



OPINION 6
A MONUMENTAL GESTURE
OF INTERFAITH HARMONY

WORLD 8
ALEXEI NAVALNY HAS DIED,
AUTHORITIES SAY

MONEY 10
RBI GIVES 15 MORE DAYS TO
PAYTM TO STOP TRANSACTIONS

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PM MODI ASSURES FARMERS OF RELIEF

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
REWARI/NEW DELHI

Amid the farmers' protest for the fourth consecutive day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Friday that his Government at the Centre has been actively working on various schemes for the "benefit of farmers". Addressing a public gathering after laying the foundation stone for AIIMS at Rewari in Haryana, the PM said his BJP-led NDA Government has provided farmers with the "guarantee" to seek loans from banks, a privilege previously denied to them.

"We provided farmers with the Modi guarantee... banks did not grant them loans, but we assured farmers," the PM said. He made these assertions at a public rally where he recalled that his first address after the party named him the Prime Ministerial candidate in 2013 was at Rewari. Modi inaugurated several development projects worth several crores for Rajasthan and Haryana, including the Rewari AIIMS, a new rail line, and a metro line.

Modi noted that the journey being there, securing over 273 Lok Sabha seats, and expressed hope for the NDA Government to claim more than 400 Lok Sabha seats in the upcoming elections.

This holds significance as another round of meetings between farmer representatives and Union Ministers is scheduled for February 18, following 'positive' discussions in



Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during the foundation stone laying and inauguration of various development projects, in Rewari district, on Friday

the meeting concluded on the night of Thursday-Friday.

Meanwhile, the situation at sensitive Delhi-Haryana and Haryana-Punjab borders remained peaceful, with continued talks between agitating farmers' organisations and Central Government representatives.

Haryana Police fired tear gas shells to disperse protesting farmers at the Shambhu border near Ambala. There was a mixed response to the 'Gramin Bharat

Bandh called by the Samyukta Kisan Morcha on Friday, with markets and bazaars in Delhi and NCR opening.

Amid the impasse, Union Ministers and farmer leaders will meet on Sunday for the fourth round of talks. Despite inconclusive talks on February 8, 12, and 15, the third round of discussions between protesting farmers in Punjab and three central ministers concluded positively in the wee hours of Friday.

Union Agriculture Minister Arjun Munda described the meeting as cordial, with a positive discussion. He confirmed that talks will continue on Sunday at 6 pm, expressing optimism in finding a solution through dialogue.

Among the farmer leaders present were SKM (non-political) leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal and Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee general secretary Sarwan Singh Pandher. Pandher highlighted the detailed

discussion on demands, including a legal guarantee for MSP and debt waiver. He acknowledged the ministers' request for time.

Meanwhile, protesting farmers vowed to continue their presence at the Punjab and Haryana borders over various demands, as the deadlock persisted despite the third round of talks with Union Ministers.

During the Gramin Bharat Bandh on Friday, protests occurred in parts of western Uttar Pradesh in response to the 'Bharat Bandh' call given by the SKM. Commuters in Punjab faced inconvenience as buses stayed off the roads in support of the SKM's call for a 'Bharat Bandh' to press the Government to accept farmers' demands, including a legal guarantee of MSP. Markets and commercial establishments at several places in the State also remained shut while farmers held demonstrations and blocked national highways in Pathankot, Tarn Taran, Bathinda, and Jalandhar. They raised slogans against the Centre for not accepting their demands.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Union Agriculture Minister Arjun Munda said the meeting between the Government and the farmer leaders took place in a cordial atmosphere. He said there was a positive discussion, and the talks will continue, scheduled for Sunday at 6 pm. "We will find a solution by sitting together," he added.

Continued on Page 2



Bengal on boil over Sandeshkhali atrocities

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

On a day when a high-powered all-women fact-finding team headed by Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee as a "mischievous person who is providing shelter to the rapists of Hindu women," the National Commission for Scheduled Castes recommended on Thursday the imposition of Article 356 in Bengal.

Days after visiting the disturbed areas of Sandeshkhali, the empowered NCSC team submitted a report to President Droupadi Murmu recommending the imposition of President's Rule, said panel's president Arun Halder.

"The NCSC has found large-scale atrocities on the Dalit and downtrodden people of Sandeshkhali... in the context of the grave situation prevailing there, it makes a perfect case for the

imposition of President's Rule," Halder said, adding, "there are provisions in Article 338 of the Constitution... according to which President's Rule can safely be imposed here... as there has been a blatant violation of the rights of the SCs and the downtrodden people, we have submitted our recommendation to the President." The NCSC recommendation came on a day when the Bengal Police prevented a high-powered delegation of the BJP led by two Union Ministers Pratima Bhoumik and Annapurna Devi at Rampur village a few kilometre ahead of Sandeshkhali. The all-women team, sent by BJP president JP Nadda and including four other MPs, staged a sit-in for two hours before returning to Kolkata, where they submitted a report to Governor CV Ananda Bose.

Continued on Page 2

IT department freezes Congress accounts, tribunal gives breather

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Soon after the Congress alleged that the main bank accounts of the party were frozen over an income tax demand of ₹210 crore, the I-T appellate tribunal allowed it to operate them pending a further hearing next week. The grand old party alleged that the move by the authorities just before the Lok Sabha polls was intended to impact all the party's ongoing political activities.

Congress treasurer Ajay Maken, who alleged at a Press conference that Income Tax authorities had frozen its accounts, informed that the tribunal has put a lien of ₹115 crore on its accounts, and the



Indian Youth Congress members stage a protest against the Central Government over freezing of some bank accounts of the Congress

party has been allowed to spend over and above that, which, however, came as a huge relief for the party. Party leader Vivek Tankha,

who appeared before the tribunal against the order, said he told the tribunal that the Congress would not be able to participate in the

"festival of elections" if its accounts remain frozen. The tribunal will hear the matter next Wednesday before a final decision is taken.

Several party leaders, including party president Mallikarjun Kharge and former party chief Rahul Gandhi, expressed their outrage and alleged that the Government's move was an attack on democracy. Maken, who said democracy was in danger in the country, detailed the tribunal's order.

The Indian Youth Congress staged a protest against the Centre over the freezing of bank accounts of the Indian National Congress and its youth wing, alleging that the move was "political vendetta."

Continued on Page 2

Tragedy strikes Delhi, 11 killed in factory fire

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In a tragic incident, at least 11 workers were charred to death, and four were injured in a massive fire that broke out inside a paint factory in Outer Delhi's Dayalpur market in Alipur on Thursday evening. The victims are yet to be identified.

The charred bodies of the 11 victims, 10 men and one woman, were recovered from the factory, which also houses chemical godowns. The fire was preceded by a blast, and soon it spread to nearby buildings, including a drug rehabilitation centre and eight shops.

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Major boost for defence



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Giving a major boost to the Indian industry with the aim of achieving self-reliance, the Government here approved proposals for various weapon systems worth ₹84,560 crore on Friday. This includes 15 maritime reconnaissance aircraft for the navy and coast guard, alongside radars and anti-tank mines.

The nod for these proposed deals was given in the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) meeting chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. Officials emphasised that the approvals, in the true spirit of 'aatmanirbharta', lay special emphasis on procurement of equipment from Indian vendors. The DAC, as the apex body in the Defence Ministry, is responsible for giving the go-ahead to proposals of the three Armed forces, with the final

decision resting with the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). Detailing the approved deals, officials highlighted that the DAC granted Acceptance of Necessity (AoN) for procurement of Medium Range Maritime Reconnaissance and Multi-Mission Maritime Aircraft through the Buy and Make category.

This is aimed at strengthening the surveillance and interdiction capabilities of the Indian Navy and the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) over the country's vast maritime area. The Indian Navy is set to receive nine aircraft, while the Coast Guard will procure six aircraft, with the total cost of this deal estimated at ₹29,000 crore.

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US vows to protect Indians

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President Joe Biden and his administration are working very hard to thwart and disrupt attacks on Indian and Indian American students, the White House has said. Deaths of at least four Indian American students have been



reported in the last several weeks. The announcement by John Kirby, Coordinator for Strategic Communications at the National Security Council in the White House comes amid a slew of attacks on Indian and Indian American students in various parts of the country.

"There is no excuse for

violence, certainly based on race or gender or religion or any other factor. That's just unacceptable here in the United States," Kirby told reporters here when asked about the series of attacks on students from India and also those from the Indian American community.

Continued on Page 2

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11 charred to death in paint factory inferno

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The youngest and the only earning member of the family, 21-year-old Brijkishore was saving money for his elder brother's wedding next month. On Thursday, Brijkishore's plans came to a tragic end when he was charred to death in a fire that gutted a paint factory in North Delhi's Alipur. Brijkishore, who hailed from Uttar Pradesh, was among the 11 workers who were charred to death late on Thursday evening after they got trapped in the factory, the shutter of which was locked from inside. "My cousin started working at the factory only a few days ago. He was saving money for his elder brother's wedding next month. I am going to pick up his parents from the railway station. How will I tell them that their son was killed in a fire?" asked Brijkishore's

cousin, Asharam, in a choked voice. Suraj, who recently quit his job at the factory after falling ill due to the hazardous chemicals used there, said, "It was a horrifying scene. People trapped inside the factory were screaming and banging the shutter. The flames were so high that we could not go anywhere near them." The father of 19-year-old Shubham, who lost his life in the incident, said, "My wife died 14 years ago. Since then I have been taking care of my family. Shubham was my youngest son. I do not want any compensation, just give my son back to me." According to locals, the fire broke out after more than 30 drums filled with chemicals exploded due to a spark caused by the welding work being carried out at the factory. "The chemical had flown into

the drains because of which the fire spread in the nearby houses and shops," Krishna Kumar, an eyewitness, said. Locals complained that there are many factories in the area that lack proper safety arrangements. A resident of the area said, "We are afraid that such an incident may take place again. There is another factory here that deals with polythene and leather. These factories should not be allowed to function in residential areas." Meanwhile, relatives of victims of the explosion and fire incident and some residents alleged that several complaints were made about fire safety in Dayalpur market area in Alipur here but "no one paid any attention". Devendra Saini, a nurse at the drug rehabilitation centre, said the work at the paint factory, where fire broke out, mostly



involves use of inflammable substances and multiple complaints were submitted by them. "By the time police reached the spot, damage was already done. We made several complaints earlier regarding our concerns but nothing happened. This is a place where fire catches easier than petrol. Government always engages in blame game, how can we expect help from them?" he asked. "Paint work includes mostly inflammable substances and that factory was situated so close to us. We raised concerns but nobody paid attention," Saini alleged. He further said that when the blast took place, the entire area was engulfed by fire instantly. "We could not do anything about it," he said. The fire was preceded by a blast and soon it spread to nearby buildings, including the drug rehabilitation centre

and eight shops. One of the victims' family members Malti said the bodies were charred beyond recognition. "My husband's brother was there at the factory when it caught fire. We couldn't even recognise the bodies. They were charred beyond recognition," she said. Another family member of a victim said they have not been informed by the police whether their kin has survived or not and they have no information about where the deceased and the injured were taken. "My nephew is one of the victims. Police didn't even tell us that," Ekta (55) said. A fire official said a call about the blaze was received around 5:30 pm on Thursday and 22 fire ten-

ders were pressed into service. The fire was brought under control by 9 pm, he said. Rajesh, an eyewitness who lives nearby, said she was near the gate of her home when the blast took place and all she could do at that moment was to run away with her children and save their lives. "I was sitting outside my house near the gate and suddenly noticed smoke fumes. The fire reached my gate and I alerted my family members and children to run inside. Who do we file complaint with? Nobody listens to us. We couldn't help others, I ran away with my children. Saving them was my only concern," she said. Sarala, 58, one of the neighbours who was also present at the spot when the blast took place, said, "We were worried about saving our families. My son had just woken up and he alerted us about the fire."

Ranjan Dimri | The Pioneer

Kejriwal moves trust vote in Assembly

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In a show of strength amid speculation of his arrest, which has ramped up following the sixth summons issued to him on Wednesday in connection with the alleged liquor policy scam, Delhi Chief Minister and AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal moved a trust vote in the Assembly on Friday. Speaker Ram Niwas Goel admitted the motion and it will come up for discussion in the Assembly starting 11 am on Saturday. This is the third time that Kejriwal has sought trust vote from the assembly in the past eight years. Moving the vote of confidence motion in the Assembly, Kejriwal said two AAP MLAs told him that BJP operatives recently approached 7 of their MLAs, proposing, "in a few days, we will apprehend your Chief Minister. Join BJP, and in exchange, receive Rs 25 crores and election tickets." "The MLAs were told that 21 AAP legislators have agreed to leave the party and more are in touch with the BJP. They offered the MLAs Rs 25 crore to join the BJP. The MLAs told me they did not accept. When we spoke to other MLAs, we found that they had not contacted 21, but seven.



Ranjan Dimri | The Pioneer

They were trying to carry out another Operation Lotus. I want to demonstrate through this motion of confidence that once again, the BJP's 'Operation Lotus' has faltered in Delhi. None of our MLAs defected, and all remain steadfastly aligned with us," Kejriwal said. "So it is clear that the alleged liquor policy scam is not a scam at all but an attempt to break our party and topple the government by filing false cases like they have in other states. Their aim is not to carry out an investigation but to arrest our leaders - and they have already arrested some - in the guise of the liquor policy case. Their aim is to topple the government because they know they can

never win elections in Delhi," the AAP chief claimed. However, the Chief Minister affirmed that their MLAs unequivocally rejected the enticement. Furthermore, Kejriwal emphasised that the BJP's agenda extends beyond investigating the alleged liquor scam; rather, it seeks to detain AAP leaders and dismantle the elected government, akin to strategies deployed in other states. Last month, Kejriwal had alleged that he was on the brink of being arrested in the liquor policy case as part of a BJP conspiracy to topple the AAP government in Delhi and that the BJP was also attempting to contact AAP MLAs, urging them to switch sides in lieu of cash of up to

Rs 25 crore. Leader of Opposition in the Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri claimed that Kejriwal, despite having the support of 62 MLAs, was bringing the trust vote motion that showed his confidence was shaken. "Not only this. Even before the trust vote is presented, they are so afraid of just eight BJP MLAs that they got seven of them suspended," he alleged. Bidhuri said it was surprising that Kejriwal was tabling a confidence motion alleging BJP of trying to poach AAP MLAs, but was not presenting evidence of it to the police that has already given him a notice in this regard. The motion in Assembly came days after the

Enforcement Directorate once again summoned the Aam Aadami Party (AAP) chief for the sixth time, in connection with an ongoing investigation into the now-scrapped liquor policy. The sixth summons follows a Delhi court's response to an ED-filed complaint, instructing Kejriwal to appear, asserting that prima facie, the AAP chief is "legally bound" to comply. Earlier, the ED had moved the court after Kejriwal skipped the fifth summons by the probe agency for questioning in a Delhi liquor policy-linked money laundering case. The agency has also issued sixth summons, asking him to appear on February 19. Kejriwal, who has denied any wrongdoing, alleged that the Bharatiya Janata Party tried to poach AAP MLAs and topple his government using law enforcement agencies. Kejriwal has been asked to appear before the central probe agency on February 19. Previously, he was summoned on February 2, January 18 and January 3 this year, and on December 21 and November 2 in 2023. Besides, the Delhi police crime branch has also planning to issue a second show cause notice to Kejriwal as he and his minister Atishi has not replied to them.

Seven BJP MLAs suspended for remainder of Budget Session

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Seven BJP MLAs were suspended on Friday for the remainder of the Budget session of the Delhi Assembly for interrupting the Lt Governor's address a day before. Delhi Assembly Speaker Ram Niwas Goel had on Thursday also sent the matter of disruption to the Privileges Committee. Leader of Opposition Ramvir Singh Bidhuri alleged that the ruling AAP was "murdering" democracy and trying to stifle the voice of opposition in the House. The BJP MLAs had interrupted Lt Governor VK Saxena multiple times during his address on Thursday highlighting achievements of AAP government, as they sought to attack the Arvind Kejriwal government on a range of issues. AAP MLA Dilip Pandey moved a resolution in the House seeking action on this issue, which was accepted by the Speaker. Pandey said that opposition members on Thursday acted in a "planned manner" while disrupting the LG's address which lowered the prestige of the House. "It was unprecedented and unfortunate," he said and demanded action while reading out from the



Ranjan Dimri | The Pioneer

rule book. Speaker Goel accepted resolution moved by Pandey and directed the matter to be sent to the Privileges Committee. Seven members of the BJP barring Leader of Opposition Ramvir Singh Bidhuri will be barred from attending the proceedings of the House till the report is pending. Goel later asked the seven members -- Mohan Singh Bisht, Ajay Mahawar, OP Sharma, Abhay Verma, Anil Vajpayi, Jitender Mahajan, and Vijender Gupta -- to leave the chamber of the House. Bidhuri also walked out of the House in protest. "The manner in which seven opposition members were suspended and marshalled out of the House as soon as the House proceedings began on Friday was a well-planned conspiracy by the AAP government," Bidhuri said. He said that as per rules, discussions were to be held on the notices of several BJP MLAs which were supposed to highlight the Aam Aadami Party government's "corruption and failure" on various fronts. "Therefore, to suppress the voice of these MLAs, they were expelled in an undemocratic manner," he alleged. Goel had on Thursday asked marshals to escort the BJP MLAs out of the House after they repeatedly interrupted the Lt Governor's address in the Budget session highlighting achievements of the AAP government. Seven out of the eight BJP MLAs in the House, barring Leader of Opposition Bidhuri, were marshalled out by the Speaker for interrupting the LG's address on the first day of the session, Assembly officials had said. Other BJP MLAs alleged shortage of water, non-implementation of Ayushman Bharat scheme, poor condition of hospitals, and electricity rates with the LG continuing and concluding his address amid multiple interruptions. The Budget session of the Delhi Assembly has been extended till the first week of March due to delay in budget finalisation.

Talks with farmer organisations fruitful, next on Sunday: Thakur

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Union Minister Anurag Singh Thakur on Friday said the Government had invited farmer organisations for talks and several farmer leaders came and very meaningful discussions took place. "We together have scheduled the next talks for Sunday. I am confident that there will be a good atmosphere on Sunday also. There will be talks and we will move towards resolving the issues," Thakur, the Information and Broadcasting and Youth and Sports Affairs Minister, said talking to the media. Responding to the work done by the Centre, Thakur said no government has done more than what the Modi government has done in the last 10 years on fertiliser, water, procurement at MSP, cheap loans from banks and compensation. "In 2013-14, when the UPA government was in power, the



agriculture budget was Rs 27,663 crore. Now the agriculture budget of the Modi government is more than Rs One lakh 25 thousand crore which is almost five times more agriculture budget than the UPA period. At that time there was no Kisan Samman Nidhi, we have transferred Rs 2 lakh 81 thousand crore directly to the bank accounts of more than 11 crore farmers through Kisan Samman Nidhi," Thakur explained. Thakur further while talking on MSP said during the time of previous regime, the total purchase of wheat, paddy, pulses and oilseeds was Rs 5,50,00 crore. Modi government made pur-

chase of Rs 18 lakh 39 thousand crore. That means almost three and a half times more. This shows that we increased the prices and also made purchases more than double," he added. Thakur same time wondered how Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann would respond to the farmer's agitation when the AAP had once demanded that the state governments pick up the tab for giving the MSP. He reminded the AAP leadership that they wanted the state government to make payments towards MSP when the Congress was in power at the Centre. "When there was a Congress government at the Centre, Arvind Kejriwal used to demand that the Punjab government make MSP payouts to the farmers. Bhagwant Mann also used to raise a lot of questions. Now, Mann is the chief minister. Will he respond to this (Kejriwal's) demand?" the senior BJP leader asked.

First Meerut Metro train set handed over to NRCTC

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The first look of the Meerut Metro train set was unveiled on Friday and the first Meerut Metro trainset was handed over to the National Capital Region Transport Corporation (NRCTC) at Savli, Gujarat. With this unveiling, the delivery of the Meerut Metro trainsets has commenced, and the first trainsets will soon arrive at the NRCTC Depot at Duha. Housing and Urban Affairs Minister Hardeep Singh Puri shared his best wishes and compliments for this occasion through video. "Since 2014, the government has laid emphasis on improving the quality of services offered to urban dwellers. Establishing a robust public transportation system in metropolitan cities is a fundamental aspect of our vision for India's urban rejuvenation. From a meagre 248 km of operational Metro lines in 2014, we have increased India's state-of-the-art Metro network to 905 km today. RRTS & MRTS are vital components of



this ongoing transformation. The tremendous progress made so far has incentivized us to achieve the target of making India the second largest Metro network in the world, even more quickly. It has also spurred many innovations in the industry and propelled us to become self-reliant. Today, as we roll out the indigenously designed and manufactured MRTS trainset for the Meerut section of the Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut corridor, we once again demonstrate our capabilities of building world-class infrastructure. This is a matter of great pride and a symbol of the new-age

Automatic Train Operations (ATO). The Metro train has a maximum operational speed of 120 kmph. Meerut Metro project aims to provide a safe, fast, and modern transportation solution for the residents of Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. With the commencement of Meerut Metro trainset delivery, the trial runs will be started soon. Meerut Metro design encapsulates a modern aesthetic approach, prioritizing optimized passenger comfort, safety, and security. The trains are air-conditioned, featuring comfortable seating, luggage racks, grab handles, USB device charging facility, and many other new-age facilities required for the convenience of modern-day commuters. The Meerut Metro will comprise of three (3) Car Train sets. It will have ergonomically designed 2x2 transverse as well as longitudinal seating arrangement. More than 700 passengers can travel in a train. The Metro corridor spans a length of 23 km with 13 stations including 18 km of ele-

vated and 5 km underground section. 9 stations are elevated, 3 stations are underground, while one station (depot station) will be at grade. Construction of the Meerut Metro is progressing rapidly, and all stations are taking shape. Underground tunnel construction has been completed and finishing works are being done at all the underground stations. Track laying activities are currently in progress on already completed tunnels and viaducts. Out of the 18 km long elevated section, viaduct construction has been completed in about 12 km. More than 10 launching gantries (Tarini) are installed to expedite viaduct construction in the rest of the section. On October 20, 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated India's first Regional Rapid Transit System and flagged off the first Namo Bharat train. With this, the 17-kilometer-long priority section between Sahibabad and Duha Depot was operationalized for the public.

Automatic Train Operations (ATO). The Metro train has a maximum operational speed of 120 kmph. Meerut Metro project aims to provide a safe, fast, and modern transportation solution for the residents of Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. With the commencement of Meerut Metro trainset delivery, the trial runs will be started soon. Meerut Metro design encapsulates a modern aesthetic approach, prioritizing optimized passenger comfort, safety, and security. The trains are air-conditioned, featuring comfortable seating, luggage racks, grab handles, USB device charging facility, and many other new-age facilities required for the convenience of modern-day commuters. The Meerut Metro will comprise of three (3) Car Train sets. It will have ergonomically designed 2x2 transverse as well as longitudinal seating arrangement. More than 700 passengers can travel in a train. The Metro corridor spans a length of 23 km with 13 stations including 18 km of ele-

Groundwater samples from city tubewells exceed permissible fluoride limits: NGT informed

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Government has informed the National Green Tribunal (NGT) that groundwater samples collected from 58 tubewells in the national Capital exceed permissible fluoride limits. In a report submitted to the NGT, the Delhi government said the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) collected groundwater samples from 1,256 tubewells across the national capital following directions from the NGT. Union Minister of State for Jal Shakti, Bishwesar Tudu, informed the Rajya Sabha on December 4 last year that

arsenic had been detected in groundwater in parts of 230 districts in 25 states, and fluoride in 469 districts in 27 states. Observing that the Central Ground Water Authority (CGWA) acknowledged the presence of high concentrations of arsenic and fluoride in groundwater, but no effective measures have been taken, the NGT issued notices to 28 states, Union territories, CGWA, and the environment ministry in December. According to the report, groundwater samples were collected from 56 tubewells in Narela and Bawana in north-

west Delhi, of which 33 exceeded permissible fluoride limits. Groundwater samples from 11 out of the 70 tubewells tested in Najafgarh Zone and Nangloi contained higher-than-permitted fluoride levels. Fluoride concentration was also found to be high in samples collected from four tubewells in North Delhi and Northeast Delhi, five tubewells in West Delhi, and four in Southwest Delhi. None of the samples collected from Central Delhi and South Delhi had fluoride content beyond permissible limits. The Delhi government informed the tribunal that the



DJB has taken precautions and issued directions to its maintenance divisions to either stop the supply from such tubewells

or utilise the water for purposes other than drinking. The city government has also requested additional time from

the NGT to assess arsenic concentration in the samples collected from tubewells in the capital. Fluoride found in groundwater occurs naturally due to the breakdown of rocks and soils, weathering, and deposition of atmospheric particles. Most fluorides are sparingly soluble and present in groundwater in small amounts. Small amounts of fluoride (less than 1.0 mg/l) have proven beneficial in reducing tooth decay. However, concentrations exceeding 1.5 mg/l may lead to staining of tooth enamel, while higher levels between 5.0 and 10 mg/l could cause

pathological changes, such as stiffness of the back and difficulty in performing natural movements. Groundwater samples with fluoride concentrations exceeding 1.5 mg/l have been collected from various locations in Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Orissa, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Delhi, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, and Assam West Bengal. Arsenic contamination is prevalent in several states in India, particularly in the

Ganges-Brahmaputra delta region, such as West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Assam. According to the Bureau of Indian Standards, the acceptable limit of arsenic is 0.01 mg/l and the permissible limit in the absence of an alternate source is 0.05 mg/l. Long-term intake of arsenic-contaminated water can lead to arsenic poisoning or arsenicosis, resulting in skin, bladder, kidney, or lung cancer, as well as skin diseases (colour changes, and hard patches on palms and soles) or blood vessel issues in the legs and feet.

Modi to lay down agenda for LS polls at BJP national meet today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to lay down the BJP's agenda for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls at a two-day meeting of its national council, which will begin on Saturday and be attended by nearly 11,500 party members, from elected panchayat heads to party district presidents and Union Ministers.



Party president JP Nadra will inaugurate the meeting and Modi will on Sunday deliver the valedictory address, a speech which is likely to draw the broader contours of the BJP's campaign and exhort its members to go all out to achieve his target for the party to win 370 seats in the elections. The meeting, which will be held at the Bharat Mandapam, is going to be the biggest gathering of BJP delegates from across the country in recent memory, with some leaders recalling the gigantic plenary organised in Mumbai by the party in 1995 in which tens of thousands of its members had participated.

are likely to figure in the speeches of its key leaders at the meeting and in the resolutions. The outcomes of the Modi government's welfare initiatives besides the prime minister's focus on empowering what he has often described the four biggest "castes" of women, youth, poor and farmers may also be discussed, party leaders said.

Modi lays foundation stone of projects in Rajasthan, Haryana

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

At the head of the Lok Sabha polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday announced and laid the foundation stone of a slew of development projects worth several crores for Rajasthan and Haryana where the announcement of setting up of much-awaited Rewari AIIMS, a new rail line, and a metro line were awaited for quite a long time. It is likely that the Prime Minister will dedicate to the nation six such hospitals in Jammu, Rajkot, Bathinda, Kalyani, Mangalagiri and Rae Bareilly in the next few days that are already functional.



solar energy, power transmission, drinking water, and petroleum & natural gas. The event marked the inauguration of several national high-way projects totaling more than Rs 5000 crores, aimed at improving connectivity in the region. Additionally, eight railway projects worth around Rs 2300 crores were dedicated to the nation, focusing on electrification and modernization of rail infrastructure. PM Modi also laid the foundation stone for solar projects worth approximately Rs 5300 crores and power transmission projects exceeding Rs 2100 crores.

on these seven hospitals is more than Rs 10,000 crore, Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya had said on Thursday. "Till 2014, the nation had six AIIMS in seven decades and in the next 10 days, the country will get seven AIIMS," he said. To be built at a cost of about Rs 1,650 crore, the AIIMS-Rewari will be developed on 203 acres of land in Majra Mustil Bhalhki village having a hospital complex with 720 beds, a medical college with 100 seats, a nursing college with 60 seats, an AYUSH block with 30 beds, residential accommodation for the faculty and staff, hostel accommodation for undergraduate and post-graduate students, a night shelter, a guesthouse etc.

Panel recommends law to curb fraudulent NRI marriages CBI extradites absconding murder convict from UAE

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Describing as a "worrysome trend" the "rising" cases of fraudulent marriages between NRIs and Indian citizens, the Law Commission has recommended a comprehensive law to deal with the situation and compulsory registration of such alliances.



Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal on Thursday. Such a legislation, the panel said, should be made applicable not only to the NRIs but also to those individuals who come within the definition of 'Overseas Citizens of India' (OCIs) as laid down in the Citizenship Act, 1955. "It is further recommended that all marriages between the NRIs/OCIs and Indian citizens should be made compulsorily registered in India," Justice Awasthi said.

bill was again referred to the Committee on External Affairs after the 17th (present) Lok Sabha was constituted, for further examination. As deliberations continued, the Law Commission received a reference on the NRI Bill, 2019 from the Ministry of External Affairs, conveyed through the law ministry last April.

istered because currently there is no comprehensive or uniform law governing registration of marriages in India, the report suggested. "Therefore, instead of making registration of marriages compulsory in specific cases, it should be done generally for all cases. Alternatively, it may be provided in the legislation (the pending NRI marriages bill) that if any married Indian citizen subsequently becomes an NRI/OCI, it shall be mandatory for him/her to get his marriage registered..." the report said.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

An absconding murder convict with an Interpol Red Notice against him was extradited from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Friday in an operation coordinated by the CBI using Interpol channels, officials said here.



was circulated to all Interpol member countries for location and arrest of accused," a CBI spokesperson said. Using Interpol channels, the CBI managed to locate him in the UAE, he said. "The Global Operations Centre of the CBI coordinated with Interpol NCB Abu Dhabi, Haryana Police, Embassy of India in Abu Dhabi, Ministry of External Affairs and a Red Notice subject was returned today from the UAE to India with a security detail from the STF of Haryana Police," the spokesperson said.

Food handlers in Government Bhawans to get training

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



So far training sessions have already been conducted at four State Bhawans including Bihar, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Sikkim, wherein all the food handlers of these Bhawans were imparted with the necessary training. In addition, training has also been conducted in the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), North Block. Training sessions are planned at Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Manipur Bhawans in the coming days.

MoU inked to enhance semiconductor design skills

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



Software startup Logicknots on Thursday said it has collaborated with the National Skill Development Council (NSDC) and Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati to elevate semiconductor design and verification education.

Centre forms tribunal to adjudicate if SIMI should be banned under UAPA

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Centre has constituted a tribunal headed by a Delhi High Court judge to adjudicate whether there is sufficient cause for declaring the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) as a banned group under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.



communal harmony in the country. As many as 10 states -- Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Kerala, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh -- have recommended declaring SIMI as an "unlawful association" under the provisions of the UAPA.

One in five cities under national clean air programme lacks infrastructure to monitor air

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

One in five cities covered under India's National Clean Air Programme do not have infrastructure i.e. continuous ambient air quality monitoring station (CAAQMS) to monitor air quality is missing, as per a new analysis.

installed as of January 2024, leaving 30 other cities without any transparent information on real-time pollution levels. The 30 cities which do not have a CAAQMS include Ranchi, Jammu, Guntur, Nellore, Jammu, Vadodra, Madurai, and Raebareilly, among others.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Reaping unrest

Farmers' standoff with the Centre persists; it is time for a meaningful dialogue to thrash out a solution

The ongoing standoff between protesting farmers and the Union Government continues to rivet the nation's attention, highlighting deep-rooted issues concerning agricultural reforms, livelihood and the role of the State. This year has witnessed a resurgence of farmer protests, reminiscent of the 2020-2021 protests. Referred to as Farmer Protest 2.0, this agitation was ignited on the morning of February 13 as farmers across the country mobilised to demand the Government's assurance on assured floor prices or Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crop production. The farmers, undeterred by past challenges and experience, converged on Delhi's borders and set their sights on marching into the Capital. The preceding negotiations between farmers' leaders and the Government on February 12 failed to yield any tangible results, thus fuelling the resolve of the protesting farmers. As the protest gained momentum, with hundreds of thousands of farmers making their way towards the Capital, the authorities responded by sealing the borders and erecting barricades to prevent their entry. Teargas canisters and water cannons were deployed at some border points to disperse the gathering crowds, comprising farmers arriving on tractors, trucks and on foot. Formidable barriers, including huge cement boulders with spikes, barbed wire and metal blocks, were set up to block access. Additionally, Section 144 was imposed for a month, prohibiting the assembly of four or more persons. The backdrop of this protest is rooted in the aftermath of the 2021 agitation, which prompted the Government to repeal all three controversial farm Acts. These Acts, namely the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce



(Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020, the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act 2020, and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020, had been passed by Parliament in September 2020. Despite this concession, the farmers claimed that their grievances remained unaddressed, leading to the resurgence of protests in 2024. As the standoff between the farmers and the Government persists, it underscores the urgent need for meaningful dialogue and concrete solutions that address the concerns of the farming community while upholding the principles of democracy and social justice. The Government would do well to talk to the farmers rather than blocking their way. Any highhandedness on the Government's part can be counterproductive at this juncture as it would only invite farmers' wrath. Moreover, there is a need for greater empathy, understanding and solidarity from all stakeholders, including the broader society and the media. The voices of protesting farmers must be heard and their demands for justice, dignity and empowerment respected. Only through dialogue, cooperation and mutual respect can we pave the way for a more prosperous future for Indian agriculture and its farmers. Farmers with genuine grievances need to be heard, like anyone else.

PICTALK



A 'chunari' being offered to the Narmada river on the occasion of 'Narmada Jayanti' in Jabalpur

A monumental gesture of interfaith harmony



PRAFULL GORADIA

In a display of interfaith unity, Islam embraced Hinduism as a grand Hindu temple was inaugurated in Abu Dhabi, symbolising a momentous shift in religious dynamics

On the Vasant Panchami of the year 2024, on the desert plane of Abu Dhabi, history performed what can arguably be called its first dance in the realm of faith, religion and God. Never before has Islam shaken hands with the idol-worshipping Hindus. The religion of Prophet Mohammad has accepted the Jews and Christians as Ahl-e-Qitab, meaning, People of the Book, whether of the Torah or Bible. Muslims have also obeyed and strictly adhered to the third of Prophet Moses' Commandments: "Thee shall not make any graven image of thy Lord the God".

That is why idols or statues of any kind were abandoned by all three religions originating from the credo of Prophet Abraham, whose inspiration Prophet Moses followed. No act by their followers to even attempt to have a glimpse of God can ever be countenanced by these faiths. The synagogue, church and mosque have been limited to being only prayer halls, unlike the Hindu temple, which is looked upon as a residence of the divine where the worshipper or follower is free to seek or meet the divine.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda and Maharshi Aurobindo, for example, confessed to having seen the divine. Until now, this has been a fundamental difference between the Hindu and Abrahamic faiths; the latter have preferred to destroy idols rather than allow them to distract the devotion of their adherents. This fundamental gulf of faith explains the catalogue of iconoclasm that litters Indian medieval history.

That is why it appears incredible to believe that any human being can achieve two victories in the course of only two years—the first at Ayodhya and the other now at Abu Dhabi. Ayodhya represents the correction of the history of iconoclasm while the event at Abu Dhabi reveals the nobility of King Zayed, the monarch of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in wiping off some of the tears of blood dripping from Hindu eyes, who, over the course of a millennium, lost thousands of their temples to iconoclasm.



King Zayed has shown the courage that perhaps no monarch in history has. There have been many kings who have made history, have invented systems and legislated path-breaking laws. It is, however, difficult to think of a monarch who has reversed history and turned his back on the past with such ease. For a thousand years now, Islam has chosen the path of taqlid (orthodoxy)—minimal change—and has done its best to avoid ijihad (reinterpretation)—embracing new ways when necessary. The objective was to conserve the strength and unity of Islam and not allow it to dissipate.

When it came to numbers, therefore, Islam has been an expanding torrent. What King Zayed has done is to pick up a hitherto untouchable aspect, reinterpretation, and in doing so, has touched the hearts of 140 crore Indians, as Prime Minister Modi has said. How many Muslim hearts might have been irritated by this remains to be seen. But the notes emanating from this seminal event are likely to be less than pleasant to a lot of ears, around the Islamic world. Pockets are easier to open; hearts are far more difficult to persuade, which is what King

Zayed has done. He can, however, be sure that most Hindus will pray for his happiness as long as history is written.

The opening of the grand Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi also has the potential to trigger schisms in the Abrahamic faith world, particularly Islam. However, this need not be necessarily an unwelcome development. Not only will millions of Hindus flock there, but their inflow will also bring in billions of dollars as revenue from tourism and the business that flows from it. The Muslim world, which has been negligent towards commerce, as Prof. Timur Koran of Duke University has explained, will have a chance to rectify this lacuna. This marvel of sculpture, which is also a live and functioning museum of the most exquisite carvings consecrated by the confluence of the holy waters of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati (represented by white light) specially brought from India is precisely the edifice, platform and opportunity for that.

Prime Minister Modi's inauguration and worship of this sprawling and breathtaking Hindu temple at Abu Dhabi is in a sense, not only the rise of Sanatana Dharma in the desert

but also a reversal of centuries of crusades and Ghaznavism. The temple, which of course has the icons of deities, is also rich with carvings, sculpted images and bass reliefs, including those of animals and birds; one could also liken it to a veritable museum-cum-zoo of stone.

Most important though, is our Prime Minister's centrality in the act of worship through his performance of the main aarti in the temple's sanctum sanctorum. Modi is a practising and worshipping Hindu, something that comes through clearly, whether at Kathmandu, Varanasi, Ayodhya, Rameshwaram or Abu Dhabi. Bhakti is visible and convincing only when it emanates from the heart; otherwise, it is nothing but the enactment of a ritual without devotion. In Modi's case, it is a phenomenon that needs no evidence or convincing, a fact I have been fortunate to witness first-hand in my own humble dwelling when a much younger Modi had graced an occasion where holy figures were present.

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



THE TEMPLE, WHICH OF COURSE HAS THE ICONS OF DEITIES, IS ALSO RICH WITH CARVINGS, SCULPTED IMAGES AND BASS RELIEFS, INCLUDING THOSE OF ANIMALS AND BIRDS; ONE COULD ALSO LIKEN IT TO A VERITABLE MUSEUM-CUM-ZOO OF STONE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MUTE SPECTATORS IN PARLIAMENT

Sir — Reports about some of the Lok Sabha representatives remaining mum throughout and not taking part in any of its debates and discussions are dismaying and eyebrow-raising. They are the people's representatives, chosen by the people for the people to voice their constituency and do the needful. They are simply not elected to become parliamentarians or just to increase the member tally of any party but are people's representatives in whom the common man has hopes, aspirations and wishes to be fulfilled. The same representative who wags his tongue with promises and assurances during the election remaining mute once he reaches the main platform where he's supposed to articulate and fulfill the needs of his constituency is a matter of concern.

Parties, national and regional, nominating election candidates have to look into this matter earnestly. Leaders who can intertwine ideologies with the practical day-to-day life of the masses and voice for them should be given opportunities to stand as members. It is high time major and minor parties shun such 'mute spectators' and those who use the post just for selfish benefits.

M Pradyu | Kannur

AI TRANSFORMS EDUCATION

Sir — As AI advances, its impact on the supply and demand sides of higher education becomes more evident which leads to a significant shift in the sector. AI-powered online learning platforms are reshaping access to education by offering affordable and adaptable alternatives for conventional brick-and-mortar universities. As technology reshapes the job market, the adage "a degree opens doors" is losing its lustre. Nowadays, employers are more interested in individuals with real-world experience instead of those with traditional academic credentials. Many universities are redesigning their

Elephant crossing



Wild elephants have begun entering residential areas in Mananthavady, Kerala leading to dangerous man-animal conflict situations.

mal conflict situations. More and more attacks by elephants are taking place in villages and towns adjoining forests. Tranquillising and capturing rogue elephants in one place and releasing them in another is no solution. It is a question of time before such translocated animals resume their activities.

We have swung from one extreme of mindless destruction of wild animals to the other extreme of, stretching the concept of conservation. It is easy for those in armchairs in urban surroundings to wax eloquent in defence of rogue elephants and man-eaters. For helpless, poor people who eke out a living in terrain near jungles, it is a matter of life and death. Instead, a permanent remedy has to be found.

Dimple Wadhawan | Kanpur

curriculum with an emphasis on industry partnerships and real-world skills. Although the future of higher education is enigmatic, one thing remains sure: those who fail to adapt will be left high and dry.

Sambhav Jain | Ujjain

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sir — Due to criticism over the allegations of sexual harassment of women by absconding Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Sheikh Shahjahan and his associates at Sandeshkhali in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district, the state's ruling party on Wednesday questioned the timing of levelling such allegations. Raising this question, TMC spokesman Kunal Ghosh also alleged that this "sudden outburst" of angst by the local women is actually part of a conspiracy hatched by the BJP, even if it is accepted that the women were silent for so many years out of fear, why didn't the local BJP leadership raise this issue earlier? "Neither the members of the West Bengal Commission for Women nor those from the National Commission

for Women were able to get any specific complaint from any victim alleging sexual harassment.

Hence the allegations are nothing but part of negative propaganda to deliberately tarnish the image of the state TMC government. Women at Sandeshkhali took to the streets complaining of sexual harassment soon after Sheikh Shahjahan, the accused mastermind behind the attack on ED (Enforcement Directorate) and CAPF (Central Armed Police Force) personnel on 5 January, went underground. Even when Governor C.V. Ananda Bose visited Sandeshkhali earlier this week, several women were seen and heard on camera complaining to him about sexual harassment at the hands of Shahjahan and his associates. However, a huge police contingent imposed section 144. With this, all is not well between TMC and BJP in Bengal.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

AI to combat auditory impairment

Around 63 million individuals grapple with significant auditory impairment in India; AI intervention offers a ray of hope for them

In India, the prevalence of hearing impairment is a significant concern, affecting millions across various age groups. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 63 million people in India grapple with significant auditory impairments, emphasizing the critical need for effective interventions and solutions. Furthermore, with India's ageing population expected to double by 2050, surpassing the number of children, the incidence of hearing impairment is anticipated to escalate, highlighting the urgency for proactive measures to tackle this pressing health issue. According to the 75th National Sample Survey (NSS) report of 2017-2018, hearing disability was estimated in 0.3% of the Indian population, with nearly half of them reporting an inability to hear anything or only loud sounds. The objective should be to mitigate preventable deafness, decrease the burden of deafness to less than 1%, and empower individuals with hearing impairments to lead economically and socially productive lives. The introduction of Genesis



AI to patients and hearing care professionals in India heralds a significant advancement. This technology expands the functionalities of hearing aids remarkably, transforming them from mere listening enhancement devices to discreet, multipurpose health and communication tools. "With Genesis AI, we have greatly expanded the capabilities of hearing aids beyond expectations. It is the largest leap forward ever in hearing technology, transforming hearing aids from single-function listening enhancement devices into discreet, multipurpose health and communication tools," says Brandon Sawalich, President of Starkey. AI intervention in hearing technology marks a quantum leap, offering unparalleled sound clarity, advanced health-tracking capabilities, and personalized user experiences. Dr Achin Bhowmik, Chief

Technology Officer of Starkey, underscores the significance of Genesis AI, which reflects years of research and innovation dedicated to enhancing the lives of individuals with hearing loss. The advanced features and cutting-edge technology of Genesis AI establish a new standard for excellence in hearing care.

With a sophisticated Neuro Processor boasting six times the transistors and four times the speed of previous generations, Genesis AI delivers unparalleled sound processing and clarity. Enhanced sound processing facilitates improved speech understanding in diverse environments, t. Besides, new AI devices have fall alerts in them. If a patient wearing the device falls an immediate alert goes to his near and dear who can come for help. The AI-powered devices are indeed communication devices, they would be translating the audio signals in the chosen language enabling people to communicate seamlessly. Genesis AI introduces a cutting-edge Advanced Neuro Processor, boasting six times the transistors and four times the speed of its predecessors.

This innovative processor mimics the function of the central auditory system, delivering unparalleled sound processing and clarity. Coupled with a Long-Lasting Rechargeable Battery providing up to 51 hours of usage on a single charge, users can enjoy uninterrupted usage throughout their day. Furthermore, integrated Health Tracking Sensors monitor activity levels, detect falls, and track overall health metrics, empowering users to proactively manage their well-being. With enhanced sound processing capabilities, Genesis AI optimises speech understanding and reduces background noise, ensuring clear communication in any environment. Its innovative features and advanced capabilities address the urgent need for effective solutions in mitigating the challenges posed by hearing loss, thereby empowering individuals to engage fully in social and economic activities. AI is offering hope for a future where accessibility and inclusivity are paramount.

(The writer is an editor of a monthly magazine; views are personal)



SARIKA JHA



FIRST COLUMN

EMBRACING THE WISDOM OF THE DAWN

The Hindu scriptures stress the profound significance of waking up early



SWAMI CHARANASHRIT

In the serene hours before dawn, when the world is enveloped in a tranquil embrace, Hindu scriptures whisper the profound significance of rising early. Rooted in the ancient wisdom of the Vedas and echoed through the teachings of saints and sages, the practice of waking at dawn holds profound importance in Hindu culture, offering a pathway to spiritual growth, physical vitality, and mental clarity.

In Hinduism, the day is divided into various segments called "Yamas" and "Nakshatras," with each having its own unique energies and influences. The pre-dawn period, known as "Brahma Muhurta," is considered especially auspicious for spiritual practices and self-reflection. It is believed that during this time, the atmosphere is charged with divine energy, making it conducive for meditation, prayer, and introspection.

One of the primary scriptures in Hinduism, the Bhagavad Gita, emphasizes the importance of disciplined living and self-mastery. Lord Krishna advises Arjuna, "One who is disciplined in his habits, including eating and sleeping, can mitigate all material pains by practicing the yoga system." (Bhagavad Gita 6.16). Waking early is seen as a foundational aspect of this discipline, setting the tone for the day and allowing individuals to align their actions with higher principles.

Furthermore, the concept of "Brahmacharya," often translated as celibacy or chastity, encompasses more than mere abstinence from physical indulgence. It entails the conservation and channeling of vital energies towards spiritual growth and self-realization. Waking early aids in this endeavor by providing precious moments for focused sadhana (spiritual practice), fostering a deeper connection with one's inner self and the divine.



The ancient seers and rishis, who delved into the mysteries of existence, recognized the profound relationship between the rhythm of nature and human consciousness. By synchronizing with the natural cycles, individuals can attune themselves to the harmonious flow of life, experiencing enhanced well-being and clarity of mind. From a practical standpoint, waking early offers numerous benefits for physical and mental health.

Ayurveda, the ancient system of medicine, advocates for a daily routine ("Dinacharya") that aligns with nature's rhythms to promote balance and vitality. Rising with the sun allows for exposure to natural light, which regulates the body's internal clock and promotes healthy sleep-wake cycles.

Moreover, the early morning hours provide an opportunity for solitude and reflection, free from the distractions of the bustling world. It is a time for setting intentions, planning the day ahead, and cultivating a sense of inner peace. By starting the day mindfully, individuals can navigate life's challenges with greater resilience and clarity.

In the Hindu tradition, waking early is not merely a ritualistic practice but a sacred endeavor that encompasses physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. It is a testament to the reverence for life and the pursuit of higher truths. As the world awakens to the gentle embrace of dawn, may we heed the timeless wisdom of Hindu scriptures and embrace the transformative power of rising with the sun. (The writer is a spiritual guide, views are personal)

Skill development: Key to India's shifting job market



DINESH SOOD

Skill-based education is paramount to bridging the gap between potential and realisation in a job market increasingly favouring specialised technical skills



In today's rapidly changing job market, skills development is of paramount importance. The job market is constantly evolving due to technological advancements, economic developments, and shifting client preferences. To excel in this dynamic environment, people must adapt and develop new abilities.

The future of work will not only revolve around hard skills but also encompass holistic skills. India, with over 808 million young workers below the age of 35, needs to reflect seriously on the correlation between skills and employability, potential versus realization, and ambition versus support. The current skill deficit of only 5% being formally skilled, and a focus on formal learning, leaves graduates unprepared for the competitive job market. Therefore, the shift towards holistic skill-based education, as outlined in National Education Policy 2020, is imperative for success.

The primary goal of skill development is to enhance sustainable employability, transition unskilled workers into formal employment, and improve job quality and livelihoods. The evolving job market demands skills that align with business productivity. The impending job landscape in India requires a blend of advanced technical skills and softer, transferable skills. It is crucial to provide early exposure to these skills during high school to ensure that young individuals are adequately prepared for the future job market.

According to a World Economic Forum report, by 2027, 69 million new jobs will be created, while 83 million will be eliminated. The era of generalists is giving way to an era of specialists. The next few years will witness significant demand for Artificial Intelligence (AI) professionals, sustainability specialists, business intelligence analysts, and information security specialists.

In today's highly competitive job market, there are still plenty of opportunities for those with the right skills. To stay



TODAY, TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR MOST EMPLOYMENT ROLES. PROGRAMMING LANGUAGES, DATA ANALYSIS, CLOUD COMPUTING AND CYBER SECURITY EXPERTISE ARE CRITICAL AS DATA-DRIVEN BUSINESSES MUST PROTECT THEIR DATA FROM CYBER THREATS

ahead of the competition, even many traditional skill-based businesses are now actively seeking out AI and automation experts. Professions are being transformed by automation and artificial intelligence, with certain jobs becoming obsolete and new opportunities emerging in growing industries. As machines take over repetitive tasks, there is now a greater demand for specialized technical skills. Currently, data science, artificial intelligence, robotics, and machine learning are the leading job creators. This means that job seekers must possess a different set of skills to remain competitive.

Today, technology and digital literacy skills are essential for most employment roles. Programming languages, data analysis, cloud computing, and cyber security expertise are critical as data-driven businesses must protect their data from cyber threats. Moreover, in this digital age, soft skills are more crucial than ever. Communication skills, problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking are all essential to navigating an automated world successfully.

Those who can combine technical skills with these soft skills will have a significant advantage in today's job market. In the current Asian job market, candidates with adaptable skills are the most sought-after. Employers demand individuals who can rapidly acquire new skills and apply them effectively in a dynamic work environment. Given the dynamic nature of the job market, many job roles become obsolete over time, and new ones emerge.

Therefore, adaptability and the ability to reskill and upskill have

become highly valued and critical for both employees and employers to remain competitive and relevant.

As technology continues to reshape job creation and the implementation of AI and automation, deep data analytics across functions are driving these changes. The introduction of new technologies has compelled businesses to reskill their workforce. With over 54% of India's workforce requiring reskilling, traditional jobs in manufacturing, administration, and retail become obsolete due to automation, and the workforce in these fields must reskill to find new opportunities.

Upskilling, on the other hand, is the process of enhancing existing abilities to meet the changing needs of a job function to be more effective and reliable. Hence, a salesperson, for example, may need to upskill in digital marketing to remain competitive.

Sustainable Employability: Lifelong learning is an absolute necessity for adapting to the ever-evolving job market. It is imperative to understand that learning should not be confined to formal education, as it holds greater significance than ever before. Continuous learning is the key to remaining employable and excelling in a career.

Furthermore, businesses highly value individuals who can embrace change and seek out new learning opportunities. Adopting a mindset of constant improvement is an invaluable asset in a job market that values adaptation and creativity. Additionally, lifelong learning can significantly improve an individual's job satisfaction and overall well-being.

It is the prime responsibility of individuals to take charge of their skill development and always adapt to the changing landscape of today's job market. As India approaches a transformative era, rethinking education and prioritizing on-the-job training are crucial.

Embracing apprenticeships can shape a workforce equipped not only with theoretical knowledge but also practical tech-based skills, essential for gaining a competitive edge and thriving in the dynamic economic landscape. Lifelong learning is paramount in adapting to the evolving job market, where adaptability and creativity are highly valued. Individuals must take charge of their skill development to remain employable and excel in their careers. The future of work demands a blend of technical proficiency and soft skills, underscoring the necessity for continuous self-improvement and adaptation.

In conclusion, as India stands on the brink of an era of transformation, it is vital to rethink education, give priority to on-the-job training, and embrace apprenticeships to shape a workforce that not only possesses theoretical knowledge but also has the practical tech-based skills necessary to gain a competitive advantage and thrive in the dynamic landscape of the country's economy.

(The writer is a Co-Founder and MD of Orane International, a Training Partner with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), and a Network Member of India International Skill Centres (an initiative of GoI). Views are personal)

Agriculture Infrastructure Fund: A catalyst for India's agri-future

The Agriculture Infrastructure Fund aims to improve India's agricultural infrastructure by providing incentives and financial support for medium to long-term debt financing

India's agriculture sector, a cornerstone of its economy, affects the livelihoods of over 55% of its population, making it pivotal for national socio-economic development. Despite being the world's second-largest agricultural producer after China, the sector has faced challenges, particularly in post-harvest management and market accessibility. Recognizing these challenges, the Indian government, under the leadership of Hon. Prime Minister Modi, launched the Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF) in July 2020, aiming to revolutionize the sector by enhancing infrastructure, reducing losses, and promoting innovation.



DEEPAK PAREEK

enhance farm gate infrastructure, to diminish post-harvest losses, and to drive investment and innovation in the agriculture and allied sectors. The AIF was not just an investment; it was a commitment to change. With a targeted sanctioning and disbursement spanning from FY 2020-21 to FY 2025-26, the scheme was designed to offer a blend of financial support mechanisms, including a 3% interest sub-

vention and credit guarantee coverage, thereby laying a fertile ground for growth and development. With an ambitious financial outlay of Rs. One Lakh Crore, the scheme offered interest subvention, credit guarantees, and the convergence of benefits, opening new horizons for farmers, cooperatives, and agricultural entrepreneurs.

As the wheels of the AIF began to turn, the agricultural landscape of India started to witness a remarkable transformation. The fund sanctioned Rs.37,653 Crore for 52,671 projects till February 15th, 2024, while disbursing Rs.23,000 Crores mobilizing an investment of Rs 63,580 Crore in the sector. From the lush fields of Punjab to the vibrant farms of Tamil Nadu, a myriad of projects sprouted,



including custom hiring centers, warehouses, and cold storage facilities, each a testament to the country's commitment to agricultural revitalization. The AIF facilitated the

creation of 51,248 post-harvest and community farming assets, including 11,434 Custom Hiring Centres, 11,284 Warehouses, and 1,549 Cold Store projects. This infra-

structure development was instrumental in reducing post-harvest losses and improving market accessibility for farmers, contributing to an estimated annual savings of 11 LMT of food grains and a reduction of 2.7 LMT in post-harvest losses of horticulture produce. Further, it is estimated that farmers can get 11-14% more price for their produce due to infrastructure created by AIF.

The impact of the AIF has been profound. In the villages, where the granaries began to fill and the cold storages preserved the fruits of labor, post-harvest losses dwindled. Farmers, armed with better infrastructure, found their produce fetching higher prices, their incomes swelling like the monsoon rivers. The creation of over 5.1 lakh employment opportuni-

ties heralded a season of prosperity, sowing the seeds of over 24,000 agri-entrepreneurs. Behind the scenes, a symphony of strategies played out. The AIF's online portal became the digital soil where applications germinated and flourished. Awareness campaigns blossomed across social media, while conclaves and exhibitions spread the word far and wide. Each initiative, like a carefully tended crop, contributed to the scheme's burgeoning success. The AIF portal led to the integration of approximately 0.99 lakh bank branches and has 1.27 lakh registered applicants, the portal stands as a unified platform for beneficiaries, lending institutions, and other vital stakeholders involved in the scheme. It fosters transparency and streamlines the loan

application process, ensuring that all parties have access to a smooth, efficient mechanism for their financial interactions. As the story of the AIF unfolds across India's agricultural tapestry, it weaves a narrative of hope and progress. The scheme's legacy, marked by enhanced infrastructure, reduced losses, and empowered farmers, promises a future where agriculture in India is not just a means of survival but a thriving, vibrant sector. And in this future, as the sun rises over the fields, it illuminates a land transformed, a testament to the enduring spirit of India and its farmers, nurtured by the waters of the Agriculture Infrastructure Fund.

(The writer is an agriculture economist a serial entrepreneur and investor; views are personal)



RBI gives 15 more days to Paytm to stop transactions

PTI ■ MUMBAI
The RBI on Friday gave 15 days more till March 15, 2024 to Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL) to stop deposits, credit transactions or top-ups in any customer accounts, wallets, and FASTags, keeping in view the interest of customers, including merchants. As per a January 31 order of the central bank, PPBL was asked to stop further deposits, credit transactions, or top-ups in any customer accounts,

prepaid instruments, wallets, FASTags, and National Common Mobility Cards, after February 29. The RBI said this is being done keeping in view the interest of customers (including merchants) of PPBL who may require a little more time to make alternative arrangements and the larger public interest. "Further, it is directed that the bank shall facilitate a seamless withdrawal of customer deposits that are parked with partner banks under the automatic 'sweep-in sweep-

out' facility without causing any inconvenience to such customers," the Reserve Bank of India said. The central bank has taken action against PPBL for persistent non-compliance and continued material supervisory concerns in the bank, warranting further supervisory action. On Friday, the RBI also released a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), for the convenience of customers of PPBL, and the general public at large.

Markets extend winning run

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Equity benchmark indices marched higher for the fourth straight session on Friday, with Nifty closing above the 22,000 level, tracking gains in index majors L&T, Infosys and M&M, amid a firm trend in the global markets.

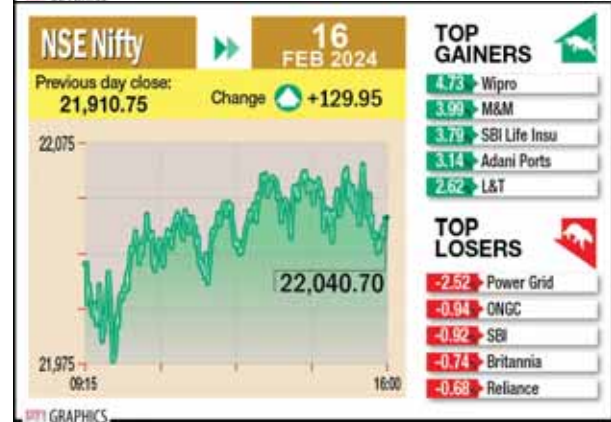
The 30-share BSE Sensex surged 376.26 points or 0.52 per cent to close at 72,426.64. The index touched a high of 72,545.33 and a low of 72,218.10 during intraday trade.

The broader NSE Nifty also climbed 129.95 points or 0.59 per cent to end at points 22,040.70.

Wipro was the biggest gainer in the Sensex chart, rising 4.79 per cent, followed by M&M, L&T, Tata Motors, Maruti, Infosys, Nestle India and IndusInd Bank. Shares of M&M shot up 3.96 per cent to finish at Rs 1,835.55 apiece after it announced its supply agreement with German automotive major Volkswagen Group for electric vehicle components under their joint vision for electric mobility collaboration.

In contrast, PowerGrid, SBI, Reliance, NTPC and Axis Bank were among the laggards. In Asia, Japan's Nikkei, Hong Kong's Hang Seng and South Korea's Kospi settled with significant gains.

China's financial markets are closed for the Lunar New Year



holidays. The US market closed higher in the overnight trade on Thursday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude slipped 0.83 per cent to USD 82.17 a barrel.

In the previous session, the 30-share index climbed 227.55 points or 0.32 per cent to close

at 72,050.38 points, while NSE Nifty gained 70.70 points or 0.32 per cent to end at 21,910.75. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Thursday as they sold shares worth Rs 3,064.15 crore, according to exchange data.



UP top State in vehicle sales: SIAM

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Uttar Pradesh recorded the highest number of vehicle sales in October-December 2023, followed by Maharashtra, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, according to Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers. As per data from Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM), Uttar Pradesh clocked a total sales of 8,22,472 units across passenger and commercial vehicles; and two and three-wheeler categories. Maharashtra was second with 6,88,192 units across the four categories followed by Gujarat with 4,21,026 units and Tamil Nadu 4,19,189 units in the quarter. Uttar Pradesh witnessed the

highest number of three-wheelers sold in the quarter at 23,859 units, followed by Maharashtra (20,495), Gujarat (19,743) and Bihar (14,955). Similarly, in the two-wheeler category, Uttar Pradesh topped the list with a total of 6,73,962 units sold in the state, followed by Maharashtra (5,15,612), Madhya Pradesh (3,35,478) and Tamil Nadu (3,24,918). However, in passenger vehicle sales, Maharashtra clocked the highest sales with 1,21,030 units, followed by Uttar Pradesh (1,01,568), Gujarat (85,599) and Karnataka (71,549). In the commercial vehicles category also, Maharashtra topped the list with 31,055 units, followed by Uttar Pradesh (23,083), Gujarat (20,391) and Karnataka (16,966).

CCPA seeks feedback on norms to curb misleading coaching advertisements



PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Consumer protection regulator CCPA has sought public comments by March 16 on draft guidelines for prevention of misleading advertisements in the coaching sector. The Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) has prepared draft guidelines after a detailed deliberations with all stakeholders including coaching institutes, law firms, government and voluntary consumer organizations, an official statement said. "Public comments/suggestions/feedback are solicited and may be provided to the Central Authority within 30 days (until 16th March 2024)," it added. The draft defines "coaching" and lays out conditions that fall under misleading advertisements. For instance, coaching institutes are not allowed to conceal information related to name of the course (whether free or paid) and duration of course opted by successful candidate or any other important information which can influence consumers' decision to choose their services. They should refrain from

making false claims regarding success rates, number of selections, or rankings of students in any competitive exam without providing verifiable evidence. They should not falsely represent that students' success is solely attributable to the coaching, without acknowledging the individual efforts of the students. Among other conditions, the CCPA said that the coaching centres should clearly state the extent of the coaching involvement in their success. They should not create false sense of urgency or fear of missing out that may heighten anxieties amongst students, or parents. They should not engage in any other practices that may mislead consumers or subvert consumer autonomy and choice. The CCPA said the objective of the guidelines is to protect consumers from misleading advertisements in the coaching sector and would be applicable to every person engaged in coaching. Misleading advertisements by the coaching sector will be governed as per the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 and the proposed guidelines will bring clarity to the stakeholders and protect consumer interests.



Gold rises ₹180; silver rallies ₹900

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices rose Rs 180 to Rs 62,450 per 10 grams in the national capital on Friday amid strong cues in international markets, according to HDFC Securities.

In the previous trade, the precious metal had closed at Rs 62,270 per 10 grams. Silver also rallied Rs 900 to Rs 75,500 per kilogram, while it had ended at Rs 74,600 per kg in the previous close.

"Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 62,450 per 10 grams, up by Rs 180, taking a positive trend from overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

In the global markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,003 per ounce, up by USD 10 from the previous close.

Silver was also trading higher at USD 22.97 per ounce, while it had finished at USD 22.50 per ounce in the previous trade.

Gold prices gained after softer US economic data pushed the dollar and Treasury yields lower. Traders shifted their focus on the US Producer Price Index (PPI) data and commentary from Federal Reserve officials for more cues on the timeline for monetary policy interest rate cut. Navneet Damani, senior vice-president of commodity research at Motilal Oswal Financial Services, said.

India begins anti dumping probe into solar imports from China

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India has initiated an anti-dumping probe into imports of certain solar glass from China and Vietnam, following a complaint by domestic players.

The commerce ministry's investigation arm Directorate General of Trade Remedies (DGTR) is probing the alleged dumping of 'Textured Tempered Coated and Uncoated Glass' made or from China and Vietnam.

The product is also known by various names such as solar glass or solar photovoltaic glass in the market parlance. An application has been filed by Borosil Renewables Ltd on behalf of the domestic industry for the probe and the imposition of appropriate anti-dumping duty on imports.

"On the basis of the duly substantiated



application by the domestic industry, and having satisfied itself, on the basis of prima facie evidence submitted by the applicant substantiating the dumping and consequent injury to the domestic industry, the authority hereby initiates an anti-dumping investigation into the alleged dumping," the notification said. If it is established that the dumping has caused material injury to domestic players, DGTR would recommend the imposition of anti-dumping duty on the imports. The finance ministry takes the final

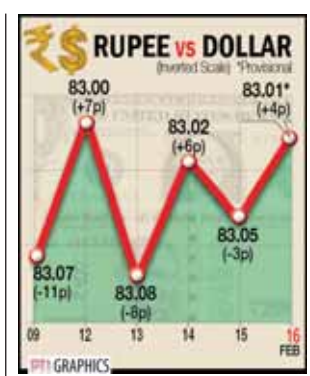
decision to impose duties. There is sufficient evidence that the product is being dumped in the domestic market of India by the exporters from these two countries.

Anti-dumping probes are conducted by countries to determine whether domestic industries have been hurt because of a surge in cheap imports.

As a countermeasure, they impose these duties under the multilateral regime of the Geneva-based World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The duty is aimed at ensuring fair trading practices and creating a level-playing field for domestic producers vis-a-vis foreign producers and exporters.

India has already imposed anti-dumping duty on several products to tackle cheap imports from various countries, including China.



Rupee rises four paise to settle at 83.01 a dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee rose 4 paise to settle at 83.01 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday, amid positive sentiment in the domestic equity markets and softening crude oil prices.

Forex traders said a strong American currency and outflow of foreign funds, however, capped a sharp gain in the domestic currency. At the inter-bank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.03 and touched the intraday high of 83.00 against the greenback. The local unit finally settled at 83.01 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a gain of 4 paise from its previous close. On Thursday, the rupee settled 3 paise lower at 83.05 against the US dollar. According to Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Sharekhan by BNP Paribas, the Indian rupee appreciated on positive domestic markets.

The dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was 0.07 per cent higher at 104.36. "US dollar index recovered on declining expectations of a rate cut by the US Fed in March and May 2024. Economic data from the US was slightly disappointing for the greenback," Choudhary said.

BUSINESS BRIEF

LOK ADALAT ON POWER THEFT SETTLEMENT ON SUNDAY
PIONEER NEWS SERVICE: A Lok Adalat of TPDDL discom for mutually agreed settlement of power theft cases will be held at Venkateshwar Global School in Rohini Sector 13 on February 18 from 10 am to 4 pm, a spokesperson of the company said on Friday. The Tata Power Delhi Distribution Limited (TPDDL), which supplies electricity in North Delhi, is holding the Lok Adalat in association with Delhi State Legal Services Authority. The litigant consumers can take part in the court proceedings by dialling the number 19124 or the official mail of the discom-eac.Care@tatapower-dtl.com. They need to carry their photo IDs and a copy of their theft bill for the settlement of cases, he said.

HI TECH REFRIGERATION SOLUTIONS
PIONEER NEWS SERVICE: Aligning with the 'Make in India' initiative, WIKKA India, a leading global measurement technology company, showcased its technologically advanced HVAC and refrigeration solutions, from intelligent monitoring systems to energy-efficient controls addressing the pressing need of efficient and sustainable solutions during the three-day ACREX India 2024 held at Greater Noida. These solutions have been designed to cater to the global and national demands for a wide range of industries seamlessly.

WIPPA CELEBRATES FOUNDATION DAY
NEW DELHI: New Delhi: The Wind Independent Power Producers Association (WIPPA) celebrated its 11th Foundation Day Conference on Friday in New Delhi. As WIPPA continues to play a pivotal role in fostering collaboration between wind energy developers, Independent Power Producers, and Government stakeholders to fortify India's wind sector, the event brought together distinguished RE industry stakeholders, including BS Bhalla, Secretary of Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, senior government officials, and leaders from the wind industry.

Centralised process of filings under companies law starts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government has operationalised the central processing centre for processing filings under the companies law and LLP Act in a "time-bound and faceless manner" as part of efforts to further improve the ease of doing business.

Initially, 12 forms and applications under the companies law will be processed at the Central Processing Centre (CPC). From April 1 onwards, other forms and applications will be processed through the centre. "As of now, 4,910 forms have been received by CPC after commencing operations. The forms shall be processed a time-bound and faceless manner," the corporate affairs ministry said in a release on

Friday. Later, forms/applications filed under Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) Act are also proposed to be centralised. Based on filing trends, the ministry said it is expected that about 2.50 lakh forms will be processed through CPC annually, once it is fully operational.

With the establishment of CPC, the ministry noted that jurisdictional Registrar of Companies (RoC) will have to focus more on their core functions of inquiries, inspection and investigation for ensuring robust corporate governance. The ministry, which implements the companies and LLP laws, has already operationalised the Central Registration Centre (CRC) and Centralised Processing

for Accelerated Corporate Exit (C-PACE). CRC, C-PACE and CPC will ensure speedy processing of applications and forms filed for incorporation, closure and for meeting regulatory requirements so that the companies are incorporated, closed, can alter and raise capital, and are able to complete their various compliances under the corporate laws with ease, it said. A total of 1,02,063 companies and LLPs were incorporated in FY 2013-14 and the count rose 92 per cent to 1,95,586 in FY 2022-23. The ministry said that incorporation of companies and LLPs till February 14 of the current financial year has been the highest as compared to any of the previous financial years.

Tech industry revenue to touch \$254 billion this fiscal: Nasscom

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The domestic technology industry's revenue is projected to grow 3.8 per cent to USD 254 billion this fiscal, industry body Nasscom said on Friday. Excluding hardware, the revenue is expected to touch USD 199 billion, a growth of 3.3 per cent over FY23.

The Engineering Research & Development (ER&D) sector alone contributed 48 per cent to the total export revenue addition in FY24. Nasscom said in its annual report. The projected 3.8 per cent growth is despite a 50 per cent slide in tech spending and 6 per cent decline in tech contracts in 2023 globally. This means the industry has added USD 9.3 billion incremental revenue in the fiscal, Nasscom said.

India has great growth potential: Sony after Zee merger collapse

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

With the proposed merger of its Indian arm with Zee terminated, Sony will seek various options, including finding another opportunity to replace the plan and organic growth opportunities in India, which has great potential in the long term, according to a top company official. In an earnings call, Hiroki Totoki, president, COO & CFO of Sony said India is a very appealing market where it would continue to invest. "India on a long term basis has a great growth potential. It's a very appealing market. Therefore, we will try to seek various opportunities and if we can find another opportunity that would replace this type of plan," Totoki said when asked about the company's strategy in India after the termination of the proposed merger. On the investment which Sony had commit-



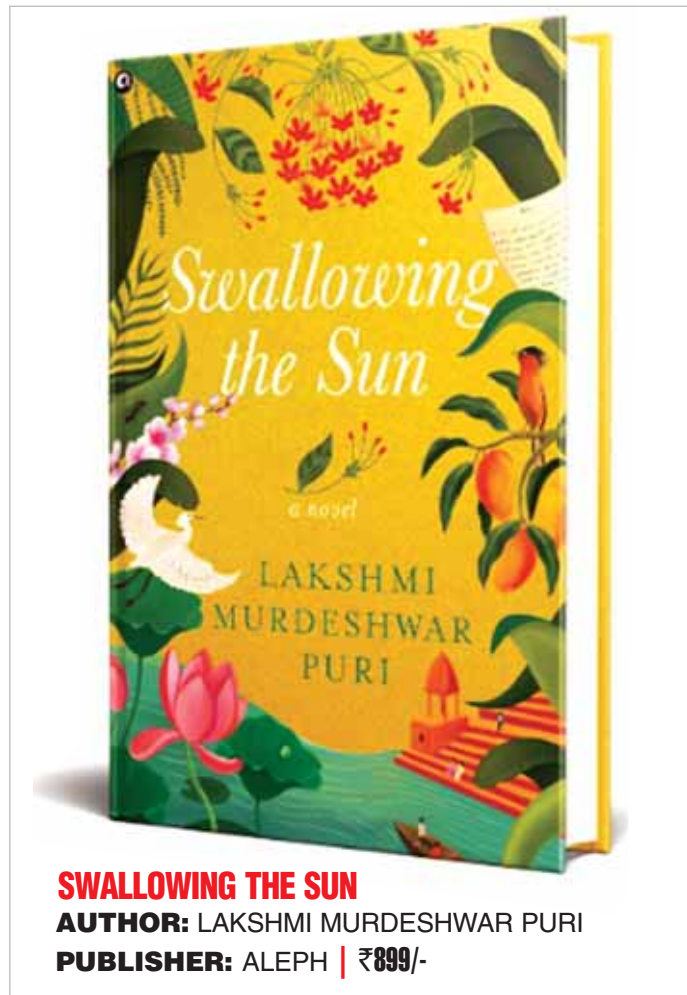
ted as part of the deal, he said: "Well, that investment is not going to change a capital allocation or it will not change our behaviour in our investment. So at the moment, we do not have any concrete plans." The earnings call was held on February 14. As per the merger conditions, which was agreed upon between Sony and ZEE, the Japanese giant was also supposed to invest USD 1.5 billion in the merged entity. The group will also continue to pursue organic growth as per its strategy in India, where it operates through Culver Max Entertainment (earlier known as Sony Pictures Network India), he said in the investors call.

SMOOTH SAILING ACROSS A CALM RIVER

While we have had a plethora of first time novelists who burst on the literary scene, only to fade away over time, Lakshmi Murudeshwar Puri is clearly here to stay, says **KUMAR CHELLAPPAN**

No one can deny the role novels play across various genres deemed literature. This fact is evident in the innumerable number of novels authored by writers from India inside as well as outside. However, the truth is that a huge majority of these works end up in waste paper baskets because of their readability, or rather the obverse, factor. The truth is nobody can be trained as a novelist or a dramatist or a poet unlike vocations like doctors, engineers or lawyers. There are eminent singers like Jayachandran, Kishore Kumar, Mohd Rafi, Mukesh or Jagjit Singh and Pankaj Udhass who to this day elevate us to a celestial world with their mellifluous tone and tenor. All share the inherent qualities that of a singer which they are born with. Kishore Kumar, an untrained musician, reigned supreme for decades because he could captivate the listeners with his voice, diction, pronunciation and modulation. The songs rendered by him echo even now despite the fact that he lived in an era when satellite TV channels and FM radio stations were alien. Although there are music colleges across the globe, one simply cannot graduate as a singer; one has to be born to it. The same stands for the field of literature. One cannot train a person to be a writer or poet or a dramatist by simply attending a degree or diploma course in novel writing. One should have a flair for writing and words should flow out of the creator's mind like a river meandering through the valleys reminiscent of the way the great

streams cascade. This has been proved right by Manoranjan Byapari, the school drop-out-turned-rickshaw puller who created a sensation with his book *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*. Reading this book was an experience of a different kind and Byapari showed the world that one need not have a PhD in English or even a formal education to write a story or novel. It is another thing that he ended up as the chairman of Dalit Sahitya Academy but that is part of a political journey. Interestingly, there are PhD holders in English who are incapable of speaking or writing even one sentence in the language without an error. The works of Kalidas, believed to date back to the third or fourth century is unique and he stands out in history as a first of a kind author. All one could say about Kalidas is that he was born with the blessings of Vaag Devatha (Goddess of Letters). Whatever he wrote remains as divine and sublime as they were when they were first penned. All of us have a story buried deep in our subconscious, in some corner of our mind. Our own life, the place where we were born and brought up, our parents, siblings, relations and people with whom we interacted, the school and college we attended, the village or town square we frequented, the tea vendor selling garam tea and vadas are all storehouses of narratives. If each of us were to write our reminiscences, the world of literature would be enriched, and may even open up avenues for debates and discussions.



SWALLOWING THE SUN
AUTHOR: LAKSHMI MURDESHWAR PURI
PUBLISHER: ALEPH | ₹899/-

It is little wonder that the works of Kalidasa like *Raghuvamsam*, and *Megha* are major benchmarks in literature. Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote *Crime and Punishment* in 1866 yet the novel retains its charm and relevance, 157 years after it was first published. We in

India can so easily empathise with the anguish and agony of Rodion Raskolnikov, almost as their personal pain and distress. The narrative, the style and the smooth flow of the storyline make the work eternal. It is almost like a sculptor carving out a figurine from a solid lifeless stone or metal. The work he crafted has beauty and style is eternally alive. One need not look for more secrets behind the success of some novels while others misfire and evaporate from the mind of the readers. This prelude was necessary to explain the significance of *Swallowing The Sun*, a novel by Lakshmi Murudeshwar Puri, a former career diplomat. I understand this is her first foray into the world of novels and she deserves to celebrate the fact that

she has crafted such a beautiful piece of work. Ambassador Puri, almost unveiling her own life, places her narrative in an era when India was under colonial rule and but there were still some remnants of the Maratha dynasty in the region where she was born. The protagonist is not necessarily the author but she weaves her story around three sisters, Surekha, Malati and Kamala, who were born in a typical Maratha village in Ratnagiri and their fights against all odds. While the elder sister Surekha is married off to an aristocrat in one of the princely States, the younger sisters grow into adulthoods starting from the Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar Ashram at Indore to Bombay (now Mumbai) at a time when the movement against British

colonialism was at its peak. The trials and tribulations of Malati and Kamala have been portrayed poignantly as the author draws the readers into the paths of the three sisters' lives, their sorrow and their joys. What stands out in this novel is the descriptive power of the author. My friend Dr Prajesh Panicker says Puri's language is honest and is not pretentious. I cannot agree more with his observation that the writer has truly spoken from her heart and has not tried to impress any literary critics or fancy theorists. We have had many one-book wonders in the past who remain darlings of the media, particularly one unconventional writer who managed to get an international award with her first novel but failed miserably in repeating the feat again as her second work fell flat and vanished from public memory. Eventually, readers decide the quality of a literary work and not those who sit in their ivory towers sipping scotch. In *Swallowing The Sun*, the author has a lot to tell the readers and that job she has perfected with an ace. I am not competent enough to call this work an eternal classic but the truth is that Lakshmi Murudeshwar Puri is here to stay, stay as a leading literary figure of our times because of her articulation and honesty. *Swallowing the Sun* is a great read as you feel you are sailing smoothly across a river with no swirls or undercurrents. Waiting to read more of Lakshmi Puri's narratives in the days to come.

THIS PRELUDE WAS NECESSARY TO EXPLAIN THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *SWALLOWING THE SUN*, A NOVEL BY LAKSHMI MURDESHWAR PURI, A FORMER CAREER DIPLOMAT. I UNDERSTAND THIS IS HER FIRST FORAY INTO THE WORLD OF NOVELS AND SHE DESERVES TO CELEBRATE THE FACT THAT SHE HAS CRAFTED SUCH A BEAUTIFUL PIECE OF WORK. AMBASSADOR PURI, ALMOST UNVEILING HER OWN LIFE, PLACES HER NARRATIVE IN AN ERA WHEN INDIA WAS UNDER COLONIAL RULE AND BUT THERE WERE STILL SOME REMNANTS OF THE MARATHA DYNASTY IN THE REGION WHERE SHE WAS BORN

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Writing is most satisfying for me

KAREN ANAND is widely regarded as one of India's first food gurus. A prolific writer, she has published numerous books including the bestselling *Good Food Good Living* and *Simple Cooking for Smart Men*, and co-authored *The Penguin Food Lovers Guide to India and Nepal*. Her twelve-book series entitled *Simple Cooking* was nominated for the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards in Paris. Anand continues to write extensively about food, with a regular column in the *Sunday Telegraph*. She is the recipient of the Trophee de l'Esprit Alimentaire (Food and Spirit Award) for Culture from the French Government and the winner of the French Ambassador's Travel Writer Award. She also runs a successful gourmet business and consults for luxury hotels and restaurants. Between all this, she ensures there is always time to cook! **SHARMILA CHAND** met up with her at the Jaipur Literature Festival 2024. Here are excerpts of the interview.

Among the various roles you undertake, which one brings you the most joy and satisfaction, and why?
 Well, I wear many hats, so I've been an entrepreneur, I've been a writer, I've been a cook chef. I've developed recipes and developed menus for people. I've done all sorts of things in the corporate sector. What gives me the most satisfaction is probably writing; it gives me the least money, but it certainly gives me the most satisfaction. What I love about writing is that you don't have to wax your upper lip or bother about your hair, or what you look like you can do it at three in the morning and wake up and I go to my desk, which is thankfully in my house and write in my pajamas. And I love the flexibility of that. However, as a profession, I loved the two restaurants I worked with in London that are hugely successful. I think success drives gratitude, and it drives what you do. For example, I developed Nimbooz for PepsiCo, and I've done lots of work, for corporates in India, for other restaurants, and I love it when that product succeeds. And it's very gratifying as a woman when you make money out of something. Because it's tough for a woman to do all of this. To run a home with children and to be successful in a career. It is tough, the whole nine yards is not easy. So, when you are successful and when it is monetarily also gratifying, it's great. But if you're asking me about the one, I enjoy most, it's writing.

reflects my journey in India for the last 30 odd years. I am of course Indian, but I came back to India in my 20s. I sort of look at it with both eyes, sometimes a foreign eye in an Indian eye. It's really stories, stories of people that I came across their great dishes, some were just housewives, some were restauranters but they're mostly great characters who produce great food and that for me is really important the fact that it's a culinary memoir. So, it features socioeconomic aspects of India, culinary aspects of India, the diversity of our regional cuisines, which I think is very important and still not brought out to the extent it should be. I think the French and Europeans are very good at marketing what they have and writing down what they have. We in India are less good at all of that.

With a notable repertoire of books, particularly in the realms of food and travel, what continues to motivate and inspire your writing journey?
 Well, I think writing is like acting or like anything, either you love it, or you hate it, and I love it. And that continues. As long as my books get published, and people want to read my books, I will do it.

What sparked your interest in the world of food, leading you to delve into its nuances and share your experiences? Somebody told me many years ago, you should always have three careers in mind. Food was one and of course, international relations was another. When I came back to India, in mid 80s, I discovered I really couldn't do International Relations because of language and various things. So, I jumped



to food and I was the right place at the right time. I was talking about European food because that's where I came from and that's what I knew and I grew up with. It wasn't because I thought it was trendy, or it was just something I knew how to do. So, I think, as I said, I was in the right place at the right time. Success spurs you on, as you get more successful with one salad bar, second salad bar, being on the cover of magazines, it's all very exciting. So, I continued down that road.

Reflecting on your journey thus far, could you share some key moments and lessons that have shaped your path?
 I don't think negatively at all. I think when things happen, they happen for the best I do believe in the universe, giving you signs. I've never had any problems really, in my career. I think people have been very kind of open doors, then of course, I had to prove myself,

When it comes to culinary experiences, which destination holds a special place in your heart, and what makes it your favourite?
 I don't know, nowadays I'm less into traveling to new places for the sake of it. I go where I have friends, or I go where I have work. I go a lot to Italy because I have lovely friends there. I love Italy and Venice where I go often. I love Paris and France, but I have less friends there. France is wonderful for me because I speak French so it's always gratifying to go there. Now I'm learning Italian now because I go so often. UK is a second home used to be a first home. I don't have the same longing and passion for it, but I do enjoy the British sense of humor. I enjoy seeing friends there. In the East there's no place that I love returning to so much but I do like exploring.

Among your various projects, which one stands out as your favorite, and what makes it memorable for you?
 Well, I think Deshaun in London, which has been a very successful restaurant, a Bombay Cafe in London is something that I'm very excited about. It is so successful; the owners have kept to the original vision we had and the inspiration. That makes it very exciting. And of course, my own company and the foodstuffs we do and the products we do. I'm very excited about the way it's going. One more thing I should also talk about is the farmers' market, we were the first people to do big events like that. It was amazing to see so many products in India, coming together and the kind of work that is happening in India in the field of natural food, organic food. Small vendors doing that. It was amazing. I hope we can do it again.

Of poets, poetry, and poetic justice

"Poetry is the lifeblood of our shared humanity, flowing through the veins of culture and society, stirring the depths of our souls with its timeless resonance."
 — Rumi

BY
GYANESHWAR DAYAL



Poetry in a world often defined by its frenetic pace and digital distractions, the timeless art of poetry stands as a beacon of introspection, empathy and connection. As Rumi, the celebrated 13th-century Persian poet, eloquently reminds us, poetry serves as the lifeblood of our shared humanity, coursing through the annals of history and resonating across cultures and civilisations. In the heart of India's rich literary tapestry, the Poetry Club of India emerges as a champion of this venerable tradition, revitalising and nurturing the art form for a new generation. With a commitment to fostering cultural appreciation and cultivating talent, the Poetry Club of India stands as a testament to the enduring power of poetry to inspire, enlighten and unite. Founded in 1994 by eminent poet Manohar Bandyopadhyay and joined by leading figures such as Keshav Malik and Rakshit Puri, the Poetry Club of India has served as a lighthouse of literary excellence for nearly three decades. Originally conceived as a serious forum for multilingual poetry, the Club has evolved under the stewardship of Manav Gupta, who have recognised the importance of adapting to changing times while preserving the essence of poetic expression. After the pause button pushed by the pandemic, Manav Gupta's leadership has revitalised the club, elevating Poetry Readings to new heights of quantity and quality. A hallmark of Gupta's initiative is honouring veteran poets whose contributions have enriched the art form over the years. By recognising luminaries such as Keshav Malik and Manohar Bandyopadhyay, Gupta pays homage to the enduring legacy of poetry while nurturing a new generation of voices. At the recent Poetry Readings session at the India Habitat Centre, Delhi, distinguished guests including Dr Yogendra Narain, a former

Defence Secretary, and Mugdha Sinha, Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, shared the stage with an array of poets. From seasoned wordsmiths to fresh voices from college poetry societies, the event epitomised Gupta's inclusive vision, bringing together disparate segments of society in a celebration of literary excellence. As Manohar Bandyopadhyay aptly observes, the essence of poetry transcends the printed page, resonating deeply when experienced aloud. Gupta's curated platform serves as a conduit for this experiential journey, weaving together myriad emotions and perspectives into a rich tapestry of artistic expression. At its core, the Poetry Club of India embodies the belief that poetry is not merely a form of entertainment but a cornerstone of cultural identity and civic engagement. In a society marked by rapid globalisation and technological advancement, poetry serves as a timeless reminder of our shared humanity, transcending barriers of language, nationality and ideology. Through poetry, we gain insights into the human experience, fostering empathy, understanding and connection. It challenges us to pause, to contemplate, and to delve into the depths of our own emotions and experiences. In doing so, poetry cultivates mindfulness and self-awareness, fostering personal growth and resilience in the face of adversity. Through the lens of poetry, we confront pressing issues, grapple with complex emotions and explore alternative perspectives. In this way, poetry becomes a catalyst for dialogue and social change, inspiring us to confront injustice, challenge conventions and strive for a more equitable and compassionate society. Central to the Poetry Club of India's mission is the cultivation of good poets and the promotion of poetry sessions throughout the country. By providing a platform for established and emerging poets to share their work, the Club nurtures talent, fosters creativity and a sense of community among poetry enthusiasts. The revival of poetry through organisations like the Poetry Club of India is not merely a cultural endeavour but a civic imperative. In an increasingly fragmented and polarised world, poetry has the power to bridge divides, inspire empathy and positive change. By embracing poetry as a vital component of our cultural heritage, we reaffirm our commitment to the values of compassion, tolerance and understanding that define us as a civilised society. In these tumultuous times, when reality often feels stranger than fiction, the need for poetic justice becomes even more pronounced. As we grapple with uncertainty and upheaval, we cling to the belief that there is meaning and purpose behind the chaos — that there is a greater cosmic justice at play. Poetic justice becomes a source of comfort and reassurance, reminding us that there is still beauty and fairness to be found in the world, even amid its surreal twists and turns. Of course, to appreciate poetic justice, one needs to understand poetry!

DUCKETT 100 TAKES ENGLAND TO 207/2

PTI ■ RAJKOT
Ben Duckett's power-packed overshadowed Ashwin's monumental feat as England thrived on their belligerent Bazball tactic to reach 207/2 at stumps on day two and put India under pressure in the third Test here on Friday.
Ashwin dismissed Zak Crawley (15) in the final session to join Anil Kumble as the second Indian, and fifth overall, to take 500 wickets in Test history.
But India's struggles to contain England's fearless and enterprising batters persisted as Duckett raced to his third Test hundred off only 88 balls. England have already wiped off a chunk of their first innings deficit and trail India by 238 runs going into day three. India ended up with 445 in their first innings.
At one stage, Duckett even flirted briefly with the prospect of breaking Gilbert Jessop's record from 1902 for fastest Test ton (77 balls) for his country.
Duckett peppered the field with powerful strokes all around the ground, hitting 21 fours and two sixes to reach 133 not out from only 118 balls. Joe Root was at the other end on nine.
Ashwin struck immediately after his introduction into the attack to send Crawley packing, with the batter gift-wrapping his wicket to help the Indian spinner complete



INDIA SCORES 445 IN FIRST INNINGS

his milestone.
On an innocuous delivery from around the wicket, Crawley managed a connection that ballooned towards Rajat Patidar at short fine leg.
Patidar only had to make a few paces on his left to grab the ball over his shoulder as each of Ashwin's teammates rushed to celebrate the feat.
The diminutive England opener Duckett, who looked a

tad tentative outside the off-stump before the tea break, came out all guns blazing to bring up his first fifty of the tour, in just 39 balls with 11 hits to the fence.
The introduction of spin did slow down Duckett's pace for a short while, but he hit the top gear quickly to keep the Indian bowlers under pressure.
A pivotal moment came in the 21st over from Bumrah in his second spell with the Indian

spearhead nailing a perfect yorker.
With his front foot out of the way, it appeared on the first instance that the ball crashed into the wickets.
However, umpire Kumar Dharmasena was not as convinced as the bowler got his captain to ask for DRS intervention.
The replays showed Duckett had done incredibly well to connect with the ferocious

yorker with the bottom of his bat.
Each of the three DRS reviews per innings would weigh in gold if the pitch continues to be as placid as it has been for the first two days, but this was a review which India would not have mind losing.
India took the second DRS against Ollie Pope when Mohammed Siraj, deployed on short-ball tactics, pitched a fuller one to hit the pads.

Umpire Joel Wilson was unmoved but he had to overturn his appeal with the replays confirming that the ball was hitting the leg stump, ending Pope's entertaining 39 off 55 balls (5 fours and 1 six). Ashwin returned for the final over of the day to have one more crack. His fourth delivery turned sharply away from Duckett after pitching on leg and Rohit Sharma collected a catch believing there was an edge.
However, it culminated with replays showing the ball pitching outside leg and missing the bat completely, with India staring at a long third day in the field with only one DRS appeal left.
Earlier in the day, India's lower order did a fair job of collecting as many runs as possible before being bowled out for 445.
Debutant Dhruv Jurel (46) missed out on a fifty in his maiden outing. The highlight of his knock was an uppercut off Mark Wood's 146 kmph delivery, which sent the ball flying into the stands over a helpless slip cordon.
Jurel partnered with Ashwin (39) to add 77 runs for the eighth wicket which pushed India past the 400-run mark while also steadying the ship after centurion Ravindra Jadeja (112) and Kuldeep Yadav (4) fell early.
Bumrah (28) and Siraj (3) did their best in keeping England out on the park for longer with a quick 30-run stand from 42 balls.



Ashwin powers to 500 Test wickets mark

PTI ■ RAJKOT
Senior off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin on Friday became the second Indian bowler after former skipper Anil Kumble to take 500 Test wickets during the third Test against England here.
Ashwin also became only the third off-spinner to achieve the feat and continues to be the second highest wicket-taker for India behind Kumble, who ended his career with 619 scalps.
The 37-year-old reached the milestone on day two of the ongoing Test. He needed just one wicket for the feat and that came in the way of opener Zak Crawley, who mis-timed a sweep which landed in the safe hands of Rajat Patidar at short fine leg.
This was after India were earlier bowled out for 445 in their first innings.
The only other off-spinners who have touched the 500 wickets mark are retired Sri Lanka great Muttiah Muralidaran (800) and Australia's Nathan Lyon

(517), who did it last year.
Overall, Ashwin is only the ninth bowler to take 500 wickets in the traditional format, scaling the landmark in his 97th Test.
Having made his Test debut in 2011, Ashwin has come a long way.
The engineering graduate from Chennai started out as a top-order batter and tried his hand at medium pace bowling before settling for the role of an off-spinner, a decision that was forced by a back injury during his teenage years.
Following the Kumble and Harbhajan Singh era, Ashwin had big shoes to fill and he has done that with remarkable consistency.
In his first 16 Tests, Ashwin snared nine five-wicket hauls and became the fastest to the 300 wickets club.
Ashwin has also proved his worth in the shorter formats, having played 116 ODIs for his 156 wickets in the format. He has 72 wickets in 65 T20 International appearances.



Sutherland smashes fastest double ton in women Test history

PTI ■ PERTH
Australia's Annabel Sutherland on Friday smashed the fastest double hundred in women's Test history, achieving the feat in 248 balls on the second day of the one-off match against South Africa here.
The 22-year-old Sutherland eventually got dismissed for 210 off 256 balls but not before helping Australia post a massive 575 for 9 declared in their first innings at the WACA, the highest total in women's Test cricket.
South Africa, who were shot out for 76 in their first innings, were 67 for 3 in their second essay at stumps on the second day, still trailing by 432 runs.
Sutherland was three runs shy of Ellyse Perry's Australian

Kiwis clinch first ever series win over Proteas

AP ■ HAMILTON (NEW ZEALAND)
Kane Williamson made 133 in an unbroken partnership of 152 with Will Young to lead New Zealand to a seven-wicket win over South Africa on the fourth day of the second test Friday and to its first-ever series win over the Proteas.
Williamson scored centuries in both innings of the first test which New Zealand won by 281 runs.
South Africa took a 31-run first innings lead in the second test and extended that to 267 when it made 235 in its second innings.
New Zealand reached 40-1 before stumps on day three, setting up a fourth day on which it needed a further 227 while South Africa needed nine wickets to win the match and save the series.
New Zealand's total of 269-3

was its fifth-highest in a successful fourth-innings run chase.
The South Africa team is considerably under-strength as most of its leading players remained at home to play in a domestic Twenty20 league. Six Proteas players including captain Neil Brand made their debuts in the first test and the second test lineup had only 51 tests in total compared to New Zealand's 436.
The South Africa bowlers made New Zealand grind its way to a victory. The winning runs finally came in the 95th over, about 20 minutes before the end of play on day four.
Williamson's played almost a lone hand at first as he built his 32nd test century from 203 deliveries. He put on 64 for the third wicket with Rachin Ravindra who made 20 from 72 balls.
He then found a resolute



partner in Young who stayed with him and was 60 not out at the close.
New Zealand was under pressure when Young came out to join Williamson at the fall of Ravindra's wicket, still needing 150 to win. Runs came slowly for him at first as Williamson approached his century but then more freely and he reached his 50 from 118 balls.
Williamson is one of only two active players along with Australia's Steve Smith to reach 32 centuries and has done so faster, in 172 innings, than Smith, Ricky Ponting, Sachin Tendulkar, Yousif Khan, Sunil Gavaskar, Kumar Sangakkara, Jacques Kallis or Brian Lara, among others.

He brought to bear all of his powers of concentration in difficult batting conditions Friday with the ball turning and bouncing, occasionally spitting off a length.
Williamson is the No. 1-ranked batter in tests and showed why with three centuries in four innings in the series and a total of 403 runs at an average of 134. He batted almost 18-1/2 hours in total in the series.
"Coming into today on a wearing surface we knew we were going to have to string partnerships together," Williamson said. "Credit to South Africa. Certainly for the first couple of days they outplayed us I thought."
"We had to fight hard to get out of that position and change momentum and with the partnerships and seeing off the new ball were able to give ourselves the chance."



Indian women assured of historic medal after QF win over Hong Kong

PTI ■ SHAH ALAM (MALAYSIA)
Indian women shuttlers assured themselves of a maiden Badminton Asia Team Championships medal by cruising to a 3-0 win over Hong Kong in the quarterfinals here on Friday.
After stunning top seeds China to top the group stage, India blanked Hong Kong riding on wins from double Olympic-medallist PV Sindhu, Ashmita Chaliha and the doubles pair of Ashwini Ponappa and Tanisha Crasto.
India will now face the winner of the other quarterfinal between top seed Japan and China.
Returning from a long injury layoff, Sindhu registered a hard-fought 21-7, 16-21, 21-12 win against a lower-ranked Lo Sin Yan Happy.
The women's doubles combination of Tanisha and Ponnappa then doubled the lead by getting the better of world no. 18 combination of Yeung Nga Ting and Yeung Pui Lam 21-10, 21-14 in 35 minutes.
Ashmita then wrapped up the tie with a comfortable 21-12, 21-13 triumph over Yeung Sum Yee, assuring the team of at least a bronze.
"It is a comfortable result for the women's team. I am very happy with their performance," former national coach Vimal Kumar, who is with the team, told PTI from Shah Alam.
"There was a little drift, so it was initially difficult to control the shuttle as it was going out. Sindhu was stretched a bit as it was tough from one end due to the drift but it is a good result, we are in the semifinals."
Up against world no. 77 Lo, Sindhu zoomed to 11-1 in the opening game after her rival found the going tough. The Indian conceded six points after resumption before wrapping up the game.
It turned out to be a tight battle after the change of sides as Sindhu and Lo moved neck and neck till 10-10 before the Hong Kong player went into the break with a one-point lead with the help of a cross drop.

Real Madrid free to make another run for Mbappé

AP ■ MADRID
Real Madrid and Kylian Mbappé may get a second chance to make it work.
Less than two years after what seemed to be a done deal fell apart, the Spanish powerhouse and the France star could have another opportunity to join forces.
Mbappé reportedly told Paris Saint-Germain on Thursday that he will leave the club at end of the season, opening the way for another run by Madrid to sign one of the world's best soccer players. There could be a bidding war among several clubs to sign the former World Cup winner, but Madrid is widely considered to be in the front seat.
Mbappé's arrival would give Madrid one of the top attacks in soccer, with Mbappé joining Jude Bellingham, Vinícius Júnior and Rodrygo. It would also give Europe's most successful club a great outlook for the future, as Mbappé

would be the oldest of the four at just 25 years old.
Madrid made a big push to sign Mbappé in 2022, with one of its offers rejected by PSG reportedly reaching 200 million euros (\$215 million).
Mbappé never hid his dream of one day playing for Madrid, but decided at the time that it was best to continue his "adventure" in Paris.
It would be a much cheaper deal for Madrid now, as Mbappé will be a free agent after seven years with PSG. He informed the French club last year that he would not trigger an extension to the contract he signed in 2022.
Madrid had failed to secure Mbappé even before that debacle a few years ago, when the player visited the club's facilities at age 14 but instead decided to join Monaco's youth academy.
The most-recent failure was a big blow to Madrid fans, who felt it was only a matter of time for the transfer to happen. The only doubts then were



about where the young Frenchman would fit in the squad. Madrid supporters had even "welcomed"

Mbappé by applauding him at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium when he played with PSG in a Champions League match.
The inability to close the deal led to criticism toward Madrid president Florentino Pérez, and even prompted some backlash against Mbappé. Midfielder Federico Valverde said at the time that to be a Madrid player was "a privilege that not everyone can have."
Mbappé would have arrived to play alongside Karim Benzema, who left a year later and was never replaced by a top-level forward.
Mbappé could be that replacement, finally giving Madrid a star who could possibly be on a similar level to former Portugal great Cristiano Ronaldo.
Mbappé perhaps could also bring the club back to the "galactics" era that it enjoyed in the 2000s with players such as Luis Figo, Zinedine Zidane, David Beckham and former Brazil great Ronaldo.

Alcaraz beats Carabelli in clay court debut

AP ■ BUENOS AIRES
Defending champion and top-seeded Carlos Alcaraz advanced to the quarterfinals of the Argentina Open by beating Camilo Carabelli 6-2, 7-5 in his first clay-court match of the season.
The 20-year-old Alcaraz came from 2-0 down in the second set against his Argentine opponent.
"I started really nervous, I'm not going to lie, with the crowd behind him, supporting him," Alcaraz said.
"I think it's normal, obviously, but really happy with my first match on clay since (the French Open)."
He will next play Italy's Andrea



Vavassori, who beat Laslo Djere of Serbia 6-4, 7-5.
Second-seeded Cameron Norrie, the runner-up last year, lost 6-2, 4-6, 6-3 to Federico Coria of Argentina.
Coria will play the winner between another Argentine, Sebastián Báez, and Italy's Luciano Darderi.
Alcaraz and Norrie are also set to play at the Rio Open later this month in Brazil.