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PAPER WITH PASSION

Win some, lose some

Nitish switching sides leaves the INDIA bloc in confusion but limits his own bargaining power

In a move that did not leave many seasoned politicians flabbergasted, JD(U) leader Nitish Kumar has executed a somersault by rejoining the BJP alliance barely 18 months after he walked out of the NDA, spilling bad blood all around. Importantly, his latest move saw Nitish abandoning the plank of Opposition unity, which he was passionately championing until very recently. In fact, he was the de facto convener of the INDIA bloc, which has been cobbled together to take on the BJP's national might. As a prime mover of the INDIA bloc, Nitish's departure puts a cloud over the coalition's future, which may have to undergo a realignment, potentially impacting its cohesiveness and effectiveness. However, there is more to this development than meets the eye: While it certainly is a major setback for the Opposition, what with Mamata Banerjee and Bhagwant Mann already having announced to go it alone in their respective States of West Bengal and Punjab, it provides an obvious edge to the BJP while straitjacketing Nitish from performing any more antics, at least till the Bihar Assembly elections next year.



The lack of communication between Bihar Chief Minister Nitish and his deputy, RJD's Tejashwi Yadav, is said to have compounded their unease with each other. Matters did not help when Central agencies started questioning Tejashwi's mother and sister in the alleged land-for-jobs scam. The BJP's inclination towards a representative from an extremely backward caste or a prominent Other Backward Classes (OBC) group adds complexity to the situation. Nitish has the additional duty of ensuring that Bihar adds handsomely to the NDA's kitty in the general elections. Nitish's decision to realign with the BJP has far-reaching consequences, influencing not only his political trajectory but also the future dynamics of the NDA and INDIA bloc. Interestingly, the Bihar developments coincide with Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra entering the State. It is sure to have a dampening effect on the Congress' campaign and lower its confidence considerably. However, nothing can be said with finality about Nitish. It will all depend on the understanding he has with the BJP and how the latter treats him. His switch was ostensibly prompted by the treatment he received from his INDIA partners. During alliance meetings, clashes of aspirations and perceived attempts by the RJD to expand its influence within the JD(U) hint at a shifting power dynamic. Nitish's political somersault and his realignment with the BJP have unleashed a series of ripple effects that extend far beyond the borders of Bihar. The departure of this seasoned politician from the INDIA bloc has injected an element of uncertainty into the political equations, casting shadows over the future cohesion and effectiveness of the coalition. The nation observes closely as this strategic realignment unfolds, shaping the future contours of Indian politics.

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Artistes perform during the presentation of the best tableau in the Republic Day parade, in New Delhi

A father's courageous fight against girl's sexual assault

Despite threats and coercion, Ranjit, supported by his resilient daughter, pursued justice with unwavering courage

When Ranjit took on the might of the powerful in his tribal village in Ranchi district, Jharkhand, to pursue action against the rapists of his 13-year-old daughter, he didn't think he would get justice. But he was still determined to go ahead. So, even though the village mukhiya was unresponsive and the police inspector on duty refused to file an FIR, Ranjit didn't give up. He called up the Superintendent of police who came to the station to help him file the case under the POCSO Act, leading to the arrest of the three perpetrators.



Thereafter began the real battle. Pressure was mounted from all sides to compromise by offering money to withdraw the case and, marriage to one of the perpetrators. Threats were made to burn their home, kill Ranjit and cause other physical harm to the family. Somehow he braved the storm, riding on the extraordinary and unwavering courage of his daughter, (the sexual assault survivor), who stood firm in her fight for justice. After a year of struggle, including withstanding

humiliation in court from the public prosecutor, Ranjit and his daughter were vindicated when the verdict came in their favour and the three were sentenced to 25 years of rigorous imprisonment. In a country where rape is reported every 20 minutes and conviction rates are less than 30%, this success inspired filmmaker Nisha Pahuja to document Ranjit and his daughter's dogged fight for justice. To Kill A Tiger, which took eight years to film, has been nominated for the Best Documentary Feature for the 2024 Oscar awards.

The survivor, who is now 20, went on to complete school. She hopes to show other survivors like her, that girls are not to blame for sexual assaults and that is why she agreed to reveal her face in the

film. But had her father Ranjit not stood up for her, she may have remained just another statistic in crime records. Ranjit attributes his ability to withstand all pressures and to raise his voice for justice to the training he received through an intervention engaging men as responsible partners and caring fathers in the context of gender equality and child rights.

Initiated by the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) in Jharkhand in 2015, this program developed innovative ways to work with men and boys on issues of masculinities. Implemented in three districts in partnership with NGOs Srijan in Ranchi, Chotanagpur Sanskritik Sangh (CSS) in Gumla and Sahyogini in Bokaro, the intervention was able to reduce gender differences in the burden of household and care work and, reduce gender disparities in education, according to an independent evaluation of the programme. Importantly, it reduced gender-based violence in families and villages engaged in the intervention. This assessment found positive mindset changes in atti-



SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

(The writer is a senior journalist; views expressed are personal)

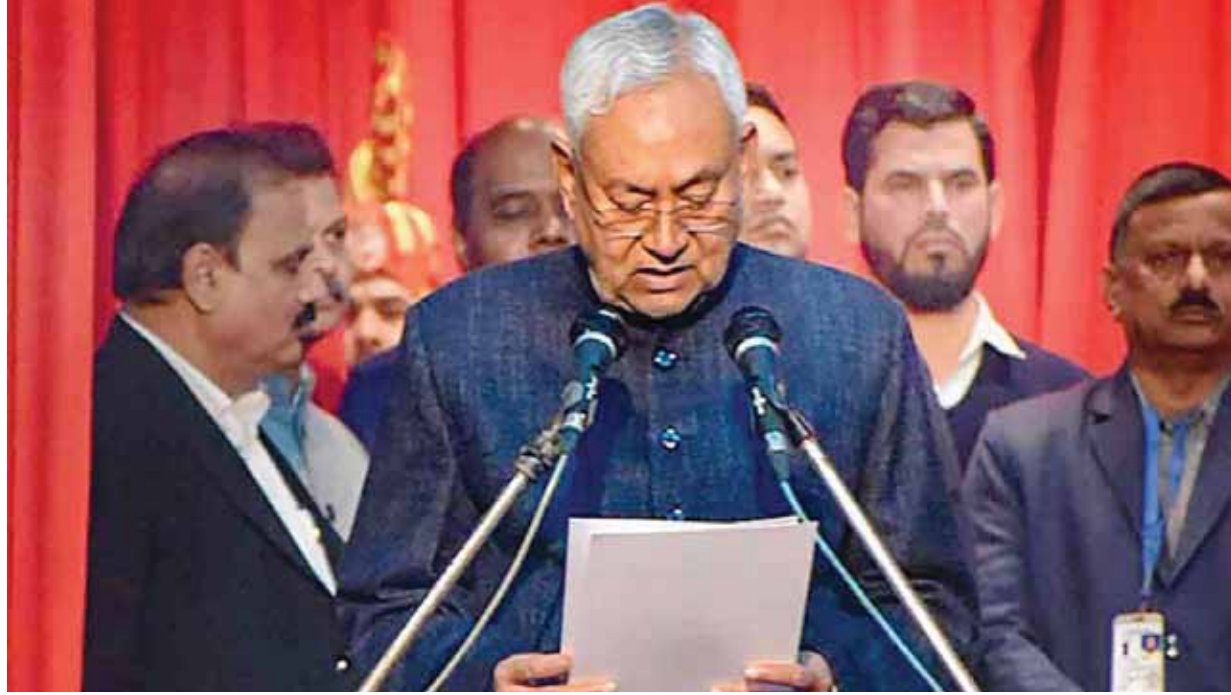
Masterstroke or political Harakiri?

Nitish Kumar has rejoined forces with the BJP, cementing his reputation as a leader known for frequent shifts in political alliances for personal benefit



KALYANI SHANKAR

On Sunday, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar threw a bombshell by leaving the ruling Mahagathbandhan in Bihar and returning to the NDA coalition. He also quit the opposition coalition which he had built eight months ago. This dismantling of the bloc has dealt a significant blow to the INDIA bloc at the national level. They missed the slim chance of defeating the BJP in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. It is worth exploring how Bihar's politics may affect the national landscape. Kumar's decision to return to the NDA, fold could benefit the BJP but weaken the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Congress in Bihar. It could ultimately impact the opposition bloc at the national level. This BJP-JD(U) partnership could improve the chances of the BJP winning more seats in the upcoming 2024 general elections and help Modi achieve a hat trick.



The BJP tried to break the opposition coalition and partner with the J.D. (U) alliance. The Party sees Nitish Kumar as a critical ally in Bihar and believes their partnership can win in the 2024 elections. Kumar has only 45 seats in the current Assembly, while the RJD and BJP have 78 and 79 seats, respectively. Despite this, Nitish managed to continue as the chief minister. Did the Congress party have a hand in Nitish Kumar's departure from the IN.D.I.A. opposition bloc? The reason behind this setback was the decision to sideline Nitish and promote Congress. Kumar accused the Party of being responsible for the failed alliance, arguing that the situation arose due to poor communication.

KC Tyagi of the Janata Dal-United (JDU) has levelled accusations against the Congress party that it conspired to dominate the Opposition bloc. On January 13th in Mumbai, the Chief (CPI-M) Sitaram Yechori proposed Nitish Kumar as the convener of the bloc. This suggestion was supported by most of the other leaders present. However, Rahul Gandhi voiced his disagreement. Mamata Banerjee subsequently proposed the name of Congress chief Kharge as the coalition chief, a move Tyagi claims was part of a broader conspiracy. Tyagi stated that Nitish Kumar mobilised an alliance that united all non-Congress parties. However, it is now disintegrating. The situation in Punjab and Bihar is on the verge of collapse, and the coalition in West Bengal is also falling apart. Nitish confirmed that he left the INDIA alliance because it didn't meet his expectations. He felt he was the only one working towards the coalition's goals. Although the partnership has brought together all non-Congress parties, the alliance disintegrated in West Bengal and almost collapsed in Bihar and Punjab.

There is also an untold story. Lalu Yadav, the leader of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), encouraged Nitish Kumar to form an opposition coalition at the national level to aim for the position of Prime Ministerial candidate. The purpose of this plan was to pave the way for Lalu Yadav's son to become the Chief Minister. However, the plan



LALU YADAV, THE LEADER OF THE RASHTRIYA JANATA DAL (RJD), ENCOURAGED NITISH KUMAR TO FORM AN OPPOSITION COALITION AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL TO AIM FOR PRIME MINISTERSHIP

failed when Mallikarjun Kharge was chosen as the leader of the new coalition. Consequently, Nitish Kumar sided with the (BJP). Kumar's credibility has been tarnished because of his unwavering desire to hold power, regardless of the repercussions. He has changed political allegiances several times, always for his benefit, and currently holds the title of Chief Minister with the longest tenure.

Nitish's track record shows that after exploring other options in 2013, Nitish Kumar left the BJP and allied with the RJD and Congress. After the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, he aligned with the BJP again and became the Chief Minister in 2020. However, two years later, Kumar left the BJP and formed a new government with the RJD and Congress. Now he has dumped the RJD. That is why he is called Palti Ram. Despite being an experienced politician, Nitish Kumar's frequent changes in stance have cost him the chance to be considered as a prime ministerial candidate for the opposition party, especially at

the age of 72. The BJP's dismantling of the INDIA bloc may facilitate Prime Minister Modi to win his third term. In Bihar, mobilising OBC votes to achieve electoral success is imperative. In November 2023, Bihar increased the reservation for Scheduled Castes and Extremely Backward Castes. It is unclear how long the Nitish and the BJP partnership will last. They may work together until the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, but what will happen afterwards is uncertain. The Bharatiya Janata Party may support Nitish only until the Lok Sabha polls and their support could decrease afterwards-some question whether the alliance will continue until the 2025 Bihar Assembly polls.

Nitish has shown that it's possible to retain power by using clever bargaining skills and winning a few seats, even if only 4% of the electorate belongs to their caste. But one thing is sure: Given Nitish's track record, there could be other flip-flops. (The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE BEHAVIOUR OF BUREAUCRATS

Sir — The idea of bureaucrats embodying exemplary conduct for the public takes a blow when incidents like the Singrauli SDM episode surface. His act of having a female employee tie his shoelace in public triggered outrage, highlighting the stark contrast between expected behaviour and reality. The swift transfer in response to public outcry via social media underscores the need for greater accountability and sensitivity among those entrusted with positions of power.

Such blatant abuse of authority cannot be tolerated, especially in public spaces. Moving forward, the government must prioritize not only competence but also ethical conduct when selecting officials for crucial roles. Common courtesy and respect for basic human dignity should be non-negotiable, forming the bedrock of every bureaucrat's interaction with the public. Only then can we rebuild trust and pave the way for a government that truly serves its people.

N Mateeni | Mumbai

DILAPIDATED POST OFFICES

Sir — People are infuriated over the lackadaisical attitude of authorities towards improving the condition of the post offices in the country which has been lying in a dilapidated condition for a long. Residents have complained that even the name of the post office has not been displayed properly at most of the places. Moreover, the internet services fail to provide connectivity during peak hours. A member of the grievances redressal committee said higher authorities of the postal department had not shown any interest in improving the condition of the post office. The infrastructure of the post office needs to be improved. There is a need to beautify the staff counters to give a neat and clean look to these counters. There is also a need to provide better seating arrangements. There was also a need to recruit more staff at the post offices. Retires invest their hard-earned money, wait for hours and then become

IMD completes 150 years



Recently, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) celebrated its 150th year of establishment and service to the nation. On this memorable occasion, the IMD has launched several initiatives, such as 'The Weather Analysis and Forecast Enabling System

(WAFES Framework of Climate Services (NFCS)). Over the years, the IMD has been playing a significant role in weather forecasting and monsoon predictions. It plays a multidimensional role in the country's major affairs, conducting general elections, the launch of ISRO missions, and the growth of infrastructural and agricultural sectors.

The IMD faces a lot of challenges posed by changing climates and the ever-increasing demand for accurate and timely weather information. As the country navigates the complexities of its diverse weather patterns, perhaps the fusion of AI and traditional meteorological methods may well be the key to a more adaptive and efficient forecasting system, ultimately safeguarding the lives and livelihoods of the people of the country.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

disappointed without getting their hard-earned money. It is high time to heed the fact that the residents living in pensioner's paradise are put to the test every time they go to pick up their monthly earnings. It is time to have better working conditions in Post Offices.

CK Subramaniam | Chennai

UGC DEGREE IN MARATHI

Sir — The University Grants Commission has taken major steps to provide degree and post-graduate education in other languages along with the Marathi language. Accordingly, a master's training program has been organized next month for professors to create educational materials. As a result of this, students will get a great opportunity to learn the local language in the coming academic years. Local language has been given priority in the national education policy. But the necessary educational materials are not available. As a result, many rural students are unable to study in the local language. Even during the three years of implementation of NEP, many course materials are not available in the

Marathi language. It will also be given. The support of the Indian Language Committee will be taken for this. Overall, this is good news in the background of the strangulation of the Marathi language going on in all areas. Today, children are not given education in their mother tongue in many places. If education is given in the mother tongue, children understand quickly and they understand anything immediately. Recently the volume of English has increased in all areas. In many places, Marathi schools are on the verge of closure. Even today, despite fulfilling all the conditions, the Marathi language does not get the status of the Abhijit language from the Centre. For that, it is necessary to try at all levels. Overall, it is necessary to give priority to Marathi in all fields. It is good news that Marathi is being included in degree and post-graduate education. It is expected to be implemented as soon as possible.

Shantaram Wagh | Pune

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FIRST COLUMN

AHIMSA: THE PATH TO PEACEFUL EXISTENCE

Buddhism's essence lies in non-violence, compassion and enlightenment



BHIKKHU SIRI SIVALI ABHASARO

Buddhism, founded by Siddhartha Gautama, commonly known as the Buddha, is a philosophy and way of life that places great emphasis on the alleviation of suffering and the pursuit of enlightenment. Central to the teachings of Buddhism is the principle of non-violence, or "ahimsa," which holds a profound and essential role in shaping the ethical framework of this ancient spiritual tradition.

The Essence of Non-Violence in Buddhism:

- **Compassion and Interconnectedness:** Buddhism teaches that all beings are interconnected and share a common desire for happiness while seeking to avoid suffering. Non-violence stems from the understanding that causing harm to others ultimately results in harm to oneself. Compassion, a key tenet of Buddhism, encourages followers to cultivate empathy and extend benevolence to all living beings.
- **The First Precept:** The Five Precepts form the ethical guidelines for Buddhist practitioners, with the first precept explicitly stating, "I undertake the precept to refrain from taking life." This foundational principle underscores the sanctity of all life and emphasizes the commitment to non-violence as a fundamental aspect of ethical conduct.
- **Karma and Consequences:** Buddhism teaches the concept of karma, the law of cause and effect. Engaging in violent or harmful actions generates negative karma, which can have repercussions in this life or future lives. By practicing non-violence, individuals seek to break the cycle of negative karma, promoting a path towards enlightenment and liberation from suffering.



- **Mindfulness and Contemplation:** Buddhist practices, such as mindfulness meditation, cultivate awareness and self-reflection. Non-violence is not only manifested in physical actions but also in the thoughts and intentions of individuals. By developing mindfulness, practitioners strive to eliminate harmful thoughts and cultivate a mindset of kindness and non-harming.

- **Conflict Resolution:** Non-violence plays a crucial role in conflict resolution within Buddhist communities. Rather than resorting to aggression or retaliation, followers are encouraged to seek peaceful solutions through dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation. This approach aligns with the Buddha's teachings on skillful means to address conflicts without causing harm.

- **Example of the Buddha:** The life of the Buddha serves as a profound example of non-violence. From his renunciation of the royal life to his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha consistently demonstrated compassion and refrained from causing harm to any being, even in the face of adversity.

Non-violence, deeply rooted in the core principles of Buddhism, is a guiding force that shapes the ethical conduct of its followers. Through the practice of compassion, mindfulness, and the observance of the Five Precepts, Buddhists strive to create a world free from violence and suffering. By embracing the philosophy of non-violence, individuals embark on a transformative journey towards personal well-being, social harmony, and the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

(The writer is a Buddhist monk and spiritual guide, views are personal)

Drones can revolutionise the agriculture sector



AS MITTAL

The Government's inclination towards precision agriculture implies that drones are poised to become an integral component of cultivation practices



In Punjab, where drones remain associated mostly with dropping drugs and arms from Pakistan in border areas, now they are poised to gain a new skyline to revolutionise the agriculture sector.

Kiranpal Kaur of Sekha village in Barnala district, who has only completed her education up to class 10 and has never travelled in a plane, is now a trained drone pilot. She travels across the district to provide rental services for spraying fertilisers and pesticides and undertaking surveys to check for any crop damage in the fields. These Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) are the cutting-edge solution for driving agriculture towards higher efficiency, sustainability and profitability.

To further empower rural women Self Help Groups (SHGs), the subsidised 'Namo Drone Didi' Scheme was launched in December last year with an outlay of Rs.1261 Crore for the period from 2024-25 to 2025-26. The scheme aims to equip and train at least 15,000 women SHGs. Kiranpal is among the first batch of 22 rural women SHGs in Punjab, out of 300 women SHGs across the country, to be equipped with Kisan drones.

Potential: The market cost of a high-end drone that can perform multiple tasks is approximately Rs 15 lakh. However, the government has introduced subsidised schemes that offer subsidies of Rs 4-8 lakh on each drone and a 3% interest subvention on loans. This initiative is expected to have a significant impact on the Indian agriculture drone market, which is projected to grow at an annual average rate of over 25% from 2024 to 2028. Additionally, the global market for agricultural drones is expected to reach USD 4.7 billion by the end of 2026, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 31.3% during the forecast period of 2024 to 2026. The increasing demand for agricultural drones, which have several applications such as field mapping, automated seeding, fertilizer sprayers, crop analysis, and imaging, is expected to propel market growth in the coming years.

The adoption of drone technology serves as an advanced decision support system



THE USE OF DRONES, EQUIPPED WITH HYPERSPECTRAL IMAGING TECHNOLOGY, HAS BROUGHT ABOUT A REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE IN HOW WE PERCEIVE CROP HEALTH

that facilitates targeted intervention and reduces the wastage of critical resources such as water, chemicals, and fertilizers. The high-resolution imagery obtained from drones can provide valuable insights that enable targeted intervention and prevent the unnecessary application of treatments across the entire field. Moreover, drones can help convert the abstract concept of precision agriculture into multifaceted approaches through compelling data and actionable insights.

Remote sensing and monitoring: Effective monitoring of crop health is crucial for farmers to achieve maximum yield and profits. The use of drones equipped with hyperspectral imaging technology has brought a revolutionary change in how we perceive crop health. In a recent study, it was revealed that drones can detect pest infestations up to 2 weeks earlier than traditional monitoring methods. This early detection can potentially save up to 30% of the harvest that might otherwise be lost.

Precision crop management: Finding a balance between agricultural production and environmental preservation is crucial. The excessive use of chemicals and water scarcity can lead to environmental degradation, which is a pressing concern that the agriculture sector must address.

Drones can play a vital role in solving these issues by accurately identifying areas that require water. By doing so, farmers can reduce water usage by approximately 25%, thereby promoting sustainable agriculture.

Drones are not only useful for surveillance purposes, but when equipped with the right analytical capabilities, they can also provide actionable insights for real-time crop management. For example, by utilizing data collected and analyzed by drones, farmers can reduce fer-

tilizer usage by an average of 26% by applying it only where needed. This is not only beneficial from a financial perspective but also contributes to sustainable agriculture that reduces environmental impact. Efficient field scouting: Given India's vast geographical expanse, monitoring remote or hard-to-reach farms is a unique challenge. Here, drones are an asset, reducing the hours of manual labour involved in field scouting to mere minutes. According to recent estimates, drones can cover 200 acres in just 30 minutes, offering timely and accurate data. It is valuable for smallholder farmers, who make up close to 68% of the Indian farming community, enabling them to act before a problem like a pest infestation becomes economically damaging. This efficiency in field scouting allows farmers to stay ahead of potential issues, even in remote or less accessible parts of their farms. Instead of labour-intensive, time-consuming manual inspections, drones provide a cost-effective and timely alternative. According to the estimates prepared by IFFCO, a drone takes just around 8-10 minutes to spray one acre.

Data-driven decision-making: We are in an era where data-driven strategies are not the exception but the rule, and agriculture is keeping pace. Drones generate extensive datasets that offer an in-depth look into crop health, growth patterns, and other variables.

For example, a farmer can now optimise planting densities of sugarcane-based on drone-collected data, potentially increasing yields by up to 10%. Imagine a farmer in the heart of Punjab who can now use drone-acquired data to optimise planting densities, manage nutrients effectively, and plan their harvest with precision. Such data-driven decisions can lead to higher yields and, consequently, better profits.

Cost savings: In a sector where profit margins can be wafer-thin, drones serve as a cost-effective ally. Early detection of potential issues allows for timely and, therefore, less costly interventions. By helping farmers make data-backed decisions, drones help avert financial setbacks. By advising on agri-input use before visible crop issues occur, they can prevent the need for expensive interventions later during the crop cycle.

Weather forecasting: For a good yield, optimum weather remains crucial. Equipped with weather monitoring technology, drones can serve as weather stations in the sky, providing real-time data on the weather. This information is invaluable for planning farm operations and responding to changing weather patterns. In India, where monsoons can be a farmer's best friend or worst enemy, having up-to-the-minute weather data is a game-changer. It allows farmers to make informed decisions about when to plant, irrigate, or harvest, ultimately improving farm resilience.

Conclusion: The government's shows a growing affinity for precision agriculture suggests that drones are set to become an integral part of crop cultivation practices. By blending traditional farming expertise with advanced technology, farmers can anticipate a more optimistic and fruitful future. Moreover, the government can offset the 80% cost of drone adoption through significant savings on fertilizers and pesticides subsidies, as the use of drone technology leads to reduced consumption.

(The Author is vice-chairman of Sonalika Group and vice-chairman of the Punjab Economic Policy and Planning Board, Chairman of ASSOCHAM Northern Region Development Council. Views expressed are personal)

Charting a course for India's maritime security

To strengthen its standing as a global leader in maritime security, it is imperative to adopt a robust Maritime Domain Awareness framework

The adoption of a robust Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) framework is crucial for addressing the challenges faced by maritime-dependent industries and nations worldwide. In order to demonstrate the necessary commitment towards the protection of marine infrastructure and maritime domains, India must strengthen its maritime security programmes by keeping the rapidly changing maritime geopolitics and emergence of diverse threats in attention. By prioritising research and development funding and promoting international MDA partnerships, India can position itself as the global leader in maritime security. India's Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) concepts



PADMALOCHAN DASH

must undergo a significant transformation, shifting from traditional water surface-centric initiatives to embrace space-based monitoring and AI-driven Operational Technology (OT) systems. The focus on maritime security needs to extend beyond territorial limitations to encompass regional and global perspectives, recognizing the heightened competition in seas. Given India's substantial glob-

al role in maritime affairs, effective MDA models must be prioritized as a fundamental component of the maritime security outlook. This evolution is essential to proactively address emerging threats, enhance surveillance capabilities, and foster international collaboration in securing maritime interests.

In the context of multilateral Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) cooperation, the Maldives' geographical proximity to China's expansion goals and the rising maritime incidents underscore the critical need for vigilant maritime monitoring. Proactively addressing China's increasing influence in the South China Sea is imperative. Given its status as the largest stakeholder and the key actor in the Indian

Ocean Region, India must take the lead in institutionalizing MDA.

Recognising the inadequacy of limited national capacity to protect vast water expanses, this necessitates fostering multilateral cooperation, promoting inclusivity, and leveraging sophisticated technologies. As one of the largest maritime operators strategically positioned in the region, India should formalize a framework for multilateral MDA cooperation involving relevant parties. This initiative can facilitate access to robust yet affordable MDA resources, while also fostering intelligence sharing and joint exercises to collectively address diverse maritime security challenges. India has demonstrated a strong commitment to

enhancing its Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capabilities, particularly in the aftermath of the "26/11" attacks. Notable initiatives, such as the National Marine Domain Awareness (NMDA) project and the collaboration with France on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) satellite constellation, highlight India's proactive efforts to create an integrated MDA network. To ensure a cohesive and successful MDA approach, there must be a focus on establishing a specialised coordination body, conducting regular audits, and evaluating past initiatives. Recognizing the dynamic nature of maritime threats, the involvement of multiple stakeholders and adaptability to evolving scenarios are emphasized, contributing to the

resilience and effectiveness of the MDA framework.

Integrating current unmanned technology with human intelligence transforms marine security. India can lead maritime security by integrating these technology into marine plans faster. Real-time threat identification, thorough monitoring, vessel vetting, due diligence, and AI insights to optimise the MDA framework are required. Technology, especially AI, improves Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) for countries like India. For early threat detection, deliberate investments in cutting-edge surveillance and intelligence technology like ASVs, UAVs, and UUVs are necessary. Autonomous systems like ASVs, UAVs, and UUVs improve reaction and marine

security. Initiatives such as the National Command, Control, Communication, and Intelligence (NC3I) network demonstrate the scope of MDA operations. Succinct and adaptable MDA is the result of periodic revisions in response to emerging threats and the active participation of experts from diverse disciplines. For autonomous system integration and preparation against emerging threats, a specialised task force, learning processes, and technology infrastructure updates are essential. It is imperative that collaborations be formed with academic institutions, research centres, and technological firms. Cybersecurity and interoperability assure MDA unmanned system security

and efficiency. Regular cybersecurity audits strengthen MDA systems against evolving cyber threats. India must modernise its technology and form new cybersecurity alliances to handle marine security issues. Since the "26/11" event, India's Navy and MDA have increased maritime security initiatives, demonstrating a commitment to securing the whole maritime domain. Recent successes in right-time detection and fast eradication of varied marine threats highlight MDA's naval operating concept evolution. Investment in naval personnel training and cutting-edge technology would help the Indian Navy meet MDA goals.

(The Author is working with an Independent Think Tank; views are personal)

FOOTLOOSE IN THE ENCHANTING KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN

From being the pearl capital of the world to a land of cultural wonders, breathtaking landscapes, and heart-pounding adventures, the island nation of Bahrain is one of the most popular and tourist-friendly countries in the Middle East. Explore the best of Bahrain with
NIVI SHRIVASTAVA



Nestled in the heart of the Middle East, the Kingdom of Bahrain stands as a jewel awaiting discovery by discerning travellers and luxury seekers. Blessed with a geographical location unlike any other in the region, this nation seamlessly blends natural wonders, opulent hospitality, vibrant shopping streets, and captivating landscapes. Brimming with rich Arabic culture, the Islamic kingdom gets the name from an Arabic term “al-Bahrayn,” which translates to “the two seas.” The blend of the two seas is a symbol of the Arabian Gulf and the freshwater springs that run beneath the sea, hinting at the unusual blend of saline and sweet waters surrounding the archipelago.

My journey in Bahrain starts at the iconic Al Fateh Grand Mosque, a masterpiece of Islamic architecture that serves as a testament to the country's heritage. An usher at the entrance informs us to cover our heads with a traditional scarf and lends us a beautiful abaya (women's robe) as a sign of respect inside the holy mosque. As I stepped into the colossal prayer hall adorned with intricate calligraphy and mesmerizing chandeliers, a sense of serenity and bewilderment captured my attention. The mosque, with its stunning blend of modernity and tradition, is located in the heart of the capital city, Manama. Constructed in 1987, the Al Fateh Grand Mosque is named after Ahmed Al Fateh, the founder of Bahrain, and can accommodate over 7,000 worshippers.

PEARL OF THE GULF

Thanks to the distinctive blend of geothermal springs and sea water, natural Bahraini pearls (locally known as dana) are famous for their superior quality. Renowned for its ethical pearl harvesting and fair trade practices by preserving the centuries-old industry, the exceptional brilliance of Bahraini pearls has been a constant throughout the ages, gaining international acclaim for their unparalleled brilliance, purity, and beauty. Our local guide Eman Ali informed us about the ancient connection of Bahrain with the Indian sub-continent. The historic nation was once the seat of the ancient Dilmun civilization from the late fourth millennium to 800 BC, and over the years it has etched its place in history as the epicenter of pearling, boasting a legacy that spans over 4,000 years. The artistry of pearl diving is still carefully preserved at the Bahrain Pearling Trail in the historic district of Muharraq, where you can find the best of glistening pearls that once adorned the crowns of kings and queens.

AN EXOTIC SEASCAPE

To experience the famous blend of seas first-hand, we decide to explore the exotic islands of Jarada with a super-modern motor boat. On a bright sunny day, we cruise along the coastline, reveling in the luxury of the sleek vessel cutting through the gentle waves to reach the secluded paradise. Here we are ready to snorkel in the pristine waters and swim with the vibrant underwater marine life. Schools of colorful fish dance around coral formations, creating a mesmerizing spectacle beneath the surface and we pick up the famous oysters to try our luck in finding the Bahraini pearls. Although, we weren't lucky enough to



find the precious pearls, the fresh catch of the day was served to us for lunch along with some delicious grilled food that our local chefs prepared on the island. For a nature enthusiast like me, the pristine beaches of Jarada Bahrain Island were the most unexpected exotic sight in the Gulf. The azure waters, soft sands, and vibrant sunsets are just perfect to indulge in a leisurely afternoon basking in the sun or go for an adventurous dive in the idyllic retreat.

THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES

Revving up the tempo, I couldn't have missed visiting the Bahrain International Circuit - home to the adrenaline-pumping Formula 1

Grand Prix. A momentous addition to my Bahrain odyssey was experiencing the roar of engines, the screech of tires, and the pulsating energy of the racing tracks. For those craving a taste of speed, the go-karting experience at the adjoining race circuit provides an exhilarating opportunity to channel their inner racer. Eager to try this one-of-a-kind activity, I went ahead with the go-karting race and donned professional racing gear for a pulsating driving experience. The moment I gripped the steering wheel of the sleek go-kart, I was transported into a world of speed and precision. As I stepped onto the track, the distinctive roar of engines reverberated around me, creating an atmosphere charged with excitement. With every twist and turn, I navigated

the circuit feeling the rush of wind against my face and the roaring sound of the engine pumping up my adrenaline levels. Whether it was the sharp corners that demanded finesse or the straight stretches that begged for full throttle, each lap was worth every dime. The thrill of go-karting at this iconic venue was an experience to remember, and the track's layout, designed to challenge even the most seasoned drivers added an element of strategy and accomplishment. The Bahrain International Circuit's commitment to delivering a world-class motorsports experience was evident in every detail, from the well-maintained track to the state-of-the-art facilities that surrounded it. As I crossed the finish line, the elation of the experience lingered, leaving me with a newfound appreciation for the artistry of motorsports and it most definitely added a thrilling glimpse into the world of professional racing.

A BLEND OF NEW AND OLD

Delving into Bahrain's storied past, a visit to the Bahrain Fort offered me a fascinating glimpse into the Dilmun civilization. In the carefully restored ancient ruins, with their labyrinthine passages and towering walls, one can still hear the whispering tales of a bygone era. As the sun set over the Arabian Gulf, the massive fort provided a captivating backdrop for contemplating the rich history of this island nation.

As we left the past behind and entered the vibrant shopping streets of Bahrain, the mood changed instantly. No visit to Bahrain would be complete without indulging in its luxurious markets and upscale malls. The Manama Souq, a bustling labyrinth of narrow alleys, enticed me with its aromatic spices, vibrant fabrics, and intricate handicrafts. Meanwhile, the city's modern malls, such as City Centre Bahrain and The Avenues, showcased a dazzling array of international brands, culinary delights, and entertainment options, offering a taste of Bahrain's cosmopolitan allure.

HURT F1 DREAM ENDED SO QUICKLY: Nyck

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Hurt that his dream of racing in Formula 1 ended "prematurely", Dutch racer Nyck de Vries is busy charting the next chapter of his life as the former champion returns to the Formula E series buzzing with positive energy. The 28-year-old was axed by F1 team AlphaTauri after just 10 races as he failed to score points in his rookie F1 season last year. "Of course it hurts in a way to end your dream so quickly and prematurely but I have been able to reflect on it well," De Vries told PTL. De Vries had entered F1 on the back of championship-winning stints in F2 and Formula

E and a long-time F1 reserve role, which meant there was more pressure on him to perform compared to other rookies. "There was always pressure and I don't think I was necessarily in an easy situation and it didn't quite work out for various reasons. But pressure is relative, everyone experiences it. I'm thankful for the opportunities." "I see life as a journey, it was a chapter in my journey and now I continue my journey elsewhere. When a door closes it always opens a new one," he added. After the F1 snub, the Dutch racer has returned to the familiar all-electric Formula E series, signing up with India's Mahindra Racing.

"The transition (from F1 to FE) happened really quick. Quite shortly when it happened I travelled to London for the final round of the championship last year to be back in the paddock, in the environment, to see if there was a spot available for me this season. "Even though I took a bit of time out I also quickly focussed on building my program for this year. I'm very happy to be back in Formula E. I had a good break, good time off and now I'm full of positive energy," he added. Though he won the 2021 Formula E world championship, De Vries still has a lot to catch up on as the series has moved on from the Gen 2 to Gen 3 cars. "It was almost like 14-15



months ago that I last drove the Formula E car and that was a Gen 2, I had a couple of brief experiences in a Gen 3 car but a lot has developed since then," he said. De Vries finished 15th in the season-opening Mexico City race and also in the Diriyah E-Prix. Given Mahindra's struggle with reliability and efficiency with the Gen3 car, he has realistic expectations from this season. "It's about managing expectations. If people expect us to dominate this year they are dreaming. We collectively know where the team was at the end of last year. "The hardware didn't really change, that doesn't mean we can't make a lot of progress and improvements but we have to

be realistic," he said. "It's more about building process in the moment collectively and getting ready for building a solid structure for the near future when things do change and we start to fight in front," he added. Much to the disappointment of the Indian fans, the second edition of Hyderabad E Prix was scheduled to be held on February 10 was cancelled by Formula E due to an alleged breach of contract by the new Telangana government. "India is a big part of our (Mahindra) DNA. I would have been happy to meet our colleagues in India and hopefully make them proud in their home country. It wasn't meant to be this year but hopefully in the future we will get to do it."

Avani eyes one more shot

PTI ■ PATTAYA (THAILAND)
India's Avani Prashanth is looking forward to a packed calendar over the next few weeks as she criss-crosses across the continent in search of golf glory at one of the world's best amateur events. The 17-year-old Bengaluru golfer, who started 2024 with two weeks in Australia while getting close to winning at one occasion, is now all set to tee off at the Women's Amateur Asia Pacific (WAAP) golf. Avani will make her fourth appearance at this event which carries extra significance, since the winner gets to seal a berth in three of the five women's Majors. On her part, Avani feels this event owes her one good finish before she moves on in her career. Avani was also thrilled for receiving a special invite to the Augusta National Women Amateur championships, which is held a week before the storied Masters at the Augusta National. Immediately after the 2024 WAAP, Avani will be off for the Ladies European Tour, where she finished in the top 10 last year. The next on her schedule is another well-known amateur event, the Sage Valley Invitational. She started 2024 with a runner-up finish at the Australian Masters of Amateurs and missed a top 10 by a whisker at the Australian Amateur Championships. The focus for Avani and her five teammates, who have been fielded by the Indian Golf Union, is the WAAP.



Her teammates are Vidhatri Urs, Mannat Brar, Keerthana Rajeev Nair, Saanvi Somu and Heena Kang. They will tee off at the Siam Country Club. The team is accompanied by former national champion Vandana Agarwal. The top stars this week will include world No 4 Minsol Kim of Korea, Japan's Hinano Murguruma (22nd), Sayaka Teraoka (23rd), Mamika Shinchi (33rd), Rin Yoshida (38th) and defending champion from Thailand Eila Galitsky (40th). India's Avani is 42nd and Rianne Malixi from the Philippines is 43rd. While this is the fourth appearance at WAAP for Avani, it is the second time for Vidhatri and Mannat. The other three, Keerthana Rajeev Nair, Saanvi Somu and Heena Kang are making their debut at WAAP. Interestingly, Ceerat Kang's sister Heena played at the WAAP in 2022 at the same course.

Vidhatri's cousin Pranavi Urs, now a pro on the LET, has also played at the WAAP in the past. Avani, coming off her nine-hole practice round just before the rains arrived, said, "Somehow I have not managed to finish better than T-16." Avani won the 2023 Queen Sirikit Individuals besides picking a title on a women's pro event in Europe. She has multiple top 10s on Ladies European Tour events. "Many of these girls I have been playing with over the years are here. We are all close to finishing with our amateur careers. It is great to be here once again," she said. "I have known Eila (Galitsky) since we were about nine. We played together in US Kids Golf, then at various other events. Now we will be playing at Sage Valley and ANWA together. We have also roomed together, and stay in touch," Avani added. "I also know others like Rianne

(Malixi), Minsol and many others. So it is great to see everyone here. It's a great event and I really want to do well, maybe win it once, before I turn pro," she said. **PRIZES AND FIELD:** The prizes are considered as the very best in amateur golf for women. The winner gets starts at three major championships in 2024 — Women's Open, the Evian Championship and Chevron Championship. In addition, the winner will get invitations to play in the 121st Women's Amateur Championship, Augusta National Women's Amateur Championship, the Hana Financial Group Championship and the Women's Australian Open. The field is made up of 90 players from 22 countries and only those in the World Amateur Golf Ranking (WAGR) list are eligible to play. The leading 50 players (plus ties) progress past the 36-hole cut and play the final two rounds.

Sneha, Hitaashee prepare for another battle in 3rd leg

PTI ■ KOLKATA
Sneha Singh and Hitaashee Bakshi, who Shad finished in the top two in both the two earlier legs in the ongoing Women's Pro Golf Tour season, will be back for another shot at the third event which begins at Tollygunge Club here Wednesday. Sneha and Hitaashee were tied for second when amateur Nishna Patel won the opening leg. In the second leg, Sneha edged out Hitaashee, who finished runner-up. Sneha, winner of the 2023 Hero Order of Merit, has taken the early lead once again, with Hitaashee chasing her. It has been a good start for Hitaashee, who was injured last year. Besides finishing second in the opening two legs, she won the Thailand Tour's LPGA Qualifying Tour, granting her access to pro tournaments in



Thailand. Amandeep Drall, Ridhima Dilawari and Seher Atwal will be among the other leading contenders in the third leg. Some of the other leading stars of Hero WPGT are going to South Africa for the Sunshine Ladies Tour starting next month, including Vani Kapoor, Tvesa Malik and Neha Tripathi. Besides, a few others like Amandeep and Seher will also be joining them for some events. An interesting feature of both the events held so far this season has been that at least the top three finishers have totalled under-par scores, underlining the tremendous improvement in the quality of women's golf in India. A total of 29 girls will tee off in the third leg, and the field includes two amateurs — Anaahat Bindra and Sinjini Mukherjee.

India lose to Netherlands in quarterfinals

PTI ■ MUSCAT
Mohammed Raheel's hat-trick went in vain as India suffered a 4-7 defeat to the Netherlands in the quarterfinals of the FIH Hockey5s Men's World Cup here on Tuesday. Apart from Raheel (1; 7; 25'), Mandeep Mor (11') scored for India. For the Netherlands, Sander de Wijn (4; 15'), and Alexander Schop (10; 26') scored a brace each, while Lucas Middendorp (12'), Jamie van Aart (13'), and Pepijn Reyenga (20') also found the net. The match started on a promising for India as Raheel showcased his skills with a remarkable field goal in the very first minute, setting the tone for an intense competition. However, the Netherlands swiftly responded to India's early lead, with de Wijn (4') leveling the score. Undeterred by the quick equaliser, India intensified their offensive strategies, leading to another goal by



Raheel. Despite the renewed lead, the Netherlands, demonstrating resilience, managed to equalise

once again, courtesy of a goal by Schop. The back-and-forth nature of the match continued, with Mandeep reclaiming the lead for India. Nevertheless, the Netherlands countered with a rapid succession of goals, as Middendorp and van Aart skilfully found the back of the net, swinging the momentum in favour of the Netherlands. Heading into half time, de Wijn delivered a crucial challenge goal, leaving India behind. The second half witnessed the Netherlands asserting their dominance, as Reyenga and Schop extended their lead. Despite a valiant effort by Raheel, who scored again to complete his hat-trick, India fell short. India will next play against Kenya in the 5-8th place match later in the day.

Divya alleges sexism by spectators at Tata Steel Masters

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Indian chess player Divya Deshmukh has alleged that she endured sexist behaviour from spectators at the recently-concluded Tata Steel Masters in Wijk Aan Zee, Netherlands, saying they "focused on irrelevant things like her hair, clothes and accent" during the tournament. The 18-year-old International Master from Nagpur, who won the Asian women's chess championship last year, shared a lengthy social media post calling out the misogyny that women players face routinely while elaborating on her unpleasant experience in Wijk Aan Zee. "I have been wanting to address this for a while but was waiting for my tournament to be over. I got told and also myself noticed how women in

chess are often just taken for granted by spectators," Deshmukh said. "Most recent example of this on a personal level would be in this tournament, I played a few games which I felt were quite good and I was proud of them. "I got told by people how the audience was not even bothered with the game but instead focused on every single possible thing in the world: my clothes, hair, accent and every other irrelevant thing," she wrote in an Instagram post on Sunday. Deshmukh finished 12th in the Challengers section with a score of 4.5 at the Tata Steel Masters. The teenager said while male players were getting their share of spotlight purely for their game, the women were judged for aspects which had nothing to do with their ability on the chess board.



"I was quite upset to hear this and I think is the sad truth that people when women play chess they often overlook how good they actually are, the games they play and their strength," she said. "I was quite disappointed to see how everything was discussed about in my interviews (by the audience) except my games, very few people paid attention to it and it is quite a sad thing. "I felt it was unfair in a way because

if I go to any guy's interview there would be way less judgement on a personal level, actual compliments about the game and the player," she asserted. Despite the progress made in women's sports in terms of pay scale, female athletes are still subjected to sexist behaviour and are often asked about their outfits. Deshmukh said women players are under-appreciated in general and often endure hatred. "...Every irrelevant thing is focused on and hated on while guys would probably get away with the same things. I think women face this on a daily basis and I'm barely 18. "I have faced so much judgement including hatred over the years for things that don't even matter. I think women should start getting equal respect," she added.

Bhutia demands resignation of AIFF president Chaubey

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Former captain Bhaichung Bhutia on Tuesday demanded the resignation of All India Football Federation (AIFF) president Kalyan Chaubey, holding him responsible for the "current mess" in the administrative side of the game in the country, following the dismissal of Shaji Parbhakaran as secretary general. Bhutia attended Tuesday's executive committee meeting of the AIFF called here to discuss the dismissal of Parbhakaran on November 7. Parbhakaran was not initially invited for the meeting but joined it virtually. "I told the executive committee members that Kalyan Chaubey and treasurer Kipa Ajay should also resign. Shaji Parbhakaran should not be made the only scapegoat. All three of them are equally

responsible for taking decisions without the approval of executive committee," Bhutia told PTI. "All three of them were taking the decisions and If Shaji has to be removed, the president and treasurer should also be removed," said the legendary striker. "Indian football is in mess, there is politics in the sport, cutting out each other after little over one year of taking charge, it is not good. The national team has been left in the lurch during the Hangzhou Asian Games as well as in the Asian Cup where there was inadequate training time for the team." Parbhakaran was removed as secretary general on November 7 for "breach of trust" but a single bench of the Delhi High Court had on December 8 ordered an interim stay on his



sacking. In its latest order of January 19, the High Court pointed out that Parbhakaran was dismissed by the emergency committee of the AIFF whereas the federation's constitution provides that only the executive committee has the power to do that. Another source confirmed Bhutia's version and added that Parbhakaran asked the executive committee members to explain what constituted the "breach of trust". "He (Parbhakaran) asked the executive committee to explain what constituted breach of trust on the basis of which he was dismissed. He said he had not committed any financial irregularities or fraud. He also said that there was no emergency committee constituted for the AIFF and how can that be a reference to the emergency committee for my dismissal," the source said. "Parbhakaran also said that he would have, in any case, resigned because his relationship with the president was nearing breaking point." AIFF vice president NA Haris then intervened and said that the matter is sub-judice. Bhutia, who lost in the AIFF presidential poll in 2022, also said that he did not know what constituted the "breach of trust" which led to Parbhakaran's dismissal. "I am an executive committee member but I don't know what was the breach of trust Shaji had committed. I am not told nor briefed about it," Bhutia said that he proposed



Mumbai Open Tennis Championship to be held from February 5-11

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Players from 31 countries will take part in the Mumbai Open Tennis Championship to be held here from February 5 to 11 following a gap of six years. The tournament will be played at the newly-laid tennis courts at the Cricket Club of India (Brabourne Stadium), which is organising the event along with the Maharashtra State Lawn Tennis Association (MSLTA). The third edition of the Mumbai Open will feature three top 100 players in the singles and six top 100 players in the doubles event, which is a part of the WTA USD 125K series. The qualifying matches will be played on February 3 and 4 whereas the main draw will start from February 5. Kayla Day of the US, who won the 2016 US Open girls singles and currently world No 82, will lead the 32-player field, along with Japan's Nao Hibino, who is the winner of three WTA Tour singles titles. The former French Open semi-finalist Tamara Zidansek, ranked 97th, is the third player from top 100 in the singles. Ankita Raina is the only Indian confirmed in the singles main draw. India's top-ranked doubles player Parthana Thombare and her Dutch partner Arianne Hartono have a direct entry into the doubles event. The wild cards for the tournament are expected to be announced soon. "The WTA Mumbai Open has attracted some big names and rising stars in the past, including two-time Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka, who won her first WTA USD125K title right here in Mumbai in 2017," said members of the organisin committee Sanjay Khandare and Pravin Darade in a statement. Sabalenka had won the first edition of Mumbai Open in 2017 while Thailand's Luksika Kumkhum won the next in 2018.

