a renewed push to reach a deal. President-elect

Donald Trump, who takes office next month for his second term, has demanded the immediate release of Israeli hostages, saying on social media that if they're not freed before he is sworn in, there will be "HELL TO PAY". Families of the hostages are becoming increasingly angry, calling on the Israeli government for a ceasefire before Trump is sworn in. After Israel's high-level negotiation team returned from Doha this week, hostage families called an emergency press conference in Tel Aviv, pleading for a ceasefire and a complete end to the war. Shir Siegel, the daughter of Israeli-American Keith Siegel, whose mother was released after more than 50 days in captivity, said every delay could endanger their lives. "There are moments when every second is fateful, and this is one of those moments," she said. The families are planning a special candle lighting ceremony in Hostages

Square Wednesday, marking the first night of Hanukkah. The agreement would take effect in phases and include a halt in fighting, an exchange of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, and a surge in aid to the besieged Gaza Strip, according to Egyptian, Hamas and American officials. The last phase would include the release of any remaining hostages, an end to the war and talks on reconstruction. Israel's bombardment and ground invasion into Gaza have killed over 45,000 Palestinians in Gaza, more than half of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between fighters and civilians in its count. The offensive has caused widespread destruction and displaced some 90 per cent of Gaza's 2.3 million people, often multiple times. Hundreds of thousands are packed into squalid tent camps along the coast as the cold, wet winter sets in.

# Pakistani airstrikes killed 46 people in eastern Afghanistan: Taliban

AP ■ PESHAWAR

Pakistan's airstrikes on eastern Afghanistan killed 46 people, mostly women and children, a Taliban government official said on Wednesday, raising fears of further straining the relations between the two neighbours. Hamdullah Fitrat, the deputy spokesman for the Afghan government, said those killed in the strikes that targeted four locations in Barmal, a district in the province of Paktika, were refugees, adding that six others were also wounded. This comes a day after Pakistani security officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity in line with regulations, told The Associated Press that Tuesday's operation was to dismantle a training facility and kill insurgents in Paktika in Afghanistan. Earlier Wednesday, Mohammad Khurasani, the spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban or Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, claimed in a statement that 50 people, including 27 women and children, have died in the strikes. He said they were "unarmed refugees" who fled to Afghanistan because of Pakistan's offensive in the northwest. The TTP - a separate group but also a close ally of the Afghan Taliban - also shared photos, alleging they were of children killed during the Pakistani operation. The strikes came hours after Mohammad Sadiq, Pakistan's special representative for Afghanistan, travelled to Kabul to discuss a range of issues. Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry in Kabul summoned the Pakistani envoy and lodged a strong protest over the strikes by Pakistan's army. In a statement, it said while a representative of the civilian government of Pakistan was busy in talks with the Afghan officials, the strikes were carried



out by the Pakistani army to "create mistrust in the relations between the two countries". It said Kabul "will not accept the violation of the country's territory under any circumstances, and the country is ready to defend its independence and territory" and "such irresponsible actions will definitely have consequences". Meanwhile, residents in the area told an AP reporter over the phone that at least 13 people were left dead, adding that the death toll could be higher. They also said the wounded were transported to a local hospital. Pakistan has not commented on the latest strikes. However, the Pakistani military said Wednesday that security forces killed 13 insurgents in an intelligence-based operation in South Waziristan, a district located along eastern Afghanistan's Paktika province. Pakistan's Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi praised "Pakistan's brave security force" in a statement for thwarting "the nefarious designs" of "terrorists". He didn't mention the Pakistani air strikes inside Afghanistan. The Taliban Defence Ministry denounced the attacks on Tuesday and promised retaliation. On Wednesday, the situation along the shared border seemed to be business as usual. However, security analysts say the TTP could launch retaliatory attacks in Pakistan. Pakistan has seen innumerable militant attacks in the past two decades but there has been an uptick in recent months. The latest was this weekend when at least 16 Pakistani soldiers were killed when the TTP attacked a checkpoint in the country's northwest. Pakistani officials have accused the Taliban of not doing enough to combat militant activity across the border, a charge the Afghan Taliban government denies, saying it does not allow anyone to carry out attacks against any country. North and South Waziristan are former strongholds of Pakistani Taliban, who have fled to Afghanistan. Tensions were at an all-high in March when Pakistan said intelligence-based strikes took place in the border regions inside Afghanistan.

# Organiser of Christmas fair in southern Mexico assassinated at his event

AP ■ MEXICO CITY

The organiser of a Christmas fair in southern Mexico was assassinated at his city's holiday event, authorities said late Tuesday. The governor of the southern state of Guerrero said gunmen killed the organiser of the annual Christmas and New Year's fair in the state capital of Chilpancingo. Gov. Evelyn Salgado called the Christmas Eve killing of Martín Ramírez Ruiz "an unacceptable act that will not go unpunished". Salgado wrote on her social media accounts that state prosecutors were investigating the crime. There was no immediate information on the motive, but the gangs gain much of their income extorting money from local businesses and routinely kill those who refuse to pay. In a separate statement, state prosecutors said that another person was killed along with Ramírez Ruiz, and that a third person in the crowd gathered outside a church was wounded in the attack. The gunmen had apparently waded into the crowd and directly targeted Ramírez Ruiz. Ramírez



Ruiz was the head of the civic group that for almost two centuries has organised an arts, food and handicrafts fair that runs from roughly Christmas to January 7. The fair also honours the local patron saint, St. Matthew. Two rival drug gangs, the Tlacos and the Arditillos, are fighting for control of the city of Chilpancingo, and violence against officials and residents there has reached grisly levels. In November, a former prosecutor and local police official was arrested in connection with the grisly decapitation of the city's mayor on October

6. Mayor Alejandro Arcos was killed just a week after he took office as mayor of the state capital. Officials had blamed the killing on one of the gangs. The mayor's body was found in a pickup truck, with his severed head placed on the roof of the vehicle, in an apparent message from the gang. The same gang is thought to be responsible for killing 11 market vendors, including four boys, in late October. The vendors, members of an extended family, were abducted as they travelled to sell their wares. Their bodies were found dumped in the bed of a pickup truck on an avenue in Chilpancingo. Chilpancingo, a city of about 300,000, is so completely dominated by gangs that in 2023, one of them staged a demonstration of hundreds of people, hijacked a government armoured car, blocked a major highway and took police hostage to win the release of arrested suspects. Violence in Guerrero reached such unprecedented levels that earlier this year, Roman Catholic bishops announced they had helped arrange a truce in another part of the state between two warring drug cartels.

# Iran restores access to WhatsApp and Google Play

TEHRAN. Iran's government on Tuesday said it had lifted a ban on access to WhatsApp and Google Play after more than two years, the official IRNA news agency reported.

The report said the country's Supreme Council of Cyber Space made the decision in a meeting led by reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian, who has vowed to remove restrictions on social media. Iran's telecommunication minister Sattar Heshemi in a post on X called the decision a "first step" in removing restrictions and said "the path will continue" - indicating the possibility of unblocking other services. Many people reached by The Associated Press across the capital, Tehran, and other cities said they had access to the services on computers but not yet on mobile phones. WhatsApp has been the third most popular messaging platform in Iran after Instagram.

# Haiti gang attack journalists covering hospital reopening leaves two dead

AP ■ PORT-AU-PRINCE

Haiti's online media association said two reporters were killed and several others were wounded in a gang attack on Tuesday on the reopening of Port-au-Prince's biggest public hospital. Street gangs have taken over an estimated 85% of Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, and they forced the closure of the General Hospital early this year. Authorities had pledged to reopen the facility Tuesday but as journalists gathered to cover the event, suspected gang members opened fire in a vicious Christmas Eve attack. Robest Dimanche, a spokesman for the Online Media Collective, identified the dead journalists as Markenzy Nathoux and Jimmy Jean. Dimanche said an unspecified number of reporters had also been wounded in the attack, which he blamed on the Viv Ansanm coalition of gangs. Haiti's interim president, Leslie Voltaire, said in an address to the nation that journalists and police were among the victims of the attack. He did not specify how many casualties there were, or give a breakdown for the dead or wounded. "I send my sympathies to the people who were victims, the national police and the journalists," Voltaire said, pledging

"this crime is not going to go unpunished." A video posted online by the reporters trapped inside the hospital showed what appeared to be two lifeless bodies of men on stretchers, their clothes bloodied. One of the men had a lanyard with a press credential around his neck. Radio Télé Métropole initially reported that seven journalists and two police officers were wounded. Police and officials did not immediately respond to calls for information on the attack. Video posted online earlier showed reporters inside the building and at least three lying on the floor, apparently wounded. That video could also not be immediately verified. Johnson "Izo" André, considered Haiti's most powerful gang leader and part of a gang known as Viv Ansanm, which has taken control of much of Port-au-Prince, posted a video on social media claiming responsibility for the attack. The video said the gang coalition had not authorized the hospital's reopening. Haiti has seen journalists targeted before. In 2023, two local journalists were killed in the space of a couple of weeks - radio reporter Dumesky Kersaint was fatally shot in mid-April that year, while journalist Ricot Jean was found dead later that month.

# Striking students demand justice

AP ■ BELGRADE

Serbia's striking university students on Wednesday rallied outside the chief prosecutor's office to demand justice over a concrete canopy collapse that killed 15 people last month in the country's north. More than 1,000 students symbolically left letters on the doorstep of the public prosecutor's office, telling chief prosecutor Zoranka Dolovac that "students expect you to fight for law and justice, without political abuse or corruption". Dolovac's office later responded with a statement inviting a student delegation to a meet-



ing. Serbia's universities have been blockaded for weeks as part of a wider movement demanding accountability over the November 1 tragedy in Novi Sad when a huge concrete construction at the railway station crashed onto the people

below. any in Serbia blame the collapse on widespread corruption and sloppy work on the building renovation, one of a number of questionable infrastructure megaprojects involving Chinese state companies. Prosecutors have arrested 13 people over the Novi Sad tragedy, including a government minister whose release later fuelled public scepticism about the honesty of the investigation. Striking students have received wide support in Serbia from their professors, farmers, actors and others. Tens of thousands joined a student-led protest in Belgrade on Sunday that also

reflected wider discontent with populist President Aleksandar Vucic's rule. Protesting students on Wednesday carried banners featuring red handprints - a protest symbol telling the authorities they have "blood on their hands." In an apparent attempt to defuse the student strikes, Vucic has been advertising what he describes as "favourable" loans for young people to purchase apartments. The increasingly autocratic Serbian leader has faced accusations of curbing democratic freedoms despite formally pursuing European Union membership for the Balkan nation.

# UN Sec-General pays tributes to Indian peacekeeper

PTI ■ UNITED NATIONS

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has paid tributes to Brigadier General Amitabh Jha of India, who was serving with the UNDOF at Golan Heights, and said he will be remembered for his "leadership and unwavering commitment to United Nations peacekeeping." Brigadier Jha was serving as Deputy Force Commander of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) from April 2023 and had recently served as acting Force Commander of UNDOF in complex circumstances, following the fall of the Assad Government in Syria. "He will

be remembered for his leadership and unwavering commitment to United Nations peacekeeping, including in the United Nations Organization Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) as a Military Observer from 2005 to 2006," a statement by the spokesman for Guterres said late on Tuesday. The Secretary-General extends his heartfelt condolences to Brigadier General Jha's family and to the Government of India for their loss, the statement added. Earlier, the Indian Army while paying tributes to Brigadier Jha in a post on X said, "#GeneralUpendraDwivedi #COAS and All Ranks of #IndianArmy expresses deepest condolences on the untimely demise of Brigadier Amitabh Jha due to medical reasons. Indian Army stands firm with the bereaved family in this hour of grief." According to the UNDOF website, Brigadier Jha joined the UNDOF Mission on April 14, 2023. He was an Infantry Officer & prior to this deployment to UNDOF, had commanded a Brigade in Glaciated Mountainous terrain of India, and a Specialised unit as Commanding Officer. Jha had a keen interest in reading on "military diplomacy, geopolitics, Indo-Pacific, modern & small wars, sub-conventional warfare & tribes & culture," it said, adding, he was a keen sports enthusiast, who played troop games and enjoyed backpacking in the mountains.

# Spice tins honour role of Indian soldiers in WW 2 Christmas truce

PTI ■ LONDON

A UK historian has highlighted further evidence of the widespread contributions made by Indian soldiers to the First World War effort as part of the British empire army with the discovery of spice tins that were used during the Christmas truce in 1914. Professor Peter Doyle, a military historian at Goldsmiths, University of London, is quoted in 'The Times' on Wednesday

an unofficial "Truce in No Man's Land" during the war and his research led him to the discovery of one of the spice tins - only the second one known to still be in existence. He knew that the 39th Garhwal Rifles were at Givenchy, France, during



to showcase how new research has found that these spice tins ended up in the hands of German soldiers when the Western Front fell silent as soldiers walked across no man's land to exchange handshakes, gifts and a game of football 110 years ago. Doyle organised an exhibition about the truce, including details around these spice tins, at the Great War Huts Museum in Bury St Edmunds, eastern England. "The truce was not just a case of 'Anglo-Saxon' to 'Saxon' fraternisation," Doyle is quoted as saying. "Up until recently, people didn't really believe or expect Indian soldiers took part in the truce, though they may have been observers," he said. The spice tins were part of morale boosting Christmas gifts to soldiers in the war by Princess Mary, the daughter of Britain's King George V. For British soldiers, her gift was made up of a smoking kit, which was deemed inappropriate as many members of the Indian army were non-smokers. Instead, their tins were filled with spice along with a picture of Princess Mary in place of a cigarette card for their UK counterparts. Doyle, the author of 'For Every Sailor Afloat, Every Soldier at the Front: Princess Mary's Christmas Gift 1914', documents how Princess Mary aged just 17 set out to send a Christmas gift to all those on active service. His book is set against the backdrop of

the Christmas of 1914, which led him to explore whether the spice tins may have become part of the Christmas truce there, along with the men who carried them. He approached Robin Schafer, a German historian, who went into the archives and found references in German newspapers to men receiving the spice tins as gifts during the brief cessation of hostilities 110 years ago. A soldier named Wilhelm Althoff wrote: "Some Indians gifted us figs [and] a shiny metal box with spices." Doyle and Schafer hope that more of these tins, which Doyle describes as "unprepossessing", may be found by people in Germany and elsewhere if they go looking. They also hold out hope that some photographs of the event may exist, as picture-taking was initially encouraged in German trenches to boost morale. During the First World War (1914-18) India, which at that time included Pakistan and Bangladesh under British colonial rule, sent the largest share of Commonwealth soldiers to the war effort at over 1.4 million. Shrabani Basu, historian-author of 'For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front, 1914-18' has also documented their immense contributions to the war effort. "Today there are descendants of the soldiers living in Britain who can be proud of what their ancestors achieved," she notes.

# Japan's foreign minister seeks 'positive' direction in bilateral ties during China visit

AP ■ BEIJING

Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya met with top Chinese leaders Wednesday during his visit to Beijing, the first since the heads of the two countries met at a summit in Peru last month, in an effort to make positive inroads in the bilateral relationship. The two neighbours have had a tense relationship in recent years. At the top of Iwaya's agenda is China's ban on Japanese seafood in response to the release of treated radioactive wastewater into the sea from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, as well as China's increasingly assertive military activity in the East and South China Seas. Iwaya met with China's premier Li Qiang Wednesday as well as Wang Yi, his Chinese counterpart. "Currently the China-Japan relations are at a crit-



ical period of improvement and development," said Li, in his remarks. "China is willing to work together with Japan to move towards the important direction proposed by the leaders of the two countries." "I want to build a relationship where the people of both countries feel that Japan-China

relations have developed and progressed in a positive direction," said Iwaya, ahead of his meeting with Wang. His trip comes just before US President-elect Donald Trump is to take office in January. Tokyo considers the Japan-US alliance the lynchpin of its diplomatic and security poli-

ties, a tone emphasised in the past four years under US President Joe Biden's direction, but it's unclear how Trump will impact the alliance. Japan has revamped its approach to defense in response to Chinese actions in recent years, boosting military spending and shifting away from a principle of self-defense. Earlier this year, Japan protested when a Chinese military plane flew into Japan's airspace, while in the summer, a Chinese survey ship sailed into Japanese territorial waters. While how US-China relations come out under the Trump administration is unclear, Japan is seeking stability in its relationship with its neighbour and hopes to develop ties in areas of mutual interest, including the economy and the elderly care industry. Iwaya told reporters before his departure Tuesday that he will also hold bilateral high-level people and cultural exchange

talks, joined by the education ministers from the two sides. "The relationship with China, our neighbouring country, is one of Japan's most important," Iwaya told reporters Tuesday, he said. "The two countries share important responsibilities for the peace and prosperity of the region and the international society." Iwaya, a security expert, is also expected to reiterate his concern about Japanese nationals detained in alleged spying allegations. Japan maintains that the water discharged from the Fukushima plant is treated and diluted to levels much safer than international standards and adequately monitored, but China calls the water contaminated. Both agreed in September to work toward easing the seafood ban by allowing China in multinational sampling missions under the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

# Fate of Trump's Cabinet picks unclear as Republicans prepare to take power in Senate

AP ■ WASHINGTON

The fate of President-elect Donald Trump's Cabinet is still unclear after Republican senators spent much of December carefully dodging questions about Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s views on vaccines, accusations of sexual misconduct against Pete Hegseth and Tulsi Gabbard's 2017 meeting with then-President Bashar Assad of Syria.



While some GOP senators have indicated they are all-in for Trump's picks, others have withheld support, for now, especially on some of his more controversial nominees. The dynamic is injecting uncertainty into the process as Republicans prepare to take the Senate majority in January with a four-seat margin and as Trump aggressively challenges them to confirm his Cabinet immediately. It's not unusual for senators to wait until after confirmation hearings to publicly announce a decision. But Republicans are under more pressure than usual as Trump and his allies make clear that they will confront senators who don't fall in line. "You only have control of the Senate because of Donald Trump," the president-elect's son, Donald Trump Jr., warned during a media appearance this month. "Without that, you'd be relegated to insignificance." There has been one casualty of the process so far - former Rep. Matt Gaetz of Florida, who

withdrew from contention as attorney general after senators relayed private concerns. But Trump has enthusiastically stood by the rest, including Kennedy for secretary of Health and Human Services, Hegseth for secretary of Defense and Gabbard for director of national intelligence. With hearings starting by mid-January, before Trump is even inaugurated, senators will soon have to decide how closely they will scrutinize the nominees and whether they are willing to vote against any of them. Republicans will have a 53-47 majority, so Trump cannot lose more than three votes on any nomination if Democrats are united in opposition. The outcome of the confirmation process, and the level of dissent in the Senate, will likely set

the tone for Trump's presidency and his relationship with Congress, which was frequently tumultuous during his first term. He often clashed with the Senate, in particular, but has signalled he expects Republican senators to be more compliant this time around. "It's not about putting yeses on the board, it's about keeping nos off the board," said Oklahoma Sen. Markwayne Mullin, one of Trump's top allies in the Senate, who speaks with him frequently. While most Senate Republicans have scrambled to display as much loyalty to Trump as possible, a handful have made clear that they are willing to defend the body's "advise and consent" role. Among the senators to watch are moderate Republicans Lisa Murkowski

of Alaska, Susan Collins of Maine and incoming freshman Sen. John Curtis of Utah. "Anybody who wants to give me heat for doing my job, bring it on," Curtis said Sunday on ABC's "This Week" when asked about vetting Trump's nominees. "This is my job. It's my constitutional responsibility." Still, even moderate senators have shied away from directly criticising Trump's picks. And not a single Republican has gone on the record against a nominee. Several of Trump's picks are expected to sail to confirmation, perhaps even with some Democratic votes. Sen. John Fetterman, D-Pa., has indicated he will support Florida Sen. Marco Rubio for secretary of State and Rep. Elise Stefanik for United Nations ambassador, as have a few other Democrats.

For the more controversial nominees, though, party unity will be key. One of Trump's most embattled picks is Hegseth, a Fox News host and veteran who some see as inexperienced and has publicly questioned whether women should serve in combat. He has also faced allegations of sexual assault and excessive drinking that he has denied. But it's all given some senators pause, despite Trump's enthusiastic support. Hegseth has faced particular pressure from Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst, herself a combat veteran who has worked to address sexual assault in the military. She has met with Hegseth several times, and has not yet said she will support him. She will have a chance to question him, publicly and face-to-face, in a Senate Armed Services Committee confirmation hearing that is scheduled for January 14. Though a hearing for Gabbard has not yet been set, senators will also be able to question her publicly and in a classified setting about her trip to Syria after the US had severed diplomatic relations. Gabbard has defended the trip, saying it's important to open dialogue, but critics hear echoes of Russia-fuelled talking points in her commentary. Assad fled to Moscow earlier this month after opposition forces overtook Syria in a surprise attack, ending his family's five decades of rule.

# Russia targets Ukrainian energy infrastructure on Christmas Day

AP ■ KYIV

Russia launched a massive missile and drone barrage targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure on Wednesday, striking a thermal power plant and prompting Ukrainians to take shelter in metro stations on Christmas morning. The strikes on Ukrainian fuel and energy sources included 78 air, ground, and sea-launched missiles as well as 106 Shaheds and other types of drones, Ukraine's air force said.



It claimed to have intercepted 59 missiles and 54 drones, with 52 more drones being jammed. In Russia, meanwhile, one woman died and three people were wounded after falling debris from a downed drone sparked a fire in a shopping mall in the city of Vladikavkaz. The head of Russia's republic of North Ossetia-Alania, Gov. Sergey Menyaylo, said security footage showed that the explosion took place outside the Alania Mall Wednesday morning. At least one person was killed in Russia's attack on Ukraine's Dnipro region, Vice Prime Minister Oleksii Kuleba said on Telegram, adding that a heating was disrupted for 155 residential buildings. He also said 500,000 people in the Kharkiv region were without heat. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said one Russian missile passed Moldovan and Romanian airspace. "Putin deliberately chose Christmas for an attack. What could be more inhumane?" Zelenskyy said on X. "They continue to fight for a blackout in Ukraine."

Ukrainian Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko said Russia again "massively attacks energy infrastructure." Ukraine's air force said that multiple missiles had been fired at the Kharkiv, Dnipro and Poltava regions in the east of the country. He said the power distributor took the necessary measures to limit consumption. "As soon as the security situation allows, energy workers will establish the damage caused," he said. State energy operator Ukrrenergoproekt applied preemptive power outages across the country due to a "massive missile attack," leading to electricity going out in several districts of the capital, Kyiv. Ukraine's biggest private energy company, DTEK, said Russia struck one of their thermal power plants Wednesday morning, making it the 13th attack on Ukraine's power grid this year. "Denying light and warmth to millions of peace-loving people as they celebrate Christmas is a depraved and evil act that must be answered," Maxim Timchenko, CEO of DTEK wrote on his X account. At least seven strikes targeted Kharkiv, sparking fires across the city, regional head Oleh Syniehubov wrote on Telegram. At least three people were injured, local authorities said. "Kharkiv is under massive missile fire. A series of explosions rang out in the city and there are still ballistic missiles flying in the direction of the city. Stay in safe places," Kharkiv Mayor Ihor Terekhov said. Russia's Ministry of Defence said in its morning report Wednesday that it had shot down 59 Ukrainian drones overnight, including over the Belgorod, Voronezh, Kursk, Bryansk and Tambov regions, as well as over the Azov Sea. It did not mention the incident in North Ossetia-Alania. Four people were also killed as a result of Ukrainian shelling in the town of Lgov in the Kursk region, regional head Alexander Khinshtein said. Three people died after several residential blocks and a beauty salon were hit, he said.

# Dutch citizen sentenced to three years prison in Russia for punching police officer



AP ■ MOSCOW

A Russian court sentenced a Dutch citizen to three years in prison on Wednesday after he was found guilty of punching a police officer. Harry Johannes van Wurden was arrested and placed under house arrest following an altercation with a police officer in central Moscow in October, Russian news agency RIA Novosti reported, citing police. It said that van Wurden punched the officer in the face following a disagreement about a knocked-down road sign. Van Wurden was found guilty of using violence against a government official by the capital's Khamovnichesky District Court, Russia's Interfax news agency said. The charge carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison. A number of foreign nationals from the US and Western Europe have been jailed in

high-profile cases in Russia in recent years. Some analysts have said that Moscow may be using jailed Westerners as bargaining chips as tensions remain high over the Kremlin's military operation in Ukraine. Those detained included Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, Michigan corporate security executive Paul Whelan and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist Alsu Kurmasheva. All three Americans, who were freed as part of the largest prisoner exchange since the end of the Cold War in August 2024, vehemently denied the charges brought against them, which range from espionage to spreading false information against the Russian army.

# Hasina's son claims Yunus govt weaponising judiciary for 'political witch hunt'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Sanjeeb Wazed, son of deposed Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina, has accused the Muhammad Yunus led interim government of "weaponising the judiciary" for carrying out a "political witch hunt" against the Awami League leadership. Wazed's allegations, as a long post on X, came two days after the interim government on Monday said it has sent a diplomatic note to New Delhi seeking Hasina's extradition from

India. Hasina, 77, has been living in India since August 5 when she fled Bangladesh following a massive student-led protest that toppled her Awami League's (AL) 16-year regime. Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) has issued arrest warrants for Hasina and several former Cabinet ministers, advisers, and military and civil officials for "crimes against humanity and genocide." The judges and prosecutors appointed by the unelected Yunus led regime to conduct

farcical trial process through International Crimes Tribunal makes it a political witch hunt that forsakes justice and marks another ongoing onslaught to persecute Awami League leadership," Wazed said in his post on Tuesday. An IT entrepreneur, Wazed is based in the US and has been an ICT adviser in Hasina's government. "The kangaroo tribunal and subsequent request for extradition comes while hundreds of leaders and activists are extrajudicially killed, framing of outrageous murder charges, illegal incarcer-

ation of thousands by law enforcement and violent attacks including looting vandalism and arson going on with impunity everyday fuelled by denial of the regime," he added. On Monday, India confirmed receiving the 'note verbale' or diplomatic communication from the Bangladesh high commission in New Delhi but refrained from commenting on it. Under the provisions of the India-Bangladesh extradition treaty, extradition may be refused if the offence is one of a "political character."

**THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS**

**LOST & FOUND**

I, Kiran Aggarwal D/o Satpal Aggarwal R/O 425, Kohat Enclave, Pitampura, Delhi-110034 have lost cancelled lease deed of the Property No. 425, Kohat Enclave, Pitampura, Delhi 110034. Finder Please Contact: 9871063925.

PD(1142)A

**CHANGE OF NAME**

I, RAVI KUMAR TANWAR S/o RATTAN SINGH R/O WZ-1420, Nangal Raya New Delhi, South West Delhi, Delhi-110046 have changed the name of my minor son RUDRAKSH TANWAR aged 12 years and he shall hereafter be known as VEDANSH TANWAR.

PD(1146)C

I, hitherto known as RAJAN KUMAR alias RAJA BABU S/O SURENDRA SINGH, R/O WZ-856, Nangal Raya, South West Delhi, Delhi-110046, have changed my name and shall hereafter be known as RAJA BABU.

PD(1147)C

I, Anju Bala C/o Anil Sharma R/O P-33 Krishan Vihar, Sultanpuri C-Block North West Delhi-110086 have changed my name to Anju to Anju Bala for all purposes.

PD(1143)C

I, Abhinav Aggarwal S/o Anil Kumar Aggarwal R/O B-150, Sector-51, Noida GB Ngr, UP, hereby inform that as per father's name is Anil Agarwal and as per Passport & Pan Card my father's name is Anil Kumar Aggarwal. Both Anil Kumar Aggarwal and Anil Agarwal are one Person only for all future purposes.

PD(1144)A

I, RAJINA, W/O. JAMIL AKHTAR, R/O, C- 584, JAHANGIRPURI DELHI-110033, HAVE CHANGED MY NAME TO RAJEENA KHATOON. RAJINA AND RAJEENA KHATOON IS THE SAME PERSON

PD(1145)C

I, Sunita, W/o- JC-472281L Sub Sunil Kumar Nunia, R/O- Vill+Po- Nunia Gothra, Teh-Chirawa, Dist-Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan-333026, have changed my name from Sunita to Sunita Devi, vide affidavit dated 25/12/2024 before Notary Public Delhi.

PD(1149)C

**M. P. POWER GENERATING COMPANY LIMITED**  
Office of The Addl. C.E. (P & W), Shree Singaji Thermal Power Project, Dongalia Distt. Khandwa (M.P.)  
E-mail ID : sepnw.sstpp1@gmail.com  
No. 515-1700/SSTPP/MPPGCL/P&W/7093 Dated : 24.12.2024

**NOTICE INVITING E-TENDER (Website : mppgcl.mp.gov.in)**

| Tender Particulars/Tender Number  | Estimated Cost (Rs.) including GST | Tender Cost & EMD in Rs. | Last Date and Time for closing of Online submission |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Supply, Erection and installation of 20 mtr. high mast with complete accessories for power house at SSTPP, MPPGCL, Dongalia. (T-2024_MPPGCL_386126)   | 66.33 Lakhs                        | 2000/- & 1,32,700/-      | 20.01.2025 up to 15:30                              |
| AOH work of Boiler Non-Pressure Part of Unit No. 2 at 2x600MW, SSTPP, MPPGCL, Dongalia. (T-2024_MPPGCL_382194_1)  | 371.35 Lakhs                       | 5000/- & 3,71,350/-      | 13.01.2025 up to 15:30                              |
| Procurement for set of carb clad coated seat and disc (gate) of 200 NB Branch Segregating valve (BSV) installed at AHP of 2x660 MW, Stage-II, SSTPP, MPPGCL, Dongalia. (T-2024_MPPGCL_381794_1) | 53.52 Lakhs                        | 2000/- & 1,07,100/-      | 17.01.2025 up to 15:30                              |

For extension & other details, the bidders are requested to please visit e-portal of GoMP at [www.mptenders.gov.in](http://www.mptenders.gov.in)  
M.P. Madhyam/117981/2024 //SAVE ELECTRICITY// SE (P&W)

**DOON UNIVERSITY**  
Methowalia Road, Dehradun, Dehradun Ph. 0135-2533134

**E-TENDER NOTICE**

Doon University, Dehradun invites separate e-tender for the Supply and Installation of Nanofiber Electrospinning Unit at Doon University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand. The tender documents are available on Uttarakhand government e-procurement [www.uktenders.gov.in](http://www.uktenders.gov.in) Interested firms may apply through e-tender.

**Store & Purchase Officer**

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

This is to inform all concerned that SH. BHOOP SINGH son of Sh. Manuwa, R/o Village-Illahabas Dadr, Sector-86, Phase-II, NOIDA, had executed a WILL on Dt. 13.02.2024 in respect of Residential Plot No.5U-12, Sector-86, Noida, Distt. Gautam Budh Nagar-U.P. area measuring 127.0 Sq.Mtrs. duly allotted by the Noida Authority against 5% Villager Quota against Khet No.193 & 310, Village-Suthiana, Noida, Distt. Gautam Budh Nagar-U.P., in our favour which is regd. Whereas Sh. Bhoop Singh died on 26.05.2024 and after his death We, Manvir S/o Sh. Ramu, R/o 158, Vill. Behloipur, Sector-65, Noida & Kirti Bhatti S/o Sh. Dinesh Bhatti, R/o 7118, Vill. Shahdara, Sector-141, NOIDA, want to get mutation of the said property on the basis of WILL in our favour. If anyone has any objection, he/she will submit his/her objection in the Residential(Plot), Deptt. of Noida Authority within 30 days of the publication of this notice. MANVIR & KIRTI BHATI

**M.P. ROAD DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION LTD.**  
(M.P. State Highway Authority)  
(Govt. of M.P. Undertaking)  
45-A, Arera Hills, Bhopal-462011 (CIN : U45203MP2004SGC016758)  
Ph. No. : 0755-2597290, 2765205, Fax : 0755-2572643, Website : mprdc.gov.in  
NIT No. 12513/664/Procu./MPRDC/NDB/CW/2024 Date : 24.12.2024

**NOTICE INVITING TENDERS**

Madhya Pradesh Road Development Corporation Limited (MPRDC) Bhopal invites online tender for Upgradation of following roads in the state of Madhya Pradesh under proposed NDB Loan :-

| Pkg. No. | Name of Road  | Length (in Km) | Estimated Project Cost (in Rs. Cr.) | Bid Security (EMD) (in INR Cr.) | Cost of Bid Document (in Rs.) | Period of Completion (in Months) |
|----------|---|----------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 10       | Upgradation of Gadasarai-Pandariya Road (CG Border)                             | 47.32          | 227.37                              | 2.27                            | 50,000/-                      | 24                               |
| 11       | Upgradation of Bachhon-Chandla-Sarwai-Gorihar-Chandrapura Road (MP - UP Border) | 57.64          | 299.56                              | 3.00                            | 50,000/-                      | 24                               |
| 12       | Upgradation of Ujjain - Maksi Road  | 38.95          | 273.45                              | 2.73                            | 50,000/-                      | 24                               |
| 13       | Upgradation of Morar-Chitora Road.  | 29.40          | 127.35                              | 1.27                            | 50,000/-                      | 24                               |

The dates for purchase, submission, etc. are mentioned in the key dates. Tender forms can be purchased online only up to 15:30 hrs. on 04.02.2025 from website [www.mptenders.gov.in](http://www.mptenders.gov.in). The bidders have to submit the Technical bid as well as Financial Bid online only. The Addendum/Corrigendum (if any) shall only be published on the website of [www.mptenders.gov.in](http://www.mptenders.gov.in) only. If holiday is declared by Govt. of M.P. on the date of opening, the same will automatically be shifted to subsequent working days. MPRDC reserves the right to accept/reject any/all tenders without assigning any reason thereof.

M.P. Madhyam/117983/2024 **MANAGING DIRECTOR**

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

This is to inform all concerned that Sh. Yuvraj Singh Chauhan son of Sh. Tejpal Singh, R/o Gali No.3, Village-Chhalera, Sector-44, Noida, had executed a WILL on dt. 06.03.2023 in respect of Residential Plot No.A-146, Sector-151, Noida, Distt. Gautam Budh Nagar-U.P. area measuring 162.0 Sq.Mtrs., in my favour which is registered in the office of Sub-Registrar, NOIDA.

Whereas Sh. Yuvraj Singh Chauhan died on 13.12.2024 and after his death I, Satish Chauhan son of Sh. Amichand Chauhan, R/o H.No.5, Gali No.3, Near Primary School, Village-Chhalera, Noida, want to get mutation of the said property on the basis of WILL in my favour. If anyone has any objection, he/she will submit his/her objection in the Residential(Plot), Deptt. of Noida Authority within 30 days of the publication of this notice.

SATISH CHAUHAN

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

This is to inform to all concern that Sh. Ishwar Dayal Sharma S/o Harbhajan Lal Sharma R/o 3413, Malayan Street, Delhi Gate New Delhi-110002, who is the original allottee of Plot No. 34, Block-D, Sector-40, Noida(U.P), had sold the said property on General power of attorney basis to the following person(s). GPA was executed in favour of Mrs. Madhu Kapoor W/o Sh. Madhu Kapoor R/o B-31, Near DAV School, Sector-56 Noida (U.P) which is registered on Dated 26.02.1997 in Sub Registrar office Delhi. The agreement to sell was not registered or not executed. So it is informed to all concern that the said property is going to be transferred in favour of Mrs. Charu Bansal W/o Sh. Rajiv Bansal R/o 16/331-B, Khajoor Road Karol Bagh Central Delhi. If any one has/have any objection he/she may file his/her objection along with the sufficient proof in the Residential Plot Department of the Noida Authority within 30 days from the date of publication of this notice.

Mrs. Madhu Kapoor

**Office of the Superintending Engineer**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Circle, Public Works Department, Almora**  
Phone/Fax: 05962-230295 Email: [sepwdalm@rediffmail.com](mailto:sepwdalm@rediffmail.com)

Letter No. : 5833(I)/ Nivida-01/2024-25 Dated : 23/12/2024

**NATIONAL COMPETITIVE BIDDING (E-Tendering)**  
**E-TENDER NOTICE**

The Superintending Engineer, 1<sup>st</sup> Circle, PWD Almora invites tender through E-Tendering (Two Bid System) **In anticipation of sanction** on behalf of Honourable Governor of Uttarakhand for following works. All other information will be available from dated 27/12/2024 & onwards on website <http://www.uktenders.gov.in>

| Sl. No. | Name of Work  | Cost of Tender Form | Earnest Money (Rupee in lakh) | Validity of Tender | Time of Completion                                  | Contractor's Category of Registration for tendering                                       |
|---------|---|---------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|---|---|
| 1       | <b>PD PWD Almora</b><br>Improvement and Damarikaran work in Goluchina Gali Bashura Govindpur Motor Road under State Sector in Someshwar Constituency of District Almora<br>(In anticipation of sanction)  | ₹ 5000.00 + 18% GST | ₹ 10.32 Lakh                  | 120 Days           | 15 Month (including Rainy Season and Winter Season) | Class "A" & Higher in Road work in Central Govt./ Any state Govt./ Any Govt. Undertaking. |
| 2       | <b>PD PWD Almora</b><br>Improvement and Damarikaran work in Dholaghat Rikhe Silani Motor Road under State Sector in Someshwar Constituency of District Almora.<br>(In anticipation of sanction)   | ₹ 5000.00 + 18% GST | ₹ 3.25 Lakh                   | 120 Days           | 15 Month (including Rainy Season and Winter Season) | Class "B" & Higher in Road work in Central Govt./ Any state Govt./ Any Govt. Undertaking. |
| 3       | <b>PD PWD Almora</b><br>Improvement and Damarikaran work in Pokhari Bagniya and Pokhari Binwal via Chaykhan to Baliya Link Motor Road in Km 1 to 9 under CM Ghoshna No. 284/2024 in Jageshwar Constituency of District Almora.<br>(In anticipation of sanction) | ₹ 5000.00 + 18% GST | ₹ 12.25 Lakh                  | 120 Days           | 15 Month (including Rainy Season and Winter Season) | Class "A" & Higher in Road work in Central Govt./ Any state Govt./ Any Govt. Undertaking. |

# Infrastructure projects, marketing campaigns drive tourism growth in 2024

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, undertook several key initiatives in 2024 to boost tourism in the country. These included infrastructure development projects under Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD schemes, promotion and marketing campaigns like 'Bharat Parv' and 'Dekho Apna Desh,' and participation in international travel fairs to showcase India's diverse tourism offerings to the global market.

■ Ministry of Tourism has sanctioned a total of 76 projects for an amount of Rs.5287.90 Crore under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, out of which 75 projects are physically complete.

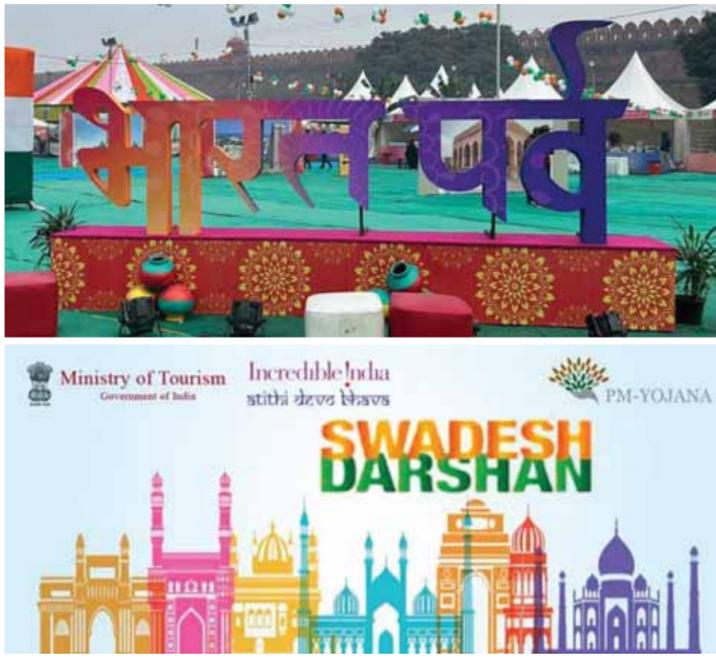
■ Ministry of Tourism has revamped its Swadesh Darshan Scheme as Swadesh Darshan 2.0 (SD2.0) with the objective to develop sustainable and responsible destinations following a tourist & destination centric approach. 34 projects have

been sanctioned for Rs.793.20 Crore under SD2.0.

■ Ministry of Tourism has sanctioned a total of 48 projects for an amount of Rs.1646.99 Crore under the PRASHAD Scheme, out of which 23 projects have been completed.

■ A total of 65 projects for an amount of Rs 937.56 Crore have been sanctioned under the Assistance to Central Agencies Scheme, out of which 38 projects have been physically completed.

■ Ministry of Tourism has formulated guidelines for 'Challenge Based Destination Development' as sub scheme of Swadesh Darshan 2.0 Scheme to enhance tourist experience across all points of the tourist value chain. Under this scheme, proposals have been invited under four thematic categories (i) Spiritual Tourism, (ii) Culture & Heritage, (iii) Vibrant Village Program, (iv) Ecotourism and Amrit Dharohar Sites. The Ministry of Tourism has selected 42 destinations under various



tourism themes for development under the scheme.

■ As a follow up to the Budget Announcements 2024-25, a total of 40 projects across 23 States have been sanctioned for an amount of Rs. 3295.76 Crore under the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI) - Development of Iconic Tourist Centres to Global Scale to infuse long term interest free loans for a period of 50 years to States for comprehensive development of iconic tourist centers in the country and branding & marketing them at global scale.

■ Ministry of Tourism organized 'Bharat Parv' event at the Red Fort grounds, Delhi, as part of the Republic Day Celebrations from 23rd to 31st January, 2024. Thematic Pavilions of States/UTs were setup to showcase diverse tourist attractions of the country. Cultural performances by various regional cultural associations were also organized. The

event promoted Vocal for Local, through the participation of local artisans from across the country by displaying and selling their products.

■ Launched 'Dekho Apna Desh People's Choice 2024' - a Nationwide poll to identify the most preferred tourist attractions under 5 categories. It is also an effort to identify attractions and destinations for development in mission mode, contributing to India's journey towards Viksit Bharat@2047.

■ Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with the Ministry of Education is organizing a nation-wide Dekho Apna Desh Schools Contest for Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV) and Navodaya Vidyalaya (NV) Schools. The students are expected to create physical brochure of their District's tourism attractions, destinations, experiences, and other offerings. The initiative aims to make the students aware about the tourism wonders and attractions

present in each district of the country.

■ Chalo India Global Diaspora Campaign was launched to enable Indian diaspora members become Incredible India ambassadors. The campaign has been implemented in the spirit of Jan Bhagidari for an Atulya and Viksit Bharat to encourage the Indian diaspora to invite their 5 non-Indian friends to travel to India every year. One lakh free e-visas for foreign tourists visiting India under 'Chalo India' campaign have been announced for the remaining part of the current Financial Year.

■ On the occasion of the 46th Session of the World Heritage Committee held at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi in July 2024, an 'Incredible India' exhibition was set up at Bharat Mandapam to highlight India's rich cultural heritage, age-old civilization, geographical diversity, hidden gems in tourism along with modern developments, for the delegates.

## Government committed to improve quality spending in FY26: Finmin report amid legal tussle with SEBI

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
The government will continue its focus on improving quality spending, strengthening the social security net and bring down the fiscal deficit to 4.5 per cent of the GDP in FY26, a finance ministry document said.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is scheduled to present the Budget for 2025-26 in Parliament on February 1.

The Union government is committed to pursuing the glide path of fiscal consolidation as announced in the Budget for FY 2021-22 and to attain a level of fiscal deficit lower than 4.5 per cent of GDP by FY 2025-26, according to finance ministry statements on the half yearly review of the trends in receipts and expenditure and deviation in meeting the



obligations of the government under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, 2003. The statements were tabled in the Lok Sabha last week.

"The thrust will be on improving the quality of public spending, while at the same time, strengthening the social security net for the poor and needy. This

approach would help further strengthen the nation's macro-economic fundamentals and ensure overall financial stability," it said.

According to the statements, the Budget 2024-25 was presented in the backdrop of global uncertainties caused by the wars in Europe and the Middle East.

India's sound macro-economic fundamentals have cushioned the country from the vagaries afflicting the global economy.

"It has also helped the nation pursue growth with fiscal consolidation. As a result, India retains its pride of place as one of the fastest growing economies in the world. However, risks to growth still remain," it said.

Total expenditure was estimated at about Rs 48.21 lakh crore, of which, expenditure on revenue account and capital account were estimated at about Rs 37.09 lakh crore and Rs 11.11 lakh crore, respectively, as per the Budget Estimate (BE) of 2024-25.

As against total expenditure of Rs 48.21 lakh crore, the expenditure in first half of FY25 was Rs 21.11 lakh crore or about 43.8 per cent of BE.

for creation of capital assets, the effective capital expenditure (Capex) was projected at Rs 15.02 lakh crore.

Gross Tax Revenue (GTR) was estimated at about Rs 38.40 lakh crore with an implied tax-GDP ratio of 11.8 per cent.

Total non-debt receipt of the Centre was estimated at about Rs 32.07 lakh crore. It comprised tax revenue (net to Centre) of about Rs 25.83 lakh crore, non-tax revenue of about Rs 5.46 lakh crore, and miscellaneous capital receipts of Rs 0.78 lakh crore.

With above estimates of receipts and expenditure, the fiscal deficit was pegged at about Rs 16.13 lakh crore in BE 2024-25 or 4.9 per cent of GDP.

In H1 of FY25, the fiscal deficit is estimated at Rs 4.75 lakh crore, or about 29.4 per cent of BE.

## BPCL picks Andhra Pradesh for India's last greenfield refinery project

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
State-owned Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) has picked Andhra Pradesh for setting up a new oil refinery-cum-petrochemical complex, which may be the last greenfield project in India which has detailed a very ambitious energy transition plan to net zero emissions.

In a stock exchange filing, BPCL said its board at a meeting on Tuesday "accorded its approval to commence pre project activities for setting up of a greenfield refinery cum petrochemical complex in east coast at Andhra Pradesh at an estimated cost of Rs 6,100 crore".

The pre-project activities include initial studies, land identification, and acquisition, preparation of detailed feasibility report,



environment impact assessment, basic design engineering package, and front-end engineering design, it said.

While the firm did not reveal the capacity or the timelines for completing the project, the refinery could be at least 9 million tonnes (180,000 barrels per day) capacity.

BPCL is India's third largest oil refiner behind state-owned Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) and Reliance Industries Ltd. It currently owns refineries at Mumbai (12 million tonnes a year capacity), Kochi in Kerala (15.5 million tonnes) and Bina

in Madhya Pradesh (7.8 million tonnes). It had lost a fourth oil refinery to Oil India Ltd in the aborted privatisation plan.

BPCL had to give up its Numaligarh refinery in Assam to Oil India Ltd when the government was attempting to privatise the company. The transfer was to keep the Numaligarh unit within the public sector to honour the Assam Accord. But BPCL privatisation was aborted due to lack of interest by bidders.

The planned unit in Andhra Pradesh is being touted as India's last greenfield refinery project. BPCL is part of a consortium that is pursuing a 60 million tonnes a year refinery-cum-petrochemical complex on west coast in Maharashtra that was conceived six years back but is yet to get off the drawing board due to land acquisition woes.



## Government extends duty-free import of yellow peas

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
The government has extended the import of yellow peas without duty and MIP (minimum import price) till February next year.

However, the imports are subjected to registration under online Import Monitoring System, with immediate effect, for all import consignments where Bill of Lading (Shipped on Board) is issued on or before

February 28, 2025.

"Import of yellow peas...is free without the MIP condition and without port restriction, subject to registration under online import monitoring system, with immediate effect, for all import consignments where the bill of lading (shipped on board) is issued on or before February 28, 2025," the directorate general of foreign trade (DGFT) has said in a notification.

## Cement industry looks for better growth in 2025

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
The Indian cement industry, witnessing a consolidation and heightened rivalry between two corporate houses snapping smaller players, pins its hope on 2025 for an improvement in sales realisation, higher margins and acceleration in demand, expecting around 8 per cent sales growth helped by an increased government spendings on big-ticket infra projects.

Over 50 MTPA (million tonnes per annum) capacity are being acquired for USD 4.5 billion by two leading players - Aditya Birla group firm UltraTech Cement and billionaire Gautam Adani-led Ambuja Cements, besides organic expansion of the existing units as they have kept their war chest ready prowling for opportunities.

The industry faced challenges on numerous fronts in 2024, right from moderate capacity utilisation to lower sales



realisation, which impacted the topline of several makers, contraction of margins and slower volume growth.

However, 2024 would also be known for big-ticket acquisitions by UltraTech and Adani Cement to consolidate their positions and achieve their targeted growth ahead of time.

Adani Cements, a lateral entrant in the sector, completed the acquisition of Saurashtra-based Sanghi Industries, Penna Industries and recently announced to

acquire CK Birla group firm Orient Cement as part of its inorganic growth strategy.

Besides, it has also snapped up small players facilities as My Home and its subsidiary ACC has also acquired Asian Concretes and Cements.

These acquisitions and expansions helped Adani Cement to cross a 100 MTPA capacity with a pan-India presence in 2024 within two years of entry in the sector, with 70 MTPA acquired capacity from Swiss firm Holcim.

The Adani group has plans in the works to raise this to 140 MTPA by FY28, just a shade below market leader UltraTech's current capacity of 156.66 MTPA grey cement.

Aditya Birla group is also firing on all cylinders to maintain its lead, and has plans for 200 MTPA capacity by FY27. In 2024 it announced acquisition of South-based India Cements Ltd and is in the process of acquiring Kesoram Industries' Cement Business.

According to Deloitte India Partner Rakesh Surana, 2024 was a year of consolidation for the cement industry, marked by significant mergers and acquisitions.

"This trend has highlighted a structural shift in the sector, with the largest companies accounting for a substantial share of the overall capacity. Currently, the top five cement producers collectively command an estimated 60-65 per cent of the industry's capacity," he said.



## Ola Electric expands pan-India network

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Ola Electric on Wednesday said it has expanded its network to 4,000 stores nationwide, a four-fold increase from its existing network. The company has opened over 3,200 new stores co-located with service facilities. The expansion spans beyond metros and Tier I and II cities into smaller towns

and tehsils, Ola Electric said in a statement.

"With our newly opened stores co-located with service centres, we have completely redefined EV purchase and ownership experience, setting new benchmarks with our #SavingsWalaScooter campaign," Ola Electric Chairman & Managing Director Bhavish Aggarwal said.

## Swan ties up with AG&P for India FSRU

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Business tycoon Nikhil Merchant-run Swan Energy has lined up a floating LNG receipt and regasification unit for its proposed liquefied natural gas import project at Jafraabad in Gujarat, the firm said in a regulatory filing.

Swan signed a Heads of Agreement with Singapore's AG&P Terminals and Logistics to form joint venture companies to provide a floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) and a floating storage unit to operate the Jafraabad terminal as well as for supplying LNG.

A joint venture company (LNG supply company) will be incorporated "for the purpose of supplying LNG in India or any other jurisdiction", Swan said in the



filing, adding it will hold 51 per cent equity stake and the balance 49 per cent equity stake shall be held by AG&P LNG.

Another joint venture company (vessel company) will be incorporated "for the purpose of providing floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) and floating storage

unit (FSU) to operate Swan LNG Pvt Ltd's LNG Terminal. AG&P LNG will hold a 51 per cent equity stake and Swan will hold 49 per cent equity stake in the company, it said.

AG&P LNG will also collaborate with Swan for regasification of LNG into RLNG. "There is also an option with AG&P LNG to

have equity participation in Swan Energy's LNG Terminal," it said.

With domestic natural gas production meeting barely half of the country's needs, the fuel in its supercooled, liquid form is imported to meet feedstock demand for generating electricity, making fertiliser and CNG sales. The country has seven LNG import facilities -- 3 in Gujarat (Dabje, Hazira and Mundra), and one each in Maharashtra (Dabhol), Kerala (Kochi), Tamil Nadu (Ennore) and Odisha (Dhamra).

Swan said all the transactions with AG&P are subject to due diligence by both the parties; and the terms and conditions for the proposed deals will be decided post due diligence.

Swan in August announced plans to divest for USD 399 million its majority 51 per

cent stake in the 5 million tonnes per annum LNG FSRU, Vasant One, to Turkey's state-owned gas company Botas. The remaining 49 per cent stake is held by Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative (IFFCO) but it is not known if the fertiliser company plans to divest its share.

The FSRU, which was built by then-Hyundai Heavy Industries, was delivered to Swan four years ago and was originally destined for its Jafraabad import terminal. But project timelines were delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic that was followed by a typhoon.

The FSRU subsequently was leased by Swan subsidiary Triumph Offshore to Botas under a one-year bareboat charter with a reported day rate of USD 250,000.

## GoMechanic eyes over 3-fold business growth by 2027

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Car services and repair platform GoMechanic expects over three-fold rise in net revenue to Rs 700 crore by 2027 and thereafter go for public listing, a top official of the company said.

GoMechanic Co-Founder and CEO Himanshu Arora told PTI that the company at present has around 3 per cent market share and aims to raise it to 10 per cent in the next three years.

The company is also looking to diversify offerings, foraying into the two-wheeler and electric vehicle services segment.

"We sit at about 3 per cent of the market share right now and to be servicing every 1 car out of ten would be around 10 per cent by 2027. By 2027, we expect our brand to generate approximately Rs 700 crore in revenue. We believe that an IPO is a natural next step for GoMechanic's growth story," Arora said.

The company at present provides services through 800 garages across 125 cities and plans to scale up to 2,500 garages across 500 cities by



2027.

GoMechanic was acquired by Servizy, a subsidiary of the Lifelong Group, in March 2023 after anomalies in its financial records were found under previous management and the firm was put on sale by the investors.

"It has been only about 20 months since we acquired the brand... The trajectory clearly indicates that an IPO is on our roadmap," Arora said.

GoMechanic posted a revenue of Rs 210 crore in the financial year 2023-24 and a revenue of Rs 85 crore in the April-June 2024 quarter.

"Our spares and accessories are also growing fast. We should be clocking about Rs 432 crore this financial year in gross merchandise value and roughly around Rs 200 crore in the net revenue," Arora said.

# Anupati, Raju emerge winners at Junior National Equestrian Championship

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Young riders Anupati Navyashree Sai and Raju Singh emerged the best performers in the show jumping and dressage categories respectively on the concluding day of the first half of Junior National Equestrian Championships. In the young rider category, Anupati, who was astride Abra ka Dabra, secured 32.60 marks without conceding any penalty in the showjumping two-phase event on Tuesday. She finished ahead of Avik Bhatia, Geetika Tikkihsetty, and Monu Kumar to be adjudged the best in her event. In dressage freestyle, Raju, who rode Louk, did extremely well in his event, securing 65.18 marks. It was a very competitive event in which Javeer Verma, Geetika and Navyasree ran him close. "It was extremely satisfying to see in this junior championship the talent



India has. It gives EFI hope and confidence that the game will grow fast in the country. Almost all the categories saw very close competition. The margin that separated the winners and other participants was very thin," Equestrian Federation of India secretary general Javeer Singh said. "I am sure that the second half of the championship will also produce high-octane competitions that will conclude on December 29," he said. In the children dressage

category, Subh Chowdhri, astride Furstentanz, trumped the challenge of Pranav Deepak, Punnet Jakhar and Jaiwant Nawle while in the children show jumping event, Mogil Anbu pipped Divyaraj Singh Rathore, Sresh Raju Mantena and Era Shree Harsha to emerge winner. Adding to the accolades in the children I category, Javeer Singh Nagra was awarded the best rider title for his exceptional performances throughout the competition, cementing his place as one of the brightest young talents in Indian equestrian sports. Sahil, astride Candy, logged 93.5 points to emerge winner in the overall individual tent pegging event, finishing ahead of Mohammad Alhamad Chishty (80), Shahrulkh Khan (79) and Adeel Ahkter (76). The action will next resume on December 27 with junior (age group 14-18) and children II (age group 10-12) category events.

# Mohun Bagan's set-piece proficiency gives them edge against Punjab FC

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Armed with a strong all-around team most proficient at set-pieces, Mohun Bagan Super Giant will fancy their chances when they face Punjab FC in the Indian Super League here on Thursday. The Mariners have won both their previous ISL matches against Punjab FC. However, Punjab FC have already beaten two sides, Mumbai City FC and Odisha FC, who managed the double over them last season, showing their ability to bounce back. Mohun Bagan enter this match after an eight-game unbeaten run that was ended with a defeat to FC Goa in their last fixture. Head coach Jose Molina has never lost consecutive games in ISL history, and the Mariners themselves have not suffered back-to-back away defeats in a single season. Punjab FC, on the other hand, have lost their last two matches on the road, conceding six goals across these outings, as many as they conceded in their previous five games combined. However, their home record



has been solid, with four wins in five games, including a 2-0 victory against Mohammedan SC in their last home outing. Right now, Mohun Bagan lead the points table with 26 points from 12 games, whereas Punjab FC are positioned seventh, having garnered 18 points from 11 matches. Punjab FC have conceded only one goal in the opening 15 minutes of matches this season, the joint lowest in the league alongside Odisha FC. This defensive strength could give them an early foothold against the Mariners. Punjab FC's Nikhil Prabhu

# PKL eliminators: UP Yoddhas to take on Jaipur Pink Panthers, Patna Pirates face U Mumba

**PTI ■ PUNE**  
UP Yoddhas will play Jaipur Pink Panthers, while Patna Pirates will be up against U Mumbai in the eliminators of the Pro Kabaddi League here on Thursday. In the fray for the top prize are Haryana Steelers and UP Yoddhas, both of whom have never won the title, and along with them are three-time champions Patna Pirates, season 8 winners Dabang Delhi KC, season 1 and 9 title holders Jaipur Pink Panthers, and season 2 champions U Mumba, who sealed qualification for the playoffs with the last game of the league stage. The winners of the eliminators will take on Haryana Steelers and Dabang



Delhi KC in the semifinals scheduled for Friday. Table toppers Haryana Steelers, who are through to the semi-finals, are gunning for their first PKL title while Dabang Delhi KC have been one of the best teams this season and have stitched

together a 15-match unbeaten streak, which helped them secure the second position on the points table. UP Yoddhas, who had to go back to the drawing board before the season began, have seen their young raiders and the defence step up in style and U Mumba stormed into the PKL Season 11 playoffs with a superb win against the Bengal Warriorz in the final league stage game this season. Among the highlights for U Mumba this season has been that the young brigade have led from the front. Having finished sixth on the points table, Jaipur Pink Panthers are looking for their third title. And coach Sanjeev Baliyan believes that the mentality and preparations for the playoff week has to be different. "The playoff is a different kettle of fish and there are no second chances like during the league stage. And moreover, to win the PKL title again, the whole squad has to play well, and support Arjun Deshwal."

# Former Chelsea player Oscar returns to Brazil's Sao Paulo from China

**AP ■ SAO PAULO**  
Former Chelsea midfielder Oscar is returning to his Brazilian boyhood club Sao Paulo after 14 years, which included a long spell in Chinese soccer. Sao Paulo president Julio Casares posted photos Tuesday on his social media channels which showed him with the 33-year-old former Brazil international. Casares described the move as "a super transfer." Minutes later, Oscar thanked China's Shanghai Port, where he played for eight seasons, for his time at the Chinese Super League club. "Today I finish a cycle that marked my life forever," he said. "I leave with my heart full of gratitude and pride for everything we achieved



together." Oscar joined Sao Paulo on a free transfer. Neither the Brazilian club nor the player disclosed the duration of their deal, but local media reports said he signed a three-year contract. Oscar is returning to a club he sued to leave for another Brazilian team, Internacional, in 2010.



# Valencia hires Carlos Corberan as its new head coach

**AP ■ VALENCIA**  
Relegation-threatened Valencia has hired West Bromwich Albion manager Carlos Corberan as its new head coach through June 2027. Valencia fired Rubén Baraja on Monday after another setback in La Liga left the Spanish club stuck in the relegation zone and sparked renewed protests against Singaporean owner Peter Lim. "Carlos Corberan has been appointed as coach of Valencia CF, signing a contract through to 2027," a statement on Valencia's website said early Wednesday. "A buy-out option in his contract with West Bromwich Albion was taken up to allow him to leave." No official figure was given but the compensation for the former Valencia youth player was reported to be in the region of \$3 million. The Spaniard led West Brom to its current seventh place in England's second-tier Championship. West Brom earlier said in a statement that the 41-year-old Corberan "is set to return to his homeland with the club's gratitude and best wishes following a two-year tenure at The Hawthorns." Chris Brunt, Damia Abella and Boaz Myhill "will oversee first-team duties until further notice."

# NADA update on Hima Das suspension creates confusion

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Asian Games gold medallist sprinter Hima Das, who was exonerated for a 'whereabouts' failure by the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA), was handed a retrospective suspension by the same body in an unusual turn of events. The 16-month suspension period ran from July 22, 2023 to November 21, 2024 and the athlete is now free to take part in tournaments but what has created a flutter is that she had been competing in events as recently as in June this year. NADA has recently announced that she was suspended by its anti-doping panels for failing to provide her



whereabouts. Known as the 'Dhing Express', she was handed the suspension under a case resolution agreement as per the NADA website. She is currently training in Thiruvananthapuram. The timeline around her suspension has created confusion as the athlete has been competing since April this year, including

participating in the Indian Grand Prix meet in Bengaluru and the National Inter-State meet in Panchkula in June even as her suspension was till November 21, 2024. The most intriguing thing is that she ran four races in June. When PTI reached out to her after her training session on Wednesday, Hima declined to comment on the issue. An Athletics Federation of India (AFI) source also confirmed that her suspension got over in November. A 'case resolution agreement' is made between the anti-doping agency and the athlete when both parties consent, and the athlete agrees to accept the consequences imposed without pursuing further appeals.

# Former Manchester City player Benjani Mwaruware challenges ruling in bid to lead Zimbabwe soccer federation

**AP ■ HARARE**  
Former Manchester City forward Benjani Mwaruware on Tuesday challenged a ruling to block him from potentially becoming the new head of Zimbabwe's soccer federation. Benjani, who also played for Portsmouth, Sunderland and Blackburn in the Premier League, last week filed his nomination to become the next president of the Zimbabwe Football Association (ZIFA). But an ethics committee of the association on Monday didn't include the 46-year-old among those eligible to contest the January elections, without immediately giving a reason.



"Our client is aggrieved by your committee's decision and he intends to appeal... Without any further delay," the player's lawyers wrote to ZIFA's interim boss Lincoln Mutasa. "We are instructed by our client to humbly request that you urgently provide us with full written reasons why your committee concluded that Mr. Benjani Mwaruware

fails to meet eligibility criteria stipulated in the ZIFA statutes." Zimbabwe has been under a FIFA-appointed normalization committee since July 2023 when soccer's governing body lifted the southern African country's 17-month international ban caused by government interference. A new executive will be elected in late January. Former Zimbabwe international Benjani still has a chance, however, through an appeals committee of the federation. Another prospective ZIFA president barred by the ethics committee is a controversial but popular local cleric, Walter Magaya.

# Indian cricket in 2024: Painful trophy wait ends before rare loss at home triggers transition talk

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
The monkey was finally off India's back in a roller-coaster 2024 when the financial giants of international cricket ended a 13-year wait for a world title, lost a rare Test series at home and dealt with transition triggered by both expected and unexpected retirements by the stalwarts of the game. There was plenty of action over the last 12 months that kept the loyal Indian fan interested. World Cup triumph; T20 farewell to Rohit and Kohli. The Indian cricket team and its unparalleled fan base were desperate for an ICC trophy after repeatedly faltering in the knock-out stages over the past decade, most recently in the ODI World Cup final at home last year. The trophy finally came home after Rohit Sharma and Co. Played a near perfect tournament to become the T20 World Cup champions in the

USA and the Caribbean. India's clarity of thought throughout the one-month long event was remarkable and with a little bit of luck on their side, especially in the final at Barbados, they were able to go the distance. On undercooked pitches in New York, they were pace heavy before unleashing their trump card Kuldeep Yadav from the Super 8 stage of the tournament. India picked as many as four spinners in the squad but played three in Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel and Kuldeep. With Jadeja not getting to do much with both bat and ball, Axar came of age in the competition producing match-winning performances with both bat and ball. The pace duo of Jasprit Bumrah and Arshdeep Singh also played their part to perfection collecting 15 and 17 wickets respectively. In the batting department, Rohit led from the front with a

fearless approach that demoralised opposition attacks. His approach was best summed up in the Super 8 game against Australia where he tore into the likes of Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins to make all the difference in the game. His opening partner Kohli was not able to make the contributions that were expected out of him but the superstar came up with an innings of immense substance when it mattered the most -- his not-so-fluent 76 of 59 balls kept India in the final after a poor start. The contributions from all-rounder Hardik Pandya, future captain Suryakumar Yadav and Rishabh Pant, playing his first international event following his comeback from a life-threatening car accident, were also noteworthy. A better script could not have been written for the likes of Rohit and Kohli, who got to say goodbye to the T20 format



with the coveted trophy in their hands. It was also a fitting farewell for head coach Rahul Dravid, whose tenure drew to a close. Change of guard in coaching: Surya's unexpected elevation With Rohit calling it a day, it was expected that Hardik will lead the T20 side into the

transition phase, having captained the side in the former's absence. However, Dravid's successor Gautam Gambhir had a different line of thinking as he played a major hand in elevating India's best T20 batter Suryakumar to the leadership position ahead of the series in Sri Lanka. To be fair to Suryakumar, the team has ticked all the boxes since he took over, also witnessing the rise of Tilak Verma and rebirth of the likes of Sanju Samson and Varun Chakaravathy. All three were simply sensational in India's recent T20 series in South Africa. Alongside Samson, Abhishek Sharma has also shown the talent and resolve at the top of the order and could serve India for long. India hit rock bottom against Kiwis While India moved on from the mighty duo of Rohit and Kohli in the shortest format rather quickly, the same is unlikely in the Test team. The chatter around the future of senior players in the Test team has gained momentum after India's first whitewash at home in a three-match series and more recently, the sudden retirement of premier off-spinner R Ashwin.

India's loss to New Zealand in their own backyard was easily one of the most embarrassing outcomes for the team in Test cricket over the past decade. Having slayed 'Bazball' earlier in the year against England, India blanked Bangladesh and were expected to hand out a similar treatment to the visiting Black Caps. However, in a stunning turn of events, the spirited Kiwis out-batted and out-bowled Rohit and Co. To script their biggest series wins overseas. The Indian batters' weakness against the turning ball was exposed threadbare and the duo of Ashwin and Jadeja, who run through sides for fun at home, were bettered by Mitchell Santner and Ajaz Patel. It was only after landing in Australia, Ashwin made up his mind on retirement but his underwhelming outing against New Zealand may have contributed to his big decision. With Ashwin gone and Mohammed Shami not

available, a Test transition is well underway Down Under. The outcome of the remaining two Tests will determine where the Indian batting stands. Jay Shah becomes youngest ICC chairman India is the engine of the global game and its influence on the sport increased further with the elevation of Jay Shah as ICC chairman, making him the fifth from the country at the helm of the governing body after Jagmohan Dalmiya, Sharad Pawar, N Srinivasan and Shashank Manohar. Shah took over in early December and has already made his presence felt by ending the deadlock over the hosting of the Champions Trophy in Pakistan by ensuring consensus for a reciprocal hybrid model in which India will not be required to travel across the border for any ICC event till 2028. Likewise, Pakistan too will get a neutral venue in case of an event in India.

# Visitors have exploited Australia's 'brittle' top order: Shastri

**PTI ■ MELBOURNE**  
Former coach Ravi Shastri has backed India to win the Boxing Day Test, saying the visitors have exploited Australia's "brittle" top order to have their "nose ahead" in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Shastri added that Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah is "almost single-handedly" responsible for the visitors keeping the series levelled at 1-1. "I think India would take this, the way the series is poised. Any overseas team being 1-1, especially with the games being in Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane, they would take this. "Going 1-1 into Boxing Day is the best case scenario. I would say India have their nose ahead," Shastri told news.Com.Au. Australia's top order comprising Usman Khawaja, Nathan McSweeney and Marnus Labuschagne have been unable to

score against Bumrah. It has forced them to hand a debut to teenage sensation Sam Konstas while dropping rookie opener Nathan McSweeney. "It's been pretty brittle. When you look at this Australian line-up, it's been a long time since I've seen an Australian line-up where the top order is that brittle. India have exploited that and continue to exploit it," Shastri said. All-rounder Mitchell Marsh has also largely struggled for runs. In the last year, Labuschagne, Marsh, Khawaja and Steve Smith all had average less than 30 in Test cricket. "India is 1-1 in the series and that man (Bumrah) has almost single-handedly got India into that position," Shastri said. "As far as Konstas goes, I think he's very refreshing. He's got flair, he's got flamboyance. But Test cricket is Test cricket. His technique will tighten up and he will be the future for Australia." Shastri feels McSweeney was



unfortunate to have been axed after just three Tests. "McSweeney was very unfortunate. He did the hard yards but he's a middle order batsman. I see him travelling to Sri Lanka when the Australian team go there and rebuild his career from there. "But I think it's a good move getting Konstas in because you need someone who can take the attack to the Indian team, because the punches were coming from nowhere." India have won the last two series in Australia and now have the opportunity to become only the third touring side to win three consecutive series Down Under, joining the West Indies (1984/85, 1988/89, 1992/93) and South Africa (2008/09, 2012/13, 2016/17). "Massive. No team has done that in a long time. Australia hammers sides when they come here. For India to pull off three on the trot will be something special.

"But they'll have to play good cricket. I see Australia coming hard in this Test match, especially with the bowlers. It's the batting that'll be the challenge for Australia more than anything else." Shastri feels India has come to Australia with a strong intent to win. "India have come here to win, they haven't come here to fill in the numbers. Even when I was the coach, our mantra was to play extremely hard, fair and to win. "You have to think of a method to beat Australia and not just compete. You've got to plan properly, how to take your 20 wickets. India have done that and been very aggressive. "They've been in the face of Australia and give as good as they get. It's been entertaining and feisty stuff. The first day of the Boxing Day Test will determine which way the series will go," he added.



## Cummins' message for Konstas: Have fun and don't overthink

**PTI ■ MELBOURNE**  
Australia skipper Pat Cummins understands what a teenager goes through on a high-profile Test debut and knows what he needs to tell a young Sam Konstas: "Have fun and don't overthink." Konstas, 19, is all set to make his debut against India in the Boxing Day Test, starting Thursday. Konstas has created a lot of buzz in Australian domestic cricket and his Test debut at the expense of Nathan McSweeney has become quite an event. When the skipper was asked about his feelings during his Test debut at 18, Cummins spoke about an element of naivety that can stop a kid from overthinking about how big a deal it is. "I spent a bit of the time wondering why or how I was there, how it happened so quick. I just remember being really excited and I think it's similar to Sammy (Konstas) this week. "There's a level of naivety that you just want to go out and play like you do when you're a kid in the backyard," Cummins said during the pre-match press interaction. "You just want to take the game on, have fun and not overthink. So that's the message to Sam. That's definitely how I felt as an 18-year-old, I was just really excited," Cummins fondly recollected. Cummins shared with

Konstas, how he, as a teenager, handled his debut back in 2011. "I was saying this to Sam the other day, I remember as an 18 year old I was thinking if I didn't have a great game it wasn't my fault, it was the selector's fault for picking me. "I was like, well they're the idiots that picked an 18 year old. You're so young starting out your career it's just its boxing day doesn't get any better than this so just enjoy the moment," he laughed. For Cummins, having 38-year-old opener Usman Khawaja, who is exactly double Konstas' age is a boon for the youngster as he will have calming influence at the other end even as youngsters with uncluttered mind always have an edge. "There's so much value in having experience and you've seen everything before. But there's almost just as many positives in having that freedom and naivety just to go out and see the ball and hit the ball." Indians can throw some challenges at some point. Even in a slump, Virat Kohli and Rishabh Pant are players whom this Australian team really respects. There are two Test matches and there could be a pushback round the corner. "I really hope not but you know they're good players so no doubt they'll throw some challenges at us at some point." Asked if his opposite number Rohit Sharma's poor form is

# South Africa aims to seal its place in WTC final in test series against Pakistan

**AP ■ CENTURION**  
South Africa will be eyeing a place in the World Test Championship final with an all-seam attack against Pakistan in the first test, starting Thursday. The Proteas need to win one of its remaining two test matches in this WTC cycle to guarantee a place at the Lord's final next year and captain Temba Bavuma believes expectations have risen in his team to do well in the two-test series. "There'll be pressure that comes with that," Bavuma said. "But to be honest with you, we're coming into the series to win the series 2-0. We understand that for us to do that, there's certain things that we need to do as a team: keep things simple, keep doing the small things right, and allow the results to take care of itself." South Africa has included four fast bowlers in the lineup with Corbin Bosch, who consistently bowls above 140 kph, set to play his first test at his hometown. Seasoned fast bowlers Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen will team up with Dane Paterson and Bosch to challenge Pakistan's batters on an expected pacy Centurion pitch where fast bowlers have a clear advantage over the last six years, picking up 227



wickets with spinners dismissing only 16 batters. Heading into the tests, South Africa's top-order batters did struggle against Pakistan in a rare 3-0 ODI whitewash with Tony de Zorzi, Ryan Rickelton and Tristan Stubbs all failing to read the offspin bowling of Salman Ali Agha in the opening game of the series. Whether it's easy, whether it's hard, we've got to find a way to do it," Bavuma said. "Whatever, I don't know, trauma that was there... Guys will have to deal with it."

Pakistan has long been struggling in test matches in South Africa, losing 12 and winning just two of the 15 test matches since it first toured the country in 1995. Pakistan's below-par show in South Africa includes its lowest test score of 49 at the Wanderers in 2013. Pakistan is lying at No. 7 in the WTC points table and Aaqib Javed is its fourth head coach in this WTC cycle with Mickey Arthur and Mohammad Hafeez quitting after one series. Jason Gillespie resigned just two weeks before Thursday's test.

Gillespie, who was hired by the Pakistan Cricket Board in April, had a horror start to his two-year contract when Bangladesh swept Pakistan in Pakistan 2-0 in the test series before England won the first test at Multan. Gillespie was removed from the selection panel and Javed masterminded Pakistan's back-to-back wins against England on two engineered spinning pitches where Noman Ali and Sajid Khan bagged 39 wickets. But Pakistan has brought in only Noman Ali for the two-test series in South Africa and is still contemplating whether to follow South Africa and go with an all-out pace attack. Shaheen Shah Afridi, who played in the preceding white-ball series in South Africa, has been surprisingly left out for the test matches. Naseem Shah and Babar Azam return to the test fold after missing the last two home tests against England while selectors have recalled seamer Mohammad Abbas after three years with the left-arm seam option of Mir Hamza in the squad. Abbas took 90 wickets in 25 test matches from 2017 to 21 before he ran out of selectors' favor despite his consistent performances for Hampshire in England and in domestic first-class cricket.

# Head best batter in world, his performances against Bumrah exemplify fearless approach: Chappell

**PTI ■ MELBOURNE**  
Travis Head is the "best batter in the world" whose performances against Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy exemplify his fearless approach and "Australian way of batting", feels legendary cricketer Greg Chappell. Head has dominated the batting chart with 409 runs in the first three Tests with two hundreds and a fifty, and former Australia captain Chappell believes his simplicity and aggression are behind his success as a Test batter. "Head's performances against Jasprit Bumrah in this series exemplify his fearless

approach. While most batsmen struggle to survive Bumrah's unorthodox action, sharp pace, and relentless accuracy, Head has treated him like any other bowler," Chappell wrote in Sydney Morning Herald. "By playing with intent and looking to score off Bumrah, Head has not only nullified his threat but disrupted his rhythm. His ability to dispatch short deliveries with authority and drive fuller ones with precision has been remarkable, underscoring the strides he has made," he added. Chappell said Head's flourish in the recent years across formats is due to an uncluttered mindset. "From a raw, unpredictable

talent to one of the most dominant male batters in world cricket, Travis Head has soared into his prime with an almost ethereal elegance," Chappell wrote. "His story is not just about overcoming challenges but about embracing a simplicity of style that has become his hallmark — one that allows his mind to remain uncluttered and his game devastatingly effective," he added. Chappell termed Head's 152 against England in the 2021-22 series as the "turning point". "The turning point came during the 2021 Ashes. Head's counterattacking 152 in Brisbane was a revelation. Walking in at 5-195, he



transformed the game with a whirlwind innings, taking the opposition bowlers apart and shifting the momentum firmly in Australia's favour," he wrote. "That innings wasn't just about runs, it was a statement of intent, a declaration that he would play his way." Chappell believes Head is one of the most feared batters in

the world who can dictate terms against the best bowlers. "Since that series, Head has gone from strength to strength, evolving into one of the most feared batsmen in the world. "His numbers since 2022 underline his dominance: 1800 runs at an average of 56.25, with six centuries at a strike rate of 75.6. These are not just impressive figures, they are a testament to his ability to thrive under pressure and dictate terms against the best bowlers in the world," Chappell added. Chappell praised the 30-year-old left-handed batter for prioritising intent over caution. "The essence of Travis Head's batting lies in his uncluttered

mind. He has chosen a path that prioritises intent over caution, a mindset that allows him to approach every ball with the aim of scoring runs," he wrote. "This doesn't mean recklessness — it's a calculated, efficient approach that keeps bowlers and captains under pressure. By getting into good positions to score, Head simultaneously positions himself to defend against the better deliveries. It's a virtuous cycle that rewards his positive intent," he added. Chappell said Head's ability to strike balance between aggression and elegance are the qualities which also make him a captaincy candidate in future. "What sets Head apart is his

ability to blend aggression with elegance. He has always been a powerful player of cross-bat shots, but his recent improvement in driving full deliveries down the ground has elevated his game," he wrote. "I believe Travis to be the most improved batter in world cricket in the past three years and in becoming so, has firmed in favouritism to be the next Australian captain. "In his current form, Travis exemplifies the Australian way of batting, and I agree with Ricky Ponting and Ian Healy when they praise the way he is playing. "Today, as the butterfly of his transformation soars, it's clear: Travis Head is the best batsman in the world."

## Bumrah equals Ashwin's record for rating points in ICC Ranking for Bowlers

**PTI ■ DUBAI**  
Pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah got a huge boost on the eve of the Boxing Day Test when he achieved the joint-highest rating ever by an Indian player, equalling the record held by spinner Ravichandran Ashwin in the ICC Ranking for Bowlers. The quick gained 14 rating points following his 9/94 in the drawn third Test at Brisbane to not only equal Ashwin's highest-ever 904 rating points but also consolidate his position at the top of the rankings. Bumrah has a chance to better Ashwin's rating points, which the now-retired off-spinner achieved in



December 2016, when the fourth match of the Border-Gavaskar Test begins at the MCG on Thursday. South Africa's Kagiso Rabada (856) and Australia's Josh Hazlewood (852) are trailing

the Indian pacer at the second and third place respectively. Charismatic Australian batter Travis Head's stellar run in the ongoing series against India helped him climb to fourth spot (825 rating

points) in the Test Ranking for Batters. He is still behind the England duo of Joe Root (895) and Harry Brook (876), and former New Zealand skipper Kane Williamson (867). Head smashed a scintillating 152 at the Gabba to follow up his century in the second Test at Adelaide. Compatriot Steve Smith's century at the Gabba got him into the top-10 once again. Among all-rounders, India's Ravindra Jadeja continues to lead the chart with 424 rating points, while Australia skipper Pat Cummins earned his place back in the top-10, following his four wickets and 42 runs in the third Test at Gabba.

## Cristiano Ronaldo takes family to Lapland for Christmas vacation

**AP ■ HELSINKI**  
Soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo said it was "just a little cold" as he posed bare-chested in the snow before taking an icy dip in a pool during a Christmas vacation in Finland's Lapland region. The 39-year-old Portuguese international traveled with partner Georgina Rodriguez and their children, who met Santa Claus in a 10-minute video posted online by Ronaldo on Tuesday. The former Real Madrid and Manchester United great appeared to decline to ski with his family. He wished his followers — including 645 million on Instagram — a "Merry Christmas" in Spanish.