

## Pakistan implodes with Balochistan explosion

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/AGENCIES ■ New Delhi/Karachi

Five people, including three Frontier Corps (FC) personnel, were killed and 30 others injured in a terrorist attack by suspected Baloch militants in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province on Sunday. Four terrorists, including the suicide bomber, were killed in counter-operations in Noshki district of the province.

The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the attack, and said 90 military personnel had been killed. Earlier last week, in the same province, the BLA militants ambushed the Jaffar Express, carrying 440 passengers, near the mountainous terrain

of Gudalar and Piru Kunri in Bolan district on March 11. The militants killed 21 passengers and four paramilitary soldiers before the Army eliminated all 33 terrorists on March 12.

As regards the latest incident, a suicide attacker rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into a convoy of Paramilitary Frontier Corp (FC) on the Nushki-Dalbandin National Highway; chief of the local police station Zafarullah Sumalani said adding that the initial investigations suggested that it was a suicide attack.

Sumalani also said evidence from the site of the attack suggested that a suicide attacker rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into the FC convoy.

Soon after the attack, security forces launched an immediate counter-

operation, killing four terrorists, including the suicide bomber, newspaper Express Tribune said.

It also quoted security sources to say that the attack was carried out by militants from the banned BLA.

Claiming that a total of 90 Pakistani military personnel were killed in the attack on their convoy on Sunday, a statement by the BLA said, "The Majeed Brigade, the Fidayee unit of the Baloch Liberation Army, targeted a convoy of the occupying Pakistani military a few hours ago in a VBIED Fidayee attack near Rakhshan Mill on the RCD Highway in Noshki. The convoy consisted of eight buses, one of which was completely destroyed in the explosion."

It added, "Immediately after the attack,

the Fateh Squad of the BLA advanced and completely surrounded another bus, systematically eliminating all military personnel on board, bringing the total number of enemy casualties to 90."

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti all condemned the attack and expressed sorrow over the loss of lives.

**Immediately after the attack, the Fateh Squad advanced and surrounded another bus, systematically eliminating all military personnel on board**

— BALOCH LIBERATION ARMY

Sharif, in a statement, said, "Such cowardly acts cannot shake our resolve against terrorism." He also directed that the injured be provided with the best possible treatment. "Those who play with the peace of Balochistan would be brought to a tragic end," Bugti said in an official release.

Minister Naqvi condemned the blast and extended condolences to the victims' families and wished a swift recovery for the injured.

Denouncing the attack as an act of brutality, Naqvi emphasised that anti-state elements are attempting to destabilise the country and asserted that such cowardly acts would not shake the nation's resolve, according to a statement shared by the Ministry of Interior on social media.

Balochistan government spokesperson Shahid Rind also condemned the attack "targeting innocents."

Balochistan has witnessed an uptick in terrorist attacks over the past year. Bordering Iran and Afghanistan, Balochistan is home to a long-running violent insurgency.

Baloch insurgent groups frequently carry out attacks targeting security personnel, government projects and the \$60 Billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects in this oil and mineral-rich province.

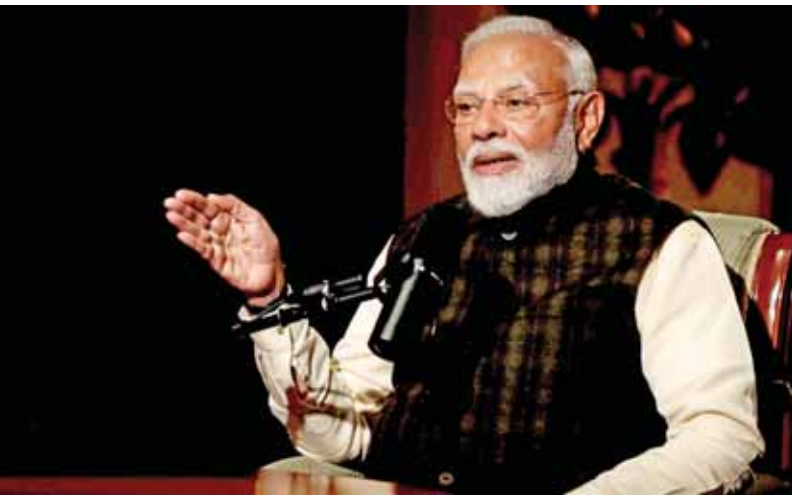
In the past, the railway tracks in this area have been attacked by Baloch militants using rockets or remote-controlled bombs, and the BLA claimed responsibility for most of the attacks.

## PM bemoans lack of will and wisdom in Islamabad

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that every attempt to foster peace with Pakistan was met with hostility and betrayal and hoped that wisdom would prevail on the leadership in Islamabad to improve bilateral ties. In a podcast with Lex Fridman released on Sunday, Modi recalled that he had specially invited his Pakistan counterpart Nawaz Sharif for his swearing-in ceremony in 2014 with the hope that the two countries could turn a new leaf.

"Yet, every noble attempt at fostering peace was met with hostility and betrayal. We sincerely hope that wisdom prevails upon them and they choose the path of peace," the Prime Minister said in his over three-hour interaction. Modi said he believed that even the people of Pakistan long for peace because they also must be tired of living in strife, unrest and relentless terror where even innocent children are killed and countless lives are destroyed. The Prime Minister said



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a podcast with Lex Fridman in New Delhi

his first attempt at improving bilateral relations was a gesture of goodwill.

"It was a diplomatic gesture unlike any in decades. The very people who once questioned my approach to foreign policy were taken aback when they

learned I had invited all SAARC heads of state and our then President Pranab Mukherjee beautifully captured that historic gesture in his memoir," Narendra Modi said.

"This was a testament to how clear and confident India's foreign policy had

become. This sent a clear message to the world about India's commitment to peace and harmony, but we didn't get the desired outcome," he said.

To a question on how he now view the 2002 post Godhra riots and its aftermaths, Modi said the discourse was an attempt to create a false narrative and his political opponents in power at the Centre wanted him to be punished but the courts cleared his name. Modi said there were many involved in misinformation to target him. "If you review the data from before 2002, you will see that Gujarat faced frequent riots. Curfews were constantly being imposed somewhere. Communal violence would erupt over trivial issues such as kite flying contests or even bicycle collisions," Modi said.

Modi said the riots in Gujarat in 1969 lasted for more than six months and that was an era when he was nowhere on the political horizon. He said the Godhra train burning incident took place barely three days after he was elected as a legislator of the Gujarat Assembly.

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## Lashkar Commander gunned down by Indian forces in Jhelum

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Atop Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) commander, wanted by Indian security agencies for several deadly terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir, was killed by gunmen in an attack in Pakistan, officials said on Sunday.

Zia-ur-Rehman alias Naadeem alias Abu Qatal alias Qatal Sindhi was gunned down in the Jhelum area of Punjab on Saturday evening. His security guard was also killed, the officials said, quoting information received from the neighbouring country.

Abu Qatal was under heavy protection from the Pakistan Army, with both Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists and plainclothes Pakistani military personnel assigned to his security. The attack took place near Zeenat Hotel, close to Dina Punjab University in the Jhelum area. As Zia-ur-Rehman's convoy was passing through, unknown gunmen launched a barrage of gunfire.

Considered the most trusted handler of LeT founder and 26/11 Mumbai terror attack mastermind Hafiz Saeed, they said

43-year-old Rehman was the main handler of the terror outfit involved in the planning of various attacks in the Poonch-Rajouri region of Jammu and Kashmir.

The officials said Rehman had infiltrated the Jammu region in early 2000 and exfiltrated in 2005. He had a wide network of Over Ground Workers in Poonch and Rajouri through his old contacts, they said. In the various investigations conducted by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) into the gruesome terror incidents in Poonch-Rajouri region, his involvement was found, officials said.

He was charge-sheeted by the NIA under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and other sections for an attack on Hindu minorities in Dhangri Village of Rajouri District in 2023, they added.

Terrorists struck Dhangri village on January 1, 2023, and targeted villagers before fleeing the scene, leaving behind an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). While five people were killed in the firing by terrorists, two others died in the IED explosion the next morning.

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## Trump orders air strikes on Houthis, 31 dead

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ West Palm Beach (US)

The Houthi rebel-run Health Ministry says the death toll from US strikes on Yemen has climbed to 31, including women and children.

Anees al-Asbahi, a spokesperson for the ministry, said on Sunday that another 101 people were wounded in the overnight strikes. President Donald Trump said he ordered a series of airstrikes on the Houthi-held areas in Yemen on Saturday, promising to use "overwhelming lethal force" until Iranian-backed Houthi rebels cease their attacks on shipping along a vital maritime corridor. The Houthis said at least 18 civilians were killed.

"Our brave Warfighters are right now carrying out aerial attacks on the terrorists' bases, leaders, and missile defences to protect American shipping, air, and naval assets, and to restore Navigational Freedom," Trump said. "No terrorist force will stop US commercial and naval vessels from freely sailing the Waterways of the World." He also warned Iran to stop supporting the rebel group, promising to hold the country "fully accountable" for the actions of its proxy. It comes two weeks after the US leader sent a letter to Iranian leaders offering a path to restarting bilateral talks between the countries on Iran's advancing nuclear programme.

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## Ram Mandir generates ₹400 crore as tax in five years

BISWAJEET BANERJEE/KAMLESH SRIVASTAVA ■ Ayodhya

The construction of the Ram temple has not only transformed the religious landscape of Ayodhya but has also had a profound impact on the city's economy. Over the past five years, the influx of tourists and devotees has surged tenfold, creating new employment opportunities and significantly boosting local businesses. This rise in religious tourism has also resulted in substantial revenue generation for the government.

Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust General Secretary Champat Rai disclosed that between February 5, 2020 and February 5, 2025, the Ram Mandir Trust contributed approximately ₹400 Crore in taxes to the government. Of this, ₹270 Crore was collected as GST, while the remaining ₹130 Crore came from other tax sources.

In the past year alone, over 16 Crore devotees and tourists visited Ayodhya, with five Crore devotees attending the court of Ramlala following the Pran Pratishtha ceremony.

During an inspection by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) about six months ago, the trust requested an economic analysis of Ayodhya.

From February 5, 2020 to February 28, 2025, the government received ₹396.26

Crore in taxes from the trust, rounded off to ₹400 Crore. The Maha Kumbh 2025 further contributed to the surge, with four to four-and-a-half lakh people arriving in Ayodhya daily for darshan. Around 1.5 Crore people visited Ramlala during this period.

Moreover, ten trains from the Kumbh Mela reached Ayodhya daily, carrying around 4,000 passengers per train. This brought approximately 40,000 to 50,000

**In the past year, over 16 Crore devotees and tourists visited Ayodhya. The 944 kg of silver donated by devotees have been converted into 20 kg silver bricks and stored securely in bank lockers**

visitors to Ayodhya each day.

The significant revenue generation from the Ram Mandir has not only enhanced the spiritual experience for devotees but has also strengthened infrastructure development and contributed to the government's revenue collection.

The Uttar Pradesh Rajkiya Nirman Nigam has been awarded a ₹200 crore contract for the construction of the Ram Katha Museum, the trust office, and a rest house.

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## SpaceX crew arrives for NASA astronauts



Sunita Williams and other astronauts greeting each other after the SpaceX capsule docked with the International Space Station

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Cape Canaveral

Sunday, delivering the replacements for NASA's two stuck astronauts.

Just over a day after blasting off, a SpaceX crew capsule arrived at the International Space Station on

The four newcomers representing the US, Japan and Russia will spend the next few days learning the station's ins and

outs from Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams. Then the two will strap into their own SpaceX capsule later this week, one that has been up there since last year, to close out an unexpected extended mission that began last June.

Wilmore and Williams expected to be gone just a week when they launched on Boeing's first astronaut flight. They hit the nine-month mark earlier this month.

The Boeing Starliner capsule encountered so many problems that NASA insisted it come back empty, leaving its test pilots behind to wait for a SpaceX lift.

Wilmore swung open the space station's hatch and then rang the ship's bell as the new arrivals floated in one by one and were greeted with hugs and handshakes. "It was a wonderful day. Great to see our friends arrive," Williams told Mission Control. Weather permitting, the SpaceX capsule carrying Wilmore, Williams and two other astronauts will undock from the space station no earlier than Wednesday and splash down off Florida's coast.

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## Clerk shot in leg, arrested for raping 7-year-old girl

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Lucknow

A clerk employed by a private construction company, accused of raping a 7-year-old girl was shot at and arrested following an encounter on the intervening night of Saturday and Sunday, officials said.

The accused, identified as Mohammed Sarju of Malda, West Bengal, allegedly raped the 7-year-old girl of a worker at a construction site. When the victim's mother reached the scene while searching for her, the girl was found lying unconscious. She rushed the girl to KGMU Trauma Centre, where she is undergoing treatment.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (East) Shashank Singh said the police received a tip-off from an informer that the accused was trying to escape from Lucknow and had been spotted near Kharagpur railway crossing. A police team surrounded him at around 2 am on Sunday. As soon as he saw the police, he began running away.

When the police chased him, the accused opened fire. In retaliation, the police shot him in the leg. He was apprehended and admitted to a CHC. The forensic team reached the spot and collected samples.

The victim, who hails from Etawah district, is a Class II student. She lives with her parents in the servant quarters of the construction site in Gomti Nagar. Her father works as a cleaner.

As per reports, at around 2 pm on Saturday, the girl went out of the servant quarters. On finding her alone the Sarju forcibly took her to a room and allegedly raped her.

The victim's father and maternal uncle rushed her to RML Hospital, from where she was referred to Jhalkari Bai Hospital. However, she was sent to Queen Mary's Hospital and then to the trauma centre.

The police swung into action and raids were conducted at various places in search of the accused. His location was traced, but he remained elusive. In the meantime, an

## Labourer confesses to murdering girl; body yet to be found

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Lucknow

A labourer from Barabanki kept the Vibhuti Khand police on edge when he confessed to murdering a girl and disposing of her body on the railway tracks in the area.

The suspect, identified as Aman Kashyap, arrived at the Vibhuti Khand police station allegedly after committing the crime. He told the police that he had killed a girl he had met the previous night and thrown her body onto the railway tracks.

Upon hearing his confession, the police immediately took him into custody. A team was dispatched to the location he mentioned, but the body has yet to be found. The police consider Kashyap to be mentally unstable, but they suspect that he may have confessed to avoid facing harsher consequences.

Investigators believe the full truth will only emerge once the body is recovered.

The suspect, Aman Kashyap (19), is a resident of Lakhpeda Bagh in Barabanki and works as a labourer in Lucknow. He reportedly lives under a bridge.

Kashyap said that he met the girl, who identified herself as Nidhi, at 6 pm on Saturday. She told him she needed to go to Barabanki and stayed with him overnight.

An informer tipped the police that the accused was trying to escape from Lucknow by a train.

A team from Vibhuti Khand police sta-

According to Kashyap, they ate together, and when he tried to drop her off in the morning, she began arguing near the railway tracks. Police found a scarf at the scene.

Kashyap confessed that he strangled the girl with the scarf before fleeing in panic. He then went directly to the police to confess his crime.

Gomti Nagar ACP Vinay Kumar Dwivedi stated that the police team searched the locations mentioned by Kashyap but found nothing, suggesting that he may be misleading them.

Meanwhile, a woman's body was found floating in Kathuta Lake in Chinhat. Locals spotted the body and alerted the police. The girl's slippers were found near the lake.

Police, with the help of divers, recovered the body. Authorities are investigating whether the death was a result of murder or suicide. The deceased woman was identified as Priyanka Kanaujia (24), a resident of Sitapur's Sandana area.

She worked for Dial-112 and lived in a rented room in the Ganga Vihar area here. Chinhat Inspector Bharat Pathak said that the body was discovered after Priyanshu Rawat, a local resident, alerted the police. The woman's family has been notified, and the cause of death will be determined after their arrival.

tion reached the spot at around 2 am on Sunday. When the police surrounded him, he opened fire and he was shot in the leg in the retaliatory firing.

## Whitewashing of Sambhal mosque outer wall begins

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Sambhal

The whitewashing of the outer wall of the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal began on Sunday morning under the supervision of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in line with a high court order, an advocate of the mosque committee said.

The Mughal-era mosque here has been at the centre of a major row after a petition claimed that it was the site of an ancient Hindu temple. The district has been tense since riots broke out on November 24 last year during protests against a court-ordered survey of the mosque. Four people were killed and several others, including police personnel, were injured in the clashes.

The Allahabad High Court had on March 12 directed the ASI to undertake and complete the whitewashing at the mosque's outer wall within one week while hearing the objections against the ASI survey report by the Shahi Jama Masjid management committee which had also sought permission for whitewashing, additional lighting and installation of decorative lights outside the disputed structure.

Following the high court order, an ASI team carried out measurements and assessments on March 13.

"The whitewashing of the outer wall of the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal began on Sunday," Shakeel Warsi, an advocate representing the mosque committee in the Sambhal district court, told PTI.

Shahi Jama Masjid's president Zafar Ali said the work started at around 9 am and 9-10 labourers are engaged. "If the work has to be completed in four days, then around 20 labourers would be needed," he said.



Labourers whitewash the outer wall of the Shahi Jama Masjid following an Allahabad High Court directive to ASI to complete the task in Sambhal on Sunday

Amid reported objection by the Hindu side over the use of green colour to paint the outer wall of the mosque, Ali said, "We are using the colours which have been used for hundreds of years. We are using white, green and light golden colours," he said.

Ali noted that the High Court has ordered that the ASI and the Muslim side will jointly get the painting done. "All the labourers of ASI are engaged, the work is being done under their direction and supervision. The ASI and we will complete this work together," he said. On the Hindu side's reported demand that white colour be used to paint the wall or else they will seek the

use of saffron colour, Ali said, "This demand is unreasonable. It is a wrong and an illegitimate demand. For hundreds of years, green, white and light golden colours have been used here and they are still there." Meanwhile, Arman Ali, the labour contractor, told reporters that their target is to complete the work in a week. Asked about the lighting of the mosque's exterior, Zafar Ali said, "This is in the ASI's hand. If it wants, it can install lights. There is no interference from our side. Whatever lighting has to be done, the ASI has to do it."

Security has been stepped up in the area since the violence in November.

## 20-year-old woman, son burnt alive

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Lucknow

A 20-year-old woman and her one-year-old son died after sustaining burn injuries in the Lahchura area of Jhansi on Sunday, police said.

Superintendent of Police (Rural) Gopinath Soni said, "Pooja, wife of Kausal Kushwaha, and her son died under suspicious circumstances. The family members have claimed that while cooking food in the morning, the woman poured some flammable material on herself and her son and set themselves on fire."

According to the police report, other family members were working in the fields at the time of the incident. The neighbours, after seeing flames coming out of the house, alerted her family and police. By the time the fire was doused, both the moth-

er and the child had died from burns.

Police said Pooja had been married to Kausal Kushwaha for four years.

"Her husband, mother-in-law and father-in-law have been taken into custody. Further investigation is underway," the SP (Rural) said, adding that the bodies of the mother and child have been sent for post-mortem.

Meanwhile, in a separate incident, Sunil Kumar Singh (57), a professor at a private university in Bareilly district, died under mysterious circumstances, a police official said on Sunday. Izzatnagar Station House Officer Virendra Singh said that Sunil Kumar Singh of Mahanagar, lived in a rented house in the Baradari area and has two sons, the elder one, Ricky, works in Noida, and the younger one, Siddhant, lives in Mahanagar Colony in Bareilly.

The official said that Singh had come to his younger son Siddhant's house on Holi, where he died.

He said that after getting information about the incident, the police reached the spot and started investigation, which revealed that the incident took place during a dispute between the father and son over something, but later it was found that Sunil Kumar suddenly fell on the ground and started bleeding from his mouth, due to which he died on the spot.

The official said that the exact cause of death would be known only after the post-mortem report came.

According to the police, no concrete clues were found in the initial investigation but considering the possibility of murder, every aspect was being investigated in depth.

## New lease of life for woman with blocked arteries, stroke

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Lucknow

A team of doctors at Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences (SGPGI) successfully treated a woman with blocked blood flow in both legs and later performed an emergency procedure to remove a clot in her brain after she had a stroke shortly after the first treatment.

The patient, a woman in her late 20s with a history of rheumatic heart disease (RHD), was admitted to the hospital with severe pain and coldness in both legs due to ALI—a life-threatening condition caused by clots from the heart migrating and blocking the arteries in the legs. If not treated urgently, ALI can lead to amputation.

"Given the severity of her condition, our team decided to perform an emergency endovascular procedure to restore blood flow to her lower limbs. Our team of interventional radiologists (Dr Tanya Yadav, Dr Avinash D Gautam, and PDCC students) performed percutaneous catheter-directed thrombolysis and thrombectomy, a minimally invasive approach to remove the clot and restore blood flow. After timely reperfusion, the patient's legs were saved from amputation," said Dr Archana Gupta from

SGPGI.

Later, the patient developed sudden neurological deficits, including right-sided weakness and slurred speech, indicating a stroke.

"The clots in her heart had migrated to the left-sided major brain arteries, causing paralysis on the right side of her body and loss of speech. An urgent brain MRI revealed an acute left middle cerebral artery (MCA) occlusion. Recognising the time-sensitive nature of stroke intervention, we immediately proceeded with mechanical thrombectomy to remove the clot from the brain. Through a small incision in the groin, a microcatheter and microwire were used to cross the clot, and aspiration thrombectomy was performed, ensuring its complete removal. A post-thrombectomy angiogram showed near-total recanalisation of the left MCA, restoring blood supply to the brain," said Gupta.

Following the thrombectomy, the patient showed progressive neurological improvement over the next few hours. Her limb circulation remained stable, and her stroke symptoms gradually resolved. After a successful recovery, she was discharged in stable condition, fully independent in daily activities, and with normal speech.

## South Korean delegation visits Ayodhya

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Lucknow

An 80-member delegation from South Korea's Garak dynasty visited Ayodhya to pay homage to their ancestors at the Queen Heo Memorial Park, reinforcing the deep historical and cultural ties between India and South Korea.

According to ancient Korean legends, nearly 2,000 years ago, Princess Suriratna of Ayodhya married King Kim Suro of Korea's Garak dynasty. After her marriage, she became known as Queen Heo Hwang-ok, the founder of the Garak royal lineage. South Koreans regard Ayodhya as their ancestral home and visit annually to honour this connection. In recognition of this shared heritage, a memorial park dedicated to Queen

Heo was established in Ayodhya, strengthening cultural ties between South Korea and Uttar Pradesh.

The South Korean delegation, including representatives of the Garak dynasty, arrived in New Delhi on March 11. They travelled to Varanasi on March 12 and reached Ayodhya on March 13. During their visit, they toured the Ram Temple, Queen Heo Memorial, and other sacred sites in the ancient city. The delegation also took part in the Saryu Aarti and enjoyed a laser show.

The evening featured cultural performances, including traditional dances by eight artists. The delegation represents the 72nd generation of the Garak dynasty, who have maintained strong emotional and cultural ties to their Indian heritage. Their visit

highlights their enduring connection to Ayodhya. During the final leg of their five-day tour, the South Korean delegation visited Agra before returning to New Delhi.

Uttar Pradesh's Minister for Tourism and Culture, Jaiveer Singh, remarked, "The deep reverence and ancestral devotion of the South Korean Garak dynasty are well known. We respect their unwavering faith in Sanatan traditions. Uttar Pradesh is home to several important Buddhist sites, including Kapilvastu, Kushinagar, Kaushambi, Sarnath, Sankisa, and Shravasti, which hold special significance for South Korean visitors. Every year, a large number of Korean tourists visit these sites, strengthening cultural and tourism ties between our nations."

## Lucknow university proposes sparrow park, bird tower for conservation

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Lucknow

The Institute of Wildlife Sciences at Lucknow University has submitted a proposal to the state government for the development of a sparrow park and bird tower to improve bird conservation efforts.

Director of the Institute of Wildlife Sciences and Professor of Zoology, Amita Kanaujia, explained that the bird tower concept involves constructing a tall tower in the city. The proposed tower would be 75 feet high, cylindrical in design, and consist of 8-10 stories. It is suggested to be built either in front of the Lucknow Nagar Nigam Directorate or in Ram Manohar Lohia Park and Janeshwar Mishra Park at an estimated cost of Rs 23 lakh. The tower would be designed with holes at different levels, allowing birds to build

nests, while people can place bird seeds around the area. Kanaujia described the tower as a way to bring humans and animals closer, fostering a shared responsibility for maintaining the environment.

The tower would also provide opportunities for wildlife observation and birdwatching, attracting tourists and fostering greater interaction between citizens and birds. This could boost ecotourism in the city. Kanaujia shared an example of a similar initiative in Parbatsar, Rajasthan, where a seven-storey bird tower has been constructed. The 65-foot tower offers food and water for the birds and has become a popular spot for local wildlife, benefiting from donations of land and resources.

In addition to the bird tower, Kanaujia proposed a Sparrow Park in the city, which would feature a central park surrounded

by buildings, providing a safe space for sparrows with suitable water facilities and bushy shrubs for roosting.

She highlighted that the biggest threats to birds are habitat destruction, climate change, and human activities such as logging, agriculture, and pesticide use. These threats have contributed to the decline of many bird species, with 80 species going extinct since 1680.

Kanaujia stressed that habitat loss, pollution, and hunting have had a significant impact on bird populations. Early human agricultural practices have also led to the selective breeding of various bird species, further affecting natural populations. She added that they have approached the Lucknow Development Authority vice-chairman to make the inclusion of Sparrow Houses mandatory when approving building plans for city residents.

## LDA demolishes, seals illegal buildings

Lucknow (PNS): The Lucknow Development Authority (LDA) demolished two semi-finished structures in the Aliganj area and sealed off unfinished multi-storey buildings in Chowk on Sunday. In addition, the LDA's anti-encroachment squad removed locals who had illegally occupied land in Mohanlalganj, recovering 2.5 bighas of land from unscrupulous elements.

LDA Vice-Chairman Prathmesh Kumar ordered raids at two locations in Aliganj, where two unauthorised semi-finished structures were identified. Following an investigation that confirmed the buildings were illegal and in violation of the land use policy, the LDA took action.

Authorities anticipated potential violence at one site, which had been forcibly

occupied by mafia. As a result, a large number of police personnel accompanied the LDA team. The team reached the first location at 9:30 am, expecting resistance. The occupiers challenged the squad and warned them not to enter in the presence of the police. However, once chased away, the occupiers did not return to the site.

The operation lasted for two and a half hours. At the second location, barely a kilometre away from the first, the squad found no sign of locals protecting the multi-storey building, despite earlier reports of their presence. In the Chowk area, two unfinished multi-storey buildings were sealed due to their failure to submit layout plans for approval. Notices had been served on the developers, but they did not take the warnings seriously.

**CLASSIFIEDS**

**NOTICE**

It is informed to the general public that I Nashrah Haider Rizvi passed my high school(class 10th) from Loreto Convent Intermediate College in 2007. I have lost my High School Pass Certificate of 2007 which was issued by Council for the Indian School Certificate Examination for the Roll No.-T/1941/014. Its use will be considered invalid. Nashrah Haider Rizvi daughter of Tanveer Haider Rizvi, R/o 251 Mumtaz Mahal Compound Gola Ganj Lucknow

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The soft copy of the application alongwith all the supporting documents can also be e mailed on **bishopdan@rediffmail.com**. The management reserves the right to call the shortlisted candidates as per mentioned criteria for the interview.



# Media a vigilant watchdog of democracy: Yogi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Gorakhpur

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, on Sunday, emphasised that the media has long been recognised as the fourth pillar of democracy, playing a crucial role as its vigilant watchdog.

While addressing the oath-taking ceremony of the newly-elected executive of the Gorakhpur Journalists Press Club, the chief minister said, "By highlighting pressing issues and holding the other three pillars accountable, the media ensures that overlooked matters are brought to the forefront with accurate facts and linked to public concerns."

He added, "Throughout history, the media's role has evolved worldwide, adapting to changing times and societal needs. Gorakhpur serves as the focal point of eastern Uttar Pradesh, making the role of the Gorakhpur Journalists Press Club even more significant. The decisions of its newly-elected executive will influence the city and the surrounding districts and institutions. In light of this, the new leadership must remain sensitive to public concerns to ensure their work remains meaningful and impactful."

Mayor Dr Manglesh Srivastava administered the oath to the newly-elected office-bearers during the event.

Chief Minister Yogi also presented election certificates to the newly-elected members and extended his congratulations.



He highlighted the media's significant role in shaping the careers of many freedom fighters who contributed as journalists and played a pivotal role in India's independence movement. He said, "Among them, Mahatma Gandhi was a key

figure who inspired newspapers through his influential writings. Similarly, Lokmanya Tilak mobilised public consciousness by organising the Ganapati festival, while Lala Lajpat Rai and Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi used their sharp pen to

bring about societal change."

He further stated that when India's democracy was threatened, the press fought with all its might to safeguard democratic values. "Even in a rapidly evolving world, the role and relevance of

media remain irreplaceable. With the fast-paced advancements in technology, the media landscape is also transforming to ensure the accurate dissemination of information."

"Today, the younger generation relies heavily on social media due to time constraints. However, the misuse of these platforms by certain individuals to spread negativity has increased the responsibility of media institutions. The media must uphold its core values and focus on delivering positive and factual content. This is not just crucial for democracy but also for the security and sovereignty of the nation," he added. Emphasising that dialogue is the foundation of good governance and democracy, the chief minister said, "Problems cannot be resolved by forcefully imposing one's viewpoint, but meaningful discussions can lead to solutions. Conflicts arise whenever we step away from constructive dialogue; preventing such discord is essential."

In this regard, the media is crucial in promoting healthy discourse, he remarked. The chief minister asserted that effective communication does not require gathering large crowds as just a few voices can be enough to amplify a message to millions. The media must foster informed discussions and ensure that the right message reaches society, he added. The newly-elected president of the Gorakhpur Journalists Press Club

emphasised that when a dedicated, inspiring and visionary leader earns recognition at both the societal and national levels, even the most eloquent words fall short in capturing the true essence of their stature. He added, "Similarly, the sentiments of the people are deeply connected with Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, whose leadership has set a remarkable example for the entire nation in terms of good governance, strong law and order and rapid development."

He further stated that journalists also share a special affinity with Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who has emerged as a role model for leadership across the country. He added, "The chief minister often remarks that those who fail to adapt to changing times are inevitably left behind. Following this vision, Uttar Pradesh, under his leadership, has embraced progress and modernisation. Today, the state's achievements and success stories are being discussed nationwide, solidifying its national reputation." Transport Minister Dayashankar Singh, MLC Dr Dharmendra Singh, MLA Vipin Singh, Rajesh Tripathi, Pradeep Shukla, Dr. Vimlesh Paswan, Mahendra Pal Singh, former mayor Anju Chaudhary, Dr Satya Pandey, Sitaram Jaiswal and editorial in-charges of prominent newspapers were also present during the oath-taking ceremony.

## Ensure swift resolution of grievances, says CM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Gorakhpur

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath personally listened to the grievances of over 150 people at the Janata Darshan programme held at Gorakhnath temple on Sunday.

Moving through the crowd gathered outside the Mahant Digvijayanath Smriti Sabhagar, the chief minister ensured that each person's concerns were heard and directed officials to address their problems promptly.

Reaffirming the government's commitment to 'Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Vikas', Chief Minister Yogi instructed officials to resolve grievances efficiently and deliver justice to the needy. He stressed that government welfare schemes should reach the underprivileged and that they must be connected to development programmes.

During this, Chief Minister Yogi personally



interacted with each individual, attentively listening to their concerns and assuring them that no injustice would be tolerated.

He forwarded their petitions to the relevant departments and ordered quick and satisfactory resolutions. He reiterated the government's firm commitment to addressing the concerns of every distressed individual, ensuring that no citizen is left unheard or deprived of justice.

At the Janata Darshan, many people sought financial help for medical treatment. Chief Minister Yogi assured them that the government would provide full support.

He instructed officials to gather the necessary cost estimates for their treatment. He also directed that cases related to revenue and police matters be resolved with complete transparency and fairness.

## BJP announces names of 70 districts' chiefs in UP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Lucknow

After over two months of deliberations, the Bharatiya Janata Party, on Sunday announced the names of presidents for its 70 organisational district units in Uttar Pradesh.

Among these 70 district presidents, 26 have got the chance to hold the post for a second time.

The announcements have been made by district election officers, marking a shift from the usual practice of releasing a consolidated list from Lucknow. The announcements coincided with BJP's statewide celebrations of 'Organisation Festival 2025'.

In Lucknow, the party has appointed Anand Dwivedi as the party's new city president. Rajya Sabha member Naveen Jain, serving as the election officer for Lucknow, also announced the new district president for the city.

In Agra, the BJP has named both city and district presidents. Rajkumar Gupta has been appointed as the party's city unit president, and Prashant Poonia as the district president.

In Moradabad, Akash Pal has been reappointed as district president while Girish Bhandula, a textile trader and party leader, has been appointed as the city unit president.

In Firozabad, Satish Diwakar has been

appointed as the new city president. However, there has been no change in the post of district president with Uday Pratap Singh continuing in the role.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath congratulated the newly-appointed office-bearers. In a post on X, he wrote: "Hearty congratulations to all newly-appointed district and metropolitan presidents of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Uttar Pradesh! I am confident that all of you will further strengthen the organisation by upholding the BJP's policies and principles, and will contribute to advancing the honourable prime minister's mission of security and good governance in Uttar Pradesh. Wishing you all a bright and successful tenure!" So far, the BJP has announced the district presidents for 68 out of 98 organisational districts in the state. The remaining appointments are expected to be announced soon.

The list of the district presidents includes the names of Vikas Chauhan (Bulandshahr), Annu Gupta (Etawah), Om Prakash Rai (Ghazipur), Harishchandra Rawat (Lalitpur), Sudhanshu Shukla (Amethi), Rajkumar Gupta (Agra city), Prashant Poonia (Agra district), Akash Pal Moradabad district), Girish Bhandula (Moradabad city), Neeraj Sharma (Kasganj), Mayank Goyal (Ghaziabad city), Vijay Maurya (Lucknow

district), Sanjay Pandey (Maharajganj), Anurag (Unnao), Buddhi Lal (Rae Bareilly), Abhishek Sharma (Noida & Gautam Buddha Nagar district), Mahesh Chauhan (Noida city), Nandlal Gupta (Sonbhadra), Vivek Rastogi (Meerut city), Janardan Tiwari (Gorakhpur district), Devesh Srivastava (Gorakhpur city), Dhruv Singh (Azamgarh), Vinod Rajbhar (Lalganj), Vivekanand Mishra (Basti), Deepak Mishra (Bhadohi), Shivram Singh (Kanpur South), Ashish Srivastava (Pratapgarh), Harish Gangwar (Rampur), Mamta Rajput (Mainpuri), Fateh Chandra Verma (Farrukhabad), Nirbhay Pandey (Mathura district), Raju Yadav (Mathura city), Brajesh Pandey (Bahraich), Sushil Tripathi (Sultanpur), Sarvesh Katheria (Auraiya), Ravi Mishra Balrampur), Amar Kishore Kashyap (Gonda), Mishri Lal Verma (Shravasti), Anil Dixit (Kanpur North) Renuka Sachan (Kanpur Dehat), Veer Kumar Singh Bhaduria (Kannauj), Neetu Singh (Sant Kabir Nagar), Ashok alias Sanjay Pandey (Maharajganj), Ramashray Maurya (Mau), Sanjay Mishra (Ballia), Nirmala Paswan (Prayagraj Ganga-paar region), Rajesh Shukla (Prayagraj Yamuna-paar region), Sanjay Gupta (Prayagraj city), Ajay Kumar Singh (Machhlishahr), Mohanlal Kushwaha (Mahoba), Mahendra Kotariya (Chitrakoot).

## 222 notorious criminals killed in encounters during Yogi rule

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Lucknow

Once infamous for crime, riots and lawlessness, Uttar Pradesh has undergone a remarkable transformation under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's leadership. Today, the state is recognised in India and globally for its robust law and order, a testament to the zero-tolerance policy adopted over the past eight years.

With unwavering resolve, Chief Minister Yogi turned the impossible into reality – establishing a governance model where every resident, from daughters to businessmen, feels secure, knowing that justice will be swift and uncompromising.

Making the above claims here on Sunday evening, an official spokesman of the government claimed that since Yogi Adityanath took charge in 2017, his administration has launched an unrelenting crackdown on criminals and the mafia.

The results speak for themselves: 222 dreaded criminals were neutralised in police encounters, 8,118 criminals were injured in operations, including 20,221 wanted criminals with bounties, 79,984 criminals were booked under the Gangsters' Act, 930 offenders were charged under the National Security Act (NSA), and illegal assets worth Rs 142 billion 46 crore 18 lakh were confiscated

or demolished, the spokesman added. By reclaiming illegally occupied properties and dismantling the criminal empire, the Yogi government has ensured that Uttar Pradesh is no longer a haven for crime but a beacon of security and justice.

Uttar Pradesh's law enforcement, under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's leadership, has set a new benchmark in crime control, with a resolute stance against mafia, organised crime, and crimes against women and minors, claimed the spokesman.

Meanwhile, Director General of Police Prashant Kumar reported that from 2017 to December 2024, the government successfully prosecuted 68 identified mafia, leading to life imprisonment or severe sentencing for 31 mafia and 74 co-criminals in 73 cases. Notably, two criminals received the death penalty.

Besides, 795 cases were registered against 68 identified mafia and 1,408 associates of their gangs in the state, out of which 617 have been arrested. Apart from this, the arms licences of 359 criminals were canceled, and action was taken against 18 criminals under the NSA. Besides, 752 criminals were punished under the Gangsters' Act, while illegal property worth more than Rs 4,076 crore was seized.

The Yogi government has also taken a tough stand on crimes against women

and minors. So far, the culprits have been punished in 27,425 cases, 11,254 cases of the POCSO Act and 3,775 cases of dowry death.

Between July 2023 and December 2024, the Yogi government's 'Operation Conviction' led to 51 accused being awarded the death penalty, 6,287 criminals being awarded life imprisonment, 1,091 criminals being sentenced to more than 20 years, 3,868 criminals being sentenced to 10 to 19 years and 5,788 accused being sentenced to less than five years of imprisonment.

The Yogi government freed more than 66,000 hectares of land from illegal occupation by forming a four-tier anti-land mafia task force. One hundred forty-two land mafias were identified, and legal action was taken against them. Since 2017, the Special Task Force (STF) has prevented 653 heinous crimes before they could happen. Meanwhile, the ATS has arrested 130 terrorists and 171 Rohingya/Bangladeshi criminals and their associates since 2017. With historic reforms in policing and governance, Uttar Pradesh has emerged as a national model for law and order. The Yogi government's zero-tolerance policy has dismantled criminal networks and instilled a deep sense of security among its citizens, marking a transformative shift in the state's safety and governance.

## 219 'madrasas' in Azamgarh getting govt aid found not-existent, FIR lodged

PRSS REUST OF INDIA ■ Lucknow

The Azamgarh police have registered a case against 219 'madrasas' that were drawing government aid but did not exist on the ground.

The FIRs were registered following a complaint by the Economic Offences Wing (EOW) after an investigation found these madrasas were non-existent.

Superintendent of Police Hemraj Meena said "219 cases have been registered in 22 police station areas of the district".

The investigation, prompted by discrepancies found during online data entry on the madrasa portal, initially identified 313 madrasas with irregularities.

An Special Investigation Team investi-

gation, conducted following a 2017 complaint to the government, further revealed that 219 of these madrasas were entirely non-existent.

"Investigation was done in this case through EOW, in which there was an allegation of government money being siphoned off in the name of madrasas. Government money was received on the basis of forged documents," Meena said.

The first FIR was registered on February 6 at the Kandharapur police station, based on a complaint filed by EOW Inspector Kunwar Brahma Prakash Singh.

Subsequently, other FIRs were registered across the district, including multiple cases at Kotwali, Sidhari, Rani ki Sarai, Mubarakpur, Nizamabad, and other police

stations.

"The matter is being investigated and action will be taken on the basis of whatever facts come to light during the investigation," the district police chief added.

### STUDENT HELD FOR NAMAZ IN OPEN AREA OF UNIVERSITY

Meanwhile, the Meerut police have arrested a student for allegedly offering namaz in an open area of a private university, officials said on Sunday. Khalid Pradhan (Khalid Mewati) was arrested following protests by local Hindu groups over a purported video surfaced around Holi celebrations this week that showed a group of students offering namaz on the university campus.

## Wheat procurement begins today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Lucknow

The wheat procurement for Rabi marketing season 2025-26 will begin across the state from Monday (March 17) and continue until June 15 at 6,500 procurement centres. The Central government has set the minimum support price (MSP) for wheat at Rs 2,425 per quintal, an increase of Rs 150 from last year's Rs 2,275 per quintal.

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has directed officials to ensure that farmers receive their payments within 48 hours. He has also stressed on making adequate arrangements at procurement centres for hassle-free procurement of wheat with no farmer facing any inconvenience. Additionally, purchase will also be done by going to the villages of the farmers through mobile centers.

Over 2.65 lakh farmers in Uttar Pradesh have already registered for wheat procurement. Farmers must register or renew their registration on the Food and Civil Supplies Department portal (fcs.up.gov.in) or the UP Kisan Mitra mobile app before selling their wheat. The department has advised farmers to thoroughly clean and dry their wheat, removing moisture, soil, stones, and dust before bringing it to the procurement centers. According to the Food and Civil Supplies Department, wheat procurement will take place daily from 8 am to 8 pm (except on



Sundays and public holidays) until June 15. To address any issues, a toll-free helpline (18001800150) has been set up. Farmers can also contact the district food marketing officer, tehsil regional marketing officer, or block marketing officer for assistance. Notably, a total of 6,500 procurement centres have been established under the Food and Civil Supplies Department and eight other procurement agencies. The payment for wheat will be directly transferred to farmers' Aadhaar-linked bank accounts within 48 hours of procurement of wheat through the Public Financial Management System (PFMS).

This year, wheat will be procured from farmers by going to villages through mobile centers. The wheat procurement process will officially begin on March 17, and all arrangements have been finalised.



# New BJP city chief in Varanasi targets 2027 assembly poll



Jubilant newly-appointed BJP city president Pradeep Agrahari, along with UP Minister Ravindra Jaiswal and others, at party's Gulab Bagh Office in Varanasi on Sunday.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Varanasi

A senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) worker Pradeep Agrahari has been appointed as the new city party president of this parliamentary constituency of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Varanasi. He will replace Vidyasagar Rai whose term ended recently and the new election was held after that. This is the second time when Pradeep Agrahari has been appointed as the city party chief.

At a programme organised at party's city office at Gulab Bagh (Sagra) here on Sunday, its election officer Purushottam Khandelwal and observer Subrat Pathak

announced the name of Pradeep Agrahari in the presence of public representatives and workers. Speaking on the occasion, the newly-appointed city BJP chief Pradeep Agrahari said he will fulfil the responsibility entrusted to him by the party organisation with full devotion and honesty. "My full effort will be to take every one along, as well as make every possible effort to give the party a historic victory in the assembly elections to be held in 2027."

The district and city presidents were announced across the state on Sunday. Pradeep Agrahari was among 78 candidates who had filed nomination for the

post of city president and successor of Vidyasagar Rai. The programme was presided over by outgoing city BJP chief Vidyasagar Rai and was attended by UP Minister of State (Independent Charge) Ravindra Jaiswal, MLAs Dr Neelkanth Tiwari and Saurabh Srivastava, MLC Dharmendra Rai, Meena Choubey, Naveen Kapoor, Jagdish Tripathi, Ashok Patel, Rahul Singh, Atma Visheshwar, Alok Srivastava, Madhukar Chitransh, Rajkumar Sharma, Santosh Solapurkar, Kishore Seth, Nirmala Singh Patel, Namrata Chaurasia, Kusum Patel, Pooja Dixit, Dr Geeta Shastri, Engineer Ashok Yadav, Sadhna Vedanti, Abhishek Mishra,

Dr Ashok Rai, Dr Rajesh Trivedi and dozens of others.

## Run for Clean Ganga Marathon on Mar 22

A Run for Clean Ganga Marathon will be organised on World Water Day on March 22 under the aegis of Sankat Mochan Foundation (SMF). SMF president Prof Vishwambhar Nath Mishra, along with international athlete Neelu Mishra, netball player Nishant Singh and footballer Farman Haider released a poster regarding the marathon at a ceremony held at Tulsi Ghat recently.

Prof Mishra said to connect the entire city in a different way than every year, a six-km-long 'Run for Clean Ganga Marathon' will be organised from Rajghat to Tulsi Ghat on March 22. The race will be flagged off from Rajghat at 6.30 am. Seven places, including Rajghat, Machhodari, Maidagin, Chowk, Jangambadi, Shivala and Tulsi Ghat, have been identified for programmes of the six kilometre marathon. The closing ceremony will be held at Tulsi Ghat in which the participants of the marathon will be given first, second, third and consolation prizes.

Neelu Mishra said all people of the city should join this marathon. They should stay healthy themselves and keep Maa Ganga clean and pure. All the people should leave their homes for Maa Ganga on the morning of March 22. Farman Haider said Muslims of the city should take a pledge to keep Ganga river clean by participating in this noble work in the holy month of Ramzan because Ganga belongs to all of us. "They should walk as far as they can but must participate in this marathon," he added.

# Cycle rally highlights importance of fitness



Doctors taking out Fit India cycle rally in Varanasi on Sunday.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Varanasi

A special cycle rally was organised on Sunday with the joint efforts of the Indian Medical Association (IMA, Banaras branch) and Sports Authority of India (SAI Fit India). Its main objective was to create social awareness about making Varanasi pollution free as well as how to keep oneself fit and healthy. The doctors who participated in the rally said that cycling keeps cardiometabolic health fine and cycling is like a panacea for diabetes, obesity, heart disease and other diseases.

President of IMA (Banaras branch) Dr SP Singh said according to a new research, cycling reduces mental stress and also keeps the body energetic. Besides, he said that cycling also does not pollute the environment and such rallies spread health awareness among general public. Secretary Dr Arun Kumar Tripathi said this programme of SAI (Fit India) gives a meaningful message to the society that along

with staying healthy, the environment should also be safe. Joint Secretaries Dr Sanjay Garg and Dr Sanjay Patel said such rallies prove helpful in controlling diseases in women such as obesity, diabetes, Polycystic Ovarian Disease (PCOD) etc.

The rally started from the premises of IMA (Banaras branch) at Lahurabir and went to Sampurnanand Sanskrit University (SSU) and ended at IMA building. Eminent doctors of the city participated on the occasion. Prominent participants included former Vice-President of IMA (Uttar Pradesh) Dr Manoj Kumar Srivastava, paediatrician Dr BL Gupta, Dr Deepak Singh, Dr Robin Dubey, Dr Rakesh Singh, Dr AK Kaushik, Dr Sunil Sharma, Dr Shailendra Kumar Singh, Dr Hemant Singh, Dr Shalini Tandon, Dr CKP Sinha, Dr Preeti Gupta, Dr Ritu Garg, IMA (Banaras) President-elect Dr Anurag Tandon, Dr Vijay Gupta, Dr Rajesh Khanna, Dr Thanwani, officials of SAI and others. The vote of thanks was proposed by Secretary Dr Arun Kumar Tripathi.

# NER running 86 spls to ease post-Holi rush

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Varanasi

To ease the huge rush of passengers returning to their work places after festival of Holi, the North Eastern Railway (NER) is running 86 festival special trains in 382 trips. Giving this information, Chief Public Relations Officer (CPRO) of NER Pankaj Kumar Singh said as the number of passengers travelling from various stations of NER to metros and other major cities of the country is increasing day by day and keeping in view the demand of passengers after Holi a record number of festival special trains are being run.

In view of the increasing demand for the return of passengers to their destinations after Holi as many as 46 festival special trains are being run in 198 trips from various stations of NER to metros and other major cities of the country. Apart from this, 40 festival special trains are being run in 184 rounds for major cities of the country through various stations of NER. In all, a total of 86 festival special trains are being run in 382 trips from/through the stations of NER. By choosing to travel by these special trains, railway passengers can make their journey smooth and enjoyable, he added.

Singh further said that extensive arrangements have been made for the convenience of passengers at the stations. The Railway Protection Force (RPF) is

making passengers enter the train in queue.

The Railway Protection Force personnel and Commercial department employees have been deployed at foot over bridges (FOBs) and crowded places. In view of the additional movement of passengers on Holi, passenger holding areas have been created at major stations for crowd management. Two holding areas have been created for the convenience of passengers at Gorakhpur Junction railway station.

Besides, he said arrangements for drinking water and cleanliness have been ensured in the passenger holding area and to facilitate the passengers in getting tickets AVTMs have been installed at every entry gate of the station. To control the crowd, ticket checking staff has been deployed at the entry gate and announcements are being made to enter the platform only after taking a ticket. Similarly, passenger holding areas have been made for passengers at Chhapra Jn and Ballia railway stations, he added.

According to him, passengers are requested to check the availability of berths in special trains as well as regular trains while planning their journey. Passengers can get information about train timings, diversions etc on National Train Enquiry System (NTES) mobile app or web portal.

# Woman's body found in canal

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Kanpur

A young woman's body was found in a canal near Dharmgapatr bridge under Sachendi police station area on Sunday. From the injury marks on the body and neck, it appeared as if she was thrown into the canal after being killed. Police sent her body for an autopsy. Sachendi SO Dinesh Singh Bisht said on the information of villagers, police force reached the spot and took out the body. During investigation, injury marks were found on her right hand and body. Along with this, a mark of strangulation with a rope had also been found on the neck. The letter 'A' was tattooed in English on left hand. The body had swollen due to being several days old. After investigation, the body had been sent for post-mortem. The SO said the photograph of the victim had been sent to all the police stations of Kanpur for identification.

In another incident, the bodies of three friends who drowned in Ganga on Friday have been recovered. However, the search for the fourth youth continued on Sunday. The incident had taken place at the Silvasa Ghat of Chandanpur village in Maharajpur police area. On getting information about the four friends being feared drowned police, PAC divers and SDRF teams had immediately rushed to the spot. The three bodies were recovering after toiling hard for about 20 hours. Efforts are on to recover the fourth youth Sumit on Sunday.

# Installation of TOM, EFO machines finalised at all 5 underground stns

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Kanpur

The installation of Ticket Office Machines (TOM) and Excess Fare Office (EFO) machines at all the five underground stations of Kanpur Metro has been finalised, marking the completion of all ticketing arrangements. The Automatic Fare Collection (AFC) system is crucial for fare management in Kanpur Metro's commercial operations.

This system includes Ticket Office Machines (TOM), Excess Fare Offices (EFO), AFC gates, and Ticket Vending Machines (TVM) at every station.

TOMs are installed at ticket counters, while EFOs are located in station control rooms. A total of 11 TOMs and 5 EFOs have now been installed — two TOMs at each of the four stations and three at Kanpur Central, with one EFO at each station's control room.

Earlier, in January ticket vending machines and AFC gates were installed across all five stations. A total of 40 ticket vending machines will allow passengers to purchase tickets independently and recharge their NCMC Go Smart Cards. Additionally, 59 AFC



gates have been installed for seamless entry and exit in the paid metro areas. Passengers can use QR-code tickets and the NCMC Go Smart Card for travelling in Kanpur Metro. Tickets are available at station counters and ticket vending

machines, or via the official 'Kanpur Metro' mobile app, available on Android and iOS. The app generates a QR code, which passengers scan at AFC gates for entry.

Managing Director (MD) of Uttar Pradesh Metro Rail Corporation (UPMRC) Sushil Kumar said, "The Kanpur Metro team is fully committed to preparing for the extension of passenger services from Motijheel to Kanpur Central. Major systems, including tunnel ventilation, environment control, Third rail, AFC, fire safety, lifts, and escalators, have been installed across all five stations. Recently, the Commissioner of Metro Rail Safety (CMRS) team conducted an inspection as part of the pre-commencement process before the start of revenue operations. After receiving the NOC from CMRS, inauguration of passenger services will follow soon."

# Students told about agriculture industry

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Kanpur

The Chemical Society, Department of Chemistry, Christ Church College, Kanpur organised a special programme on biofertilisers. The objective of the programme was to provide information about bio-fertilisers among the students and to provide information about agricultural problems and their solution.

The programme began with lighting of lamps and prayers. The prayer was conducted by Dr Joshua Lawrence, faculty member of the English department. The Principal and Secretary, Governing Body, Prof Joseph Daniel welcomed the guests. He highlighted the importance of bio-fertilisers in the present times. He also advised the students to be aware of various other demanding areas apart from the bookish knowledge. The chief guest, Raj Kumar Srivastav was welcomed by presenting him a memento and a shawl.

In the ceremony, the winners of a poster competition organised by the Chemical Society were felicitated. The competition was open to all BSc and MSc students and they participated enthusiastically. Prof Jyotsna Lal, Chemistry department, gave information about the programme after which a short film on information about bio-fertiliser was shown.

Anjali Sachan gave a PowerPoint presentation on bio-fertilisers which contained information about different types of bio-fertilisers. The programme was organised by Head of the Chemistry department Prof Anandita Bhattacharya. Chief speaker Raj Kumar Srivastava, General Manager of Shiv Shakti Agro Ltd. provided informa-



Participants of the programme on biofertilisers at Christ Church College

tion about agriculture industry to the students and told them that students can also make their future in agriculture industry. The programme was conducted by Aishwarya Singh. Students Avnish, Subhash, Shiv, Mahmood, Ariba, Prachi etc. made a special contribution. All the UG/PG Science students actively participated in the programme.

## Memorandum

The members of the All India EPS-95 Agitation Committee, on the call of their national leadership, submitted a memorandum to City MP Ramesh Awasthi. Their four-point demand letter was submitted under the leadership of state president Om Shankar Tiwari and national adviser Rajesh Kumar Shukla, requesting the MP to forward it to the PM with his recommendation and to raise the issue in the Lok Sabha. The MP assured them that he would send their memorandum to the PM with his recommendation and, if necessary, would also raise the matter in the Lok Sabha. Rajesh Kumar Shukla, SK Mishra, Anoop Kumar Kushwaha, Jagroop Singh, Ramdayal Sharma and others were present.

# Capacity-building programme for educators from today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Varanasi

The Inter-University Centre for Teacher Education (IUCTE), BHU (Varanasi), in partnership with UNESCO MGIEP, New Delhi and the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi, is organising a capacity-building programme for educators titled 'Empowering Educators in the Global South' from March 17 to 24 at IUCTE, BHU campus.

Giving this information at a press conference on Sunday, Director, IUCTE, BHU, Prof Prem Narayan Singh said this innovative initiative combines an immersive eight-day experience with a comprehensive online learning component, focusing on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) for early childhood education and digital pedagogy. The programme features two key components- 'Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)', targeting educators working with children aged three-eight years and 'The Digital Educator: A Primer in Digital Pedagogy', which equips participants with advanced digital teaching competencies.

"The participants will access continuing education through UNESCO MGIEP's digital learning platform, ensuring sustained professional development beyond the in-person workshop. This hybrid approach enables educators to implement learned strategies in their local contexts while maintaining connections with their global peer network. The workshop integrates hands-on training sessions with cultural experiences, including visits to Varanasi's heritage sites", Prof Singh said



Director Prof PN Singh (middle) addressing a press conference in Varanasi on Sunday.

and emphasised that this programme is a strategic initiative to elevate IUCTE's contribution in education on the global stage. He highlighted that the programme will equip educators from the Global South with latest advancements in SEL for ECCE, as well as foundational knowledge in digital pedagogy.

He said that Director of UNESCO MGIEP, New Delhi, Dr Obijiofor Aginam in his message underscored the transformative potential of integrating digital pedagogy with social-emotional learning. Dr Aginam stated, "By combining digital pedagogy with social-emotional learning, we are empowering educators to create more inclusive, resilient and technology-enabled learning environments. This initiative marks a significant step forward in reshaping education systems across the Global South." The IUCTE director said the programme will bring together 60 educators from 19 countries, fostering a diverse and collaborative learning environment. The participating countries include Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Malaysia,

# Programme to foster entrepreneurial mindset

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Kanpur

The Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj University (CSJMU) organised a four-day Capacity Building Programme on Incubation at The Oasis, T-Hub Building, Hyderabad, under the Kickstart Programme which witnessed active participation from faculty members

of various schools of CSJMU. The primary objective of this programme was to foster an entrepreneurial mindset among the academic community and equip faculty members with the knowledge and skills necessary to develop incubation centers within educational institutions. In the current scenario, where startups are crucial for socio-economic development, CSJMU is

committed to creating a vibrant startup ecosystem by fostering innovation and entrepreneurship. The event was inaugurated by Phani Kondepudi, Chief Digital Officer of T-Hub, and Dr Anil Kumar Yadav, Registrar of CSJMU. The inaugural session set the tone for the four-day programme, highlighting the importance of incubation in educational institutions.

## Joint team to study Kaimur art

A joint team of teachers of Banaras Hindu University (BHU) and Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University (BBAU), Lucknow, will do research work on the sociological and cultural study of art, architecture and archaeological materials of Kaimur district. Historians Dr Vinod Kumar Jaiswal and Dr Sarvesh Kumar from BHU and social scientist Dr Shankar Kumar Lal from BBAU will do detailed research work on the topic 'Collection of art, architecture and archaeological materials of Kaimur district: Sociological and cultural study' under a major research project. For this, financial assistance of Rs 16 lakh has been approved under the ambitious project 'Arts Practices and Folk/Oral Forms' proposed by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi. The coordinator of this project, which will run for two years, is Dr Vinod Kumar Jaiswal of the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology of BHU and co-coordinators are Dr Sarvesh Kumar (BHU) and Dr Shankar Kumar Lal, Department of Sociology, BBAU, Lucknow. Under the project, Dr Jaiswal and Dr Sarvesh Kumar will survey every village of Kaimur and collect and classify various archaeological materials such as ancient statues, idols, architecture and other art remains, earthen pots made in ancient times, stone and other tools, iron ore and slag, their construction technology, materials used in construction and their availability in the area, tradition of development of science and technology and their continuity.



## ₹88 Crore drugs seized in northeast

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A massive consignment of methamphetamine tablets worth ₹88 Crore was seized and four members of an international drug cartel were arrested in Imphal and Guwahati zones, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Sunday.

Shah also said the drug haul is a testament to the stellar performance of the bottom-to-top and top-to-bottom approach towards investigation and asserted that the Narendra Modi government's crackdown on drugs will continue. "No mercy for drug cartels. Accelerating the Modi gov't's march to build a drug-free Bharat, a massive consignment of methamphetamine tablets worth ₹88 Crore is seized, and 4 members of the international drug cartel are arrested in Imphal and Guwahati zones," he wrote in a social media post.

The home minister expressed his "heartfelt" congratulations to the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) for the success. Acting on a tip-off, the officers of NCB Imphal zone carried out an operation on March 13.

The NCB team intercepted a truck near the Lilong area and recovered 102.39 kg of Methamphetamine tablets from a toolbox in the rear section of the truck, according to an official statement. Two occupants of the truck were arrested, it added. Without delay, the team immedi-



Consignment of Methamphetamine tablets worth ₹88 crore seized by Narcotics Control Bureau PTI

ately conducted a follow-up operation and apprehended the suspected receiver of the contraband from the Lilong area, the statement said. A four-wheeler, used for drug trafficking, was also seized and the man was subsequently arrested, it said.

The suspected source of the contraband is Moreh town in Manipur. Further investigation is underway to nab others involved in the case, the statement said.

In another operation on the same day, officers of the NCB-Guwahati zone intercepted an SUV on the Assam-Mizoram border near Silchar and seized 7.48 kg of Methamphetamine Tablets concealed inside the spare tyre of the vehicle, it said.

The occupant of the vehicle was arrested, according to the statement.

The source of the contraband was Moreh and the suspected destination was

Karimganj in Assam, the statement said. Further investigation to nab others involved in the case is going on, it said.

Meanwhile, the Narcotics Control Bureau would be taking over the probe from the Mizoram State Excise Department into the seizure of about 46 kg of crystal meth from Brigade Bawngkawn in Aizawl on March 6. In this case, four people involved in the drug syndicate have already been arrested.

The investigation is being taken over by NCB to probe the international and inter-state linkages of the drug trafficking network, the statement said.

The Northeastern region has emerged as one of the most vulnerable areas of India from the point of view of drug trafficking owing to its geographic location, it said. Identifying this vulnerability, the Ministry of Home Affairs augmented the strength of the Narcotics Control Bureau in 2023 to further strengthen the "war against drugs" in the region.

The Narcotics Control Bureau, through its five zonal units and a regional headquarters in the Northeast, has been continuously working against drug traffickers operating in the region, particularly those involved in the trafficking of synthetic drugs such as Methamphetamine tablets, popularly known as YABA, it said.

These tablets pose a threat to not only the young population of the region, but also to the security of the nation as a whole, the statement said.

## Seven year jail term for using forged passports

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Anyone found using a forged passport or visa for entering, staying or exiting India will be punished with a jail term of up to seven years and a fine to the extent of ₹10 Lakh if the new immigration bill is approved by Parliament.

The legislation, piloted by the Union Home Ministry, also provides for mandatory reporting of information about foreigners by hotels, universities, other educational institutions, hospitals and nursing homes to enable tracking of overstaying foreigners.

All international airlines and ships will also be required to submit at a port or place in India the passenger and crew manifest, the advance information of passengers and crew on board of such aircraft, vessel or other mode of transport.

"Whoever knowingly uses or supplies a forged or fraudulently obtained passport or other travel document or visa for entering into India or staying in or exiting from India, shall be punishable with an imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than two years, but may extend to seven years and shall also be liable to fine which shall not be less than one lakh rupees, but may extend to ten lakh rupees," according to the bill introduced in Lok Sabha on March 11.

It also says that any foreigner who enters into any area in India without a valid passport or other travel document, including visa required for such entry in contravention of provisions of the law or of any rule or order given in pursuance thereof, shall be punishable with an imprisonment for a term which may extend to five years with a fine which may extend to five lakh rupees or with both.

The legislation empowers the Centre to exert control over places that are "frequented by any foreigner" and require the owner to close the premises, permit its use under specified conditions, or refuse admission to all or a "specified class" of foreigners. The Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025 is a comprehensive legislation to regulate all matters relating to foreigners and immigration.

Matters relating to foreigners and immigration are presently administered through four Acts—the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920, the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939, the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act, 2000.

All these laws are now proposed to be repealed.

While the Immigration and Foreigners Bill, 2025 consists of several existing provisions in the four Acts proposed to be repealed after simplification and harmon-

isation, it also has certain new provisions to meet the present-day requirements.

This legislation is in line with the government's policy of simplification of laws, ease of doing business and minimising compliance burden.

It seeks to balance the requirements of national security and related issues of immigration of foreigners with the need to promote economic growth and tourism in the country. However, it is not connected with any matters related with grant of citizenship.

"The Bill will help in tackling the problem of illegal migration into India and facilitate tracking of movement of overstaying foreigners within India.

**The legislation empowers the Centre to exert control over places that are "frequented by any foreigner" and require the owner to close the premises, permit its use under specified conditions**

It will also help in reducing the compliance burden," an officer said.

While Indian visas of all categories to foreigners can be granted in physical or sticker form by Indian missions or posts located abroad, the Bureau of Immigration (BoI) grants electronic visas under seven categories to people from 167 countries.

Besides, visa-on-arrival is granted by immigration authorities at six designated airports to nationals of three countries - Japan, South Korea and the UAE (only for such UAE nationals who had earlier obtained e-visa or regular or paper visa for India).

The stay and movement of foreigners in India and their exit are regulated by the BoI and state governments and Union Territory administrations.

According to existing laws, all foreigners on long-term (more than 180 days) student, medical, research, employment, missionary and project visas are required to register with the Foreigners Regional Registration Officer (FRRO) or the Foreigners Registration Officer (FRO) concerned, having jurisdiction over the place where the foreigner intends to stay, within 14 days of arrival. Pakistani nationals are required to register within 24 hours of their arrival.

Other laws that cover foreigners in India include the Citizenship Act, 1955, which regulates acquisition and termination of Indian citizenship as well as acquisition and registration of foreigners as Overseas Citizens of India (OCI).

## Jairam Ramesh slams government over air pollution report

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Congress on Sunday criticised the government after a world air quality report ranked India as the world's fifth most polluted country, and demanded that all "anti-people" environmental law amendments over the past 10 years be rolled back.

In a statement, Congress General Secretary (Communications) Jairam Ramesh said the Swiss air quality technology company IQAIR has just released its 2024 World Air Quality Report which finds that India is the world's fifth most polluted country.

The Rajya Sabha MP said in his statement that according to the report, India's population-weighted average concentration of fine particulate matter is 50.6 µg/m<sup>3</sup> which is 10 times the WHO's annual guideline level of 5 µg/m<sup>3</sup>.

He claimed that according to the report, 74 of the world's 100 most polluted cities are in India, and national capital New Delhi is the second-most polluted city in the world after Brynihat in Meghalaya.

"Among the lesser-known tragedies of



PIONEER PHOTO

the non-biological PM's reign is the rapidly deteriorating air quality nationally and

the inattentiveness and policy chaos that has characterised the government's

response to it," he said in his statement.

Ramesh cited several studies in the past about air pollution-linked fatalities in the country. In early July 2024, he said, a study published in the prestigious Lancet journal showed that 7.2 percent of all deaths in India are associated with air pollution which comes about 34,000 deaths each year in just 10 cities.

The former environment minister said that around the same time, a study by the Centre for Science and Environment revealed that the government's interventions in pollution control are poorly designed, with the National Clean Air Program (NCAP) largely focused on mitigating road dust rather than industrial, vehicular, and biomass emissions -- the source of PM 2.5 that are the leading causes of mortality.

To make matters worse, in the last five years, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has left more than 75 percent of the Environment Protection Charge (EPC) and Environmental Compensation (EC) funds unspent, he claimed, adding that in total ₹665.75 Crores have been left unutilised.

## India to host regional counter terror conclave

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

India will host a two-day conclave of 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) grouping and some of its dialogue partners beginning Wednesday that will focus on firming up a comprehensive strategy to combat the threat of terrorism and extremism. The conclave of the experts working group (EWG) on counter-terrorism under the framework of ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) mechanism is also expected to deliberate on the evolving regional security scenario, officials said.

The ADMM-Plus is a platform comprising 10-nation ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and its eight dialogue partners India, China, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the US. The EWG conclave to be held in Delhi will be co-chaired by India and Malaysia.

The defence ministry said here on Sunday delegations from 10 ASEAN members and the bloc's eight dialogue partners along with Timor Leste and ASEAN Secretariat will be participating in the meeting. "India will co-chair the EWG on counter terrorism for the first time," the ministry said. Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh will deliver the keynote address at the opening ceremony of the conclave on Wednesday. It will be the first meeting for activities planned for EWG on counter-terrorism for the ongoing cycle from 2024-2027. "Discussions will focus on evolving a robust and comprehensive strategy designed to tackle the evolving threat of terrorism and extremism," the ministry said.

"The meeting aims to share the on-ground experience of the defence forces of ASEAN and its dialogue partners.

It will lay the foundation for the activities/exercises/seminars/workshop planned for the cycle 2024-2027," it added in a statement.

The ADMM-Plus has been focusing on seven areas of practical cooperation such as countering terrorism, maritime security, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian mine action and cyber security. EWGs have been established to facilitate cooperation in these areas.

The EWGs are each co-chaired by one ASEAN member state and one dialogue partner following a three-year cycle.

The task of the co-chairs is to lay down the objectives, policy guidelines and directions for the EWG.

## Parliamentary committee recommends consolidation of all Ayush drugs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A parliamentary committee has recommended the consolidation of all AYUSH drug related standard-setting processes under a single independent drug controller in alignment with the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, and its associated rules.

To achieve this, the ministry should establish a streamlined and inclusive mechanism that actively involves stakeholders in the development of pharmacopoeial standards, ensuring greater efficiency and uniformity, said the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare in a report presented in the Rajya Sabha this week.

Additionally, the Pharmacopoeia Commission for Indian Medicine and Homoeopathy (PCIM and H) and Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS) may come together to coordinate and collaborate in this initiative, the committee emphasised in its 165th report on "Demands for Grants 2025-26 (Demand No. 4) of Ministry of Ayush". This will enhance the scientific testing and evaluation of a larger number of ASU&H (Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, and Homoeopathy) drug samples to ensure safety, efficacy, and quality, strengthening the foundation of research and standardisation in the sector.

The committee flagged that the state-wise reach of Arogya Fair/Ayurveda Parv is less compared to the size of India with its 28 states and eight Union Territories. It recommended that the reach should cover 50 per cent of Indian states in the coming year and eventually all of the country in the near future to propagate the Ayush System for the prevention and treatment of common ailments.

It recommended that the ministry leave no stone unturned in efficiently and effectively implementing the IEC (Information, Education, and

Communication) Scheme, thus generating awareness amongst the common masses, especially in rural, urban slum, hilly and tribal areas. The committee also took note of the financial and physical performance made under the international cooperation scheme with respect to budgetary allocation and set objectives. It recommended that going forward communication should be made with first-world countries like the UK and the US for promoting AYUSH among the Indian diaspora as well as their native citizens.

Underlining the potential in promoting AYUSH-related healthcare travel to India, the panel said that the Ministry has to chalk out strategies to vigorously promote the AYUSH system of medicine in international markets, and support investment and exchange of experts to boost Ayush products in the global market.

"The Ayush Ministry should keep the consideration that Ayush Vision@2047 has a target to enhance the contribution of the

communication) Scheme, thus generating awareness amongst the common masses, especially in rural, urban slum, hilly and tribal areas. The committee also took note of the financial and physical performance made under the international cooperation scheme with respect to budgetary allocation and set objectives. It recommended that going forward communication should be made with first-world countries like the UK and the US for promoting AYUSH among the Indian diaspora as well as their native citizens.

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"The Ayush Ministry should keep the consideration that Ayush Vision@2047 has a target to enhance the contribution of the

Ayush Sector up to 7.7 per cent of GDP" it said. It suggested that the strategic course of action viz.

Road shows abroad, CMEs for the foreign audience, familiarisation trips, strategic marketing communication through a professional agency, collateral audio-video content and social media marketing can further be taken up by the Ministry for the achievement of the Mission Objective of the scheme. The committee also recommended that the ministry give equitable impetus to all sub-components of the capacity building and continuing medical education (CME) in Ayush under the Ayurgyan Scheme.

Underlining the vital role of research and innovation in Ayush Drugs for prioritised diseases, the committee recommended collecting data on safety, standardisation and quality control for Ayush products and practices in order to develop evidence-based support on the efficacy of Ayush drugs and therapies.

In order to inculcate scientific aptitude and expertise relating to Ayush systems, the ministry should chalk out a strategy for the development of potential human resources and their management in the Ayush system, the report said.

The committee reiterated its recommendation that the outcome of the research scheme should successfully demonstrate the effectiveness of Ayush systems and the novel technology successfully developed out of such research and development must harness the potential of Ayush in the interest of public health delivery. The committee expressed happiness and welcomed the laying of the foundation of a WHO Global Traditional Medicine Centre (GTMC) at Jamnagar, Gujarat and said that increasing collaboration with WHO in the Ayush Sector is significant in the global acceptance of traditional medicine and Ayush healthcare.

Such events will certainly help with the rapid growth of traditional medicine.

## PM to inaugurate Raisina Dialogue

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will on Monday here inaugurate the three-day Raisina Dialogue, India's flagship conference on geopolitics and geo-economics that will be joined by delegates from 125 countries.

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybaha are among those attending the 10th edition of the conclave.

In a first, a delegation, including a senior security official, from Taiwan is also attending the deliberations reflecting growing cooperation between the two

**The Raisina Dialogue is being hosted by the leading think-tank Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)**

sides in the last few years, people familiar with the matter said. The Raisina Dialogue is being hosted by the leading think-tank Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).

It will witness the participation of representatives from about 125 countries including ministers, former heads of state

and heads of government, military commanders, captains of industry, technology leaders, academics, journalists, scholars on strategic affairs and experts from leading think tanks, MEA said on Sunday.

Officials said foreign ministers from 20 countries are attending the deliberations. The visit to India of the Ukrainian foreign minister comes as the US is stepping up efforts towards a temporary ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia to end their conflict. New Zealand Prime Minister Luxon will deliver the keynote address at the inaugural session on Monday.

The theme of this edition of the Dialogue is "Kalachakra People, Peace and Planet". Over the course of three days, decision-makers and thought leaders of the world will engage each other across conversations in various formats, over six thematic pillars.

The pillars are: Politics Interrupted: Shifting Sands and Rising Tides, Resolving the Green Trilemma: Who, Where, and How, Digital Planet: Agents, Agencies and Absences, Militant Mercantilism: Trade, Supply Chains and the Exchange Rate Addiction, The Tiger's Tale: Rewriting Development with a New Plan and Investing in Peace: Drivers, Institutions, and Leadership.

In various sessions, the participants will discuss the state of the world and explore opportunities for cooperation on a wide range of contemporary matters.

## New Zealand PM Christopher Luxon arrives on five-day visit to India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Christopher Luxon on Sunday began a five-day visit to India with a focus on deepening the bilateral trade and economic ties.

On Monday, Luxon will hold wide-ranging talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and will attend the inaugural session of the Raisina Dialogue as the chief guest. Days ahead of the trip, the New Zealand prime minister Christopher Luxon said he will push for a comprehensive economic partnership with India and explore ways to strengthen bilateral security ties.

Luxon is visiting India from March 16 to 20 in his first trip to the country as the prime minister.

He is accompanied by one of the largest delegations a New Zealand prime minister has ever travelled with. The visiting leader was received at the Delhi airport by Union Minister Satya Pal Singh Baghel.

"What I'm looking for is just a much more comprehensive economic partnership and how we'd move that forward, Luxon said last week, adding, "I am determined that we are going to change the trading relationships with India big time."

The New Zealand Prime Minister also described India as an "important" power



New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon being received by MoS SP Singh Baghel upon his arrival, New Delhi PTI

in the Indo-Pacific.

"India is an important power in the Indo-Pacific and I will discuss with Prime Minister Narendra Modi what more we can do together to maintain peace and prosperity in our region," Christopher Luxon said. Christopher Luxon said travelling with a senior business delegation will help increase trade and business opportunities and promote

New Zealand as an investment destination. The delegation accompanying the New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon comprise ministers, senior business leaders, a community delegation of prominent Kiwi Indians and several parliamentarians.

Christopher Luxon will also visit Mumbai from March 19 to 20 before returning to Wellington.



Editor's TAKE

## From SAGAR to MAHASAGAR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Mauritius bolsters Indo-Mauritius relations

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent state visit to Mauritius marks a significant step in reinforcing the historical and strategic ties between the two nations. Received with warmth and enthusiasm by Mauritius' Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam, Modi's visit underscores the mutual commitment to fostering greater collaboration in infrastructure, defence, economic growth, and cultural exchange.

India and Mauritius share a long-standing relationship shaped by cultural ties, historical connections, and strategic interests. As a major partner in India's Indian Ocean Region (IOR) strategy, Mauritius plays a crucial role in regional stability and economic cooperation. Modi's visit, which comes a decade after his previous trip in 2015, aligns with Mauritius's National Day celebrations, reinforcing the historical linkage between the two nations. Mauritius, strategically positioned in the southern Indian Ocean, has traditionally engaged with global powers such as France and the United States. However, with India's growing strategic influence in the region, New Delhi has solidified its role as Mauritius's leading development partner and security provider. While Mauritius has explored economic ties with China, India remains focused on ensuring fair competition for Indian businesses and safeguarding regional security. One of the most significant outcomes of Modi's visit was the announcement of an upgraded partnership framework—transitioning from the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine to MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions). This enhanced partnership is designed to promote trade-driven development, capacity-building for sustainable growth, and mutual security, benefiting both India and Mauritius while strengthening regional collaboration. Mauritius holds a key position as the host of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Secretariat and is an active participant in the Indian Ocean Commission and the Colombo Security Conclave. This trilateral engagement ensures that Mauritius remains a pivotal player in the broader Indo-Pacific strategy, with India playing an instrumental role in its economic and strategic development. India views Mauritius as a vital neighbour with deep cultural and political ties. The recent political shift in Mauritius, with Ramgoolam's Alliance du Changement securing a decisive victory in the November 2024 general elections, necessitates a recalibration of bilateral relations. While former Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth's administration had closely aligned with India, Ramgoolam's previous tenure saw an exploration of other global partnerships, including closer economic engagements with China. Modi's swift visit following Ramgoolam's return to power signifies India's proactive approach in ensuring Mauritius remains within its strategic fold. This move is particularly important given the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Indian Ocean, where India has faced challenges from external players like China in neighboring Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Modi's visit brought a renewed focus on several key areas of cooperation. India continues to support Mauritius through grants and concessional loans for major infrastructure projects, including the Metro Express, smart cities, and digital connectivity initiatives. The security partnership includes maritime surveillance, joint naval exercises, and enhanced intelligence-sharing to combat transnational threats in the Indian Ocean. Both nations are working on deepening trade relations through preferential trade agreements, investment in fintech, and capacity-building in key economic sectors. Given the significant Indian diaspora in Mauritius, cultural and educational collaborations remain a key pillar in bilateral relations, ensuring the preservation and promotion of shared heritage. Modi's visit to Mauritius marks a renewed commitment to strengthening Indo-Mauritian ties.

# Religious supremacism in Pakistan

What began as a tool of political manoeuvring during the Zia-ul-Haq era has now morphed into an all-encompassing force, blurring the lines between faith and performance

Muhammad Ali Jinnah may have wished, "Religion should not be allowed to come into Politics....Religion is merely a matter between man and God", but reality proves that religion is not just allowed, but insisted, in everything that Pakistan does. It is an unleashed genie that is eating the sovereign from within. Hindsight suggests that it was perhaps inevitable given the dalliance with inherent supremacism in the sovereign idea that is predicated on the "land of the pure" ie, Pakistan, the only country in the world to be created in the name of religion.

Pakistan watchers would confirm that religion got truly valorised, accelerated, and institutionalised in the national bloodstream during the Shariaisation years of the Zia-ul-Haq dictatorship (1978-88). Geopolitics of the times (read, Afghanistan's Mujaheddin war) aided Zia's regressive project. The byproduct of creating the mujaheddin ecosystem in the '80s subsequently bred the phenomenon of the Taliban (and its various offshoots that were either India-facing or sectarian) and an accompanying air of religious extremism that was amplified by all subsequent governments. No so-called educated, moderate or well-travelled politicians could extricate themselves from the curse of invoking religion, and so even an Oxford-educated, married to a Westerner (Jewish to be precise), and self-proclaimed reformist, ultimately morphed to Taliban Khan ie, Imran Khan.

The surrender to religious fundamentalism was similarly mirrored in the realm of Pakistani cricket. Once the playing ground of flamboyant hardy boys who played hard and partied even harder with the likes of Imran Khan, Zaheer Abbas, Majid Khan, Asif Iqbal et al, took a U-turn to displayed piety and persona that reflected the nation's obsession with Puritanism. Beyond optics of sporting long beards, praying on pitches, and prefixing all public utterances with religious invocations like "bismillah rahman raheem" (In the name of Allah, the most gracious and the most merciful) and contextualising all situations with "inshaallah" (God willing) etc, — the postured fervour became highly religiously charged.

By itself, faith is perfectly healthy and can give the impetus for living life to the fullest, but when it spills out from a personal or private matter to a public insistence, the danger of enforced religiosity or even proselytisation is usually consequential. It could then distract from the task, in this case, cricket, to be secondary to religious pandering.

Like many of Jinnah's suggestions towards secularism (even if often contradictory), the invisibility of the same is mirrored in the



Pakistani dressing room. The '90s saw the sudden advent of Tableeghi Jamaat (Party of Preachers) stressing the 'authentic Islamic lifestyle' that went beyond a private/individual matter and became a matter of team routines. Pakistani cricket also got mired in embarrassing cricketing scandals (e.g., match-fixing), which led to the appropriation and demonstration of religiosity as a means of suggesting otherwise.

Soon accusations of only those who were visibly adherent getting selected saw the 'coincidental' conversion of Christian-born Yuusuf Youhana to a bearded and pious Mohammad Yousuf, diminishment of the career of Danish Kaneria (only Hindu in the squad) etc. But all this turn towards religiosity wasn't helping cricketing results (as was the case in the national narrative on all other fronts). In the moments of rare success against India, it took the Interior Minister to incredulously attribute the same as "Victory of Islam" and say that "Muslims all over the world are rejoicing!"

In another instance a fast bowler, Waqar Yunis said that the sight of watching Rizwan kneeling in namaz "in front of Hindus was very special to him" — basically, the entire



BHOPINDER SINGH

Muslim, no matter whatever you do in your life, straight to heaven" and after Dilshan's inaudible retort, Shezad responded, "Then be ready for hell fire" (incidentally, Pakistan lost the match).

Soon the depressing performances on the field led a slew of people like the then President Parvez Musharraf, PCB Chairman Shahryar Khan, coach Bob Woolmer to media manager PJ Mir all call out to curb overt religiosity as it was distracting and leading to poor performance. Recently, Danish Kaneria who was also

one of the many Pakistani players accused of spot-fixing reiterated the discrimination that he faced when he accused, "Shahid Afridi was the main person telling me to convert, and he did a lot of times".

While guilty of corruption, he perhaps was singled out for a harsher treatment vis-à-vis other players, even though he took 261 wickets in Test cricket to just 48 for Shahid Afridi. Danish's career was cut prematurely with no hope for a return. The fourth-highest wicket-taker was on a roll and as he said, "PCB didn't support me because I was Hindu, and I would break all the records. They could not drop me based on my performance. They knew I could break all the records, and Pakistan has never had a Hindu rising through the ranks".

The accusation does not seem unreasonable. To think that there is no excess space, consideration and toxic naturalness for religiosity in the Pakistani dressing room is to live under a rock, and the resultant performance is only collateral.

(The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. Views expressed are personal)

## Leaderspeak



I do have tendencies to kind of go overboard. I have never shied away from that. For a lot of people, it might not have been something that they are able to process. But for me, it always comes from the right place. My competitiveness has not gone down. You can still be aggressive in your mind, but you do not necessarily need to express it out there every now and then out of frustration, which I have. I mean, in the recent past as well, I do not feel great about those things myself.

VIKAS KOHLI, INDIAN CRICKETER



# AI-powered LASIK: The future of vision correction

## SECOND Opinion



MAHIPAL S SACHDEV

In an era where technology is reshaping healthcare, ophthalmology is experiencing a paradigm shift with artificial intelligence (AI)-driven advancements in vision correction. The latest milestone in this evolution is the integration of FORESIGHT technology with the AMARIS 1050RS laser system—ushering in a new era of unprecedented precision, safety, and speed in LASIK surgery. With the capability to correct vision in under 10 seconds per eye, this innovation is poised to redefine the treatment of refractive errors. Myopia (nearsightedness) is emerging as a global health concern, with projections indicating that nearly half of the world's population could be affected by 2050. As dependence on digital screens increases, the demand for precise, safe, and minimally invasive vision correction solutions has never been greater.

While traditional LASIK surgery remains highly effective, it has continued to evolve to meet these growing demands—leading to the development of AI-assisted laser vision correction. At the core of this breakthrough is FORESIGHT, an AI-driven predictive system that enhances surgical precision. By analysing thousands of data points unique to each eye, FORESIGHT customises laser correction plans, allowing surgeons to predict surgical outcomes before the procedure even begins. This AI integration ensures unmatched accuracy through real-

time eye tracking and adaptive treatment planning, minimising potential complications by adjusting treatment based on real-time corneal analysis. The result is a safer, more effective procedure with faster recovery and superior visual outcomes. For the first time in Asia, FORESIGHT is available in India, along with AMARIS 1050RS—the world's fastest and safest refractive surgery technology. With this advancement, cutting-edge vision correction solutions such as CustomEyes and SmartSurf ACE have also been launched. CustomEyes offers a highly personalised approach to LASIK, tailoring treatment to the unique characteristics of each eye for superior results. Meanwhile, SmartSurf ACE provides a completely touch-free, blade-free LASIK experience, enhancing patient comfort and ensuring faster healing. These innovations mark a significant leap forward in refractive surgery, offering patients safer and more effective alternatives to traditional laser vision correction.

While LASIK remains the gold standard for refractive correction, AI-driven solutions are also revolutionising the management of complex corneal conditions like keratoconus. FORESIGHT-powered treatments such as Topography-Guided Removal of Epithelium for Keratoconus (TREK) and Topography-Guided Custom Ablation Treatment (TCAT) are bringing new hope to patients with irregular corneas. These techniques provide customised corneal reshaping for improved vision and reduced dependency on specialised contact lenses. Furthermore, their minimally invasive nature enhances safe-

ty and optimises patient outcomes, making them a game-changer in corneal treatment.

The continuous evolution of refractive surgery, driven by AI and next-generation laser technology, is setting new benchmarks in ophthalmology. Centre for Sight has been at the forefront of pioneering refractive techniques, from bringing Small Incision Lenticule Extraction (SMILE) to India to leading clinical trials for Smooth Incision Lenticule Keratomileusis (SILK). Today, with the adoption of AI-enhanced LASIK through FORESIGHT and AMARIS 1050RS, vision correction is entering an era of unparalleled precision and safety. The integration of AI into laser vision correction represents more than just technological progress—it signifies a commitment to patient-centric care. With faster procedures, enhanced safety, and optimised outcomes, individuals suffering from refractive errors now have access to the most advanced solutions available.

As technology continues to evolve, so does the promise of a future where perfect vision is within reach for all. The next decade will witness even greater strides in laser eye surgery, further solidifying technology's role in transforming lives through vision. With myopia on the rise, these advanced LASIK laser correction technologies are set to redefine vision correction by providing safer, faster, and more effective solutions to reduce dependence on glasses or contact lenses.

(The author is an eye surgeon, Chairman, and Medical Director of Centre for Sight. Views expressed are personal)

# Letters to the Editor

## Festival of Colours or Divisive Tool?

Madam — In a display of outright arrogance, Uttar Pradesh Cabinet Minister and Nirbal Indian Shoshit Hamara Aam Dal (NISHAD) party president Sanjay Nishad shot his mouth off when he said that "those who have a problem with Holi colours should leave the country." Such a calculated push to divide communities through religious festivals is being increasingly used by BJP leaders.

In fact, another BJP leader had gone a step further, saying that Muslim men should wear tarpaulin hijabs if they wished to avoid Holi colours. And it is all the more regrettable that UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath defended a police officer who told Muslims to stay indoors if they did not wish to be smeared with colours, rather than condemning such open communal bias.

His words further reinforced the idea that India's religious minorities are expected to either assimilate into the dominant narrative or be excluded from public spaces. Holi, the festival of colours, has always been a celebration of joy, togetherness, and the breaking down of social divisions.

However, in recent years, political rhetoric has sought to distort this spirit, turning moments of harmony into flashpoints of communal tension. The increasing use of festivals to push a divisive agenda has exposed the extent to which India's secular fabric is under threat.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR | CHENNAI

## Stuck in space no more

Madam—NASA and SpaceX have launched a joint mission to bring back veteran astronauts Sunita Williams and Barry Wilmore stranded in the international space station (ISS) and replace them with new crew. What has been originally scheduled to be an odyssey for eight days has now stretched past 285 days. The NASA duo (both 'Butch' and 'Suni' are now household names) has garnered a lot of sympathy around the world. It is a matter of great relief that the countdown to the splashdown off the Florida coast is all set to begin.

The saga of the expedition has shown the risks involved in space travel and exploration. Professional astronauts venture into space and push back the frontiers of science and the boundaries of human knowledge despite being conscious of the fact that human space flight is inherently risky. Technical glitches are always possibilities. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Findings from experiments and research help to broaden our horizons. Imagining ourselves as the astronauts stuck on the remote orbital outpost is an exercise in self-evaluation and an appreciation of their resilience, adaptability, grit, agility, will power and courage.

The pair has rejected the adjectives 'stranded' and 'stuck' to describe their state and maintained that it is all 'fun' for them and they have enjoyed their time in space.

G DAVID MILTON | MARUTHANCODE

## Vote for transparency

Madam — Apropos of the headlines 'EPIC Aadhar link on cards' (March 16), the absolute transparency of voter list and complete linking of the remaining 33 Crore Voter ID-Aadhar linking are imperative at the earliest possible. The political controversy on fake voters should be set at rest by eliminating the fake voter IDs.

Rather, a step further, like banks and Income Tax Department, Voter ID should also be linked with the PAN and mobile numbers to rule out any possibility of fake voter ID even in future and new voters should be registered with the multiple linking of Aadhar, PAN and mobile numbers.

In fact, broad based roll reforms should be considered by the Government and the Election Commission barring culprits and corrupt from contesting elections, making it mandatory to exercise franchise to vote and incorporating facility to vote from remote and distant locations through online voting facility for the voters outside their constituencies on the voting day.

The EC should make necessary arrangements for online voting facility from all the district headquarters in the country. The Opposition politics is still around caste and religion divide in the society and is likely to remain so in the distant future too. The aspirational youth of the young country should decide the future of the country.

VINOD JOHRI | DELHI

## LINGUISTIC WAR: INDIA'S THREE LANGUAGE FORMULA UNDER FIRE

The question of language in India has never been limited to mere communication, it has always been an instrument of power, identity, and dominance. Once again, the debate has resurfaced this time over the central government's three-language formula, which is being perceived as an attempt to impose Hindi, sparking strong opposition from non-Hindi-speaking states, particularly Tamil Nadu. This controversy is not new, the same battle was fought in 1937, 1965, and again in 2020. The fundamental question remains: will India's linguistic diversity be respected, or will the imposition of a single language in the name of majority rule continue?

Tamil Nadu's Opposition is not just emotional but deeply historical. The first attempt to impose Hindi in the Madras Presidency in 1937 led to a fierce resistance spearheaded by leaders like C N Annadurai, who made it

clear that Tamil identity could not be suppressed. In 1965, when efforts were made to declare Hindi as the national language, the Dravidian movement labeled it as a manifestation of North Indian dominance, resulting in widespread and violent protests across the state. Today, with the three-language formula being pushed through the New Education Policy, the same old question arises — does India belong only to Hindi speakers? The Central government claims that no language is being imposed, but the reality tells a different story. When exams like UPSC favour Hindi-medium candidates, when Hindi becomes the primary language in Indian Railways and government offices, and when most Digital India portals are accessible only in Hindi and English, it is evident that a systematic strategy is being implemented to establish Hindi as a 'national identity.'

SACHIN TRIPATHI | SATNA



# The global race for resources in the Arctic

The Arctic is emerging as a critical frontier in the race for mineral wealth, fossil fuels, and geopolitical dominance. As ice continues to melt at alarming rates, new trade routes are opening, intensifying competition among global powers

**FIRST**  
**Column**

There has been increasing competition and conflict in the Arctic region for the exploitation of mineral wealth and fossil fuels. It has environmental consequences such as pollution, habitat destruction, impacts on wildlife and indigenous communities. In the warming world, the melting of ice in the Arctic Sea has been opening many new routes for trade in the region and the use of high-fuel oil in ship propulsion is becoming increasingly common. Diesel vehicles, open biomass burning and the use of high-fuel oil for engine propulsion in shipping are the largest global sources of black carbon, which consists of pure carbon in many linkages and is produced by incomplete combustion of fossil fuel and biomass by wildfires.

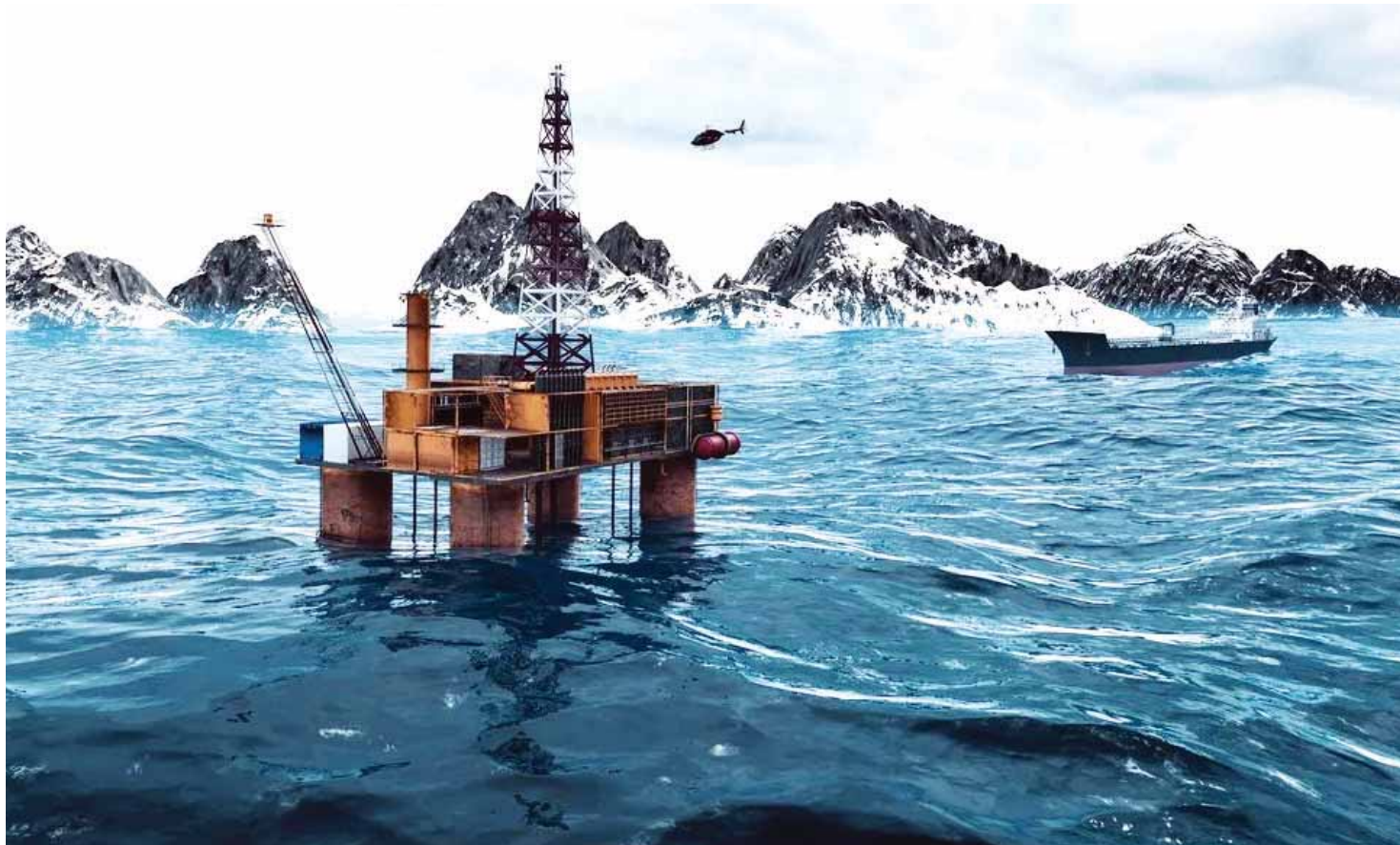
It can generate sufficient energy only next to carbon dioxide and its proximity around ice/snow sheets and glaciers of Arctic and Antarctica regions can extend the period of snow melting and can result in environmental catastrophes caused by the melting of glaciers and the rise in sea level. Eventually, it contributes to the warming of the planet.

South of the treeless Arctic region, we have the world's largest forests known as boreal forests covering large portions of Alaska, Canada, Scandinavia and Siberia. These forests have stored huge quantities of carbon and have protected the planet from further warming. Forests are rich in biodiversity and house numerous species of mammals, fish, plants of coniferous and broad leaved species, insects and birds. Studies have revealed that the warming of Arctic and Antarctic regions is three to four times higher than that of equatorial and tropical regions. Boreal forests are thus experiencing more warming than the global average, which in turn is adversely impacting its growth and regeneration.

The northern part of the forests is slowly expanding towards the Arctic region where ice has melted. Studies in Alaska's Brooks Range have also found that spruce trees have grown and established north of the tree line. Once inaccessible, the southern part has been kept open for commercial logging. The Anthropogenic pressure and wildfires have been causing the degradation of forests considerably. The gain in northern boreal forests is far too low as compared to the loss in the south.

Nearly 15 Million hectares of Canadian forests, constituting approximately four per cent of the geographical area of the country burned in 2023 and researchers found that it released 2371 megatons of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. This caused a jump in Canada's ranking of global emissions from 11th in 2022 to fourth in 2023, behind China, the US and India. The new trade routes due to melting ice in the Arctic are seen as an opportunity, which in turn boosts the use of high-fuel oil in ship propulsion causing further warming.

Portuguese-flagged Solong cargo ship collided



BK SINGH

recently with MV Stena Immaculate in the North Sea off eastern England setting both vessels ablaze and despite great firefighting efforts, it took two days to control the blaze. It caused oil leakage and such incidents have severe environmental consequences, especially threatening aquatic biodiversity.

Ever since February 24, 2022, Russian aggression in Ukraine began, decade-long cooperation between Russia and other Arctic countries on biology and nature conservation has been paused. The suspension of data across the boundary has made it difficult to understand how wildlife and ecosystems are changing during unprecedented warming. 2023 has been the warmest year recorded on the planet and 2024 has further broken this record and registered an average rise in global temperature by 1.56 degrees Celsius above the preindustrial temperature.

Data are also not available to find the impact of permafrost thaw that contains two and half times more carbon than what is already available in the atmosphere.

TRUMP ALSO REPEATEDLY BROUGHT OUT THAT THE US HAS PROVIDED \$350 BILLION WORTH OF DEFENCE EQUIPMENT DURING THE LAST THREE YEARS TO COUNTER RUSSIAN AGGRESSION, HOW UKRAINE WOULD PAY IT BACK?

The critical and rare earth minerals have applications in over 200 high-tech consumer products namely electric and hybrid vehicles, computer hard

drives, flat screen monitors and TVs, cellular telephones, and defence applications like electronic displays, guidance systems, lasers, submarines, radars sonar systems etc. The quantity used in some of the applications is insignificant, yet it is critical for the functioning of the technology. The magnets made have a relatively insignificant volume of the element as compared to the volume of the product but it is needed for the functioning of spindle motors, and voice coils of desktops and laptops.

Neodymium magnets are made of Neodymium, iron and boron which have the highest strength and can withstand 230 degrees Celsius temperature. Magnets are used in automobiles, computer hard disks and digital cameras. Lanthanum is used for digital and cell phone cameras and also in petroleum refining and steel making. Erbium is used in optical fibre and laser repeaters. Cerium is used in water purifiers and its alloys with other elements are useful for making catalytic converters. Europium, Terbium and Yttrium are used in phosphors that emit luminescence.

The traditional mining of these elements was labour-intensive; with lower wages and duly relaxed environmental laws, China proceeded and devel-

oped the infrastructure for extraction and processing of the minerals in a big way leaving the US far behind. China built mines to magnet industries and high-tech countries like the US and Japan had to depend on it. The territorial conflict between China and Japan in 2010 led to China using it as a weapon and putting an embargo on the sale of the minerals to Japan. China dominated the supply chain and even today major chunk of these elements mined outside China also continue to be shipped back to China for separation, refining and magnet production. To bring the US back to dominate the supply chain of rare and critical minerals Donald Trump in his second term as US President has moved to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America, expressed taking over the Panama Canal from Panama and purchasing Greenland from Denmark for strategic reasons.

He has also vowed to end Russian aggression in Ukraine and stop the years-old war early. US Vice President D Vance asked why Ukraine was not thanking the US for billions of dollars in tax-payer-funded aid. Trump also repeatedly brought out that the US has provided \$350 Billion worth of defence equipment during the last three years to counter Russian aggression, how Ukraine would pay it back? Though Ukraine President Zelensky was initially hesitant, he has come forward to sign the rare earth deal with the US to pay back the military aid already provided by the Biden administration. Greenland has voted for the central right democratic party vocal against Trump.

The Arctic island holds large reserves of critical and rare earth minerals. It is also home to a US air-base and straddles a strategic route to the North Atlantic. Though Greenland wants independence, Trump has been outspoken about his desire to control the island. In his address to Congress recently he said, "he thought US is going to get Greenland one way or the other."

In an exclusive conversation with NATO's Secretary General recently, Trump reiterated that Greenland would be annexed to the US. It is an island of 56,000 people, whose ancestors were colonized 300 years ago by Denmark. Since 2009, the island has been on the path to independence and Denmark controls only foreign and defence policies. Trump has an eye on Greenland's oil and rare earth resources.

All these moves in the Trump 2.0 regime are to gain the upper hand in supply chain dominance of rare earth minerals. Russia is also expanding exploration and extraction of oil and gas in Western Siberia and opening new trade routes by cutting the ice, yet to melt in the Ocean. The race in the Arctic region will surge greenhouse gas emissions at an unprecedented scale.

(Writer is a retired Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Head of forest force, Karnataka. Views expressed are personal)

## Maha Kumbh: Sacred togetherness in the world's largest gathering

The Maha Kumbh Mela, a pilgrimage that draws over 450 Million people, is often hailed as the world's largest human gathering. Yet, beneath its spiritual significance lies a sociological marvel—a transient civilisation where hierarchies dissolve, altruism flourishes, and time itself seems to bend. This grand spiritual event holds immense religious significance, attracting not only devotees from across India but also pilgrims from around the world. Maha Kumbh is considered the ultimate confluence of all major Hindu rituals and traditions.

At first glance, the Kumbh Mela may appear to be a ritualistic pilgrimage, a momentary pause where millions immerse themselves in the holy rivers to wash away sins and attain spiritual liberation. However, beyond this sacred act lies a deep-seated cultural narrative. The event is an ancient ritual encapsulating centuries of collective memory, myths, and legends—a continuous reminder of India's quest for meaning in a chaotic world. Sociologists observe that the act of congregating at the confluence of sacred rivers transforms personal spirituality into a communal experience—a shared ritual of rebirth and renewal that transcends individual belief systems.

### The suspension of social stratification

The Maha Kumbh Mela functions as a dynamic arena where India's social fabric is both displayed and redefined. In the temporary cities that spring up along the riverbanks, traditional hierarchies are simultaneously challenged and reaffirmed. The festival becomes a melting pot where age-old caste distinctions, regional identities, and modern socio-economic divides are momentarily blurred. Here, the paths of the pious ascetic, the devout seeker, and the curious traveler intersect.

Anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of "liminality"—a transitional phase where societal norms are suspended—finds vivid expression at the Kumbh. For weeks, the mela transforms into a liminal space where caste, class, and creed merge. A CEO and a farmer bathe in the same waters, a Dalit and a Brahmin share meals in community kitchens (langars). Turner termed this egalitarian bonding *communitas*, a temporary but transformative unity. In this sacred space, the rigid hierarchies of everyday India dissolve, revealing a latent potential for radical equality.

The Kumbh Mela also offers a unique opportunity to meet various saint groups, such as the Naga Babas, Moni Babas, Kabootar Babas, and Manchan Wale Babas. Observing their daily routines, including their methods of prayer, deep meditation, and spiritual discourses, provides insight into the diverse spiritual practices within Hinduism. The mela is a place where every-

one is immersed in a sense of collective unity. The Gift Economy: Altruism as Social Currency

Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift economy—where exchanges foster social bonds—comes to life at the Kumbh. Volunteers serve millions of free meals, ascetics offer blessings without expectation, and strangers share resources. This is not mere charity but a ritualised reaffirmation of interdependence. The mela's economy operates on trust rather than transactions, challenging modern capitalism's transactional ethos. In a world fractured by inequality, the Kumbh models a society where giving is sacred.

At the Kumbh Mela, people enthusiastically extend help—offering water, food, or prasad from saints. Receiving prasad through the Ganga is considered a divine blessing. This culture of generosity fosters an environment devoid of bias, where individuals unite in a shared spirit of giving.

### A living tapestry of India's soul

Emile Durkheim's notion of "collective effervescence"—the electric energy of communal rituals—pulsates through the Kumbh. The synchronised bathing rites, devotional chants, and grand processions generate a transcendent solidarity. Pilgrims shed individual identities to become part of a cosmic whole, mirroring Durkheim's idea that religion is society worshipping itself. This collective energy is not just spiritual, it acts as a social glue, bridging the divides of a diverse nation.

To reach the Kumbh, pilgrims walk for miles, yet their faith and devotion energise them, making fatigue an afterthought. Wrapped in saffron, a color symbolising peace and devotion, they forget their individual identities and merge into a harmonious collective.

### Cyclical Time and Social Renewal

The Kumbh's 12-year cycle mirrors India's ancient rhythms of renewal. Unlike linear time, which progresses toward an uncertain future, the Kumbh's cyclicity offers a ritualised "reset." Communities fragmented by modernity reunite, and generational stories are retold. This periodicity is not nostalgia but a sociological balm, healing temporal fractures and reaffirming continuity in a rapidly changing world.

Beyond its religious significance, the Kumbh Mela is a space where societal renewal unfolds daily. As millions journey to the sacred waters, they seek not just personal salvation but also a



BABITA CHAUDHARY

symbolic cleansing of societal ills. The sheer scale of the event demands meticulous coordination and cooperation—elements that mirror the broader workings of democracy in action. In a country characterised by its diversity and complexity, the Kumbh Mela serves as a microcosm of India's pluralistic society, where order emerges from chaos through an intricate balance of tradition and modern administrative ingenuity.

Gender and Quiet Subversions Historically, both men and women have held esteemed positions in Hindu traditions. In the Vedic period, religious ceremonies were considered incomplete without the participation of women. Even in Hindu worship, the names of goddesses are inseparably linked with deities, such as Lakshmi-Ganesh, Sita-Ram, and Radha-Krishna. Just as men uphold Hindu traditions, women play an equally vital role in preserving and practicing them at the grassroots level.

This devotion is clearly visible in the Maha Kumbh of 2025, where women have participated with great enthusiasm alongside men. Female religious leaders have taken part in rituals such as the Shahi Snan and Akhara processions with the same fervor as their male counterparts. Pilgrims have sought blessings not only from male saints but also from female Mahatmas, demonstrating a shift from traditional social barriers. The high number of participants in the Kumbh can also be attributed to the active involvement of women, symbolising their empowerment and societal progress.

### Conclusion

The event culminates on the auspicious occasion of Mahashivratri, dedicated to Lord Shiva, who shares equal reverence with Goddess Parvati. The Maha Kumbh Mela is not just a religious festival—it is a celebration of faith, equality, and the timeless spiritual essence of India.

The true miracle of the Kumbh Mela is not its sheer scale but its social vision—a blueprint for harmony in a divided world. It serves as a reminder that societies can momentarily choose cooperation over competition, shared purpose over self-interest. As climate crises and polarization threaten global stability, the Kumbh's ephemeral utopia whispers: "Another world is possible, even if only for 42 days."

The Kumbh Mela is more than a pilgrimage; it is India's subconscious dreaming aloud. In its chaos, we find order, in its transience, permanence. To study it is to glimpse the soul of a civilisation—not in its temples, but in its people's capacity to imagine, however briefly, a society built on sacred togetherness.

(The author is an assistant professor Maitreyi College University of Delhi. She works on gender issues. Views expressed are personal)

## The five causes of action in the Bhagavad Gita

We all wish to be in control. Yet, we fail miserably because control is never truly in our hands. Lord Krishna explains in the Bhagavad Gita:

"The place of action, the doer, various instruments, different efforts, and the fifth—providence—are the five factors of action." (Bhagavad Gita 18.14)

The Lord further states: "Whatever action a person initiates through body, speech, and mind, these five are its causes." (18.15)

Are we not constantly engaged in actions through our bodies, speech, and minds? Speech and mind are mentioned separately because our words have a profound impact on our lives. Speech is not just another sense—it can shape outcomes significantly. For example, consider an accident where both parties are at fault. If they apologise, the matter is resolved amicably. However, if they resort to harsh words, a fight ensues. Similarly, our thoughts operate on a subtler level than our physical senses, yet they wield immense influence over our lives.

### The five causes of action

What are these five causes? 1. The Place of Action (Circumstances):

Our circumstances significantly impact our actions, yet we have no control over them. Are we in a scorching summer in Delhi or a freezing winter in Toronto? Are we raising a newborn in a nuclear family or a joint family? Such external factors shape our experiences, but they remain beyond our control.

2. The Doer (The Individual): While we assume we are in control, the truth is that our nature governs us. Are we truly in command of our emotions and reactions? Hardly. In the same accident scenario, an aggressive person will likely escalate the situation, while a calm individual will seek resolution. Our inherent nature dictates our responses, often beyond our conscious control.

3. The Instruments (Resources Used): The tools we have at our disposal also play a role. A person with a modern smartphone can communicate and function more efficiently than someone with an outdated or non-existent device. The availability and quality of resources impact our actions.

4. The Effort (Personal Endeavor): Even our efforts are influenced by factors beyond our control. Our health, energy levels, and circumstances determine how much effort we can put in. While we may wish to exert ourselves fully, our limitations often dictate otherwise.

5. Providence (Divine Will):

This is the most decisive factor, and it is entirely beyond human control. Our past karmas (actions) shape our present outcomes. Success and failure are not solely determined by our present efforts but are deeply intertwined with the results of past actions (karmaphalas).

### Are we in control?

Not at all. Control ultimately rests with God. Let's examine God's role in the five causes: "Circumstances are under God's control, as He is the Creator of all situations."

"The Doer (soul), though possessing free will, is bound by past karmas and thus remains under divine governance."

"Instruments and resources originate from God, as He is the ultimate source of everything. "Efforts are permitted by God, as He determines what we are able to do."

"Providence is part of God's justice, ensuring the consequences of past actions unfold accordingly."

### The path forward

Understanding that God is the ultimate controller should inspire us to seek His guidance and refuge. As Lord Krishna advises:

"In all respects, take shelter in Me alone. By My mercy, you will attain supreme peace and the eternal abode." (Bhagavad Gita 18.62)

By surrendering to God's will, we can find true peace and liberation, rather than struggling to control the uncontrollable.

### Conclusion

In our quest for control, we often overlook the deeper truth—true control lies with God. The Bhagavad Gita teaches that our actions are shaped by five factors: circumstances, the doer, instruments, effort, and providence. While we may influence some aspects, ultimate control remains beyond us.

Recognizing this should not lead to helplessness but to surrender and faith. Instead of resisting the inevitable, we can align ourselves with divine wisdom. By cultivating awareness of our nature, utilising our resources wisely, and making sincere efforts, we can act with greater clarity. However, accepting divine providence helps us navigate life with peace, rather than frustration.

As Lord Krishna assures, taking refuge in Him leads to supreme peace (Bhagavad Gita 18.62). True liberation lies not in control but in surrender—trusting that God's will is perfect and that every experience serves a higher purpose.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher. Views expressed are personal)



# TMC to employ I-PAC to identify 'ghost voters'

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ Kolkata

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) is likely to employ the services Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC) to identify the "ghost voters" ahead of the 2026 Assembly elections.

TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee has told a virtual party meeting attended by several thousand leaders and workers right from the panchayat level that the party was in the process of employing agents and setting up committees at various levels to ensure the identification of fake voters.

The agents would be taken from I-PAC sources said.

In the meeting held on Saturday, Banerjee, who is also the nephew of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee alleged that "BJP has conspired with the Election Commission of India (ECI), to disenfranchise a large number of Bengal's electorate" in which case a large number of voters from BJP ruled other States had been allocated the same electoral photo identity card (EPIC) numbers in Bengal "so as to manipulate the 2026 Assembly elections."

The junior Banerjee said that the party rank and file had been alerted of the "nefarious designs of the BJP" after meticulously examining the irregularities in the voters' lists.

"We have chalked out a comprehensive plan to democratically counteract this fraud," he said.

Though he would not directly speak about I-PAC insider sources said that the



volunteers of the poll agency would be employed in large numbers and "would be assisted by the party workers down to the booth level to avoid any double cross."

The party would make house-to-house survey of the ID cards of new voters and will appoint booth level agents-1 (BLA-1) in every organisational district.

These agents would coordinate with the district election officers, electoral registra-

tion officers, and assistant electoral registration officers of the state administration. Similarly these agents would be assisted by another booth level agent, he said. The leadership was not keeping anything to chances.

"Even you cannot believe any professional agency to the full. Everyone and everything is saleable. So each agent will be shadowed by another agent," a TMC insider said interpreting the tactic of Banerjee who is also the party MP from Diamond Harbour winning the seat by more than 7.5 Lakh votes in 2024.

Earlier, the Chief Minister last month alleged that the BJP had been faking electoral rolls with "ghost voters" from outside states.

Referring to sample surveys done by the party workers from various areas she said how the BJP was registering 20,000-30,000 fake voters in every Assembly seat. "The ECI will conduct the polls by sending central forces. Voters who do not belong to Bengal will come and cast their votes. We will foil your plans. You employed these plans in Maharashtra, Haryana, Delhi but the leaders there failed to catch your trick. But here we will catch the fake voters. Khela Hobo (a new game will be played in Bengal) until we throw you out of the State," she had said.

The BJP leadership however countered the TMC's allegations saying the electoral rolls were prepared by State Government officials and the TMC being the largest party its own members and the government officials should explain the irregularities if there was one.

# Racket smuggling stolen mobile phones to Nepal busted in Delhi, one arrested

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Delhi Police has arrested a man involved in a racket that smuggles stolen mobile phones to Nepal, an officer said on Sunday.

The accused, identified as Nadeem (45), a resident of Banbasa in Uttarakhand, was apprehended from IBSB Anand Vihar while attempting to board a bus to Nepal on Saturday, he said. A total of 32 high-end mobile phones, including Apple iPhones and Samsung Galaxy models, were recovered from his possession. According to police officer, Nadeem was working as a courier for the stolen phones. He transported the devices, acquired from snatchers in Delhi, to Nepal.

"A Nepalese bus conductor, Narender Bhat, facilitated Nadeem's operations. Narender paid him Rs 200 per phone, along with travel expenses. Over the last several months, Nadeem has made multiple trips to Delhi to collect stolen phones from Karol Bagh and nearby areas before smuggling them across the border," said the officer.

A fresh, feeble Western Disturbance is likely to affect the Western Himalayan region from March 19.

Keylong recorded the lowest night temperature of minus 2 degrees Celsius while Dhaukalan in Sirmaur district was hotted during the day recording a high of 28.3 degree Celsius.

# Snow in higher reaches, rain in several parts of HP



Snow-covered ranges after fresh snowfall at Auli in Chamoli district

PRESS TRUTH OF INDIA ■ Shimla

Isolated places in higher reaches of Himachal Pradesh received snowfall while moderate rains lashed parts of the state, the Shimla Meteorological office said on Sunday.

The wet spell will continue in the hill state till Friday, barring Tuesday, it said. Some areas in the state have witnessed snowfall since Saturday evening.

Kothi in Manali received 27.5 cm of snow, Shimla's Khadrula 5 cm, Kinnaur's Kalpa 4 cm and Sangla 3.4 cm while Lahaul and Spiti's Gondla recorded 15 cm of snowfall, Kukumseri 4.8 cm and Keylong 4 cm.

Thunderstorms were observed in Shimla, Jubbarhatti, Kangra, Sundernagar and Kullu's Bhuntar. Shallow fog reduced visibility to about 800 metres in parts of Mandi district, the weather office said.

Several areas in Himachal Pradesh were lashed by rains. Manali recorded 66 mm of rains followed by Bhuntar 46.6 mm, Kasol 44 mm, Seobagh 42 mm, Gohar 36mm, Kothi 34 mm, Baggi 32.1 mm, Katula 30.3 mm, Pandoh and Rohru 30 mm each and Bijahi 26.2 mm.

Ghagas in Bilaspur received 25.6 mm rain, Sundernagar 26.2 mm, Pooh 22.8 mm, Jubbal 21.4 mm, Mandi 18.4 mm, Jogindernagar 18 mm Shillaro 17 mm, Slapper 16.5 mm, Baldwara 16.0 mm and Kufri 15 mm. The Meteorological office has predicted light to moderate rain at few places on Sunday and light rain at isolated places of Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur.

Higher reaches of Chamba, Kangra and Kullu will also witness a wet spell from March 17 to 21, barring March 18 when the weather would remain dry, it said.

# Ram Mandir generates ₹400 crore as tax in five years

Continued from >> P1 The 944 kilograms (kg) of silver donated by devotees have been converted into 20 kg silver bricks and stored securely in bank lockers. An ERP system has been implemented for error-free financial management after two years of rigorous effort.

Champat Rai also shared the progress of the Ram Mandir construction, stating that 96 percent of the work has been completed. The Ram Lalla temple is expected to be ready by June, while the construction of the Parikrama will continue until October. The Shabri Nishad and Rishi Mandirs are scheduled for completion by May, while the Sheshavatar Mandir will be finished by August. The idol of Saint Tulsiidas has already been installed, and its unveiling will take place on Ram Navami, which falls on April 17 this year. By April 30, all the deities' idols will be installed in their respective temples within the Ram Mandir complex.

# Seven policemen injured in spate of mob attacks in Bihar

PRESS TRUTH OF INDIA ■ Bhagalpur/Madhubani/Nawada

Seven policemen were injured in three incidents of mob attacks in Bihar, officials said on Sunday. These attacks happened in Bhagalpur, Madhubani and Nawada districts on Saturday, and were similar in nature police visiting an area on receiving information about a fight, and getting assaulted by a mob, they said.

Two more such incidents happened in the state in the last five days. While an assistant sub-inspector (ASI) died on Saturday after he was assaulted in Munger district, another policeman of the same rank died in Araria district on Wednesday. In Bhagalpur's Kahalgaon sub-division, five policemen were injured after being attacked by a mob in the Antichak police station area, officials said.

Among those injured were a sub-inspector, three constables and a chowkidar, they said.

"The incident took place when a police team went to investigate a brawl between two boys, which had escalated. One of the boys hurled stones at the team. Following that, locals also started hurling stones. A police vehicle was damaged," Station House Officer of Antichak Ashutosh

Kumar said. "Additional forces were immediately sent to the area and the situation was brought under control," he said.

The injured policemen were taken to the nearest government hospital for treatment, he said.

"The prime accused, however, managed to flee. Local magistrate Sanjeev Choudhary was also present there when the incident happened. Based on the statement given by Choudhary, a case was registered against 24 people," Kumar said.

Five people have been arrested so far, he added.

In Madhubani district, a police team was attacked when it went to the Parsahi area on receiving information about a fight between two groups of people, officials said.

"Initially, a group of people indulged in a scuffle with the policemen. Amid the melee, a policeman was hit by a blunt object on his head. He was immediately rushed to the nearest hospital. He is out of danger at present. Some more policemen sustained minor injuries," a police officer said. A case was registered against 30 people, they said.

Another policeman was injured in a similar attack when he along with some of his colleagues went to Shekodaura in

Nawada's Kawakol police station area on getting information about an incident of stone pelting between two groups of people. "A case has been registered and a search is underway for the accused," the district police said in a statement.

Hours before these three incidents, ASI Santosh Kumar Singh succumbed to the injuries that he received after being attacked by a mob in Nandlalpur village in the Mufassil police station area of Munger district.

He was part of a police team that went to the village on Friday after receiving information about a scuffle. He was attacked with a sharp weapon on his head by some men who were drunk. He died at a hospital in Patna on Saturday.

On Wednesday night, when police went to Lakshampur area in Araria's Phulkaha to make an arrest, a scuffle broke out between the personnel and some locals who were resisting them. Amid this, someone pushed ASI Rajeev Ranjan, who collapsed and later died.

Following the spate of attacks, DGP Vinay Kumar said all police stations have been directed to assess the situation before conducting raids.

Instructions have been issued to always visit spots of investigation with adequate

numbers of personnel, he said.

"I must also say that people should maintain the sanctity of the Emergency Response Support System (ERSS) Dial 112. Once a call is received on the number, no time is wasted to reach the spot. The team of Dial 112 comprises not more than three to four personnel. People should not misbehave with them," Kumar told PTI on Saturday.

Attacking the Nitish Kumar government, RJD leader Tejaswini Yadav claimed the law and order situation has collapsed in the state.

"After the murder of two ASIs in Araria and Munger, several policemen were injured following attacks on them in Bhagalpur, Nawada and other parts of the state... But the chief minister has not even said two words on the martyrdom and courage of these policemen... People of Bihar are suffering due to the current insensitive government," he said in a post in Hindi on X.

"The CM also holds the Home portfolio, but he is least bothered about the collapsed law and order situation of the state. His government has been in power for 20 years. During Nitish Kumar's tenure, a large number of policemen and officers have been murdered," he claimed.

# Exposed in Delhi, Kejriwal claiming to be honest in Punjab: Sachdeva

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva on Sunday said that it is gradually becoming clear that after being rejected in Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal is now afraid of being sidelined from Punjab's politics as well.

That is why he is trying to re-establish himself here.

The Delhi BJP President said that it is unfortunate that after Kejriwal's so-called honesty was exposed in Delhi, he is now repeating the same story in Punjab.

Sachdeva stated that despite being embroiled in numerous scams in Delhi, Kejriwal kept beating the drum of his honesty until the last moment of the February 5, 2025 elections.

However, after 10 years, the people of Delhi, having understood his corruption, ensured his defeat.

# Trump orders air strikes on Houthis, 31 dead

Continued from >> P1 Trump has said he will not allow it to become operational. The Houthis reported explosions in their territory Saturday evening, in the capital of Sanaa and the northern province of Saada, the rebels' stronghold on the border with Saudi Arabia, with more airstrikes reported in those areas early Sunday.

Images online showed plumes of black smoke over the area of the Sanaa airport complex, which includes a sprawling military facility. The Houthis also reported airstrikes early Sunday on the provinces of Hodeida, Bayda, and Marib.

At least 18 people were killed, including 13 in Sanaa and five in Saada, according to the Houthi-run health ministry. At least 24 others were wounded, including nine in Sanaa and 15 in Saada, it said.

A US official said this was the beginning of air strikes on Houthi targets that are expected to continue. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to talk to the press.

Nasruddin Amer, deputy head of the Houthi media office, said the airstrikes won't deter them and they would retaliate

against the US. "Sanaa will remain Gaza's shield and support and will not abandon it no matter the challenges," he added on social media.

Another spokesman, Mohamed Abdulsalam, on X, called Trump's claims that the Houthis threaten international shipping routes "false and misleading".

The airstrikes come a few days after the Houthis said they would resume attacks on Sanaa's northern district of Shoubah. Residents said at least four airstrikes rocked the Eastern Geraf neighbourhood there, terrifying women and children.

"The explosions were very strong," said Abdallah al-Alfi. "It was like an earthquake."

The Eastern Geraf is home to Houthi-held military facilities and a headquarters for the rebels' political bureau, located in a densely populated area.

The Houthis reported fresh strikes on the southwestern Dhamar province late Saturday. They said the strikes hit the outskirts of the provincial capital, also named Dhamar, and the district of Abs.

The United States, Israel and Britain

have previously hit Houthi-held areas in Yemen. Israel's military declined to comment.

However, Saturday's operation was conducted solely by the US, according to a US official. It was the first strike on the Yemen-based Houthis under the second Trump administration.

Such broad-based missile strikes against the Houthis were carried out multiple times by the Biden administration in response to frequent attacks by the Houthis against commercial and military vessels in the region.

The USS Harry S Truman carrier strike group, which includes the carrier, three Navy destroyers and one cruiser, are in the Red Sea and were part of Saturday's mission. The USS Georgia cruise missile submarine has also been operating in the region.

Trump announced the strikes as he spent the day at his Trump International Golf Club in West Palm Beach, Florida. "These relentless assaults have cost the US and World Economy many BILLIONS of Dollars while, at the same time, putting innocent lives at risk," Trump said.

# Lashkar Commander gunned down by Indian forces in Jhelum

Continued from >> P1 As many as 14 villagers were injured in the twin attacks. The officials said Rehman is also the mastermind of the Reasi Bus Attack which was orchestrated on the day of the oath-taking ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government on June 9, 2024. In this attack, terrorists killed nine pilgrims and injured 41 by firing on a bus carrying pilgrims to Shiv Khori temple.

He was also involved in the Bhatta-Durian terror incident on April 20, 2023, in which five Army personnel were killed. He is also accused in the Kandi attack on officers and personnel of the 9 Para Special Forces on May 5, 2023. The attack claimed the lives of five personnel, officials said.

They said Rehman, along with Saifullah Sajid Jutt, another Pakistan-based terrorist, was the main handler of terrorists of the outfit operating in the Poonch-Rajouri belt of Jammu and Kashmir.

Born on February 4, 1982, in the Sanghar district of Sindh province of Pakistan, Rehman was in-charge of LeT's Khairatta dets (small group of terrorists ready to infiltrate) located in Kotli district of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

He was the main link between the LeT cadres and its operators in PoK and Sindh Province of Pakistan, the officials said, adding he was the most trusted handler of Saadee.

On several occasions, the LeT founder tasked Rehman with ensuring control over the dets in PoK, the officials said. Rehman's associates — Riyaz Ahmed alias Abu Qasim and Hanzla Adnan — were killed in separate incidents in Pakistan in September and December 2023.

Over a dozen terrorist commanders of different outfits, including the LeT, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Hizbul Mujahideen, have been eliminated by unidentified gunmen in Pakistan and PoK over the last three years.

# PM bemoans lack of will and wisdom in Islamabad

Continued from >> P1 "It was a tragedy of unimaginable magnitude, people were burned alive. You can imagine, against the backdrop of incidents like the Kandahar hijacking, the attack on parliament, or even 9/11, and then to have so many people killed and burned alive, you can imagine how tense and volatile the situation was," he said, adding that "nothing should happen, we also wish so. Everyone would wish there should be peace."

Modi, who was the Gujarat Chief Minister at that time, said the big incident at Godhra was the sparking point and violence took place. He said that a fake narrative was spread regarding the Godhra case. "But, the courts investigated the matter thoroughly and found us completely innocent. Those who were truly responsible have faced justice from the courts," he said, adding that his political opponents

were in power at the Centre when the violence took place and they were keen to see him punished over the allegations.

"At that time, our political opponents were in power, and naturally they wanted all allegations against us to stick. They wanted to see us punished. Despite their relentless efforts, the judiciary analysed the situation meticulously twice and ultimately found us completely innocent," Modi said. He said the most important thing was that Gujarat, which used to witness violence almost every year, has not seen riots since 2002. "Over the past 22 years, there hasn't been a single major riot in Gujarat. Gujarat remains completely peaceful," Modi said. He reiterated how "some people" tried to malign his image after the riots but ultimately justice prevailed and the courts cleared his name.

To a question on his relation with RSS, Modi said he feels blessed to have learnt life's values from a "sacred" organisation like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, lauding it for working since 1925 to inspire people to dedicate themselves to the country. He said the RSS gave him the purpose of his life, noting that its different affiliates are involved in numerous fields and with every section of society. A former RSS 'pracharak' himself before moving over to the BJP, Modi said he was drawn to the Hindutva organisation at a young age as he was touched deeply by patriotic songs sung at its 'shakha' near his home in Gujarat.

Whatever one does, one should work for the country, he said, speaking of the RSS' philosophy. "I have not heard if there is any voluntary organisation as big as the RSS." The RSS teaches that the country is

supreme and serving people is like serving God, he said. "I feel blessed to have got values from such a sacred organisation," he said. The Hindutva organisation has devoted itself to its cause with the dedication of a seeker while keeping away from attention in its 100 years of journey, said Modi.

RSS inspires people to work for the society, he said, citing extensive work of organisations like Seva Bharti, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh. Another RSS affiliate Vidya Bharti runs nearly 25,000 schools and crores of students have received education at an affordable cost, he said.

The Prime Minister said while leftist unions ask workers to unite so that they can then deal with others, the RSS-inspired labour union asks its workers to unite the world. During his over three-

hour interaction, Modi also mentioned Ramakrishna Mission, its founder Swami Vivekananda and its monk Swami Atmasthananda as among those who shaped his spiritual values.

To question on his relationship with US President Donald Trump, Modi said he shares a bond of mutual trust with Trump and they connect well because they believe in putting their respective national interests above everything else. Modi hailed Trump as a man of courage, who took his own decisions, was unwaveringly dedicated to the United States and the same spirit it was on display when he was shot at by a gunman on the election campaign trail last year.

The Prime Minister said President Trump appeared far more prepared than before in his second term. "He has a clear roadmap in his mind with well-defined

steps, each one designed to lead him toward his goals," said Modi. "I truly believe he has put together a strong, capable group. And with such a strong team, I feel they are fully capable of implementing President Trump's vision," Modi said. He recalled his meetings with Vice President JD Vance, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, Vivek Ramaswamy and Elon Musk.

Modi said he saw the same resilient and determined Trump when he was shot at during the US election campaign. "Even after being shot, he remained unwaveringly dedicated to America. His life was for his nation. This showed his America First spirit, just as I believe in nation first? India first," the prime minister said. "I stand for India first and that's why we connect so well. These are the things that truly resonate," Modi said.



# 59 dead, 150 hurt in North Macedonia nightclub fire

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Kocani

A massive fire tore through a nightclub in North Macedonia's eastern town of Kocani early Sunday, killing 59 people and injuring 155, authorities said. The blaze broke out around 2:30 am during a concert by a local pop group at Club Pulse, Interior Minister Panche Toshkovski told reporters.

He said 39 of the dead had so far been identified. He said, following an initial assessment, pyrotechnics likely caused the roof to catch fire. Videos showed chaos inside the club, with young people running through the smoke as the musicians urged people to escape as quickly as possible.

As relatives gathered outside hospitals to await news, Kocani resident Dragi Stojanov was informed that his 21-year-old son Tomce had died in the fire. "He was my only child. I don't need my life any more," he said. "One hundred and fifty families have been devastated."

Officials said the injured have been taken to hospitals around the country, including the capital, Skopje, many with severe burns. The effort was being assisted by multiple volunteer organisations.

Health Minister Arben Taravari said 118 people have been hospitalised, adding that he had received offers of assistance from neighbouring countries, including Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia.

"All our capabilities have been put to use, in a maximum effort to save as many lives as possible of the young people involved in this tragedy," Taravari told reporters, at times looking visibly shaken. This is the worst tragedy in recent memory to befall the landlocked nation, whose population is less than 2 million.

President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova visited burn victims at a hospital in Skopje and spoke to parents waiting outside the building. "It's terrible... hard to believe how this happened," she said, her voice halting with emotion. "We must give these young people courage to continue."

In an online post, Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski wrote: "This is a difficult and very sad day for Macedonia. The loss of so many young lives is irreparable, and the pain of the families, loved ones and



Police officers investigate a nightclub after a massive fire in the town of Kocani, North Macedonia, on Sunday. API/PTI

friends is immeasurable." Family members gathered in front of hospitals and city offices in Kocani, some 115 kilometres east of Skopje, begging authorities for more information. The club was in an old building that was previously a carpet warehouse and has been running for several years, according to local media MKD. The fire caused the roof of the single-story building to partially collapse, revealing the charred remains of wooden beams and debris. Police cordoned off the site and sent in evidence gathering teams in an operation also involving state prosecutors.

A state prosecutor, Ljubco Kocevski, said several people were being questioned by police but gave no further details and stressed that the cause of the blaze was still being investigated. Interior ministry officials said authorities would investigate the venue's licensing and safety provisions, adding that the government had a "moral responsibility" to help prosecute anyone responsible. Police have arrested one man already, but didn't provide details on the

person's involvement.

As they awoke to news of the overnight tragedy, the country's immediate neighbours and leaders from further afield in Europe sent condolences. The European Union's foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas, posted on X that she was "deeply saddened" and said the 27-nation bloc "shares the grief and pain of the people of North Macedonia."

North Macedonia is a candidate for EU membership. Condolences also poured in from politicians across the region, including Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. "I wish those who were injured a speedy recovery. Ukraine mourns alongside our (North) Macedonian friends on this sad day," Zelenskyy wrote on X. Pyrotechnics have often been the cause of deadly fires in nightclubs, including the one at the Colectiv club in Bucharest, Romania, in 2015 in which 64 people died.

# B'desh HC upholds 20 students' death penalty for lynching university mate

Dhaka (PTI): The High Court on Sunday upheld a trial court verdict handing down the death penalty to 20 students of an elite university here for beating to death a fellow second-year student over his alleged political affiliation in 2019.

Court officials said the two-judge bench of Justice AKM Asaduzzaman and Justice Syed Enayet Hossain pronounced the verdict simultaneously wrapping up the hearing on the mandatory death reference and convicts' appeals against the lower court judgment. All the convicts, students of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), belonged to the now disbanded Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League.

They lynched Abar Fahad, a second-year student of BUET's electrical and electronics department on October 7, 2019 over a Facebook post by him criticising the government. Fahad's battered body was found in his university dormitory the next morning. Investigations later found that he was beaten to death with a cricket bat and other blunt objects for almost six hours by 25 fellow students. Both the BUET and BCL immediately expelled these students after Fahad's murder.

A Dhaka court sentenced to death the 20 convicts on December 8, 2021 when Awami League was in power. Apart from upholding the death penalty for 20 students, "the court also upheld the life term imprisonment for other five convicts, who too were BUET students," Attorney General M Asaduzzaman said.

Fahad's father told reporters after the High Court verdict: "We are satisfied with the High Court's ruling. However, the verdict must be implemented swiftly."

His brother Faiyaz said, "We did not expect to receive such a swift verdict from the High Court. We are satisfied with this ruling, although there are still many legal procedures remaining." Defence lawyer Azizur Rahman Dulu said the verdict disappointed him and added: "We will appeal to the Appellate Division, hoping to receive justice there." The convicts were tried in person but one of the death row inmates in the case, Muntasir Al Jamie, had fled a high-security prison at suburban Kashmir Central Jail last year.

# Russia, Ukraine trade overnight aerial attacks

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Kyiv

Russia and Ukraine traded heavy aerial blows overnight, with both sides on Saturday reporting more than 100 enemy drones over their respective territories. The attacks comes less than 24 hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with US envoy Steve Witkoff to discuss details of the American proposal for a 30-day ceasefire in the war with Ukraine. Putin told a press conference on Thursday that he supported a truce in principle but set out a host of details that need to be clarified before it is agreed. Kyiv has already endorsed the truce proposal, although Ukrainian officials have publicly raised doubts as to whether Moscow will commit to such a deal.

Speaking to reporters in Kyiv on Saturday, after virtual talks between Western allies hosted by UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Zelenskyy voiced Ukraine's support for the 30-day full ceasefire proposal to discuss a longer-term peace plan, but said Russia would attempt to derail talks with conditions and "buts".

Starmer has told allies to "keep the pressure" on Putin to back a ceasefire in Ukraine, hailing Ukraine as the "party of peace". Starmer said Putin will "sooner or later" have to "come to the table".

In a statement earlier on Saturday, Zelenskyy had accused Moscow of building up forces along the border. "The build up of Russian forces indicates that Moscow intends to keep ignoring diplomacy. It is clear that Russia is prolonging the war," he said. However, Zelenskyy stressed that if Russia did not agree with the US proposal there would be "specific, harsh and straightforward" response from the administration of US President Donald Trump.

He also said that Kyiv's troops were maintaining their presence in Russia's Kursk region after Trump said Friday that "thousands" of Ukrainian troops had been surrounded by the Russian military.

"The operation of our forces in the designated areas of the Kursk region continues," Zelenskyy said. "Our troops continue to hold back Russian and North Korean groupings in the Kursk region. There is no encirclement of our troops."

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio spoke Saturday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. In the call, they discussed next steps to follow up on recent meetings in Saudi Arabia and agreed to continue working towards restoring communication between the United States and Russia, State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce said in a statement.

Ukraine's air force said Saturday that Russia had launched a barrage of 178 drones and two ballistic missiles over the country overnight. The attack was a mixture of Shahed-type drones and imitation drones designed to confuse air defences. Some 130 drones were shot down, while 38 more failed to reach their targets.

Russia attacked energy facilities, causing significant damage, striking energy infrastructure in the Dnipropetrovsk and Odessa regions, Ukraine's private energy company DTEK said in a statement on Saturday. Some residents were left without electricity. "The damage is significant. Energy workers are already working on the ground. We are doing everything possible to restore power to homes as soon as possible," the energy firm said.

Falling drone debris in Russia's Volgograd region sparked a fire in the Krasnoarmeysky district of the city, close to a Lukoil oil refinery, according to Gov. Andrei Bocharov, who provided no further details. Nearby airports temporarily halted flights, local media outlets reported. No casualties were reported.

The Volgograd refinery has been targeted by Kyiv's forces on several occasions since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine more than three years ago, most recently in a drone attack on February 15.

# Massive storm leaves at least 32 dead in US

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Piedmont

Violent tornadoes and high winds decimated homes, wiped out schools and toppled semitractor-trailers as a monster storm that killed at least 32 people ripped its way across the central and southern US.

Missouri resident Dakota Henderson said he and others rescuing trapped neighbours found five bodies scattered in the debris Friday night outside what remained of his aunt's house in hard-hit Wayne County. Scattered twisters killed at least a dozen people in the state, authorities said. "It was a very rough deal last night," Henderson said Saturday not far from the splintered home from which he said they rescued his aunt through a window of the only room left standing. "It's really disturbing for what happened to the people, the casualties last night."

Coroner Jim Akers of nearby Butler County described the "unrecognizable home" where one man was killed as "just a debris field."

"The floor was upside down," he said. "We were walking on walls."

Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves announced six people died in three counties and three more people were missing late Saturday as storms moved further east into Alabama, where damaged homes and impassable roads were reported. Officials confirmed three deaths in Arkansas, where Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders declared a state of emergency.

Georgia Governor Brian Kemp also declared an emergency in anticipation of the storm's shift eastward. Early Sunday morning, the Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency used its social media accounts to repost a National Weather Service tornado watch for parts of southeast Georgia.

In response to the watch, which warns



A vehicle sits in front of a damaged home and debris from a severe storm on Saturday in Wayne County. API/PTI

of isolated tornadoes and hail and gusts of 50 to 70 mph, Kemp posted a note saying his family was "praying for all those impacted by this storm system and those still in its path."

"We will continue to work closely with state and local officials to respond to damage and assess any needs following this weather event," Kemp wrote. Dust storms spurred by the system's early high winds claimed almost a dozen lives on Friday. Eight people died in a Kansas highway pile-up involving at least 50 vehicles, according to the state highway patrol. Authorities said three people also were killed in car crashes during a dust storm in Amarillo, in the Texas Panhandle.

The extreme weather conditions were forecast to impact an area that is home to more than 100 million people, with winds

threatening blizzard conditions in colder northern areas and fanning the wildfire risk in warmer, drier places to the south.

Evacuations were ordered in some Oklahoma communities as more than 130 fires were reported across the state and nearly 300 homes were damaged or destroyed. Governor Kevin Stitt said at a Saturday news conference that some 689 square kilometers had burned, sharing that he lost a home of his own on a ranch northeast of Oklahoma City.

To the north, the National Weather Service issued blizzard warnings for parts of far western Minnesota and far eastern South Dakota starting early Saturday. Snow accumulations of 3 to 6 inches were expected, with up to a foot possible. Winds were expected to cause whiteout conditions. Still, experts said it's not

unusual to see such weather extremes in March.

Significant tornadoes continued late Saturday, with the region at highest risk stretching from eastern Louisiana and Mississippi through Alabama, western Georgia and the Florida panhandle, the Storm Prediction Center said.

Bailey Dillon, 24, and her fiancé, Caleb Barnes, watched from their front porch in Tylertown, Mississippi, as a massive twister struck an area about half a mile (0.8 kilometer) away near Paradise Ranch RV Park.

They drove over afterward to see if anyone needed help and recorded video of snapped trees, leveled buildings and overturned vehicles. "The amount of damage was catastrophic," Dillon said. "It was a large amount of cabins, RVs, campers that were just flipped over. Everything was destroyed."

Paradise Ranch said via Facebook that all staff and guests were safe and accounted for, but Dillon said the damage extended beyond the RV park itself.

"Homes and everything were destroyed all around it," she said. "Schools and buildings are just completely gone." Some images from the extreme weather went viral online.

Tad Peters and his father, Richard Peters, had pulled over to fuel up their pickup truck in Rolla, Missouri, on Friday night when they heard tornado sirens and saw other motorists fleeing the interstate to park. "Whoa, is this coming? Oh, it's here. It's here," Tad Peters can be heard saying on a video. "Look at all that debris. Ohhh. My God, we are in a torn..." His father then rolled up the window.

The two were headed to Indiana for a weightlifting competition but decided to return home to Norman, Oklahoma, about six hours away, where they then encountered wildfire.

# French-British blueprint doesn't foresee deploying 'mass' of soldiers in Ukraine, says Macron

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron has fleshed out some possible missions that could be undertaken by a military support force for Ukraine that Paris and London are working to put together with other nations, in a so-called "coalition of the willing" that could deploy after any ceasefire with Russia.

Speaking to French media ahead of an online summit that the UK hosted on Saturday, Macron said the French-British blueprint doesn't aim to deploy a "mass" of soldiers in Ukraine and instead envisages stationing troop contingents in key locations.

Macron's office said Sunday that it couldn't provide a recording of the French leader's exchange with reporters from regional French newspapers on Friday night. But according to La Dépêche du Midi and Le Parisien, the French president spoke of participating nations each deploying several thousand troops to "key points" in Ukraine. Their missions could include providing training and supporting Ukrainian defences, to demonstrate long-term support for Kyiv, the reports quoted Macron as saying.

Macron added that the proposed contingents from countries that are members of the NATO alliance would serve as "a guarantee of security" for Ukraine and that "several European nations, and also non-European, have expressed their willingness

to join such an effort when it is confirmed," La Dépêche reported.

Le Parisien cited Macron as saying that Moscow's agreement wasn't needed for such deployment. "Ukraine is sovereign. If it asks for Allied forces to be on its territory, it's not up to Russia to accept or not," he said.

Following Saturday's two-hour virtual meeting, Starmer challenged Russian President Vladimir Putin to sign up to a ceasefire in its war against Ukraine if he is serious about peace, and said allies will keep increasing the pressure on the Kremlin, including by moving planning for a peacekeeping force to an "operational phase".

Around 30 leaders were involved in the call, including Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and leaders from Australia, Canada and New Zealand, as well as officials from NATO and the European Union.

It was the second such meeting in two weeks, meant to help Ukraine face a change of approach by the US following the return of President Donald Trump, as well as gauging support for any future possible peacekeeping mission. Many more countries were involved this time than the previous meeting on March 2. According to Starmer, military planners will convene again in the UK on Thursday to progress practical plans to support Ukraine's future security.

# Over 1 lakh people join protest rally in Belgrade against Serbia prez, govt

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Belgrade

At least one lakh people descended on Belgrade on Saturday for a mass rally seen as a culmination of months-long protests against Serbia's populist President Aleksandar Vucic and his government.

Large crowds of flag-waving protesters clogged the downtown area of the capital despite occasional rain, with people hardly able to move and many stuck hundreds of metres away from the planned protest venue. Following apparent sporadic incidents between protesters and the police, university students — who have been leading the peaceful protests for the past four months — abruptly called for an end to the demonstration on Saturday, saying they no longer can guarantee safety at the rally.

Most of the protesters dispersed, but thousands remained on the streets as tensions surged. Police said the crowd reached 1.07 lakh people at the peak of the protest. Serbian independent media described the rally as the biggest ever in

the country, saying the numbers were much higher. All public transport in Belgrade was cancelled as protesters streamed into the city from various directions. The rally was part of a nationwide anti-corruption movement that erupted after a concrete canopy collapsed at a train station in Serbia's north in November, killing 15 people.

Almost daily demonstrations that started in response to the tragedy have shaken Vucic's firm grip on power in Serbia like never before in the past 13 years in charge. Many in Serbia blamed the crash on rampant government corruption, negligence and disrespect of construction safety regulations, demanding accountability for the victims.

Saturday's rally was dubbed "15 for 15", referring to the date of the protest and the number of people killed in the city of Novi Sad on November 1. The crowds fell silent for 15 minutes in the evening to honour the victims.

Ahead of the demonstration,



Vucic repeatedly warned of alleged plans for unrest while threatening arrests and harsh sentences for any incidents.

A deafening sound of whistles, drums and vuvuzelas filled the air on Saturday. Some protesters carried banners that read, "He's Finished!" Crowds chanted

"Pump it Up," a slogan adopted during past four months of student-led protests.

"I expect that this will shake his authority and that Vucic will realise that people are no longer for him," Milenko Kovacevic, a protester, said.

The massive rally is not the endgame in

a struggle for a more democratic Serbia, Dejan Simic, another protester, said. "This is just the beginning of the end, a process which I hope will end soon," he said.

Protesting university students have been a key force of the anti-graft movement with their call for justice. Students' determination has struck a chord among the citizens who are disillusioned with politicians and have lost faith in the state institutions.

**Hundreds of police deployed in city:** On Friday evening, tens of thousands of people staged a joyous welcome for the students who have been marching or cycling for days from across Serbia toward Belgrade. Interior Minister Ivica Dacic told state RTS broadcaster that 13 people were detained overnight. He said police detained six opposition activists for allegedly plotting to stage a coup and stir unrest.

By Saturday morning, people were assembling in various parts of the city as they marched toward the centre. The entire downtown zone was flooded with people

hours before the scheduled start of the gathering. Reflecting the tensions, police said they arrested a man who rammed his car into protesters in a Belgrade suburb, injuring three people. Hundreds of police officers were deployed inside and around government buildings and in front of the presidential palace.

Many railway and bus links toward Belgrade have been cancelled, in an apparent effort to prevent people from attending the rally. The transport company said the cancellation was made "for security reasons". Several reporters from neighbouring Croatia as well as Slovenia have been turned back from Serbia's border under explanation that their presence at the rally "represents a security risk".

**Vucic claims West is backing protests:** Vucic has rejected earlier proposals for a transitional government that would prepare an early election. Fueling fears of clashes, Vucic's supporters have been camping in central Belgrade in front of his headquarters.



# Chhattisgarh plans to double state GDP

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Raipur

Chhattisgarh plans to double the state's gross domestic product (GSDP) to ₹10 Lakh Crore in five years, combining the state's rich resources with progressive policies to bolster economic growth and development, its Finance Minister OP Choudhary said. The state's new industrial policy that incentivised employment creation has already drawn investment commitments of more than ₹1 Lakh crore in the last 15 months, he said.

Semiconductors manufacturing, data centres, IT services, pharmaceuticals as well as medical tourism are the focus areas, he said. The power surplus state is also eyeing renewable energy, particularly solar, as it has abundant sunlight through the year, the minister said, adding that a few opportunities in hydel power are also being explored. "We have a focus on clean energy. We have a focus on sustainability. Sustainable development will sustain in the long term," he said. While it looks at boosting manufacturing, the state is tapping other areas such as ayurveda and medical tourism as well as using its vast natural resources as a draw for tourism.

"We want to develop Raipur as a wedding destination. Our secondary sector is already very strong. We are focusing on the tertiary sector and the labour-intensive sector so that we can give employment to our youth." The state is focusing on infrastruc-

ture development, urban transport modernisation, digital connectivity and education and skill development to pivot a path to economic progress.

Aligned with the vision of making India a developed nation by 2047, no state should lag behind in the race for development, he said. "As a state government, we have to worry about this. And it is our duty to contribute to the development of the country. And when the country becomes a developed nation, Chhattisgarh should not lag behind. The 3 crore people of this state should not lag behind," he said.

**◀ We have a focus on clean energy. We have a focus on sustainability. Sustainable development will sustain in the long term**

— OP CHOUDHARY, CHHATTISGARH FINANCE MINISTER

Chhattisgarh has prepared a vision document to become a developed state by 2047. In the medium term, "We have set a very important goal of doubling the GDP of Chhattisgarh to ₹10 Lakh crore within 5 years," he said. "For that, including inflation, we need a growth rate of 14 per cent. This is a very important goal. But I am confident that we will be able to do this. It is a very ambitious target." The state government led by Chief Minister Vishnudeo Sai feels creating a skilled human resource base is important and is linking education with

vocational skills and training to equip students with employable skills.

This month, P Choudhary presented the Chhattisgarh government's Budget for the fiscal year 2025-26, totalling ₹1.65 Lakh crore, with a focus on economic revival, infrastructure development, and social welfare. While last year's Budget focused on theme GYAN (Gareeb, Yuva, Annadata & Nari), this year's Budget aims to drive progress in the state under the theme of GYAN ke liye 'GATI' to build on the progress made so far, he said discussing the focus of this year's budget.

"In GATI, G stands for good governance, A for accelerating infrastructure, T for technology and I for industrial growth," he said. Last year's Budget centred around inclusive development. But for inclusive growth, economic development is equally important, he said. With enhanced allocations, the budget aims to boost infrastructure, industrial development, and regional connectivity, creating an environment that attracts both public and private investments.

The bureaucrat-turned-politician said improving tax through governance is his government's first strategy.

"Secondly, I have talked about speed in this budget. We will focus on infrastructure and industrial growth and ensure rapid economic growth. When there is economic growth, the revenue collection will increase automatically," he said. "So, governance and economic growth, these

# India, New Zealand announce resumption of FTA talks



Union Minister Piyush Goyal and New Zealand's Todd McClay during a meeting

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

After a gap of about ten years, India and New Zealand on Sunday announced resumption of negotiations for a proposed free trade agreement to boost economic ties.

India and New Zealand began negotiating the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) in April 2010 to boost trade in goods, services, and investment. However, after nine rounds of discussions, the talks stalled in 2015. "The two nations are pleased to announce the launch of negotiations for a comprehensive and mutually beneficial India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations," the commerce ministry said.

The announcement was made after the meeting of Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and Todd McClay, New Zealand's Minister for Trade and Investment.

Prime Minister of New Zealand Christopher Luxon is here on a four-day visit from March 16.

"The India-New Zealand FTA negotiations aim to achieve balanced outcomes that enhance supply chain integration and improve market access," it said.

"With bilateral trade continuing to grow steadily, surpassing \$1 billion during April-January 2025, the FTA negotiations aim to unlock new avenues for businesses and consumers, fostering mutual growth and prosperity of our nations," Goyal said in a post on X.

# Artificial Intelligence driving force in modern markets, says CCI chief

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Artificial intelligence is a driving force in modern markets that also has the potential to enable collusion, including algorithmic discrimination under the garb of dynamic pricing, Competition Commission of India (CCI) chief Ravneet Kaur said on Sunday.

She also emphasised the need to adopt a forward-looking approach as well as trust-based regulations.

Delivering the special address at the 10th National Conference on Economics of Competition Law in the national capital, Kaur said Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a driving force in modern markets. AI shapes pricing strategies, decision-making, and operational efficiencies across industries but also presents risks, she noted. CCI Chairperson said, AI can enable new forms of collusion such as "cartels without human communication, price coordination without explicit agreements, and algorithmic discrimination under the garb of dynamic pricing."

The fair trade regulator is already conducting a study on AI and competition.

While mentioning that traditional enforcement models, built on adversarial approaches, are no longer sufficient in addressing evolving market complexities, Kaur said the future demands a more collaborative regulatory strategy.

"Today's competitive landscape is defined by platform economies, network effects, and algorithm-driven decision-making," the CCI chief said and added that market power today is about



Competition Commission of India (CCI) Chairperson Ravneet Kaur speaks at CCI's 10th National Conference on Economics of Competition Law in New Delhi

data control, network effects, and platform reach. The goal is to balance innovation with competition, ensuring fair and open markets, she noted. At the conference, organised by the CCI, Union Minister of State for Corporate Affairs Harsh Malhotra pitched for real time monitoring of markets to ensure fair competition. Since the enforcement of the Competition Act, 2002, CCI has received over 1,300 antitrust cases and out of them, 1,180 cases have been disposed of.

Last year, the regulator received 42 antitrust cases and prima facie violations were found in 8 cases, leading to detailed investigations.

As many as 19 cases were closed at the prima facie stage due to no violation, and 15 cases are pending at various stages of inquiry. In 2024, the watchdog received 128 combination notices and 126 cases were disposed of, Kaur said, adding that in 2 cases, approvals were granted with remedies to safeguard competition.

# India should seek reciprocal concessions from EU: GTRI

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

India should seek reciprocal concessions from the European Union (EU) under the proposed free trade agreement (FTA) in the medical devices sector to promote its exports, economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said on Sunday.

India charges zero to 10 per cent tariffs on most medical devices and a duty cut by India on medical devices without addressing EUs regulatory challenges will result in low exports but large scale imports from EU.

"To achieve a fair trade deal, India must demand reciprocity. India should cut tariff on medical devices only if the EU reduces its non-tariff barriers," the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said.

The ongoing India-EU FTA negotiations on medical devices are asymmetrical. While the EU demands zero tariffs on medical devices from India, it maintains high regulatory barriers that hinder Indian exports difficult in the EU markets, it added.

GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava said the EU customs duty rates are zero, but market entry costs are substantial because of the stringent regulatory framework.

"Exporting to EU has become more difficult as it replaced the Medical Device Directives (EU-MDD) with the more stringent Medical Device Rules (EU-MDR)," he said.

Citing an example, he said the new certification and regulatory expenses amount to 60,000-300,000 euro annu-

ally for market access of 100,000-3.75 million euro.

"Certification approval time increased from the earlier 4-8 months to 2-3 years now. Shortage of notified bodies and auditors in the EU is leading to high certification costs," Srivastava said.

On account of this, Indian exporters are withdrawing from the EU market or limiting product offerings as high entry and certification costs make market participation financially unsustainable, he noted.

Moreover, he said the lack of Indian participation in the Medical Device Single Audit Program (MDSAP) limits the acceptance of Indian devices in key regulated markets.

MDSAP allows medical device manufacturers to be audited only once for compliance with regulatory requirements in multiple markets, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan, and the United States.

To facilitate exports in EU and other major markets, India needs to undertake the reforms like seeking MRAs (mutual recognition agreements) with the EU, USA, and other regulated markets based on ISO (International Organization for Standardization) harmonised standards.

Indian medical devices sector is steadily growing and helping India cut its reliance on imports.

In 2024, India's global exports were \$2.3 Billion while imports were \$4.7 Billion.

EU remains an important market with exports of \$580 Million and imports of \$1.15 billion.

# Digital competition law after due process, says Union Minister Harsh Malhotra

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

The digital competition law will be brought out after following the due process, Union Minister Harsh Malhotra said on Sunday. More than 100 suggestions have been received on the draft Digital Competition Bill (DCB), which was put out for public consultations by the corporate affairs ministry last year.

Malhotra, the Minister of State for Corporate Affairs, said the report from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) on the bill is awaited. "We are not in a hurry (on bringing the digital competition law) (we will follow) due process," the minister said.

Speaking at the National Conference on Economics of Competition Law in the national capital, he also said the best practices with respect to digital markets in other jurisdictions like Japan, Australia, and Europe can be looked at and how they can fit into the Indian market. He also called for real-time monitoring and analysis of markers for fair competition.

The DCB has proposed certain ex-ante provisions to ensure proactive monitoring of the behaviour of large digital enterprises and curb possible practices. Currently, the Competition Act primarily envisages an 'ex-post' framework of intervention, wherein the CCI intervenes after the occurrence of anti-competitive conduct.

# Mcap of five of top-10 most valued firms declines ₹93k crore

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

The combined market capitalisation of five of the top-10 most valued firms declined by ₹93,357.52 Crore, with IT giants Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services taking the biggest hit, in line with a weak trend in domestic equities. Last week, the BSE Sensex benchmark declined 503.67 points or 0.68 per cent, and the NSE Nifty fell 155.3 points or 0.69 per cent. The stock markets were closed on Friday on the occasion of Holi festival.

Meanwhile, Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Hindustan Unilever, State Bank of India and Reliance Industries saw a decline in their market valuations.

In contrast, ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank, ITC, Bajaj Finance and Bharti Airtel posted gains. The five firms together added ₹49,833.62 Crore in their market capitalisation. The market capitalisation (mcap) of Infosys dropped by ₹44,226.62 Crore to ₹6,55,820.48 Crore.

The Mumbai-based TCS' valuation tumbled by ₹35,800.98 Crore to ₹12,70,798.97 Crore and slipped to the third place among the country's 10-most valuable companies chart.

Hindustan Unilever's market valuation depreciated by ₹6,567.11 Crore to ₹5,11,235.81 Crore. State Bank of India's mcap decreased by ₹4,462.31 Crore to ₹6,49,489.22 Crore, and that of Reliance Industries' went lower by ₹2,300.50 Crore, taking its market capitalisation to ₹16,88,028.20 Crore. However, ICICI Bank's valuation surged by ₹25,459.16 Crore to ₹8,83,202.19 Crore.

# Sugar production declines 16 per cent to 23.71 Million tonnes

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

India's sugar production has declined by 16.13 per cent to 23.71 Million tonnes so far in the ongoing 2024-25 season, creating challenges for government policies which were formulated based on higher initial projections, cooperative body NFCSF said on Sunday.

The National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories (NFCSF) expressed concern over the "ambiguity" in sugar production numbers as the 2024-25 sugarcane crushing season (October-September) nears its end with significantly lower output than initially projected.

Sugar production estimates have been repeatedly revised downward since the season began, creating challenges for government policies which were formulated based on an initial projection of 33.3 Million tonnes, the industry body said in a statement.

**◀ The entire sugar industry in Maharashtra has found itself in huge financial trouble this year. It is very difficult to correlate expenses of 365 days**

— HARSHVARDHAN PATIL, NFCSF PRESIDENT

"One section of the industry submitted an estimate of 33.3 million tonnes of sugar production to the central government. Based on that, the central government started formulating its policies," NFCSF said. The central government had permitted exports of 1 million tonnes of sugar in January 2025 based on the initial production estimate, but now faces a supply-demand mismatch as actual production figures trend lower.

According to NFCSF data, production in Maharashtra, India's largest sugar producer, fell to 7.86 Million tonnes till March 15 of the current season, from

10.04 Million tonnes a year ago.

Output in Uttar Pradesh, the country's second largest producer, decreased to 8.09 million tonnes from 8.85 Million tonnes, while Karnataka's production declined to 3.91 Million tonnes from 4.95 Million tonnes in the same period.

NFCSF President Harshvardhan Patil said the crushing season across most states would conclude by March-end, while Uttar Pradesh mills would operate until mid-April. Patil expressed concern over the shortened crushing period, particularly in Maharashtra where the season lasted only 83 days against the economically viable duration of 140-150 days. "The entire sugar industry in Maharashtra has found itself in huge financial trouble this year. It is very difficult to correlate expenses of 365 days and load it on an 83-day season," Patil said.

Major sugarcane growing states faced multiple challenges this season. The Co-0238 variety in Uttar Pradesh suffered heavy infestation of "Red Rot" disease and "Top Shoot Borer" pests, while standing cane in Maharashtra and Karnataka experienced premature flowering, resulting in stunted growth and reduced sugar yields. NFCSF has projected the country's total sugar output to be lower at 25.9 million tonnes in the ongoing 2024-25 season, compared to 31.9 million tonnes in the previous season. Despite current challenges, NFCSF Managing Director Prakash Naikaware expressed optimism about the 2025-26 season, citing increased plantings due to satisfactory rainfall in 2024 and favorable weather predictions.

"If that happens, the availability of sugarcane and sugar production will be much better not only in the ensuing 2025-26 season but may also extend into 2026-27," Naikaware said.

# Indian corporate houses remain positive for hiring persons with disabilities

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kolkata

Indian companies are ramping up hiring of persons with disabilities (PwDs), seeing it as both a "social imperative" and a "strategic business advantage" amid growing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) commitments, stakeholders said. Onboarding such people in Indian corporate houses has seen a steady rise, with a 30-40 per cent increase in job postings for inclusive roles over the past three years, they said.

Indian companies, ranging from the steel and mining sectors to the insurance segment are focusing on workplace accessibility to onboard PwDs in their job rolls. Future Generali India Insurance Company MD and CEO Anup Rau said the insurer has achieved the milestone of one per cent of its workforce comprising of PwDs.

"The commitment to ensuring at least one per cent PwDs of our workforce is rooted in our belief that inclusion is not just a box to tick or a policy to implement it's a responsibility to create a meaningful change," Rau said. In the last one year, the insurer's PwD workforce has increased from 16 to 41 employees across 16 regional branches, and nearly 22 per cent of the PwD hires are women, he said.

"In FY'23 it was stated that only seven of the Nifty 50 companies had over one per cent PwD employees, with four out of them being in the public sector space. This stark reality underscores the urgent need for corporate leadership in championing inclusion," Rau said.

Vedanta Chief Human Resource Officer Madhu Srivastava said the group has taken a slew of steps to enhance workplace accessibility such as ramps and dedicated walkways for easy mobility, braille-enabled elevators to support visually

impaired employees and text-to-speech software for better digital accessibility, and ensure a seamless experience for individuals with disabilities.

"Currently, we employ over 50 individuals from the PwD community in front-end roles and continue to expand our efforts in this space. Additionally, we have onboarded interns with disabilities to provide them with hands-on exposure to the dynamic environment of a global natural resources conglomerate like ours," Srivastava said.

**◀ Currently, we employ over 50 individuals from the PwD community in front-end roles and continue to expand our efforts in this space**

— MADHU SRIVASTAVA, VEDANTA CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCE OFFICER

While the group's core operations in mining and smelting present certain challenges in integrating PwDs into technical roles, it remains "committed to identifying opportunities that provide them with meaningful exposure and upskilling," the Vedanta official said. "Embracing workplace diversity, including hiring persons with disabilities, is not just a social imperative it is a strategic business advantage," she said.

Tata Steel spokesperson said the company employs 100+ PwD employees across functions. In an emailed response, the spokesperson said, "Over the past 2-3 years, the number of PwD employees at Tata Steel has steadily increased. We have made significant strides in our hiring practices and have actively sought to create a more inclusive environment."

The steelmaker's official also said including people with disabilities in the workforce strengthens businesses by fos-

tering diverse perspectives and boosting creativity and innovation. With environmental, social and governance-focused hiring and government incentives like tax benefits for PwD employment, the share of such employees in the formal workforce is expected to double by 2030, human resources investment platform First Meridian Global Services and Innovsource CEO Manmeet Singh said.

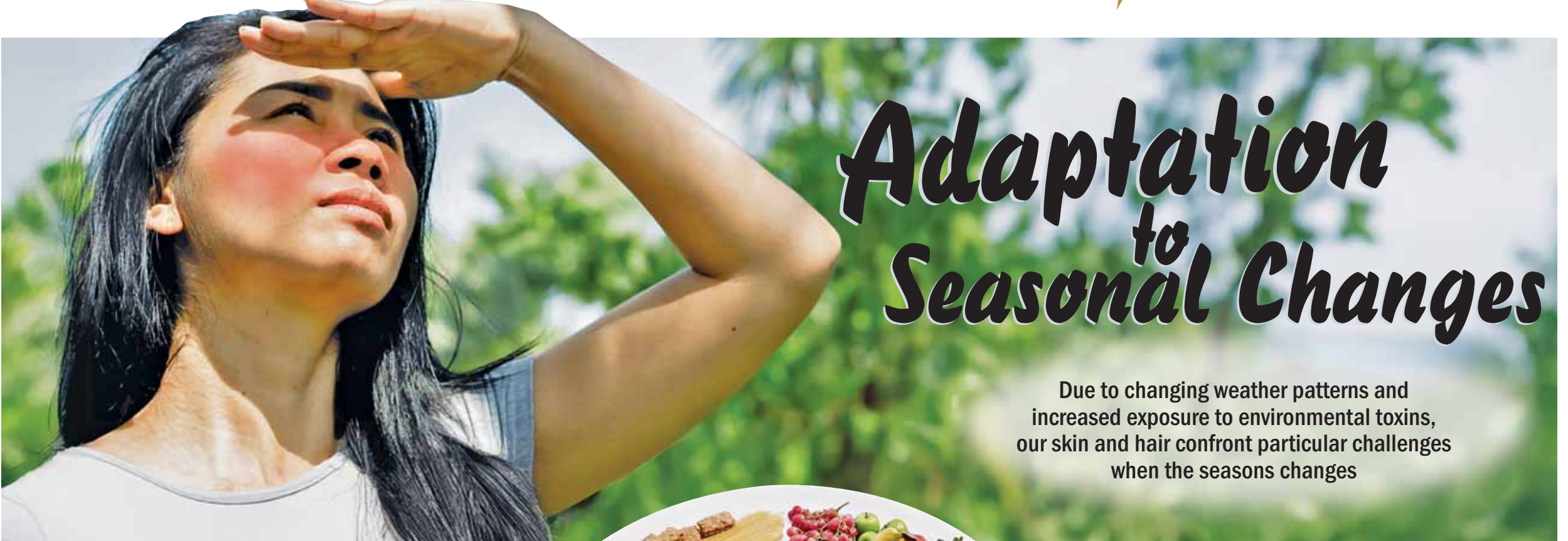
Large corporations and startups alike are "prioritising diversity, especially in sectors like IT, retail, and BFSI, where remote and hybrid work models enable greater participation," Singh said.

"Despite reports that India has over 7 Crore persons with disabilities (PwDs), and their employability rate remains at just 0.4 per cent, hiring of PwDs in India has seen a steady rise, with a 30-40 per cent increase in job postings for inclusive roles over the past three years," he said.

Atlanta-based Global technology & digital talent solutions provider NLB Services CEO Sachin Alug said integrating persons with disability, although a focus area, is gaining momentum slowly in India Inc.

"Today, culture plays a major role in determining the brand identity of a company and how it is perceived by partners, customers, employees and the entire business ecosystem. In order to build a diversity-oriented culture, businesses are striving to employ a diverse workforce," Alug said. However, there is a flip side to the story. Leading HR service provider Randstad India'Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Study: 'Embracing All Abilities', revealed that talents with special abilities are employed majorly at junior and middle levels (29.84 per cent and 23.27 per cent, respectively), while their representation is relatively lower at senior and management roles.





# Adaptation to Seasonal Changes

Due to changing weather patterns and increased exposure to environmental toxins, our skin and hair confront particular challenges when the seasons change

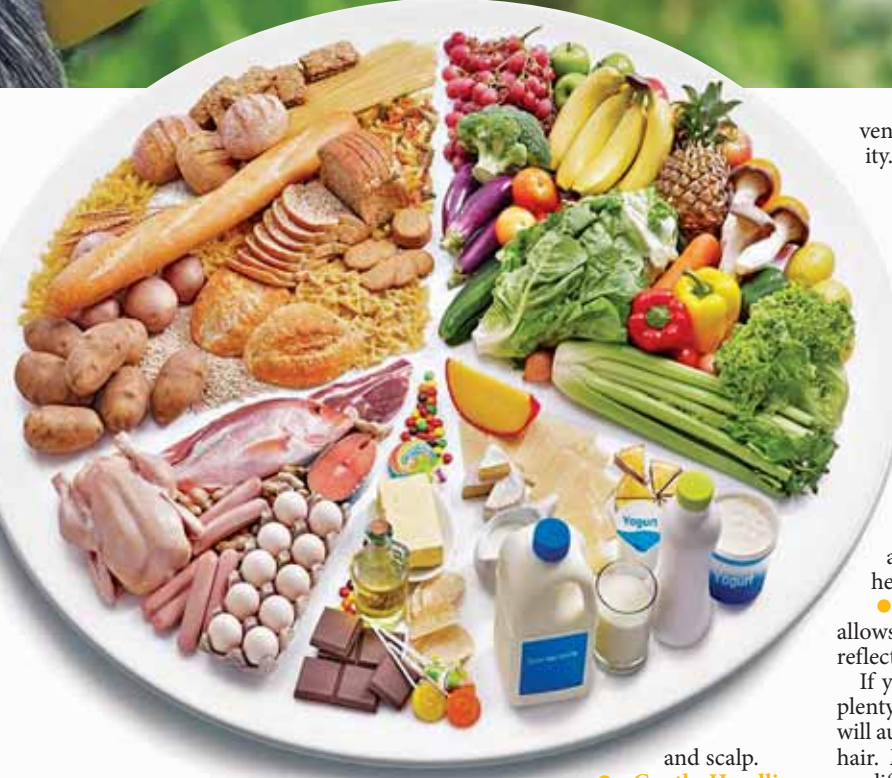
**D**ue to changing weather patterns and increased exposure to environmental toxins, our skin and hair confront particular challenges when the seasons change, especially during this time of the year. To properly handle these changes, we must modify our skincare and hair care regimens. These professional tips and advice can help you keep your skin and hair healthy throughout these periods.

## Skincare Adjustments

- **Gentle Cleansing:** With increased exposure to pollutants, it's essential to cleanse your skin thoroughly to remove impurities. Use a gentle cleanser twice daily to prevent clogged pores and breakouts.
- **Antioxidant Protection:** Pollutants can lead to free radical damage, causing premature aging. Incorporate antioxidant-rich serums into your routine to combat this effect.
- **Moisturization:** Despite the humidity, maintaining skin hydration is crucial. Opt for lightweight, non-comedogenic moisturizers to keep your skin supple without clogging pores.
- **Sun Protection:** Even during festive seasons, applying a broad-spectrum sunscreen is vital to shield your skin from harmful UV rays and prevent premature aging, sunburns, hyperpigmentation, and long-term skin damage.
- **Cleansing is crucial:** Use a gentle cleanser twice daily and apply an antioxidant-rich serum to protect your skin from free radical damage. Moisturizing and using a broad-spectrum sunscreen, even indoors, is essential.

## Understanding Seasonal Impacts

A change in the weather frequently occurs over the holiday season, increasing humidity and exposing people to toxins from things like fireworks. The health of both skin and hair may be negatively impacted by these variables. The change in weather, paired with makeup, pollutants, and erratic schedules, can take a toll on your skin, leaving it dull and tired. Excessive sweating and increased oil production can cause acne, clogged pores, and sunburns.



vent split ends and maintain hair vitality.

Similarly, hair tends to become dry and brittle due to pollutants. Using leave-in conditioners or oils can create a protective barrier for the hair and scalp.

## Holistic Care

Beyond topical treatments, overall wellness plays a significant role in skin and hair health.

- **Hydration:** Drinking plenty of water helps maintain skin elasticity and hair strength.
- **Balanced Diet:** Consuming a diet rich in vitamins and minerals supports overall skin and hair health.
- **Adequate Rest:** Proper sleep allows the body to repair and rejuvenate, reflecting positively on skin and hair. If you eat a well-balanced diet, drink plenty of water, and get plenty of rest, it will automatically show on your skin and hair. Maintaining their health requires modifying your skincare and hair care regimens to coincide with seasonal shifts and celebratory events.

## Hair Care Adjustments

- **Protective Measures:** Exposure to pollutants can make hair dry and brittle. Using leave-in conditioners or oils can create a protective barrier for the hair
- **Gentle Handling:** Avoid excessive heat styling and frequent shampooing during festive periods to prevent further dryness and damage.
- **Regular Trimming:** Keeping hair ends healthy through regular trims can pre-

## SEASONAL CHANGE

Indian summers (March - June) bring intense heat and humidity, leading to various skin and hair concerns. Excessive sweating and increased oil production can cause acne, clogged pores, and sunburns. Prolonged sun exposure also results in tanning, dehydration, and pigmentation. Skin tends to become dull and sensitive, requiring lightweight, oil-free moisturizers, sunscreen, and regular hydration. Hair also suffers in summer, becoming greasy, frizzy, and prone to dandruff due to sweat and humidity. The scalp may feel itchy, and excessive washing can strip natural oils, leading to dryness and breakage. UV exposure can further weaken hair, causing color fading and split ends. To combat these issues, it is essential to use mild, sulfate-free shampoos, hydrating hair masks, and protective hairstyles. Drinking plenty of water, maintaining a balanced diet, and using cooling skincare ingredients like aloe vera and cucumber help keep skin and hair fresh, healthy, and nourished during summer.



— BY DR. KARUNA MALHOTRA, AESTHETIC PHYSICIAN & COSMETOLOGIST

## Understanding Seasonal Impacts

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# Survivors Join Hands to Stop TB

**B**efore 2025 World TB Day, I spent a day accompanying TB-affected street activists (TASA) in Delhi, women who assist homeless women and female migrant workers in finding TB services. It was an intense experience, connecting with women battling gender inequalities and surviving. Homelessness or migrant status significantly increases TB risk and gender-based suffering.

## TB and Gender Inequalities Affect Both: Career and the Person Being Cared For

I recall a powerful encounter with a TB-affected woman supporting others through treatment. Her story highlights the importance of advocacy and community support for homeless women, empowering them to act against TB and assert their rights. As Samantha Power said, "All advocacy is, at its core, an exercise in empathy."

## Empathy Binds Women to Stop TB

Jyoti's story is one of resilience. Daughter of a vegetable vendor, she graduated from Delhi University and is pursuing further education while working. She experienced TB firsthand when her sister suffered from it in 2019, navigating misdiagnosis and expensive treatment.

"We spent INR 1.5 lakh (about USD 1721) on her treatment with borrowed money. But we could save her life, and she was cured of TB."

## Never Say Die Attitude

Jyoti faced immense challenges, particularly after her mother's death in 2022. Despite financial hardship, she began working while continuing her education, determined to fulfill her mother's dream.

"When she was gone, our lives were broken. We are now slowly coming to terms with her loss. Right after completing my class 12, I started working in a



## THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE SUPPORT

Reena, living in a threatened Delhi slum, was diagnosed with TB in 2010, interrupting her treatment due to neglect. After 14 years, her symptoms returned severely in June 2024. Fortunately, she met Jyoti, a TASA with Humana People to People India, during a "Saheli Support Group" meeting.

Jyoti recognised Reena's symptoms and took her to government clinics. Despite initial negative test results, Jyoti persisted, securing a positive diagnosis and initiating treatment. She also helped Reena access financial support through the "Nikshay Poshan Yojna."

call centre as our financial condition was not good. My father had said that if I wanted to study, I would have to bear the expenses myself. But come what may, I was determined to fulfil my mother's dream of becoming a teacher. Currently I am the sole bread winner of the family," Jyoti shared with me.

## Finding Light in Helping Others

Jyoti became a TASA in August 2024, surveying areas, organising health camps, and assisting with government procedures. She helps people obtain essential documents and encourages them to take control of their lives.

"We TASAs do survey work in our allotted areas, looking for homeless people with TB symptoms and also asking the people about their needs. We hold health camps to mobilise the homeless persons of our area. In these health camps, doctors do free health checkups and provide free medicines. We also help people navigate the hospital system (and other government systems). We help them get their identity cards and other documents made, without which they cannot avail the existing government facilities."

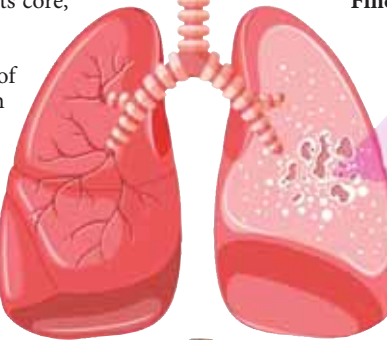
— By Shobha Shukla (The author is the award-winning founding Managing Editor and Executive Director of Citizen News Service)

Aadhar unique identification card, etc., made themselves without any help," she added. Jyoti finds immense satisfaction in helping vulnerable women. Her message is clear: respect and support all lives, regardless of education or economic status. "I get a lot of gratification by deploying my skills as a social worker with Human People to People India" said Jyoti. Jyoti's message to all women is: "One must be educated, but we must respect even those who are not educated."

## SAHELI SUPPORT GROUP MEETINGS

Weekly Saheli Support Group meetings educate women on TB and other health issues, fostering empowerment and knowledge sharing. They address challenges like unequal wages and discrimination, encouraging women to advocate for their rights.

"These meetings have yielded good results by way of general empowerment and knowledge sharing among the homeless and migrant women. They are now capable of getting birth certificate,



# The Need for Early Detection and Prevention

With nearly 2 lakh new cases of kidney failure diagnosed annually in India, Chronic Kidney Disease is a growing health concern, writes ABHI SINGHAL



**N**early 210000 new cases of kidney failure are diagnosed annually in India highlighting the growing burden of Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD). A research paper 'Journey of a Patient with CKD in India' published by Kidney 360, a Nephrology Journal reveals that CKD is often diagnosed late in India. This delay stems from a lack of awareness and the absence of noticeable symptoms particularly with higher incidences of interstitial nephritis and CKD of unknown origin.

Our kidneys the silent workhorses of the body play an important role in filtering waste and maintaining overall health. World Kidney Day observed on March 12th every year, serves as a crucial reminder of their importance and the need to combat the growing prevalence of kidney disease.

Recently marking this significant day medical professionals highlighted the critical need for proactive kidney care. Dr Vikas Agarwal, Director & HOD - Robotic Urology, Kidney Transplant, Uro Oncology, Andrology & Male Infertility Kidney Transplant, Akash Healthcare speaking on the occasion emphasised that kidney health through exercise, hydration, and a vegetarian diet while avoiding junk food and preservatives. Early signs include swelling and fatigue, but routine kidney function and urine tests ensure early detection, especially for diabetics and hypertensives.

Dr Vikas Agarwal said, "If you talk about Indian transplant numbers, it goes around fifteen thousand per year, and most of them are living-related donors. If we talk about kidney health, we need to exercise daily, have a routine walk, and drink a lot of water to stay hydrated. We should decrease the amount of salt and sugar in our diet, consume more vegetarian food, and avoid junk food and preservatives."

**Early Signs** - If we talk about the early signs of kidney issues, swelling may occur, such as feeling your ring becoming tight or experiencing swelling in your legs, hands, or fingers. Other signs include early tiredness, low energy, and urine-related issues like frothy urine or microscopic abnormalities in a urine test.

**Precautions** - Diet and hydration play a crucial role in preventing kidney diseases. Proper hydration helps flush out waste and excess salt, reducing the risk of kidney stones and ensuring proper kidney function. A vegetarian diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables helps prevent kidney disease, while junk food, soft drinks like Coca-Cola, and alcohol should be avoided.

Most kidney diseases are diagnosed late due to a lack of awareness. Since we have two kidneys, they continue functioning until more than 50% of their capacity is lost, leading to late symptoms. The best way to detect kidney disease early is through a kidney function test and a urine routine test. Otherwise, symptoms appear only when significant damage has occurred, such as swelling around the eyes or extreme fatigue."



# McLaren's Lando Norris wins Australian Grand Prix

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Melbourne

McLaren's Lando Norris has won a chaotic rain-affected Australian Grand Prix, his first at Albert Park, with the Brit just managing to stay ahead of Red Bull's Max Verstappen following a third safety car late in Sunday's race.

Lewis Hamilton had a miserable Ferrari debut. The seven-time champion finished 10th and was annoyed by constant radio messages from his pit team.

Norris started the season-opening race, Melbourne's first wet race since 2010, from pole position. But, while he initially came under increasing pressure from Piastri, who set a series of fastest laps until his papaya team told him to hold position, the Australian spun at the penultimate corner on lap 44 as the rain intensified and dropped down the order.

A late race fightback helped Piastri recover to take ninth place including passing Hamilton on the final lap and two championship points. Verstappen finished 0.895 of a second behind Norris after starting from third on the grid, and took advantage of Piastri's misfortune and the



final safety car and tire stops. Mercedes' George Russell closed out the top-three.

"I knew I had a good pace, but I made one mistake in turn six and he got me in the DRS and the DRS around here is probably like a second or something so that allowed it to keep staying within that second," said Norris, who scored McLaren's 12th win in Australia to steal the outright record from Ferrari.

"I know what I'm capable of, I know what I can do, but obviously it's just round one, so we need to go and do it again next weekend and then continue from there. A long season ahead, we've just got to keep our head down and keep pushing."

Williams endured a mix bag, with Alex Albon securing his best result since Abu Dhabi 2020, and new recruit Carlos Sainz who won here last year driving for Ferrari out at the final turn on the opening lap.

Mercedes was thrilled to get two cars in the top five, with Russell onto the podium, his first since winning in Las Vegas last year. Rookie Andrea Kimi Antonelli, who replaced Hamilton at the silver squad, showed his class with a superb fightback drive from 16th on the grid, following his Q1 exit, to finish fifth.

Aston Martin's Lance Stroll also made the best of the chaotic conditions to move up from 13th to sixth, ahead of Sauber's Nico Hulkenberg, bringing home eight points in what has been a difficult weekend for the green team with its car uncompetitive in dry running.

Ferrari is the most successful constructor at the Australian Grand Prix, with 11 wins since its first in 1987, but it will leave Melbourne disappointed with just five points to show after Charles Leclerc finished eighth and Hamilton 10th.

The Scuderia was seen as a potential championship challenger ahead of the season start and has plenty of work to do ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix next week. The Melbourne race had a thrilling start with Racing Bull's Isack Hadjar out on the formation lap, and Alpine's Jack Doohan joined Sainz in crashing out on the opening lap.

There were just 14 finishers, after Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso hit the turn eight barriers on lap 34, while Red Bull's Liam Lawson and Sauber's Gabriel Bortoletto went into the barriers and out of the race 10 laps from home in the treacherously wet conditions.

## New Zealand beat Pakistan by nine wickets

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Christchurch

A new era for Pakistan white ball cricket got off to a rough start on Sunday with a nine wicket loss to New Zealand in the first of five Twenty20 internationals. First time captain Salman Ali Agha-led a new look team into the match which followed Pakistan's poor performance at home in the 50-overs Champions Trophy and began its buildup to the 2026 T20 World Cup.

The Pakistan batting crumbled against the New Zealand pace attack and the tourists were all out for 91 in 18.4 overs, its fifth-lowest total in T20 internationals. New Zealand easily ran down that total, reaching 92-1 from 10.1 overs with Tim Seifert making 44 from 29 balls and Finn Allen 29 from 17.

Tim Robinson was 18 not out and took two runs from the first ball of the 11th over to complete the win. "It was obviously difficult and we weren't up to the mark," Ali Agha said. "They bowled really well. They were bowling in the right

areas and there was swing and seam for them as well. "But out batting wasn't up to the mark. We have won day before the next game and we will try to gather ourselves and be better in the next game."

Pakistan was in trouble from the start with the new opening pair of Mohammad Harris and Hasan Nawaz, stepping in for the veterans Mohammad Rizwan and Babar Azam, both dismissed without scoring in the first eight balls of the match.

**They bowled really well. They were bowling in the right areas and there was swing and seam for them as well**

— SALMAN ALI AGHA, PAKISTAN CAPTAIN

A fully fit Kyle Jamieson took 3-8 and Jacob Duffy 4-14 as Pakistan stumbled to 14-4 at the end of the six over powerplay. Jamieson and Duffy produced pace, bounce and swing on a brownish pitch at Hagley Oval and the Pakistan batters had no early response.

"It was really nice to be back on home

soil," said Jamieson who bowled 18 dot balls. "We had some pretty favorable conditions which I'm sure me and (Duffy) would take most places around the country. "It was nice to have those and just try to cash in as much as we could."

Salman and Khushdil Shah gave the Pakistan innings some impetus when they took 14 runs from the 10th over bowled by Ish Sodhi and 15 from the 11th bowled by Michael Bracewell to lift Pakistan from 28-4 after nine overs to 57-5 after 11. The Pakistan batters looked more at home against the spinners

But Duffy returned to dismiss Khushdil for 32 and the rest followed quickly with only three batters reaching three figures.

Seifert put New Zealand on course to a comfortable win, taking 12 runs from the third over and 14 runs off the fifth as New Zealand reached 43-1 in the power play. Allen, unusually subdued, scored only nine runs in the first six overs.

New Zealand was 90-1 after 10 overs, needing only 2 runs to win, when the umpires unaccountably called for drinks.

## Bayern held to 1-1 draw at Union Berlin

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Munich

A mistake by young goalkeeper Jonas Urbig meant Bayern Munich dropped points for the second Bundesliga game in a row with a 1-1 draw at Union Berlin.

Bayern seemed on course for victory when Leroy Sané scored in the 75th minute after Bayern had struggled to break through Union's deep defensive line, but Urbig's error eight minutes later proved costly.

Urbig came off his line to deal with a deflected cross which looped high into the air, but he could only palm it to Union striker Benedict Hollerbach, who hit it in low to level the score.

Bayern's lead in the Bundesliga over Bayer Leverkusen increased to nine points, but Leverkusen could cut the gap to six with a win Sunday over Stuttgart. Union is 13th.

"We're not happy with the result but it wasn't a bad performance," Bayern coach Vincent Kompany said.

While Bayern has been strong in the

Champions League, beating Leverkusen 5-0 over two legs to reach the quarterfinals, its Bundesliga form has dipped. The draw with Union follows a 3-2 loss last week against Bochum.

The 21-year-old Urbig played both of those games because first-choice goalkeeper Manuel Neuer tore a calf muscle when celebrating a goal in the first leg against Leverkusen last week.

Leipzig punishes wasteful Dortmund Dortmund's disappointing Bundesliga season took another turn for the worse with plenty of missed chances in a 2-0 loss at Leipzig that left the club 11th in the 18-team league.

Three days after beating Lille to reach the Champions League quarterfinals, Dortmund looked a different team in a loss which dealt another blow to its hopes of qualifying for any European competition next year.

Xavi Simons made the difference for Leipzig, scoring on a rebound in the 18th minute and setting up Lois Openda to volley in the second goal in the 48th.

Dortmund came alive after that and

racked up 26 total shots in the game, but a mix of strong goalkeeping by Leipzig's Peter Gulacsi, poor finishing and bad luck three shots hit the crossbar or post prevented a comeback.

It was the fourth loss in six Bundesliga games since coach Niko Kovac took charge last month, and he could face more problems after midfielder Marcel Sabitzer went off with a potentially serious knee injury. Leipzig moved up to fifth after its first Bundesliga win in more than a month and only its third victory in 11 league games since the new year.

Champions League-chasing Mainz clings on Mainz earned a 2-2 draw with Freiburg despite a first-half red card but its efforts to qualify for the Champions League for the first time were still dented. Third-place Mainz twice took the lead with goals from Jonathan Burkardt and Andreas Hanche-Olsen and ended Freiburg's run of not having conceded in six games but Freiburg leveled each time. Mainz had Dominik Kohr sent off just before halftime for a foul as the last defender.

## Early wickets of Shafali, Lanning turned match for us: Edwards

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mumbai

Mumbai Indians head coach Charlotte Edwards said the early wickets of Delhi Capitals' skipper Meg Lanning and opener Shafali Verma helped her team win the Women's Premier League final here.

Lanning (13) and Shafali (4) departed with just 17 runs on the board as DC ended up at 141 for nine while chasing 150. "150, we knew we were a little bit light, but in a final, it's always worth a little bit more. Shafali didn't come out like she normally does, and I knew straightaway that potentially we were in with a chance, because if we could get her wicket," Edwards said in the post-match press conference on Saturday night.

Edwards said the Capitals were a bit cagey in their chase, and it made things easier for her side. "It probably fell in our hands a little bit that we were a bit short, and potentially they went about it a bit slower than they normally do."

"The opening partnership of Lanning and Shafali has been our curse over the last few years, if I'm honest, so I was really pleased to see the back of those two batters early. It was a real team performance," she added.

Edwards lauded MI skipper Harmanpreet Kaur for making an important 66 off 44 balls that led her side to a

competitive total.

"She's been really calm. She's deeply competitive, so clearly she wanted to win another title here, and she did everything in her power to do that with the innings she played. She's great around the group, she brings out the best in our young players, and works brilliantly with all our overseas and experienced players," she said. Edwards also praised all-rounders Nat-Sciver Brunt and Hayley Matthews for making heavy contributions throughout the tournament.

Brunt was the highest run-getter in the WPL 2025 with 523 runs and Hayley shared the top wicket-taker spot with teammate Amelie Kerr, taking 18 wickets apiece.

"I think Hayley's been exceptional, and Nat Sciver-Brunt has been absolutely amazing, and to have that kind of experience around Harman, I think it really frees her up to play the way that she's played," she said.

The former England skipper also patted MI players for maintaining intensity despite playing four matches inside six days.

"To play four games in six days, yeah. I mean, it's been fantastic to see how the players have backed those performances up, and to come out here on the big stage and still give that energy to the performance, you know, I'm truly proud," she said.

## Having family around helps player to recover from on-field disappointments, says Kohli

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Bengaluru

Star batter Virat Kohli supported the presence of players' families on tours, saying he would always prefer having personal support around him to deal with tough and intense days on the field, instead of sulking alone in his hotel room. A BCCI directive which was issued after India's 1-3 Test series defeat against Australia had curtailed the family time of players for no longer than 14 days on tours exceeding 45 days.

The wife, children or girlfriends of players could be with them for a maximum of one week on shorter tours.

"The role of family is very difficult to explain to people...how grounding it is to just come back to your family every time you have something which is intense, which happens on the outside," Kohli during RCB's Innovation Lab summit which concluded here on Saturday.

"I don't think people have an understanding of what value it brings," Kohli said having the family around would help a player to recover from on-field disappointments that much quicker. "I don't want to go to my room and just sit alone and sulk. I want to be able to be normal. Then you can really treat your game as something that is a responsibility. "Not in a vague sense, but in a very real way that



you finish your commitment and then you come back to your house, you're with family, and absolutely normalcy in your house and normal family life goes on.

"So, for me, that is absolutely a day of immense pleasure. I won't miss any opportunities to go out and spend time with my family whenever I can," said Kohli. The 36-year-old was "disappointed" because people with no real connection with such issues have been involved in such discussions.

"I feel quite disappointed about that

because it's like people who have no control over what's going on are brought into conversations and put out at the forefront of that, 'oh, maybe they need to be kept away.' "And if you ask any player, do you want your family to be around you all the time? You'll be like, yes," he said.

"Support system from the team's point of view wasn't tough. Convincing my mom what I was doing was way harder. She was very disappointed in the fact that I wasn't eating any parathas and I was looking weak on the field," he said.

## Jack Draper knocks off Carlos Alcaraz to reach BNP Paribas open final

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Indian Wells

Jack Draper toppled two-time defending champion Carlos Alcaraz 6-1, 0-6, 6-4 to reach the BNP Paribas Open final. The 13th-seeded Draper will face 12th-seeded Holger Rune on Sunday. Rune beat fifth-seeded Daniil Medvedev 7-6, 6-4 in the first semifinal for his 150th tour-level victory.

In the women's final Sunday, top-seeded Aryna Sabalenka will play 17-year-old Mirra Andreeva. They won semi-final matches Friday night in chilly conditions.

Draper ended Alcaraz's 16-match winning streak in the ATP Masters 1000 event in the California desert. The 23-year-old English left-hander set to break into the top 10 in the world for the first time Monday won last year in Vienna and Stuttgart for his lone tour titles. He's 2-3 against Alcaraz. Alcaraz, seeded second, missed a chance to become the youngest player to win three consecutive singles titles at any ATP Tour event and just the third to do it at Indian Wells. The 21-year-old Spanish star won in Rotterdam in February for his 17th ATP Tour title.

The 21-year-old Rune, from Denmark, snapped a seven-match losing streak in semifinals. He's 2-2 against Medvedev.

## Real Madrid 2-1 win over Villarreal in Spanish League

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Barcelona

After a slow start to his Real Madrid career, Kylian Mbappe has already surpassed one of the club greats.

Mbappe scored twice in Madrid's 2-1 comeback win over Villarreal on Saturday to take his tally to 31 goals in all competitions this season one more than Brazil striker Ronaldo managed in his first campaign at the club. It also helped Madrid open up a three-point lead atop the Spanish league over Barcelona, which has played two games less.

Long gone are the scoring troubles Mbappe endured in his first months at Madrid. Having surpassed Ronaldo's tally from 2002-03, the former Paris Saint-Germain player is now closing in on the 33 goals that Cristiano Ronaldo scored in his first season with Madrid in 2009-10.

"They are legends who marked eras with the club," Mbappe said about the two Ronaldos. "If I score more goals than



Ronaldo and Cristiano it doesn't mean that I am better, just that my first season is better. Scoring goals is important, but it is even more so if we win La Liga, the

Champions League and the Copa del Rey."

His double at fifth-placed Villarreal took Mbappe's La Liga tally to 20 goals, only one fewer than Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski in the domestic competition. Leading the comeback Villarreal made it a pulsating game as it attacked in waves with Alex Baena and Nicolas Pepe helping create a series of chances. Thibaut Courtois made three good stops for Madrid to deny Pepe, Ayoub Pérez, and Pape Gueye in the first half.

But Villarreal paid at the other end where Mbappe ruthlessly exploited the holes in the Yellow Submarine's defense. "Mbappe didn't participate much, but he was lethal," Villarreal coach Marcelino Toral said.

A one-handed save by Courtois to deny Ayoze led to a corner kick that resulted in Villarreal's eight-minute opener. Juan Foyth swept home a ball that fell to him inside the six-yard box after it had ricocheted off players in a packed area.

## AC Milan beat Como 2-1 in Serie A

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Milan

Christian Pulisic scored again to help AC Milan earn another comeback victory in Serie A with a 2-1 home win over Como. Tijjani Reijnders set up Pulisic's second-half equalizer before netting the winner himself in the 75th minute. It was Pulisic's third goal in two matches, taking the United States international to nine goals in Serie A and 15 in all competitions this campaign equaling his tally from his first season at Milan.

Milan moved up to seventh, five points below fourth-placed Juventus. Como remained seven points above the relegation zone. Pulisic's two goals last weekend helped Milan fight back to win 3-2 at Lecce and end a three-match losing streak.

It again went behind on Saturday, when Lucas Da Cunha drilled into the bottom left corner from the edge of the area in the 33rd minute. The Milan fans jeered loudly at halftime and it almost got worse for

them four minutes after the restart but Da Cunha's second goal of the night was ruled out for offside.

Instead it was Milan which leveled four minutes later. Rafael Leão and Alex Jiménez combined on the left before picking out Reijnders, who delicately dinked the ball over the top for Pulisic to sweep into the far bottom corner from a tight angle.

Reijnders also clipped the top of the crossbar before scoring the winner in the 75th minute, slotting home after being sent through on goal by a backheeled pass by Tammy Abraham. Como substitute Dele Alli's return to soccer lasted just nine minutes as he was shown a straight red card late on for a foul on Ruben Loftus-Cheek, shortly after coming off the bench for his first appearance in two years.

Lengthy goal wait ended Monza captain Armando Izzo scored his first goal in more than two years but it wasn't enough to secure a win as the last-place team drew 1-1 against fellow struggler Parma.

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