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# The Pioneer

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## PIONEER IN SHORT

### INDIA REACHES SQUASH WORLD CUP FINAL

The hosts produced a fearless, all-round performance on Saturday, sweeping aside two-time champions Egypt 3-0 to storm into their first-ever Squash World Cup final. Seeded second, India will now face Hong Kong China in the title clash at Express Avenue Mall, after Hong Kong edged past Japan in the other semifinal. India set the tone early. National champion Velavan Senthilkumar blitzed past Ibrahim Elkabbani 7-1, 7-3, 7-6 to hand the hosts a flying start. The momentum only grew when India's top-ranked women's player, Anahat Singh, dug deep in a gritty five-game battle to beat Nour Heikal and double the lead. With Egypt wobbling, Abhay Singh sealed the deal. The Asian Games bronze medallist outlasted Adam Hawal in a tense four-game contest to complete the clean sweep and send the home crowd into raptures.
The result marked a landmark moment for Indian squash. Having settled for bronze in 2023, this is the nation's best-ever showing at the World Cup. Joshna Chinappa's scheduled match became academic once India wrapped up the tie.

# Nitin Nabin to succeed Nadda

> I am confident that his energy and dedication will strengthen our Party in the times to come. Congratulations to him on becoming the BJP National Working President
> — PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ New Delhi/Lucknow/Patna

NABIN IS LIKELY TO SUCCEED INCUMBENT BJP CHIEF JP NADDA AND IS ONE OF THE YOUNGEST LEADERS TO OCCUPY THE POST

In a surprising move, the ruling BJP is known for, the party on Sunday appointed Bihar Minister Nitin Nabin as the party's national working president.

The BJP Parliamentary board picked Nabin for the post until the process of the new full-time party chief is done to replace incumbent Union Minister JP Nadda. Similarly party also announced Union Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary's name as the new president of the BJP's Uttar Pradesh unit, who replaced Bhupendra Chaudhary.

Party sources said Nabin was rewarded for exuding greater confidence as the person in charge of the Chhattisgarh BJP Assembly elections. He had consistently maintained to the top leadership that the party would sweep the Assembly polls.

"Bharatiya Janata Party's parliamentary board has appointed Nitin Nabin, a minister in the Bihar Government, the BJP national working president with immediate effect," BJP national general secretary Arun Singh said in a notification.

Nabin, 45, who belongs to the Kayastha community, is likely to succeed incumbent BJP chief JP Nadda and is one of the youngest leaders to occupy the post.

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# Delhi-NCR chokes, GRAP Stage IV curbs imposed

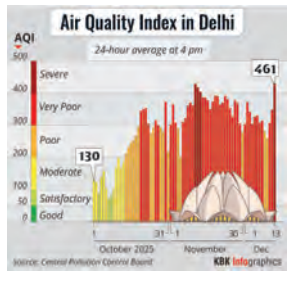
**ABHINAV KUMAR JHA**
■ New Delhi

People have tea at a roadside stall during a cold and smoggy winter morning in New Delhi PTI

Acute air pollution across the National Capital Region (NCR) on Sunday compelled authorities to order stricter emergency measures, sharply impacting school schedules, office attendance and public activities as Delhi recorded its worst air quality of the season.

With the Air Quality Index (AQI) touches 461 firmly in the "severe" category, the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) put into operation the toughest curbs under the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), including limits on mobility, construction, outdoor activities and physical presence in institutions.

Classes in schools across Delhi and adjoining NCR districts, including Noida and Ghaziabad, were revised with effect from Monday, 15 December, due to the aggravating pollution. As stated by a circular issued by district administrations, classes from pre-nursery to class V would continue fully online. The classes for VI to IX and XI shall be hybrid, meaning students can attend classes either physically or online, which is to be decided by the parents of the students concerned, based on the school facilities available.




The school authorities explained that the school timings from 7.50 am to 1.50 pm would remain the same, and the school buses would ply as usual. Classes for class X and class XII would continue in physical mode owing to the requirement for board examinations. Flexibility has been given to parents by allowing them to opt for online classes, a measure to decrease children's toxic air exposure.

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## The ByStander

### HIMANTA INVITES VP RADHAKRISHNAN

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma paid a courtesy call on the Vice President of India, CP Radhakrishnan, in the national Capital on Sunday. During the meeting at the Vice President's enclave, Chief Minister Sarma personally congratulated Radhakrishnan on his assumption of the august office of the Vice President of India. The Chief Minister also extended a formal invitation to the Vice President to visit Assam and witness the state's transformation and developmental progress achieved in recent years.

FULL REPORT ON P6

### US ENVOYS ARRIVE IN BERLIN

US envoys arrived in Berlin on Sunday morning for another round of talks intended to secure a deal to end the war in Ukraine. US President Donald Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner were spotted in downtown Berlin by a photographer for the German news agency. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that Ukrainian, US and European officials will hold a series of meetings in Berlin in the coming days. "Most importantly, I will be meeting with envoys of President Trump, and there will also be meetings with our European partners, with many leaders, concerning the foundation of peace — a political agreement to end the war," Zelenskyy said in an address to the nation late Saturday. Washington has tried for months to navigate the demands of each side as Trump presses for a swift end to Russia's war and grows increasingly exasperated by delays. The search for possible compromises has run into major obstacles, including control of Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, which is mostly occupied by Russian forces, and security guarantees for Ukraine.

FULL REPORT ON P10

# MP rolls out Kamdhenu dairy scheme with land, loan and subsidy terms

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ Bhopal

CHIEF MINISTER DR MOHAN YADAV SAID THE SCHEME IS MEANT TO MAKE LIVESTOCK OWNERS MORE SELF-RELIANT

Chief Minister Dr Mohan Yadav on Sunday said the State's new Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar Kamdhenu Yojana is aimed at lifting milk production and strengthening rural incomes by supporting larger, better-managed dairy units.

Dr Yadav said the scheme is meant to make livestock owners more self-reliant and push the dairy sector towards organised, professional operations. The State continues to depend on small herds with low yields, and officials say the new programme is designed to give farmers and rural youth a clearer route into stable, modern dairy enterprises.

The plan allows applicants to set up a unit of 25 milch animals, with the option to expand to as many as eight units, or 200 animals, if they meet the land requirements. Each unit is estimated to cost between ₹36 lakh and ₹42 lakh and must contain a single breed of cattle or buffalo.

A minimum of 3.50 acres of agricultural land is required for each unit. The state says the land is necessary for housing animals, growing fodder and running routine operations. Joint family land is allowed if all members agree, and the land requirement increases proportionately for larger projects.

The Government is offering subsidies to ease the financial burden. SC and ST beneficiaries will get 33 per cent of the project cost, while others will receive up to 25 per cent. The remaining amount will be financed through bank loans released in four instalments tied to on-ground progress.

Applications are being accepted online on a first-come, first-served basis. Preference will be given to livestock owners who already supply milk to cooperatives and dairy unions. Required documents include Aadhaar, residence proof, land records, bank details, caste certificate, where applicable and training certificates. Further guidance is available on the Animal Husbandry and Dairy department portal and at district veterinary offices.

# Congress seeks ouster of BJP, accuses it of 'Vote Chori'

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE** ■ New Delhi

(L-R) Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, party President Mallikarjun Kharge and party MP Sonia Gandhi hold copies of the Constitution of India during the rally at Ramlila Maidan PTI

Congress on Sunday launched a scathing attack on the BJP, saying those indulging in "vote chori" are *gaddars* and need to be removed from power to save voting rights and the Constitution.

Addressing the party's *Vote Chor Gaddi Chhod* rally at the Ramlila Maidan, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said the ideology of RSS's Mohan Bhagwat, M S Golwalkar and Manusmriti will destroy the country, and only the ideology of Congress can save it.

Top Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi, Sachin Pilot, Himachal Pradesh chief minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, Telangana CM Revanth Reddy, amongst others, also addressed the massive rally held in the national Capital.

Addressing the party's 'Vote Chor Gaddi Chhod' rally at the Ramlila Maidan here, he launched a scathing attack on the Election Commission and mentioned the names of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, and Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi to allege that they were working for the BJP.

Rahul Gandhi claimed that the BJP transferred ₹10,000 during elections, but the poll panel did not take any action against them. "In this fight between truth and untruth, the Election Commission is working with the BJP Government," he said. "(Prime Minister Narendra) Modi brought a new law to give immunity to EC; we will change this law retroactively and act against election commissioners," Rahul said, asserting that it may take time, but truth will ultimately win.

"We will stand with *satya* (truth) and will remove the Narendra Modi-RSS Government from power. They have *satta* (power), and they indulge in 'vote chori'," the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha said.

CONTINUED ON >> P4

# Messi to meet PM Modi

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ New Delhi/Mumbai

Lionel Messi, Rodrigo De Paul and Luis Suarez arriving for the GOAT India tour 2025, at Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai PTI

Lionel Messi, the Argentine football icon, is scheduled to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi at his official residence in Delhi on Monday. This meeting will be part of Messi's Delhi leg, following his controversial trip to Kolkata on Saturday, a successful visit to Hyderabad, and an eventful stay in Mumbai on Sunday.

Messi will also meet the Chief Justice of India and the Army Chief at the residence of Rajya Sabha MP Praful Patel, a former president of the All India Football Federation (AIFF).

The final day of the GOAT India Tour will also feature Messi interacting with two Indian cricketers at the Ferozshah Kotla Stadium.

Messi will arrive in the national Capital at 10.45 am, and after a 50-minute 'Meet and Greet' session at a city hotel, he will head to the PM's residence, where he will spend 20 minutes interacting with Modi.

CONTINUED ON >> P4

### ORGANISER DUTTA SENT TO 14-DAY CUSTODY

**Kolkata:** A city court in Kolkata has sent Satadru Datta, the chief organiser of the Lionel Messi football event at Salt Lake stadium, to 14-day police custody. Datta was arrested by the Bidhannagar police on Saturday for alleged mismanagement of the event. The chaos erupted at the stadium a day ago, and Datta was arrested at Kolkata airport while seeing off Messi and his entourage to Hyderabad.

During the hearing, Datta's counsel questioned the basis of the arrest, stating that his client had been "victimised". The State counsel said the organiser of the event was responsible for crowd movement, and his team members moved around on the pitch in such a way that spectators could not see the World Cup-winning captain of Argentina from the galleries.

West Bengal Governor CV Ananda Bose visited the venue on Sunday for a first-hand inspection and called for a judicial inquiry. Bose also urged the Government to frame Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for managing such events in future. The governor, accompanied by Chief Secretary Manoj Pant and senior police officials, " visited the venue for a first-hand assessment of the stadium chaos.

CONTINUED ON >> P4

# Centre seeks more women, SC/ST officers in key positions

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ New Delhi

For an adequate representation of women and SC, ST in the Government machinery, the Centre has asked States to nominate women officers and those from the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) for appointment in key posts on central deputation.

In a communique issued to the chief secretaries of all State Governments, the Personnel Ministry sought nominations of only those officers who are not likely to be recalled by them on the grounds of having availed promotion for at least two years.

The sponsored officers are to be appointed on deputation to the posts under the Central Staffing Scheme (CSS) and for the posts of Chief Vigilance Officers (CVOs) in Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) and other central Government organisations. CVOs act as a distant arm of the Central Vigilance Commission to check corruption in Government departments.

"Sufficient names of women and SC and ST Officers may be sponsored so that adequate representation can be provided to them," read the communique dated December 10. Details of any inquiry/complaints/proceedings which may affect the vigilance status of the applicant may also be forwarded, it said.

In the letter, the Ministry said that such movement of officers from the States to the Centre is crucial for building up the capabilities and contributing towards developing State perspectives in the Government of India or national perspective in the State at the decision-making levels.

"I would also like to draw your attention to the Central Deputation Reserve (CDR) data for IAS officers, which determines the extent to which officers could be sent on deputation to the Government. Proper cadre management requires an adequate number of officers to be deputed to the Centre under the Central Staffing Scheme," it said.

This will also ensure that every eligible officer has an opportunity to serve at the Centre at least once at the middle management level, the communique said.

CONTINUED ON >> P4

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# CM opens new MYH project, unveils major plans for Indore

PNS ■ Indore

Chief Minister Dr Mohan Yadav on Sunday laid the foundation for a new 1,450-bed hospital at Indore's Maharaja Yashwantrao Hospital campus and later chaired a marathon review that cleared a raft of projects aimed at transforming the city into one of the country's leading metropolitan centres.

Dr Yadav said the state's healthcare system had seen sustained improvements for more than a decade, supported by the Centre and boosted by the opening of new medical and nursing colleges.

He said the new MY Hospital block, to be built at a cost of Rs 773.07 crore, would strengthen care for patients. He asked construction agencies to prioritise quality, noting that the hospital already provides free bone-marrow and kidney transplants.

The new building will house major departments including medicine, surgery, orthopaedics, paediatric surgery, paediatrics, neurosurgery, ENT, dental, dermatology, ophthalmology and mother-and-child care. The ward block alone will cost Rs 528 crore. A 550-bed nursing hostel, a mini auditorium, a public parking facility, solar installations and upgrades to water supply and sewage systems are planned under separate allocations.

Ministers Kailash Vijayvargiya, Tulsiram Silawat and Narendra Shivaji Patel, along with MPs, MLAs and senior officials, attended the ceremony.

Dr Yadav also chaired a high-level meeting at the Brilliant Convention Center to draw up a long-term framework for the city's growth. He said the decisions taken would set a decisive direction for the future of Indore and expressed confidence that the projects would be executed on schedule.

A major decision involved redesigning the metro corridor, with the state agreeing to bear about Rs 900 crore to shift its main sections underground after persistent technical challenges with revised routes. Dr Yadav said the choice was made with the city's future in mind to ensure maximum public benefit and improve traffic management.

Work on an elevated corridor - described as essential to easing congestion - is expected to begin soon. After the dismantling of the BRTS, the Chief Minister ordered a fresh, integrated mobility plan backed by new scientific traffic surveys to address transport needs for the next 25 to 50 years.

The meeting cleared a proposal to expand the Indore Metropolitan Region to around 14,000 sq km by integrating Ujjain, Dewas, Dhar, Ratlam, Nagda, Badnawar and Shajapur-Maksi. Dr Yadav said the region's rail connectivity, the international airport, proposed airports at Ujjain and Ratlam, and expressway and industrial-corridor links would help Indore emerge as a national hub for trade, industry and tourism.

The state will also pursue an international-level startup park and convention centre near MR-10. Modelled on Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi, the convention centre - estimated to cost Rs 550-600 crore - will be developed through the PPP model with a three-year completion target. Long-pending redevelopment of the 17.5-hectare Hukumchand Mill site was also reviewed.

A plan to redevelop 12 hectares of PWD land at Palasia was approved, with emphasis on protecting green cover and open spaces. Officials were asked to accelerate efforts to make Indore a "future-ready" city through expanded CCTV coverage, advanced IT infrastructure, smart traffic systems and the rollout of 270 e-buses from March under the PM e-Bus programme.

The Chief Minister said the city would work towards becoming slum-free, with 150,000 permanent homes to be built under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana within three years. DPRs for ten locations are in preparation.

Dr Yadav said Indore would also see new sports infrastructure including AstroTurf grounds and modern facilities to host national tournaments. He asked universities to evolve into employment-generating institutions and highlighted opportunities in food processing, medical tourism, wellness, IT and industry across the Malwa region. He said the PM MITRA Park at Badnawar would be a milestone in industrial growth.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav performs the bhoomi pujan of the new hospital building of Maharaja Yashwantrao Hospital in Indore, Madhya Pradesh on Sunday. Pioneer photo

## Bride halts wedding before pheras

**Bhopal:** Gwalior police on Sunday began probing a complaint that a bride called off her wedding moments before the pheras, sending the barat home after what had started as an entirely routine ceremony. The incident occurred on December 11 in the Janak Ganj police station area of Beldar Pura.

According to the complaint filed by groom Prashant Kushwaha and his father Lotan Kushwaha of Nadariya Mata Guda, the marriage had been fixed for about one and a half years with the daughter of Dharmjeet Kothari Kushwaha of Beldar Pura. Police said the barat reached the bride's home as planned, and the varmala ceremony was completed without any sign of trouble. But when Prashant proceeded to the mandap for the pheras, the bride did not appear.

The complaint states the bride's relatives told the groom's side that Prashant was physically disabled in his legs and the marriage could not move forward. The groom's family denied the claim and said no such concern had ever been raised during the long engagement period.

The situation allegedly escalated when the bride's family surrounded the groom's relatives and demanded Rs 10 lakh. Lotan Kushwaha said he had already provided jewellery, clothes and customary offerings but arranged Rs 9 lakh under pressure. A written panchnama documented the exchange. Even then, the bride's family allegedly refused to send her to the mandap.

The complaint further alleges that the wedding photographer was detained and pressured to delete photos and videos.

Police said an inquiry is under way and statements are being recorded.

## Air India adds extra Bengaluru flight

**Bhopal:** Air India will operate an additional Bengaluru-Bhopal-Bengaluru flight from December 14 to December 19 to handle increased festive-season and business travel demand. The temporary service is expected to ease passenger load on a route that already sees heavy traffic.

The airline said flight AI 3391 will leave Bengaluru at 2:30 pm, while the return flight AI 3392 will depart Bhopal at 3:05 pm. Officials said the extra service will boost connectivity at Raja Bhoj Airport during a period of higher bookings.

IndiGo currently runs two daily flights on the route, rising to three on weekends. With Air India's added service, passengers will have access to four flights a day for six days, improving seat availability and travel options.

## 20 students injured as school bus falls into river in Vidisha, probe launched

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

A school bus carrying 49 children on an excursion to Sanchi plunged off a culvert into a river in Vidisha district on Sunday, injuring about 20 students, authorities said. The trip had been organised as part of an educational outing planned by the school.

Police said the bus from Ashoknagar district lost control near Johad and fell into the river. Four staff members were also on board. Villagers rushed to the scene and helped pull children and teachers from the vehicle before police and district officials arrived to launch rescue and relief work. Panic briefly spread as people struggled to reach the partially submerged bus.

The injured were taken by ambulance to the Ganj Basoda hospital, where doctors said all were in stable condition. Several students were kept under observation as a precaution.

Officials said a preliminary inquiry found that the bus was operating without valid insurance, a fitness certificate, or a tour or transport permit. Investigators also said the driver had been speeding and was under the influence of alcohol. He fled after the crash.

Police said a detailed investigation is underway and that efforts to trace the driver have intensified. Officials said the incident has raised concerns about gaps in administrative oversight that allowed the vehicle to operate without proper documents, prompting calls for stricter checks.

## 235 students set blindfold record

**Indore:** A group of 235 students performed blindfolded activities for three hours on Sunday at Modern International School, earning a World Book of Records entry, organisers said.

The "Quantum Brain Parade" featured skating, cycling, cricket, basketball, chess, carrom and rifle shooting, all completed with eyes fully covered. Students also read books, recognised colours and identified currency notes.

Officials from the World Book of Records inaugurated the event and later issued provisional certificates and medals on site. School leaders said the feat demonstrated the impact of the school's Midbrain Activation Programme.

They said the achievement reflected sharp improvements in students' concentration, intuition and mental clarity. Parents and guests attended the demonstration.

## City's air stays moderate, but PM pollution raises health concerns

**Bhopal:** The state capital ended Sunday with a citywide Air Quality Index of 149, a level that experts say can cause discomfort for people with asthma, heart disease or chronic lung problems. The 9.05 pm update placed the city in the 'moderate' category - but several neighbourhoods recorded significantly poorer air.

The Paryavaran Parisar station reported the highest pollution with an AQI of 194, driven almost entirely by fine particulate matter. PM2.5 averaged 88.17 micrograms per cubic metre, pushing the sub-index to 194 and making it the day's most prominent pollutant. PM10 also remained elevated at 178.46.

At the Collectorate Office, the AQI settled at 124. PM10 dominated again, with concentrations at 136.20. PM2.5 levels reached 62.36, and other pollutants such as ozone, carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides stayed in the moderate range.

TT Nagar reported an AQI of 160, with ozone emerging as the lead pollutant. The ozone sub-index touched 160, while PM10 and PM2.5 stayed high at 163.28 and 60.23.

Even as pollution levels rose across monitoring stations, no visible pollution control measures were evident in the state capital. Firewood was being used widely at wedding venues over the weekend, adding to winter emissions. There have also been no recent reports of significant action against polluters, construction sites or debris-generating activities, despite the season's typical rise in particulate matter.

Doctors say most healthy people will not feel immediate effects at an AQI of 149, but sensitive groups may experience discomfort.

Madhya Pradesh Chief MInister Mohan Yadav during his visit at Organic Market in Indore, Madhya Pradesh on Sunday. Pioneer photo

## Minister, mayor open eye camp, Suryavanshi launches civic work

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Minister of State Krishna Gaur and Mayor Malti Rai on Sunday inaugurated a free eye camp at Maa Aashapura Darbar in Koh-e-Fiza, while Bhopal Municipal Corporation chairman Kishan Suryavanshi launched separate civic works at MANIT Square.

Officials said the eye camp marked the start of the 41st "Netra Jyoti Yagya," a long-standing community outreach initiative.

Gaur and Rai lit a ceremonial lamp in the presence of Geeta Mata, head of Maa Aashapura Darbar, as residents, volunteers and civic representatives joined the event. Large numbers of citizens attended, including Rajesh Hingorani, Manoj Rathore and zone president Vinita Soni.

Meanwhile BMC chairman Kishan Suryavanshi performed the ceremonial groundbreaking for a set of civic projects planned near MANIT Square, including the construction of a boundary wall and beautification of the area around the Nursing Bhagwan Temple.

Officials said the projects, estimated to cost about Rs 5.15 lakh, are aimed at improving the appearance and utility of the busy junction.

Suryavanshi said the corporation was committed to enhancing public convenience and ensuring the city's overall growth. He told residents that efforts were under way to keep civic works continuous and that no slowdown would be allowed in initiatives aimed at improving neighbourhood facilities.

Before the bhoomipujan, Suryavanshi offered prayers and inspected the surrounding area. Former councillor Vandana Parihar and a large number of community members attended the programme.

## Walkathon sees record turnout to promote organ donation drive

PNS ■ Indore

A walkathon in Indore aimed at raising awareness about anaemia and organ donation drew record participation on Sunday, with more than 6,100 people joining the event, organisers said.

The Grand Walkathon 2025 began at 7 am from Nehru Stadium, moved through Palasia Square and returned to the stadium. The orgxnisers certified the turnout after verifying 6,128 participants through drone footage.

They said the walk saw participation from citizens, students, doctors, security personnel and members of social organisations. Nine transplant recipients and seven athletes who represented India at the World Transplant Games in Germany also took part, appealing for greater awareness of the shortage of organ donors.

Mitasha Foundation founder Alok Singh said the initiative sought to highlight the need for organ donation and underline the health risks posed by anaemia. He said lasting impact is possible only when the community participates fully.

MP Shankar Lalwani said healthy citizens strengthen the nation and stressed that tackling anaemia is critical for the country's youth. Mayor Pushyamitra Bhargava said Indore has consistently shown leadership in civic and social campaigns.

More than 70 organisations set up registration booths, health check-ups and anaemia screening counters. Organisers said the effort underscored that organ donation can transform lives and that preventing anaemia is essential for building a healthier society.

## Digvijaya calls for tighter scrutiny as Congress firms up stance on SIR

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

The Congress party on Sunday held a key meeting at its national headquarters in New Delhi to deliberate on voter list verification, with the party stressing the need for transparency and accuracy in the electoral process to strengthen Indian democracy.

Addressing the meeting, senior Congress leader and former Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijaya Singh outlined the importance of systematic voter list verification and presented a detailed roadmap for its effective implementation at the grassroots level. He said free, fair and transparent elections form the foundation of democracy and that any lapse or irregularity in voter lists cannot be accepted. Singh emphasised that ensuring every eligible citizen's name is correctly included in the electoral rolls is essential to protect the integrity of elections.

The meeting was attended by Congress general secretary in charge of Madhya Pradesh Harish Chaudhary, Pradesh Congress Committee president Jitu Patwari, Leader of the Opposition in the Madhya Pradesh Assembly Umang Singhar, Telangana in-charge and former MP Meenakshi Natarajan, national secretary and Madhya Pradesh co-in charge Chandan Yadav, and Usha Naidu, among other senior leaders.

Party leaders discussed the verification process in detail, focusing on coordination between the organisation's national, state and district units. It was decided that voter list verification would be carried out with greater seriousness and accountability at all levels of the party to ensure that no eligible voter is left out and any discrepancies are identified and addressed in time.

The Congress leadership underlined that the exercise is aimed at preventing irregularities in electoral rolls and safeguarding the voting rights of citizens. Leaders agreed that a structured and coordinated approach is necessary to monitor the process on the ground and to raise concerns with election authorities wherever required.

The party reiterated its commitment to protecting democratic institutions, upholding constitutional values and strengthening citizens' right to vote. Congress leaders said the organisation would continue to work proactively to ensure transparency in elections and to reinforce public confidence in the democratic process.

## Minor suffers severe burns after touching high-tension line

PNS ■ Indore

An eight-year-old boy suffered severe burn injuries after coming into contact with a high-tension power line while chasing a kite in Indore's Chhatri Pura area on Sunday, police said.

The child, identified as Gudiya, was first taken to the district hospital after residents spotted him injured near Lakdi Mandi. Police said he had sustained burns on nearly half of his body.

Residents alleged there was a delay in treatment at the district hospital and that doctors advised an immediate referral to MY Hospital. With hospital staff reportedly unavailable at the time, two locals, Sandeep Pal and Lalu, placed the child on a stretcher and carried him to the ambulance themselves.

The child's family was informed later and reached MY Hospital, where he is undergoing treatment. Police said preliminary inquiries suggest he may have suffered an electric shock after coming too close to the overhead line while running after a kite. An investigation is underway to determine the exact circumstances.

## Karni Sena protest halts traffic on Super Corridor for two hours

PNS ■ Indore

Karni Sena workers blocked part of Indore's Super Corridor for nearly two hours on Sunday after police stopped them from moving ahead with a planned rally, prompting leaders to sit on a dharna near TCS Square until early evening.

The protest began around 4 pm when Karni Sena chief Jeevan Singh Sherpur and other office-bearers were prevented from proceeding towards Vijay Nagar. The group was travelling along the route as part of preparations for its Jan Kranti Nyay Andolan Yatra, scheduled to begin in Harda on December 21.

Sherpur later alleged that they were halted because of a programme involving the Chief Minister, saying officers first asked them to wait for half an hour and then continued to hold them back, leading the group to occupy the road in protest.

Traffic police diverted vehicles to the service road as one side of the Super Corridor remained clogged with parked two-wheelers and Karni Sena vehicles, slowing movement across the area during peak evening hours. Officials restored traffic on the main carriageway after the sit-in concluded at 6 pm.

Assistant Commissioner of Police Rubina Mizwan of Hira Nagar said officers intervened because the organisers attempted to start their rally ahead of the permitted time window. She said the group had formal approval to hold the rally between 3 pm and 5 pm but sought to proceed earlier, leading police to stop the movement of vehicles and initiate talks with the leaders.

Throughout the sit-in, Sherpur addressed his supporters and at one point urged them to bring blankets and food for ten people, signalling that the protest might stretch late into the night. By around 6 pm, he announced that the dharna would end, and workers began dispersing from the spot.

The demonstration prompted posters and banners to appear across parts of the Super Corridor, and police briefly blocked Karni Sena vehicles while negotiations were under way. By the time the protest wrapped up, authorities had cleared the route and normal traffic resumed.

Chief Minister Dr Mohan Yadav called on Union Minister for Home and Cooperatives Amit Shah in New Delhi on Sunday.

## Bank of Baroda named best bank in India by The Banker

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Bank of Baroda has been named Best Bank in India at The Banker's Bank of the Year Awards 2025, the Financial Times-owned publication announced.

The award recognises the public sector lender's financial performance, digital transformation efforts and improvements in customer experience, along with its expanding leadership role in India's banking sector.

Managing director and CEO Dr Debadatta Chand said the honour validated the bank's sustained growth and ongoing transformation. He said the recognition reflected customer trust and staff commitment, adding that the institution was focused on strengthening its capabilities as a future-ready bank contributing meaningfully to India's progress.

The annual awards recognise global financial institutions for excellence across categories, with national winners selected on criteria including financial metrics, strategic initiatives, technological innovation, sustainability programmes and service delivery for retail and corporate customers.

Founded in 1908, Bank of Baroda is among India's largest commercial banks and is majority-owned by the Union government. It serves around 180 million customers across 15 countries through about 65,000 service touchpoints and digital platforms.

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# Water cannons push back Brahmin protesters

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Police resorted to water cannons to push back Brahmin community protesters in the state capital on Sunday after jostling demonstrators pushed through multiple barricades while attempting to march to the chief minister's residence.
The protest began at Roshanpura Square, where members of the community gathered in the morning under the leadership of Gwalior-based advocate Anil Mishra. The crowd raised slogans and demanded the arrest and dismissal of IAS officer Santosh Verma over remarks they say insulted Brahmin daughters.
Police attempted to block their movement, but protesters pushed through the first cordon and advanced to Banganga Square, where a four-layer barricade had been set up. Officers issued repeated warnings, but the crowd continued to push forward, prompting police to use water cannons to prevent further movement.
Several elderly people and women suffered minor injuries in the jostling. Ambulances and medical teams at the site provided first aid, and additional police forces were deployed as tensions rose. Protesters were later detained, taken in police vehicles to Ratibad and dispersed.
The demonstration came as the state government confirmed it had sent a proposal to the Centre seeking action against Verma. A retired senior bureaucrat said the proposal may be returned because it does not clearly state whether the government seeks Verma's dismissal or cancellation of his promotion.
The proposal, sent to the Department of Personnel and Training on December 12, cites memorandums from organisations and refers to social tension but does not spell out the legal grounds required for dismissal.
Several organisations, including the Mantralaya Officers and Employees Association, Akhil Bharatiya Brahmin Samaj and the Brahmin Regiment, welcomed the move but said it is only a first step. Leaders said their agitation will continue until concrete action is taken.
Verma has defended his remarks, saying a two-second clip from a 27-minute speech was circulated out of context and that he has already expressed regret publicly.

## UP bus overturns in Shivpuri, 15 hurt

**Bhopal:** Fifteen people were injured on Sunday night when a UP-registered passenger bus overturned near a petrol pump in Shivpuri's Bairad area. Police said two passengers, Mohar Singh and Pankaj Goswami, are in serious condition.
Bairad police station in-charge Suresh Sharma reached the spot and sent the injured to Bairad Hospital, from where seven were referred to the district hospital and medical college.
Passengers said the bus, running about half an hour late, was being driven at high speed to make up time. As it exited Bairad, it lost balance and toppled. The bus, bearing number UP 81 DT 3004, was travelling from Gwalior to Sheopur and onward to Jaipur. Police have begun an investigation.

Students in preparation for an attempt to make India's longest sandwich, at Institute of Hotel Management, Catering Technology and Applied Nutrition, in Bhopal on Sunday. Around 100 students and other staff members participate in a mega culinary event to set a new benchmark of preparing a 270 ft long sandwich in the hospitality training. Pioneer photo

Noted singer Jaspinder Narula performs at a cultural event titled 'Gamak' during Tansen Samaroh in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh on Sunday. Pioneer photo

## Helicopter bookings rise as flyers head to Bandhavgarh, Kanha

PNS ■ Jabalpur

Bookings under the Madhya Pradesh government's PM Shri Helicopter Scheme are climbing in the Jabalpur division, with nearly 100 tourists using the service since its rollout last month. The scheme is meant to boost tourism by connecting Jabalpur with major wildlife destinations.
A senior Fly Ola manager said the operator has completed about 25 flights so far and has logged roughly 85 advance bookings for the Christmas and New Year holidays. He said demand was slow in the early days but has strengthened as travellers finalise year-end plans.
No private jet bookings have been received yet, though the company expects one or two requests during the festive period.
Bookings open on Mondays and Tuesdays from 8:30 am, and flights depart at 10 am depending on demand. One helicopter is currently based in Jabalpur, and separate aircraft are arranged for private charters.
Regular flights run on Mondays, Tuesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays on the Jabalpur-Bandhavgarh-Kanha route. The Jabalpur-Bandhavgarh leg takes about one hour, while the Bandhavgarh-Kanha stretch takes around one hour and fifteen minutes. Fares begin at Rs 5,000, with the Tourism Department expecting the service to draw more domestic and international visitors in the coming weeks.

## Dense fog grips Madhya Pradesh as cold intensifies

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

**Morning fog snarls traffic statewide even as Western Disturbances soften the cold briefly**

Visibility dropped below 100 metres across large parts of Madhya Pradesh on Sunday, with several pockets reporting near-zero conditions that slowed traffic and forced commuters to drive with headlights on. The dense fog offered mixed fortunes for farmers, helping conserve soil moisture but raising worries about frost damage to sensitive crops.
The India Meteorological Department said moderate sunshine would bring brief relief from the cold over the next three days, with no cold-wave alert in place except for Indore. Officials said two active Western Disturbances had weakened icy winds from the north, though fresh snowfall and rain in the Himalayan region are expected to tighten the chill in the state once again.
Night temperatures fell below ten degrees Celsius in twenty-five cities over the past day. Pachmarhi was the coldest at 5.2 degrees, followed by Kalyanpur in Shahdol at 5.6 degrees. Bhopal recorded seven degrees. Mandla district continued to reel under biting cold, with Sunday's minimum at 8.5 degrees and fog lifting only after sunrise.
Singrauli and Bhind saw their first dense fog of the season, with visibility in rural belts dropping to around ten metres. Vehicles in these districts, and in fog-hit Chhatarpur where visibility was fifty metres, used headlights until nearly 9 AM.
The IMD has warned of shallow to moderate fog in Gwalior, Datia, Bhind, Morena, Singrauli, Sidhi, Panna, Tikamgarh and Maihar, and moderate to dense fog in Rewa, Satna and Chhatarpur. Indore remains under a cold-wave warning.
Agriculture experts said the cold is broadly favourable for wheat and pea crops by improving yield potential and maintaining soil fertility, but excessive frost could harm peas and potatoes. Farmers have been advised to monitor fields closely and use smoke to shield crops during severe cold. Weather officials expect persistent fog during mornings and late nights, with night temperatures likely to dip further in coming days.

## IHM Bhopal assembles 269-foot sandwich, scripts world record

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Bhopal set its sights on scale Sunday as the Institute of Hotel Management assembled what it says is the world's longest sandwich, completed in 7 minutes 26 seconds.
The Limca Book of Records team monitored the attempt and has provisionally listed it, with final confirmation expected in about two to two-and-a-half months. The sandwich, nearly 8 inches wide, was arranged on a 300-foot table built for the event. Loaves measuring 24 inches were baked specially and joined with edible glue to form a continuous base.
IHM Principal Dr Rohit Sareen said the task was as much about taste as size, and the team worked to maintain flavour across the full length of the sandwich. Vegetables were cut uniformly to ensure every section tasted the same.
Students used three kinds of lettuce, capsicum, bell peppers, olives, jalapeños and multiple spreads to build the layers. Sareen said the goal was to show students that even ambitious ideas can be executed with planning and teamwork.
He said cooking is a form of service, central to hospitality training, and such exercises help students understand the responsibility of serving guests.
The event followed two months of preparation. Students were divided into six teams, each handling about 40 feet of the sandwich. Limca officials recorded the entire process on video and measured the final length before certifying the provisional record.

## 380 children screened at JPH, 158 marked for heart surgery

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

A special screening camp under the National Child Health Programme examined 380 children for heart ailments at the District JP Hospital in the state capital on Sunday, identifying 158 who require surgery. Officials said all recommended procedures will be provided free of cost.
Doctors from Bhopal division's eight districts conducted echocardiography tests with support from Shri Satya Sai Seva Organisation, Rajkot and Ahmedabad. Regional health director Neera Chaudhary, Bhopal's chief medical and health officer Manish Sharma, Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK) deputy director Nidhi Sharma and civil surgeon Sanjay Jain were present during the exercise.
National Health Mission mission director Saloni Sidana reviewed individual cases and spoke with parents about the state's health services. She said the programme plays a crucial role in the early detection of diseases, disabilities, deficiencies, developmental delays and congenital conditions in children.
Officials said all children brought to the camp had been flagged earlier by RBSK mobile teams during routine screenings at anganwadi centres and schools. Those with suspected cardiac issues were referred for echocardiography, and the children now identified will receive treatment under the programme.
The National Child Health Programme, launched in 2013, screens children from birth to 18 years for 30 common health conditions and ensures referral to district early intervention centres when required. The state provides free surgeries for congenital heart disease, cochlear implants, retinopathy of prematurity, clubfoot and cleft lip or palate without any income-based eligibility criteria.

## Fraudsters siphon off Rs 3.30 lakh

**Bhopal:** Govindpura police on Sunday registered a case against fraudsters who siphoned off Rs 3.30 lakh from a woman's bank account through a series of unauthorised Unified Payments Interface (UPI) transactions over the past month. The complaint, filed by the victim's husband, Prasann Malviya of Rachna Nagar, said his wife, Usha Malviya, who works in a private company, realised something was wrong when she began receiving repeated debit alerts on her phone. On checking her bank messages, she found that several small and large transactions had been carried out without her knowledge, totalling Rs 3.30 lakh.
Malviya first approached the Cyber Cell. After a preliminary inquiry, the case was forwarded to Govindpura police station for further investigation.

## NIT Srinagar crowned Inter-NIT faculty, staff cricket champions

**Bhopal:** NIT Srinagar won the 5th All India Inter-NIT Faculty and Staff Men's Cricket Tournament at MANIT campus on Sunday, defeating NIT Hamirpur by 10 runs in a closely fought final. The match capped four days of competition featuring 24 NITs from across the country.
NIT Srinagar elected to bat after winning the toss and put up 129 in the allotted 15 overs. Hamirpur responded with a determined chase, but disciplined bowling and sharp fielding from Srinagar kept the pressure on and ultimately sealed the win.
NIT Puducherry earlier beat NIT Jalandhar to secure third place. Officials said the level of competition reflected growing interest in inter-institutional sporting events among faculty and staff.
Senior MANIT administrators, including Director Karunesh Kumar Shukla, Registrar Gaurav Dwivedi and other deans and sports officials, presented trophies and medals at the closing ceremony. They commended the teams for their sportsmanship and praised the efficient organisation of the tournament.
Organisers said the coordinated efforts of Vijay Singh Rawat, Moirangthem Romila Devi and Akash Maurya were central to the smooth execution of the event. Volunteers managed ground preparation, logistics, team coordination and umpire assistance, helping ensure a seamless tournament that strengthened camaraderie among participating NITs.

## Youth arrested for raping minor

**Bhopal:** Piplani police on Saturday arrested a youth accused of raping a 15-year-old girl he had befriended on Instagram. The case was registered under sections of rape and the POCSO Act after the survivor informed her family.
Piplani police in charge Chandrika Yadav said the girl, a private school student, became friends with the accused, Vicky Prasad, on Instagram and later spoke to him on the phone.
Police said Vicky called her on Saturday on the pretext of meeting her and taking her for a ride. He took her to his room and allegedly raped her before fleeing. The girl returned home, told her family and then approached the police. Officers arrested the accused later that day.
In another case, Khajuri police registered a complaint from a 15-year-old girl who alleged that a relative, Vivek Giri, raped her about a week ago when she was alone at home. Police said Giri had been visiting the house for six months and had previously behaved inappropriately with her.
Khajuri police said they are searching for the accused, who is absconding. Investigations are under way in both cases.

## Outsourced bank employee booked for credit card fraud

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

Piplani police on Sunday booked an outsourced employee of the State Bank of India for allegedly duping a customer by fraudulently issuing a credit card in his name and using it for personal expenses of about Rs 1 lakh.
Police said the fraud came to light when the victim, Triveni Prasad Lodhi of Ayodhya Nagar, visited the Indrapuri branch to apply for a loan and was informed of an outstanding credit card bill linked to his name. Officials told him the unpaid dues had damaged his credit rating, making him ineligible for the loan. Lodhi said he had never received or used any credit card.
Officers said a bank inquiry later indicated that outsourced staffer Abhay Trivedi had used the card for shopping and other payments. Lodhi told police that he had visited the branch about six months ago for routine work when Trivedi persuaded him to apply for a credit card, citing attractive benefits. After collecting his documents, Trivedi allegedly entered his own mobile number in the application and later intercepted the card's delivery. Lodhi assumed the process had failed and did not follow up.
Sub-Inspector Mitesh Mujalde said a case was registered against Trivedi on Sunday based on Lodhi's complaint. He said police are tracing the accused and efforts to arrest him are underway.
The case has renewed concerns about the misuse of customer data by outsourced bank staff and highlighted the need for stronger verification in credit card issuances.

## Youth killed by brother-in-law in Khadampur village after dispute

STAFF REPORTER ■ Bhopal

A 22-year-old man died early Sunday after being stabbed repeatedly by his brother-in-law following a family dispute in Khadampur village under the Gunga police station area, police said.
The victim, identified as Abdul alias Abdullah Khan of Khadampur, was attacked late Saturday evening by his brother-in-law, Bhura Khan, a resident of Dobra village in Ratibad. According to police, Bhura had visited his in-laws' home on Saturday afternoon to take his wife back, as she had been staying with her parents for two months amid marital disagreements.
When she refused to leave, an argument broke out between Bhura and the family. Police said Bhura suspected Abdul of influencing his wife's decision and interfering in their marriage. The exchange escalated, and both men allegedly used abusive language before Bhura left the house.
Investigators said Bhura returned to Khadampur about seven hours later, travelling nearly 40 kilometres from Dobra. Armed with a knife, he confronted Abdul, who was working on his truck nearby, and stabbed him multiple times in the neck, stomach, thigh and leg.
Despite several people being present, no one intervened, police said. Family members took Abdul to Hamidia Hospital, where he died during treatment at 4 am on Sunday.
Gunga police station in-charge Krishna Thakur said a murder case has been registered against Bhura Khan. Raids are under way to arrest the accused, who fled after the attack.

## Energy Secretary reviews operations at key Transco facility

PNS ■ Jabalpur

Madhya Pradesh Energy Secretary Vishesh Gadhpale on Sunday reviewed operations at the State Load Dispatch Center in Nayagaon, examining real-time monitoring, grid discipline and load patterns across the state. Officials briefed him on data flows from substations, energy accounting and open-access mechanisms.
He assessed the centre's cyber security framework, which has drawn national recognition, and reviewed disaster-management preparedness, including periodic mock drills. Gadhpale also discussed power scheduling, coordination with generating stations and the challenges of integrating expanding solar capacity into the grid.
He commended the SLDC's infrastructure and 24x7 operations. MP Transco MD Sunil Tiwari, SLDC chief engineer Pradeep Sachan and senior officers were present during the visit.

# When law intervenes in love: Bhopal's marriage-promise rape cases

KISHAN SINGH RANA ■ Bhopal

Across the state capital, police stations have increasingly become the final stop for relationships that began with affection and ended in allegations of betrayal. A steady run of cases this year shows women accusing men of rape after promises of marriage fell apart, drawing the law directly into the lives of couples who once planned a shared future.
In the first week of December, Koh-e-Fiza police registered a case after a woman said a man raped her over two years while repeatedly telling her he would marry her. A few days earlier, another woman from the area said a man she met on social media exploited her under the same pretext before severing contact.
The pattern stretches across neighbourhoods. On August 19, a 25-year-old woman from Piplani told police that a man took her to Ujjain on the promise of helping her find a job and raped her, assuring her of marriage when she resisted. Police acted after she returned home following a missing person report. On July 30, a lab technician in the Kolar area accused her former partner of exploiting her for three months under the promise of marriage, only to withdraw when asked to formalise the relationship.
On July 18, police arrested a man in the Nishatpura area after a 24-year-old woman said he sexually exploited her for three years and assaulted her when she pressed him to fulfil his promise. On September 21, a mother of two in Tila Jamalpura alleged that a man known to her raped her over six months while promising marriage; police are still searching for the accused. And in Misrod, about 29 days ago, another mother of two reported that her live-in partner refused to marry her after eight years and threatened her when she raised the issue.
Police say such complaints now arrive with regularity, often following the end of personal relationships that began consensually. The frequency has intensified debate over how - and when - law should step in when romantic commitments collapse. Some residents argue it is unclear why consensual sex becomes criminal only after a couple parts ways. One man said he struggles to understand how consent is reassessed once a relationship breaks down.
Courts have repeatedly held that adults are free to engage in consensual sexual relationships. They have also ruled that a failed promise to marry does not automatically amount to rape. In Jaspal Singh Kaural v The State of NCT of Delhi, the court observed that breach of promise is not rape unless it is shown that the promise was false from the start.
Others point to the gender asymmetry in such cases. Rajat Sharma, who works in the financial sector, said Indian law allows only women to file rape complaints on the pretext of marriage. He said men cannot file similar cases because prevailing legal interpretations do not recognise them as victims of rape by women.
A look at recent cases suggests most complaints originate in urban areas or involve women who moved to the city for work. Barber Kamal Sen said cases he has seen typically involve accused men with secure jobs or strong financial backgrounds, not unemployed or extremely poor men. He said he sees no conspiracy but believes women often choose partners who offer stability.
The conversation also reflects a generational divide. Radheshyam Srivastava, a retired educationist, said earlier social customs served as safeguards to prevent relationships from reaching a point where the law becomes involved. He said adults who go against family expectations must be prepared for consequences, noting that family support often wanes once a case is filed.
Others say many cases arise not from manipulation but from social pressure. Nikita Sharma, who works in the IT sector, said complications escalate when couples face family opposition. She said a woman who leaves her family for a partner may file a complaint if he later hesitates to marry.
Experts commenting on the debate point to social and biological arguments. Though not directly tied to the legal cases, opinions in the city highlight the complex terrain in which love, family and responsibility intersect with the law.


**कार्यालय नगर पालिका परिषद बड़वानी जिला बड़वानी म.प्र.**

निविदा क्र./8460/ई-टेण्डरिंग/2025 बड़वानी दिनांक 12.12.2025

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## IN FOCUS

Workers carrying their boats to the shore after fishing at Elathur Beach in Kozhikode, Kerala PTI

# CBI charges 17 in ₹1,000 crore cyber fraud

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

The CBI has filed a chargesheet against 17 people, including four Chinese nationals, and 58 companies for their alleged roles in a transnational cyber fraud network that siphoned off over ₹1,000 crore through a sprawling web of shell entities and digital scams, officials said on Sunday.

After busting the racket in October, investigators unravelled a single, tightly coordinated syndicate that relied on an elaborate digital and financial infrastructure to run a range of frauds. These included misleading loan applications, fake investment schemes, Ponzi and multi-level marketing models, bogus part-time job offers and fraudulent online gaming platforms. According to the probe agency's final report, the group layered the flow of illicit funds through 111 shell companies, routing about ₹1,000 crore via mule accounts. One account received more than ₹152 crore in a short span.

The shell companies, the CBI said, were incorporated using dummy directors, forged or misleading documents, fake addresses and false statements of business objectives. "These shell entities were used to open bank accounts and merchant accounts with various payment gateways, enabling rapid layering and diversion of proceeds of crime," a CBI spokesperson said in a statement. Investigators traced the origins of the scam to 2020, when the country was grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic. The shell companies were allegedly incorporated at the direction of four Chinese handlers — Zou Yi, Huan Liu, Weijian Liu and Guanhua Wang.

Their Indian associates procured identity documents from unsuspecting individuals, which were then used to establish the network of shell companies and mule accounts to launder proceeds from the scams and obscure the money trail.The investigation exposed communication links and operational control that, the agency said, nailed the role of Chinese masterminds running the fraud network from abroad.

"Significantly, a UPI ID linked to the bank accounts of two Indian accused was found to be active in a foreign location as late as August 2025, conclusively establishing continued foreign control and real-time operational oversight of the fraud infrastructure from outside India," the CBI statement said.

The probe found that the racketeers employed a highly layered, technology-driven modus operandi, using Google advertisements, bulk SMS campaigns, SIM-box-based messaging systems, cloud infrastructure, fintech platforms and multiple mule bank accounts. "Each stage of the operation — from luring victims to collection and movement of funds — was deliberately structured to conceal the identities of the actual controllers and evade detection by law enforcement agencies," the spokesperson said.

The chargesheet names 17 individuals, including the four Chinese nationals, and 58 companies.

The investigation was launched on the inputs from the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) under the Ministry of Home Affairs, which flagged large-scale cheating of citizens through online investment and employment schemes, resulting in the arrest of three individuals in October.

"Though initially appearing as isolated complaints, detailed analysis by CBI revealed striking similarities in applications used, fund-flow patterns, payment gateways and digital footprints, pointing towards a common organised conspiracy," the agency said.

# Violence reported in several parts of Kerala

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Kozhikode

Violence erupted at various places across Kerala, particularly in the northern districts, following the announcement of local body election results on December 13, police said on Sunday.

In Eramala in Kozhikode district, tension prevailed throughout the Saturday night after the Indira Gandhi Bhavan, a Congress office, was allegedly attacked by CPI(M) workers.

According to an FIR registered at Edachery police station, around 200 people marched towards the Congress office carrying weapons and vandalised the building, causing damage estimated at around Rs five lakh. A statue of the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was also damaged in the attack, police said. Soon after, UDF activists gathered at the spot, further aggravating the situation.

However, with the deployment of additional police personnel, the situation was brought under control, an officer said. Police said another violent incident was reported at Marad, where stones were allegedly pelted at a UDF victory procession, leaving several people injured.

In Sultan Bathery in Wayanad district, police registered a case after a car carrying a UDF activist and his family members was allegedly attacked by around 40 CPI(M) workers, an official said. Sultan Bathery police also booked UDF activists in a separate incident for allegedly attacking a CPI(M) worker who objected to the bursting of crackers near his house, the officer added. In Panoor in Kannur district, houses of several Muslim League activists were allegedly attacked by CPI(M) workers, and vehicles parked at the houses were also damaged. According to Panoor police, the violence broke out after a UDF victory rally was allegedly stopped by CPI(M) workers armed with swords and daggers. Some UDF leaders sustained injuries in the clash.

Clashes were also reported between UDF and LDF workers at Ulikkal in Kannur district, though police intervention brought the situation under control later in the night, an officer at Ulikkal police station said.

# Honour, respect for Indians abroad were never the same before 2014, says Piyush

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Lucknow

Union Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal on Sunday said that the honour and respect Indians get abroad now were never the same before 2014. He was addressing BJP workers and leaders at a gathering in Lucknow, after announcing the name of Union Minister Pankaj Chaudhary as the state party president.

He said that before 2014 — when the BJP came to power at the Centre — the news featured corruption and major scams every day, and the law and order scenario was "very bad" in Uttar Pradesh. Addressing the attendees, he said that by making Narendra Modi the prime minister and ensuring the formation of the NDA Government with a huge majority, "you have been the witness to ('saakshi') and the facilitator of ('sutradhaar') the development spree it started". "In the journey from 2014 to 2025, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the mindset and the way of working changed. At the international level, India's identity also changed. Today, wherever we go carrying the Indian passport, the honour and respect one gets abroad as an Indian, it was never the same before 2014," Goyal said.

Union Minister Piyush Goyal, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi during the latter's election as State BJP President in Lucknow PTI

He also said the way Modi Government has made good governance its focal point, linked a developing country with development, made the spirit of 'antyodaya' reach houses in the true sense, and changed the lives of people after 2014, it is a "precedent" for the country and the world. The Union minister also listed the achievements of the Government and said it has pulled a record number of 25 crore people from poverty in 11 years. He also said that in such a short time, the country's economy became the fastest-growing economy in the world, and is on the way to becoming the third-largest economy globally. Goyal, while praising Uttar Pradesh chief minister, said Yogi Adityanath has freed the state from land mafia, sand mafia and liquor mafia in the past eight years. He has ensured good law and order and made Uttar Pradesh the second largest economy in India, which is moving towards ₹1 trillion, Goyal said.

"I feel that both leaders have worked to take India and Uttar Pradesh forward with a new thought and in a new direction, which is in front of us, and it inspires all of us," he said.

The Union minister also said that there is probably no other state that has developed so much in eight years, and there are unlimited possibilities (in the state).

He claimed that when the BJP came to power in 2017, there was an atmosphere of exodus in the state, no job avenues for people, and the mafia prevailed.

"But today, an environment has been created by which industrialists feel secure here," he said.

# Punjab polls: Congess, SAD attack AAP

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Chandigarh

Opposition parties Congress and Shiromani Akali Dal in Punjab on Sunday accused the ruling AAP of indulging in electoral malpractices during zila parishad and panchayat samiti elections and slammed the State Election Commission for "failing" to conduct polls in a fair manner.

Polling to elect members of 347 zones of 22 zila parishads and 2,838 zones of 153 panchayat samitis was held on Sunday. A total of 1.36 crore voters were eligible to cast their ballot. Punjab Congress president Warring alleged that the ruling AAP indulged in "gross and blatant electoral malpractices" during the elections, saying it showed its lack of confidence.

Warring, in a statement, said that reports from across the state said that the ruling party workers, allegedly supported by the police and administration, resorted to "booth capturing" at several places. "They have gone a step ahead of their mentors in the BJP who are known for 'vote chori'," he alleged.

The Ludhiana MP said the AAP picked up another leaf from the BJP's "vote chori" book, that of not providing voter lists to the opposition parties.

The SAD too accused the AAP of stealing the elections "in league with the State Election Commission and the Punjab Police" and demanded a judicial probe into the functioning of the state election commissioner as well as its immediate removal. Senior leaders Daljit Singh Cheema and Arshdeep Singh Kler alleged that for the first time in the history of the state, a ruling party had "captured" polling booths by using arms and weapons, and attacked opposition workers and indulged in widespread rigging.

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### Nitin Nabin to succeed Nadda

He has served as a minister in the Bihar Government multiple times and is a five-time MLA. At present, he is the PWD minister in Bihar and MLA from Bankipur in Patna.

Nadda was appointed the BJP President in January 2020 and has already completed his full term. He was granted extensions to lead the party through the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

Congratulating Nabin on his appointment, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he has distinguished himself as a "hardworking Karyakarta" and expressed confidence that his energy and dedication will strengthen the party. "He is a young and industrious leader with rich organisational experience and has an impressive record as MLA as well as Minister in Bihar for multiple terms. He has diligently worked to fulfil people's aspirations. He is known for his humble nature and grounded style of working. I am confident that his energy and dedication will strengthen our Party in the times to come. Congratulations to him on becoming the BJP National Working President," PM Narendra Modi said on social media.

Earlier in the day, Chaudhary's announcement as UP BJP chief by Union Minister Piyush Goyal was made in the presence of UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and deputy chief ministers Keshav Prasad Maurya and Brajesh Pathak. Pankaj Chaudhary will be the 17th chief of UP BJP.

Yogi Adityanath said Pankaj Chaudhary's election to the BJP's State president's post would give fresh momentum to the party and the Government in the State. The chief minister exhorted party workers to strengthen the organisation at the booth level for the 2027 Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls, and make full use of the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. He described the exercise as an opportunity to "strengthen democracy". He said large gaps had emerged in the voter list following the revision.

Chaudhary had filed his nomination for the post on Saturday and was the sole candidate in the fray. Goyal presented Pankaj Chaudhary with his certificate of election. At the programme, Sangathan Parv, Goyal called the BJP the world's largest political organisation, and said the global community is astonished by its disciplined and democratic functioning.

Goyal also announced the names of the party's newly elected national council members, whose numbers ran up to 120, and included Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Modi represents Varanasi, while Adityanath represents Gorakhpur. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh is from Lucknow, Maurya from Prayagraj, and Pathak from Unnao.

Other members of the national council include Bhupendra Singh Chaudhary (Sambhal), Smriti Irani (Sultanpur), Dr Mahendra Nath Pandey (Varanasi), Surya Pratap Shahi (Salempur), Swatantra Dev Singh (Banda), and Dr Ramapati Ram Tripathi (Gorakhpur). A seven-time Lok Sabha MP from the Maharajganj constituency, Pankaj Chaudhary, belongs to the Kurmi community, categorised under Other Backwards Classes (OBC). He is considered a close confidant of Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. Maurya said the 2027 UP Assembly election is the next major challenge for the party and asserted that the BJP would secure an overwhelming victory under Chaudhary's leadership.

### Centre seeks more women, SC/ST officers...

Further, it is requested to ensure that an officer, "once placed on the offer list," continues to be available for consideration throughout the year, it said. The Ministry said withdrawal of the name of an officer, after his or her name has been recommended, may result in five years of debarment from central deputation, including foreign postings.

"The Government of India has been following a policy of debarring an officer for five years if he/she fails to join the central deputation as per orders of DoPT (Department of Personnel and Training), either on personal grounds or the refusal of the cadre to relieve him.

"It may be noted that withdrawal of the name of an officer after a panel has been recommended by the Civil Services Board results in debarment for five years," said the communique issued by Manisha Saxena, Establishment Officer and Additional Secretary, DoPT.

It also asked them to ensure the names of officers debarred from central deputation should not be forwarded for appointments. The DoPT said the nomination process for posts under the CSS, CVO positions in CPSEs, and other organisations will be routed through a dedicated portal from January 1, 2026.

The Government usually invites nominations every year to fill key posts, such as joint secretaries, directors, deputy secretaries, and CVOs. A similar communique has been sent to secretaries of all Central Government departments to recommend officers on central deputation.

### Congress seeks ouster of BJP, accuses it of Vote...

Kharge, who claimed that he did not go to Karnataka to attend a family medical emergency and gave priority to the people's demand, alleged that the BJP-RSS people are engaged in efforts to finish off the Constitution.

"In the name of Hindutva, these people want to enslave the poor again. But we must remember that the Congress got Independence for the country, Modi-Shah were not even born at that time. These people talk against Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi and B R Ambedkar; they sow a rift of ideas between Patel and Nehru, but we will not allow it," he said.

"On the other hand, there is vote chori. These people are 'gaddars', you will have to remove these gaddars. If you want to protect yourself, remove these gaddars. For that purpose, Rahul Gandhi walked throughout the country BJP people are 'dramebaaz', they only believe in their own propaganda," Kharge said.

Noting that some BJP people raised the issue of Rahul Gandhi going abroad, Kharge said when Parliament is on, Prime Minister (Narendra) Modi goes abroad and does not come to the House to give answers. "These gaddars will have to be removed. Will you remove them?" Kharge asked the gathering. "They stole our Vande Mataram, so don't trust these thieves," Kharge said, as he urged people to strengthen Rahul Gandhi's hand in his fight for the citizens.

Priyanka challenged the BJP to win a fair election on the ballot paper and asserted that the election commissioners would have to answer to the country one day as to how they "conspired" to take away people's voting rights and made every step of the poll process "suspicious".

Priyanka said the country will never forget the three names -- Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi -- as no matter how much efforts are made to protect them, one day they will have to answer how they "conspired and attempted to take away" voting rights of the people. All institutions have been made to bend before the Government, she alleged.

### Messi to meet PM Modi

His next stop will be the residence of an MP, where he is also set to meet the Argentine Ambassador to India, Mariano Agustin Caucino, besides CJI Justice Surya Kant and Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi.

The chief of the Enforcement Directorate, Rahul Navin, is also likely to be part of the select gathering at the MP's house, which will also comprise a few top Government officials. After he meets with the VVIPs, Messi's convoy will leave for the Ferozshah Kotla Stadium, where a few programmes are lined up.

At 3:30 pm, Messi is scheduled to enter the stadium via the walkway leading to the pitch, where cars will be waiting to take him directly to the airport after the GOAT concert ends. He will receive a grand welcome with music, then head to a small soccer field where Indian celebrities are playing a match. Messi will greet the players and take a group photo with the teams. A football clinic for 22 children is scheduled from 3:55 pm to 4:15 pm. Afterwards, he will move to the centre of the field, where two Indian cricketers will present him with a gift, and he will give them two pre-signed jerseys in return.

Lionel Messi arrived in Mumbai on Sunday under "World Cup-level" security measures, marking the second day of his four-city 'GOAT India Tour 2025'. He was accompanied by Inter Miami teammates Luis Suarez and Rodrigo de Paul as he reached the iconic Wankhede Stadium for the main event of the tour. Mumbai Police put in place stringent security arrangements, including restrictions on carrying water bottles, metal objects and coins inside the venues, while watchtowers have also been set up to monitor the crowd. Messi had arrived in India in the wee hours of Saturday, but the opening leg of the tour in Kolkata quickly descended into chaos later in the day due to poor crowd management and security lapses. However, his evening programme in the Hyderabad leg stood in stark contrast to the mayhem in Kolkata, proceeding smoothly and concluding on a positive note.

### Delhi-NCR chokes, GRAP Stage IV curbs imposed

Colleges and higher educational institutions have also been told to reduce physical attendance. Offices and private establishments in Delhi will have to operate with only 50 per cent of their staff strength in line with the existing government orders, while the GRAP Stage III and IV are in force. The State Governments of NCR have been asked to consider similar work-from-home arrangements to cut down on vehicular emissions.

It also ordered an immediate ban on outdoor sports and physical activities in Delhi-NCR. By an order, the Commission expressed concern that despite a landmark SC order dated 19th November, some schools and institutions continue to hold sports in open areas. Such activities seriously expose people, especially children, to health risks.

According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), Delhi's overall AQI stood at 458 at 2 pm on December 14, placing the city deep in the severe category. This came after the 24-hour average AQI stood at 431 at 4 pm on Saturday.

Under the most stringent stages of GRAP, authorities have completely banned BS-III petrol and BS-IV diesel four-wheelers in Delhi and key NCR districts — Gurugram, Faridabad, Ghaziabad and Gautam Buddha Nagar. Entry of trucks into Delhi has been banned, except for those carrying essential goods or running on cleaner fuels like CNG, LNG, electric or BS VI diesel. All construction and demolition work has been banned across the NCR. Health experts warned of a "severe" air quality that can affect the health of even healthy individuals and can badly deteriorate respiratory and cardiac diseases. Many hospitals complained about the influx of patients with complaints of shortness of breath, irritation in the eyes and persistent cough.

The CAQM attributed the sudden spike in pollution principally to unfavourable meteorological conditions rather than a sharp rise in emissions. The calm winds, shifting wind directions, and increased moisture levels due to a weak western disturbance have resulted in poor dispersion of pollutants and formation of dense smog, the Commission said.

The authorities have been directed to scale up the ground-level activities, like mechanical road sweeping, timely disposal of dust from roads and water-sprinkling systems, and to take strict action against open burning of waste, especially at sites belonging to land owned by the Delhi Development Authority.

Officials said that the air quality is expected to remain severe over the next few days with marginal improvement unless the weather conditions change.

### Organiser Dutta sent to 14-day custody

He also said all those responsible for the chaos must be arrested and the organiser must immediately refund ticket prices to spectators.

The police said they were also investigating how bottled water and beverages, which are banned items during such events, were allowed to be sold inside the stadium premises. Two cases have been registered in connection with the stadium chaos, and the investigation is underway, the officer said. "We have prepared a list of people who will be summoned. CCTV footage will be reviewed, and those responsible will be arrested," he said, adding that police will also interrogate vendors who were in the stadium during the event.

Waving slippers in their hands, BJP supporters staged a protest outside the court when Datta was taken there. What was supposed to be a marquee football spectacle turned into widespread violence and disorder at the stadium after Messi's brief appearance, his first at the venue since 2011, left large sections of the crowd frustrated. They failed to catch a glimpse of their superstar despite having travelled from far and wide and paying hefty sums for tickets.

## Amitabh Bachchan's ancestral village to get major facelift

Amitabh Bachchan's ancestral Babu Patti village in UP's Pratapgarh district is all set to get a facelift as a Maharashtra-based NGO has planned a series of development projects.

## Tamil kings, leaders get due recognition: VP Radhakrishnan

Vice President CP Radhakrishnan on Sunday lauded efforts to recognise and honour Tamil kings, leaders and freedom fighters who had "not received due recognition earlier". He made the remarks at an event here to release a commemorative postage stamp in honour of Emperor Perumbidugu Mutharaiyar II. In a social media post, the Vice President's Secretariat said Radhakrishnan appreciated the Narendra Modi Government for its continuous support to Tamil culture and language.

## Congress leader Shamanuru Shivashankarappa dies at 95

Veteran Congress leader Shamanuru Shivashankarappa passed away at a private hospital on Sunday due to age-related ailments, official sources said. He was 95 and represented the Davanagere South Assembly constituency. He had been undergoing treatment at the hospital for some time.

## Suvendu Adhikari demands probe into Messi event chaos

West Bengal's Leader of Opposition Suvendu Adhikari on Sunday demanded a court-monitored investigation into the chaos that erupted during Argentine football icon Lionel Messi's event at Salt Lake stadium here a day ago. Adhikari said once the BJP is elected to power in the 2026 Assembly polls, the saffron party will ensure Messi comes to Bengal again and regale his thousands of fans in Yuva Bharati Krirangan with his football skills.

# President Murmu urges citizens to embrace energy efficiency

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
New Delhi

President Droupadi Murmu, Union Power Minister Manohar Lal Khattar and others during a group photographs with awardees at the presentation of 'National Energy Conservation Awards 2025' and 'National Painting Competition on Energy Conservation' prizes in New Delhi PTI

President Droupadi Murmu on Sunday said behavioural change in every citizen is crucial to bringing energy efficiency to all sectors in the country.

Addressing National Energy Conservation Day Function here, she said the consciousness of adopting a balanced lifestyle in harmony with nature is fundamental to India's cultural tradition — this very sentiment forms the basis of our message to the world, "Lifestyle for Environment — LiFE".

"Participation of every sector and citizen is essential for the success of India's energy transition. Behavioural change is crucial for bringing energy efficiency to all sectors," she said.

The President said energy conservation is the most environmentally friendly and reliable source of energy.

Energy conservation is not just an option, but the most crucial need of today, she said.

She underlined that saving energy doesn't simply mean using less, but utilising energy wisely, responsibly, and efficiently.

"When we avoid unnecessary use of electrical appliances, adopt energy-efficient devices, utilise natural light and ventilation in our homes and workplaces, or embrace solar and renewable energy options, we not only save energy but also reduce carbon emissions," she said.

Energy conservation is also important for maintaining clean air and safe water sources, and a balanced ecosystem, Murmu said, adding, "Every unit of energy we save will be a symbol of our responsibility towards nature and our sensitivity towards future generations."

If the youth and children are aware about energy conservation and make efforts in this direction, the goals in this area can be achieved and the sustainable development of the country can be ensured, the President said.

Access to affordable and clean energy empowers communities, she said, adding that green energy is not limited to electricity generation; it is a powerful means of empowerment and inclusive development.

The President noted that initiatives, such as Pradhan Mantri Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana and the National Green Hydrogen Mission, are reducing dependence on fossil fuels.

The Government is also promoting renewable energy adoption and energy efficiency through the Renewable Consumption Obligation and Production-Linked Incentive schemes. She noted that India's energy efficiency efforts in 2023-24 resulted in energy savings of 53.60 million tonnes of oil equivalent.

She said these efforts are leading to significant economic savings annually and have also resulted in a substantial reduction in $CO_2$ emissions.

The President said the participation of every sector and citizen is essential for the success of India's energy transition.

She appreciated all stakeholders working in the field of energy conservation and said their contribution will ensure a healthy and bright future for coming generations.

She expressed confidence that with the spirit of collective responsibility, partnership, and public participation, India will continue to play a leading role in energy conservation and achieve its goals towards a green future.

She presented the National Energy Conservation Awards 2025 and National Painting Competition on Energy Conservation prizes in New Delhi on Sunday on the occasion of National Energy Conservation Day.

# BJP alleges Congress rally aims to protect infiltrators

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
New Delhi

Ahead of the Congress's rally over the "vote theft" issue, the BJP on Sunday alleged that the main Opposition party was holding the event in its bid to "protect infiltrators" from being removed from the electoral rolls.

The ruling BJP asserted that the Congress will not succeed in its design of misleading people as well as "insulting and defaming" constitutional institutions, because the entire world knows that India's democracy is "very robust".

Stepping up its campaign against the alleged "vote theft" by the BJP in elections, the Congress has organised a rally at the Ramlila Maidan here on Sunday that will be attended by the party's top leaders, including general secretaries Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, KC Venugopal, Jairam Ramesh, and Sachin Pilot.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and former party chief Rahul Gandhi are expected to address the gathering. Former Congress president Sonia Gandhi is also likely to be present at the event.

Ahead of the event, BJP national spokesperson Sambit Patra said the Congress was holding the rally even as Union Home Minister Amit Shah "exposed" the Opposition through his point-by-point rebuttal to their "fabricated" allegations during a debate on electoral reforms during the ongoing Winter Session of Parliament.

"This shows that you do not have truth in your hand, yet you are trying to create an atmosphere of confusion. The Congress' rally is an exercise to protect 'ghuspaithiyas (infiltrators)'. This is what the Congress is doing," the BJP MP told reporters.

"The Congress party may try all it wants to mislead the people as well as insult and defame our constitutional institutions. But, the entire world knows that India's democracy is very robust and it cannot be shaken," he added.

The BJP leader accused the Congress of holding the rally to pursue its "appeasement politics" and dared Rahul Gandhi to challenge the Bihar assembly polls if he felt that there was any irregularity.

"Rahul ji, you still have perhaps 10 days left in your hands. You can still file a complaint if you feel that there was any irregularity (in the poll process) in any of the seats in the Bihar assembly polls," Patra said.

# Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine sees drop in pilgrim numbers

**MOHIT KANDHARI** ■ Jammu

As the Kashmir Valley looks forward to a resurgence in winter tourism in the weeks ahead, authorities at the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board are grappling with a sharp drop in pilgrim numbers compared to previous years.

At the time of the launch of the Vande Bharat Express connecting the Kashmir valley with the rest of the country by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June this year, the Shrine Board authorities had expected a rise in the pilgrim traffic.

According to Yatra statistics available on the official website of the Shrine Board, 65.03 lakh pilgrims have visited the cave shrine this year. The pilgrim traffic was adversely affected due to the Pahalgam terror attack. Operation Sindoor and devastating flash floods in August, leading to the death of over 30 pilgrims along the yatra track. The yatra remained suspended for over three weeks due to repair works and prevailing inclement weather conditions.

Ahead of the New Year celebrations, the Shrine Board authorities are now gearing up to welcome the pilgrims and hoping the yatra figures to cross the 70 lakh mark. During the last week of December, around 3 to 4 lakh pilgrims offer prayers inside the cave shrine located in the Trikuta hills.

To further boost pilgrim traffic, the Shrine board has made concerted efforts to attract pilgrims by providing improved infrastructure facilities.

Last year, 94.84 pilgrims visited the cave shrine. In 2023, the pilgrim traffic crossed 95 lakh. In 2022, 91.25 lakh pilgrims performed the yatra.

For the first time, the pilgrim traffic crossed the 70 lakh mark in 2007.

# Sharad Pawar urges support for talent beyond privileged families

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
Mumbai

President Sharad Pawar addressing the gathering during the award ceremony of the Sharad Pawar Inspire Fellowship in Mumbai PTI

NCP(SP) president Sharad Pawar on Sunday said talent and leadership are not limited to persons with privileged backgrounds and stressed the need to identify and support capable individuals from ordinary families to bring positive change in society.

Speaking at the Sharad Pawar Inspire Fellowship award ceremony held at Yashwantrao Chavan Centre here, he said the fellowship programme has been designed keeping in mind the life and values of Yashwantrao Chavan, Maharashtra's first chief minister.

"Many people succeed in life because they have a strong background and support system, but there are many others who lack such support yet have the ability and vision to work for society. They need opportunities and encouragement," Pawar said.

Recalling Chavan's journey, Pawar said he came from a very modest background and yet went on to become not only the chief minister of Maharashtra but also served the country as defence minister, finance minister and external affairs minister.

"This shows that ability is not the monopoly of a few. It exists among common people as well," the NCP (SP) chief said while praising the work of Yashwantrao Chavan Pratishthan for identifying such individuals across Maharashtra through the fellowship programme and giving them a platform to grow.

Referring to rapid changes across sectors, Pawar highlighted the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly in agriculture. "AI-based technologies can significantly improve crop productivity while reducing the use of water and fertilisers. With the right use of technology, agricultural output can increase by 25 to 30 per cent while lowering costs," he said.

Pawar cited the example of the Sahyadri Farmers Producer Company in Nashik district, saying it had successfully transformed young farmers into entrepreneurs through collective efforts and confidence-building.

Pawar congratulated the fellowship awardees and expressed confidence that the knowledge and experience gained through the programme would help bring change at the village, taluka and district levels. He urged the participants to focus not only on good work but also on building strong institutions to sustain long-term impact.

Talking to reporters later, Nationalist Congress Party (SP) working president Supriya Sule said the Sharad Pawar Inspire Fellowship will be launched exclusively for women from next year. The fellowship was started by the Yashwantrao Chavan Centre to mark the 'Sahasrachandra Darshan' celebrations of party president Sharad Pawar and has now entered its fifth year.

Sule said the fellowship will focus on women interested in areas such as agriculture, education and social transformation. Commenting on the recently concluded Winter session of the State legislature, Sule said its duration was very short and it failed to meet expectations. "Even as the Opposition, we look at the larger interest of the State. However, there was no positive or meaningful discussion on key issues facing Maharashtra," the Baramati MP said. Raising concern over crimes against women, Sule said incidents of atrocities and dowry deaths are increasing in the State and should have been discussed in the House.

She said Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis needs to take strong policy decisions to address the issue. She also called for unity across party lines to bring about social change, adding the ruling dispensation should take the lead in working with the Opposition on such issues. Referring to the proposed Shakti Act, Sule said the Modi-led Government has been in power for the last 11 years but the legislation has not yet been brought before Parliament. "If the Shakti Act is introduced in Parliament by the Centre, we will strongly support it," she added.

# AIIMS study finds no link between COVID vaccines and deaths

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
New Delhi

A comprehensive, one-year autopsy-based observational study conducted at AIIMS, Delhi, has found no evidence linking COVID-19 vaccination with sudden deaths among young adults, reaffirming the safety of Covid vaccines.

Sudden death in young adults is a significant concern requiring targeted public health strategies, the study said, underlying coronary artery disease remains the leading cause and that respiratory and unexplained deaths warrant further investigation.

The study, titled "Burden of Sudden Death in Young Adults: A One-Year Observational Study at a Tertiary Care Centre in India", has been published in the Indian Journal of Medical Research (IJMR), the flagship journal of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

The research involved a detailed evaluation of sudden death cases through verbal autopsy, post-mortem imaging, conventional autopsy, and histopathological examination, carried out by a multidisciplinary team of experts.

The study examined sudden deaths among adults aged 18-45 over a one-year period. No statistically significant association was found between COVID-19 vaccination status and sudden deaths in the young population, the study said.

Cardiovascular system-related causes constituted the most common cause of death in young, followed by respiratory-related causes and other non-cardiac conditions, the study said.

The COVID-19 illness history and vaccination status were found to be comparable between younger and older age groups, with no causal link identified.

The findings are consistent with global scientific evidence affirming the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines.

Dr Sudheer Arava, Professor at AIIMS, New Delhi, asserted that the publication of this study assumes particular significance in light of misleading claims and unverified reports suggesting a connection between COVID-19 vaccination and sudden deaths.

He highlighted that the findings do not support such claims and emphasised that scientific, evidence-based research must guide public understanding and discourse.

Health experts reiterated that sudden deaths in young individuals, while tragic, are often related to underlying, sometimes undiagnosed medical conditions, especially cardiovascular diseases, and require focused public health interventions such as early screening, lifestyle modification, and timely medical care.

Dr Arava added, "Citizens are advised to rely on credible scientific sources and avoid misinformation that may undermine public confidence in proven public health interventions."

# Fadnavis launches Project Mahadeva to nurture football talent

**PRESS TRUST OF INDAI**
Mumbai

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Sunday said the State Government's football development initiative 'Project Mahadeva' aims to identify and nurture talented young players who could represent India in the 2034 FIFA World Cup.

The project was formally launched at Wankhede Stadium by Fadnavis in the presence of football icon Lionel Messi, and prominent personalities, including footballers Luis Suarez and Rodrigo De Paul.

The programme is part of Maharashtra's 'Mission Olympic 2026', which targets improved sporting performance and increased medal tally at national and international events.

Under Project Mahadeva, 60 under-13 footballers, including 30 boys and 30 girls, selected from across Maharashtra, will receive specialised training and mentoring. The selected players will get a residential scholarship for five years, along with world-class coaching, including training by foreign coaches.

"Project Mahadeva is a crucial initiative of the Maharashtra Government to scout football talent at the grassroots level and develop high-quality players. We are confident that this project will produce players capable of competing at the highest global level, including the FIFA World Cup," Fadnavis said.

# Tamil Nadu to expand welfare scheme for women: CM

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
Dharmapuri (Tamil Nadu)

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin on Sunday said even if some more eligible persons had been left out of the ₹1,000 per month assistance scheme for women, they will be brought under the welfare initiative.

Addressing a function here, Stalin, referring to the RBI data, said Tamil Nadu has topped the GSDP growth at a rate of 16 per cent and this was achieved despite obstacles.

The number of beneficiaries under the 'rights' scheme for women that provides ₹1,000 per month assistance has increased to 1.30 crore with the inclusion of 17 lakh beneficiaries days ago, Stalin said.

The CM said: "If even some more eligible persons had been left out, if they make a representation, they will be provided the assistance under the scheme; I have also said that the assistance amount too would be increased."

On SIR, the CM said, "We have to protect our right to vote and we have done our work vigilantly." However, "we have work till such time the Assembly election is held (due by March-April next year) and the result is announced. You must not forget it."

Furthermore, the chief minister said that the party functionaries should reach out to the people highlighting the Government's achievements and welfare measures.

The party must get the honour of forming the Government for the seventh time and the State's growth should continue.

## States Focus

### CORRUPTION CAUSED CONGRESS DOWNFALL: RAJASTHAN CM

Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajanlal Sharma on Sunday asserted that those involved in graft would not be spared under any circumstances and pointed at the Congress to assert that corruption led to the "downfall" of the party that once ruled from Parliament to panchayats.

Addressing a state-level cleanliness awareness and labour donation programme held at Jal Mahal here, he said that public money should be used for the welfare of the people. "Public funds are not meant for corruption; they should serve the interests of the common people, including farmers, labourers, and the poor."

Targeting the Congress, Sharma said, "The party once ruled from Parliament to Panchayats, but its corruption, appeasement, and lies have brought it down."

### VAJPAYEE'S VISION GUIDES SELF-RELIANT INDIA: CM DHAMI

Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami on Sunday said that former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's values, governance model and national vision continue to inspire India's journey towards self-reliance under the leadership of PM Narendra Modi.

Addressing a public meeting as the chief guest at the Atal-Modi Good Governance Yatra here, Dhami spoke after unveiling a statue of Vajpayee at Annamayya Circle, Madanapalle in Annamayya district.

"Vajpayee's values, governance framework and national vision continue to guide India's march towards self-reliance under Prime Minister Modi's leadership," Dhami said.

# MP leader sparks Ladli Behna scheme controversy

**GIRISH SHARMA** ■ Bhopal

Senior Madhya Pradesh Cabinet Minister Kunwar Vijay Shah has triggered a fresh political storm after remarks made during a district-level meeting in Ratlam were widely interpreted as linking benefits under the Ladli Behna Scheme to the participation of women beneficiaries in a proposed felicitation programme for Chief Minister Mohan Yadav.

The controversy has erupted at a time when Shah is already facing legal and political scrutiny over an earlier objectionable comment related to an Indian Army officer, further intensifying pressure on the BJP leadership.

Madhya Pradesh Congress president Jitu Patwari launched a scathing attack, accusing the BJP of insulting women beneficiaries and displaying an 'anti-women mindset'. Former chief minister Kamal Nath also weighed in, alleging that the minister's remarks treated Ladli Behna beneficiaries as bonded labour and amounted to an attack on the civil rights and dignity of women in the state.

The latest row stems from Shah's comments while chairing the District Development Advisory Committee meeting in Ratlam on Saturday evening. Referring to the Ladli Behna Scheme — a flagship women-centric programme credited with playing a decisive role in the BJP's victory in the 2023 Assembly elections — Shah said the district had around 2.5 lakh beneficiaries and suggested that at least 50,000 of them should come forward to felicitate the Chief Minister for completing two years in office. He proposed that the event be organised in the New Year and asked officials to make arrangements accordingly.

However, a video clip of the meeting that later went viral sparked controversy. In the footage, Shah is heard telling officials that beneficiaries who fail to attend the proposed programme could face scrutiny of their documents, including Aadhaar verification, and that their applications could be kept pending.

The remarks were quickly seized upon by the Opposition, which accused the minister of using a welfare scheme as a tool for political mobilisation and intimidation. The Ladli Behna Scheme was launched in June 2023, a few months ahead of the Assembly elections, and currently provides monthly financial assistance of Rs 1,500 to more than 1.26 crore women. The state Government has promised to increase the amount to Rs 3,000 per month by 2028, making the scheme a central pillar of its welfare and political strategy.

As the controversy escalated, speaking to The Pioneer on Sunday, Shah asserting that his remarks had been 'twisted and misrepresented'. He denied any suggestion that women were being threatened or coerced and said there was no ill intent behind his comments. Emphasising the Government's commitment to women's empowerment, Shah said the objective of the scheme is to make women self-reliant and economically secure.

He explained that during an informal discussion at the meeting, concerns were raised about reports of ineligible women allegedly availing benefits under the Ladli Behna Scheme, which had caused resentment among sections of the public.

According to Shah, the discussion focused on the need for proper verification to ensure that only eligible beneficiaries continue to receive assistance and that ineligible names are filtered out in a transparent manner. He maintained that the intent was administrative correction and accountability, not pressure on beneficiaries.

Despite the clarification, the episode has added to a growing list of controversies surrounding the senior minister, reviving debate over the language and conduct of public representatives. With the Ladli Behna Scheme occupying a central place in the BJP's political narrative, the controversy has also sharpened the Opposition's attack, setting the stage for a prolonged political confrontation over welfare, accountability and the dignity of beneficiaries.

# CM Himanta invites VP to witness Assam's progress

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ New Delhi

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma paid a courtesy call on the Vice President of India, CP Radhakrishnan, in the national Capital on Sunday.

During the meeting at Vice President's enclave, Chief Minister Sarma personally congratulated Radhakrishnan on his assumption of the august office of the Vice President of India.

The Chief Minister also extended a formal invitation to the Vice President to visit Assam and witness the state's transformation and developmental progress achieved in recent years.

The Vice President appreciated the gesture and interacted warmly with the Chief Minister during the meeting which lasted for around 30 minutes.

Later taking to X, formerly Twitter, Chief Minister Sarma wrote, "Honoured to call upon Vice President of India, CP Radhakrishnan in New Delhi today.

I personally congratulated him on assuming the august office of @VPIndia and invited him to visit Assam to witness the State's transformation in recent years."

# ISRO plans seven launches by March including Gaganyaan test

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ New Delhi

Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has lined up seven launch missions by March next year, including one to demonstrate home-built electric propulsion systems for satellite and quantum key distribution technologies, and the first uncrewed mission of the Gaganyaan project.

The first of the seven launches is expected to take place next week. India's heaviest rocket LVM3 will place in orbit the Bluebird-6 communication satellite for US-based AST Spacemobile through a commercial agreement with ISRO's New Space India Limited (NSIL), Union minister Jitendra Singh recently told Parliament. The human-rated LVM3 will soar into the sky early next year carrying the first uncrewed mission of India's human spaceflight Gaganyaan with a robot 'Vyommitra'? onboard the crew module.

One more uncrewed mission is planned later next year before ISRO sends Indian astronauts into low earth orbit in 2027. "First uncrewed mission of Gaganyaan to demonstrate end-to-end mission, including aerodynamics characterisation of human rated launch vehicle, mission operations of Orbital Module, re-entry and recovery of Crew Module," Singh said.

Next year will also see the launch of India's first industry-built Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) that will put in orbit Oceansat satellite. The PSLV will have two more passengers — Indo-Mauritius Joint Satellite and LEAP-2 satellite of Dhruva Space.

To increase commercial launches of satellites, NSIL had given a contract to a HAL-L&T consortium to manufacture five PSLV rockets, under a technology transfer agreement signed in September this year.

An ISRO-built PSLV will put in orbit an earth observation satellite (EOS-N1) for a strategic user and 18 smaller satellites of Indian and international customers. The GSLV-Mk II rocket is expected to launch the EOS-5 satellite or GISAT-1A, which will be a replacement for GISAT-1 which failed to reach the intended orbit in 2021.

# Arunachal sets stage for panchayat and civic polls

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ Itanagar

The stage is set for elections to panchayati raj institutions and civic bodies of Itanagar and Pashighat in Arunachal Pradesh with the deployment of over 40,000 personnel to ensure the smooth conduct of polls on Monday, officials said. Polling will begin at 7 am and continue till 4 pm, State Election Commissioner (SEC) Rinchin Tashi said.

The ruling BJP won 58 zilla parishad constituencies unopposed, and the National People's Party (NPP) bagged one seat, while four saffron party candidates were elected to the Itanagar Municipal Corporation (IMC) without any contest.

Altogether 5,037 BJP candidates for gram panchayat seats have also been declared elected unopposed.

In total, 440 candidates are in the fray for 186 zilla parishad seats, while 39 are contesting for 16 IMC wards and 21 for eight wards in Pasighat Municipal Council (PMC). The SEC said 13 gram panchayat constituencies received no nominations, while all nominations in 14 gram panchayat constituencies were rejected during scrutiny.

Polling in the Dumba Singpho gram panchayat seat has been countermanded following the death of a candidate. Altogether 8,31,648 voters, including 7,59,210 for panchayat bodies and 72,438 for municipal elections, are eligible to cast their ballots.

There will be 2,171 polling stations for panchayat elections, 67 for IMC and 12 for PMC, the SEC said.

"In the panchayat polls, female voters outnumber male voters," Tashi said.

Upper Subansiri district has the highest number of panchayat voters at 58,764, while Dibang Valley has the lowest at 3,854 electors.

In the municipal polls, Itanagar's Ward 19 has the highest number of voters at 5,106, whereas Pasighat's Ward 6 has the lowest with 812 voters.

The SEC has deployed over 40,000 personnel, including 15,000 polling staffers, to ensure the smooth conduct of the polls.

# NMA frames rules for conservation of Sher Shah Suri's tomb

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ Patna

Bylaws have been made for the 480-year-old tomb of Sher Shah Suri, an Afghan king who ruled parts of north India, to help the authorities resolve the problem of protecting the monument in Bihar's Sasaram, and developing the locality in its vicinity at the same time.

The National Monuments Authority (NMA) has enacted the legislation after obtaining objections and suggestions from various stakeholders of the memorial of the Afghan ruler, who was also known for his exceptional administrative skill.

Built between 1540 and 1545 CE, the tomb stands in the middle of an artificial lake

at Sasaram, a historical town in the south-western district of the state. Designed by Mir Muhammad Aliwal Khan, it is popularly referred to as the 'second Taj Mahal of India'.

According to experts, the bye-law will bridge the gap between managing the ambient environment near a protected site and the requirements of the populace inhabiting immediate vicinity of such monuments.

It is expected that with a site-specific bye-law, common people as well as administrative and local stakeholders would find it easy to meet their construction, repair and other development-related requirements.

However, according to the bylaw, new constructions should be in harmony with the existing architectural style and compatible with the surrounding historic character and streetscapes.

No intrusive materials like cladding or use of panelling on the exterior facade should be permitted, it said, adding that the use of coloured glazing should also be discouraged.

OP Jaiswal, former Professor in the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, Patna University, welcomed the bye-laws for the tomb of Sher Shah Suri in Sasaram.

"The Central Government and other authorities must come out with such bye-laws for other protected monuments in the state. Protection of such monuments is important for our next generation," Jaiswal said.

# BARC plans 3,000-acre research, development campus in Andhra

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ Amaravati

Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) is planning to set up a new Research and Development campus spread over 3,000 acres in Anakapalli district.

The premier multi-disciplinary nuclear research centre has approached the Andhra Pradesh Government for the diversion of 148.15 hectares (0.366 acres) of land for the new campus, according to sources from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

An Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) under the ministry examined the proposal earlier this month and recommended it for 'in-principle' approval for the diversion of the first land parcel.

"Bhabha Atomic Research Centre is setting up a new campus on the east coast near Visakhapatnam for strategic reasons. The selection of the site was based on recommendations from the Site Selection Committee and approved by the Atomic Energy Commission," the EAC noted in the minutes of the meeting.

Over 1,200 hectares (about 3,000 acres) of revenue land have already been acquired for the project.

The 148.15 hectares of forest land proposed for diversion is adjacent to this acquired land and lies between the project site and the sea, the EAC added.

The project is a strategic initiative of the central Government, and hence, the Detailed Project Report is protected from disclosure.

The proposal involves the construction of a perimetre compound wall, zonal security fencing, patrolling roads, a pump house, watch towers, drains, service lines, and area development works, according to the minutes, without specifying the nature of the activity.

As many as 1,722 of the 21,244 trees on the land will be felled. However, those located in areas close to the sea will not be cut, and the EAC said this will not affect the general ecosystem. "This centre will contribute to nation-building by conducting research in the nuclear field with applications in energy security, health, agriculture, water, and other strategic areas as mandated by the Centre," the EAC said.

# BNHS trains staff ahead of vultures release in MTR

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ Mumbai

Ahead of the release of vultures in Maharashtra's Melghat Tiger Reserve (MTR), the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) has conducted a workshop to sensitise forest staff and other personnel on bird conservation and post-release management.

As part of the reintroduction programme, 15 long-billed vultures were brought from Pinjore in Haryana in April 2025 and housed in a pre-release facility in Melghat (in Amravati district).

The birds have undergone training over the past eight months to feed independently and acclimatise to local environmental conditions and are expected to be released in the reserve soon, a BNHS release said.

A workshop, titled 'Bringing Back the Apex Scavenger', was organised jointly by BNHS and the state forest department on December 12 at Shahanur in Akot wildlife division of Akola district to sensitise veterinarians, forest staff and field personnel about vulture conservation and post-release management, it said.

Nearly 30 participants, including animal husbandry practitioners from Amravati and Buldhana districts, wildlife veterinarians and field biologists from MTR, attended the workshop.

# Indian Coast Guard carries out medical evacuation

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ Kochi

The Indian Coast Guard became a lifesaver for a 75-year-old by carrying out an urgent medical evacuation from Lakshadweep to Kochi, officials said on Sunday.

A statement by the Coast Guard said that the patient diagnosed with acute sabacute subdural hematoma on oxygen support was airlifted from Agatti in Lakshadweep and shifted to a private hospital in Kochi in an operation that started late Saturday night and was completed by Sunday early morning.

The urgent request, received post-closure of runaway operations at Agatti airfield, activated the ICG distress and HADR response mechanism, the Coast Guard said. "To facilitate the medical evacuation, ICG launched a Dornier aircraft from ICG Air Enclave at Kochi Airport at 10 pm".

The aircraft landed at Agatti island at 11.20 pm, where the patient, along with the medical support team and spouse, was embarked swiftly considering the urgency of distress," the statement said.

According to the Coast Guard, the aircraft took off within 25 minutes and landed safely at Kochi airport at about 1.10 am on Sunday.

Subsequently, the patient was shifted to Amrita Hospital and is receiving advanced medical care and support, it said.

# Jharkhand to procure 60 lakh quintals of paddy

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
■ Ranchi

The Jharkhand Government has set a target to procure around 60 lakh quintals of paddy and will begin the exercise from December 15, an official said on Sunday. Altogether 783 procurement centres have been set up across the state to carry out the exercise, he said.

State Food, Public Distribution and Consumer Affairs Minister appealed to his cabinet colleagues, MPs and MLAs to visit the procurement centres in their respective areas and inaugurate the initiative.

He said the Government will purchase paddy at ₹2,450 per quintal from farmers.

The authorities have set a target to procure around 60 lakh quintals of paddy, according to the state's e-uparjan portal.

The Jharkhand Cabinet had on December 8 decided that farmers of the state will get a bonus of ₹81 per quintal of paddy in addition to the Centre's minimum support price (MSP) for the crop in the 2025-26 fiscal.

The state council of ministers also approved ₹48.60

crore as a bonus against paddy procurement from the farmers.

The MSP and a bonus have been fixed at ₹2,450 per quintal, the official said.

The farmers will also receive a one-time payment for paddy to be purchased by the Government, and not in instalments as was the practice earlier, he said.

The BJP, however, accused the Government of delaying the paddy procurement and forcing farmers to sell their produce at a minimal price.

Leader of Opposition and Jharkhand BJP chief Babulal Marandi, during the winter session, which concluded on Thursday, had alleged,

"Farmers are forced to sell their paddy at a meagre price of ₹1,500 and ₹1,600 per quintal in the open market, as Government procurement has not yet started."

In 2024-25, the Government had procured the highest 40.08 lakh quintal of paddy against the target of 60 lakh quintals.

However, in 2023-24 and 2022-23, the procurement was 17.02 and 17.16 lakh quintals, respectively. The state had faced drought situations during the period, as per the e-uparjan portal.

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# Supreme Court's conflicting decisions on bank fraud settlements creates dilemma

RANJIT KUMAR SINHA

In November 2025, two decisions of the Supreme Court garnered nationwide attention. Both of them were on the issue of quashing criminal proceedings related to bank fraud on the basis of One Time Settlement (OTS).

The first was the Supreme Court judgment in Central Bureau of Investigation versus M/s. Sarvodaya Highways Ltd and Others (Nov 11, 2025), and the second was the order in the Sandesara brothers (Sterling Biotech Ltd) cases (Nov 19, 2025).

The two decisions were contradictory on the application of the principle of OTS. While in the Sandesara case, the Supreme Court proposed to quash all criminal proceedings on the condition of ₹5,100 Crore deposit, the Apex Court restored the criminal proceedings in the Sarvodaya Highways Ltd case, explicitly holding that an OTS is not a ground to quash charges of fraud and corruption.

Although the Sarvodaya judgment by a Bench of Justices VikramNath and Sandeep Mehtawas delivered a week before the Sandesara order by a bench of Justices JKMaheshwari and Vijay Bishnoi, the latter was widely reported as unprecedented. It is only now that the Sarvodaya judgment is gaining attention, as critics question how there can be two standards when the ultimate relief sought was identical.

The reading of the two decisions makes it clear that the Sandesara case reached the Supreme Court through an Article 32 petition, in which, without mentioning, the bench concerned applied the inherent power under Article 142 in the peculiar facts of the cases to do complete justice and made it clear that it cannot be cited as a precedent.

In the Sarvodaya case, the Supreme Court set aside the Punjab and Haryana High Court's order, which had quashed the criminal proceedings against the company based on OTS with the bank. The Supreme Court essentially held that a one-time settlement does not erase criminal liability for serious economic offences like fraud and corruption under Section 482 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC).

Besides other findings and observations, the bench concerned emphasised that serious economic offences, especially those involving financial fraud against a nationalised/public sector bank, are not merely private disputes between the bank and the customer. They constitute a public wrong because they impact the public exchequer and harm society at large.

Further, the Supreme Court, in its judgment, specifically noted that the settlement amount of ₹41 crore was significantly lower than the actual outstanding liability of approximately ₹52.50 crore, resulting in a deficit, a loss to the public exchequer, even after the settlement. This was a key factor in the Supreme Court's decision to restore the criminal proceedings. A notable feature in which the two decisions have come is that one case involves a smaller company (M/s. Sarvodaya Highways Ltd) and the other involves a large, fugitive-run conglomerate (Sandesara brothers — Nitin and Chetan).

While the Sandesara brothers had fled the country in 2017, reports do not indicate that the accused/offenders in the Sarvodaya case are out of the reach of law enforcement agencies, rather, the judicial process is actively moving forward against the named individuals (Gurinder Kumar Garg, ArunaGarg, AashutoshGarg, AayushGarg, and the then Branch Manager of the Bank, NishanLal).

Also, there is no explicit report linking the accused or the fraud itself in the Sarvodaya case to any specific politician or established political connection. In contrast, the Sandesara case has been connected to several politicians, bureaucrats, and other influential people, leading to a political controversy that ran parallel to the financial fraud investigations. Consequently, if the proceedings are quashed against the Sandesara brothers, this may automatically shield their alleged co-conspirators and facilitators, who were also under investigation, raising further concerns about the full scope of the investigation being curtailed. Comparing the outcome of the two cases at the highest court in no way means siding with any party, but the contradictory nature of the two Supreme Court decisions creates several serious issues within the legal system and public domain.

Do the conflicting judgments from the Benches of the Supreme Court shake the public's confidence in the stability and uniformity of the law? Does it not create a perception that justice depends on the bench rather than the established law?

Further, critics raise the question of two standards — one for minor offenders or small amounts and another for high-profile, high-value offenders, where cases can be settled for a price, as proposed in Sandesara. Does it not suggest that serious economic offences can be resolved by wealth, not by law?

Another question arises that when two Benches of equal strength pass contradictory rulings on the same principle (OTS vs Criminal Liability), it creates an impossible dilemma for High Courts and Trial Courts. Subordinate courts are left confused about the correct legal position, stalling trials and increasing the burden of litigation as they await clarification.

The contradiction creates a serious challenge to the stability, predictability, and integrity of the judicial system, particularly in the critical area of combating large-scale economic fraud. Irrespective of the public perception of the outcome of two bank fraud cases, Supreme Court advocate Madhumita Bhattacharjee prefers to provide a purely legal perspective.

She stated that in the Sandesara case, it is apparent that since its inception, this Court has been of the view that if the petitioners are willing to deposit the amount as settled in OTS and public money is returned to the lender banks, the continuation of the criminal proceedings would serve no useful purpose.

"The tenor of the proceedings apparently indicates peculiarity, with intent to protect the public money and interest and to get deposited the defalcated amount. In furtherance, the consensus has been arrived at as indicated above. In this view, in the peculiar facts and situation of the present case, discretion as prayed, deserves to be exercised for granting the relief, as prayed and to direct for quashment of all the proceedings," Bhattacharjee opined.

She said this observation in the judgment would show that there has been no deliberation on the settled position of law and in the peculiar facts and circumstances of the case, which means that it shall not form any precedent, and without going into the merits, the relief has been granted as the case proceeded from the very beginning on this basis.

Whereas the judgment written by Justice Mehta in the Sarvodaya case deals with the legal position of law and is a judgment under Article 141 of the Constitution of India, and hence, both cannot be compared, as the previous one (Sandesara) is only based on the facts and in the peculiar facts and circumstances of the case.

Bhattacharjee, who is Advocate-on-Record in the Supreme Court, said she had gone through both the judgments in extensive detail. She said in her view, the judgment in the Sarvodaya case also lays down the correct position of law, as upholding the sanctity of law is the primary duty of the constitutional court. Section 482 is an inherent power which was designed to ensure that there is no abuse of the process of law. Therefore, before invoking this provision, a glaring abuse of the process of law is mandatory.

On the contrary, she accepted that in the Sandesara case, a huge financial fraud committed with an intention was being settled on the basis of the power of money, which, if permitted, would send a very wrong message to society at large. "Therefore, in my view, this (Sarvodaya) judgment lays down the correct position of law. However, with two divergent views of concurrent benches, the final settled position can be enunciated by a larger bench only," Bhattacharjee said.

*The writer is a senior journalist covering legal affairs*

## Order Order

### Unauthorised coke plants demolished in Meghalaya's East Jaintia Hills

The East Jaintia Hills district administration on Sunday demolished unauthorised coke plants operating in the area, an official said.

Deputy Commissioner Shivansh Awasthi said a joint team comprising officials of the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board and police under the supervision of Sub-Divisional Officer Manish Kumar was constituted to carry out the demolition drive.

He said 16 coke plants were identified in the district as having been set up without mandatory authorisations under Government norms, of which five had been demolished earlier. Notices were issued in October 2025 to the remaining 11 units, directing their owners to submit compliance documents for regularisation, but no response was received, the deputy commissioner said.

Following this and in pursuance of the Meghalaya High Court's directions, the demolition drive was launched on December 13.

As of the latest report, seven of the 11 coke plants were demolished by the authorities, while the remaining four were found to have already been dismantled by their owners. "All 11 unauthorised coke plants are now non-operational," Awasthi added.

### SC to hear plea on protection of persons with autism today

The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear on December 15 a plea seeking the constitution of a national expert committee to formulate comprehensive guidelines for care, rehabilitation and protection of persons with autism and other intellectual disabilities.

The petition has also sought directions to the Centre and others to establish population-based residential facilities for persons with autism and other intellectual disabilities in every district, and to frame comprehensive and binding standard operating procedures (SOPs) for their establishment, regulation and monitoring.

According to the Supreme Court's cause list of December 15, the plea is slated to come up for hearing before a bench of Justices BV Nagarathna and R Mahadevan. The plea has sought directions "to constitute a national expert committee comprising representatives of autistic persons, parents' associations, disability-rights experts and medical professionals to formulate and finalise comprehensive guidelines for the care, rehabilitation and protection of such persons across the country". The plea has also sought directions to the authorities to ensure proper medical facilities, regular health check-ups and continuous access to qualified doctors, therapists and trained caregivers for persons with autism and other intellectual disabilities residing in residential homes. The plea has urged the Supreme Court to issue appropriate directions for regular audits, monitoring and accountability mechanisms to prevent abuse, neglect or exploitation in such facilities.

# ED aims to end legacy FERA cases by early 2026

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has decided to bring to a conclusion cases registered under the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA), which was repealed by the country more than 25 years ago in 1998. The criminal sections-loaded FERA of 1973 was replaced in June 2000 by the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA) of 1999, a civil law.

Officials told media that the federal probe agency has begun identifying about 400-500 cases in which adjudication proceedings pending before various courts under the FERA can be fast-tracked for closure, as the individuals under prosecution have either died or gone untraceable, or the assets under question have been liquidated or have ceased to exist.

The officials said the aim is to complete the exercise in the next few months — the first quarter of 2026 being the immediate deadline.

The last show cause notices under the FERA were issued in May 2002.

ED Director Rahul Navin, during a recent conference of the agency officers held in Gujarat, had also reiterated his directions for "fast-tracking" of old FERA adjudication cases as he emphasised the "completion of lifecycle" of all pending cases in various forums. The officials said that the closure of FERA cases over the "next few months" will end the legacy of litigation and redundancy going on for more than two decades.

They said that the FERA had an avatar even before 1973 which was first brought in 1947.

The Central Government had, in 1956, established the ED as an "enforcement unit" under the Department of Economic Affairs (DEA) to handle violations and cases registered under the FERA of 1947. This law was then repealed and replaced by the FERA of 1973 and subsequently by the FEMA law of 1999 as part of the economic liberalisation policy of India.

The FEMA focuses more on the management of foreign exchange rather than its regulation and control (like in FERA).

Most of the violations under the FEMA are treated as civil offences as compared to criminal proceedings under the FERA.

# President Murmu rejects mercy plea of man convicted for rape, murder

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

President Droupadi Murmu has rejected the mercy petition of a man convicted of kidnapping, raping and killing a two-year-old girl in Maharashtra in 2012, officials said on Sunday.

This is the third mercy plea rejected by the President after assuming office on July 25, 2022. The Supreme Court on October 3, 2019, affirmed the death sentence awarded to Ravi Ashok Ghumare, saying he had no control over his "carnal desires" and surpassed all natural, social and legal limits just to satiate his sexual hunger.

In its verdict, a three-judge bench comprising Justice Surya Kant (now chief justice of India), by a majority verdict of 2:1, said the man had "ruthlessly finished" a life which was yet to bloom and his act of committing unnatural offence with the two-year-old exhibits "a dirty and perverted mind, showcasing a horrifying tale of brutality".

Ghumare's mercy plea was rejected by the President on November 6, 2025, according to the status of the mercy petition disclosed by the Rashtrapati Bhavan. "Having said that, it may be seen that the victim was barely a two-year-old baby whom the appellant (Ravi) kidnapped and apparently kept on assaulting for over four to five hours till she breathed her last.

"The appellant, who had no control over his carnal desires, surpassed all natural, social and legal limits just to satiate his sexual hunger. He ruthlessly finished a life which was yet to bloom," Justice Surya Kant had said, while writing the verdict for himself and (now retired) Justice Rohinton Fali Nariman. The appellant, instead of showing fatherly love, affection and protection to the child against the evils of society, made her the victim of lust, the majority verdict said.

# Kerala Governor questions SC, says institutions must know, respect their limits in democracy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Thiruvananthapuram

Days after the Supreme Court decided to go ahead with the selection of Vice Chancellors, Kerala Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar on Sunday said that in a democracy, every institution has its limits and that the health of democratic functioning depends on knowing and respecting those limits.

The Governor was speaking after conferring the Justice VR Krishna Iyer Award on former Chief Justice of India and former Kerala Governor Justice (retd) P Sathasivam.

The award was instituted by the LAW Trust (Legal Assistance and Welfare Trust).

Arlekar's remarks come in the backdrop of a recent Supreme Court direction appointing a committee headed by Justice (retd) Sudhanshu Dhulia to recommend one name each for the appointment of vice chancellors to two technical universities in Kerala, in an attempt to resolve the deadlock between the Governor and the Kerala Chief Minister over the issue.

The Governor moved the top court challenging the order of the division bench of the Kerala High Court disposing of a plea filed against a single judge's order setting aside the November 27, 2024, notification appointing Professor K Sivaprasad of Cochin University of Science and Technology as vice-chancellor, APJ Abdul Kalam Technological University.

A statement issued by Lok Bhavan here said that the Governor deplored the tendency of one institution usurping the role of another in a democracy.

"He said that the power to amend the Constitution is vested with the Parliament and elected legislature, and the courts are there to 'interpret the Constitution and not to amend the Constitution'," the statement read.

The Governor said that contradictory interpretations/verdicts on the same matter/issue are not in the true spirit of the Constitution.

"He was referring to the three-member Supreme Court judgement on Kannur University Vice Chancellor appointment earlier, which upheld the supremacy of the Chancellor in the appointment process," the statement said.

The Governor is the Chancellor of most state universities in Kerala.

Accepting the award, Sathasivam said that courts have to remain committed to Justice Krishna Iyer's humanist ideals, even when society is turning increasingly 'digital'. Judges of the Kerala High Court, H Nagaresh, K Babu, and A Badarudeen, were present on the occasion.

# Technology should amplify human judgment, not replace it: CJI Surya Kant

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Cuttack

Chief Justice of India Surya Kant on Sunday said technology should amplify human judgment and not replace it.

He was addressing a symposium on 'Ensuring justice for the common man: strategies for reducing litigation costs and delays' here.

"Pendency of cases in courts clogs every level of the judicial structure, from the trial court to the constitutional court. And when a blockage occurs at the top, the pressure only intensifies below," he said.

He also stressed the need to strengthen judicial infrastructure to reduce pendency. "This is because without sufficient courts, even the most sincere judicial system will collapse under logistical strain," he said.

Justice Kant said technology was very useful during the COVID pandemic.

CJI Surya Kant

He, however, said that one cannot afford to forget that technology comes with its own shadows.

"In an age of deep fakes and digital arrests, courts cannot afford naive optimism... A reform that excludes the poor, elderly, or digitally unfamiliar is not reform at all, it is regression. That is why I have always maintained that technology must remain a servant of justice, not its substitute. It should amplify human judgment, not replace it," the CJI said.

He said a system where the executive, legislature and judiciary do not move in harmony resembles a tricycle missing a wheel — the rule of law cannot balance, let alone move forward.

"And the consequences are stark — laws may be enacted, offences registered, even liberty curtailed, yet the citizen is left waiting for the one thing that completes the promise of justice: a timely trial that the infrastructure is simply too frail to deliver," he added.

Among others, Orissa High Court Chief Justice Harish Tandon, and judges from high courts across India attended the event, which was also joined by Advocate General Pitambar Acharya.

## Editor's TAKE

# A dispute written in stone

**The clashes between two otherwise peaceful countries underscore how unresolved historical disputes can turn heritage sites and borderlines into flashpoints**

The year 2025 has been turbulent throughout. From the war in Ukraine to the Gaza conflict and renewed hostilities along the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier, the year has witnessed conflict on multiple fronts. Even in its final month, unrest persists, with unexpected clashes erupting between Cambodia and Thailand – two otherwise peaceful neighbours bound by shared borders and intertwined histories.

The latest flare-up along the Thailand-Cambodia border is a grim reminder that unresolved issues have a habit of erupting into armed conflict. Sporadic skirmishes on the border escalated into air strikes and artillery exchanges, leading to large-scale evacuations on both sides and leaving at least 20 dead. If there is a conflict anywhere in the world, US President Donald Trump has an uncanny urge to get involved and become a self-appointed peace broker, often with detrimental effect. This time too, US President Donald Trump announced that both sides had "agreed to cease all shooting", a statement that proved rather premature, as neither side appeared very keen on it.

At the heart of the confrontation lies the long-disputed border region surrounding the 11th-century Preah Vihear temple complex. Though the International Court of Justice awarded the temple to Cambodia decades ago, divergent interpretations of boundary lines and provocative statements on both sides have fuelled public anger. Periodic flare-ups, including violent clashes in 2008–11 and again earlier this year, demonstrate how fragile past ceasefires have been.

This week's violence followed the collapse of October talks, after Thailand accused Cambodian forces of laying landmines in the region. What is clear is that deep mistrust, militarised borders, and domestic political pressures in both countries continue to fuel this conflict, which is more emotive than real. The involvement of Donald Trump as a self-styled mediator adds another dimension to the problem. Announcing the ceasefire on his Truth Social platform, Trump cast himself as an indispensable power broker, positioning himself as the principal mediator. His eagerness to insert himself into every global conflict often appears driven less by a commitment to peace than by the pursuit of personal legacy. By sidelining regional diplomacy and framing himself as a Nobel Peace Prize contender, Trump ultimately does more harm than good to the cause of peace. For India, the conflict is not a distant Southeast Asian squabble but a matter of tangible concern. New Delhi's immediate worry has been the reported damage to conservation facilities at the Preah Vihear temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where the Archaeological Survey of India has been leading a $5.5 million restoration project since 2022. Beyond heritage, India has strategic stakes in regional stability under its Act East policy. Prolonged instability between two ASEAN members threatens trade routes, economic integration, and the broader balance in a region already under pressure from great-power rivalry. For India and the wider region, the lesson is stark: history ignored does not fade – it flares up, often with consequences far beyond the battlefield.

# How a Jaish network was uncovered

**What began as a routine investigation into Jaish-e-Mohammed posters in Srinagar's Nowgam area spiralled into the exposure of a chilling, multi-state terror network involving radicalised doctors, clerics and overground workers**

ANIL BHAT

On October 19, 2025, when Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) Police began an investigation into Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) posters threatening attacks on security forces that appeared in Srinagar's Nowgam area, a terror network involving Kashmiri doctors was exposed. Persistent police work, including analysis of CCTV footage, led to the identification and arrest of three local overground workers (OGWs) with prior records of stone-pelting. Their interrogation led the police to a cleric and former paramedic named Maulvi Irfan Ahmad from Shopian.

Irfan's interrogation revealed a wider Jaish-e-Mohammed network operating across multiple states, including J&K, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. He had allegedly used his position as an imam to radicalise educated professionals, including doctors. Maulvi Irfan's phone contacts included several doctors, raising police suspicion. His interrogation, along with that of another arrested individual, Zameer Ahmad Ahanger, exposed a network of radicalised medical professionals. Based on these leads, police conducted a series of raids across different states.

Dr Adeel Ahmad Rather was arrested in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, where he had moved after working at Government Medical College (GMC), Anantnag. An AK-47 rifle was recovered from his old locker at GMC, and his interrogation led the police to Dr Muzammil Ganaie at Al-Falah University in Faridabad, Haryana.

Raids on two houses rented by Ganaie in Faridabad uncovered a massive cache of explosives — nearly 2,900 kg of materials, including ammonium nitrate, two AK-series rifles, and other bomb-making equipment.

The multi-agency crackdown caused panic among the network members, which, it is believed, led another doctor, Dr Umar Ul Nabi, who worked with Drs Adeel and Muzammil, to prematurely detonate a vehicle-borne explosive device near Delhi's Red Fort on November 10, 2025, resulting in 13 fatalities and his own death. On November 10, 2025, at about 6:52 pm, a white Hyundai i20 car parked near the Red Fort Metro rail station in Delhi exploded, killing at least eight people and injuring many more. Reportedly, a probable reason was that its driver, Dr Umar Nabi, whose accomplices were already under investigation and some of whom had been arrested, may have panicked and prematurely caused the detonation of the device.

Immediately afterwards, Delhi Police, forensic teams, and fire engines rushed to the scene. CCTV footage from the scene and nearby areas was collected to trace the car's movements and ownership. On November 11, 2025, the Ministry of Home Affairs handed over the probe to the National Investigation Agency (NIA), indicating that it was being treated as a terror attack. J&K Police collected DNA samples from Nabi's family in Pulwama for matching with the remains from the blast site. On November 12, 2025, DNA results confirmed that Dr Umar Nabi was the driver and sole occupant of the exploded car. It was revealed that Drs Nabi and Ganaie had visited the Red Fort in January 2025, possibly for reconnaissance. A red Ford EcoSport car linked to the accused was also found in Haryana. On November 13, 2025, J&K Police's Counter Intelligence Kashmir wing conducted further raids at 13 locations across the Kashmir Valley in connection with the terror module.

> WHITE-COLLAR TERRORISTS ARE CERTAINLY NOT NEW IN THE KASHMIR VALLEY. ONE CLASSIC CASE IS YASIN MALIK, HEAD OF THE JAMMU KASHMIR LIBERATION FRONT (JKLF), WHO SPEARHEADED SEPARATIST IDEOLOGY AND VIOLENT ACTIVITIES IN THE VALLEY SINCE 1988, WHEN THE TERM 'WHITE-COLLAR TERROR' WAS NOT CURRENT

On November 15, 2025, an explosion occurred inside the Nowgam police station in Srinagar while police and forensic teams were handling the seized explosive materials brought from Faridabad as evidence in the Red Fort case, resulting in nine deaths and numerous injuries among police personnel and civilians.

It is believed that Nabi's panicked actions inadvertently set off an explosion and thereby prevented a larger, planned series of attacks in many other parts of the country.

Wider investigations also revealed Dr Shaheen Saeed, a doctor and teacher from Lucknow, who raised ?20 lakh for procuring raw materials for IEDs; Amir Rashid Ali, arrested for arranging the Hyundai i20 car used in the attack and helping prepare the explosives; and Jasir Bilal Wani, a technician tasked with exploring ways to attach explosives to drones. Authorities also reportedly questioned over 50 doctors in Kashmir in connection with the case, including Drs Sajjad Ahmed and Sajad Malik. The doctors were reportedly radicalised through online channels such as Telegram and through trips to countries like Turkey. Funds were allegedly raised under the guise of social or charitable causes.

Al-Falah University, a private university in Faridabad, Haryana, established in 2014 by the Al-Falah Charitable Trust, is headed by Jawad Ahmad Siddiqui, chairman-cum-chancellor of Al-Falah University and founder of the Al-Falah Group. While it aims to provide "quality education, promote research, and prepare students for successful careers" and is officially recognised by the University Grants Commission, it has been a hub of Kashmiri doctors involved in terror.

White-collar terrorists are certainly not new in the Kashmir Valley. One classic case is Yasin Malik, head of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), who spearheaded separatist ideology and violent activities in the Valley since 1988, when the term 'white-collar terror' was not current. He was the mastermind behind the purging of Kashmiri Pandits and was responsible for their genocide and the exodus of at least 400,000 from the Kashmir Valley. He and his colleagues were known to boast about murdering Indian Air Force officers and many innocent non-Muslims. After all that, they masqueraded as 'separatists' and enjoyed being hosted at taxpayers' expense by Congress governments.

It should also not be forgotten that political leaders ruling J&K were responsible for allowing the massacre and purge of the Kashmiri Pandits and who, after five years of the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A, got elected again in 2024 by the decision of the Supreme Court, and are ruling at a time when Pakistani terrorists massacred tourists in Pahalgam, with their presence being known to and accommodated by local shopkeepers and pony operators.

A vital course correction for India's security by New Delhi, albeit very right-wing sounding, should be:

(a) reverting J&K to long-term President's Rule;

(b) ensuring long-term, organised, and effective de-radicalisation;

(c) increasing permanent Army presence in the Kashmir Valley and hinterland, with many more cantonments; and

(d) ensuring that elections are held in J&K only when there are sufficient Kashmiri Pandit and/or Dogra candidates.

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## PIC TALK

An artist performing at the Divya Kala Mela on Kartavya Path, near India Gate, New Delhi.

PHOTO: PANKAJ KUMAR

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# Justice delayed leaves truth unanswered still

ASHA IYER KUMAR

2ND OPINION
THE PIONEER

Justice is an elusive and often ambiguous idea. It does not always arrive where one expects it to, nor does it consistently side with those who have been grievously wronged. At times, it appears to favour individuals widely perceived as guilty in the court of public opinion, yet declared "not guilty" within the strict confines of the law.

This uneasy tension between moral certainty and legal outcome came sharply into focus in Kerala this week, when a prominent actor was acquitted of criminal conspiracy in the 2017 abduction and rape case involving another actor. The verdict triggered an outpouring of anger across social media and public forums in the state. Many viewed the acquittal as a stain on the country's judicial system, a moment that seemed to reaffirm public cynicism about the ability of institutions to deliver justice in cases involving wealth, influence, and power. Accusations flew thick and fast — some openly asserting that money and clout had tilted the scales, quietly seeping into the crevices of a system meant to safeguard truth and fairness. Enough rage has been vented over what many see as the irony of the judgment, and it will likely remain one of the most telling examples of how a high-profile case can unravel over time. For eight long years, the matter lingered in court.

While it is true that truth, in law, must be established through evidence alone — and, viewed strictly through that prism, the acquittal followed established legal principles — the larger question cannot be ignored. When justice is delayed for nearly a decade, it ceases to be justice in any meaningful sense. In such cases, delay itself becomes a denial of the victim's fundamental right.

Memories fade, narratives shift, and pressure — subtle or otherwise — begins to reshape testimony. In this case, several witnesses who once provided critical statements later turned hostile. Of the 261 witnesses examined, 28 reversed their earlier accounts. How much truth was lost in that erosion is impossible to measure, but its impact on the outcome is undeniable. Such reversals are not uncommon in trials involving influential accused persons, and they point to a systemic vulnerability that the justice system has yet to adequately address. While there may be no legal proof establishing intimidation or directly implicating the accused as a conspirator, the manner in which the crime was executed and subsequently handled makes it difficult to accept that it was a random act. The precision of the crime and the subsequent disintegration of the prosecution's case suggest manipulation so thorough that it left the state with little to sustain a conviction.

For the public — largely excluded from the complexities of legal procedure and the unseen forces that can shape a trial — the only option is reluctant acceptance of the verdict. There is some consolation in knowing that higher courts remain open should the survivor choose to pursue the matter further, with the hope that proceedings there may be swifter and more resolute. Yet a deep unease lingers. When crimes appear to be softened by power and privilege, it breeds fear and insecurity. It sends a chilling message that truth can be weakened by neglect, delay, or influence, and that the law may not always protect the vulnerable. The anger provoked by the Ernakulam court's verdict may eventually fade, but the questions it raises will endure. At the heart of this legal and moral dilemma stands a woman whose struggle for justice and dignity remains painfully unresolved.

The writer is a Dubai-based author, columnist, independent journalist and children's writing coach

## FOREIGN CAMPUSES EXPOSE NEGLECT OF INDIA'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

The entry of foreign universities into India marks a significant shift in the country's higher education landscape, but it also exposes a worrying lack of confidence in public, government run institutions.

While foreign campuses may reduce foreign exchange outflow and offer international exposure, their high fees, absence of reservation policies, and limited geographical reach will largely benefit a privileged minority. More fundamentally, the policy raises an uncomfortable question: is India's education system truly incapable of reform, or has it simply suffered from prolonged neglect? Public universities, despite chronic underfunding, faculty shortages and infrastructure constraints, continue to educate the overwhelming majority of students and remain vital spaces for social mobility, inclusion and diversity. They produce teachers, researchers, administrators and professionals who sustain the country's economic and democratic life.

Instead of importing exclusivity under the banner of globalisation, the government must prioritise strengthening domestic institutions. Meaningful reform requires sustained public investment, academic autonomy, transparent governance and respect for constitutional values such as equity and access. Without this, foreign universities will remain islands of privilege, while the foundational system that serves millions continues to erode, undermining education as a public good.

KYAMUDIN ANSARI | MUMBAI

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com.
In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Parliamentary praise for Ladakh institute

The Himalayan Institute of Alternatives, HIAL, founded by Ladakh educator and innovator Sonam Wangchuk, has received strong praise from a Parliamentary panel, which described its work as exemplary and urged the University Grants Commission to grant long pending recognition. In its report, the Standing Committee on Education, Women, Youth and Sports, chaired by Congress Member of Parliament Digvijaya Singh, expressed concern that HIAL's application for recognition has remained unresolved for years despite the institute's growing academic stature and international acclaim. The committee said it was impressed by HIAL's distinctive academic ecosystem, which blends education, research and entrepreneurship while remaining rooted in the region's socio cultural and ecological realities. It highlighted the institute's emphasis on experiential and project based learning, noting that HIAL reflects the spirit of the National Education Policy 2020.

The panel noted HIAL's impact on local communities and its global recognition through initiatives such as ice stupas and sustained community engagement. Despite administrative challenges, the report presents HIAL as a beacon of educational innovation deserving recognition and wider national adoption.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

### Messi event signals administrative failure

The chaotic collapse of Lionel Messi's Kolkata appearance is a sobering reminder that celebrity spectacle without professional planning can quickly turn into a public hazard. Tens of thousands of fans paid exorbitant prices in good faith, only to be denied even a fleeting and dignified glimpse of the footballer they idolise. What followed, vandalism, pitch invasion and panic, was not spontaneous behaviour but the predictable outcome of gross mismanagement.

Events of such scale demand meticulous crowd control, transparent communication and realistic expectations. Instead, Messi's brief appearance was overwhelmed by VIPs and selfie seekers, while paying spectators were left confused and frustrated. The abrupt withdrawal of players without explanation deepened the sense of betrayal. That even experienced administrators and security forces were overwhelmed speaks volumes about the organisers' lack of preparedness. Damage to a stadium refurbished with public funds and risks to lives make this more than an entertainment fiasco. Accountability must be fixed, refunds ensured and criminal negligence examined. India's sporting ambitions will ring hollow unless professionalism, transparency and respect for fans are strictly enforced.

SANJAY CHOPRA | MOHALI

### Centralisation threatens higher education

The Cabinet's approval of the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhikshan Bill is being presented as reform, yet it reveals a troubling obsession with centralisation in higher education governance. Replacing the University Grants Commission, AICTE and NCTE with a single regulator ignores India's deeper crisis of chronic underfunding, faculty shortages, rural exclusion and shrinking academic freedom. Separating funding from regulation while retaining ministerial control invites political interference and weakens university autonomy.

Centralised uniform standards will disproportionately harm small and rural institutions, pushing many towards closure or privatisation. Genuine reform requires trust in universities, sustained public investment and transparent, accountable governance. India's higher education system needs empowerment, not another top down, one size fits all experiment that rewards administrative control over quality, equity and intellectual freedom. Students and teachers deserve meaningful investment, institutional autonomy and academic accountability, rather than cosmetic restructuring and symbolic renaming of regulatory bodies that fail to address foundational structural problems affecting access, excellence and inclusion nationwide.

VIJAYKUMAR H K | RAICHUR

# Remembering Chandan Mitra: Mentor, visionary, and friend

**In an industry often marred by sensationalism, Chandan championed balanced reporting, reminding us that journalism's true power lies in informing, not inflaming. Beyond his professional acumen, he was a multifaceted personality — a politician, historian and cultural enthusiast**

FIRST Column

PROF (DR) K G SURESH

DR. CHANDAN MITRA
(12 DEC 1954-01 SEPT 2021)

As I sit down to pen this tribute (my first column after his demise) on the occasion of Chandan Mitra's birth anniversary, my thoughts drift back to the man who shaped not just Indian journalism but also impacted the lives of countless journalists like me. Born on December 12, 1955, Chandan would have turned 70 this year, a milestone that feels both poignant and unreal in his absence. He left us on September 1, 2021, at the age of 66, but his legacy endures like the enduring ink of a well-crafted editorial.

My association with Chandan Da was both as a columnist with *The Pioneer*, where he served as the Editor and Managing Director for many years and as General Secretary of the Indian Media Centre (IMC), an organisation focused on media training and skill upgradation, led by him as Chairman. There, we collaborated on initiatives aimed at strengthening grassroots journalism, a cause close to both our hearts.

Chandan's journey into journalism was nothing short of illustrious, marked by academic excellence and a relentless pursuit of truth. A product of Kolkata's La Martiniere School, he went on to graduate from St Stephen's College, Delhi University, before earning a Master's and a DPhil from Oxford University. His scholarly background infused his journalism with depth and rigor, setting him apart in an era when reporting often prioritized speed over substance.

Starting his career at *The Statesman* in Kolkata, Chandan quickly rose through the ranks, moving to *The Times of India* in Delhi and then to the *Hindustan Times*, where he served as Executive Editor. But it was at *The Pioneer*, which he joined in 1993 and eventually led as editor and managing director, that he truly left his mark. Under his stewardship, *The Pioneer* transformed from a regional newspaper into a national voice known for its bold editorials, investigative reporting, and commitment to ethical journalism.

As a senior journalist with experience in broadcast and print media, I had contributed to various outlets, but writing for *The Pioneer* under Chandan's guidance was a defining phase. He had a knack for spotting potential in young and mid-career journalists, encouraging us to push boundaries while maintaining journalistic integrity. I remember submitting columns on socio-political issues, and Chandan would often call me personally to discuss nuances — sometimes challenging my views, other times refining them with his sharp insights. His feedback was never condescending; it was always aimed at elevating the discourse.

ON THIS DAY, I RAISE A SILENT TOAST TO MY FRIEND AND MENTOR. MAY HIS VISION FOR A VIBRANT, ETHICAL, AND INCLUSIVE MEDIA CONTINUE TO GUIDE US. REST IN PEACE, CHANDAN — YOU ARE MISSED, BUT NEVER FORGOTTEN

In an industry often marred by sensationalism, Chandan championed balanced reporting, reminding us that journalism's true power lies in informing, not inflaming. Our collaboration extended beyond *The Pioneer* to the Indian Media Center initiatives, particularly through events and programs at IIMC, where I later served as Director General. IIMC, with its focus on training and skill upgradation for aspiring journalists, especially from grassroots levels, aligned perfectly with Chandan's vision for a more inclusive media ecosystem.

He was a frequent panelist and guest at IIMC events, sharing his experiences on topics ranging from the evolution of Indian language journalism to the challenges of digital media. One memorable occasion was a panel discussion on journalism ethics, where Chandan delved into how media could empower rural and underserved communities. He emphasized the need for skill-building programs that went beyond urban elites, advocating for training modules that equipped journalists from small towns with tools for investigative reporting and multimedia storytelling. Often me and IMC Founder and veteran journalist late Shyam Khosla would admire the manner in which Chandan, unlike people of his stature and with hectic work schedules, would spend days together at our meetings in Chandigarh and other cities discussing how to empower content wise and technologically the journalists working in small towns and districts.

Chandan's commitment to grassroots journalism was not mere rhetoric; it was action-oriented. At *The Pioneer*, he initiated coverage of underreported stories from India's hinterlands, giving voice to issues like rural development, tribal rights, and local governance. This approach resonated with the ethos of IMC's training programs, which aim to bridge the gap between metropolitan media and regional realities. He was also a passionate advocate for the soft power of Indian cinema, and was amongst the first to dedicate space in any mainstream newspaper to discussions linked to the industry. During our joint sessions, we discussed strategies to integrate digital literacy into journalism curricula, recognizing that the rise of social media demanded new skills for fact-checking and ethical online reporting. Chandan often shared anecdotes from his early days, illustrating how grassroots stories could influence national policy. He whole heartedly supported our demand for a National Register for Working Journalists, expanding the scope of Press Council of India to a wider Media Council of India and giving the ombudsman more teeth to enforce its mandate and fixing a minimum qualification for scribes. Later, as Vice Chancellor of Makhanlal Chaturvedi National University of Journalism and Communication, Bhopal, I tried to take forward Chandan's dream by facilitating meetings between a high level delegation of Press Council of India led by Prof J S Rajput with local journalists and media educators for determining a minimum qualification for journalists in the backdrop of untrained and so called Citizen Journalists peddling fake news, misinformation and disinformation and thereby causing incalculable damage to the credibility of mainstream media.

Beyond his professional acumen, Chandan was a multifaceted personality—a politician, historian, and cultural enthusiast. Nominated to the Rajya Sabha twice by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2003 and 2010, he later joined the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in 2018. His political journey reflected his ideological flexibility and deep understanding of India's diverse socio-political fabric. As a parliamentarian, he contributed to debates on media freedom, education, and cultural heritage, often drawing from his journalistic roots. I recall him speaking passionately about preserving India's linguistic diversity in journalism, a theme that echoed in our IIMC collaborations. He was very supportive when I introduced Marathi, Malayalam, Urdu and Sanskrit courses at the Institute.

On a personal level, Chandan was warm, witty, and incredibly generous with his time. Despite his busy schedule, he mentored many, including me, during transitional phases in our careers. When I moved from active journalism to media education, Chandan was one of the first to encourage me, saying, "Suresh, teaching the next generation is the ultimate form of journalism — it's about passing the torch." His words stuck with me as I took on roles at IIMC and later at institutions like IIMC and Apeejay Institute of Mass Communication. He believed that journalism wasn't just a profession but a public service, and his life exemplified that. Chandan's impact on Indian media is immeasurable. He revived The Pioneer during turbulent times, expanding its reach and introducing innovative formats that blended print with emerging digital trends. His editorials were incisive, often critiquing power structures while advocating for democratic values. In fact, I vividly remember him telling me that financially managing a newspaper was a huge challenge and he was never interested in becoming a proprietor "but circumstances, the prospects of my journalist and non journalist colleagues losing their jobs, prompted me to take up this challenge."

In politics, he bridged the gap between media and governance, using his platform to highlight issues like press freedom and cultural preservation. Tributes poured in after his passing, from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to fellow journalists, underscoring his role in nurturing young talent. The Rajya Sabha even paid homage to him in November 2021, recognizing his contributions as a former MP and Editor.

In the context of grassroots journalism, Chandan's work at The Pioneer and his engagements with training bodies like IMC were pioneering. He supported programs that trained journalists in regional languages, ensuring that stories from India's villages reached national audiences. Today, as media faces challenges from misinformation and digital disruption, his emphasis on skill upgradation feels more relevant than ever. I often reflect on our discussions about integrating technology into journalism education — ideas that have influenced modern curricula at institutions across India. As we mark this anniversary, I am reminded of Chandan's enduring spirit. He was a man of many seasons: journalist, politician, scholar, and above all, a humanist.

His death snapped long-standing friendships, as noted by colleagues like Swapan Dasgupta, who remembered their bond dating back to 1966. For me, Chandan was a guiding light in a profession that demands both courage and compassion. His initiatives at the Indian Media Center — through panels, workshops, and advocacy — helped democratize journalism. In closing, Chandan Mitra's legacy is not confined to headlines or parliamentary records; it lives in the journalists he inspired, the stories he amplified, and the institutions he strengthened. On this day, I raise a silent toast to my friend and mentor. May his vision for a vibrant, ethical, and inclusive media continue to guide us. Rest in peace, Chandan — you are missed, but never forgotten.

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# India's missing digital infrastructure: Why a tech Superpower still imports Computer

KRISHNA V GIRI
PAYAL SETH

India generates close to one-fifth of the world's digital data yet hosts barely 2–3 per cent of global data-centre capacity. The result is stark: a country that creates the digital exhaust of 1.4 billion people depends heavily on infrastructure physically located elsewhere. Our firms, start-ups and even public systems increasingly rely on computing outside India's borders.

The global comparison is sobering (see Figure 1). Switzerland, with under ten million people, operates over a hundred data centres, while India, with 1.4 billion, has only around 150. That is roughly a hundred-fold gap on a per-capita basis. The paradox is that India, the world's software factory, is still a compute importer.

Our domestic capacity today is about 1.2 gigawatts (GW) and is projected to rise to 2 GW by 2026 and 9 GW by 2032. These are healthy growth numbers, yet they remain modest relative to our digital footprint, and as AI workloads surge, the deficit will deepen unless compute is treated as national infrastructure.

## The Job Question and the Real Economic Multiplier

It is easy to dismiss data centres as "job-poor". Indeed, a typical 100 MW facility might sustain only around 50 long-term operational jobs and approximately 500 construction roles during its build phase. But this narrow view ignores the broader ecosystem they anchor: power infrastructure, fibre connectivity, cooling systems, server manufacturing and high-skilled services. The surrounding economic activity is expected to exceed ₹50,000 crore by FY 2027. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh, a ₹4,500-crore facility (by Adani Group and Google) is projected to create over 16,000 direct and indirect jobs, and a broader renewables-plus-data-centre cluster could add over 70,000 indirect jobs.

If India reaches 9 GW by 2032, even conservative multipliers imply tens of thousands of direct construction jobs, several thousand high-skill permanent roles and many times that number in the wider ecosystem spanning equipment, power, cooling, connectivity and services. That is not labour-intensive in the way textiles are, but it is deeply consequential for state economies looking to anchor clusters of high-wage activity.

## How India Built the Wrong Architecture

India entered the data-centre era early but built the wrong model. Beginning in 2006, government funding created State Data Centres (SDCs) with a ₹1,623-crore outlay to host e-governance workloads. They replaced scattered server rooms but were designed for kilowatt-scale loads — not the tens of megawatts modern workloads need. Managed as government IT assets rather than industrial platforms, they remain closed to private demand. India essentially built small server rooms and mistook them for a compute strategy.

## The Policy Flip-Flop That Followed

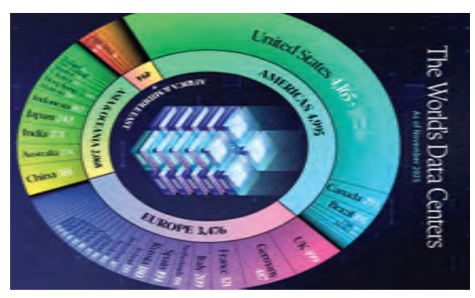
Regulatory shifts deepened investor uncertainty. The 2018 Srikrishna Committee recommended storing a copy of all personal data in India and designating some as "critical", to be stored exclusively onshore. This signalled a strong localisation push and could have guaranteed domestic demand. But the 2023 law took the opposite approach: most cross-border transfers are allowed unless countries are blacklisted. Investors, expecting guaranteed local demand, faced years of ambiguity followed by a diluted regime. The result was predictable: hesitation and slow capacity growth.

## A Compute Hub Emerges on the East Coast

Against this backdrop, Visakhapatnam (Vizag) demonstrates what a coherent ecosystem can achieve. A planned US$15-billion investment, including a subsea cable landing and gigawatt-scale compute capacity, aims to position Vizag as a regional gateway. Andhra Pradesh targets 6 GW in five years, with 1.6 GW already committed. The vision includes Google's largest India data centre and major renewable-energy integration. Andhra Pradesh's IT Minister has separately articulated a vision of Visakhapatnam as "India's Data City". While many states—Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Telangana—have data-centre policies offering tariff waivers and land subsidies, the absence of a national framework risks a race to the bottom. States compete on incentives but lack coordination on grid integration, cooling standards, renewable-energy tie-ups and geographic distribution.

## A Coherent National Strategy

India's compute transition will not happen by accident. It requires three deliberate shifts. First, treat data centres as core national infrastructure: link incentives to efficiency, water use and renewable PPAs. Second, adopt a national spatial strategy: coast to inland, cable-landing hubs to high-voltage corridors. Third, shift the state from operator to enabler: provide land, trunk infrastructure and clearances; let private capital build and run to global standards.




## The Energy Constraint: Why Green Is Not Optional

Finally, no credible data-centre strategy can ignore energy. One expects data centres to consume nearly 30 per cent of national electricity in a decade. India's share today is modest, around 0.8 per cent of total electricity demand, rising to 2.6 per cent by 2030. But the grid is weaker and reliability uneven. One megawatt of IT load requires roughly 1.2-1.5 megawatts of grid power, depending on efficiency.

Without pairing new capacity with dedicated renewable generation, the sector risks public backlash in a country where many households still face outages. The only durable solution is to structurally couple new data-centre capacity with new renewable-energy projects. For instance, Madhya Pradesh's agreement with Submer Technologies is to develop up to 1 GW of energy-efficient, immersion-cooled, AI-ready data centres with up to 45 per cent energy savings and 90% water conservation relative to conventional designs. Another good example of the model India needs is Greenko's 1,680 MW pumped-storage hydropower project at Pinnapuram in Andhra Pradesh, one of the largest of its kind globally. By pairing long-duration storage with solar and wind, it functions as a round-the-clock clean-energy backbone.

## The Stakes

The next decade will be defined not by who writes the algorithms, but by who owns the infrastructure that runs them. If India remains a talent exporter but a compute importer, it will capture only a fragment of the value the AI era creates. We already generate the data. We already have the developers. What we lack is the infrastructure, the strategy and the execution strength to convert that into sovereign compute power.

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Krishna V Giri. Distinguished Fellow & Special Advisor to the Chairperson and Payal Seth, Fellow. Both are at Pahle India Foundation
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# The high-technology turn in India–Russia relations

PRIYA GUPTA

President Vladimir Putin's 4-5 December visit to India has often been interpreted through conventional lenses such as energy supplies, defence transactions and routine diplomatic signalling. Putin described India as "a unique civilisation and a trusted partner," a sentiment that framed the tone of his visit and underscored why technological cooperation now sits at the centre of the relationship. "India has shown remarkable stability and responsible leadership," he observed in the interview.

India's emergence as the world's fifth-largest economy, with credible projections of becoming the third largest by 2027, forms the backdrop to this renewed engagement. A median age of twenty-eight strengthens India's long-term capacity in digital innovation, advanced computing and scientific research. Bilateral trade with Russia has now crossed sixty-five billion dollars. A large part of this increase came from the shift in energy sourcing, with Russian crude rising from one per cent of India's imports in 2021 to more than thirty-five per cent today. This shift generated savings estimated to be between five and six billion dollars in the last financial year.

Defence cooperation remains substantial. Russia continues to supply a significant share of India's military equipment, and a large proportion of India's defence platforms still depend on Russian technical ecosystems. The digital economy is projected to reach one trillion dollars by 2030. India has become the third-largest hub of global AI talent. Unlike earlier engagements that were centred on defence procurement and hydrocarbons, this visit placed technology at the forefront of bilateral priorities.

## From Buyer and Seller to Joint Innovators

As he put it in the interview, Russia does not "simply sell weapons to India; we share technologies," a remark that reveals how Moscow now views India as a long-term co-developer rather than a downstream recipient.

Putin's interview reflects an important shift in Russia's approach to India. He stated that Russia seeks to share technology with India rather than remain a supplier of equipment. The principle of joint development is now extending beyond defence into artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, space systems, nuclear research and advanced materials. These sectors jointly form a coherent Indo-Russian technology corridor. It represents a move from a transactional relationship to one grounded in shared knowledge creation and scientific confidence. For India, this aligns closely with the pursuit of technological sovereignty and long-term strategic autonomy.

## Artificial Intelligence and the New East-Eurasian Axis

Artificial intelligence is one of the clearest areas where the benefits of collaboration are visible. India contributes nearly sixteen per cent of global AI talent and hosts more than nine hundred AI-based start-ups. Its digital public infrastructure, which includes Aadhaar, UPI and DigiLocker, provides a fertile environment for designing and deploying large-scale AI systems. Russia adds strengths derived from several decades of scientific investment. When combined, these capacities give the partnership the ability to build independent AI architectures without relying on Western technological ecosystems.

## Quantum Technologies as a Transformative Frontier

Quantum science is another domain in which cooperation could deliver long-term advantages. India's National Quantum Mission, supported by significant public investment, aims to build national capacity in quantum communication, quantum computing and advanced materials. Russia already possesses strong foundations in quantum physics and superconducting materials. Joint projects could include Quantum Key Distribution satellites, secure post-quantum communication protocols, shared quantum laboratories and hardware accelerators for high-performance computing.

## Space Cooperation for Renewed Strategic Depth

India and Russia have a long history of collaboration in space. The recent visit opens the possibility of a much more expansive programme. Potential areas of cooperation include joint lunar exploration building upon India's Chandrayaan missions, propulsion systems for deep-space mobility and a coordinated navigation architecture through NavIC and GLONASS. This functions as a form of national infrastructure that influences communication, logistics, defence readiness and economic planning.

Please read the complete article online at https://www.dailypioneer.com

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# US envoys arrive in Berlin for Ukraine peace talks

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Berlin

US envoys arrived in Berlin on Sunday morning for another round of talks intended to secure a deal to end the war in Ukraine.

US President Donald Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner were spotted in downtown Berlin by a photographer for the German news agency dpa.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that Ukrainian, US and European officials will hold a series of meetings in Berlin in the coming days.

"Most importantly, I will be meeting with envoys of President Trump, and there will also be meetings with our European partners, with many leaders, concerning the foundation of peace — a political agreement to end the war," Zelenskyy said in an address to the nation late Saturday.

Washington has tried for months to navigate the demands of each side as Trump presses for a swift end to Russia's war and grows increasingly exasperated by delays. The search for possible compromises has run into major obstacles, including control of Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, which is mostly occupied by Russian forces, and security guarantees for Ukraine.

"The chance is considerable at this moment, and it matters for our every city, for our every Ukrainian community," Zelenskyy said. "We are working to ensure that peace for Ukraine is dignified, and to secure a guarantee — a guarantee, above all — that Russia will not return to Ukraine for a third invasion." Russian President Vladimir Putin has demanded that Ukraine withdraw its forces from the part of the Donetsk region still under its control and abandon its bid to join NATO, among the key conditions for peace — demands Kyiv has rejected.

Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov told the business daily Kommersant that Russian police and national guard troops would stay in parts of eastern Ukraine's Donbas even if they become a demilitarised zone under a prospective peace plan — a demand likely to be rejected by Ukraine as US-led negotiations drag on.

Ushakov warned that a search for compromise could take a long time, noting that the US proposals that took into account Russian demands had been "worsened" by alterations proposed by Ukraine and its European allies. "We don't know what changes they are making, but clearly they aren't for the better," Ushakov said, adding: "We will strongly insist on our considerations."

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, who has spearheaded European efforts to support Ukraine alongside French President Emmanuel Macron and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, said Saturday that "the decades of the Pax Americana are largely over for us in Europe and for us in Germany as well."

He warned that Putin's aim is "a fundamental change to the borders in Europe, the restoration of the old Soviet Union within its borders." "If Ukraine falls, he won't stop," Merz warned on Saturday during a party conference in Munich. Putin has denied plans to restore the Soviet Union or attack any European allies.

As peace efforts continued, Russia and Ukraine exchanged another round of aerial attacks.

Ukraine's air force said overnight that Russia launched ballistic missiles and 138 attack drones at Ukraine. In its daily report, the air force said 110 had been intercepted or downed, but missile and drone hits were recorded at six locations. Zelenskyy said Sunday that hundreds of thousands of families were still without power in the south, east and north-east regions and work was continuing to restore electricity, heat and water to multiple regions following a large-scale attack the previous night. The Ukrainian president said that in the past week, Russia had launched over 1,500 strike drones, nearly 900 guided aerial bombs and 46 missiles of various types at Ukraine.

"Ukraine needs peace on decent terms, and we are ready to work as constructively as possible. These days will be filled with diplomacy. It's very important that it brings results," Zelenskyy said.

Russia's Defence Ministry said that air defences downed 235 Ukrainian drones late Saturday and early Sunday. In the Belgorod region, a drone injured a man and set his house ablaze in the village of Yasnye Zori, regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said.

Ukrainian drones struck an oil depot in Uryupinsk in the Volgograd region, triggering a fire, according to the regional governor, Andrei Bocharov.

In the Krasnodar region, the Ukrainian drones attacked the town of Afipsky, where an oil refinery is located. The authorities said that explosions shattered windows in residential buildings, but didn't report any damage to the refinery.

## FROM THE WORLD

**PAIKISTAN**

### Army kills three TTP terrorists

Three terrorists associated with the banned terror outfit Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan were killed in an intelligence-based operation in northwest Pakistan's restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, police said on Sunday. The operation was conducted in the area close to the Pak-Afghan border in Bajaur district after the reported presence of the terrorists. The terrorists were involved in various subversive activities like attacks on security forces, police, and IED blasts. The security forces seized a huge cache of arms and ammunition from the possession of the terrorists after the operation. The police cordoned off the area and launched a search operation. Pakistan continues to reel under terrorism with a surge of 25 per cent terror incidents in 2025.

**SOUTH AFRICA**

### Indian killed in temple collapse

A 52-year-old Indian-origin man is among four people killed after a four-storey Hindu temple under construction collapsed in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, officials have said. The New Ahobilam Temple of Protection, situated on a steep hill in Redcliffe in north of eThekwini , was being expanded when a section of the building gave way on Friday while workers were on site. The exact number of workers and temple officials believed to be trapped beneath tonnes of rubble is unknown. While two people, a construction worker and a devotee, were confirmed dead on friday, the death toll rose to four on Saturday after rescue teams recovered more bodies. Of the four deceased, one has been identified as Vickey Jairaj Panday, an executive member of the temple trust and manager of the construction project.

# Cambodian rocket fire caused its first civilian death, says Thailand

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Kantharalak (Thailand)

A village security volunteer splashing water to control a fire at a house after what a Thai soldier said was a Cambodian artillery strike in the area in Sisaket province, Thailand AP

Thailand's Government said a rocket attack from Cambodia on Sunday killed a 63-year-old villager, its first civilian death reported as a direct result of combat over the past week along the border of the two Southeast Asian nations.

Both countries confirmed that large-scale fighting, which was set off by a skirmish on December 7 that wounded two Thai soldiers, continued Sunday. The two sides are battling over long-standing competing claims to patches of frontier land, some of which contain centuries-old temple ruins.

More than two dozen people on both sides of the border have officially been reported killed in the past week's fighting, while more than half a million have been displaced.

Reporters from The Associated Press arrived at the scene of Sunday's rocket impact in Sisaket province's Kantharalak District about 10 minutes after it hit. They witnessed the body of a man totally wrapped in bandages being put on a stretcher that was taken to an ambulance.

A house a couple of hundred metres away was in flames, with village volunteers attempting to put out the fire with buckets of water. A piece of shrapnel believed to be from the same rocket was embedded nearby in the road.

The victim, identified as Don Patchapan, was killed in the heart of a residential area near a school, according to a Thai Army statement.

Thai Government spokesperson Siripong Angkasakulkiat condemned Cambodia for deliberately firing into civilian areas, saying that such an action was "cruel and inhumane".

Cambodia has deployed truck-mounted BM-21 rocket launchers with a range of 30-40 km. Each can fire up to 40 rockets at a time but cannot be precisely targeted. They have landed largely in areas from where most people have already been evacuated. Thai authorities say Cambodia has launched thousands of the rockets on virtually a daily basis.

Thailand, meanwhile, has been carrying out airstrikes with its fighter planes, with Cambodia saying the bombing continued on Sunday. Both sides have employed drones for surveillance and delivering bombs.

The Thai military has acknowledged 15 of its troops have died during the fighting, and estimated Sunday that there have been at least 221 fatalities among Cambodian soldiers.

Cambodia denounced the Thai count of its dead as disinformation but has not yet acknowledged any military casualties. It has said at least 11 civilians have been killed and more than six dozen wounded.

Cambodia Prime Minister Hun Manet delivered a morale-boosting message to his countrymen on Sunday, writing on social media that he is proud to see this nation's strength "in this situation where our country is facing difficulties due to aggression from neighbouring countries".

The new fighting derailed a ceasefire promoted by US President Donald Trump that ended five days of earlier combat in July. It had been brokered by Malaysia and pushed through by pressure from Trump, who threatened to withhold trade privileges unless Thailand and Cambodia agreed.

It was formalised in more detail in October at a regional meeting in Malaysia that Trump attended.

Trump announced this past Friday that the two countries had agreed at his urging to renew the ceasefire, but Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul denied making any commitment and Cambodia announced it was continuing to fight in what it said is self-defense.

A Thai Navy warship in the Gulf of Thailand joined the fighting on Saturday morning, trading fire with guns based in Cambodia's southwestern province of Koh Kong.

# UK hikes security near Jewish sites after attack in Australia

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
London

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer condemned the terrorist attack at Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia, as he confirmed increased vigilance around Jewish sites across the country on Sunday.

The attack in Sydney was earlier described by Australian authorities as a terrorist attack targeted at members of the Jewish community celebrating the holy festival of Hanukkah, or Chanukah, at the time of the shooting. The Metropolitan Police in London issued a statement in solidarity soon after, reiterating plans to bolster security around synagogues. "The news that the Bondi beach attack was an antisemitic terrorist attack against Jewish families at a Chanukah event is sickening," said Starmer.

"My thoughts are with the victims and their families. The United Kingdom will always stand with Australia and the Jewish community. We are actively working with the Community Security Trust (CST) on the policing of Chanukah events," he said.

New South Wales Premier Chris Minns said two individuals fired on a "crowded group of families" at the park in a "cowardly act of terrifying violence". At least 11 fatalities and 29 injuries have been reported from the site of the attack, categorised by Australian officials as a "terrorist incident".

"While the details of the incident continue to emerge, the Australian authorities have now confirmed that the target was a Hanukkah gathering taking place on Bondi Beach," the Met Police said in a statement. We were already working closely with partners, including the Community Security Trust, to provide an increased presence around synagogues and other community venues at this important time.

# Jaishankar meets European, UK, Egyptian counterparts in UAE

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Dubai

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar with Belgium Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Maxime Prevot in Dubai PTI

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has met with his counterparts from Europe, the UK and Egypt on the sidelines of a high-level international summit in the United Arab Emirates(UAE), where leaders and policymakers gathered to discuss key geopolitical and security challenges.

In a social media post on Saturday, Jaishankar said "it was great to be" with Luxembourg's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Xavier Bettel, Poland's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, and Latvia's Foreign Minister Baiba Braze.The minister was in the UAE capital Abu Dhabi to attend the three-day Sir Bani Yas Forum 2025, which concluded on Sunday.

Jaishankar also met UK Deputy Prime Minister David Lammy on the sidelines of the summit. "Good to see UK DPM @DavidLammy on the sidelines of Sir Bani Yas Forum 2025," he said in another social media post.

In another meeting, the External Affairs Minister said it was "nice to catch up" with Egypt's Foreign Minister Dr Badr Abdelatty.

Sir Bani Yas Forum is an annual platform that brings together global leaders, ministers and experts to deliberate on regional and international issues.

# Anti-immigrant rhetoric across Europe

ASSOCIATED PRESS
London

In the past year, tens of thousands hostile to immigrants marched through London chanting "send them home!" A British lawmaker complained of seeing too many non-white faces on TV. And senior politicians advocated the deportation of longtime UK residents born abroad.

The overt demonisation of immigrants and those with immigrant roots is intensifying in the UK — and across Europe — as migration shoots up the political agenda and right-wing parties gain popularity.

In several European countries, political parties that favour mass deportations and depict immigration as a threat to national identity come at or near the top of opinion polls: Reform UK, the Alliance for Germany and France's National Rally.

IMMIGRATION HAS RISEN DRAMATICALLY OVER THE PAST DECADE IN SOME EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

President Donald Trump, who recently called Somali immigrants in the US "garbage" and whose national security strategy depicts European countries as threatened by immigration, appears to be endorsing and emboldening Europe's coarse, anti-immigrant sentiments. Amid the rising tensions, Europe's mainstream parties are taking a harder line on migration and at times using divisive language about race.

"What were once dismissed as being at the far extreme end of far-right politics has now become a central part of the political debate," said Kieran Connell, a lecturer in British history at Queen's University Belfast.

Immigration has risen dramatically over the past decade in some European countries, driven in part by millions of asylum-seekers who have come to Europe fleeing conflicts in Africa, the Middle East and Ukraine.

Asylum-seekers account for a small percentage of total immigration, however, and experts say antipathy toward diversity and migration stems from a mix of factors.

Economic stagnation in the years since the 2008 global financial crisis, the rise of charismatic nationalist politicians and the polarizing influence of social media all play a role, experts say. In Britain, there is "a frightening increase in the sense of national division and decline" and that tends to push people toward political extremes, said Bobby Duffy, director of the Policy Unit at King's College London. It took root after the financial crisis, was reinforced by Britain's debate about Brexit and deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic, Duffy said. Social media has exacerbated the mood, notably on X, whose algorithm promotes divisive content and whose owner, Elon Musk, approvingly retweets far-right posts.

Across Europe, ethnonationalism has been promoted by right-wing parties such as Alliance for Germany, France's National Rally and the Fidesz party of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Now it appears to have the stamp of approval from the Trump administration, whose new national security strategy depicts Europe as a collection of countries facing "economic decline" and "civilisational erasure" because of immigration and loss of national identities.

## Three children killed as drone crashes in Pakistan

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA Peshawar

At least three children were killed and another sustained injuries when a quadcopter drone crashed into a residential area in northwest Pakistan, police said.According to initial reports, the incident occurred in the Mumand Khel area, in Bannu district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the drone fell into a populated neighbourhood late Saturday, causing casualties among children. Following the incident, residents immediately launched rescue efforts and shifted the injured child and the bodies of the deceased to a nearby hospital.Rescue and security personnel also rushed to the scene soon after the incident. Hospital authorities confirmed that the injured child is out of danger, while the bodies of the three children have been placed in the hospital morgue.

## Bangladesh foreign ministry summons Indian envoy

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA Dhaka

Bangladesh's Foreign Ministry on Sunday summoned Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma to express its "serious concern" over the "incendiary statements" made by deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina. Hasina fled to India in August last year. She was sentenced to death by a special tribunal last month after being convicted on charges of crimes against humanity. Bangladesh has been demanding her extradition. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Indian High Commissioner today to convey the Government of Bangladesh's serious concern to the Government of India for allowing fugitive Hasina to continue to make incendiary statements calling upon her supporters to engage in terrorist activities in Bangladesh, aiming to thwart the upcoming parliamentary elections," a foreign office statement said.

# Lithuania-India Relations Gain Momentum Through Trade, Aadhaar 2.0 and Cybersecurity

**ASHOKE RAJ** ■ New Delhi

In an in-depth conversation with *The Pioneer*, Lithuania Ambassador Diana Mickeviciene spoke about India-Lithuania trade dynamics, high-tech cooperation, her country's surprising role in India's proposed Aadhaar 2.0 upgrade, and the cultural bridge connecting Lithuanian and Sanskrit.

**• How do you assess the current trade relationship between India and Lithuania? Which sectors show the greatest potential for growth?**

I am happy to see the positive trade dynamics between our countries. Lithuania started from a very small base-almost ground zero. But as of 2024, our bilateral trade has crossed 300 million, which is significant for us. It is still a humble number, but what's important is the steady, stable growth, increasing annually by 20-30 per cent.

Indian exports to Lithuania were once very small, but they are now growing rapidly-by almost 40 per cent annually. Lithuanian exports to India have also grown by about 30 per cent.

Among all sectors, technology holds the greatest potential. Over the last few years, we have seen a clear rise in tech-oriented trade-engineering products, machinery, devices. Lithuania is a small but highly advanced tech economy. India is huge, fast-growing, and always expanding its digital footprint. That naturally creates complementarities.

One success story is Teltonika, a leading Lithuanian IoT company. Their devices-sensors, trackers, industrial applications-are already used across India, from mining to public transport. They've also decided to Make in India, beginning with assembly and gradually expanding.

**• Many in India are curious about Lithuania's involvement in Aadhaar 2.0. Could you explain your country's role?**

Lithuania has a very strong reputation in biometrics, robotics, and identity technologies. Our company Neurotechnology is internationally known for expertise in identity de-duplication, which prevents duplicate or fraudulent identity records.

In the case of Aadhaar 2.0, Neurotechnology has been shortlisted-along with one French and one Japanese company-for a very specific technical function: deduplication of identities, to ensure Aadhaar remains unique for every individual.

Lithuania Ambassador Diana Mickeviciene

Aadhaar is fully Indian. India rightly does not hand over a nationally sensitive system to any foreign entity. But for highly specialised components, Indian project leaders source the best global solutions. That is why Neurotechnology is among the top three companies selected. This is a de-risked, multi-vendor model.

No foreign company gets access to the full system-only to the segment they are contracted for. This protects sovereignty and privacy.

**• If Lithuanian firms excel in de-duplication, does that expertise extend to voter rolls or other identity systems as well?**

Lithuanian companies have performed voter-list de-duplication in Africa and Asia, and similar tasks in property and identity databases. These systems use high-accuracy criteria-fingerprints, retina scans, and other biometric markers. But how Aadhaar is linked to voter cards in India is not something I can comment on. Each country decides how to integrate its systems.

**• Beyond Aadhaar, which other high-tech areas can Lithuania and India collaborate in?**

Lithuania is known as the "country of lasers." We specialise in femto-second and pico-second precision lasers, used in research, manufacturing, and semiconductor industries. Indian research institutions already use our lasers, and we are keen to support India's smart manufacturing initiative.

> "We're proud to announce a significant milestone for Neurotechnology! In the latest Aadhaar 2.0 benchmark evaluation, Neurotechnology achieved the #1 ranking among all participating solutions, emerging as the top-performing technology. This recognition underscores our unwavering commitment to precision, innovation, and world-class biometric performance. The achievement was formally recognized today at the Aadhaar Head Office during the award ceremony. Building on this moment, we will be hosting a technical presentation and knowledge-sharing session in Mumbai on the 13th, where we'll highlight the capabilities, system architecture, and performance insights behind our benchmark-leading solution.This accomplishment is a testament to the dedication, expertise, and hard work of our entire team? A truly proud moment for everyone at Neurotechnology," says Lithuania Ambassador.

Cybersecurity — Lithuanian companies are very strong in this domain. For example, a Lithuanian firm designed the National Cybersecurity System of Bhutan, including its CERT. These are private companies competing globally without Government backing. Fintech — After the UK left the EU, Lithuania became the #1 fintech hub in the European Union. Despite being only a 3-million-population country, it hosts over 300 global fintech operators. This is an area of significant collaboration potential with India. Biotech & Pharma — Lithuania offers high-quality labs and research facilities at competitive costs.

We already work with several Indian pharmaceutical companies for testing and joint development.

**• If a Lithuanian company participates in Aadhaar 2.0, would it work independently or with an Indian partner?**

That depends entirely on the tender conditions. In India's case, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) is the main agency commissioned by the Government of India for Aadhaar. To speed up work and ensure the best solutions are used, they may outsource very small specialised functions to foreign partners.

Given Aadhaar's national importance, India naturally would not hand over control to any non-Indian entity. But for specific tasks that do not compromise access or privacy, collaboration is possible.

**• Lithuania and Sanskrit often appear in discussions. What is the linguistic connection between the two?**

It surprises many people, but Lithuanian is considered the closest living sister language to Sanskrit. Linguists, not diplomats, established this connection. It is a purely scientific, linguistic link.

We have published a small dictionary of 108 identical Lithuanian-Sanskrit words, and we are now preparing a much larger dictionary with scholars from both countries. As someone who studied Sanskrit at university, I can personally attest to the similarities-especially in grammar, declensions, and roots. This connection serves as a beautiful bridge between our cultures.

**• What about visas? How easy is it for Indians to travel or study in Lithuania?**

Lithuania is a Schengen country, so Schengen rules apply uniformly. Anyone with a valid Schengen visa can travel to Lithuania.

However, applicants must ensure they actually intend to visit Lithuania. Some travel agents misuse the system, which leads to visa rejections. A useful provision for travellers is the visa cascade rule, which grants longer-term visas to applicants with a consistent past travel history. On education, around 2,000 Indian students go to Lithuania every year, mainly in engineering and increasingly in other fields.

Our universities offer English-medium Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD programmes. For long-term stays, Lithuania now offers a fully online national residence permit application, valid for two years.

**• Finally, where do you see India-Lithuania ties heading in the next few years?**

We started from a small base, but the direction is upward. The future lies in technology, cybersecurity, lasers, IoT, fintech, biotech, and of course in our cultural ties through Sanskrit.

Our companies are small but highly advanced, and India is vast, innovative, and full of opportunity. It is a natural partnership.

# Russia's increasing influence and the looming threat from America are both consequences of the Trump era

**SURJIT SINGH FLORA**

Amidst a chaotic landscape of conflicts, economic sanctions, and global threats, the recent meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to India on December 4 and 5, 2025, represents a turning point in the enduring friendship between India and Russia, as well as in the broader international arena.Indeed! Prior to arriving in India, he departed from Moscow. Initially, he dismissed US President Donald Trump's 28-point peace proposal concerning the Ukraine-Russia conflict, which was presented following talks with his special envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner (Trump's son-in-law). Secondly, he commanded Russian forces to carry out a 'special military operation' against Ukraine for the second time, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The whole world is once again on the brink of war. Nations find themselves entangled in both minor and major conflicts with one another. Civil wars are also taking lives in many countries. The year 2025 was very chaotic. This year, it has become difficult to even recognize strangers. Everyone is following the policy of selfishness.The greed of the second-time elected President of the United States, Donald Trump, is not hidden from anyone; in the name of the rights of Americans, he is busy in a different game to increase his business. That is why he has made tariffs a big weapon, and it is used to attack anyone.

India has also come under the influence of this weapon. Apart from this, America's increasing tendencies toward Pakistan have also forced India to distance itself. During his first term, Trump praised Prime Minister Modi, but in his second term, he is doing everything he can to trap India, while India remains silent.

Due to these tricks of America, India's inclination towards Russia is increasing. Just a few weeks ago, Russian President Vladimir Putin came to India on a visit. During his visit, he formed numerous business partnerships, attracting the attention of the world, particularly America, which understands the significance of India. Apart from this, his own country's political opponents are not letting him live; they clearly say that the reason for India's increasing inclination towards Russia is President Trump's unnecessary strictness and wrong policies.

Due to Trump's wrong policies, we are losing a valuable friend. A photo of Putin and Modi was also shared regarding the growing India-Russia relations so that Trump's eyes can be opened.

In addition to this, Trump and the American people are deeply concerned about Russia's increasing dominance.

Trump tried very hard to stop the Russia-Ukraine war so that he could pressure Russia. For this, the support of allied countries was also taken, weapons were also given to Ukraine, and financial sanctions were also imposed, but Putin is not ready to come under pressure or stop. In fact, a week ago, Russia also openly threatened its opponents that if a war is started to suppress Russia, then in the end there will be no one left for the agreement; that is, Russia can bring destruction.

After this, NATO chief Mark Rutte warned the European allies of the alliance about the risk of a possible conflict, for which he urged all allies to intensify their defense efforts and be prepared. Expressing his concerns, Rutte warned that NATO allies could be Russia's next target in the future; we must be prepared. Speaking in Berlin, the NATO chief asserted that conflict is imminent and that Russia has returned war to Europe.

According to him, this potential conflict could be like the war that our grandparents endured. Rutte urged allies to increase defense spending and production to prevent wars witnessed by previous generations. Rutte warned that it is wrong to assume that time is on our side and that action is now.

Rutte said that Russia could be ready to use military force against NATO allies within years. The NATO chief said that Russia has fired more than 46,000 drones and missiles against Ukraine so far this year. Rutte also highlighted Russia's relations with China, describing it as a lifeline for Moscow's war efforts in Ukraine.

Apart from this, now that Trump has threatened Venezuela with a ground war, Putin has taken the front in favor of Venezuela and has announced all kinds of open support.

However, the American report, spanning 33 pages, indicates that Europe and its nations are facing a significant crisis. Consequently, it has requested that the European (NATO) allies assume their security responsibilities by 2027. If the decline of Europe persists, the continent risks losing its identity. In this context, the friendship and partnership between India and Russia will undoubtedly mark the start of a new chapter in the geographical and political history of the world.

On the other hand, the border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia is escalating in severity. Despite US President Donald Trump's recent assertion that he could resolve the conflict with a simple phone call, the present circumstances appear to be intensifying military activity along the border. The Thai Air Force conducted airstrikes in regions adjacent to Cambodia on Saturday. Based on available information, the Thai Air Force deployed two F-16 fighter jets to strike and bomb multiple sites.

The Thai Air Force actually bombed the Tamor Da area of Cambodia's western province of Battambang at 5.50 am local time. The Thai Air Force similarly attacked another nearby hotel at 5.55 am. The assaults subsequently extended to critical infrastructure. Reports indicate that the Chhey Chomnas Bridge was struck at 6.02 am, followed by another bombing of the same bridge at 6:07 am. The old Chhey Chomnas Bridge was struck at 6.12 am.

Amid the escalating tensions at the border, President Donald Trump recently asserted his ability to halt the ongoing conflict between Thailand and Cambodia. He mentioned that his involvement might bring back peace to the area.

Nonetheless, the actual situation indicates that the tensions between the two countries are intensifying instead of subsiding.Overall, Russia's increasing influence and strong ties with India and China have raised significant concerns globally, yet the misguided policies of Trump are evidently to blame for this situation.

*The author is Flora is a freelance writer and journalist who lives in Brampton, Canada*

# 6 peacekeepers killed in drone strike in Sudan

**ASSOCIATED PRESS**
■ Cairo

A drone strike hit a United Nations facility in war-torn Sudan on Saturday, killing six peacekeepers, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said. The strike hit the peacekeeping logistics base in the city of Kadugli, in the central region of Kordofan, Guterres said in a statement.

Eight other peacekeepers were wounded in the strike. All the victims are Bangladeshi nationals, serving in the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei, UNISFA. "Attacks targeting United Nations peacekeepers may constitute war crimes under international law," said Guterres, who called for those responsible for the "unjustifiable" attack to be held accountable.The Sudanese military blamed the attack on the Rapid Support Forces, RSF, a notorious paramilitary group at war with the army for the control of the country for more than two years. There was no immediate comment from the RSF.

The attack "clearly reveals the subversive approach of the rebel militia and those behind it," the military said in a statement. The military posted a video on social media showing plumes of dense black smoke over what it said was the UN facility.

The oil-rich Abyei is a disputed region between Sudan and South Sudan, and the UN mission has been deployed there since 2011 when South Sudan gained its independence from Sudan.

Guterres also called for an immediate ceasefire in Sudan to allow "a comprehensive, inclusive and Sudanese-owned political process" to settle the conflict in the northeast African country. Sudan was plunged into chaos in April 2023 when a power struggle between the military and the RSF exploded into open fighting in the capital, Khartoum, and elsewhere in the country.

The conflict has killed over 40,000 people — a figure rights groups consider a significant undercount. The fighting has recently centered on Kodrofan, particularly since the RSF took control of el-Fasher, the military's last stronghold in the western region of Darfur. The war has wrecked urban areas and has been marked by atrocities, including mass rape and ethnically motivated killings which the UN and rights groups have said amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

# India sends essential medicine to Sri Lanka

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**
■ Colombo

India on Sunday donated a 25 tonnes shipment of 17 essential medicines and over 14,200 kilograms of dry food items to Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health to help it cope better after the devastating Cyclone Ditwah, officials said.

The essential medicines and dry food items were donated on a request by Sri Lanka in wake of the catastrophic cyclone that has left over 640 dead.

Widespread flooding, landslides and severe infrastructure collapse across the island nation severely strained the country's disaster-response capacity since mid-November.

India was the first country to respond to Sri Lanka's international appeal for assistance under its Operation Sagar Bandhu.

A special Indian Airforce aircraft brought the supplies following a meeting between Health Minister Nalinda Jayathissa and the Indian High Commissioner Santosh Jha, officials said.

The same aircraft took home a team that helped Sri Lankans with a field hospital. Days after the cyclone made a landfall, India has sent a Mobile Field Hospital and over 70 medical personnel to Sri Lanka as part of its humanitarian assistance following the devastating floods and landslides triggered by Cyclone Ditwah.

"As the Indian Army Field Hospital team concludes its mission and returns home today under #OperationSagarBandhu, the Minister @NalindaJay conveyed appreciation for the team's dedicated service," the Indian High Commission said in a post on X. As much as 10 tonnes of medicines and 15 tonnes of dry rations, as requested by Colombo, "were delivered through @IAF_MCC C17 Globemaster, in which the team returned, for providing relief to affected communities," the Indian mission said in the post.

# EC demands extra security as unrest grips Bangladesh

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**
■ Dhaka

The Election Commission (EC) of Bangladesh has demanded extra security for its chief, other commissioners and officials as fresh unrest visibly gripped Bangladesh after gunmen shot an upcoming parliamentary polls candidate and frontline leader of last year's violent street movement dubbed 'July Uprising'.

"The EC has written to the Inspector General of Police (IGP) urging comprehensive security arrangements for the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), Election Commissioners (ECs), senior officials of the Election Commission Secretariat," the state-run BSS news agency reported on late Saturday.

The EC simultaneously sought the extra security for its field-level offices ahead of the 13th national election, as two of them came under attack in southeastern Lakshmipur and southwestern Pirojpur by unidentified miscreants after the announcement of the schedule for the upcoming polls on

Thursday. The commission demanded an additional escort vehicle for the CEC, while one such police escort with a vehicle was currently in place for him. It asked for round-the-clock police escorts for the four commissioners and the senior secretary. The letter said the enhanced security measures were "urgent and necessary," while EC officials said their 10 regional offices, 64 district election offices and 522 sub-district level offices would store important documents and election materials. The EC on Thursday said the upcoming parliamentary election would be held on February 12 next year, while a day later, Sharif Osman Hadi was shot from a close range in the head, critically wounding him, as he initiated his election campaign from a constituency in the capital. Critically ill former prime minister Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) simultaneously asked Muhammad Yunus' Government to provide security for all candidates in the upcoming election after the attack on Hadi, who leads a radical right-wing cultural group called Inquiab Mancha.

"We demand that the real culprit be identified immediately and brought under the law, and we call upon this Government to ensure the security of all candidates without delay," BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said.

Hadi was also a frontline leader of last year's student-led violent uprising that toppled then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League Government on August 5, 2024.

His Inquilab Mancha was also at the forefront of a campaign to disband the Awami League, which the interim Government complied with in May this year, disqualifying the party from contesting the polls.

The Government on Saturday ordered a nationwide security clampdown called 'Operation Devil Hunt 2' amid escalated fears over the law and order situation and promised to issue firearms licenses for election candidates for their own security. Home adviser (retd) Lieutenant General Jahangir Alam Chowdhury said the Government had taken steps to ensure special security for the "frontline fighters" of the July Uprising and promised to issue firearms licenses for the election candidates.

**Office of Nagar Parishad Harpalpur, District Chhatarpur (M.P.)**
Phone-(07685) 261734, Fax-(07685) 261734,, e-mailcmoharpalpur@mpurban.gov.in
No.:2135/E-T ender/2025 Harpalpur Date: 08-12-2025
**E-TENDER INVITATION NOTICE**
Online e-tenders are invited from contractors registered under the centralized registration system, who fulfill the prescribed tender eligibility criteria, for the execution of the following construction work:

| S. No. | NIT | Tender No | Work | Estimated Cost (2) | EMD (?) | Cost of T ender Form (2) | Start Date/ Last Date | Time Period |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2135 | 2025_UAD_466545 1 | Additional Construction & Maintainance Work of Existing Building for ULB office near Bus stand harpalpur | 18569951/ | 93000/ | 12500/ | From 12-12-2025 to 15-01-2026 | 10 months from the date of work order (including rainy season) |

Conditions: In case of any amendment in the N.I.T., the same shall be available on the website www.mptenders.gov.in. No separate publication in newspapers shall be made for such amendments.
President Nagar Parishad Harpalpur
Chief Municipal Officer Nagar Parishad Harpalpur

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS
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PD(36354)C

# India beat South Africa in third T20I

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Dharamsala

India's Varun Chakravarthy, left, celebrating with captain Suryakumar Yadav, second left, after taking the wicket of South Africas Donovan Ferreira during the third T20 International cricket match of a series between India and South Africa at HPCA Stadium in Dharamshala Himachal Pradesh on Sunday PTI

Abhishek Sharma played a sparkling little innings after the pacers produced a riveting exhibition of swing bowling, powering India to a smooth seven-wicket victory in the third T20I on Sunday.

Chasing a modest 118 for a 2-1 lead in the five-match series, vice-captain Gill (28, 28 balls) and his opening partner Abhishek (35, 18 balls) added 60 runs in 5.2 overs as India achieved their target without much effort in 15.5 overs.

The lone point of interest in India's chase was whether the South African pacers could emulate their Indian counterparts with the new ball and make the opponents' task tougher. However, Abhishek and Gill never allowed the South African bowlers to settle, as the former carted Lungi Ngidi for 16 runs in the first over. In fact, the very first ball of the chase went for a six — an early indicator of the Indian openers' intention.

In the second over, Gill too joined his partner to garner 16 runs as India sped to 32 for no loss in the initial two overs.

Abhishek, as is his wont, batted in a single gear and it required a gem of a catch by Aiden Markram in the deep off Corbin Bosch to snap his stay. Once the left-hander was dismissed, India's chase of the remaining 58 runs settled into a much more sedate rhythm as Gill, who was saved by a DRS call early in his innings and Tilak Varma (26 not out) did not look for any adventure. Gill's run-a-ball 28 will certainly not rank among his fluent ones, but it might have boosted his confidence after two lukewarm outings in the first two matches of the series. He eventually dragged a Marco Jansen delivery back on to his stumps and skipper Suryakumar Yadav too failed to remain till the end. But those were the minor aberrations on the night.

All the credit for this canter should go to India's pacers, who produced a mesmerizing spell of swing bowling to bundle out South Africa for a below-par 117.

Leading India's show with early wickets were Arshdeep Singh (2/13), Harshit Rana (2/34) and Hardik Pandya (1/23) after the hosts chose to bowl. Skipper Markram offered a tiny spark for South Africa with a spirited 46-ball 61. Undoubtedly, the brightest stars under a cool sky were India's quick bowlers, who procured lethal swing and lateral movement with the new ball.

It had its effect on the low-key power play effort of South Africa — 25 for three — and the phase contained just two fours. Arshdeep, who had a horror outing at Mullanpur a couple of days back, redeemed himself with a dream first spell (3-0-9-1). He bowled three deliveries which angled away from Reeza Hendricks and then jagged one back to trap the South African opener leg before with the help of DRS. Rana did precisely the same to Quinton de Kock, a nip-backer, trapping the frozen-legged left-hander inside the crease.

Dewald Brevis was slightly unfortunate to get castled while attempting a release shot off a wide delivery from Rana. South Africa suddenly found themselves at 7 for 3 in 3.1 overs and it was always going to be an uphill climb for them from there. Markram crunched a couple of sweet drives in between to keep the board moving but Tristan Stubbs and Bosch departed in quick succession to further derail South African innings.

Stubbs' wicket helped all-rounder Pandya to complete 100 wickets in T20Is, the third Indian bowler to do so after Arshdeep and Jasprit Bumrah, who did not play this match after returning home to attend to a personal situation.

The BCCI said his availability for the remainder of the series will be announced in due course. Kuldeep Yadav too came into the eleven for an unwell Axar Patel.

Spinner Varun Chakravarthy (2/11 in 4 overs) too reached a milestone, capturing his 50th T20I wicket while flattening the stumps of Donovan Ferreira (20, 15 balls).

The big-hitting Ferreria was dropped on 13 by Arshdeep at long-on off Shivam Dube, but that did not hurt India.

Chakravarthy cut open the lower-order with his bottomless bag of tricks as the pitch also continued to offer good pace and carry.

The spinner also added the wicket of Jansen to keep South Africa pinned to the mat. Markram completed his fifty off 41 balls with a slashed six off Rana, as the 18th over produced 19 runs. But the South African surge came tad too late.

# Coughlin, Novak lead mixed-team Golf event

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Naples (US)

Lauren Coughlin holed a bunker shot for eagle on the par-5 17th hole, and she and Andrew Novak teamed for a stout 4-under 68 in foursomes to build a one-shot lead going into the final round of the Grant Thornton Invitational.

It's another chance for Novak to pick up a team title this year. He partnered with Ben Griffin to win the Zurich Classic of New Orleans. The Grant Thornton is the only mixed-team event.

They were at 19-under 125 and leading by one shot over Charley Hull and Michael Brennan, who were poised to share the lead until a three-putt bogey on the final hole when Hull lipped out from just outside 3 feet. They shot 71. Lexi Thompson and Wyndham Clark were two shots behind after finishing with eight straight pars for a 72. The final round is modified four-balls. Each player tees off, then they switch golf balls and stick with that ball the rest of the way, with the low score counting.

It should lead to lower scoring, although the Canadian duo of Brooke Henderson and Corey Conners did their part in the more difficult foursomes. They managed seven birdies and briefly shared the lead until a bogey on the 18th for a 67.

# Cameron Green blames manager after IPL auction listing error

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Adelaide

Australia all-rounder Cameron Green on Sunday clarified that he will be available to bowl in the IPL saying a "stuff-up" by his manager led to him being mistakenly registered as a batter for next week's mini auction.

The 26-year-old, who missed the 2025 IPL season as he recovered from back surgery, returned to international cricket as a specialist batter in June. However, he has since been cleared to bowl and has been rolling his arm in the ongoing Ashes series between Australia and England.

"I'll be good to bowl. I don't know if my manager would like to hear this, but there was a stuff-up on his end," Green was quoted as saying by ESPNCricinfo.

"He didn't mean to say 'batter'. I think he accidentally selected the wrong box. It was pretty funny how it's all played out, but it was actually a stuff-up on his end.

The lanky all-rounder, who previously represented Mumbai Indians in 2023 and Royal Challengers Bengaluru in 2024, is among the biggest names in the auction and is likely to be in the highest demand.

Green has entered the auction with a base price of ₹2 crore. He has been listed under the batters' category instead of the all-rounders' lot.

The auction will take place in Abu Dhabi on Tuesday.

"I'm sure I will be (watching), with a few other guys. They're always good fun to watch. It's a bit of a lottery where you might go, but also who might be in your team, so it's always been fun to watch," he added

# India outplay Pakistan in U19 Asia Cup

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Dubai

A disciplined bowling performance, led by all-rounder Kanishk Chouhan and seamer Deepesh Devendran, powered India to a comprehensive 90-run victory over Pakistan in their Group A match of the Under-19 Asia Cup, here Sunday.

After being put in to bat, India posted a competitive 240 all out in 46.1 overs, riding on a fluent 85 from Aaron George and useful contributions from captain Ayush Mhatre (38) and Chouhan (46).

Pakistan were then bundled out for 150 in 41.2 overs, never quite recovering from the early setbacks in a chase of 241.

India got off to a brisk start with skipper Mhatre striking four boundaries and three sixes during his 25-ball knock before Mohammad Sayyam removed both openers inside the first 10 overs.

George then held the innings together, finding the gaps consistently and adding stability through the middle phase. Chouhan's late flourish, which included three sixes, helped India cross the 230-run mark despite losing wickets regularly.

For Pakistan, Sayyam (3/67) and Abdul Subhan (3/42) were the standout bowlers, while Niqab Shafiq chipped in with two wickets.

Pakistan's chase faltered early as they slipped to 30 for four, with Devendran striking thrice in a sharp opening spell.

Captain Farhan Yousaf (23) and Huzaifa Ahsan attempted to steady the innings, but Chouhan's incisive off-spin broke the resistance. Ahsan top-scored for Pakistan with 70 off 83 balls, but lacked support at the other end.

Chouhan finished with 3 for 33, while Devendran returned figures of 3 for 16 as India maintained a firm grip on the contest throughout to register a dominant win in the marquee Group A clash. The players of the two teams did not shake hands with each other at the toss and after the match, continuing the 'no-handshake' protocol observed by the Indian men's team during the recently concluded Asia Cup 2025, where they refused to receive the winner's trophy from PCB Chairman Mohsin Naqvi.

**Brief scores:**

**India U-19:** 240 all out in 46.1 overs (Aaron George 85, Kanishk Chouhan 46; Mohammad Sayyam 3/67, Abdul Subhan 3/42).

**Pakistan U-19:** 150 all out in 41.2 overs (Huzaifa Ahsan 70; Kanishk Chouhan 3/33, Deepesh Devendran 3/16).

# RUSSELL'S LATE CHARGE IN VAIN FOR ABU DHABI KNIGHT RIDERS

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Abu Dhabi

Andre Russell displayed his hitting prowess with an unbeaten 33-ball-53 but failed to take Abu Dhabi Knight Riders past Dubai Capitals which won a close ILT20 League match by nine runs.

Dubai Capitals posted a competitive 196 for 5 riding on US international Shayan Jahangir's 54-ball-99 and then stopped ADKR in its blocks at 187 for 8 despite Russell hitting four sixes and an equal number of boundaries.

Batting first, the Capitals recovered from early setbacks through a defining 115-run partnership between Jordan Cox (29 off 30) and Jahangir. He anchored the innings before falling agonisingly short of a century having hit 10 fours and five sixes and propelling the Capitals to a formidable 196/5.

This was the highest score by an associate player in the ILT20 tournament.

Although Russell's explosive late cameo injected hope, it ultimately proved insufficient as the Capitals held their nerve to seal a deserved win.

"I'm proud to now be part of the ILT20, representing the USA, where cricket is making strong progress. Performances like these will bring greater recognition to US cricket. Being entrusted with this responsibility means a lot, and I'm glad I could repay that trust," Player of the Match Jahangir said after victory.

Dubai Capitals skipper Dasun Shanaka said: "We had runs on the board, but with the dew around, you never know against such power-hitters. Having Nabi there made my job easier. Jahangir was under pressure early and didn't have the best powerplay, but he showed character to go on and make 99. Hopefully, he will build on this in the matches to come."

# Andhra wins against Punjab in SMAT

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Pune

Young Andhra batter Hemanth Reddy proved way too strong-willed in the face of some hostile bowling from Punjab as he smashed an unbeaten 109 to lead his side to a thrilling five-wicket win in a high-scoring Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy Super League A match, on Sunday.

Reddy, playing only his second career SMAT game, saw the entire Andhra top and middle order being wiped out and leaving them perilously close to defeat at 56 for 5 while chasing 206 for victory.

But the 23-year-old, who has played most of his cricket in the Andhra Premier League, came up with his career-best performance, blazing to a 53-ball 109, studded with 11 boundaries and seven sixes as Andhra reached 211/5 on the penultimate ball of the match.

Tall Punjab pacer Gurnoor Brar (3/23) made life difficult for Andhra batters, removing openers Srikar Bharat (1) and Ashwin Hebbar (4) in the very first over, reducing the opponents to seven or two.

Brar, a former net bowler for five-time IPL champions Mumbai Indians who was bought for ₹1.3 crore by Gujarat Titans ahead of the 2025 season, struck again in the fifth over by dismissing Andhra skipper Ricky Bhui (15). In between, pacer Ayush Goyal also got the wicket of India all-rounder Nithish Kumar Reddy as Andhra reeled at 4/35, which quickly became 5/56 in the ninth over.

Needing someone who could really thwack the Punjab bowlers and also play a sensible innings, Reddy stepped up.

# Had to reinvent my running, Shelly Ann on shedding poor finisher tag

DEVARCHIT VARMA
Pune

Legendary Jamaican sprinter Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce says she hated being labelled "a great starter but not a great finisher," and had to reinvent her running style in her formative years to rise to the elite level.

Fraser-Pryce, an eight time Olympic and 17-time World Championship medallist, said she put in a lot of effort in 200m to sharpen her 100m sprint race in which she owns the third-fastest time in history at 10.60 seconds.

"I had to really reinvent the way I ran, growing up in high school to becoming an elite sprinter because how I ran wasn't ideal, it wasn't going to make me win races," Fraser-Pryce, a brand ambassador of the Bajaj Pune Marathon, told *PTI* in an exclusive interview.

"People would say 'man, she's a great starter but not a great finisher' and I used to hate hearing those things, because I'm like, 'but I can finish too!'."

"I had to get stronger in the gym. I had to do more 200m if I wanted my 100m to be better. I really had to put myself out there, challenge myself more and come out of my comfort zone." "I used to literally run and fall on my face. I had to learn and relearn how to stay upright, strike the ground, swing my arms and go forward. For me, yes people talk about your height and say 'oh you're too short' but that wasn't something that I could control."

Fraser-Pryce, whose list of achievements include three Olympics and 10 World Championships gold medals, said she did not have big goals growing up in the Waterhouse district of Kingston, Jamaica. *(PTI)*

# Over 3,000 runners from across India participate in 5th Assam Rifles Half Marathon

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Shillong

More than 3,000 people from across the country took part in the fifth edition of the Assam Rifles Half Marathon here on Sunday, an official statement said.

The annual event was organised at the headquarters of the Directorate General Assam Rifles at Laitkor, attracting runners from 26 states and two Union territories.

Held against the scenic backdrop of the headquarters of the force in the higher reaches of East Khasi Hills district, the event was attended by senior officials from the armed forces, Government representatives and volunteers from different parts of the country.

The event was conducted in three categories — Cloud Chase (21 km), Pine Path (10 km) and Crystal Stream (5 km). The 21 km run was flagged off by Director General Assam Rifles Lt Gen Vikas Lakhera, while the 10 km and 5 km categories were flagged off by senior officers of the force.

A total of 3,038 runners participated, including 559 in the half marathon, 1,502 in the 10 km run and 977 in the 5 km run, the statement said. Participants were awarded medals, certificates and commemorative T-shirts, while cash prizes of ₹20 lakh were presented to 48 runners across categories, along with several consolation prizes.

In the overall category, Sandeep Devrari of Kumaon Regiment of the Indian Army, won the men's 21 km race with a timing of 1 hour 7 minutes, while Tamsi Singh from Uttar Pradesh's Varanasi emerged as the winner in the women's 21 km category with a timing of 1 hour 23 minutes.

Air Marshal Surat Singh, AOC-in-C Eastern Air Command, attended the event as the chief guest and presented prizes to the winners of the 21 km and 10 km categories, praising the enthusiasm and sporting spirit of the participants.

Speaking on the occasion, Lt Gen Lakhera said the marathon seeks to foster a culture of fitness, wellness and togetherness in the Northeast, adding that participation has more than doubled compared to last year. The Assam Rifles thanked the Meghalaya Government for its support in ensuring the smooth conduct of the event, it added.

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# Open graveyards in open skies

*Over the past few decades, most successful airlines crashed*

OUR TAKE

**Sutanu Guru**
Author, Journalist and Academician

There are probably tens of thousands of furious flyers, who want the CEO of IndiGo Airline, Peiter Elbers, to go. There may be a few hundred, who desire that he is arrested for the way the airline treated thousands of passengers over the past two weeks, as thousands of flights were either delayed or cancelled. But even the worst critics of IndiGo will not like Elbers to suffer the fate of another CEO of a past, and similarly successful, private airline.

Three decades ago, to be precise, in 1995, Thakiyuddin Abdul Wahid left for his office in the western suburbs of Mumbai. He had received several threats from the city's underworld, even as the leadership of the most dreaded gang had shifted lock, stock, and barrel to the United Arab Emirates. But Wahid, who had launched the East-West Airlines, which was the country's first private sector airline, and doing reasonably well, seemed unfazed. He should have heeded to the warnings, as on his way to the office, he was shot dead.

The police stated that the shooters possibly belonged to one of the gangs that operated in the city. With the brutal and public killing came the hastened end of East-West Airlines which, like Wahid, died an unsung death. Started in 1993, the airline was history by 1996. Interestingly, in 1993, Naresh Goyal promoted Jet Airways, which later emerged as the most successful airline in India. More than two decades later, Jet crashed, was declared bankrupt, and sold off to a new buyer as part of the insolvency exercise.

Goyal, who worked for years in the travel agency business, started his career in East-West. Back in the early 1990s, Jet and East-West were rivals. With the demise of the latter, Jet became an even stronger player in the domestic market. There is more of history, when one talks about the travails and troubles of the Indian aviation industry, and its private and state-owned players. These remind us of the situation that IndiGo finds itself in today.

In 1995, the Tata Group tied up with Singapore Airlines, one of the best-known, and arguably one of the best airlines in the world, to launch a domestic airline to ply on both local and international routes. Incidentally, the Tata Group was the promoter of India's national carrier, Air India, which was later taken over by the Government, merged with the state-owned Indian Airlines, and then privatised and sold to the same group. There were speculations and allegations, though unproven, that Jet was responsible for the non-take-off of the Tata-Singapore Airlines venture.

So successful was the lobbying by Jet in preventing the entry that there was a time when the then chairman of Tata Group, the late Ratan Tata angrily spoke about vested interests that were damaging the Indian aviation sector by blocking worthwhile investments from gold-plated firms like Singapore Airlines. In any case, the Tatas had to wait for more than two decades before it could enter the Indian airwaves with its proposed venture with Singapore Airlines. Vistara was launched in 2016, and the Tatas later took over Air India.

There are several other examples of major engine failures in the aviation sector. Most of us may not remember a relatively-unknown NEPC Airlines, which belonged to NEPC Group that specialised in non-renewable energy. The background of the promoters, and the source of the finances were questionable, and the airline died a quiet death a few years after it launched the operations. Around the same time, there was the famous or notorious Subrata Roy of the Sahara Group, who decided to jump into the cockpit. Sahara Airways, in retrospect, seemed more like a pomp-and-show business aimed to satisfy the late Roy, rather than a serious effort.

As the passenger and freight market grew, Captain Gopinath launched Air Deccan, possibly the first low-cost airline in the country. Since the launch in 2003, it proved to be a major success as it offered flight tickets at amazingly affordable prices. IndiGo entered the fray as another low-cost operation in 2006. There were two promoters. Rahul Bhatia was associated with the travel agency business, and Rakesh Gangwal, who lived in the US, was a known expert in the aviation sector. Of course, not to be outdone, the flamboyant Vijay Maliya launched Kingfisher Airline.

Giving this short, and summarised history of private aviation in India is not to recap past events. It is to pinpoint a major highlight, trend, and pattern. In most cases, possibly in every case, the most successful private player at any given point in time, or the upcoming ones that dreamed of flying high, either crashed, or were sold off. We know about Jet and East-West, as well as NEPC. Jet took over Sahara, and Kingfisher gobbled Air Deccan. Later, Kingfisher went out of business, and took down Mallya, and his spirits with it.

IndiGo may survive the current problems, and controversies, but its credibility has taken a huge hit. Till date, Captain Gopinath accuses that the promoters of IndiGo sabotaged Air Deccan by mishandling the latter's backend Internet-based operations. When Kingfisher hit air pockets, it died a messy death in 2012 with thousands of non-refunded canceled tickets, hundreds of employees who found themselves out of jobs, and without salaries for months. Mallya left India in 2016, and remains a fugitive in the UK.

Questions were repeatedly raised about the finances behind many successful airlines. East-West's Wahid was believed, rightly or wrongly, to have links with the underworld. Jet's money initially came through the Isle of Man, which is known for banking secrecy laws. Mallya was accused of siphoning off banks' money from his ventures. Jet's Goyal, once celebrated as the hero of Indian aviation, was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate for money laundering, and possible bank fraud at an old age. It was a sight to watch the pitiable condition of Goyal pleading for bail.

Months before the IndiGo debacle, Gangwal, the co-founder who fought with his previous partner, and exited the airline, sold a huge portion of his and family's existing stake. Although this is in the realm of speculation, one can question whether Gangwal knew what was about to happen. To be fair, he had charged that the airline was being mismanaged, and could go down under any time. This was the reason for his tussle with Bhatia. But finances, arrogance, overconfidence, and hubris are only some of the factors why private and state-owned players fail to remain in the air for too long.

The author has worked for leading media houses, authored two books, and is now Executive Director, C Voter Foundation

## BLASÉ CAPITAL

### US vs THEM

A leading business newspaper did an interesting calculation. It stated that foreign institutional investors sold equities worth more than ₹2.23 lakh crore in the secondary market in this calendar year (January 1-December 14). This worked out to a net selling of ₹900 crore a day based on the number of days the stock exchanges were open. In other words, it translated into sales of just over ₹150 crore an hour based on the number of hours they were open. Such a pace, added the newspaper, had never been witnessed before, ever since foreign investors were allowed to directly invest in Indian equities. There were days, weeks, and months when hectic selling took place. But it was never so sustained, regular, consistent, and continuous over nearly 12 months. During this year, there were moments, and short periods of net inflows. The overall trend was outwards.

However, the broader indices remained relatively stable despite periods of high volatility, and regular uncertainties. The net outflows by the foreigners were more than matched by the domestic inflows, especially by retail investors largely through mutual funds, which invariably invested in the secondary market. The small investors pumped in huge sums in IPOs (Initial Public Offerings) through the year, and especially in the past 2-3 months. Listing gains in the IPOs were common, and some shares were listed 50-60 per cent higher than the offer prices. For example, while foreigners sold ₹16,000 crore worth of equities in this month, the domestic investors bought shares worth ₹40,000 crore, or two-and-a-half times the former figure. Experts contend that domestic inflows have consistently been ₹30,000 crore a month for the past three months. One of them dubs the pattern as foreigners versus domestic "tug of war."

What does this mean? Are the foreigners smarter, or know something about the Indian equities that the local investors do not? Or is it that the domestic investors have more faith and trust in equities? As far as the foreigners are concerned, they are driven by three factors. One, they regularly book profits, and invariably have target sale prices in mind. The moment they achieve it, they vamoose. While the larger institutions invest for a longer period, others like hedge funds, which are more driven by quarterly returns, buy-and-dump regularly. When the sale decisions of the two converge, there is madness in the markets, and the herd mentality takes over. Two, the foreigners are dictated by safety. Whenever they see threats, or feel that the safer US market offers decent returns, money flies away from the emerging markets like India. Three, the foreigners take macro and fundamental data seriously. Any instability, and they are gone, even if they return quite fast, and within weeks or months.

In the case of the Indian retail investors, they are generally the last ones to join the equity party. They wait until stock prices are already high, and then jump in because either they see their friends, relatives, and neghbours making money, or they are gripped by FOMO, and do not wish to lose out on the opportunities. Although many of them burnt their hands, and legs, during the pandemic bust, the Indian indices have gone up by more than three times since then. Thus, the small investors have seen massive returns accrue to those who stayed invested, and had the patience. Now that the stocks are rising across the large-caps, midcaps, and small-caps spectrum, the retail investors feel that the party will go on. During the past few years, they have come to believe that mutual funds are the safest, and the least risky instruments, which offer substantial returns on the upside. They have thronged to the markets like never before.

One needs to examine two more factors that are likely to play out in the future. The first is that the foreigners will return, as they have in the past, as soon as there is good news on the Indian economic horizon. This can be in the form of the India-US trade deal that may be inked within weeks or a few months. It will ensure that the current 50 per cent tariffs will come down, even as India will need to open its market for American imports. This will change the growth trajectory immediately, and positively impact the trade deficit. It will aid private investments even as the Government feels compelled to ease public investments to manage the fiscal deficit. External factors like an end to the Russia-Ukraine war, and the easing of the western sanctions on Russia will help India, which is being forced to limit crude oil imports from Russia. Oil prices are likely to come down.

On the domestic investors' front, there are a few under-the-radar changes. Despite the overall inflows, the retail investors have begun to sell in the secondary market, and invest in IPOs, where they see better returns. This means that the mindset may change in 2026, and there may be less inflows through mutual funds in percentage terms, even if the overall inflows remain positive. If the stock indices go up, or if the prices of certain stocks go up, even the domestic investors, who possibly entered late, will begin to book profits. This will put pressure on overall inflows. One will need to watch these two sub-trends to determine whether they converge or diverge.

## A Contrarian Investor

# 57 months of equity inflows

*Since 2021, investors thronged to invest in equity mutual funds*

At the end of November 2025, the mutual funds industry's asset under management (AUM) crossed ₹80 lakh crore. This marked positive inflows into equity mutual funds for 57 months since March 2021, when the monthly inflow was just over ₹9,000 crore, and the AUM stood at just over ₹30 lakh crore. However, trends indicate that investors across equity, hybrid, and alternative mutual funds categories have continued to show strong confidence in professionally-managed portfolios, which reflect both the market performances, and rising retail participation.

Today, small investors are increasingly integrating mutual funds into their long-term financial plans, favoring goal-oriented, transparent, and disciplined portfolios. The mutual fund ecosystem continues to flourish through diversified strategies, and customised solutions, cementing its role as a cornerstone of sustainable and long-term wealth creation. "AMFI's (Association for Mutual Funds in India) data for November shows strong... flows once again, and that strength is clearly feeding into equity market sentiment. This comes after almost a year of mostly sideways and dull markets."

Between 2021 (in fact, since the middle of the pandemic year, 2020), and late-2024, the Indian equities, and equity indices have zoomed. They reached all-time highs in September 2024, after which navigating shares has become tough. As foreigners began to withdraw money, and turn net sellers in this calendar year, the indices and stocks became volatile, and the growth faltered. But the encouraging, and possibly surprising, part is that the inflows through SIPs (Systematic Investment Plans) by domestic retail investors continue to grow, and are now just shy of Rs 30,000 crore every month," says Santosh Joseph, CEO, Germinate Investor Services.

In November 2025, according to AMFI's data, mutual funds recorded net equity inflows of nearly ₹30,000 crore, which pushed the AUM to more than ₹80 lakh crore, with robust growth across large-cap, mid-cap, and small-cap funds. According to Sanjay Agarwal, Senior Director, CareEdge Ratings, despite the macroeconomic uncertainties, equity inflows remained positive for more than four-and-a-half years, witnessing massive net inflows in November 2025. More importantly, the equity categories registered inflows for the month, apart from the dividend yield funds, and ELSS funds.

A few interesting shifts are happening within the categories. Thematic funds, which dominated for most of 2024, began to cool off in the second half of 2024-25.

"Sectoral/Thematic gross sales softened only because October was boosted by NFO-driven one-offs. The overall trend for November reflects a stabilising risk appetite, and stronger, broad-based net inflows across core equity categories," says Akhil Chaturvedi, Executive Director and Chief Business Officer, Motilal Oswal Asset Management Company.

"Flexi-cap funds, which were less favoured earlier, are seeing renewed traction as investors rotate back into broader, more flexible equity strategies. Another steady trend is the rise in gold and silver funds, which are seeing consistent monthly inflows. The ETF and FoF structures there are clearly finding more acceptance," explains Joseph. Over the past three months, between September and November 2025, the overall AUM rose from ₹78-79 lakh crore to nearly ₹81 lakh crore. Most of the incremental money and inflows came into equity, hybrid, and passive strategies, even as the inflows in debt funds turned choppy, and diverged from month to month.

"What stands out is that the small cap, sector/thematic, and flexi-cap funds continue to see rising folios alongside healthy NFO mobilisation in small cap, thematic, multi-asset, and passive offerings, signalling that retail investors are steadily embracing more diversified, higher beta, and solution-oriented mutual fund portfolios to play the India's growth story," says Robin Arya, Small-case Manager, Founder & CEO, GoalFi. During November 2025, 24 open-ended NFOs were floated, with sectoral/thematic funds accounting for 63 per cent of the share. Two dozen schemes were launched during the month, raising a total of ₹3,126 crore.

Gold ETFs continue to witness healthy investor interest in November 2025, recording net inflows of ₹3,741 crore, extending their streak of positive flows for the seventh consecutive month. "Although moderating from the unusually strong surge seen in September and October (this year), the latest figure still reflects sustained demand for gold-backed products in a market environment marked by elevated macro uncertainty and intermittent risk-off sentiment," says Nehal Meshram, Senior Analyst, Morningstar Investment Research India. After a sustained surge, global gold prices softened slightly during the month as the US dollar strengthened. Despite this trend, the domestic investors maintained their allocations to gold ETFs, underscoring their growing role as a strategic asset for wealth preservation, hedge effectiveness, and portfolio diversification.

Debt mutual fund categories witnessed outflows, barring the ultra-short duration funds, low duration funds, money market funds, short duration funds, corporate bond funds, and floater funds. "There was a marginal net outflow in the debt category overall, but the AUM of the category remained steady at ₹19.36 lakh crore for the month of November 2025, owing to MTM gains," says Agarwal. India's passive investing landscape continues to be strong, with AUM for passive funds increasing from ₹13.72 lakh crore in November 2025. This reflects momentum, and a broader behavioural shift that has seen passive assets grow more than eight times since March 2020.

"The surge is driven by the structural evolution of the Indian markets. Greater financial penetration, and widespread real-time access to information have enhanced market efficiency, encouraging investors to embrace transparent, low-cost products that deliver index-linked outcomes. Supported by the seamless digital access, and a progressive regulatory environment, passive investing is rapidly emerging as a preferred choice in India's asset management ecosystem," says Hemen Bhatia, Executive Director & CEO, Angel One. The investors have become smarter and sharper.

Overall, even though 2025 was a difficult year, and the markets slowed down for most of the past 11 months, mutual funds remained the preferred investment option. "Investors are staying committed through SIPs, equity flows remain healthy despite volatility, and interest in gold and silver continues to climb. The resilience in flows is the strongest signal that the retail participation, and long-term investing habits are only getting stronger," says Joseph. This is contrary to the behaviour of the foreign investors, who remained net sellers during the year. It seems like a war is on between the two sections.

As the accompanying article (Sidebar) on this page highlights, the divergence in the investing mindset can be explained through several factors. In the future, foreigners may emerge as net buyers, and domestic retail investors may turn part-sellers to book profits. Thus, 2026 will be an interesting year for Indian equities, even as some brokerage houses predict the beginning of another bull run. However, the battles between foreigners and Indians may decide the outcomes.

## PIOTECH

### SBI aims to double YONO app users to 20 crore

State Bank of India Chairman CS Setty has said that the bank is targeting to double its YONO app user base to 20 crore over the next two years with the launch of a new version on Monday. YONO 2.0 is a significant upgrade, offering a better experience for customers and a robust digital platform for the bank, and full fledged features will be rolled out over 6-8 months, he told PTI in an interview. "From a bank perspective, YONO 2.0 is a key anchor of digitalisation, with a common code for internet banking and mobile banking.

This allows for seamless integration across channels, enabling SBI to launch new products and processes quickly. The bank aims to leverage YONO 2.0 to enhance its digital presence and customer engagement," he said. For example, he said, YONO 2.0 developed a common core for customer journeys, which will ensure a seamless experience across internet banking, mobile banking and branch channels for account opening or any other transaction. *(PTI)*

### Ola electric commences hyperdelivery for its 4,680 Bharat cell powered vehicles

Ola Electric on Sunday said it has commenced same-day registration and delivery of its 4,680 Bharat Cell powered vehicles in Bangalore. This offering is a part of the company's umbrella Hyperservice initiative to deliver a transparent, convenient and customer-first service experience, the Bengaluru-based firm said in a statement. Under Hyperdelivery initiative , customers can now complete their purchase online or at an Ola Electric Store and ride home on their fully registered vehicles on the same day, it added. Earlier this year, the company announced that it has moved its vehicle registration process completely in-house.

"Hyperdelivery adds another layer of ease and convenience for customers who want to purchase our vehicles. When we introduced it earlier this year, we completely changed the way Indians bought their vehicles," a company spokesperson stated. Under its customer-first experience under Hyperservice, the company recently announced the nationwide rollout of its in-app service appointment feature enabling customers across India to seamlessly schedule service for their vehicles. Furthermore, the company also announced the scale up of Hyperservice into an open platform that redefines EV servicing in India. *(PTI)*

### Rubrik drives trusted AI adoption with amazon bedrock

Rubrik (NYSE: RBRK), the Security and AI Operations company, has announced availability of Rubrik Agent Cloud for Amazon Bedrock AgentCore. The new integration will allow Amazon Bedrock AgentCore customers to easily enable monitoring, governance, and remediation for agents across multi-cloud resources and infrastructure. Rubrik Agent Cloud is designed to monitor and audit agentic actions, enforce real-time guardrails for agentic actions and finally, undo agent mistakes. Built on the Rubrik Platform that uniquely combines data, identity and application contexts, Rubrik Agent Cloud will provide customers with security, accuracy and efficiency as they transform with AI.

"Amazon Bedrock AgentCore gives developers the flexibility to build and deploy intelligent agents using their choice of AI model or framework," said Devvret Rishi, General Manager of AI at Rubrik. "With Rubrik Agent Cloud, organisations will have a single plane of glass for the complete AI agent lifecycle, one that enables customers to see every agent in action, enforce policies in real-time, and instantly rewind mistakes before they become catastrophic errors." Today's agents help increase productivity, however if not properly governed, they are also capable of taking real-world, destructive actions on behalf of users, often without centralised oversight.

In fact, research shows that 72 per cent of leaders have reported an increase in cyber risks, nearly half (47 per cent) of which are linked to the growing capabilities of generative AI-driven attacks. Now more than ever, organisations urgently need a control layer within their cyber strategies. With Rubrik Agent Cloud, Amazon Bedrock AgentCore helps security and IT teams automate complex tasks while keeping pace with a new, rapidly expanding attack surface.

# The India paradox: AI anxiety rises even as energy jobs surge

**Why the world's electricity boom shows India's problem isn't job loss — but the race to train enough workers**

NISHANT SAHDEV

Niels Bohr, the Nobel laureate in Physics and father of the atomic model, once remarked, "Prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future." Few lines capture our era better. Artificial intelligence has become a global amplifier of hopes and anxieties, yet the loudest anxiety — that AI will take away jobs — continues to grow despite evidence pointing in the opposite direction. The fear is simple, dramatic, easy to repeat.

India sits at the centre of this contradiction. Public debate warns of AI-driven unemployment, but India's energy economy — especially electricity — has been adding jobs at one of the fastest rates in the world. The new World Energy Employment 2025 report by the International Energy Agency (IEA) paints a picture sharply at odds with popular fears.

The global energy workforce has expanded to 76 million people, growing 2.2 per cent in 2024 — almost twice the rate of global employment. Since 2019, more than 5 million energy jobs have been created, even as AI adoption has accelerated. Electricity is now the single largest employer in the global energy system, outpacing oil, gas and coal. And India is among the countries seeing the steepest rise. AI anxiety is rising, but so is the demand for skilled work. Something in our narrative is wrong.

### India's reality check: The world is hiring, not replacing

The belief that AI will steal jobs persists because it offers a tidy storyline: machines advance, humans exit. But the electricity sector — arguably the backbone of the modern world — offers a counterexample too large to ignore. Since 2019, electricity has become the fastest-growing source of energy employment. Solar alone employs more people than any energy technology in history.

Transmission lines, grid expansion, battery installations, nuclear maintenance and renewable manufacturing have created millions of jobs across emerging and advanced economies. For India, this shift is happening at accelerated speed. India recorded nearly 6 per cent growth in energy employment in 2024 — among the highest globally — driven by rapid renewable additions, urbanisation and rising electricity consumption. Solar parks in Rajasthan and Gujarat, new transmission corridors across central India, the spread of EV charging networks and the rise of battery gigafactories are all labour-intensive undertakings.

And none of these jobs can be automated away. Automating a call centre is one thing; automating the installation of a 400-kilovolt transmission line is quite another.

No robot climbs a 60-metre tower in monsoon winds. No algorithm swaps a failed transformer at midnight. No predictive model walks into a solar field under 45°C heat to realign panel arrays.

Electricity systems are physical and improvisational. They demand judgement under uncertainty, risk-taking and hands-on skill. AI can guide decisions, but it cannot hold a spanner or secure a safety harness. This is why electricity-related employment has grown in nearly every region and why mass AI-driven unemployment does not match the empirical record.

### AI is modifying work, not removing it

Across the electricity sector, a clear pattern emerges: AI multiplies human work by making systems larger, safer and more efficient.

Sensors in power plants, turbines and substations generate continuous data. AI analyses this data to predict failures, but prediction is not repair. Humans still diagnose issues, replace components and restore service. AI simply makes their work timelier and more effective. AI-enhanced grid analytics forecast demand spikes, detect faults and improve load management. But crews still rebalance flows, upgrade infrastructure and respond on the ground. AI speeds up permitting and compliance as well, helping projects break ground sooner — leading not to fewer jobs but to more physical work being done faster.

Training is changing too. Virtual reality tools now prepare linemen, nuclear operators and maintenance crews for hazardous tasks. Learning becomes faster and safer, but real work still happens in the field.

The economic truth is straightforward: when efficiency rises, sectors expand. And when sectors expand, demand for human labour increases. Predictive tools reduce breakdowns, so companies deploy more infrastructure and need more technicians. Better grids enable more renewable integration, creating manufacturing and installation jobs.

Faster permits accelerate project timelines, requiring more workers in shorter cycles.

The IEA dataset shows no evidence that AI has reduced electricity-sector jobs. What it does show is a global labour shortage: too few electricians, too few solar installers, too few grid technicians and too few engineers who understand both electrical systems and data analytics.

### India's crucial choice: Fix the skill mismatch or fall behind

India's energy transition is among the most ambitious in the world. With over 500 GW of installed power capacity — more than half from non-fossil sources — the country is expanding at historic speed. Every new gigawatt requires design teams, manufacturing workers, construction crews, inspectors and engineers. India's challenge is not a shortage of work, but a shortage of workers trained to do it.

The IEA report is blunt: India's grid is becoming more digital, yet the workforce is not scaling at the same pace. Predictive maintenance tools require technicians who can interpret diagnostic dashboards. AI-assisted control rooms need engineers fluent in circuits and code. Solar and wind additions require installation teams skilled in safety standards, electrical systems and digital monitoring. This skill mismatch threatens to slow down the very transition powering India's growth.

Coal-dependent regions highlight both risk and opportunity. As India shifts toward cleaner energy, technicians, machinists, fitters and operators can move into new roles — if supported with structured reskilling. This demands new curricula, regional training hubs and stronger vocational systems.

AI will not replace India's workers. But it will replace India's untrained workers. The future belongs to technicians who can read both wiring diagrams and data dashboards, to engineers who understand turbines and algorithms and to operators who manage electrical parameters alongside predictive models.

Seizing this future requires transforming ITIs and polytechnics into hybrid digital-energy institutes, creating national certifications for solar, storage, grid and EV roles, embedding AI tools in vocational programs, building training hubs in coal-transition districts and elevating energy apprenticeships to mainstream aspiration.

### A final reckoning: The myth and the moment

AI has been cast as the thief at the door. But the electricity sector — one of the most physical and rapidly expanding industries in the world — shows a different truth. AI is not shrinking work; AI is expanding the universe of what humans can build.

Energy transitions are labour-intensive. Infrastructure is labour-intensive. India's growth story is labour-intensive. The only scarce resource is skill.

Countries that embrace AI as a force multiplier — not a job destroyer — will build faster and grow stronger. Those that cling to fear will misread the era entirely.

India stands at a decisive moment. The myth of job-stealing AI has had a long run. The evidence is louder now: work is not vanishing; work is evolving. And nations that prepare their workers for this evolution will shape the next century.

Author is a theoretical physicist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the author of the forthcoming book Last Equation Before Silence

# New technologies chugs Indian railways

SHITANSHU SHEKHAR SHUKLA

PAMBAN BRIDGE

The Indian Railways is in a reset mode, for a change. The train has chugged up the hill in Kashmir and Mizoram. The sight of a rail winding through the mountains and the terrains overwhelmed the residents in Kashmir and Mizoram (Bairabi-Sairang railway line) held back in growing alienation by history and geography for ages. Their inclusion into ever expanding ambit of Indian transport is a step stone to prosperity. The promise of the incredible North East or even Kashmir had long been buried deep into status quo.

The three capitals of the Northeast, Guwahati, Agartala and Itanagar, are already connected to the national rail network. The Shokhuvi-Molvom section in Nagaland was completed in March 2025, with further sections to Kohima (Zubza) under construction and expected to open by 2026-2029. The Murkongselek — Sille stretch in Arunachal Pradesh is to open in a couple of months, if not earlier, with the Sille-Pasighat section following in February 2026.

CHENAB BRIDGE

VANDE BHARAT

Assam saw new *Amrit Bharat* trains and new railway links approved, boosting connectivity and economic prospects. The Indian Railways has also illuminated several areas of darkness like Palamu, Jharkhand, the only state in the country where the operation of Rajdhani Express was limited and irregular.

Connecting Kashmir to Kanyakumari, completion of Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail Link (USBRL) included the construction of the Chenab Bridge, the world's highest railway bridge, and the Anji Bridge, India's first rail cable bridge. The New Pamban Bridge, India's first vertical lift sea bridge, replaced the 105-year-old Pamban Bridge. The inauguration left many gasping with awe and admiration across the world, given the audacity of the magnitude defying the geography and the technology. The inspiration is drawn from the leadership up the order.

Union Minister of Railways, Ashwini Vaishnaw is often sitting with the driver running down a test drive fraught with the risks of an inaugural drive. The Minister is neither bound by a rule nor required by a custom to tread an un-trodden path. Needless to say, the message is quietly communicated to keep moving without fear. Even in the aftermath of the railway accidents, the Minister himself remains present at the site of the accident like a common passenger or victim, sitting on the tracks or on the culvert even at night to inspect. Of course, the criticisms keep flying thick and fast. The opposition and the doomsayers are always far removed, and for a purpose as well. The distance lends enchantment too.

But if it was so easy, why could the previous ministers worthy of salt not set such an example? After all, it is neither an obligation under any rule nor a requirement. However, a new start is not a hostage to the past for a person possessed with a mission. The relief and distribution work in the aftermath of an accident is best completed in an overdrive. Minister's presence ensures the precious time is not lost to save a victim from the clutches of red tape always ready with salt to injury of the victims already reeling under the misfortune. Even small act of gratitude is beautiful, leave alone the huge leaps. Playing Chhath songs and music on loudspeakers at stations and in the trains ferrying the devout passengers to Bihar was another unforgettable pleasant surprise to all the passengers that has never happened before and may never happen in the future. But resonating so small but inner chords deep in the hearts of passengers is a memory that will be cherished for the rest of their lives. Railways also successfully made up for the previous mismanagements with a heart and compassion.

Treating our passengers as a part of its own, this compassion for their well-being adds a touch of sweetness to help overcome the obvious discomforts of a difficult journey, the horrific crowds and the stretched system during *Chhath*. This is a reflection of the fundamental change taking place within Indian Railways.

That's not to say everything is perfect and there's nothing left for an improvement. There's still a lot to correct. But the wheels are turning, the engine is roaring strong, and most importantly, the priorities are clear and right. The statistics below bear a testimony to the wheels of the Railways chugging into unchartered territories. Renewable energy capacity reached 2,014 MW, with 375 MW solar and 103 MW wind energy commissioned in 2024-25. Production milestones included 700 locomotives by CLW and 477 by BLW, setting new annual records. Coach production also saw a 9 per cent growth, with 7,134 coaches manufactured. Track renewal reached 6,450 km, turnout renewals 8,550, and 6,200 km of rails were renewed, with speed upgrades on 2,000 km to 130 kmph and 7,200 km to 110 kmph. Freight loading reached 1,473 million tonnes (MT), showing a 3.86 per cent growth, supported by Dedicated Freight Corridors (DFCs) which facilitated over 72,000 train runs. Average speed of goods trains improved by 18.1 per cent, from 13.40 to 15.82 kmph and mail/express punctuality stood at 93.78 per cent for the year. A record 136 Vande Bharat trains were introduced, with the launch of the first Namo Bharat Rapid Rail. Vande Bharat now operates on over 40 routes nationwide.The Amrit Bharat Station Scheme saw work start on 1,198 stations out of 1,337 targeted, modernising station infrastructure. Over 10,000 locomotives were equipped with Kavach, the indigenous train protection system, enhancing safety. Indian Railways electrified a record 7,188 km of railway lines, averaging 14.5 km per day, surpassing previous years and advancing the goal of 100 per cent electrification. The Amrit Bharat Station redevelopment scheme is modernising stations across the country, improving amenities and accessibility.

Indian Railways has prioritised digital transformation, renewable energy adoption, and eco-friendly practices to ensure a sustainable future. These developments collectively demonstrate a clear upward trend in Indian Railways' operational efficiency, safety and passenger experience over the last five years. Over 23,000 track kilometers have been upgraded to support speeds up to 130 kmph, and 54,337 km upgraded for 110 kmph, enhancing both passenger and freight transit efficiency. Electrification of broad-gauge tracks has advanced rapidly, with 6,577 route kilometers electrified in 2023 alone. Modernisation efforts include the introduction of LHB coaches, onboard Wi-Fi at over 9,000 stations, smart ticketing and enhanced safety technologies.

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## PROSPECT

# Parl panel backs easing clearances for underground coal mining projects

A Parliamentary panel has suggested simplifying the policy and standardised protocols for allowing underground coal mining, saying that the complex clearance process, similar to large open-cast mines, leads to delays in projects that have low environmental impact. The Government has set a target to produce 100 million tonnes (MT) of coal from underground coal mines by 2030. Underground coal mining minimises surface disturbance, thereby preserving land, forests and infrastructure while reducing land reclamation costs and indirect greenhouse gas emissions. This method also allows access to high-quality, deep-seated reserves and ensures year-round operations regardless of weather conditions, the Standing Committee on Coal, Mines and Steel has said in a report.

"Despite low environmental impact, several UG projects undergo the same clearance and documentation processes as in the case of large open-cast coal mines, thereby reportedly facing delays. The committee, therefore, emphasise the need for policy simplification and standardised protocols for UG coal mining practices in India," it said.

Underground mines (UG), Underground Coal Gasification (UCG) projects and clean coal technology-based pilot projects represent special categories of coal sector initiatives that offer significant environmental and operational advantages. Besides, the panel has also recommended exploring the feasibility of putting in place a standard Terms of Reference (ToRs) and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on a single-window clearance system for open-cast mining, on the lines of similar provisions for underground mines.

The coal ministry has earlier said that it has introduced a series of transformative policy measures aimed at promoting underground coal mining. These bold reforms address the traditional challenges of high capital investment and longer gestation periods, reaffirming the Government's resolve to modernise the coal ecosystem while aligning with the broader vision of sustainable development.

# Army promotes youth empowerment through sports

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
Kohima/Nagaland

Reinforcing its enduring commitment to youth empowerment, peace-building and nation-building through sports, the Indian Army is organising the inaugural edition of the Red Shield Division Rising Hockey Tournament (Under-19) at the Khuman Lampak Hockey Stadium, Imphal, Manipur.

The week-long tournament commenced on 14 December 2025 and witnessed enthusiastic participation from budding hockey players across Manipur. The initiative was conceptualised following an appeal by Olympian Kshetrimayum Thoiba Singh, a celebrated hockey legend from Manipur, who approached the Indian Army with a vision to provide a constructive platform for young sportspersons from the state, particularly in the backdrop of recent challenges.

Recognising the earnest and noble intent, the Indian Army responded promptly, translating the idea into a meaningful sporting event aimed at nurturing talent, fostering discipline and instilling hope among the youth.

The tournament was inaugurated by Shri Kuldeep Singh, Security Advisor to the Government of Manipur, who graced the occasion as the Chief Guest, in the presence of KT Singh Hockey Olympian, Dr M Veto Singh, Director YAS and other civil dignitaries and sports enthusiasts, hosted by GOC and officers of the Red Shield Division.

While interacting with the participants, the Security Advisor highlighted the transformative power of sports in channelising youthful energy, promoting unity and resilience and contributing to long-term peace and development in the region. The opening ceremony captivated spectators with a series of vibrant performances, including a disciplined and energetic display by cadets of Sainik School Imphal, an impressive Wushu demonstration by athletes supported by the Youth Affairs and Sports ecosystem and colourful cultural performances by Manipuri troupes alongside displays by Army personnel. The performances reflected a harmonious blend of tradition, martial spirit and youthful exuberance. Eight teams are participating in the tournament.

The inaugural match was played between Khongman Students Club (KHSC) and Taobungkhok Welfare Club (TWC) wherein KHSC emerged victorious by 2 goals to 1. Whereas in the 2nd Match Hockey Union, Lairik Yengbam Leikai (HU) defeated South East Youth Organisation (SEYO) with 8 goals to 1. The final match will be played on 21 Dec 2025.

Through this tournament, the Indian Army, under the aegis of the Red Shield Division, has reaffirmed its role as a guardian of national security and as a catalyst for social cohesion and youth development. By promoting sports as a vehicle for positive engagement, the Army continues to inspire confidence, resilience and aspiration among the young generation of Manipur.

The tournament stands as a testament to an unwavering dedication to empowering youth, strengthening community bonds and fostering a brighter, more inclusive future through the unifying power of sports.

# Leh students bags award at National Energy Conservation Day contest

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
New Delhi

Droupadi Murmu President of India presented the Second Prize of ₹50,000 alongwith a silver medal and a laptop to Master Stanzin Chosyangs, a student from Standard X of Druk Padma Karpo School, Shey, Leh, UT of Ladakh for his outstanding painting on energy conservation under Category "B". The award recognises his creativity, talent and awareness showcased at the National Level Painting Competition 2025 on Energy Conservation.

Manohar Lal Union Minister for Power and Housing and Urban Affairs, Shripad NaikMinister of State for Power and New and Renewable Energy, Pankaj Agarwal, Secretary (Power), Goverment of India and Dhiraj Kumar Srivastava, DG, BEE were also present during the National Energy Conservation Day Awards Ceremony held in Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi on 14.12.2025.

Bhupender Gupta, CMD, NHPC, while congratulating the winners for their exceptional talent and artistic excellence in effectively conveying the message of energy conservation, stated that NHPC takes pride in supporting young talent committed to promoting energy conservation and will continue to be an active partner in the National Awareness Campaign on Energy Conservation, conducted under the aegis of the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE), Ministry of Power, Government of India.

Under the National Awareness Campaign on Energy Conservation launched by the Ministry of Power, Government of India, NHPC was entrusted the States/UTs of Arunachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Sikkim, Ladakh and Madhya Pradesh to organise School & State Level Painting Competition on Energy Conservation for the year 2025. NHPC successfully organised the school and State-level painting competitions in the above States/UTs.

# CM Sarma receives 28th SIES Chandrasekarendra Saraswati Eminence Award in Mumbai

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
Mumbai

In recognition of his exemplary governance and service to the people of Assam, South Indian Education Society conferred Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma with 28th SIES Chandrasekarendra Saraswati Eminence Award at a function held in Mumbai this evening.

It may be noted that instituted in the sacred memory of Pujyasri Chandrasekarendra Saraswati Mahaswamigal, the 68th Sankaracharya of the venerated Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam, the award is an acknowledgement of Sarma's leadership in public.

Speaking on the occasion, Chief Minister Sarma paying rich obeisance to His Holiness Pujyasri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswathi Swamigal, the Jagadguru Shankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam expressed his gratitude to the South Indian Education Society for considering him for the award. Drawing a connection, Chief Minister Sarma reminded how closely Assam's spiritual history is woven with the larger civilizational story of Bharat. Adi Shankaracharya himself travelled through ancient Kamarupa, debating great scholars like Navagupta and established the Advaita tradition in the Northeast. A mandapam at Kamakhya Temple stands as testimony to that visit. He also said that the setting up of Sankardeva Nethralaya and Poorva Tirupati Mandir with the initiatives of Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal deepened this connection.

The Chief Minister said that Poorva Tirupati Balaji Mandir has become a spiritual anchor for the people of Assam, who once travelled thousands of kilometres to Tirupati, now find the same divinity, the same grace, right at home. The Sankardeva Nethralaya that carries the name of the greatest spiritual luminary of Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva, is a beautiful confluence of Shankaracharya and Sankardeva, of Advaita and Bhakti, of Kanchi and Assam.

Speaking on the Sanatana Dharma, the Chief Minister said that it is the eternal, ever-renewing civilisational philosophy that has shaped the soul of Bharat for thousands of years. It is not merely a religion; it is a way of life, an ethical compass, a spiritual inquiry and a timeless quest for truth. It is eternal not only because it is ancient, but because its essence continues to remain relevant, open to reform, renewal and reinterpretation across generations.

He said that within Hinduism itself, diversity is not merely accepted, it is celebrated. A Hindu may choose a personal deity, an ishta devata; another may find solace in the silence of the formless; another in ancestor worship; another in local traditions. Outsiders may mistake this as confusion. But in reality, it reflects the vast freedom that Sanatana Dharma accords to every seeking soul.

The Chief Minister observed that Assam represents one of the most vibrant expressions of this lived diversity. Assam has always been a meeting ground of cultures where tribal cosmologies, indigenous rituals and classical Hindu traditions have coexisted and enriched one another. Hinduism did not arrive in the Northeast as a conquering force; it arrived as a cultural companion. It adapted to the land, absorbed local traditions and preserved ancient spiritual impulses connected to nature, ancestors and the cosmic order.

He also said that the communities like the Bodos worship Bathou through the sacred siju plant, symbolising nature's purity. The Rabha people blend ancient spirit worship with Shakta and Vaishnavite traditions. The Tiwas regard Mahadeo as supreme, fusing tribal rituals with Shaivism. The Dimasas worship ancestral gods like Sibrai and Ranachandi, while embracing elements of mainstream Hinduism. The Karbis preserve deities of protection, illness, forest and home echoing Vedic-era nature worship. The Tai-Ahoms honour a Supreme Being and celestial deities yet eventually embraced Vaishnavism and Shaktism.

Sarma further referred to the issues of political appeasement, intellectual mockery, and ideological hostility after Independence and also shed light on the challenges faced by Sanatan Dharma in its land of origin.

He pointed out the legal asymmetries created by the Places of Worship Act, 1991 and the Waqf Act, 1995, as well as historical distortions that weakened Hindu identity. The Chief Minister also spoke about the civilisational challenges posed by demographic aggression in Assam. He elaborated on how policies such as the 1941 land development scheme led to large-scale settlement of Muslim immigrants from East Bengal, fundamentally altering the state's demographic structure, threatening the cultural continuity of indigenous communities and resulting in encroachment on government land, forest land and the sacred lands of Satras. Sarma asserted that his government has taken bold steps to address these issues, including freeing nearly 15,000 hectares of forest land from encroachers and clearing encroachments from Bordowa, the sacred birthplace of Srimanta Sankardeva.

He stated that maintaining demographic balance means protecting the civilisational continuity that Assam has preserved for centuries. Sarma strongly reiterated his commitment to nurturing the nation's spiritual heritage and to building an India that is modern in capability, ancient in knowledge and universal in outlook.

It may be noted that this year along with Dr. Sarma the 28th Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati National Eminence Award, 2025 was presented to Padma Bhushan Dr A Sivathanu Pillai, Founder Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, BrahMos Aerospace and Padma Dr Prahlad Ramarao, the first Project Director of the Akash Missile System. The Collective Leadership Award was presented to the Mumbai's Dabbawalas, the city's renowned lunchbox delivery network, while the award for Social Leadership and Philosophy was conferred upon Dr Mani Dravid Shastigal.

# Budget 2026-27: CII suggests reforms to drive investment-led growth

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**
New Delhi

Industry lobby Confederation of Indian Industry CII has proposed a comprehensive set of reforms for the forthcoming Union Budget 2026-27 to drive sustained investment growth spanning public, private, and foreign investments and maintain India's momentum as one of the world's fastest-growing major economies.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) suggested increasing central capital expenditure by 12 per cent and capex support to states by 10 per cent in FY27; launching a ₹150 lakh crore National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP) 2.0 for 2026-32; offering incremental tax credits or compliance relaxations for firms achieving significant new investment, production, or tax contribution milestones; and establishing an NRI Investment Promotion Fund.

It also called for reinstating accelerated depreciation benefits to further incentivise fresh capital expenditure and technology upgrades, particularly for MSMEs and manufacturing industries, provided the measure is structured to stimulate modernisation without triggering Minimum Alternate Tax (MAT) obligations.

Besides, CII urged for strengthening the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) by forming a Sovereign Investment Strategy Council (SIFC) to align investments with national priorities.

The Union Budget for the 2026-27 fiscal year is expected to be presented on February 1. According to CII, reinforcing fiscal stability through an economic-cycle-based public debt framework, in place of inflexible annual deficit rules, would also enhance resilience by allowing counter-cyclical flexibility during global shocks and avoiding repeated breaches of yearly targets.

Such a framework would strengthen credibility by aligning fiscal policy with medium-term debt sustainability, it said. "The forthcoming Union Budget 2026-27 has to serve the dual role of stabiliser and growth enabler, and promoting investments will be one of the most critical components in this regard," CII Director General Chandrajit Banerjee said. Towards this objective, CII has proposed a comprehensive investment strategy anchored in fiscal prudence, capital efficiency, and investor confidence.

The recommendations emphasise strengthening public capital expenditure as the backbone of infrastructure-led growth, while simultaneously unlocking private and foreign investment through targeted incentives, institutional reforms, and enhanced global engagement.

Bolstering public investment remains essential, CII said, observing that public capital expenditure has been the key driver of India's post-pandemic recovery, catalysing infrastructure expansion and crowding in private capital.

To strengthen project selection and execution, CII has proposed institutionalising a Capital Expenditure Efficiency Framework (CEEF) to prioritise high-impact projects, track physical and financial progress and evaluate outcomes based on productivity and regional spillovers.

Second, facilitating private investment will be the next major priority.

While public investment lays the foundation, private and foreign capital will be the true accelerators of India's transformation. "The Government of India has provided a big demand push via income tax relief in last year's Union Budget and recently via GST 2.0. Investments, especially private sector investment, will be the next big driver for economic growth that needs to be focused on in the next fiscal to continue the growth momentum," added Banerjee.

In this context, incremental tax credits or compliance relaxations for firms achieving significant new investment, production, or tax contribution milestones will encourage reinvestment of profits into productive assets and the scaling of capacity in high-growth sectors such as clean energy, electronics, semiconductors and logistics, CII said.

It suggested creating an NRI Investment Promotion Fund, which can be a government-private holding company, with up to 49 per cent government stake, that channels NRI, FPI and institutional investments into sectors such as infrastructure and AI. nThe fund can raise capital through long-term convertible bonds benchmarked to FCNR rates, offering secure returns with equity upside, including special India Global Dia spora Bonds, the industry lobby said.

# FPIs withdraw ₹17,955 cr from equities in December; total outflow at ₹1.6 lakh cr

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
New Delhi

Foreign investors pulled out ₹17,955 crore ($2 billion) from Indian equities in the first two weeks of this month, taking the total outflow to ₹1.6 lakh crore ($18.4 billion) in 2025. This sharp withdrawal follows a net outflow of ₹3,765 crore in November, extending the pressure on domestic equity markets.

The current trend comes after a brief pause in October, when Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) infused ₹14,610 crore, snapping a three-month streak of heavy withdrawals. FPIs sold equities worth ₹23,885 crore in September, ₹34,990 crore in August and ₹17,700 crore in July.

According to data from the National Securities Depository Ltd (NSDL), FPIs withdrew a net ₹17,955 crore from Indian equities between December 1-12.

Market experts attributed this sustained outflow to several factors including sharp depreciation of the rupee and rich Indian valuations. Explaining the outflow, Himanshu Srivastava, Principal Manager Research at Morningstar Investment Research India, said elevated US interest rates, tighter liquidity conditions and a preference for safer or higher-yielding developed-market assets have weighed on investor sentiment. Adding to the pressure, India's relatively rich equity valuations have made it less attractive compared to other emerging markets that currently offer better value, he added.

In addition to these concerns, Vaqarjaved Khan, Senior Fundamental Analyst at Angel One, pointed to weakness in the Indian rupee, global portfolio rebalancing, year-end effects and lingering macroeconomic uncertainty as key reasons behind the continued pullout. Despite this persistent foreign selling, the impact on markets has been largely offset by strong domestic institutional investor (DII) participation. DIIs invested ₹39,965 crore during the same period, effectively eclipsing FPI outflows.

Looking ahead, some market experts believe the selling pressure may ease.

VK Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist at Geojit Investments, noted that sustained selling appears unsustainable given India's strong growth and earnings outlook, suggesting that FPI selling is likely to decline going forward.

Khan added that an expedited US-India trade deal could potentially trigger a reversal in foreign investment trends.

## BRIEFLY

### REAL SOCIEDAD FIRES COACH SERGIO FRANCISCO

Real Sociedad fired coach Sergio Francisco on Sunday, two days after the club's third straight loss in the Spanish league. Sociedad lost 2-1 to struggling Girona on Friday in a home match it led through 75 minutes. It had also lost at Alaves and against Villarreal in its league games.
Girona hadn't won in four consecutive matches in all competitions, being eliminated by third-division club Ourense in the second round of the Copa del Rey earlier this month.
Francisco leaves Sociedad in 15th place with 16 points from 16 matches, one point clear of the relegation zone. The 46-year-old Francisco had taken over the helm from long-time Sociedad coach Imanol Alguacil in April.
Sociedad has yet to announce Francisco's replacement. Its next match is at Eldense in the Copa del Rey on Tuesday.

### TEENAGER BARTESAGHI SCORES TWICE BUT MILAN HELD TO DRAW

Teenage defender Davide Bartesaghi scored his first senior goals but couldn't prevent AC Milan from being held to a 2-2 draw at home to Sassuolo in Serie A on Sunday.
The result left Milan just a point ahead of Napoli, which was playing at Udinese later. Inter Milan can also move above its city rival if it wins at Genoa later.
Sassuolo had only won one of its past three matches but it took the lead at San Siro in the 13th minute. The visitors won the ball back from a Milan defensive throw-in and Andrea Pinamonti laid it off for the onrushing Ismaël Koné, who forced his way into the area before lifting it over Mike Maignan.

# Odisha Masters: Unnati Hooda, Kiran George clinch singles titles

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**
Cuttack

Top seed Unnati Hooda and Kiran George delivered commanding performances to clinch the women's and men's singles titles respectively in the Odisha Masters Super 100 tournament on Sunday.

Hooda was a picture of composure as she defeated compatriot Isharani Baruah 21-17, 21-10 in just over half an hour.

The 18-year-old controlled the rallies from the outset, denying Baruah the momentum that had powered her impressive run in the BWF World Tour event.

Despite the loss, Baruah capped a memorable week with a well-earned silver medal after a series of standout performances at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium.

The men's singles final witnessed a gripping contest with second seed George prevailing over Indonesia's Muhamad Yusuf 21-14, 13-21, 21-16 in a hard-fought battle that lasted 65 minutes.

George took the opening game before Yusuf fought back to level the match. Showing resilience and tactical clarity, George closed out the decider to secure the title. Indonesia enjoyed success in the mixed doubles, where Marwan Faza and Aisyah Pranata defeated compatriots Dejan Ferdinansyah and Bernadine Wardana 21-15, 21-10.

In women's doubles, Bulgaria's top seeds Gabriela and Stefani Stoeva overcame Malaysia's Ong Xin Yee and Carmen Ting 21-19, 21-14.

The men's doubles crown went to Indonesia's Ali Faathir Rayhan and Devin Artha Wahyudi, who rallied past Malaysia's Khang Khai Xing and Aaron Tai 15-21, 21-12, 21-16.

# CM Reddy thanks Messi, team for GOAT India tour

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**
Hyderabad

Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy on Sunday thanked Argentine football icon Lionel Messi, and his Inter Miami teammates, Luis Suarez and Rodrigo de Paul, for enthralling sports lovers, especially youth, during the second leg of Messi's GOAT India Tour 2025.

Messi's programme in Hyderabad on Saturday evening ended on a positive note thanks to thorough preparations, sound planning, and discipline. "I wholeheartedly thank GOAT Lionel #Messi football greats Luis Suarez and Rodrigo de Paul, for accepting our invitation and gracing our city of #Hyderabad and enthralling all our sports lovers, especially youth. We are deeply grateful to our leader Shri @RahulGandhi ji for joining us and making the evening a memory of a lifetime", Reddy said in a post 'X'.

Reddy also thanked and congratulated all officers, security personnel, organisers and staff on duty across the city for ensuring Telangana was able to showcase to the world that "Telangana means sports, Telangana means excellence, and Telangana means hospitality".

# Having Messi is a golden moment for Mumbai and India: Tendulkar

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**
Mumbai

Cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar on Sunday termed Argentine football superstar Lionel Messi's visit to Mumbai as a golden moment for the city and the country.

Tendulkar compared the 2011 Cricket World Cup triumph at the same ground with the visit of Messi, along with his Inter Miami team-mates Luis Saurez and Rodrigo de Paul.

"I have spent some incredible moments here. As we call it, Mumbai is a city of dreams. And a number of dreams have seen the finish line here on this very venue. And without your support, we would never have seen those golden moments on this ground in 2011," Tendulkar said referring to India's ODI World Cup triumph in which he played a major role.

"And today, having all three of them here is indeed a golden moment for Mumbai, Mumbaikars and India. The way you have received all three greats of the game has truly been remarkable."

Talking about Messi, he said, "When it comes to Leo, if I have to speak about his game, it wouldn't be the right platform. And you know, what does one talk about him? He has achieved everything. We really admire his dedication, determination, commitment.

"And above all, his humility, the person that he is. And on behalf of Mumbaikars and Indians, I would like to wish him and his family the very best of health and happiness to all of you. Thank you once again for being here and encouraging youngsters."

Tendulkar also hoped that "India also reaches the height that we all aspire to (in football)."

Tendulkar presented a No.10 jersey signed by him to Messi. The Argentine World Cup-winning captain reciprocated with a football.

Messi arrived in Mumbai around noon under "World Cup level" security measures, marking the second day of his four-city 'GOAT India Tour 2025'.

He will wind up his visit on Monday in New Delhi where he will meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Messi had arrived in India in the wee hours of Saturday, but the opening leg of the tour in Kolkata quickly descended into chaos later in the day due to poor crowd management and security lapses.

However, his evening programme in the Hyderabad leg stood in stark contrast to the mayhem in Kolkata, proceeding smoothly and concluding on a positive note.

# Young players shine as PSG beats Metz

**ASSOCIATED PRESS**
Paris

Defending champion Paris Saint-Germain returned to the top of Ligue 1 with a 3-2 win at last-place Metz that highlighted the strength of its flourishing youth academy.

Teenage forward Ibrahim Mbaye, who in September was taking a high school diploma exam, set up two goals. After coming through the PSG academy he made his Ligue 1 debut at the age of 16 years, 6 months, 23 days last season, making him the youngest PSG player to start a league game.

After Portugal striker Gonçalo Ramos put PSG ahead in the 31st minute, Mbaye set up 18-year-old Quentin Ndjantou — another player who came through PSG's academy — with a cross from the left to make it 2-0 in 39th.

It was Ndjantou's first goal for the club.

"Is this a big moment for me? Yes, absolutely. It's my first goal, I'm very happy to have scored it," Ndjantou said. "I thank the coach for having faith in me today."

Metz midfielder Jessy Deminguet pulled one back just before halftime, before Mbaye's pass sent 20-year-old Désiré Doué sprinting through on a counterattack from deep to score PSG's third, midway through the second half.

Georgia midfielder Georgiy Tsitaichvili scored with a brilliant curling strike from the left past goalkeeper Matveï Safonov to make it 3-2 in the 81st and give Metz hope.

But PSG held on to move two points ahead of surprise front-runner Lens, which can reclaim the lead if it beats struggling Nice at home on Sunday.

In Sunday's other games, third-place Marseille takes on Monaco and fourth-place Lille is at lowly Auxerre.

Brest defender Kenny Lala made two big mistakes during a 3-1 loss at fifth-place Rennes.

Lala was at fault for the first two Rennes goals after Brest had taken an early lead through striker Mama Baldé. Rennes replied with goals in quick succession from top scorer Estéban Lepaul and Jordan winger Mousa Al-Taamari.

On the first goal, the right back got the ball stuck in his feet and lost his balance, allowing Al-Taamari to break down the left and whip in a cross for Lepaul to slide the ball home in the 24th minute.

One minute later, Lala tried a first-time back pass on the halfway line and mistimed the waist-high ball completely, with Al-Taamari profiting to race clear and finish confidently.

# Liverpool beat Brighton in Premier League

**ASSOCIATED PRESS**
Liverpool

The first stage of Mohamed Salah's rehabilitation at Liverpool is complete after the Egypt forward returned to the team for its 2-0 win over Brighton in the Premier League.

The question now as Salah heads off to the Africa Cup of Nations: Is there a future for him at Anfield when he comes back?

Salah, who let rip last weekend about his current frustrations at Liverpool, entered as a 26th-minute substitute to a big ovation and set up the second of Hugo Ekitike's goals as the defending champions jumped to sixth place and extended their unbeaten run to five games in all competitions.

"For me, there is no issue to resolve," Liverpool manager Arne Slot said of his star player's current situation at the club.

Arsenal is attempting to take Liverpool's title and opened up a five-point lead by beating last-placed Wolverhampton 2-1 — but only thanks to two own-goals, the second of which came in stoppage time.

On a run of just one win in their previous three games, the leaders looked like dropping more points when Tolu Arokodare equalized for Wolves in the 90th minute, canceling out an own-goal by goalkeeper Sam Johnstone in the 70th.

Then Yerson Mosquera headed into his own net from Bukayo Saka's cross to gift Arsenal the win.

Also Saturday, Chelsea beat Everton 2-0 and was set on its way to victory by Cole Palmer's first goal in three months.

Salah held talks with Liverpool manager Arne Slot on Friday in an effort to overcome their issues and the result was that Salah was recalled to the matchday squad for the Brighton game. He had been a substitute for the last three Premier League matches before being left at home for the midweek Champions League trip to Inter Milan as a punishment for his explosive comments to reporters last weekend.

"It was an easy decision to put him in the squad," Slot said. "I have said many times before what has been said between us will stay between us." Liverpool's fans demonstrated they are willing to excuse Salah for his show of anger and gave him a rapturous welcome when he came on as a substitute for the injured Joe Gomez midway through the first half.

By then, Liverpool was leading 1-0 thanks to Ekitike's rising shot inside the first minute and Salah showed glimpses of his class, especially on the counterattack.

# Raphinha scores 2 as Barcelona wins to add pressure on Real Madrid's Alonso

**ASSOCIATED PRESS**
Barcelona

Raphinha scored a brace as Barcelona beat Osasuna 2-0 to increase its La Liga lead and pile more pressure on beleaguered Real Madrid coach Xabi Alonso.

The Brazil forward broke the deadlock with a shot from the top of the area in the 70th minute at Camp Nou. He then put the result beyond doubt by scoring from close range with six minutes remaining.

A seventh league win in a row left the defending champions seven points clear of Real Madrid before its game at Alaves on Sunday. That is likely a must-win game for Alonso after the powerhouse has won just two of its last eight games across all competitions.

Madrid had led Barcelona by five points in the Spanish league after winning a clasico match in late October. But a huge dip in form with just one win in five rounds, including a humiliating 2-0 defeat to Celta Vigo at home last weekend, has left Madrid reeling.

Relishing the trouble of Barcelona's top rival, the Camp Nou crowd chanted "Stay Xabi! Stay Xabi!" in Spanish at one point during the Osasuna match.

Raphinha, however, stayed focused on his team.

"We need to focus on ourselves and if we do our job then we won't have to worry about anyone else," Raphinha said. "We are playing better than before and the more points, the better."

Raphinha was key to Barcelona winning La Liga and Copa del Rey last season, when Hansi Flick's side also reached the Champions League semifinals.

Barcelona struggled to replaced his speed and incisiveness when Raphinha was sidelined with a leg injury for six weeks earlier this campaign. But he has returned as strong as ever. He also assisted in a 3-1 victory over Alaves in late November and scored in a 3-1 win over Atletico Madrid earlier this month.

Sixteenth-placed Osasuna generated little in attack but its defense and goalkeeper Sergio Herrera frustrated Barcelona until Raphinha struck. Herrera saved a shot by Lamine Yamal while Marcus Rashford's goal-bound effort was blocked by a defender.

Raphinha's first goal came after Barcelona recovered the ball and Pedri González led a counterattack before laying off for him to score from distance. His second was easier: a tap-in after Osasuna defender Alejandro Catena redirected a cross from Jules Koundé to the far post where Raphinha was unmarked.

Antoine Griezmann scored the winner after coming off the bench to help fourth-placed Atletico beat Valencia 2-1 and stay nine points behind Barcelona. Griezmann replaced Julián Álvarez with half an hour to go with Atletico leading after Koke Resurrección scored from a rebound in the 17th.

Lucas Beltrán pulled the visitors level in the 63rd with a shot from outside the area as the Argentine striker skirted past a defender and lashed a long strike just inside the post.

Griezmann restored the lead in the 74th at the Metropolitano Stadium when he used an exquisite control, hooking down a long ball with the tip of his boot, before he fired in the winner.

The 34-year-old Griezmann has taken a more limited role with Atletico this season, but he is still proving to be decisive. The former France star scored two goals as a substitute in a 3-1 win over Levante last month and also netted after coming on in the second half against Sevilla and Real Madrid.

His winner against Valencia increased his record haul for Atletico to 204 career goals.

The loss for Valencia will increase the pressure on coach Carlos Corberán with the team in 17th place just on the edge of the relegation zone. Leandro Cabrera's header helped Espanyol beat Getafe 1-0 on the road and secure a fourth consecutive league win.

Espanyol is the surprise of the season approaching the winter break. The Barcelona-based team is in fifth place after 16 rounds, having barely avoided relegation on the final day of last season.