

CAPITAL GAINS ₹ONE LAKH CRORE

RAJESH KUMAR ■ New Delhi

Terming it 'historic' Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on Tuesday presented her first Budget of ₹ One Lakh Crore (₹ One Trillion) for the year 2025-26 marking a 31.5 per cent increase from the previous year, with 10 focus areas. They include Yamuna cleaning, economic empowerment of women, infrastructure, water and connectivity, asserting that it is a roadmap for making the national capital self-reliant. The last Delhi Budget was presented by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in March 2023 with an allocation of ₹76,000 Crore.

In her 138-minute speech, Gupta called the maiden Budget of the BJP-led Delhi government "historic", for a "Viksit Dilli" (developed Delhi), emphasising that the era of "corruption and inefficiency" was over and Delhi is entering a new era of Traffic-Free Expressways, Seamless Connectivity, Elevated Corridors and Smart Surveillance System.

"The Budget Estimates in 2025-26 of ₹ One Lakh Crore is 31.5 per cent more than the Budget estimates 2024-25 of ₹76,000 Crore and 44 per cent higher than the revised estimates 2024-25 of ₹69,500 Crore. The proposed Budget of ₹ One Lakh Crore for the year 2025-26 is to be financed from the Tax Revenue of ₹68,700 Crore, Non-Tax Revenue of ₹750 Crore, Small Savings Loan of ₹15,000 Crore from, Central Road Funds of ₹1,000 Crore from, Centrally Sponsored Schemes of ₹4,128 Crore, Grant in Aid from Government of India of ₹7,348 Crore and



Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta presents the Budget 2025-26 PHOTO: RANJAN DIMRI/THE PIONEER

KEY TAKEAWAYS	
• ₹19,291 crore (19.29 per cent) in Education Sector	
• ₹12,893 crore (12.89 per cent) in Health Sector	
• ₹12,952 crore (12.95 per cent) in Transport Sector including roads and bridges	
• ₹10,694 crore (10.69 per cent) in Housing & Urban Development Sector	
• ₹9,000 crore (9.00 per cent) in Water Supply & Sanitation Sector	
• ₹10,597 crore (10.59 per cent) in Social Welfare & Social Security Sector	
• ₹3,843 crore (3.84 per cent) in Power Sector	
• ₹1,758 crore (1.76 per cent) in Agriculture, Rural Development & I&FC	
• ₹4,642 crore (4.64 per cent) in Repayment of loan	
• ₹2,246 crore (2.25 per cent) in Interest payment	

the remaining amount from the opening balance. Of them 72 per cent of the proposed Budget 2025-26 has been allocated for revenue expenditure and 28 per cent for capital expenditure," said Rekha Gupta while presenting the Budget.

The Chief Minister said that corruption and inefficiency in the government will be weeded out and they will make efforts to utilise all Budget provisions, as well as the central aids and grants that it receives.

This is the first Budget presented by a BJP-led government in Delhi after 27 years, following the party's victory over the AAP. Highlighting the focus on infrastructure development in the city, the Chief Minister announced the government has doubled capital expenditure to ₹28,000 Crore in its 2025-26 Budget as against AAP government's ₹15,000 Crore, saying days of corruption, inefficiency are over now.

Yeh Hai Mumbai Meri Jaan!

New complaint in Disha Salian case

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ Mumbai

Within days after he moved the Bombay High Court seeking a fresh probe in the Disha Salian death case, former celebrity manager Disha Salian's father Satish Salian on Tuesday submitted a complaint to the Mumbai police, seeking registration of an FIR against Shiv Sena (UBT) MLA Aaditya Thackeray and others in the much-discussed case.

In his complaint submitted to Mumbai's Joint Commissioner of Police, Satish Salian named Aaditya Thackeray his bodyguards, actors Dino Morea and Suraj Pancholi, ex-police commissioner Parambir Singh, dismissed Mumbai police officer Sachin Vaze and actor Rhea Chakraborty.

Talking to media persons after submitting a complaint to them Mumbai police, Salian's lawyer Nilesh Ojha said, "Today, we have filed a written complaint with the Commissioner of Police, and the Joint Commissioner of Police Crime has accepted it." "The accused in this are Aaditya Thackeray, Dino Morea, Suraj Pancholi and his bodyguard, Parambir Singh, Sachin Vaze and Rhea Chakraborty."

Accusing the Parambir Singh, who was the Mumbai Police Commissioner at the time of the deaths of Disha Salian and Sushant Singh Rajput, of "masterminding" a cover-up in the celebrity-manager's death, Ojha alleged: "Parambir Singh was the mastermind behind the cover-up in this case. He held a press conference and fabricated lies to protect Aaditya Thackeray. The NCB's investigation papers

prove that Aaditya was involved in the drug business, and this detail has also been mentioned". Satish Salian, who was present along with his lawyer, said, "I am expecting justice for my daughter.....I won't speak much now. I am feeling dizzy."

Disha Salian (28), it may be recalled, had reportedly committed by falling from the 14th floor of Galaxy Regent building at Malad in north Mumbai on the intervening night of June 8-9, 2020. She had allegedly ended her life five days before actor Sushant Singh Rajput committed suicide at his rented duplex flat in Bandra in north-west Mumbai on June 14, 2020.

Earlier, in a petition filed in the Bombay HC last week, Satish had sought a fresh probe, an FIR against Aaditya and transfer of the case to the CBI.

Eknath Shinde calls for a limit to satire

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ Mumbai

Undeterred by the protests by the ruling Shiv Sena over his 'gaddar' jibe against Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, a defiant stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra on Tuesday came out with another parody song — "hum honge kangal ek din..." — this time targeting the BJP, even as Shinde said that "every action has a reaction" while reacting to Shiv Sainiks' act of vandalism at a Mumbai studio.

Using the clips of the manner in which the Shinde-led Shiv Sena workers on Sunday night vandalised a studio where he had recorded a parody song against Shinde, Kamra uploaded one more song on "X" which has barbs against the ruling BJP at the Centre and the State.

Recorded by him in the same Habitat in The UniContinental hotel at Khar in south-central Mumbai, the song rendered by Kamra had the following lines: 'Mann me andhviswah, Desh ka satyanash'; 'Honge nange charo aur', 'Karenga dange charo or', 'Police ke pange charo aur'; 'Man me Nathuram, Harkate Asaram'; 'Hoga gai ka prachar', 'Leke haathon me hathiyar'; 'Hoga Sangh ka shishtachar', 'Janata berozgar', 'Garibi ki kagaar'. The song ends with 'Hum honge kangal ek din...'

Thirty-six-year-old Kamra — who had earlier refused to tender apology for his jibe against Shinde as demanded by chief minister Devendra Fadnavis — did not appear before the Mumbai police in response to the summons issued to him to present himself before them at 11 am

on Tuesday for questioning in connection with the First Information Report (FIR) registered against in the "gaddar" controversy. He has reportedly sought a week's time to appear before the Mumbai police.

In a related development, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde came out with his first reaction over the Kamra-triggered controversy.

Speaking at a Marathi television event, Shinde said that there should be a limit to everything and that every action has a reaction. He said that he would refrain from responding to allegations.

"Freedom of speech is there. We understand satire. But there should be a limit. This is like taking 'supari' (contract) to speak against someone...." Shinde said.

Dhankhar holds meet over cash controversy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar on Tuesday held a meeting with leaders of various parties to decide the course of action the House should take on pleas by some MPs seeking discussion on the alleged discovery of cash from the official residence of a Delhi High Court Judge.

He announced about the meeting after rejecting a Rule 267 notice of Haris Beeran of Kerala-based IUML who wanted a discussion on the matter by setting aside the business of the day.

Dhankhar said he had on Monday met Leader of the House JP Nadda and Leader of the Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge on the "very critical issue that is agitating the minds in branches of governance". "The issue is undoubtedly serious enough," he said.

According to him, Kharge had suggested calling a meeting of floor leaders and Nadda agreed. "The three of us took note of the developments and also took note that for the first time, in an unprecedented manner, the Chief Justice of India took the initiative to put everything in the public domain," he said.

Dhankhar was referring to the apex court uploading on its website an in-house inquiry report, including photos and a video, into the alleged discovery of a huge stash of cash at high court Yashwant Varma's official residence.

Meanwhile, the three members of Supreme Court-appointed in-house committee on Tuesday commenced its inquiry into the cash discovery row involving Delhi High Court Judge Justice Yashwant Varma. The three members — Justice Sheel Nagu, Chief Justice of the High



Court staff that accompanied the three-member committee during their visit to the residence of senior Delhi High Court Judge Justice Yashwant Varma in New Delhi PTI

Court of Punjab and Haryana, Justice G S Sandhwalia, Chief Justice of the High Court of Himachal Pradesh, and Anu Sivaraman, Judge of the High Court of Karnataka — reached Justice Varma's official residence at 30, Tughlak Crescent here.

The judges were inside the official residence of Justice Varma for around 30-35 minutes and apparently inspected the site. The cash discovery took place following a fire at Justice Varma's official residence at around 11.35 pm on March 14, prompting the fire officials to rush to the spot and douse it. On March 22, Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna constituted a three-member committee to conduct an in-house inquiry into allegations

against Justice Varma. A fire at the storeroom of the official residence of Justice Varma on March 14 in posh Lutyens' Delhi locality purportedly led to the discovery of the cash by fire fighters and police personnel.

Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna has constituted a three-member panel to probe the discovery of "four to five semi-burnt sacks" of Indian currency notes after the fire incident.

Stating that legislature and judiciary function optimally when they perform best in their respective realm, he said, adding the Supreme Court putting the entire material available with it in the public domain has found wide acceptability in the country.

Pramod Tiwari of the Congress said justice should not just be done but also seen to be done and so steps need to be taken to ensure such incidents are not repeated.

On cue, Dhankhar referred to the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) Act passed by Parliament, saying if the mechanism for judicial appointments had not been struck down by the Supreme Court, things would have been different.

The law was passed by Rajya Sabha with near unanimity, with no dissension, only one abstention and was later endorsed by the requisite 16 state assemblies and signed by the President under article 111 of the Constitution, he said.

"Now, it is befitting the occasion to reiterate (that it) was a visionary step. And imagine if that had taken place, things would have been different."

"What emanated from the Indian Parliament as a historic development with rare convergence of unanimity since independence, found acceptance by needed state legislatures. We need to reflect on what happened to that," he said.

Dhankhar said under the Constitution, there is no provision that allows anyone to tinker with a Constitutional Amendment.

"There is no constitutional provision of review or appeal of a constitutional amendment. If there is a legislation (passed) by parliament or state legislatures, judicial review can take place on whether it is in conformity with the Constitutional provisions," he said.

The Rajya Sabha chairman went on to state that one is considered innocent until proven guilty, but MPs should think about the "judicial mess".

India, China hold talks in Beijing on bilateral ties

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

India and China on Tuesday agreed to work together to make "substantial preparation" for the next meeting of their Special Representatives (SR) on the boundary question that is set to be held in the national capital later this year.

The decision was taken at a fresh edition of talks held in Beijing under the framework of Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC).

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said the WMCC meeting was held in a "positive and constructive atmosphere" and both sides "comprehensively" reviewed the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

"The two sides agreed to work together to make substantial preparation for the next meeting of the Special Representatives (SR), which will be held in India later this year," it said in a statement. The MEA said peace and tranquillity on the border are critical for the smooth development of overall bilateral relations.

"The two sides explored various measures and proposals to give effect to the decisions taken during the 23rd meeting of the Special Representatives on the India-China boundary question in Beijing in December 2024 and to advance effective border management," it said.

The Indian readout said the two sides agreed to maintain and strengthen relevant diplomatic and military mechanisms towards this end. "They also exchanged views on early resumption of cross-border cooperation and exchanges, including on trans-border rivers and Kailash-

Mansarovar Yatra," the MEA said. The Indian delegation at the talks was led by Gaurangalal Das, Joint Secretary (East Asia) in the MEA.

The Chinese delegation was led by Hong Liang, Director General of the Boundary and Oceanic Affairs Department of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Earlier, on March 16, Prime Minister Narendra Modi conveyed optimism about India's ties with China, emphasising the value of learning from and understanding one another.

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"Look, the relationship between India and China isn't something new. Both nations have ancient cultures and civilisations. Even in the modern world, they play a significant role. If you look at historical records, for centuries, India and China have learned from each other. Together, they have always contributed to the global good in some way," he said in a podcast with AI researcher Lex Fridman.

The Prime Minister said, "It is true that there have been ongoing border disputes between us. We are now working to restore conditions to how they were before 2020. Slowly but surely, trust, enthusiasm, and energy will return. But of course, it will take some time since there's been a five-year gap."

No lashmir learnt: Is DGP violating standard operating procedures in J and K?

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ Jammu

Despite sacrificing senior police officers, including the Chief of the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism squad (ATS) Hemant Karkare, during the Mumbai terror attack on November 26, 2008, very few lessons have been learned by the in-service fellow officers of the Indian Police Service in recent years.

On Monday, the Director General of Jammu and Kashmir Police (DGP), Nalin Prabhat, was seen leading the combing and search operations (CASO) in the border area of Hiranagar, Kathua. The IPS officer of the 1992 batch, who also served as the Director General of the National Security Guard (NSG), was armed with an AK series rifle as he led the anti-terrorist operations from the front.

Senior officers of the Jammu range, including the Inspector General of Police,

DIG, SSP Kathua and SP operations, Kathua, accompanied him in the thickly forested area. Despite taking all necessary precautions, the DGP was not seen wearing a bulletproof vest and protective headgear (patka) to ensure his safety.

As his images were published on various social media platforms, questions were raised about whether DGP was violating the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) while leading the anti-terrorist operations.

The Police Chief earlier rushed to the active area on Sunday and supervised the ongoing operations to neutralise the terrorists trapped in the thickly forested area of Sanyal.

According to preliminary reports, an alarm was raised by a couple who claimed to have spotted a group of five terrorists in the nearby forests while they were out there to collect firewood. DGP also inter-



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acted with the couple and gathered vital inputs based on their assessment of the group of terrorists hiding in the area.

In the past, senior army and police officers sacrificed their lives in the line of duty during anti-terrorist operations, and sev-

eral others received injuries when they were present on ground zero.

On September 14, 2023, Col Manpreet Singh and Major Ashish Dhonchak of 19 Rashtriya Rifles, and DSP Humayun Bhat of J&K Police sacrificed their lives during a fierce gunfight with terrorists in the forests surrounding Gadool village of Kokernag in Anantnag district.

On Feb 18, 2019 a deputy inspector general of police, a Rashtriya Rifles commander of the rank of brigadier and a lieutenant colonel were among the top police and Army officers injured in an encounter in Jammu and Kashmir's Pulwama district. The encounter took place in Pulwama's Pingleena area.

On September 13, 2018, two para-commandos received gunshot injuries while neutralising the third terrorist in the last leg of the counter.

Emerging out of his safe hideout, the

lone terrorist opened fire on these commandos when he came face to face with them during the combing and search operations in the thickly vegetated fields of Kakriyal.

Media teams led by a senior police officer had a narrow escape as the lone terrorist opened a barrage of fire using his AK rifle. In the fierce gun fight the commandos eliminated him, successfully ending the 33-hour-long chase in search of these terrorists.

Meanwhile, in the absence of any success, a joint team of security forces continued to search the general area of Hiranagar for the third day in succession to eliminate terrorists hiding in the area. On the other hand, local police authorities have so far detained three suspects, and the army found two China-made hand-grenades since Monday evening in the area.

Traffic review meeting: 572 driving licenses suspended, Rs 14.5 lakhs fine collected

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

In a decisive move against traffic violations, 572 driving licenses were suspended in February, and fines amounting to ₹14.5 lakh were collected for violations, including riding without helmets and driving without seat belts. Additionally, 1,928 new driving licenses were issued, with 1,637 for men and 291 for women.

The developments were part of a Traffic and Road Safety meeting chaired by District Magistrate cum Deputy Commissioner Ananya Mittal at the Collectorate Auditorium. Senior Superintendent of Police Kishore Kaushal, ADM Law and Order Aniket Sachan, SDM Dhalbhum

Shatabdi Majumdar, Rural SP Rishabh Garg, City SP Kumar Shivashish, and other key officials attended the meeting.

The meeting reviewed road accidents, revealing that illegal roadside parking, wrong-side driving, and over-speeding were major causes. Police identified nine accident-prone zones, with recommendations for barricading and installing blinkers. Authorities were also directed to prevent frequent accidents at Jemco, Domuhani, MGM, and PW Chowk Baharagora.

Strict action was ordered against auto drivers violating parking rules at Sakchi roundabout. Officials were instructed to inspect and identify parking spaces for

heavy vehicles in the Jemco area to prevent congestion and reduce the risk of accidents. In line with the directives, traffic police have been mobilized to conduct surprise inspections and issue fines for violations, ensuring compliance with designated parking areas.

Additionally, officials discussed plans for removing dilapidated buses from Mango Bus Stand and developing a temporary ISBT with basic passenger amenities. The sub-divisional officer Dhalbhum and Mango Municipal Corporation were directed to take necessary steps for constructing temporary sheds and installing mobile toilets at ISBT to improve commuter convenience.



In the review of road accidents, illegal parking on the roadside along the National Highway, driving on the wrong side and over-speeding were found to be the main reasons. The Senior Superintendent of Police said that in a survey conducted by the Police Department, 9

places have been identified where road accidents are happening continuously. He suggested hard barricading for concrete action against illegal parking on the highway, installing blinkers near the connecting road meeting the highway and installing barriers at identified places

to prevent overspeeding. The Deputy Commissioner directed the NHAI officer to take concrete action on the above suggestions. He said that preventing road accidents is the priority of the district administration, all necessary safety measures must be taken on the highway so that there is no loss of life and property.

The discussion also covered measures to curb reckless driving and enforce stricter penalties for violations.

In February alone, 33 road accidents occurred, leading to 25 fatalities and 20 serious injuries. Authorities were instructed to identify accident-prone areas and implement safety measures, including widening sharp curves, installing additional

signage, and increasing police patrols to curb reckless driving.

A major point of discussion was enhancing road safety awareness. The District Magistrate and SSP directed CII Young Indians representatives to conduct awareness campaigns focusing on traffic rules and responsible driving, especially for heavy vehicle drivers. Ongoing campaigns in private schools were reviewed, with directives to make sessions more engaging and accessible for students to help instill road safety habits from an early age.

Furthermore, traffic authorities were instructed to take firm action against underage drivers and unlicensed auto drivers. Random

checks will be intensified to ensure compliance with traffic norms, and repeat offenders will face severe penalties, including prolonged license suspensions and vehicle impoundment.

The meeting saw participation from DTO Dhananjay, Deputy Municipal Commissioner JNAC Krishna Kumar, Executive Engineer Path Nirman Deepak Sahay, DSP Bhola Prasad, DSP Traffic, MVI Suraj Hembram, representatives from Young India, Tata Steel, Tata Steel UISL, the Bus Association, and the Auto Association. Authorities reiterated their commitment to making Jharkhand's roads safer through continuous enforcement and awareness initiatives.

XLRI's first AI conclave 'Manakriti' explores role in business

PNS : JAMSHEDPUR

XLRI Jamshedpur successfully hosted Manakriti: AI & Business - Transforming Strategy, Innovation and Leadership, its first AI Conclave organized by the PGDM (GM) AI Nexus Club. The event brought together industry leaders, policymakers, and AI experts to discuss AI's impact on business strategy, leadership, and innovation. Inaugurated by Dr. (Fr.) S. George, S.J., Director, and Dr. Sanjay K. Patro, Dean (Academics), the conclave emphasized ethical



AI adoption and leadership adaptation to AI-driven transformations.

The first panel, moderated by Dr. (Fr.) Kuruvilla Joseph Pandikattu, S.J., focused on AI's role in

collaboration. The second panel, moderated by Rahul Ratnam, highlighted AI's role in business transformation, featuring insights from industry leaders at PwC, Verizon, Microsoft, Jio, Atos, and Target India.

Concluding with a vote of thanks by the AI Nexus Club, the event reinforced XLRI's commitment to AI-driven leadership and innovation. With guidance from faculty and organizers, XLRI remains at the forefront of shaping future business leaders in an AI-powered world.

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MANTU YADAV APPOINTED JMM'S BOKARO MAHANAGAR PRESIDENT

PNS : BOKARO

Under the guidance of JMM central president Dishom Guru Shibu Soren, the party has reorganized the Bokaro Mahanagar Committee, appointing Mantu Kumar Yadav as its president. The restructuring was carried out under the directive of central general secretary Vinod Kumar Pandey to strengthen the party's presence and outreach.

Alongside Mantu Yadav, Sanjay Kejrival, Akash Tudu, Mohd. Nayyar Jamal, Manoj Hembram, and Bholu Khan have been named vice presidents. Madan Mahato will serve as secretary, while Mithun Mandal takes charge as treasurer.

The Chas and Phusro Nagar Committees have also been restructured with key appointments. JMM leadership emphasized that the new committees will work towards expanding public engagement and effectively implementing party policies.



Containing Corruption in Higher Judiciary is a big Challenge before the Collegium



BY VIVEK KRISHNA

Accidental recovery of a huge pile of cash recently from the residence of a Delhi High Court Judge, Yashwant Varma, has again triggered a debate about the corruption in the higher judiciary and failure of the system to check corruption among the members of the higher judiciary. An enquiry will reveal the truth regarding allegation of corruption on Justice Varma, but this is also a fact that time and again various judges of the Supreme Court and different High Courts have overtly indicated towards prevailing corruption in higher judiciary.

No Denial of Corruption in Higher Judiciary: The Judges themselves have admitted it.

P. Sathasivam, former Chief Justice of India, had stated in an interview, in June 2013: "I should fairly admit that the judiciary is not untouched by corruption" (The Hindu, 28 June, 2013). The former Chief Justice of India S. P. Bharucha, once stated that "20 percent of those manning the judiciary are corrupt. Removing corrupt judges in the subordinate judiciary is easy because it is under the disciplinary control of the High Courts. But it is difficult where the higher judiciary is concerned because the impeachment process is unworkable" (The Hindustan Times, 17th February, 2002). Mr. Markandeya Katju, retired judge of the Supreme Court, and former Chairman of the Press Council of India, had also said, "My assessment is that 50% of the higher judiciary has become corrupt" (The Hindustan Times, 28 September, 2015). Whether the number of corrupt judges in the Higher judiciary hovers round the figure of 20 percent or 50 per cent, but one thing is beyond a reasonable doubt that there are corrupt judges in the system, and the system has failed to tackle the corruption in higher judiciary.

A number of other judges of the Supreme Court, and various High Courts as also eminent lawyers have also openly made statements about prevailing corruption in the higher judiciary. Justice J S Verma, one of the architects of the Collegium system had said in an inter-

view with CNN-IBN, "I cannot say that there has not been a single corrupt judge even in the Supreme Court. You have that in public knowledge."

Corruption in higher judiciary found a mention before a bench of the Supreme Court on 20 August, 2020 when Attorney General for India K.K. Venugopal told the Supreme Court Bench of Justices Arun Mishra, BR Gavai and Krishna Murari that he has the names of nine former judges of the Supreme Court who have said that there is corruption in higher judiciary. He had made this statement during the case of activist-lawyer Mr. Prashant Bhushan. Earlier in 2008 Mr. Prashant Bhushan in an interview with Tehalka magazine had stated that '8 of the 16 former Chief Justices of India were definitely corrupt'. When a contempt proceeding was initiated against Mr. Prashant Bhushan his father Mr. Shanti Bhushan, a former Law Minister of the Country, had filed a petition before the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India to implead his name in the contempt proceedings in the Supreme Court which was initiated against his lawyer son, Mr. Prashant Bhushan, and said that he stood by the statement made by Mr. Prashant Bhushan. Mr. Shanti Bhushan had given the names of the judges in a sealed envelope and had dared the court to open the envelope and read out the contents of the allegations made for an open debate.

Unworkable Impeachment Process is making judges of Higher judiciary immune from punitive action: A study of the Constitutional debate would reveal that the framers of the Constitution were deeply concerned about the independence of judiciary. But, the framers of the Constitution were also aware about the normal human virtues and vices of a judge. This can be understood by the statement of Dr. Ambedkar made during the discussion regarding appointment of Chief Justice India- "But, after all the Chief Justice is a man with all the failings, all the sentiments and all the prejudices which we as common people have." (Constituent Assembly Debate on appointment of Chief Justice of India; May, 24, 1949).

It may be mentioned that the same constitutional provision which is ensuring the independence of judiciary, is also responsible for making the higher judiciary immune from punitive action. A judge of the Supreme Court or a High Court cannot

be removed from service otherwise than the Constitutional provision of impeachment, which has practically proved unworkable. In this context Justice V R Krishna Iyer very aptly stated "Our founding fathers have laid down for us a constitutional jurisprudence of judicial power, but the integral component of judicial accountability has not been designed with a sense of principled pragmatism. As a result the escalating misconduct of judges has often gone unpunished. Barring the extreme measure of impeachment, the law is silent, so much so that one might well say that the accountability of the judiciary is the vanishing point of jurisprudence. This void, unless competently covered by well thought-out legislation, is bound to undermine the democratic credibility of the judiciary." (Judicial Accountability to the Community: A Democratic Necessity; Economic and Political Weekly; July 27, 1991, p.1808)

Containing Corruption in Higher Judiciary: A Big Challenge before Collegium Judiciary practically holds the whole edifice of democracy, and if the public faith in judiciary collapses democracy will collapse. As a matter of fact, Indian judiciary has emerged more strong each time it faced a challenge posed from outside. Furthermore, it has championed the cause of a vibrant democracy in the Country, and repelled successfully all attacks on the institutions that could have weakened the Indian democracy. The formation of Collegium system is itself a step in this direction. The biggest challenge before the Indian judiciary now is to handle corruption in its own higher ranks which is a difficult task to handle. Corruption which affects the independent functioning of judiciary from within will be countered effectively provided, what Justice Markandeya Katju said, "Indian judiciary do not bury the corruption of its own members under carpet, and keep on hypocritically speaking against corruption by politicians and bureaucrats." The people have to wait and watch as to what measures the Collegium takes to effectively contain corruption in the higher judiciary. People have to be hopeful for the sake of the success of democracy in the country.

THE WRITER IS A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVIST AND A PRACTISING ADVOCATE IN JHARKHAND HIGH COURT. VIEWS EXPRESSED ARE PERSONAL.

Swachhata Rath flagged off at BSL as part of Swachhata Pakhwada

PNS : BOKARO

As part of Swachhata Pakhwada, observed from March 16 to 31 at Bokaro Steel Limited (BSL), the Swachhata Rath was flagged off today, March 25, by Executive Director In-Charge C. R. Mahapatra from the Ispat Bhavan premises. The event was attended by senior officials, including Executive Director (Finance & Accounts) Suresh Rangani, Executive Director (Human Resources) Rajshree Banerjee, Executive Director (Mines) Vikas Manwati, Executive Director (Materials Management) C. R. Mishra, and Executive Director (Projects) Anish Sengupta, along with other senior officers and employees.

The Swachhata Rath aims to spread awareness about cleanliness among the residents of Bokaro Steel City. Through video presentations, it educates the public on avoiding single-use plastics and maintaining cleanliness in their surroundings. The initiative reinforces BSL's commitment to a cleaner and more sustainable environment.



SAIL honours excellence at SAIL Corporate Awards 2023 & 2024

PNS : NEW DELHI



Recognizing in-house exceptional contributions and performance, SAIL presented the prestigious Corporate Awards for Excellence for 2023 and 2024 at a ceremony in New Delhi on 24th March, 2025. The event honored 25 employees across 11 categories. IISCO Steel and Bokaro Steel Plant were awarded Best Steel Plant for the performance years 2022-23 and 2023-24, respectively. For these years, awards for the Best Plant/Unit (other than ISPs) were conferred upon the Centre for Engineering and Technology (CET) and the Management Training Institute (MTI), both based in Ranchi, Jharkhand.

Launched in 2020, the awards celebrate achievements in areas such as profitability, cost reduction, process efficiency, technology adoption, motivation, marketing innovation, and safety practices among others. The ceremony was graced by SAIL's Chairman, Board of Directors, Chief Vigilance Officer, and other senior officials, underscoring the organization's commitment to employee engagement and excellence.

Admin directs schools to prioritize education over profit

PNS : BOKARO

Under the directives of Deputy commissioner Vijaya Jadhav, Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) of Chas, Pranjali Dhandra chaired a meeting with representatives of private schools and the district parents' association. The meeting, attended by District education officer (DEO) Jagarnath Lohra and District superintendent of education (DSE) Atul Chaubey, focused on ensuring compliance with CBSE/ICSE/RTE and state government guidelines. Officials reviewed various concerns raised by parents regarding school management practices.

Emphasizing that schools must function as educational institutions, not profit-making entities, officials directed schools to ensure trans-



parency in their operations. Any fee hikes must be approved by a nine-member committee comprising school representatives and parents. Schools were also instructed to upload book lists on their websites and ensure availability in 10-15 stores, prioritizing NCERT books. Parents cannot be forced to buy books from a

single vendor or change uniforms annually.

To improve communication, schools must conduct monthly parent-teacher meetings (PTMs) to address concerns. Additionally, they must publicly display teacher contact details on their websites and within school premises. The administration also strictly ordered

schools to stop imposing fines on students for absenteeism.

The SDO, DEO and DSE warned that strict action would be taken against schools violating these directives. The meeting also covered other critical issues related to school management, ensuring that schools prioritize students' educa-

tion and welfare over financial gains. Overall Bokaro administration has taken a firm stand to ensure that the city maintains its reputation as an educational hub while balancing the interests of parents and schools. SDO DEO and DSE made it clear that schools must function as educational institutions, not profit-making entities, prioritizing students' education and welfare over financial gains. Schools have been directed to follow fair fee structures, avoid compulsory purchases, and ensure transparency in their operations.

At the same time, the administration acknowledged the role of private schools in delivering quality education and urged them to work collaboratively with parents.

FinMin writes to CS over obscenity at Sri Banshidhar Mahotsav

NITYANAND DUBEY : GARHWA

The recently concluded State Shri Banshidhar Nagar Festival has been the subject of considerable controversy. Finance Minister Radhakrishna Kishore has written to the Chief Secretary, recommending a comprehensive investigation, and BJP MP BD Ram has also voiced concerns regarding the event's organization.

The state government is reportedly taking the allegations of lewd songs and

dances at the State Shri Banshidhar Festival very seriously.

Local residents have voiced their dissatisfaction with the festival, which has been beset by disagreements since its inception in 2025. Residents claim that the administration organised the festival in an arbitrary manner, neglecting to consult or involve the local community. This discontent reportedly extends beyond the selection of performers, with many expressing a desire for renowned artists to be invited, a request they allege was

ignored by the administration.

The Shri Banshidhar Nagar Mahotsav in Garhwa has been at the centre of a controversy, leading Jharkhand's Finance Minister, Radhakrishna Kishore, to formally address his concerns to the Chief Secretary in a letter.

In his correspondence, Kishore made serious allegations against the Garhwa district administration concerning the organisation of the Shri Banshidhar Nagar Mahotsav. He suggested that the responsibility for organ-



ising this state festival should be moved from the Deputy Commissioner (DC) to either the Commissioner or a departmental secretary. The Finance Minister's letter to the Chief Secretary claims that the state festival



included lewd songs presented as cultural performances. It was also alleged that individuals, believed to be district administration officials, were seen dancing to these songs in front of the stage. The state festival had a

budget of ₹8 million, with ₹5 million already given to the Garhwa district administration as an advance. These funds were intended to support cultural programmes like classical music, poetry recitals, tribal folk dances, and flute performances. However, the letter contends that the inclusion of indecent songs through Bhojpur music undermined the prestige and sanctity of the Shri Banshidhar Nagar Mahotsav.

Kishore has requested that the officials responsible for the alleged misconduct be identified and face appro-

priate consequences. Furthermore, he has stressed the importance of auditing the funds allocated for the festival. The state festival was held on 19 and 20 March at Shri Banshidhar Nagar, Garhwa, a town famous for its historic statue of Lord Krishna. Shri Banshidhar Nagar has also been designated as part of the Shri Krishna Corridor project.

Palamu's Member of Parliament, BD Ram, has voiced his disapproval of the administration's handling of the Banshidhar Festival. He

criticised the district administration for, in his view, transforming the Shri Banshidhar Festival into merely an administrative function, which he described as unfortunate. The MP stated that he has consistently brought up the matter in Parliament of furthering the development of the Shri Banshidhar Temple and promoting it on an international scale. He added that during the festival's initial two iterations, significant efforts were made to personally invite people, generating considerable excitement.

Aadhar linked single bank account holders to get Maiyan funds

Cabinet approves proposal to dismiss suspended JAS officer Sadhna Jaipuria

PNS : RANCHI

Jharkhand Cabinet meeting was held under the chairmanship of Chief Minister Hemant Soren where nod to 16 proposals were approved. In a major decision taken by the Soren cabinet, the government decided to make an amendment in the Jharkhand Chief Minister Mainiya Samman Yojana. Partial amendment has been approved in the implementation of this scheme. After March-2025, only Aadhar linked single bank account holders will get the benefit of Mainiya Samman Yojana.

Samman Yojana is a welfare initiative aimed at providing financial assistance of Rs 2,500 per month to economically weaker women across the state. Launched to empower women and improve their financial stability, this scheme is open to women aged 18 to 50 years and belonging to families holding ration cards issued by the Jharkhand government.

In other decisions, the Cabinet approved the proposal to dismiss suspended Jharkhand Administrative Service officer Sadhna Jaipuria (then Block Development Officer, Manika, Latehar). The Hemant Soren Cabinet has approved the for-

mation of Jharkhand Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (Special Exemption) Bill-2025. Along with this, the third supplementary expenditure statement of the financial year 2024-25 has been approved post-deduction.

The cabinet has given post-deduction approval on the budget estimates of the financial year 2025-26. Post-deduction approval has been given regarding the presentation of Jharkhand Economic Survey 2024-25 on the table of the Legislative Assembly. In the light of various orders passed by the High Court regarding service regularization and the recommendation made in the meeting of the

Departmental Regularization Committee (18.08.2022), approval was given to confirm/regularize the services of a total of six employees.

Approval was given to relax the provision related to the limited competitive examination provided in the Jharkhand Secretariat Service Rules-2010 (as amended by Departmental Notification No.-6125, dated-09.05.2012) related to promotion from the category of Assistant Branch Officer to the post of Branch Officer under Jharkhand Secretariat Service as a convenience.

In the sequence of digitization process going on for the works related to state employees in the Office of the

Chief Accountant General, Ranchi, financial assistance of Rs. 50 lakh 3 thousand 7 hundred was approved as the second phase. Approval was given for the formation of Jharkhand Community Health Assistant Cadre (Recruitment, Promotion and Other Service Conditions) Rules-2025 under the Department of Health, Medical Education and Family Welfare. Approval of in-principle consent on the proposal for construction of Balpahari Barrage

In view of the increase in the rate of Goods and Services Tax (GST) from 12% to 18% in the category of construction work, approval of the related payment/differ-

ence amount liability in the work contracts of the Water Resources Department was given. In the light of the in-principle consent received by the State Government for the implementation of the third phase of the e-court project, the Cabinet has given post-deduction approval on the tripartite agreement (MOU) signed by the Principal Secretary cum Legal Advisor on behalf of the State Government as the second party. In-principle consent has been approved on the proposal of the State Government for construction of Balpahari Barrage in the downstream (D/S) of Balpahari Dam under the Balpahari Irrigation Scheme.



Chief Minister Hemant Soren arrives at the Assembly to attend the Budget Session in Ranchi on Tuesday. Pix by Vinay Murmu

Govt to probe violation of 75% quota in Pvt Sector, take strict action

PNS : RANCHI

The State government will investigate violations of its norm to provide 75 per cent reservation for locals in private companies operating in Jharkhand. If any irregularities are found in this regard the government will initiate strict action on the concerned firm, said Labour and Employment Minister Sanjay Prasad Yadav in State Assembly during Budget Session today.



said in the House.

Mahto further urged the government to clarify its stance on taking action against non-compliant companies. In response, Labour Minister Sanjay Prasad Yadav assured that the government would investigate the issue and take strict measures against any firm found violating the order.

Following this, Mahto asked about the government's course of action after the High Court's ruling and the strategies it planned to implement moving forward. Minister Yadav responded that the government would act in the state's best interest and frame policies accordingly.

Jairam Mahto also raised concerns about whether outsourcing firms should be classified as private companies under the reservation policy. He pointed out that while private companies employ nearly two lakh non-Jharkhandis, only 53,000



Local residents have secured jobs in the sector.

MLA Naveen Jaiswal also sought clarification on whether outsourcing companies fall under the private sector category and questioned the measures in place to ensure 75% reservation for Jharkhandi youth.

Minister Sudiya Sonu responded that implementing such laws takes time and cannot happen instantly. He stated that companies had

been adhering to the policy before the High Court's stay order. He also clarified that outsourcing companies are indeed considered private companies. Supporting this statement, Labour Minister Sanjay Prasad Yadav assured that any officials found to have provided misleading reports on the matter would face action.

The labour minister then detailed the Employment of Local Candidates in the Private Sector of Jharkhand State Act, 2021, which was officially published in the Jharkhand Gazette on January 4, 2022.

Under Clause 4(1) of the Act, once implemented, all employers are required to reserve 75 per cent of jobs for local candidates in roles offering a gross monthly salary of up to Rs 40,000 or any other limit set by the government. This provision applies to both existing vacancies at the time of notification and any new job

openings thereafter.

Currently, the Employment Act, 2021, along with the Rules, 2022, is being enforced, and a dedicated portal (www.jharniyojan.jharkhand.gov.in) has been created for implementation. As of February 28, 2025, 7,470 establishments have registered on this platform.

However, the Act's enforcement is temporarily on hold due to an interim stay imposed by the Jharkhand High Court in case number WPC-5688/2024, issued on December 11, 2024. The next hearing on this matter is scheduled for March 26, 2025.

Despite this legal stay, the Jharkhand Private Sector Employment of Local Candidates Rules, 2022, has been in effect since September 12, 2022. The government is awaiting the court's decision before taking any further action.

Martyrdom Day fortnight organised at JN College



Addressing the Martyrdom Day fortnight organised by the History Department in the memory of Shaheed Bagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev at JN College, Principal Dr Shamsun Nihar said, "Your life can be successful only when you have a definite goal and you are completely dedicated to it." Head of the department Professor Jagdish Lohara said that the coming generation will always take inspiration from their martyrdom and thinking. Students Rahul Kerketta, Shruti Kumari and others remembered martyrs with speeches, poems and patriotic songs. Dr Vidyand Choudhary, Dr Kumar Pushkar Singh, Dr SN Oraon and other professors were also present on the occasion.

Bol partners with NIACL for enhanced general insurance



Bank of India (BoI) one of India's leading public sector banks and New India Assurance Company Limited (NIACL), India's premier insurance company have entered into a strategic partnership to offer a wide range of general insurance products to the Bank's customers. With this tie-up, BoI's customers will have access to insurance solutions, including health, motor, personal accident, home, and commercial insurance products offered by NIACL, a systemically important insurance company. Speaking on the occasion, MD and CEO, BoI, Rajneesh Karnatak, said "The tie-up is a step forward in offering comprehensive insurance solutions under one roof".

OLIC review meeting concludes at CCL

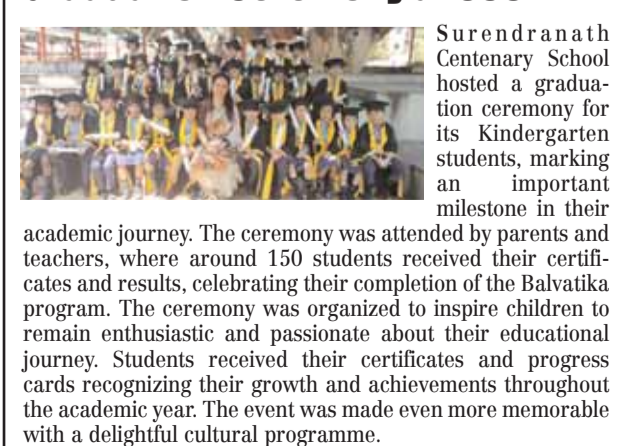
The quarterly review meeting of the Official Language Implementation Committee was successfully concluded today at CCL Headquarters. The meeting was chaired by CCL Director (Personnel) Harsh Nath Mishra virtually. General Manager (EE/Official Language) Sanjay Kumar Thakur, Heads of Departments of various departments, General Managers, Official Language Nodal Officers and representatives from CCL areas were present in this meeting. During the meeting, a detailed discussion was held on the promotion and effective implementation of official language Hindi. Harsh Nath Mishra appreciated the efforts being made to promote the official language in CCL and gave necessary guidelines for its further empowerment.

Kaleidoscope 2025 at SBPS



SBPS students under the supervision of the Art department showcased their incredible artistic skills at their annual art exhibition, Kaleidoscope 2025. The exhibition featured a stunning collection of artwork, including spectacular Gond, Sohrai, Madhubani and Mandala paintings of our students along with landscape and floral paintings in glass, sculptures, and digital creations. An array of projects of our students was also displayed which included dinosaur basket, floral pen stands, ducklings, snowman, wall hangings, terracotta sculptures and clay models. The students' imagination and creativity shone brightly, leaving visitors in awe.

Graduation Ceremony at SCS



Surendranath Centenary School hosted a graduation ceremony for its Kindergarten students, marking an important milestone in their academic journey. The ceremony was attended by parents and teachers, where around 150 students received their certificates and results, celebrating their completion of the Balvatika program. The ceremony was organized to inspire children to remain enthusiastic and passionate about their educational journey. Students received their certificates and progress cards recognizing their growth and achievements throughout the academic year. The event was made even more memorable with a delightful cultural programme.

Preparations for JMM Mega Conference in full swing

PNS : RANCHI

A number of committees have been formed by Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) for the preparations of the 133rd Mahaadiveshan to be held on April 14 and April 15 at Hariwansh Tana Bhagat Indoor Stadium in Khelgaon, Ranchi.

JMM Working President Hemant Soren has been given the special responsibility of running these committees. Three major committees have been formed for this event which are Political Proposal cum Upcoming Program and Outline Committee, Constitution Amendment Committee and Organizing cum Welcome Committee. Political Proposal cum Upcoming Program and Outline Committee includes Prof. Stephen Marandi, Vinod Kumar Pandey, Deepak Birua, Mahua Maji, Basant Soren, Mathura Prasad Mahato, Supriyo Bhattacharya, Hemlal Murmu, Mithilesh Thakar and Hafizul Hasan. In Constitution Amendment Committee members are Dumka MP Nalin Soren, JMM General Secretary, Vinod Kumar Pandey, JMM Labour Cell Chief, Fagu Besra, Minister in the State Government, Sudiya Kumar Sonu, Minister in the State Government, Yogendra Prasad, Abhishek Prasad and Rajmahal MP Vijay Hansda are nominated from the party. In Organizing cum Welcome Committee JMM General Secretary Vinod Kumar Pandey, JMM Spokesperson Supriyo Bhattacharya, Minister in the State Government Chamra Linda, Nandkishore Mehta, Abhishek Prasad, JMM Spokesperson Manoj Kumar Pandey, Rajya Sabha MP Mahua Maji, MLA Vikas Singh Munda, MLA Amit Kumar and Mustaq Alam.

'JMM should not mislead people on Manipur and delimitation'

PNS : RANCHI

State BJP spokesperson Pratul Shahdev on Tuesday countered the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha's press conference and said that JMM should not mislead the public on the issue of delimitation and Manipur.

Pratul said that Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is a nationalist organization which has always worked in the interest of the nation and Sanatan and that JMM is misrepresenting the statements of the Sangh due to irritation and frustration. Pratul said that it is not appropriate for JMM, during whose tenure Jharkhand got infamous on the international level on the



issue of corruption, to comment on a nationalist organization. Pratul said that RSS has never opposed delimitation and believes that delimitation should be implemented in such a way that it strengthens the unity and integrity of the country. RSS has clarified that regional imbalance and cultural identity should not be ignored due to delimitation. Pratul said that on several occasions Home Minister Amit Shah has reiterated that delimitation will neither cause injustice to any state nor will the proportional reservation be reduced in any way.

Pratul said that neither the process of delimitation has been decided nor its draft has been revealed and despite that, the statement given by JMM is beyond comprehension. Pratul said that the Sangh's statement on Manipur was also misrepresented by JMM. The organization believes that Manipur has been going through a difficult phase for the last 20 months and the recent administrative and political decisions taken by the Centre have given a ray of hope. Like the BJP, the Sangh also believes that the ongoing dispute in Manipur will be resolved by creating trust among all communities.

Pratul also said that now the situation in Manipur is changing rapidly. The government is also opening the long closed roads in a phased manner. Pratul said that it appears that Jharkhand Mukti Morcha is resorting to such statements to mislead the public.

BJP, Cong tussle over Muslim quota



Opposition leader Babul Marandi enters the House during the ongoing Budget Session of State Assembly in Ranchi on Tuesday. Pix by Vinay Murmu

PNS : RANCHI

Politics is going on in Karnataka over giving 4% reservation to Muslims in government contracts. BJP is opposing it while Congress and other non-BJP parties are supporting it. This issue which started from Karnataka and reached Jharkhand is gaining momentum. Leader of Opposition Babul Marandi has criticized it and said that there is no provision in the Constitution that there should be reservation on the basis of religion.

The Leader of Opposition said that despite there being

no provision in the Constitution, it has been decided to give 4% reservation to Muslims in government contracts in Karnataka. This shows that the Constitution should be amended. He said that it has been the habit of Congress to twist the Constitution. Babul Marandi has said that the government should identify non-veg shops at the places where worship is done during Navratri.

Congress leader and state Health Minister Dr. Irfan Ansari has supported giving 4% reservation to Muslims in Karnataka and said that Muslims are treated step-motherly in BJP ruled states. They are oppressed and their rights are snatched away. Due to this, Muslims there have become the lowest in the society. He said that the Congress government never discriminated and worked to take everyone along.

Responding to the question of journalists, Irfan Ansari said that if the government takes such a step in Jharkhand too, he will support it. Targeting the BJP, he said that in BJP ruled states, the house of Muslims is demolished and bulldozers are used, this is not right. The Bharatiya Janata Party ruled Jharkhand for 18 years and made Muslims poor. He said that he would like that all sections of the society get respect and their rights should not be snatched away.



Director General SSB Amit Mohan Prasad meets DGP Anurag Gupta at police headquarters in Ranchi on Tuesday. PNS

CVC finds two HEC officials guilty of irregularities

PNS : RANCHI

The Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) has found two former directors and two current officials of Heavy Engineering Corporation (HEC) guilty of giving work without tender. Regarding this, CVC sent a letter to the Ministry of Heavy Industries, after which the ministry directed the HEC management to take action as per the guidelines.

The CVC investigation revealed that Tirupati Industrial Cooperation Committee Limited was entrusted with the task of reinstatement of supply workers without tender. Among the officials found

guilty in this are former Personnel Director MK Saxena, former Director Production Dr Ranab Chakraborty, Senior DGM Kaushik Das and Senior DGM TUK Singh. Partial penalty will be imposed on TA Division Manager LS Lugun. No action will be taken against former General Managers JP Prasad, DN Chaudhary, DP Singh and former Director Finance Arundhati Panda.

HEC is currently going through a serious financial crisis. 30 months' salary of the employees is pending, due to which they are not even able to deposit the school fees of their children. Illegal construction is going on in the HEC residen-

tial complex with the connivance of the officials of the Municipal Administration Department, while it is being claimed in the annual report of the company that not a single inch of land has been constructed illegally in the last 3 years.

Just a month earlier The Union Industries Ministry informed the Lok Sabha that it has not prepared any plans for reviving the ailing HEC. This was in stark contrast to what Union Industries Minister HD Kumaraswamy, who visited Jharkhand in January, and incumbent Ranchi MP and Union Minister for Defence, Sanjay Seth, told the workers' union leaders during a meeting.

TN gets more MGNREGS funds than Uttar Pradesh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Tamil Nadu has been given more funds than Uttar Pradesh under MGNREGA in one fiscal although its population is seven crore as against the northern state's 20 Crore, Union Minister Chandra Sekhar Pemmasani informed Lok Sabha on Tuesday, inviting strong protests from DMK MPs.

The Union minister of state for rural development said the Central government has never discriminated against any state in the release of funds under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) that guarantees 100 days of employment to eligible rural households.

Pemmasani also said during Question Hour that there were several instances of alleged misappropriation of funds provided to West Bengal under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Replying to a question about the scheme's implementation in West Bengal, he said "multiple things went wrong" in the state. First, there was "misappropriation" of funds and there were instances when works were split and given to contractors on a nominated basis, he said.

"We sent an audit (team). They found 44 works where there were irregularities. They made full recovery in 34 cases. Still, 10 other works need to be completed. The financial misappropriation was to the tune of ₹5.37 Crore.

Out of this, they have recovered ₹2.39 Crore. Some of the things still need to be taken care of," the minister said.

Pemmasani said as soon as these things are taken care of, the Union rural development minister (Shivraj Singh Chouhan) will sit with the state minister and resolve the issues. When DMK MP Kanimozhi said that Tamil Nadu had been waiting the release of ₹4,034 Crore under MGNREGA for the past five months, the minister said the scheme is demand-driven, and if payments are delayed by over 15 days, they must be paid with interest to workers.

Pemmasani pointed out that the MGNREGA was enacted by the previous UPA government and stipulates that delays beyond 15 days incur a penalty of 0.05 per cent as interest.

"According to the law, if there is a delay, the state government initially pays the amount and the central government reimburses it. Tamil Nadu has already received ₹7,300 Crore (this fiscal).

"Earlier also, with a population of seven

crore, Tamil Nadu received over ₹10,000 Crore in comparison to Uttar Pradesh, which has a population of 20 Crore and got close to ₹10,000 Crore. There is no question of bias," he said, evoking strong protests from the DMK members.

Pemmasani's senior minister Chouhan also defended the government, saying, "Be it Tamil Nadu or West Bengal, the Modi government has never discriminated against any state. The pending MGNREGA dues, including material costs, will be released soon.

"Under UPA, from 2006-07 to 2013-14, only ₹111 Crore was allocated for person-days in West Bengal, while under the NDA, we have created 239 crore person-days and allocated ₹54,515 Crore," he said.

Upset with the minister's reply, DMK and Trinamool Congress MPs entered the well of the House, staging strong protests. Members belonging to Congress and Samajwadi Party joined the protests too, rising from their seats in solidarity with some of them standing near the Well.

Speaker Om Birla urged them to return to their seats, but they did not budge. Following this, the House was adjourned for about 15 minutes till 12 pm. Birla urged the Opposition not to "politicise" the questions raised during the Question Hour.

Avalanches recurring phenomenon in high-altitude areas: Government

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Avalanches are a recurring natural phenomenon in high-altitude areas such as Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Arunachal Pradesh, the government is aware of the significant risks they pose to human lives and property, Lok Sabha was informed on Tuesday.

Union Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai said automated weather stations and doppler radars have been installed in vulnerable regions to improve forecasting capabilities.

He said that the Defence Geoinformatics Research Establishment (DGRE) has installed 72 snow meteorological observatories and 45 automated weather stations (AWS) are operational, 100 (AWS) are under testing and 203 (AWS) are under installation.

The data is regularly received from snow observatories at three hour intervals and at one hour interval from AWS at DGRE. This output and the expert opinion is used to draw avalanche forecast for different areas at least 24 hour in advance, Rai said in a written reply to a question.

He said the government is aware of the hazard of avalanches in the Himalayan regions, which poses significant risks to human lives and property.

"Avalanches are a recurring natural phenomenon/disaster in high-altitude areas such as Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Arunachal Pradesh," he said.

The minister said the government effectively deploys technologies for improved early warning and forecasting of avalanches in the hazardous zones.

Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) is a national level agency for avalanche forecasting and is involved in the daily Operational Avalanche Forecasting for Defence users, he said.

Rai said the Defence Geoinformatics Research Establishment, Chandigarh under the Defence Research and Development Organisation is also the nodal agency for studying and developing avalanche mitigation technologies.

The methodologies include aerial reconnaissance/ground surveys, which are further used as an input to prepare avalanche hazard maps.

Regular operational avalanche warning is issued by Defence Geoinformatics Research Establishment to the Army and civilian population in the snow bound regions of north-west Himalayas. Additionally, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) supplies six-hourly weather updates to enhance situational awareness, Rai said.

UP reports highest number of ragging complaints in medical colleges

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Uttar Pradesh reported 33 the highest number of ragging-related complaints in medical colleges in 2024 followed by Bihar with 17, Rajasthan with 15 and Madhya Pradesh with 12, Minister of State for Health Anupriya Patel told the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday.

The National Medical Commission (NMC) has taken stringent measures against such incidents which include regular monitoring and follow-up through video conferences with Deans and Principals of medical institutions, Patel said in a written reply.

Additionally, the National Medical Commission mandates the submission of annual Anti-Ragging reports by these institutions to ensure they are adhering to anti-ragging protocols. Non-compliance is met with strict penalties, which may include the withdrawal of recognition or other punitive actions to maintain a safe and supportive academic environment, Anupriya Patel said. Several measures have been implemented by the government to create a zero-tolerance environment against ragging and ensure a safe and harassment-free academic atmosphere in medical colleges, Patel said.

Measures include implementation of the Prevention and Prohibition of Ragging in Medical Colleges and Institutions Regulations, 2021, outlining institutional responsibilities and preventive measures, Patel stated.

Besides specific information about anti-ragging measures are incorporated in admission brochures, prospectuses, and booklets.

Also, CCTV cameras have been installed in vulnerable areas of the campus, including colleges, hospitals and hostels, and anti-ragging posters and hoardings are displayed in different locations within the institutions.

Every student and their parent/guardian submits an online undertaking through the University Grants Commission's online portal.

The National Medical Commission has set up a portal where students can lodge complaints related to ragging. Besides, Patel also mentioned the operation of the NMC Anti-Ragging Cell, which actively monitors and addresses complaints through email (antiragging@nmc.org.in) and the UGC helpline (antiragging.ugc.ac.in) also mentioned the operation of the NMC Anti-Ragging Cell, which actively monitors and addresses complaints through email.

Survival in today's battlespace about those who can adapt: CDS

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Survival in today's battlespace is not about being the fittest, but about those who adapt, transform and position themselves and seize emerging opportunities," said Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan on Tuesday at College of Defence Management (CDM), Secunderabad.

He made this assertion while addressing future strategic leaders undergoing Higher Defence Management Course HDMC-20 on the challenges of navigating the complex security landscape of the 21st century, according to defence ministry here.

General Chauhan highlighted the importance of adaptability, resilience and visionary leadership amidst rapidly shifting global power dynamics, non-traditional threats and technological advancements, characterised by fast paced Artificial Intelligence disruptions, to address contemporary and emerging security challenges effectively.

The CDS impressed upon the need for a whole of nation approach towards syn-

ergetic response and underscored the role of Indian Armed Forces in shaping the country's national security strategy.

The CDS, in his talk on National Security Architecture and Change Management in the Year of Defence Reforms, gave a deep insight into the functioning of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) and the transformative drive towards fostering jointness, integration and synergy in the armed forces.

He provided a nuanced perspective of the roadmap for year of transformation marked by articulation of Vision 2047 for the armed forces, joint doctrines, defence and military policies along with efforts towards finalisation of Integrated Capability Development Plan, while elaborating upon the Atmanirbharta initiatives undertaken by the DMA. During the visit, General Chauhan engaged with faculty members and course participants, including officers from friendly foreign countries, sharing his insights on the importance of fostering innovation, experimentation and collaboration within the defence establishment to stay ahead in an evolving environment.

There could be repercussions for what you say: Kangana on Kamra row

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Disgracing anyone in the name of comedy is in bad taste, actor and MP Kangana Ranaut said on Tuesday as she weighed in on the ongoing controversy over comic Kunal Kamra's remarks on Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde's political career.

The actor also said it was wrong to compare the incident at the comedy club with the demolition of her Mumbai office by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) back in the 2020 incident following her spat with the Shiv Sena-led Maharashtra government. "Demolition of my office was a completely illegal activity, this is absolutely legal. They can't be clubbed together," MP Kangana Ranaut added. Ranaut, a BJP MP from Himachal Pradesh's Mandi, was speaking to reporters outside the Parliament here.

"You may be anyone but disrespecting anyone is not good." You are disgracing someone in the name of comedy, you are



BJP MP Kangana Ranaut stands outside Parliament during the Winter session in New Delhi

disregarding what all he has done.

Shinde ji used to drive an auto rickshaw a while ago. "Today he has made it till here on his own. What are his (Kamra's) credentials? Who are these people who haven't done anything in life? If they can

write, I'd say write literature or comedy scenes in films. Abusing in the name of comedy, mocking our scriptures in the name of comedy, making fun of people, mothers and sisters (is not right)," MP Kangana Ranaut said.

Kamra recently performed a parody of a popular Hindi song from the film "Dil Toh Pagal Hai," apparently referring to Shinde as a "gaddar" (traitor). He also made jokes about recent political developments in Maharashtra, including the Shiv Sena and NCP splits.

On Monday, Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis commented on the row, saying Kamra should apologise for his "low level comedy".

Echoing Fadnavis' remarks, MP Kangana Ranaut said: "These people call themselves influencers. Where is society headed for this 2-minute fame? We need to think about this."

Like Fadnavis ji said we have to take some responsibility for what we say. There could be repercussions. Would you stand by that when you are questioned legally?"

BJP cites book on Bofors to demand Sonia, Rahul's resignations as MPs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Tuesday cited a book by a journalist, who is credited with exposing the alleged Bofors scam, to attack Congress leaders Sonia and Rahul Gandhi, and demanded they quit as MPs till they make a full disclosure about their relations with alleged Italian middleman Ottavio Quattrocchi.

BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia claimed the "huge revelations" made by Chitra Subramaniam in her book 'Bofors Gate' are worrisome, and alleged that Quattrocchi used his proximity to the then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and his wife Sonia Gandhi to pull strings in finalising defence deals.

There was no immediate reaction from the Congress to the BJP's allegations and the demands made at the press conference. It has long been alleged that Quattrocchi, who is no more, enjoyed warm ties with Sonia Gandhi, who is also of Italian origin, and used it to his business advantage in India.

He was one of the accused in the CBI's long-winded probe into the alleged bribery in the Bofors gun deal after the kickoff was first reported by the Swedish state radio in 1987.

Subramaniam subsequently did a number of stories on the unfolding development. Bhatia alleged that defence files during the Rajiv Gandhi's term would be taken to Quattrocchi so that he could change them to favour companies of his choice.

He said the current Congress leadership, including party president Mallikarjun Kharge, should answer if it was no violation of oath by Rajiv Gandhi.

The Bharatiya Janata Party leader alleged that Quattrocchi's bank accounts were defrozen by the CBI in 2005 during the Congress-led UPA rule at the behest of Sonia Gandhi.

Citing these incidents, he asked if this did not amount to betrayal to the country and claimed that the Rafale defence deal also could not be finalised during the UPA's term as the Gandhi family wanted a cut.

"Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi should resign from their position till they make a full disclosure about their family's relations with Quattrocchi. Till then, they have no right to remain MPs," he said. Will Kharge stand with the country or "corrupt" Gandhis, he said.

Finance Bill 2025 offers unprecedented tax relief



Union Minister Nirmala Sitharaman speaks in the Lok Sabha during the Budget session of Parliament in New Delhi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Tuesday said the Finance Bill 2025 provides unprecedented tax relief, and the 13.14 per cent projected growth in personal income tax collection is "realistic" and supported by solid data. Replying to the discussions on Finance Bill 2025 in the Lok Sabha, Finance Minister also said the customs duty rationalisation announced in the Budget will support manufacturing units, domestic value addition, promote exports, facilitate trade and also provide relief to the common people.

In the 2025-26 Budget, the government has hiked income tax rebate to ₹12 Lakh per annum from ₹7 Lakh earlier. For the salaried class, this rebate will be ₹12.75 Lakh per year after taking into account the standard deduction.

The hike in I-T rebate will lead to tax foregone to the tune of ₹1 Lakh crore in FY26.

Sitharaman said the Budget also provides "marginal relief" under the Income Tax law for those taxpayers whose income exceeds ₹12 Lakh per annum by a small margin. "The Finance Bill provides unprecedented tax relief to honour taxpayer. We have recognised the contribution of the middle class," she said.

Collections in personal income tax have shown considerable buoyancy in the last few years and they have been increasing around 20 per cent year-on-year, the minister added.

"For the year 2025-26, the personal income tax collection is projected at ₹13.6 Lakh Crore. The Revised Estimates for 2024-25 is ₹12.2 Lakh Crore. So, ₹12.2 Lakh Crore is going to be ₹13.6 Lakh and this is done with a certain realistic calculation," Sitharaman said.

The personal I-T revenue is projected to grow by 13.14 per cent in FY26, after taking into account a 7 per cent dip after factoring in the ₹1 Lakh Crore revenue foregone.

Par panel recommends calendar-based budgeting system for culture ministry

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A parliamentary panel has recommended the government develop a cultural calendar-based budgeting system for events that takes into account cyclical landmarks such as Kumbh Mela for long-term financial planning. The report on the 'Demands for Grants (2025-26) of Ministry of Culture' by the Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture was presented in Parliament on Tuesday.

The panel said in its report it observed a "pattern wherein the Ministry relies heavily on mid-year budgetary adjustments, seeking substantial increases at the RE (Revised Estimates) stage instead of ensuring that BE (Budget Estimates) accurately reflects financial needs".

In the opinion of the Committee, this approach introduces uncertainty into long-term financial planning and may disrupt the timely execution of projects.

A more accurate and predictive budget estimation process is required to minimise dependency on adjustments during the stage of revised estimation, it said.

"The Committee recommends that the Ministry strengthen its engagement with the Ministry of Finance to establish a more flexible, needs-based budget allocation framework, one that will ensure funding provisions are more effectively met with practical expenditure requirements," the report said. Also, the ministry should establish a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) engagement cell to facilitate partnerships between businesses and cultural projects, capitalising on the 100 per cent tax exemption available

under Section 80G (ii) of the Income Tax Act. The Committee observed that there is a significant reduction in the ministry's total budget from ₹3,406.90 Crore (actual) in 2023-24 to ₹3,260.93 Crore (Revised Estimate or RE) in 2024-25, and an increase to ₹3,360.96 Crore in the budget allocation for 2025-26. The panel observed the reduction in 2024-25 can be attributed primarily to the one-time expenditures related to the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav (AKAM).

The AKAM celebrations saw a "substantial increase" in expenditure, with a revision of the Budget Estimate (BE) from ₹185 Crore to ₹335 Crore during 2023-24, resulting in an expenditure of ₹334.39

India may adopt a cultural calendar-based budgeting system to improve long-term financial planning for events like Kumbh Mela

Crore, which was more than 80 per cent over and above the original BE allocation, the report said. The Committee, in its report, also noted that the budget formulation process for 2024-25 "did not adequately account" for key national cultural commitments, including the Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj and the Republic Day tableau, leading to an additional request for funds mid-year. The omission of such significant expenditures at the BE stage does seem to indicate "deficiencies" in financial forecasting and contingency planning, it said.

"The Committee recommends the implementation of a comprehensive

MYBF for the Ministry of Culture that extends beyond the annual budget cycle," it said. This framework should incorporate a "five-year rolling budget projection" with annual revisions to accommodate changing priorities while maintaining long-term vision; categorisation of expenditures into core recurring activities, planned development initiatives, and special events or commemorations with separate budgetary provisions for each category, the panel said. The committee also said it "strongly recommends" the development of a cultural calendar-based budgeting system that maintains a comprehensive five-year cultural events calendar, identifying recurring festivals, commemorations, and international engagements with historical budget requirements. It should integrate cyclical cultural events such as the Kumbh Mela (which occurs every 12 years) into "long-term financial planning through a dedicated cultural events fund, it said.

The panel also recommended establishment of a 'Budget Stabilisation Reserve' of approximately 5 per cent of the total annual allocation to account for unforeseen cultural activities or emergencies, preventing mid-year fiscal disruptions. "This approach would mitigate the abrupt budgetary fluctuations witnessed between 2023-24 and 2024-25, and provide greater stability for cultural institutions dependent on government funding," the report said. The panel also suggested developing an "AI-assisted forecasting model" that analyses historical expenditure patterns and predicts resource requirements for upcoming cultural activities based on past event costs, inflation factors, and attendance projections.

XR Creator Hackathon revolutionises India's immersive technology

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Creator Hackathon, Organized under the leadership of Wavelaps as part of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's flagship WAVES initiative. It is revolutionizing India's immersive Technology sector. This competition is providing emerging XR innovators with a platform to showcase their talent on a global scale. Wavelaps, a pioneering solutions provider in India's immersive technology industry and an industry partner

of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. It is offering technological and consulting guidance to finalist teams throughout the hackathon.

Team members Mr. Mohit Kumar Sharma and Mr. Aneesh Doble, hailing from different states of India. They share a common vision. They are establishing India as a global leader in XR and immersive technology. Mr. Mohan said, "His ambition extends beyond gaming, they aim to integrate immersive technology into Defence and Military training."

"We want our technology to transform not just the gaming industry but also contribute to national security and military training", He added.

Team YouthBuzz has achieved a new milestone in the VR gaming industry by securing a place in the top 40 with their project. Immersive Warfare Simulator - The Game of Dimensions, Chapter 1.

This is not a VR Game, but a unique innovation bridging the gap between mobile and VR Gaming. The game allows two teams to play simultaneously. One

using VR headsets and the other on mobile devices. Each team will have four players, completely transforming the multiplayer gaming experience.

Under this project, Team YouthBuzz has developed a 'Made in India Haptic Gun. This game based on a 1:1 scale model of a real gun.

This gun will give players an immersive feeling similar to actual warfare. Additionally, the team is developing a haptic vest. Currently, it's in the prototype stage and designed to take the gaming

experience to the next level.

XR communities such as Bharat XR and XDG have played a crucial role in taking this competition nationwide. These communities have played an important role in providing XR innovators with the right platform and spreading immersive technology on a larger scale.

Teams like YouthBuzz and platforms like the XR Creator Hackathon are demonstrating that India is not only developing technology but is also ready to give the world new experiences.

Wife, lover kill husband in Uttar Pradesh

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Lucknow

In a shocking case of betrayal and murder, a newlywed woman in Uttar Pradesh's Auraiya district plotted her husband's killing just 14 days after marriage, echoing the recent Meerut case, where Muskan and her lover Sahil conspired to murder her merchant navy husband Saurabh.

The 22-year-old accused, Pragati Yadav, and her longtime lover, Anurag Yadav, had been in a relationship for four years. However, their families disapproved and forced Pragati to marry Dilip on March 5. Unable to stay apart, the couple decided to eliminate Dilip and hired a contract killer, Ramaji Chaudhary, for Rs 2 lakh to carry out the murder.

On March 19, Dilip was found severely injured with bullet wounds in a field. He was rushed to multiple hospitals in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, but succumbed to his injuries on March 21.

Police investigations revealed that Ramaji and his associates lured Dilip to a secluded area, brutally beat him, and shot him before fleeing. CCTV footage led to the arrest of Pragati, Anurag, and Ramaji, with police recovering two pistols, four live cartridges, a bike, mobile phones, and cash.



Police personnel escort accused Pragati, her lover Anurag, and contract killer Ramu after their arrest for allegedly conspiring to murder Pragati's husband, Dilip Yadav in Auraiya

A manhunt is underway for the remaining accused.

This cold-blooded crime, just like the Meerut case, exposes a rising trend of contract killings fueled by illicit relationships,

where love turns deadly.

During police interrogation, Pragati revealed that after her family discovered her love affair, they arranged her marriage with her elder sister's brother-in-law,

Dilip. Unhappy with this forced alliance, she conspired with her lover to eliminate her husband. To execute the plan while keeping herself out of suspicion, she hired contract killers for Rs 2 lakh. She admitted to paying them Rs 1 lakh in advance, using money she received as gifts during her wedding rituals.

Since the incident, tears have not stopped flowing from the eyes of Pragati's maternal family. They expressed deep regret, stating that if they had even the slightest hint of her intentions, they would never have agreed to her marriage with Dilip. They demand that Dilip's killers face the strictest punishment, including the death penalty.

Pragati's brother, Alok, refuted claims that she was forced into the marriage, calling such allegations baseless. He condemned her actions, stating that she is now considered dead to the family.

"The marriage happened with mutual consent. If we had any suspicion, we would never have allowed it," Alok said. He urged the judiciary to ensure the harshest punishment for all those involved in Dilip's murder, including his sister Pragati. He also stated that he would personally submit a written complaint to the authorities demanding justice.

Bengal believes in building bridges, not walls: CM

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ Kolkata

Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has appealed to the British businessmen and the Indian Embassy in Britain to work towards enhancing business ties and social and cultural relationship between England and Bengal and not least restoring a direct flight from Kolkata to London.

The Chief Minister who was speaking at a programme at the Indian Embassy said that though London was not far from Kolkata she took 18 hours to reach the British Capital as there was no direct flight between the two of the biggest cities of the erstwhile Raj.

Banerjee on Tuesday told a British delegation that attended the programme at the Indian Embassy in London said, "London is not far away from Kolkata. We need a direct flight from London. It took 18 hours for me to reach here. It could be easier." The Chief Minister also said that she was looking forward to strengthen ties between Bengal and England. "Bengal has always believed in building bridges and not walls," she said.

Later Banerjee said that her discussions with the visiting dignitaries that included some industry captains and a British delegation centred around "deeper cultural and business cooperation ... enhancing economic partnerships and strengthening people-to-people ties."

Banerjee is on a six-day trip to England where she is to deliver a lecture at a private college on Thursday besides meeting some possible investors. The Chief Minister is also likely to take part in a Government-to-Government (G2G) programme on Wednesday.

Banerjee who was earlier seen jogging inside the Hyde Park off Buckingham Palace on her characteristic saree and trademark sleepers told businessmen she met, how Bengal had "a huge trained labour force and they are intelligent and ready for the market." Her activities inside the park, particularly jogging on a saree and a pair of sleepers instantly became an object of "likes" "dislikes" and "comments" in the social media.

Banerjee is accompanied by Chief Secretary Manoj Pant and her senior party colleague Kunal Ghosh.

BJP's 'Dharma' vs TMC's 'Karma' funds

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ Kolkata

With the Bengal Assembly elections just about a year away and State Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari ceaselessly bombarding the Mamata Banerjee Government on the issue of Muslim appeasement the Trinamool Congress has gone on a counter offensive with its time-tested weapon of alleged central deprivation of the State.

Hours after TMC general secretary set the tone for anti-BJP tirade claiming that unlike the TMC the saffron party had failed to learn from its mistake and continued to deprive Bengal which would in the long run be electorally counterproductive for them senior party MP Kalyan Banerjee launched a scathing attack on the Union Government for depriving Bengal of its rightful dues.

Slamming Union Minister Shivraj Singh Chowhan for acting as an agent who worked in the interest of the rich and deprived States like Bengal, Serampore MP said "Shivraj Chowhan is a 'dalal' (agent) for the rich. He does nothing for the poor which is why he was

removed from as the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh."

The TMC MPs in Parliament on Tuesday demonstrated against the Centre for holding back the State's funds for 100-days' scheme. "Bengal has been demanding its rightful dues that have been stopped for the past several years ... central funds due to Bengal should be given to us ... it is taxpayers' money ... it is not their personal money ... Shivraj Chowhan is not clearing the dues because he tried to form a Government there but the people rejected them ... now they are taking revenge ... and if they go on doing this ... if they continue to withhold funds then they will never be able to come to power in Bengal," Kalyan Banerjee.

His statement came hours after Abhishek Banerjee slammed the BJP for allegedly failing to learn its lessons from its acts.

"The BJP has failed to learn its lessons... unlike the TMC ... in 2019 they won 18 seats and the TMC got 22 ... but the TMC rectified its mistakes and learnt from it but the BJP went on committing them ... still they are repeating

their mistakes and depriving Bengal of its rightful dues ... the Centre has withheld Rs 2 lakh crore that belongs to the State of Bengal ... despite repeated reminders and despite repeatedly coming to Delhi with tomes files they have refused to clear the State's funds ... but this is strategy is counterproductive ... this was proved in 2021 Assembly elections when the TMC roared back to power with a thumping majority and the BJP stopped at 77 seats," the junior Banerjee who is also the nephew of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said.

Reacting to the TMC's allegations the BHP however said that the Centre had never withheld the State's funds. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been equally cooperative with all the States ... but the problem lies somewhere else ... the State has been asked to account for the previous funds allocated in MNREGA and PM housing and other schemes ... but they have failed to do so as their leaders have devoured hundreds of crores belonging to the poor man ... the BJP Government cannot allow the TMC leaders to be enriched at the cost of the poor," senior leader Dilip Ghosh said.

Portuguese-era cannonballs found at Goa heritage site

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Panaji

The Goa government on Tuesday announced that it was temporarily putting on hold the work on the proposed tourist amenity centre at Old Goa heritage site after the ASI found some Portuguese-era cannonballs.

The work won't continue until clearance is granted by the Archaeological Survey of India and church authorities approve it again, Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte told the Assembly, two days after some citizens protested against the project claiming "a mall is being constructed at Old Goa, a UNESCO protected heritage site".

The tourist amenity centre is coming up near a church, under the central government's PRASHAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive) scheme to facilitate tourism activities. This issue was raised in the House through a calling attention motion by BJP MLA Rajesh Phal Desai and St Andre MLA Viresh Borkar. The legislators

raised concerns after some citizens on Sunday protested against the project claiming "a mall is being constructed in Old Goa, which is a protected heritage site by UNESCO".

"The project work is currently put on hold after ASI found cultural deposits in the form of cannonballs while cleaning the proposed site," Khaunte said.

He stressed that the facilitation centre construction work started only after securing approval from ASI and consulting church authorities.

The minister said the proposed facility houses a building with a lower ground floor and a ground floor with facilities created for tourists.

Speaking about the protests, the minister pointed out that various works of Rs 300 crore were undertaken in Old Goa during the recently-held exposition of relics of St Francis Xavier. "Nobody opposed the implementation of works earlier. The current facilitation centre is coming up at the same place where the exposition secretariat was built," he said.

ADC directs departments to ensure strict action against mining mafia

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Gurugram

The Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC) of Gurugram, Adesh Kumar Meena directed the Mining, Police, Forest, and Regional Transport Authority (RTA) departments to ensure strict action against the mining mafia in the Aravali range by running a joint campaign.

He told the officials to identify the areas of illegal mining in the district and take effective action to prevent it by preparing an action plan. He also directed that the officials of the Mining Department should ensure that mining is not done in any area or place other than the lease prescribed in the district. This direction comes after the ADC was presiding over the meeting of the District Level Task Force Committee of the Mining Department on Tuesday here in Gurugram.

In the meeting, DC has given instructions to form special monitoring teams to strictly deal with illegal mining activities in the district. These special teams will keep a watch on the vehicles involved in illegal mining activities on various roads in the district and ensure departmental action against them as per the prescribed rules. "SDM, Sohna, and the officials of the District Mining Department are to make a joint visit and continuously monitor the illegal activities related to mining in the Aravalli area and ensure a ban on them," he told the officials.

The ADC said that in the upcoming meeting, a detailed report should also be presented on what action has been taken so far on the FIRs lodged in connection with illegal mining in the last three months. During the meeting, Assistant Mining Engineer Surender Solanki said that the Mining Department has seized 50 vehicles in the current financial year in Gurugram district.

He said that 14 FIRs have been registered during this period and a total fine of ₹66.13 Lakh has been imposed. Giving information about the date-wise vehicle checking done in the month of March, he said that so far in this month, 123 vehicles have been checked and necessary action has been taken.

AHCBA goes on indefinite strike over Justice Varma's transfer

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Lucknow

The Allahabad High Court Bar Association (AHCBA) on Tuesday launched an indefinite strike to protest the proposed transfer of Delhi High Court Justice Yashwant Varma to the Allahabad High Court.

Leading the protest at Gate Number 3 of the high court, Bar Association President Anil Tiwari emphasised that the agitation was not directed against any court or judge but against what he described as a betrayal of the judicial system. "Our fight is against corruption and a system that lacks transparency. We demand a reconsideration and withdrawal of the transfer order," he said.

The association had reiterated its opposition to Justice Varma's transfer and subsequently decided to cease work indefinitely. Tiwari asserted that the lawyers were prepared for a prolonged battle. "From the very beginning, there has been an attempt to cover up this matter. Lawyers across India are now fighting this battle. Until a resolution is

reached, we will not resume work, regardless of the consequences," he declared.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court collegium on Monday reaffirmed its decision to recommend Justice Varma's transfer to his parent Allahabad High Court. This followed allegations that a large sum of cash was found at his official residence in Delhi after a fire broke out on March 14. Following the incident, judicial work was withdrawn from Justice Varma, and the Delhi High Court, under Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna, issued directives on the matter.

Justice Varma has strongly denied any involvement in the alleged cash discovery, calling it a conspiracy to malign him. "Neither I nor any of my family members placed any cash in the storeroom. I unequivocally denounce the suggestion that the alleged cash belonged to us," he stated.

With the Bar Association firm on its stance, the standoff over Justice Varma's transfer is expected to intensify in the coming days.

Chhattisgarh: Naxalite killed in encounter

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Dantewada

A Naxalite carrying a reward of ₹25 lakh on his head was among three ultras killed in an encounter with security forces in Chhattisgarh's Dantewada district on Tuesday, police said. The gunfight took place at around 8 am in a forest along the border of Dantewada and Bijapur districts when a team of security personnel was out on an anti-Naxalite operation, Superintendent of Police Gaurav Rai said.

Personnel belonging to the District Reserve Guard (DRG) and Bastar Fighters, both units of the state police, were involved in the operation launched on the basis of inputs about the presence of Maoists in forests of Girsapara, Nelgoda, Bodga and Ikeli villages under Geedam police station limits, he said.

After the exchange of fire stopped, bodies of three male Naxalites were recovered from the site, the official said.

An Insas rifle, a 303 rifle, explosive materials and items of daily use were also recovered from the spot, he said.

Prima facie, one of the three Naxalites killed in the gunfight, identified as Sudhir



Security personnel return after an encounter in which three Naxals were gunned down in Dantewada district

alias Sudhakar alias Murlu, resident of Warangal in Telangana, was active as a member of Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee - the strongest formation of Maoists, the official said.

He was carrying a bounty of ₹ 25 lakh, the official said. The identity of the two other cadres was yet to be ascertained, he said. Search operation was still underway in the area, he added.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah recently said the Narendra Modi government is moving forward with a ruthless approach against Naxalites and is adopting a zero-tolerance policy against those Maoists who have not surrendered despite facilities being offered to them, ranging from to inclusion.

He said the country will be Naxal-free by March 31, 2026.

HM's assertion on eliminating LWE is awe-inspiring

SURYA SARATHI RAY ■ New Delhi

Home Minister Amit Shah's forceful assertion in Parliament last week that Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) will be eradicated from the country by March 2026 has caught many by surprise, while others are in awe.

Why surprise? Naxalism, starkly opposed to the country's democratic framework and the biggest unequals in the Indian context, has been a dreaded menace for decades. Based on building a classless society through the barrel of a gun, the very idea of Naxalism or Left-Wing Extremism is flawed. Wild. However, the damage it has caused to the Nation and its democratic fabric is immeasurable.

For decades together, Naxalism has deprived vast swathes (Red Corridor) of land across West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, and Odisha, inhabited by eight crore people, mostly tribal, of the goodness of development and equal opportunity for progress. Thousands of lives were lost. Often upturning internal security measures and development initiatives, LWE runs with the nefarious intention of perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation by inhibiting businesses from setting up and performing and, ultimately, delaying the mainstreaming of the peo-

ple in the country's Red Corridor.

What has it done to the country and its hapless tribal populations? Between 2004 and 2014, 1,858 security personnel died in 16,463 violent incidents, which also caused 4,766 civilian deaths. There were 126 Naxalism-affected districts in the country by 2014 and, in contrast, just 66 fortified police stations. Loss of moveable and immovable properties will also run in a few thousand crores.

Quite naturally, when someone of the stature of Home minister speaks about eliminating the dreaded menace, and that too on the floor of the Parliament, many are surprised. But, they might be in awe knowing today's ground reality. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's guidance, the Home Department has achieved the unthinkable.

Tackling a menace of this magnitude is never easy. Home Minister Amit Shah's meticulous planning and multifaceted strategy to quell the discontent holistically by dispersing the seeds of development to turn problems into prospects and responding with an iron fist where an Olive Branch fails to melt the ice have yielded astounding results. How did this happen?

Immediately after taking over, the government was hell-bent on eradicating naxalism. To holistically address the LWE menace, the government approved the 'National Policy and Action Plan to

address LWE' in 2015, envisaging a multi-pronged strategy involving security-related measures, development interventions, ensuring the rights and entitlements of local communities, etc.

There were 126 Naxalism-affected districts in the country by 2014 and, in contrast, just 66 fortified police stations. Loss of moveable and immovable properties will also run in a few thousand crores

The resolute implementation of the policy has resulted in a consistent decline in violence and constriction of geographical spread. However, during the Modi government's tenure from 2014 to 2024, the number of violent incidents decreased by 53 per cent, dropping to 7,744. Similarly, the number of security forces' casualties decreased by 73 per cent, from 1851 to 509, and the number of civilian casualties decreased by 70 per cent, dropping from 4766 to 1,495.

The number of Naxal-affected districts has now come down to 12, while the number of fortified districts has increased to 612. In the past 5 years, a total of 302 new security camps and 68 night landing helipads have been established. These were never in existence before the

Modi regime.

HM's professional, layered, and strategic approach to LWE involved accelerated plugging of security vacuums and eliminating information-dark areas that served as major headwinds in the battle against insurgency. In the last 10 years, the LWE-affected regions' mobile connectivity towers have increased from 0 to 6,000. This single move had a game-changing impact at the grassroots level by instilling a sense of security among the people and bridging the gap between them and the government for the first time.

There was a fierce offensive against Left Wing Extremism, dealing crushing blows to terror outfits every time. If the number of eliminations, arrests, and surrenders are any marker of the triumph of the security forces in this battle against the menace, then Indian security forces deserve a pat on the back.

Over the last ten years, security spending in LWE-affected areas nearly tripled to over ₹3,000 crore. Over the past four years, an additional ₹1,285 crore has been released to LWE-affected states under the Security Related Expenditure (SRE) scheme, reinforcing their ability to combat insurgency.

Social infrastructure—roads, schools, and healthcare facilities—has been built in abundance. Banking services have been made accessible to all.

Mayawati charts strategy to bolster BSP's OBC support base

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Lucknow

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) chief Mayawati held a pivotal meeting on Tuesday with leaders from the Other Backward Classes (OBC) community, aiming to enhance the party's influence at the grassroots level.

The discussions, which took place at the BSP headquarters, centered on expanding the party's organizational reach, strengthening its OBC vote bank, and refining strategies for upcoming elections.

A large contingent of OBC leaders and party workers attended the meeting, signaling the BSP's renewed focus on consolidating support among backward communities. With elections on the horizon, the party is intensifying efforts to reconnect with its traditional voter base and revitalise its presence in rural and semi-urban areas.

Addressing the gathering, Mayawati underscored the necessity of direct engagement with OBC voters, urging party cadres to amplify outreach initiatives and effectively communicate the BSP's commitment to their welfare. She emphasised that strengthening ties with marginalised sections would be key to the party's resurgence.

"To regain the trust of the people, our

workers must engage at the grassroots level, understand public concerns, and spread awareness about the BSP's vision for social justice and empowerment," she said.

The meeting also served as a platform to assess the party's recent electoral performance and discuss corrective measures. Leaders were instructed to launch community interactions, door-to-door campaigns, and awareness drives, particularly in areas where the party has witnessed a decline in support.

A major point of discussion was countering misinformation about the BSP and reinforcing its core message of inclusive governance. Special attention was given to issues such as reservation, economic opportunities, and social welfare, which hold significant weight among OBC voters.

Mayawati's renewed outreach underscores the BSP's strategy to reassert its relevance in Uttar Pradesh's political landscape. Party leaders were urged to work cohesively, ensuring that the BSP's ideological foundations and policies resonate strongly with the electorate.

The meeting concluded with a call for unity and grassroots mobilisation, as the party prepares for the upcoming electoral challenges.

Editor's TAKE

Turkey in turmoil

Ekrem Imamoglu's arrest could pose a serious challenge for President Erdogan

Democracy is increasingly under attack across the world. Turkey is the latest case in point where the President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is out to weed out any opposition and would not mind even if it irks the people at large. Turkey is facing one of its most intense political crises in years following the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, a key Opposition leader and major rival to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The arrest has sparked mass protests across the country, raising concerns about Turkey's democratic future and stability. Imamoglu was arrested on corruption-related charges, including running a criminal organisation, bribery, extortion, bid-rigging, and illegal data collection.

His supporters argue that the charges are politically motivated and are part of Erdogan's broader strategy to sideline a formidable contender for the 2028 presidential race. The Turkish government, however, denies any political interference, insisting that the judiciary remains independent. The timing is particularly significant, as it coincided with the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) holding a symbolic primary election to endorse him as their presidential candidate.

The arrest has triggered widespread protests across Turkey, particularly in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. Riot police have responded with water cannons, tear gas, and plastic bullets, while demonstrators have fought back with stones. Despite the government's vow to crack down on what it calls "street terror," the protests continue to gain momentum. The opposition sees Imamoglu's detention as an attack on democracy.

In response to the government crackdown, the CHP has set up nationwide ballot boxes for non-members to cast 'solidarity votes' in support of the embattled mayor. The international community has reacted strongly to Imamoglu's arrest. The Council of Europe has condemned the move and called for his immediate release. Political analysts suggest Erdogan is attempting to eliminate his strongest opposition ahead of the next elections. Domestically, the case has rattled Turkey's financial markets. Investors are increasingly wary of the country's political instability, which could further impact Turkey's struggling economy. This is not Imamoglu's first legal battle. In 2022, he was convicted for allegedly insulting Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council. More recently, a university nullified his degree over alleged irregularities, effectively barring him from running for president.

His political ascent has been a major challenge for Erdogan. He secured a surprise victory in Istanbul's 2019 mayoral elections, defeating Erdogan's ruling AKP in a major blow. A rerun of the election only solidified his popularity, making him one of the strongest opposition figures in Turkish politics today.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has increasingly exhibited authoritarian tendencies, undermining Turkey's democratic institutions. Over the years, he has consolidated power by curbing judicial independence, restricting press freedom, and suppressing political opposition. His government has jailed journalists, academics, and activists critical of his rule, while elections have been marred by allegations of unfair practices, media censorship, and crackdowns on rival parties.

The transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2018 granted Erdogan sweeping executive powers, weakening checks and balances. Furthermore, his handling of protests, such as the Gezi Park demonstrations and the post-2016 coup purges, has drawn widespread criticism for human rights violations. These actions have significantly eroded Turkey's democratic credentials, pushing the country toward an increasingly autocratic rule.

Leaderspeak



Rishabh Pant is an intelligent cricketer, and he will have picked up valuable insights regarding his batting and captaincy. I believe we will see him improve his performance. Additionally, when a captain scores runs or takes wickets, it significantly boosts their confidence in making bowling changes and setting the field. Once he gets some runs under his belt, I expect his captaincy to become even more assured.

SUNIL GAVASKAR, INDIAN CRICKETER



A historic return from space

Sunita Williams safe return has sparked pride across India and the world, with leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, celebrating her achievement

NASA astronaut Sunita Williams, of Indian descent, is in the news this week. Her team has returned safely to Earth after spending nine months in space. They initially planned to be in space for eight days, but technical problems extended their mission. The spacecraft returned without them in September. This week, they landed in a SpaceX Crew Dragon capsule alongside Nick Hague and Alexander Gorbunov.

After landing near Tallahassee, they were taken on stretchers for health checks. Her return is a moment of immense pride for leaders in India and across the globe, marking a significant leap in space exploration. Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote an emotional letter to the "illustrious daughter of India," inviting her to visit India after her return.

Notable figures who praised her include Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin, among others. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee expressed her joy: "Our daughter of India returns to us, and we are deeply, deeply happy and elated. We are profoundly happy for Butch Wilmore as well. Hail their courage, hail their return, hail human glory!" Mamata also called for a Bharat Ratna for Sunita in a post on X.

Sunita Williams, 59, is a former US Navy captain. She was born in Ohio to a Gujarati father, Deepak Pandya, from Jhulasan in Gujarat, and a Slovenian mother, Ursuline Bonnie Pandya. Sunita practices Hinduism and took a copy of the Bhagavad Gita and a Ganesh idol to space. She feels proud of her Indian heritage and said, "Everywhere I have lived, I have had Ganesh with me, so he had to come with me to space. The last time, I brought a small copy of the Upanishads."

The NASA astronauts will now undergo standard protocols to mitigate the physical challenges posed by prolonged weightlessness in space. They have been sent to the Johnson Space Center in Houston, where they will undergo recovery and return to normal life after some time.

According to Newsweek, Sunita has spent 322 days in space across several missions. She previously held the record for the most spacewalks by a female astronaut, with nine spacewalks, until Peggy Whitson broke the record in 2017. Sunita joined NASA in 1998 and has helped test new space technologies and conduct research on the International Space Station (ISS). She has been married to former police officer Michael J Williams for



over 20 years.

What began as an eight-day mission became a remarkable testament to the astronauts' resilience.

Their extended stay included over 4,500 orbits and a staggering journey of more than 121 Million statute miles.

Experts worry that spending a long time in microgravity can cause health problems for astronauts when they return to Earth's gravity. NASA maintains that transitioning from one gravity field to another is more challenging than it sounds.

"It affects spatial orientation, head-eye and hand-eye coordination, balance, and locomotion, with some crew members experiencing space motion sickness," the US agency stated.

The rehabilitation program includes daily two-hour sessions to help improve mobility, build muscle strength, and increase endurance. Life on the ISS follows a set routine, focusing on dealing with weightlessness, fluid shifts in the body, and the loss of bone density. Their extended stay has provided valuable scientific insights into space exploration. Their endurance in the face of balance issues, dizziness, and muscle weakness common due to the legs and back not supporting body weight is commendable.

Although both astronauts have completed their mission, adjusting to life on Earth

will take time.

Former US President Donald Trump has turned the issue of the stranded astronauts into a political matter. He blamed former

President Joe Biden for not helping them. The White House's official X account stated, "PROMISE MADE, PROMISE KEPT: President Trump promised to rescue the stranded astronauts while criticising Joe Biden."

Trump mentioned Sunita, referring to her as "the woman with wild hair" in his

comments. Trump explained why he has not yet invited the NASA astronauts to the White House. "They have to get better. You have no pull in your muscles and gravity when you are up there (in space). You can lift a thousand pounds like this," the former US President told Fox News.

Sunita and her crew's return is a key success in space exploration. This mission will provide valuable data for future space travel and help improve spacecraft technology. The mission was critical in understanding

the effects of prolonged space travel, aiding NASA and other space agencies in planning future missions, including sending humans to Mars.

Conclusion

Sunita Williams' safe return from her extended mission in space marks a significant milestone in human space exploration. Despite the unforeseen technical setbacks that prolonged their stay, the mission has contributed valuable scientific data that will aid future space endeavors, particularly in understanding the long-term effects of space travel on the human body. Leaders and citizens alike have celebrated her achievements, with calls for national recognition reinforcing her status as a symbol of perseverance and excellence. As Sunita and her fellow astronauts undergo rehabilitation, their experiences will continue to shape the future of space travel. With missions to Mars and beyond on the horizon, their insights into endurance, adaptation, and survival in microgravity will be invaluable. This mission underscores the evolving challenges and triumphs of human spaceflight, reminding us of the limitless possibilities that lie ahead in the quest for exploration beyond Earth.

(The writer is a popular columnist. Views expressed are personal)

Green infrastructure for sustainable cities

SECOND Opinion



HARI SOMALRAJU

According to UN reports, approximately 55 per cent of the global population lives in urban areas, but this percentage is expected to reach 68 per cent by 2050. Rapid urban growth surpasses effective urban and transport planning, resulting in worsening air and noise pollution, urban heat islands, and limited green spaces. These challenges contribute to significant health risks, including increased mortality rates for city dwellers.

However, with strategic urban planning and sustainable transport solutions, cities can mitigate these harmful effects and create healthier, more liveable environments.

One of the most effective ways to achieve this is through active transportation. Cities that invest in pedestrian-friendly pathways and bike lanes encourage physical activity while also minimising reliance on cars.

By ensuring safety and convenience, such infrastructure makes walking and cycling more appealing to residents, reducing vehicle congestion and emissions.

Public transport also plays a critical role in sustainable urban mobility. Expanding metro networks, bus services, and other mass transit options can significantly ease traffic congestion and lower pollution levels. For example, Paris is enhancing its transit system with new routes to offer viable

alternatives to car travel, encouraging a shift toward greener commuting habits.

Technology is another powerful tool for improving urban transport. Smart traffic systems that analyse real-time road conditions can optimise signal timings, reducing unnecessary idling and emissions. Adaptive traffic control strategies lead to smoother traffic flow, minimising pollution and enhancing efficiency.

The transition to electric vehicles (EVs) is a key component of sustainable transport. By investing in EV charging stations, cities make it easier for residents to adopt cleaner transportation options. Many municipalities are prioritising this shift to align with long-term sustainability goals. Green urban planning extends beyond transport infrastructure. Parks, green roofs, and urban forests help combat the heat island effect while providing essential recreational spaces. Brisbane, for instance, has been actively designing cooler, walkable urban spaces, setting a precedent for other cities worldwide. Sustainable road construction materials further contribute to environmental benefits. The use of recycled asphalt and permeable concrete minimises resource consumption and improves stormwater management, making roads more resilient while reducing their ecological impact.

The advantages of sustainable urban transport planning are far-reaching. Reduced vehicle usage leads to lower carbon emissions and improved air quality. Access to green

spaces and active transport options fosters healthier lifestyles, reducing the risk of lifestyle-related diseases. Efficient public transport and smart traffic systems ease congestion, enhancing the daily lives of commuters. Additionally, investments in sustainable infrastructure create job opportunities and attract responsible businesses, stimulating economic growth.

Despite these benefits, several challenges must be addressed. Implementing sustainable infrastructure requires significant initial investment, but the long-term savings in public health improvements, reduced environmental damage, and economic development make it a worthwhile endeavour. Strong policies and regulations are essential to drive these initiatives forward, ensuring that sustainable urban development remains a priority. Community engagement is also crucial—when residents are actively involved in planning, projects are more likely to meet local needs and gain public support. The journey toward sustainable cities is both necessary and achievable. By prioritising active transport, public transit enhancements, smart traffic solutions, and green infrastructure, urban areas can minimise their environmental footprint while improving the quality of life for their residents. While challenges exist, the long-term benefits of a low-carbon, people-centric urban environment far outweigh the obstacles, paving the way for a greener and healthier future.

(The writer is managing director of Systra Group India. Views expressed are personal)

Letters to the Editor

RESERVATION HAS BECOME A SLOGAN FOR HARNESSING VOTES

It has become a routine process to raise the issue of reservations whenever an election is near as now Bihar elections will be held after six months and political parties know that the issue will be challenged in the court and will be rejected by the judiciary and till then keep this alive for vote bank. In the Parliament elections, Opposition parties were to flare up the issue of reservations and due to this reason BJP could not get the absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, and it is a great weapon in the hands of Opposition. Now the Karnataka government has declared four per cent reservation for Muslims in allotment of contracts, and it is also true that the state has already provided similar reservation for SCs and STs and OBC contractors. Articles 14 and 15 of the Constitution of India mandate that the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth but authorises governments to "make special provisions for the

advancement of socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes."

The Karnataka Transparency in Public Procurements (Amendment) Bill, 2025, which the state Assembly passed the other day reserving for Muslims four per cent of contracts in civil works valued up to ₹2 Crore, and goods or services procurement contracts up to ₹1 Crore, hence, hardly qualifies for constitutional protection. The government would argue that the measure is designed to address the acute unemployment among the communities.

But the fact remains that the Constitution has designed reservation as a policy to ensure that communities which have been kept off the mainstream get a chance to be part of it. Economic disadvantages are an issue that have to be addressed separately.

YASH PAL RALHAN | JALANDHAR

Trump's Greenland gambit

Madam—President Donald Trump's renewed interest in acquiring Greenland has intensified geopolitical discussions and raised concerns among Greenlandic and Danish officials. In December 2024, Trump described the acquisition of Greenland as "an absolute necessity" for US national security, building upon a similar proposal from his first term that Denmark had previously declined. The situation escalated with the planned visit of a US delegation to Greenland, including National Security Adviser Mike Waltz, Second Lady Usha Vance, and Energy Secretary Chris Wright. This visit, coinciding with local elections, was labeled "highly aggressive" by Greenland's Prime Minister Mute Egede, who viewed it as unwelcome pressure amid Trump's controversial annexation plans.

Despite significant opposition from Greenlandic lawmakers and the Danish government, the Trump administration has continued its efforts. In January 2025, Trump's son, Donald Trump Junior, visited Greenland's capital, Nuuk, distributing "Make America Great Again" hats and engaging with locals, actions perceived by many as attempts to sway public opinion.

The US delegation's visit included cultural engagements such as attending the Avannaata Qimussersu dogsled race and touring historical sites.

Clamour for Justice Varma's impeachment

Madam—Apropos of the headlines 'Bar demands Justice Varma's Impeachment' (March 25), amid heightened reactions from the Bar Associations and the public ire, it is imperative that the case should be handed over to the Central Vigilance Commissioner (CVC) and it should be first ascertained whether the unaccounted cash of ₹500 currency notes were demonetised.

The investigation should be taken to a logical end as early as possible lest the agitation of Allahabad Bar Association takes an ugly turn. Even for impeachment, the investigation is mandatory.

The Union Government and media have been much disciplined in handling matter of the unusually stashed cash found at the Delhi High Court Judge. But the Collegiums' approach manifests reluctance and delay. The public is not convinced by the action in the matter. It should also be borne in mind that just one High Court Judge implicated in alleged recovery of huge unaccounted cash at home does not put the entire judiciary under fire.

But for this, the Supreme Court should have taken prompt action as they do in similar cases. Many a time, the High Court and Supreme Court benches held midnight hearings in very urgent cases and took decisions even taking cognisance suo moto. This time, their inertia is not convincing.

MPs' get a salary hike of 24 per cent

Madam—Parliament is the cornerstone of democracy, where the nation's fate is decided. The representatives sitting there should be committed to public service, yet reality paints a different picture.

While farmers take their own lives under the weight of debt, laborers struggle for fair wages, and youth remain unemployed, MPs focus on increasing their own salaries and privileges. This stark contrast mocks the very spirit of democracy.

Recently, Indian MPs' salaries were increased by 24 per cent, raising their monthly pay to ₹1.24 Lakh. Along with numerous perks such as travel allowances, medical benefits, and housing facilities, their total monthly benefits exceed ₹3 Lakh. Meanwhile, an unskilled worker earns around ₹20,358 per month, a highly skilled worker only ₹26,910—nearly 10 times less than an MP. This vast disparity questions the fairness of our democratic system.

In neighbouring countries, MPs' salaries are significantly lower. In Pakistan, it is ₹1,59,246, in Bangladesh ₹40,000, in Nepal ₹43,000, and in Sri Lanka merely ₹15,000. Given India's economic challenges, should MPs receive such high salaries and benefits while millions struggle for basic survival? Supporters argue that higher salaries ensure honesty in politics, but corruption and nepotism continue to flourish.

The ailing discoms need structural changes

India's power distribution companies (discoms) remain trapped in a cycle of mounting losses. Can the government's latest 'Reforms-Linked, Result-Based Scheme for Distribution' (RLRBSD) aims to curb inefficiencies and improve their financial health

FIRST Column



The power distribution companies (discoms) stand at the core of the power supply and distribution network in the country. Mostly owned and controlled by State Governments, they buy electricity from the generating companies (gencos) and supply it to the consumers. Yet, invariably, the financial health of discoms has been a matter of serious concern.

According to a report by the Lok Sabha's Standing Committee, the accumulated losses of discoms increased from ₹545,000 Crores in financial year (FY) 2020-21 to ₹584,000 Crores in 2021-22, ₹647,000 Crores in 2022-23 to ₹692,000 Crores in 2023-24. The government has sought to address these losses under a 'Reforms-Linked, Result-Based Scheme for Distribution' (RLRBSD). The Scheme was unveiled by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her Budget speech for FY 2021-22.

Involving an outlay of ₹300,000 Crore for five years (FY 2021-22 to FY 2025-26), the RLRBSD was aimed at trimming discus Aggregate Technical and Commercial (AT&C) losses to pan-India levels to 12-15 per cent and gradually narrow the ACS-ARR gap (ACS stands for an average cost of purchase, transmission and distribution of electricity whereas ARR stands for the average revenue realized from its sale) by March 2026.

It has two components: (i) providing financial support for compulsory prepaid and smart metering to be implemented across the power supply chain, including in about 220 Million households and up-gradation and strengthening of the distribution infrastructure (ii) training and capacity building.

As reported in the Standing Committee, the Ministry of Power (MoP) has sought an extension of the Scheme by two years through FY 2027-28 to complete the envisaged targets.

Can the scheme deliver?

Before answering this question, we need to analyze the fundamental causes behind discoms losses. AT and C losses are a sophisticated nomenclature for leakage from the system or power theft. During FY 2015-16, these were 20.7 per cent. When, out of say 100 units of electricity that leave the generating stations or power dispatch centre, 20.7 units are stolen and hence not paid for, this is bound to have a debilitating effect on the discom operations.

The discoms could charge more on the sale of the balance 79.3 units to compensate for the 'nil' revenue on the 20.7 stolen units. But this is theoretical. So, the discoms would end up making a loss to the extent of revenue lost on stolen units. There is another potent factor that



UTTAM GUPTA

exacerbates their losses.

The Electricity Act (2003) and the Guidelines issued by the MoP require the discoms to fix the electricity tariff supplied to consumers in a manner such that the ARR from its sale is equal to the ACS.

Yet under diktat from the State Government, either they don't bill certain households (HHs) at all (on consumption up to 200 or 300 units a month in Delhi or Punjab) or give a flat subsidy of ₹800 on monthly consumption (between 201 and 400 units a month in Delhi), besides free

supply to farmers as in Punjab. The discoms seek to make up for the resulting under-recoveries by charging more from industries and businesses for which the tariff can go up

to a high of ₹16 per unit as in Delhi (there being no more than two-three discoms in any jurisdiction hence an oligopolistic situation, they have no option but to pay). Moreover, the States not fully compensating discoms for the under-recoveries, despite making loud promises, further adds to the discom losses.

The twin problems of AT and C losses and under-recoveries on sale to HHs or farmers have existed for close to a quarter century. Since the beginning of 2000, the Centre has come up with four financial restructuring packages (FRPs) to help discoms.

While, the first two (2002, 2012) merely sought to condone their losses, the third namely the Ujwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana (UDAY) launched in November 2015 required discoms to set their house in order and achieve certain milestones in exchange for financial assistance.

Under UDAY, discoms' mammoth debt of about ₹400,000 Crore was condoned. Instead of this, they were required to reduce AT and C losses from 20.7 per cent during FY 2015-16 to 15 per cent by FY 2018-19. Further, they were to reduce the ACS-ARR gap from ₹0.59 per unit of electricity during FY 2015-16 to 'zero' by FY 2018-19. But, the discoms failed to deliver.

During FY 2019-20, AT&C losses were 18.9 per cent against the 15 per cent target for FY 2018-19. The ACS-ARR gap during FY 2019-20 stood at ₹0.42 per unit against a target of 'zero' for FY 2018-19. During FY 2020-21, AT and C losses zoomed to 22.3 per cent and the ACS-ARR gap scaled up to ₹0.69 paise per unit. In the following years, despite some improvement, the AT and C losses still stood at a high of 16.87 per cent during FY 2023-24. No wonder, discoms were grappling with cumulative loss of ₹692,000 Crore in

FY 2023-24.

The RLRBSD launched in FY 2021-22 talks of lowering AT&C losses to 12-15 per cent by the end of FY 2025-26, a level that should have been reached in FY 2018-19. As for the ACS-ARR gap, it merely talks of 'gradually narrowing' the gap forgetting the 'zero' target that UDAY sought to achieve by FY 2018-19. Now, the MoP has shifted the goalpost to the end of FY 2027-28.

The Scheme seeks to address discoms losses by up-grading the distribution infrastructure, pre-paid and smart metering, training and capacity building and so on. Out of ₹300,000 Crore outlay proposed for implementing it, the Centre was to provide gross budgetary support (GBS) of close to ₹100,000 Crore and funding by Power Finance Corporation (PFC) and Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) under irrevocable State Government guarantee. The fund's release is subject to discoms meeting the pre-qualifying criteria and achieving the basic minimum benchmark in reforms.

As for the follow-up action, in reply to a question in Parliament given by then Power Minister RK Singh in December 2023: "Till today, detailed project reports (DPRs) having total outlay of ₹120,000 Crore has been approved for loss reduction works and ₹130,000 Crore for smart metering works." Further, as of January 2024, the total loan disbursed by PFC-REC was ₹112,000 Crore for 16 States, against the sanctioned amount of ₹133,000 Crore.

As for the GBS, the release of funds by the Centre during FY 2023-24 was a mere ₹6,000 Crore against the budget allocation of ₹12,000 Crore.

During FY 2024-25, as of February 10, 2025, 96 per cent of the ₹12,665 Crore allocated for the scheme was utilised as per the revised estimates for 2024-25. So, the money spent (GBS plus loans from PFC-REC) has been less than half of the intended outlay. But, more worrisome is the outcome.

Till last year, 'against the sanctioned smart meters of around 220 Million, only about 0.8 Million had been installed.' During the current FY, till February 10, 2025, 20.8 million smart meters have been installed.

That takes the total to 21.6 million. This is less than 10 per cent of the target. The scheme merely addresses the 'technical' side of the problem. It barely touches the fringe. The real problem has to do with free or heavily subsidised power and theft assured or facilitated by the political brass just to win elections. For this, it rides piggyback on discoms. Till this is addressed, discoms will continue to remain under serious financial stress.

(The writer is a policy analyst. Views expressed are personal)

Importance of Himalayan glaciers and risks posed by climate change

Himalayan glaciers are not just frozen reservoirs of water; they are the lifeblood of South Asia. These colossal ice masses feed major river systems, including the Ganges, Indus, and Brahmaputra, directly impacting over a billion people. However, these glaciers are vanishing at an alarming rate, putting millions of lives, biodiversity, and entire ecosystems at grave risk.

Among them, the Gangotri Glacier stands out, supplying water to the sacred and economically crucial Ganges River. The glacier's retreat is not just an environmental concern but a looming humanitarian crisis, threatening water security, agriculture, energy production, and even cultural heritage.

The Gangotri Glacier is just one part of a larger crisis, other Himalayan Glacier including Yamunotri, Pindari, Milam and Sunder Dhunga Glaciers are also Shrinking impacting tributaries such as the Yamuna, Kali and Ramganga rivers. This accelerating glacier retreat is disputing the delicate balance of the Ganga River system.

The Himalayas are warming at nearly twice the global average, causing glaciers to melt at an accelerated pace. Several studies, including those conducted by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), confirm that Himalayan glaciers have lost over 20 per cent of their ice mass in the last four decades.

The Gangotri Glacier, which feeds the Ganges, has retreated by approximately 1,500 meters since 1935, with an annual recession rate of 10-22 meters. Scientists warn that by 2050, many smaller glaciers feeding the Ganges may completely disappear, leading to severe water shortages across northern India, Nepal, and Bangladesh.

The situation is dire for other glaciers as well for example Yamunotri Glacier (source of the Yamuna River) is shrinking, affecting water supply to Delhi and surrounding regions. Pindari, Milam, and Sunderdhunga river area depleting, impacting tributaries such as the Kali, Ramganga. Chorabari Glacier (Kedarnath region) is receding, increasing the risk of glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs), similar to the catastrophic 2013 Kedarnath floods.

The retreat of Himalayan glaciers will severely impact freshwater availability. The Ganges, which supports more than 400 Million people, is at risk of reduced flow in the dry season. This would devastate agriculture in the Indo-Gangetic plains, one of the most fertile regions on Earth. Without adequate glacial meltwater, farmers will face severe droughts, reducing crop yields and leading to food shortages.

As glaciers melt, rivers swell, leading to devastating floods. Initially, increased meltwater boosts river flows, but as glaciers deplete, erratic water patterns emerge, alternating between excessive flooding and extreme drought.

There are over 2,500 glacial lakes in the Himalayas, with more than 200 classified as dangerous and among them 50 glacier lakes in the Himalayas as "very highly hazardous". These lakes, formed by melting glaciers, can burst due to landslides or earthquakes, triggering catastrophic floods downstream.

As a result of glacial melting and heavy rainfall, the flash floods killed over 6,000 people, in Kedarnath in 2013 washing away entire villages. A chunk of the Nanda Devi Glacier collapsed, leading to floods that killed over 200 people and destroyed two hydroelectric projects in Chamoli in the year 2021.

The melting of permafrost (frozen ground) destabilizes mountain slopes, triggering landslides and rockfalls. Roads, villages, and even major infrastructure projects like dams and tunnels are at constant risk.

Uttarakhand Tunnel under construction in the Himalayas collapsed, trapping dozens of workers due to unstable, melting permafrost and excessive rainfall.

Entire villages in Himachal Pradesh, Nepal, and Arunachal Pradesh are being abandoned as the land underneath them becomes unstable.

Glacial meltwater is the primary source of many South Asian rivers. If glaciers continue to retreat at the current rate the Ganga will dry up during summer months, leading to severe water shortages and the Indus and Brahmaputra Rivers will also suffer reduced flows, threatening millions in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh and Salinity levels in coastal Bangladesh will rise, destroying freshwater ecosystems.

Himalayan forests depend on glacial-fed rivers. As river flows decrease, many plant species will perish. Endangered species like the snow leopard, Himalayan brown bear, and black-necked crane are at risk as their habitats shrink.

Even the fisheries in the Ganges and Brahmaputra will collapse due to erratic water temperatures and reduced oxygen levels in the rivers.

As glaciers melt, ancient pathogens trapped in ice for thousands of years may resurface. Scientists warn that melting permafrost in the Arctic and Himalayas could release deadly viruses and bacteria.

Rising temperatures also increase the spread of waterborne diseases like cholera and dysentery due to contaminated water sources.

For millions, the Ganges is not just a river but a sacred entity. Hindu beliefs hold that the

Ganges descended from the heavens to cleanse humanity's sins.

The Gangotri Glacier, the river's source, is thus considered divine. The retreat of the Gangotri Glacier represents not just an environmental disaster but a spiritual crisis.

Many believe that a receding Ganges is a sign of moral and ecological imbalance. The river is celebrated in countless hymns, scriptures, and festivals, yet today, it is polluted, shrinking, and at risk of vanishing. Air pollution is accelerating glacial melting. Black carbon (soot) from vehicles, industries, and crop burning settles on ice, reducing its reflectivity. As a result, glaciers absorb more heat, melting 50 per cent faster than they would naturally.

A study by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) found that black carbon contributes to nearly 30 per cent of the total glacier melting in the Himalayas.

The burning of fossil fuels in India, Nepal, and China is significantly worsening the problem.

Regional and Global Consequences like Hydropower projects in Nepal, which rely on glacial meltwater, are at serious risk due to erratic water flow.

The cities like Kathmandu face severe drinking water shortages, impacting millions and in the Tibetan Plateau, known as the "Water Tower of Asia," is drying up, affecting the Mekong, Yangtze, and Yellow Rivers. China's water security is under threat, leading to geopolitical tensions.

The Ganga-Brahmaputra Delta is experiencing severe water shortages and rising sea levels. Salinity intrusion in coastal areas is making agricultural land unusable, displacing millions.

Glacial melt from the Himalayas contributes to rising sea levels, threatening coastal cities like Mumbai, Kolkata, Dhaka, and Karachi. The global sea level is rising by 0.13 inches per year, with estimates suggesting a 10-32 inch rise by the end of the century, endangering low-lying islands and coastal megacities.

The melting of Himalayan glaciers is an existential crisis. This is not just about losing ice-it is about losing water security, agriculture, biodiversity, and entire cultures. The crisis threatens the livelihoods of millions, disrupts ancient river systems, and accelerates natural disasters.

If the current trends continue, South Asia faces an unprecedented humanitarian disaster. The melting glaciers of the Himalayas are a warning-one that the world cannot afford to ignore. Urgent global action is needed to mitigate climate change and protect the lifeline of over a billion people before it is too late.

(The writer is a lawyer at the Supreme Court of India. Views expressed are personal)

The art of stress-free management

Most of the people working in the corporate field would agree to the fact that in the fast-paced world of modern business, stress seems to be an unavoidable companion for every manager. This is mainly because the pressure to meet deadlines, satisfy stakeholders, and navigate through uncertain environments creates a constant state of tension.

And that is why the topic of "Management Without Stress" has become very popular and nowadays it is being discussed in all corporate seminars and plenaries that are held all over the globe. It's a known fact that the world over, corporations spend millions and, in some cases, even billions to find that magical technique of management without any kind of tension.

But still, no company has found that magical technique. Why? After a lot of mind churning and keeping a pragmatic approach, it can be said that the art of tension-free management is mainly about using the 8 M's, 7 P's, 6 S's and lastly 5 T's in an organised way and useful, profitable and peaceful manner and to the maximum possible satisfaction of and justice to all concerned. The 8 M's are: men, money, materials, machines, marketing, mutual connections, mutual relations and means. The seven P's. These are: productivity and performance, price and profitability, planning ahead of time, pecuniary discipline, publicity, public relations and politeness, punctuality and personal commitments. The six S's are: skills, standards, strategies and speed, salesmanship, systems and structures social good and finally the 5 T's are: time and time sense, technology or techniques, teamwork, treatment of each other, thanks giving habits.

Now, to be a good manager, one has to have a good judgement of men, materials, movements and moments and one has to have the abilities of innovation, intuition, entrepreneurship and enthusiastic efforts. One has also to have the qualities of farsightedness, global thinking, humility, integrity and lastly humour.

Since this is the era of increasing competition, rapid changes in technology and trends and doing things in ever new ways and at a great speed, one must have the abilities of resilience and feel relaxed in the face of all these and many more pressures, else one would lose one's health and happiness and temper and tranquillity.

If one plans, organises and manages the above factors properly and has the essential abilities and qualities, some of which have been mentioned above, one can sustain an atmosphere of growth and can achieve success for himself and all the members of the team, else one is bound to be a failure in life, business and industry or administration and organisational work.

Now, to attain success in achieving the goal of

one's life, we must add 2 M's, P's, S's and T's, to the above list viz: moral values, meditation, purity, peaceful personality, spiritual study, soul-consciousness, truthfulness and trusteeship.

"If we practice Meditation, there would be no mental tension" and that is why it is generally explained to managers and administrators that one must spend some time daily in meditation to do management without tension. But one thing that is being very much neglected today is that, in many places, there is tension without management.

Since there is neither any planning, nor any fixed priorities, neither fit personnel nor any fixed protocol, neither any sincerity nor any spirit of cordiality, neither any impartial judgement nor any mutual understanding, there is a great mental tension. Finally, leading by example is perhaps the most powerful way to promote stress-free management.

Managers who prioritise their well-being, practice effective stress management techniques, and cultivate a positive work culture set the tone for their team members to follow suit.

By modelling healthy behaviours and attitudes, managers can inspire their team members to prioritise self-care, communicate openly, and embrace flexibility, ultimately fostering a more resilient and productive work environment.

It should also be remembered that meditation and management have an intimate connection. One who can manage well can also meditate well and vice versa of it also is true.

So, while there is tension in many places because there is management without meditation, there is tension in many places because there is no proper management at all and, in the disturbed atmosphere, many find it difficult to meditate also. There is thus the need to follow good principles of management to be able to facilitate good and easy meditation at workplaces. This would automatically bring in a stress-free environment and stress-free life for everyone.

A stress-free work environment is crucial in today's corporate world, where managers face relentless pressures.

Adding moral values, meditation, and self-awareness further enhances efficiency. Ultimately, leading by example, fostering open communication, and prioritising well-being create a productive, stress-free atmosphere.

Integrating meditation with management ensures mental clarity and balance, proving that structured leadership and inner peace go hand in hand for lasting success.

(The writer is a spiritual educator and popular columnist. Views expressed are personal)



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

Palestinian director attacked by Israeli settlers

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Jerusalem

Israeli settlers beat up one of the Palestinian co-directors of the Oscar-winning documentary film "No Other Land" on Monday in the occupied West Bank before he was detained by the Israeli military, according to two of his fellow directors and other witnesses.

The filmmaker Hamdan Ballal, was one of three Palestinians detained in the village of Susiya, according to attorney Leah Tsemmel.

Police told her they're being held at a military base for medical treatment and she said she has not been able to speak with them.

Basel Adra, another co-director, witnessed the detention and said around two dozen settlers, some masked, some carrying guns, some in Israeli uniform, attacked the village. Soldiers who arrived pointed their guns at the Palestinians, while the settlers continued throwing stones.

"We came back from the Oscars and every day since there is an attack on us. This might be their revenge on us for mak-

ing the movie. It feels like a punishment," Adra said.

The Israeli military said it detained three Palestinians suspected of hurling rocks at forces and one Israeli civilian involved in a "violent confrontation" between Israelis and Palestinians.

The military said it had transferred them to Israeli police for questioning and had evacuated an Israeli citizen from the area to receive medical treatment.

"No Other Land", which won the Oscar this year for best documentary, chronicles the struggle by residents of the Masafer Yatta area to stop the Israeli military from demolishing their villages.

Ballal and Adra, both from Masafer Yatta, made the joint Palestinian-Israeli production with Israeli directors Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor.

The film has won a string of international awards, starting at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2024. It has also drawn ire in Israel and abroad, as when Miami Beach proposed ending the lease of a movie theatre that screened the documentary.



Hamdan Ballal, Palestinian co-director of Oscar-winning documentary 'No Other Land' detained by the Israeli military

Adra said the settlers entered the village on Monday evening, shortly after residents broke the daily fast for the Muslim holy month of Ramzan.

A settler, who according to Adra frequently attacks the village, walked over to Ballal's home with the military, and soldiers shot in the air. Ballal's wife heard her hus-

band being beaten outside and scream "I am dying", according to Adra.

Adra then saw the soldiers lead Ballal, handcuffed and blindfolded, from his home into a military vehicle. Speaking to the AP by phone, he said Ballal's blood was still splattered on the ground outside his own front door.

Some of the details of Adra's account were backed up by another eyewitness, who spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisal.

A group of 10-20 masked settlers with stones and sticks also assaulted activists with the Center for Jewish Nonviolence, smashing their car windows and slashing tires to make them flee the area, one of the activists at the scene, Josh Kimelman said.

Video provided by the Centre for Jewish Nonviolence showed a masked settler shoving and swinging his fists at two activists in a dusty field at night. The activists rush back to their car as rocks can be heard thudding against the vehicle.

Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 Mideast war, along with the Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem. The Palestinians

want all three for their future state and view settlement growth as a major obstacle to a two-state solution.

Israel has built well over 100 settlements, home to over 500,000 settlers who have Israeli citizenship.

The three Million Palestinians in the West Bank live under seemingly open-ended Israeli military rule, with the Western-backed Palestinian Authority administering population centres.

The Israeli military designated Masafer Yatta in the southern West Bank as a live-fire training zone in the 1980s and ordered residents, mostly Arab Bedouin, to be expelled.

Around 1,000 residents have largely remained in place, but soldiers regularly move in to demolish homes, tents, water tanks and olive orchards and Palestinians fear outright expulsion could come at any time.

During the war in Gaza, Israel has killed hundreds of Palestinians in the West Bank in wide-scale military operations, and there has also been a rise in settler attacks on Palestinians.

US President hits Venezuela oil buyers



President Donald Trump

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Washington

President Donald Trump said he would be placing a 25 per cent tariff on all imports from any country that buys oil or gas from Venezuela, as well as imposing new tariffs on the South American country itself.

In a Truth Social post, Trump said Venezuela has been "very hostile" to the US and countries purchasing oil from it

will be forced to pay the tariff on all their trade to the US starting April 2. The tariffs would most likely add to the taxes facing China, which in 2023 bought 68 per cent of the oil exported by Venezuela, according to a 2024 analysis by the US Energy Information Administration. Spain, India, Russia, Singapore and Vietnam are also among the countries receiving oil from Venezuela, the report shows.

But even the United States, despite its

sanctions against Venezuela, still imports oil from that country. In January, the United States imported 8.6 Million barrels of oil from Venezuela, according to the Census Bureau. And on Monday, the Treasury Department issued an extension for US-based Chevron Corp's lease to pump and export Venezuelan oil until May 27. The extension, known as a general license, exempts the country from economic sanctions and allows it to continue to pump oil.

In February, Trump had announced an end to the Chevron-Venezuela relationship, in what became a financial lifeline for the South American country. Trump's latest tariffs threat suggests the administration may be willing to take bolder moves against China in its efforts to rewrite the guidelines of the global economy. The Trump administration has already levied universal 20 per cent tariffs on imports from China as an effort to crackdown on the illicit trade in fentanyl, but another 25 per cent import tax could further escalate tensions between the world's two largest economies.

Trump said Venezuela will face a "secondary" tariff because it is the home to the gang Tren de Aragua. The Trump administration is deporting immigrants that it claims are members of that gang

who illegally crossed into the United States. The US president told reporters during a public portion of a Cabinet meeting Monday that the tariffs related to Venezuela were "long in the making," as he promised forthcoming import taxes on autos and pharmaceutical drugs that he has pledged will lead to more investment and factories inside the United States.

Trump has labelled April 2 as "Liberation Day" based on his still unclear plans to roll out import taxes to match the rates charged by other countries, as well as fully levy 25 per cent tariffs against Mexico and Canada, the two largest US trading partners. The Republican president has also increased his 2018 tariffs on steel and aluminium to 25 per cent for all imports. Trump told reporters on Friday that there would be "flexibility" in his tariffs even as he has opposed granting exemptions to his import taxes.

The US stock market had been climbing on Monday as investors expect the tariffs to be more targeted. Still, the S and P 500 index is down so far this year that a trade war could hinder economic growth and increase inflationary pressures. Trump said his social media post on Monday would serve as notification of this policy to the Department of Homeland Security and other law enforcement agencies.

Trump's portrait to be taken down at Colorado Capitol

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Denver

A painting of Donald Trump hanging with other presidential portraits at the Colorado state Capitol will be taken down after the US president claimed that it was "purposefully distorted", according to a letter.

House Democrats said in a statement that the oil painting would be taken down at the request of Republican leaders in the Legislature. Colorado Republicans raised more than \$10,000 through a GoFundMe account to commission the oil painting, which was unveiled in 2019.

Senate Minority Leader Paul Lundeen, a Republican, said he requested for Trump's portrait to be taken down and replaced by one "that depicts his contemporary likeness". "If the GOP wants to spend time and money on which portrait of Trump hangs in the Capitol, that's up to them," the Democrats said.

The portrait was installed alongside other paintings of US presidents. Before the installation, a prankster placed a picture of Russian President Vladimir Putin near the spot intended for Trump.

Initially, people objected to artist

Sarah Boardman's depiction of Trump as "nonconfrontational" and "thoughtful" in the portrait, according to an interview with Colorado Times Recorder from the time. But in a Sunday night post on his Truth Social platform, Trump said he would prefer no picture at all over the one that hangs in the Colorado Capitol. The Republican lauded a nearby portrait of former President Barack Obama, also by Boardman, saying "he looks wonderful".

"Nobody likes a bad picture or painting of themselves, but the one in Colorado, in the state Capitol, put up by the governor, along with all other presidents, was purposefully distorted to a level that even I, perhaps, have never seen before," Trump wrote. The portraits are not the purview of the Colorado governor's office but the Colorado Building Advisory Committee. The ones up to and including former president Jimmy Carter were donated as a collection. The others were donated by political parties or, more recently, paid for by outside fundraising.

The Legislature's executive committee, made up of both Democratic and Republican leadership, signed a letter directing the removal of Trump's portrait.

Perpetrators of crimes against peacekeepers must be brought to justice: India at UNSC

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ United Nations

Asserting that peacekeeping is not a zero-risk effort, India told the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) that peacekeepers have to contend with the presence of non-state actors, armed groups and terrorists and in an era of complex conflicts and threats, perpetrators of crimes against peacekeepers must be brought to justice.

These remarks were made by India's Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Parvathaneni Harish, during the UN Security Council Open Debate on Advancing Adaptability in UN Peace operations on Monday.

"UN Peacekeepers today have to contend with the presence of non-state actors, armed groups, terrorists, as well as transnational criminal networks. Technological advancements have created new challenges in the form of mis/dis/mal-information and hate speech, new-age weapons, including drones, IEDs etc. These are but a few new realities that peacekeepers are up against," he said.

"Safety and security of peacekeepers must remain paramount. In an era marked by complex conflicts and asymmetric threats, we must ensure that those who risk their lives for peace are adequately protected and that perpetrators of crimes against peacekeepers are brought to justice," he said. He stressed that troop or police-contributing countries need to focus on enhancing the capabilities of their personnel to address emerging challenges to operate effectively in hostile environments.

"India is willing to curate and offer courses that address specific demands of

modern peacekeeping at our Centre for UN Peacekeeping (CUNPK), which has been training national and international peacekeepers for over two decades," he added. Underlining that the use of advanced surveillance, communication and data analytic tools should be integrated into peacekeeping operations to improve situational awareness and rapid response capabilities, Harish said that India stands ready to share its expertise as a tech-

India ranks among the top contributors to UN peacekeeping missions with 5,384 personnel, including 153 women, across 10 missions as of September 2024. Nearly 180 Indian peacekeepers have made the supreme sacrifice in the line of duty

nology enabler in this regard.

He said that countering modern challenges to peacekeeping demands that Peacekeeping Missions are adequately funded and resourced. Resources need to be commensurate with the mandate.

"The current state of uncertainty over funding and the mandate-resource mismatch is neither sustainable nor comforting nor desirable, particularly for countries from the Global South who contribute the lion's share of troops."

Earlier this month, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced the "UN80 Initiative" aimed at improving efficiencies at the 80-year-old world organisation and making it more cost-effective

as he voiced concern over shrinking resources and liquidity crisis amid an environment of "uncertainty and unpredictability".

The UN General Assembly approved a \$3.72 Billion budget for the United Nations for 2025. The US is the single largest financial contributor to the UN, paying 22 per cent of the regular budget and 27 per cent of the peacekeeping budget. The approved budget for UN Peacekeeping operations for the fiscal year 1 July 2024 - 30 June 2025 is \$5.6 Billion and at 26.95 per cent, the US is largest contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations.

US President Donald Trump, in his second term in the White House, had announced that America will withdraw from and end funding to certain UN organisations. India ranks among the top contributors to UN peacekeeping missions with 5,384 personnel, including 153 women, across 10 missions as of September 2024. Nearly 180 Indian peacekeepers have made the supreme sacrifice in the line of duty, the highest number by far from any troop-contributing country.

Harish said that adapting peace operations to new realities cannot happen unless those on ground, the troop-police-contributing countries, are made part of the mandate formulation process at every stage. He further said that the rationalisation of peacekeeping missions is essential for the efficient allocation of resources.

"Redundant missions that continue on political life support without operational rationale only for propaganda purposes divert resources from urgently required peacekeeping missions and undermine the credibility of the UN."

Wildfires force evacuation in Andong

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Seoul

Officials in the South Korean city of Andong on Tuesday advised residents to evacuate to safe areas as firefighters struggled to contain wildfires that have ravaged southern regions since last week, forcing thousands to flee and destroying dozens of structures, including a 1,300-year-old Buddhist temple.

Thousands of firefighters in South Korea were battling at least nine wildfires across the country as of Tuesday afternoon, after the blazes fuelled by dry winds burned more than 36,300 acres of land in the past five days.

Officials in Andong, a city in the country's southeast, and the nearby town of Uiseong ordered residents in several villages to evacuate to temporary shelters, including an elementary school and indoor gymnasium, as a blaze that began in Uiseong continued to spread from strong winds.

The blaze in Uiseong destroyed Gounsa, a Buddhist temple built in the seventh century, according to officials from the Korea Heritage Service.

There were no immediate reports of injuries, and some of the temple's national treasures, including a stone Buddha statue, were evacuated before the fire reached the wooden buildings. The Korea Forest Service raised its wildfire warning to the highest "serious" level nationwide, requiring local governments to allocate a larger workforce for emergency response, tighten entry restrictions for forests and parks, and recommend that military units withhold live-fire exercises.

South Korean officials said earlier on Tuesday that firefighters had extinguished most of the flames from the largest



Houses burn in a village after being engulfed by a wildfire fueled by strong winds in Uiseong, South Korea

wildfires in the country's southern regions, including Uiseong, the neighbouring town of Sancheong, and Ulsan city. However, the ongoing dry and windy weather now appears to be causing setbacks.

Four firefighters and government workers were killed in Sancheong on Saturday after being trapped by fast-moving flames driven by strong winds.

At least 11 other people have been injured by wildfires around the country since last Friday that forced more than 5,400 to evacuate from their homes and damaged or destroyed more than 150 buildings, according to the Ministry of the Interior and Safety.

The national government designated

the hardest-hit south eastern regions as disaster zones to focus resources and accelerate recovery efforts.

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, serving as the country's acting leader following President Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment over a December martial law decree, vowed an all-out effort to contain the wildfires during a government meeting on Tuesday.

He also urged public vigilance as dry spring weather persists.

Government officials suspect that several of the recent wildfires, including those in Uiseong and Ulsan, were caused by human error, possibly due to the use of fire to clear overgrown grass in family tombs or sparks from welding work.

United States-Russia negotiations on Ukraine likely to continue, says Kremlin official

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Moscow

Further contacts between United States (US) and Russian officials on achieving a proposed ceasefire in Ukraine are likely to follow a round of talks Monday, a Kremlin official said on Tuesday, but no concrete plans have yet been made. The American and Russian negotiators held talks throughout the day on Monday in the capital of Saudi Arabia to hammer out details on a partial pause in the three-year-old war in Ukraine, a day after US officials held separate talks in Riyadh with a team from Kyiv.

It has been a struggle to reach even a limited, 30-day ceasefire, which Moscow and Kyiv agreed to in principle last week with both sides continuing to attack each

other with drones and missiles and disagreement over what kinds of targets would be included in a pause on strikes.

On Tuesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the outcome of the talks in Riyadh "has been reported in the capitals" and was currently being "analysed" by Moscow and Washington, but that the Kremlin has no plans to release any details of what was discussed to the public.

"We are talking about technical negotiations, negotiations with immersion in details," Peskov said, adding that while there are currently no plans for US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin to speak, such a conversation could be quickly organised if the need arises. "There is an understand-

The American and Russian negotiators held talks on Monday in capital of Saudi Arabia to hammer out details on a partial pause in the three-year-old war in Ukraine

ing that the contacts will continue, but there is nothing concrete at the moment," Peskov said. He added that there are no plans to hold a three-way meeting between Russia, the US and Ukraine.

Moscow and Kyiv have taken differing interpretations of what a possible partial ceasefire would look like, even after Trump spoke with the leaders of both

countries to advance a pause. While the White House said a partial ceasefire would include ending attacks on "energy and infrastructure", the Kremlin declared that the agreement referred more narrowly to "energy infrastructure".

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said he would also like to see sites like railways and ports protected.

Senior Russian lawmaker Grigory Karasin, who took part in the Russia-United States talks in Riyadh on Monday, told Russian state news agency RIA Novosti that the conversation was "very interesting, difficult, but quite constructive". "We were at it all day from morning until late at night," Karasin was quoted by the agency as saying on Tuesday.

Speaking about the war in Ukraine,

Karasin said Moscow's and Washington's positions don't always align, but that the two parties will continue to look for ways to cooperate, as there is now an understanding that cooperation is necessary to resolve the conflict.

The lawmaker added that talks between expert groups from Russia and the United States could continue.

Injuries rise in missile strike on Ukrainian city

The number of people injured Monday in a Russian missile strike on the centre of the Ukrainian city of Sumy rose to 101 people including 23 children, according to the Sumy regional administration. The strike on Sumy, across the border from Russia's Kursk region which was partially

occupied by Ukraine since August, hit residential buildings and a school, which had to be evacuated due to the attack.

Meanwhile, Russian forces launched one ballistic missile and 139 long-range strike and decoy drones into Ukraine overnight, according to the Ukrainian air force. Those attacks affected seven regions of Ukraine. Two people were injured after drone debris fell on a warehouse in the Poltava region, administration head Volodymyr Kohut wrote on Telegram Tuesday, while two people were injured outside the city of Zaporizhzhia, according to the head of the region.

One man suffered injuries after a Russian drone attack in Kherson, city administration head Roman Mrochko wrote on Telegram on Tuesday.

India losing three per cent of GDP annually: Gadkari

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

India is losing three per cent of its GDP due to around five lakh road accidents annually in the country, Union Minister Nitin Gadkari said on Tuesday.

The Minister for Road, Transport and Highways made the remarks while addressing AMCHAM's Technology Interventions For Road Safety: US-India Partnership in the national capital.

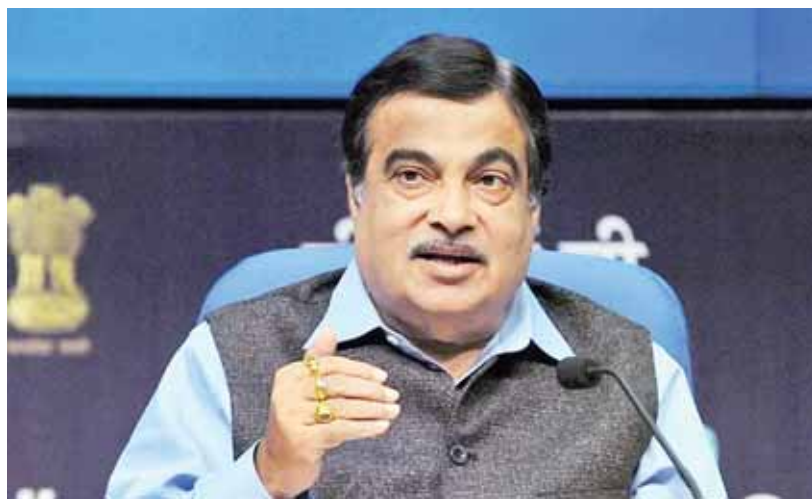
The most important problem for the country is road accidents, Gadkari said, noting that every year India sees 4,80,000 accidents, which lead to 1,88,000 deaths of people aged between 18 and 45 years.

The minister raised concerns that 10,000 deaths are of children below 18 years.

Gadkari said, "It is one of the major public health issue and the most important thing is also, we are losing three per cent of GDP because of road accidents."

The Union minister cited poor detailed project reports (DPRs) as one of the key reasons for accidents.

"DPR consultants are the main culprits who are responsible for the road accidents. (They prepare DPRs) sometimes because



Union Minister Nitin Gadkari

PIONEER PHOTO

of cost saving, other different reasons and non-serious approach," he said.

Gadkari further said that to promote helping of accident victims, the government has decided to provide an award of ₹25,000. "We have taken the decision that any third person who is going to

help to the victim of an accident, we will give him an award of ₹25,000.

Also, if any patient, by accident or after accident, is admitted to any hospital, we can give him ₹1,50,000 maximum or seven years expenditure for his treatment from the doctor," he said.

Government recovers ₹416 crore under PM-KISAN scheme

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

The government has recovered ₹416 crore from ineligible farmers under the flagship scheme PM-KISAN since its launch in 2019, Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan told Lok Sabha on Tuesday. Chouhan, in a written reply, said the central government has disbursed over ₹ 3.68 Lakh Crore to farmers in 19 installments since inception.

Under the PM-KISAN scheme, launched in February 2019, a financial benefit of ₹6,000 per year is transferred in three equal instalments, into the Aadhaar-seeded bank accounts of farmers through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mode. "An amount of ₹416 Crore has been recovered from the ineligible beneficiaries so far across the country," he said. The minister explained that the PM-KISAN scheme initially started on a trust-based system, where beneficiaries were registered by the states on a self-certification basis.

Initially, Aadhaar seeding was also relaxed for some of the states, he said.

Later on, to address this, several technological interventions were introduced, including integration with PFMS, UIDAI, and the Income Tax Department.

In order to ensure that benefits are released only to the eligible beneficiaries, land seeding, Aadhaar-based payment and eKYC have been made mandatory. Chouhan said the benefits of the farmers, who did not meet these mandatory criteria, were stopped. "As and when these farmers complete their mandatory requirements, they will receive the benefits of the scheme along with their due installments, if any," he said.

Further, states and Union Territories have been mandated to recover any amount transferred to ineligible farmers marked due to higher income groups such as income tax payees, employees of PSUs, state and central government, Constitutional post holders, etc.

The minister informed that Aadhaar is one of the key parameters for establishing identity of the farmers in scheme and the benefits of the scheme are transferred to only Aadhaar authenticated farmers. At present, 100 per cent of PM KISAN beneficiaries' database is Aadhaar-seeded, authenticated and e-KYC verified. From the 15th installment cycle of the scheme (August 2023 - November 2023), Aadhaar-based e-KYC has also been made mandatory under the scheme.

12,957 new cooperatives registered in past two years: Shah

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

A total of 12,957 new multi-purpose primary agricultural credit societies, dairy and fishery cooperative societies have been established across the country in past two years, Cooperation Minister Amit Shah said on Tuesday in Parliament.

Shah, in his written reply to the Lok Sabha, said the government had in February 2023 approved the plan for strengthening cooperative movement in the country and deepening its reach up to the grassroots.

The plan entails establishment of new multipurpose Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (M-PACS), Dairy, Fishery Cooperative Societies covering all the panchayats/villages in the country over a period of five years.

As per National Cooperative Database, a total of 12,957 new PACS, Dairy and Fishery Cooperative Societies have been registered across the country as on January 27, 2025, Shah added.

Out of which, 1,995 new cooperatives have been registered in Rajasthan, 1,535 in Odisha, 1,464 in Uttar Pradesh and 1,118 in Jammu and Kashmir, he said.

REC transfers four transmission SPVs to Power Grid, IndiGrid

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

REC on Tuesday said its subsidiary, RECPDCL, has handed over four project-specific special purpose vehicles (SPVs) — three to Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd and one to IndiGrid 2 Private Ltd.

Transmission asset, namely Ratle Kiru Power Transmission Ltd, has been handed over to IndiGrid 2 Private Ltd, REC said in a statement.

It involves the construction of a 150-km, 400 kV transmission line between Samba (J&K) and Jalandhar (Punjab), along with a 35-km, 400 kV line between Kishenpur (J&K) and Samba. The project also includes other associated works. The estimated cost of the project is around ₹1,407.44 Crore.

The Banaskantha Transco Ltd project, handed over to Powergrid, covers the augmentation of transformation capacity at the Banaskantha (Raghnesda) Pooling Station. This includes the installation of two 500 MVA (megavolt amperes) 400/220 kV ICTs (Kilovolt interconnecting transformers and associated works, at an estimated cost of ₹143.35 Crore. The Kurnool-IV Transmission Limited project involves the establishment of a Pooling Station near Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh.

It also includes 765 kV transmission lines spanning 375 km from Kurnool-IV to Bidar and 127 km from Kurnool-IV to Kurnool-III, along with other associated works, with an estimated cost of ₹ 4,727.05 Crore.

The Rajasthan V Power Transmission Limited project covers the establishment of a transmission system for immediate evacuation of power from the Sirohi substation (2 GW) and a transmission system for common evacuation of power from Sirohi PS (2 GW) and Merta-II PS (2 GW). The estimated cost of this project is ₹4,736.23 crore.

Government rolls out fix quality norms for hinges

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

The government has issued mandatory quality norms for hinges to curb the import of sub-standard goods and boost domestic manufacturing of these goods, according to a notification. The Hinges (Quality Control) Order, 2025 was issued in this regard by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) on March 21, this year.

Under these orders, items cannot be produced, sold, traded, imported and stocked unless they bear the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) mark.

The notification said this order would not apply on these goods manufactured domestically for exports; and up to 200 articles imported for the purpose of research and development by manufacturers of hinges per year with the condition that such items would not be sold commercially.

"Any person who contravenes the provisions of this order shall be punishable under the provisions of the Bureau of Indian Standards Act, 2016," it said, adding the order will be implemented from July 1, 2025.

Violation of the provision of the BIS Act can attract imprisonment of up to two years or a fine of at least Rs 2 lakh for the first offence.

In case of second and subsequent offences, the fine will increase to a minimum of Rs 5 lakh and extend up to 10 times the value of goods or articles.

Various initiatives, including the development of QCO, are being undertaken by the department to develop quality sensitisation among users and manufacturers alike.

Mandatory QCOs help curb the import of sub-standard products, prevent unfair trade practices and ensure the safety and wellbeing of consumers as well as the environment.

CM Rekha Gupta announces education boost with ₹19,291 crore allocation

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

In a major push for education and entrepreneurship, Delhi Chief Minister and Finance Minister Rekha Gupta on Tuesday announced a slew of initiatives, including CM Shri schools, language laboratories, modern computer labs and startup support centres.

The government has allocated ₹100 Crore to set up new CM Shri schools and ₹500 Crore for an education hub in Narela, aiming to strengthen Delhi's education infrastructure.

Talking about the AAP government's education policy, the Delhi CM accused it of manipulating student performance data. "The AAP government has failed many students in 9th and 11th standard so that their 10th and 12th results appear better," she alleged.

The Chief Minister, during the press conference, said that the education sec-

tor has got a major boost as the government has increased allocation of ₹19,291 Crore, a 17% rise from the previous year's Budget of ₹16,396 Crore.

While presenting Delhi's annual budget of FY26, the chief minister highlighted the government's commitment to digital learning by announcing free laptops for 1,200 Class 10 students, and set aside ₹7.5 Crore for the initiative.

For the development of multilingual skills, 100 new language labs named after Dr APJ Abdul Kalam will be established, offering courses in French, German, English, Spanish, and other languages. The project has been allocated ₹21 Crore. The chief minister also introduced a new scheme, 'New Era of Entrepreneurial Ecosystem and Vision', designed to instill business mindset in students, and allocated ₹20 Crore to support this initiative.

Additionally, several startup support

centres will be set up across Delhi to help young entrepreneurs with financial assistance and guidance.

Recognising the need for modern infrastructure, Rekha Gupta announced the establishment of 175 new computer labs and smart classrooms, with an investment of ₹50 Crore.

"In many of Delhi's existing schools, computer systems are outdated, and this initiative aims to upgrade facilities for students," she said.

The budget also emphasised on technical education, with a fund of ₹230 Crore for institutions such as Delhi Silk Entrepreneur University, ₹57 Crore for Netaji Subhas University of Technology, ₹42 Crore for Delhi Technological University, and ₹68 Crore for Industrial Training Institutes.

"₹886 Crore has been allocated for training and technical education programmes," the CM announced.

India, Singapore join hands for Green and Digital Shipping Corridor

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

India and Singapore on Tuesday signed a Letter of Intent (LoI) for Green and Digital Shipping Corridor (GDSC), with a focus on digitalisation and decarbonisation.

The Singapore-India GDSC, when established, will enhance collaboration from both countries and help accelerate the development and uptake of zero or near-zero GHG emission technologies and the adoption of digital solutions, a joint release from Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore and Ministry of Ports, Shipping said.

The minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal said his

visit to Singapore with a high-level marine sector delegation will strengthen the long-standing relationship.

Moreover, the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" will deepen and broaden cooperation between the two countries, he noted.

Sonowal is on a three-day visit to Singapore and is attending the maritime week which is expected to see participation from 20,000 delegates and exhibitors from around the world.

Under the LoI, both sides will collaborate on maritime digitalisation and decarbonisation projects, including identifying relevant stakeholders who could contribute to the effort, and work towards formalising the partnership through a

memorandum of understanding on a Singapore-India GDSC.

The LoI was signed by R Lakshmanan, Joint Secretary in the MoPSW and Waterways and Teo Eng Din, Chief Executive of the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore.

The LoI signing in Singapore was witnessed by Amy Khor, Senior Minister of State of Sustainability and the Environment of Singapore and Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal.

Since 2022, the GDSC has grown to include over 28 stakeholders across the maritime, energy and finance value chains. The maritime week is being held from March 24-28, 2025.

NorthEast Frontier Railway achieves 100 per cent electrification of Alipurduar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Guwahati

The Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) is advancing steadily in its electrification efforts, supporting Indian Railway ambitious vision of achieving 100 per cent electrification and net-zero carbon emissions. A major milestone has been reached with the successful electrification of the Alipurduar Division (APDJ), while electrification efforts in the Tinsukia Division (TSK) continue at a steady pace, said NFR said in a statement.

"In APDJ, the electrification of the Fakiragram-Golakganj section, spanning 46Route Kilometres (RKM)/ 50.536Track Kilometres(TKM), marks the final step toward full division electrification, ensuring greater efficiency and sustainability. Similarly, the electrification of New Coochbehar-Dinhata-Bamanhat sections, covering 49.81 RKM / 55.71 TKM, further reinforces the progress of

railway electrification in NFR. This achievement features major upgrades including SCADA implementation, Trip Unit Rating supply at stations and successful electric loco trials. Notably, the electric loco trial commenced at 19:16 hours, with the loco arriving at Fakiragram (FKM) at 20:11 hours, demonstrating the successful implementation of electrification," NorthEast Frontier Railway.

"With these advancements, the Northeast Frontier Railway remains committed to modernizing railway infrastructure and actively contributing to the Government of India's "Mission Electrification" initiative. By prioritising sustainability and efficiency, NFR is paving the way for a greener more reliable and future-ready railway network, seamlessly connecting the Northeastern states with the rest of the country," said Kapinjal Kishore Sharma, Chief Public Relations Officer of NorthEast Frontier Railway.

India needs to turn to beer to reduce alcohol, hooch tragedies



VINOD GIRI

India has grappled with tragedies related to alcohol including hooch mishaps. While such tragedies also happen elsewhere in the world, the frequency of such events in India is definitely way above the rest of the world. Banning alcohol is not the solution as one has seen in Bihar where hooch tragedies have jumped after prohibition. A more pragmatic solution therefore lies somewhere else.

WHO estimates that 25.5 per cent of global alcohol is "unrecorded" (illicit + legal homebrew and community alcohol). Some of it is what local communities and tribals have made for generations and while the product quality may be open to debate, there has been no health scare there. The bulk (81 per cent) of the global illicit market is actually distilled alcohol, also called spirits or liquor. This is a serious public health, social, and financial problem.

The reason is simple, distilled spirits are easy to make even in the backyard, unlike products like beer which need large investment and expertise. So, in a society

where spirits are the dominant form of alcohol, like India is, the fear of alcohol-related tragedies is always around the corner.

The answer therefore lies in shifting consumers to milder forms of alcoholic drinks like beer and wine, which has become a norm in the West. This is also what the WHO suggests — "the most effective approach to taxation with a view to improving public health and reducing this harm is to tax the volume of alcohol through a specific system of taxation. Such a system may be most effective at improving health if it has higher rates of taxation for stronger products."

Beer, a low alcohol product, accounts for 68 per cent of all alcoholic beverages consumed globally. But in India, it accounts for just about 35 per cent, and a whopping 64 per cent is the distilled spirits or the "hard liquor". It is pure economics that drives this 'bang for buck' behaviour by consumers in India, making them consume maximum amount of alcohol at the minimum possible cost. And this is delivered by "hard liquor". A product with 43 per cent alcohol priced is more attractive than a similar priced product with 5-7 per cent alcohol.

The humble 180 ml bottle called "pauwa" (nips), priced ₹140 on an average and with 42.8 per cent alcohol content delivers 77 ml of pure alcohol at a cost of ₹1.8 per ml. On the other hand, the milder and less damaging beer delivers half the alcohol at twice the price. A 650 ml beer bottle, with an average 7 per cent alcohol content, and priced at ₹160 on an average delivers 45 ml of alcohol at ₹3.6 per ml, twice the price as compared to hard liquor. Mind you, we are not talking

about the country liquor ("desi daru") which, considering its price is not even worth comparing.

This is exactly what the WHO warns against, "Such a system may be most effective at improving health if it has higher rates of taxation for stronger products for two reasons: first, drinkers can consume a greater volume of alcohol more quickly through stronger products, and such products may therefore be more closely associated with heavy episodic drinking and intoxication and second, production and distribution costs may be lower, at least in some cases, for stronger products, meaning that the same volume of alcohol can be sold more cheaply in higher ABV products even at the same rate of specific duty."

Primary reason behind this pricing anomaly which makes liquor more attractive is the fact that unlike in most part of the world, in India the excise policies that do not differentiate between a hard liquor and the milder versions like beer or wine. All alcoholic beverages are often taxed at similar rates irrespective of the amount of alcohol they contain.

This defies logic. Alcohol and water are added in different proportions to make an alcoholic beverage. Around 95 per cent of the beer in a bottle contains water. Taxing it same as liquor which has just 50-55 per cent water is wrong, because doing means that the consumer is being made to pay tax on the high water content in beer, thus being penalised for drinking a product with less alcohol.

Taxation based on alcohol strength is the best way to improve public health outcomes. Another WHO study conducted in Europe revealed that policies shifting

consumption away from high-strength alcohol beverages toward lower-alcohol beverages were associated with improving multiple public health indicators. While any beverage containing alcohol can be abused, independent research supports a conclusion that beverages with a low concentration of alcohol, like beer, are less tied to population health risks like alcohol poisoning.

Many developed countries, particularly in Europe, now recalibrate their tax structures and policy initiatives in favour of milder alcoholic beverages. In 2023 the UK rationalised its tax structure for alcohol which is based on ABV content of alcoholic beverages. So, higher the actual alcohol content, higher the tax.

Similarly, the majority of OECD countries now have a tax structure which is based on actual alcohol content a beverage has. Studies show that it has helped in reducing consumption of actual alcohol and alcohol related harms in these nations. Experts are now calling for this practice to be implemented more consistently across countries.

It is high time that the state governments in India also go in for a policy overhaul in favour of milder versions of alcoholic beverages. Taxation on an alcoholic beverage needs to be linked directly with the amount of alcohol it contains.

Also, beer and wine licenses need to be liberalised so that consumers prefer beer and wine over "hard liquor". Unless the state governments and our policymakers realise this, it is impossible to meet the target set by the WHO to reduce alcohol consumption by 10 per cent in 2030 over 2010. To do so we need to shift from "hard liquor" to beer and wine.

IN BRIEF

IPF BIHAR COUNCIL CELEBRATES BIHAR DIWAS IN SHARJAH, UAE WITH GRANDEUR AND CULTURAL SPLENDOUR

New Delhi: The IPF Bihar Council successfully organised a grand celebration of Bihar Diwas at Hotel Crystal Plaza, Sharjah, bringing together more than huge number of attendees, primarily from the Bihar diaspora in the UAE. The event was a vibrant tribute to Bihar's glorious heritage, culture and contributions to India and the world.



RECPDCL HANDOVERS RATLE KIRU POWER TRANSMISSION LIM, TRANSMISSION PROJECT, TO INDIGRID TWO PRIVATE LIMITED



REC Power Development and Consultancy Limited (RECPDCL), a wholly owned subsidiary of REC Limited, the Maharatna CPSU under the aegis of Ministry of Power, handed over project specific SPV (Special Purpose Vehicle) of ISTS Transmission Project under TBCB route viz, Ratle Kiru Power Transmission Limited to IndiGrid 2 Private Limited on 24th March 2025 at Gurugram.

GNUD BUDGET ESTIMATES OF 764 CRORE 35 LAKH AND 59 THOUSAND FOR YEAR 2025-26 APPROVED

Amritsar: The Senate of the Guru Nanak Dev University approved the Budget Estimates of 764 crore 35 lakh and 59 thousand for the year 2025-26. University would spend 46.27 per cent amount on further improvement in Teaching, Allied Teaching, Research and Education. Prof Karamjeet Singh, VC presided over both the Syndicate and Senate meetings which were held here today in the Syndicate and Senate hall of the University.



New stadium for Brisbane 2032 Olympics unveiled

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Brisbane

Sailing the Whitsunday islands. Surfing an iconic Gold Coast break. Rowing in a crocodile-inhabited river in Rockhampton.

Extra tourism-focused venues and a new 60,000-seat Olympic stadium to be built in inner-city parkland have been unveiled as part of a major overhaul of planning for the 2032 Brisbane Games.

David Crisafulli, the third premier of Queensland state in the almost four years since the International Olympic Committee awarded the 2032 Games to the capital of Queensland state, announced the latest plans on a rainy Tuesday.

He said it's not going to be like last year's Paris Olympics or the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles, promising instead it'll be uniquely-Queensland.

It's been more than 1,340 days since that IOC decision in 2021, and local organisers still haven't started the Olympic venue construction program.

"The time has come to just get on with it — get on with it, and build," Crisafulli said, marking his 150th day in office.

"We are going to start immediately. We've got seven years to make it work — and make it work we will."

A 25,000-seat aquatics centre has also been proposed in an Olympic precinct that

includes the new main stadium at Victoria Park, a former golf course near downtown Brisbane. The 11 years that Brisbane had to prepare is now down to seven, and leaders at federal, state and local levels agree it's time to stop squabbling over venues and start building them.

Newly elected IOC president Kirsty Coventry, who oversaw the initial planning stages as head of the IOC's coordination commission, has been updated on the changes by Andrew Liveris, chairman of the 2032 organizing committee.

"The stage matters," Liveris said.

"We've still got 7½ years to go, and we have a plan. This is a go-get-it-done plan." Brisbane was the first Summer Games host picked in a new process to put a preferred candidate into exclusive, fast-track talks without facing a rival bidder in a vote. With it, the IOC aimed to cut the cost of campaigning and building venues.

A croc, or not?

Domestic media earlier this week raised concerns about crocodiles at the Olympic rowing venue when it emerged that events would be staged on the Fitzroy River.

Crisafulli confirmed the Fitzroy River venue at Rockhampton, on the central Queensland coast, and said a "multitude" of events had been staged there — including Australia's pre-Olympic rowing camps. He said local kids swam and paddled in



the river and crocodiles wouldn't be a problem. Sarah Cook, the head of Rowing Australia, said the crocodile concerns were overblown in the media. But she raised some issues about the river current and its suitability for Olympic competition.

Liveris, who said World Rowing would visit the venue in May, also wasn't worried about crocs.

"There are sharks in the ocean and we still do surfing ... This is can do, not can't

do, please flip the mindset here," he said. "Creatures below the water .. That's a bit kind of Hollywood-ish."

False starts

It's been a year since local organisers scrapped initial plans to demolish and rebuild the Gabba, an iconic cricket ground, as the Games centerpiece when a previous review panel appointed in 2023 recommended a new stadium in city

parkland. The costs soared and the concept lost the support of the Australian Olympic Committee.

The premier at the time, Steven Miles, rejected the recommendations of that review led by former Brisbane Mayor Graham Quirk. Miles instead planned to use a rugby stadium to host the ceremonies, and to renovate the aging facility built to host the 1982 Commonwealth Games.

Crisafulli went to a state election late last year promising no new stadiums, but then instituted another independent review quickly after taking power for the Liberal-National coalition. His cabinet went through the recommendations of the 100-day review and approved new plans Monday.

Opposition

A group of protesters gathered outside the riverside location where Crisafulli confirmed the revised venue plan. Dozens more protestors converged on Victoria Park, holding up "Hands OFF Victoria Park" signs and shouting "shame" while listening to news of the announcement.

The Save Victoria Park community group is fundraising for a legal challenge in a bid to prevent the stadium being built in the hilly, 64-hectare (158-acre) park. Regions and legacy

Brisbane organisers plan to host Olympic sports in coastal cities and sites from the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coasts in the south to Cairns in Queensland's far north and to the gateway of the Outback at Toowoomba, where an equestrian hub will be built.

The state and federal governments initially agreed a 50-50 funding split on a venue budget of just over 7 billion Australian dollars (USD 4.4 billion).

The bulk of federal money was for an indoor arena adjacent to the city centre that was initially set to host Olympic aquatics in a drop-in pool and later be transformed to host the National Basketball League and concerts.

That project has been scrapped, with Crisafulli's government aiming to spread the federal funding around other venues and seeking private-sector funding to build a similar arena on state-owned land near the Gabba, outside the scope of the Olympics.

Under the new plan, the Gabba is set to be demolished after the 2032 Games and replaced with housing. The main existing tenants — the Brisbane Lions in the Australian Football League and Queensland Cricket — have endorsed the plan to relocate them to the Victoria Park stadium that will have a post-Olympic and Paralympic capacity of 63,000.

England beats Latvia in World Cup qualifier

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ London

Reece James scored a brilliant free kick and Eberechi Eze grabbed his maiden international goal as England beat Latvia 3-0 in a World Cup qualifier at Wembley Stadium on Monday.

James, making his first start in 2 1/2 years, curled a 25-meter free kick into the top corner after 37 minutes. The goal was his first in 18 England appearances and broke down a stuffy Latvia side.

Midway through the second half, with the home crowd starting to get restless, young midfielder Morgan Rogers combined well with Declan Rice to pave the way for a Harry Kane tap-in.

Then Eze cut in from the right and his shot hit the back of the net after taking a slight deflection.

England is the hot favorite to win Europe Group K and qualify for the 2026 World Cup. New coach Thomas Tuchel, in just his second game in charge, was content with the result if not the performance against a side 136 places behind it in the FIFA rankings.

The German praised the returning James, a player he knows from his time managing Chelsea, and said he was

happy with the way things have gone in his first two matches.

"I know Reecey and the quality the boy has is amazing," Tuchel told broadcaster ITV. "He has every right to be proud and happy with his performance. He is in excellent shape. He looks sharp, in shape and the quality there can be no doubt."

He has every right to be proud and happy with his performance. He looks sharp, in shape and the quality there can be no doubt

—THOMAS TUCHEL, COACH

"It was not an easy match. We saw a lot of good things, created good chances. We needed a free kick to unlock it. I'm happy with the attitude, energy and desire. We will get there."

Albania record first winIn the same group, Albania bounced back from losing to England 2-0 on Friday by beating Andorra 3-0 at home. Rey Manaj scored twice in the first half and Myrto Uzuni added a third in second-half stoppage time.

In Group G, Poland won for the second time in three days thanks to two goals

from Karol Swiderski against Malta. Swiderski scored in each half.

Earlier, Finland gave up a two-goal lead in Lithuania and drew 2-2, missing the chance to maintain a 100 per cent record.

Kaen Kairinen put the Finns ahead after four minutes and Joel Pohjanpallo doubled their lead from the penalty spot 13 minutes later.

But Armandas Kucys pulled a goal back for Lithuania just before halftime and Gvidas Gineitis equalised with a 30-meter strike in the 69th.

Poland tops Group G with six points, two ahead of Finland, one of the teams that has never before qualified for the World Cup.

Bosnia wins againIn Group H, Bosnia and Herzegovina beat Cyprus 2-1 at home to stay perfect.

Ermedin Demirovic put the Bosnians 1-0 up midway through the first half and Ioannis Pittas headed home an equalizer for Cyprus on the stroke of halftime. However, Haris Hajradinovic fired into the top corner early in the second half to add to their opening win over Romania last week.

Romania got its first points after winning at San Marino 5-1.

Do not know how I won last year, says Nakajima

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Gurugram

Gearing up to defend his title at Hero India Open, Keita Nakajima says he still doesn't know how he has won in the previous edition but feels patience will be key to retaining the crown, as he seeks to join his Japanese peers on PGA Tour next year.

The 24-year-old registered a four-stroke win here last year to secure his maiden DP World Tour title.

Nakajima is also hoping to emulate fellow Japanese Kenji Hosoishi, who is the first player to win the India Open title back-to-back in 1967 and 1968.

Since then, Jyoti Randhawa (2006 and 2007) and SSP Chawrasia (2016 and 2017) have also achieved the feat.

"Last year, winning here was so great. It gave me a lot of confidence in my first season and also I was able to play all the way to the Tour Championship in Dubai," he told reporters ahead of the prestigious event beginning on Thursday.

"This is a tough course and I don't know how I won last year but I will just

stay patient this year.

"Excited to play again in this tournament and honoured to be back as a defending champion. So, of course I want to win. It is a tough golf course all right but I will play and just commit to one shot at a time."

Nakajima, who won the 2023 Order of Merit with the help of three of his four wins on the Japan tour, had taken a break after the Olympics to recover from a back pain. "I had back pain after the Olympics and then I stopped playing. Started playing again like one month, so I would like to say thank you to the team, family and also agents. So I restarted in Japan in 2025. That was great moment for me."

He played five tournaments this year and found success last week, finishing second at the Porsche Singapore Classic.

"Last week at Singapore, the performance was great. I had five or six weeks off, but I was prepared for this Asian swing. Yeah, I finished in second place but I was playing great and I still feel positive this week," said the Japanese, a former Asia-Pacific Amateur champion.

Atlanta Drive takes 1-0 lead in TGL finals

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Palm Beach Gardens (US)

Patrick Cantlay came up clutch with the putter again by making a 6-foot birdie putt to give the Atlanta Drive a 6-5 victory over New York and a 1-0 lead in the best-of-3 finals of the TGL indoor golf league's inaugural season. Xander Schauffele had a chance to sent the match to a shootout with a 6-foot birdie putt, but it caught the right edge and lipped out. The second final match of high-tech league is Tuesday night, followed immediately by a third match, if necessary. The score was tied at 2 after nine holes of alternate shot.

Cameron Young made a 9-foot eagle putt to give New York a 4-2 lead because Atlanta challenged with the hammer, making the hole worth two points. Billy Horschel of Atlanta returned the favor, making an 11-foot birdie putt when New York threw the hammer. Young won the 13th hole when Justin Thomas of Atlanta made bogey, only for Horschel to hit his tee shot on a par 3 to 5 feet for a conceded birdie.

Ednaldo Rodrigues re-elected as Brazil soccer president

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian soccer boss Ednaldo Rodrigues was re-elected as president on Monday, 12 days after his main rival Ronaldo Nazario gave up his bid. Rodrigues received all 67 votes, a first in the history of the Brazilian Football Confederation. The celebratory speech by the 71-year-old Rodrigues described "unparalleled unity that exists within Brazilian soccer today." He will be in charge of the confederation when Brazil hosts the 2027 Women's World Cup.

Rodrigues' second mandate at the CBF will officially start in April 2026 and run till 2030. He first took the job as interim president in 2021. Ronaldo, the two-time World Cup champion, gave up on his bid on March 12, saying he lacked the support of soccer executives to challenge Rodrigues. Rodrigues' management has been under fire among fans and former players, though he continues to enjoy high approval among soccer executives.

Targeting top-20 finish: Marcel Siem

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Gurugram

Two years ago, a win at the Hero Indian Open kickstarted his career, and though he is happy with his fitness and form, Germany's Marcel Siem doesn't want to get greedy.

He is keeping a reasonable target of a top-20 finish. The 44-year-old had ended an eight-year wait when he clinched the crown in 2023. However, he couldn't compete to defend his title last year due to an injury and is now on the comeback trail after recovering from a hip injury. "For me, I have to be careful that I don't get greedy with my expectations," Marcel, who has six victories on the European Tour, said.

"If I put my expectations too high, it never works with me. That's why I'm saying top 20 and inside the top 20 is the will included, it's a soft will to win the golf tournament."

Marcel had endured a winless phase since winning the BMW Masters in 2014, but the Hero Indian Open title brought him back into the winner's circle as he went on to claim the Italian Open in June last year.

"I need to stay like this. I started with this in 2020 when I lost my card, just doing baby steps. It's not easy, even though I finished 14th and 9th in the last two weeks, I didn't move in the world rankings. So consistency is the key for me now," he continued.

"I need to play well in the bigger tour-

When I just arrived here, all the memories came back. I had a long stretch where I didn't win a tournament, and it meant a lot to me

—MARCEL SIEM, GOLFER

naments. These are things I put my focus on now." Marcel said he remembers each shot from his win two years ago and is relishing the prospect of taming the challenging conditions at the DLF Golf Course here. "When I just arrived here, all the memories came back. I had a long stretch where I didn't win a tournament, and it meant a lot to me. And yeah, kick-started my career again in a way. So I'm very happy to be back," he said.

"The last two weeks, I started to play better again. That hip injury took me a

long time. I think since two months, my hip is not hurting at all anymore. I can do normal stuff in the gym. I don't have to worry about it anymore. So now the focus is back on having consistent top 20s every week."

Reflecting on the tournament, Marcel said: "For me, it feels like a title defense, to be honest. I was crying in Mauritius last year, not being able to defend my title. So I'm fitter than ever. I'm trying to live healthier. The lifestyle in Mauritius helps me a lot to work hard on my game, on my fitness, mental strength as well. So I'm happy where I am right now. My form curve is good to come into this week. That was my main goal."

Talking about the golf course and strategy, the German said: "I know the golf course. I have my strategy already. I can remember literally every shot from two years ago."

"My caddy walked the course today, checked out the grain on the greens. The greens look very firm and the grain change on the plateaus is very important when you hit irons into it. So he did his homework. He thinks it's a bit more difficult than 2023."

Brazil predicts end to winless run in Argentina in World Cup qualifier

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Buenos Aires

Brazil has not won in Argentina for 16 years and hasn't scored in Argentina in 10 years. That didn't put off Brazil striker Raphinha, who kicked off the hostilities on Monday by promising to score against the World Cup holder in Buenos Aires on Tuesday in a 2026 qualifier. Raphinha also spoke about "kicking them" ... "on and off the pitch if needed" in a podcast with 1994 World Cup winner Romario. Argentine media reproduced his comments broadly.

Defender Marquinhos piled on by saying Brazil was set to break its 16-year winless streak in Argentina. "It is our time to win now. It has been a while," Marquinhos said in a press conference on Monday.

"It won't be easy, we will fight. We will have to be at our best both physically and mentally." Argentina, leading South America, can clinch a World Cup berth by drawing with third-placed Brazil with four rounds to spare. The teams will meet in Monumental de Nunez Stadium without injured stars Lionel Messi and Neymar, and

minus several other players due to suspension or injury. They last met in 2023, when Argentina won 1-0 in a qualifier at Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro.

Brazil is one point ahead of Uruguay and Paraguay. Colombia has the sixth and final direct qualification position.

Fourth-placed Uruguay will have a chance against Bolivia to recover from Friday's 1-0 home defeat to Argentina. If the Bolivians fail to beat the Uruguayans, Argentina will qualify for the World Cup even if it loses against Brazil.

Colombia takes on Paraguay. Ecuador will travel to 10th-placed Chile. Venezuela will host ninth-placed Peru.

Injuries and suspensions

Argentina also won't have injured Lautaro Martinez and the suspended Nico Gonzalez. After the 1-0 away victory against Uruguay, three players appear to have the confidence of coach Lionel Scaloni: Midfielders Leandro Paredes and Giuliano Simeone and striker Thiago Almada, who scored the winner. They are expected to play against Brazil, too.

Sepp Blatter, Michel Platini acquitted again at second trial of financial wrongdoing at FIFA

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Muttentz (Switzerland)

Sepp Blatter and Michel Platini won again in court on Tuesday and now lead 2-0 in trial verdicts against Swiss federal prosecutors.

The former FIFA president and former UEFA president were acquitted for a second time on charges of fraud, forgery, mismanagement and misappropriation of more than \$2 million of FIFA money in 2011. Blatter, now aged 89, gave little reaction listening to the verdict of three cantonal (state) judges acting as a federal criminal appeals court. Sitting in the row in front of Platini, Blatter alternately tapped his fingers on his desk or held his left hand over his mouth.

Platini sat with his arms folded or rubbing his hands as he listened to a translator sitting beside him relating the court's verdict in German into his native French.

The attorney general's office in Switzerland had challenged a first acquittal in July 2022 and asked for sentences of 20 months, suspended for two years. The indictment alleged the payment "damaged FIFA's assets and unlawfully enriched Platini."

"Michel Platini must finally be left in peace in criminal matters," his lawyer Dominic Nellen said in a statement. "After two acquittals, even the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland must realize that these criminal proceedings have definitively failed."

A further appeal to the Swiss supreme court can be filed by prosecutors.

Decade-long caseBlatter and Platini have consistently denied wrongdoing in a decade-long case that swung on their claims of a verbal agreement to one day settle the money in question.

Blatter approved FIFA paying 2 million Swiss francs (now \$2.21 million) to France soccer great Platini in February 2011 for supplementary and non-contracted salary working as a presidential advisor from 1998-2002.

The latest win for Blatter and the 69-year-old Platini came exactly 9½ years since the Swiss federal investigation was revealed and kicked off events that ended the careers of soccer's most powerful men.

That September 2015 day in Zurich, police came to interrogate them at FIFA after an executive committee meeting when Platini was a strong favorite to succeed his one-time mentor in an



upcoming election.

Corruption crisesThough federal court trials have twice cleared their names, Blatter's reputation likely always will be tied to leading FIFA during corruption crises that took down a swath of senior soccer officials worldwide.

Platini, one of soccer's greatest players and later Blatter's protégé in soccer poli-



tics, never did get the FIFA presidency he often called his destiny.

Neither Blatter nor Platini has worked in soccer since they were suspended by the FIFA ethics committee in October 2015. They were later banned and failed to overturn the bans in separate appeals to the Court of Arbitration for Sport in 2016.

"The criminal proceedings have had not

only legal but also massive personal and professional consequences for Michel Platini, although no incriminating evidence was ever presented," Nellen said, suggesting further legal action "against those responsible for the criminal proceedings."

Platini's ban expired in 2019 and Blatter was given a subsequent ban by FIFA in 2021 months before his first was due to end. Blatter is exiled from soccer until late in 2028 — when he will be 92 — because of an ethics prosecution of alleged self-dealing in eight-figure management bonuses paid for successfully organizing the men's World Cup in 2010 and 2014.

Gentleman's agreementThe verdict was given Tuesday in a low-key provincial courthouse where a four-day trial was held three weeks ago.

Blatter and Platini have claimed at five different judicial bodies — twice at FIFA, then the Court of Arbitration for Sport and now two Swiss federal criminal courts — that they had a verbal "gentleman's agreement" to one day settle the unpaid and non-contracted salary.

Platini was a storied former captain and coach of the France national team when he worked to help Blatter get elected to lead

FIFA in Paris on the eve of the 1998 World Cup he organized.

The two men said Platini agreed to be a presidential adviser on an annual salary of 300,000 Swiss francs (now \$340,000) through 2002. They claim there was a verbal deal to later get the balance of 1 million Swiss francs for each year that FIFA could not pay at the time.

Platini started asking for the money early in 2010, citing seven-figure payments made to senior Blatter aides who left FIFA which showed the soccer body could afford to pay him. The payment was finally made in February 2011.

Details of the payment only emerged in the crisis that hit FIFA in May 2015 when U.S. Federal investigators unsealed a sweeping investigation of international soccer officials. Swiss authorities made early-morning arrests at hotels in Zurich before seizing FIFA financial and business records.

In 2015, Swiss federal prosecutors already were handling a criminal complaint filed by FIFA. That was about suspected financial wrongdoing linked to votes in December 2010 that picked Russia and Qatar as future World Cup hosts.

KKR, RR eye batting, bowling overhaul

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Guwahati

Outmuscled in their previous matches, title-holders Kolkata Knight Riders and Rajasthan Royals will eye a quick course correction in every aspect when they face each other in an IPL match here on Wednesday.

The Knight Riders were beaten by seven wickets by Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the tournament-opener while the Royals were given a 44-run drubbing by Sunrisers Hyderabad.

The common theme in those defeats was how the seemingly powerful batting and bowling units of KKR and RR failed to fire.

While the Rajasthan outfit might offer the excuse of playing on a Hyderabad bowling front for the malfunction of their bowling unit, the Kolkata side do not have any such cover.

Apart from Sunil Narine, none of the KKR bowlers were able to contain free-flowing RCB batters, and in that the demystification of mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy might just worry them a bit.

Even on an Eden Gardens pitch that had some grip, Chakravarthy was given a towelling by Phil Salt and Virat Kohli.

The KKR camp now hopes that the spinner will find his stride on a Guwahati pitch that generally has some bite.

They will also keep an eye on the fitness of Anrich Nortje, who is recovering from



a back strain. If the South African gets a green signal from the physios, then he will walk in for Spencer Johnson.

Similarly, KKR's middle-order batting crumbled spectacularly after skipper Ajinkya Rahane and Narine gave them a blistering start, eventually settling for a sub-par score.

Their batting pivots such as Venkatesh Iyer and Andre Russell got out, playing predetermined cross-batted shots, and KKR will hope that they will show more game awareness in Guwahati.

The Knight Riders will also hope that Rinku Singh regains his hitting prowess

down the order. It is crucial in converting a good total into something more intimidating in nature.

His recent T20 form is not that encouraging and in his last five international outings, Rinku has logged scores of 11, 9, 8, 30, 9 along with a 12 in the IPL opener.

Rinku and his top-order colleagues in KKR will hope that the Rajasthan bowlers would once again struggle to find their groove here.

The likes of Jofra Archer, who bowled the most expensive spell in the history of IPL against SRH, Fazalhaq Farooqi and Maheesh Theekshana were rudderless

against the onslaught of Travis Head and Ishan Kishan. Archer had leaked 76 runs from his overs at the Uppal.

But they have an opportunity in Guwahati to regain their form.

It will also be a blot on stand-in skipper Riyan Parag who, at times, looked perplexed on the field about the decisions to be made. The Rahul Dravid-coached side will eye sharper and more intuitive leadership from Parag against KKR.

Teams

Kolkata Knight Riders: Ajinkya Rahane (captain), Rinku Singh, Quinton de Kock, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Angkrish Raghuvanshi, Rovman Powell, Manish Pandey, Luvnity Sisodia, Venkatesh Iyer, Anukul Roy, Moeen Ali, Ramandeep Singh, Andre Russell, Anrich Nortje, Vaibhav Arora, Mayank Markhande, Spencer Johnson, Harshit Rana, Sunil Narine, Varun Chakravarthy, Chetan Sakariya.

Rajasthan Royals: Riyan Parag (stand-in captain), Sanju Samson, Shubham Dubey, Vaibhav Suryavanshi, Kunal Rathore, Shimron Hetmyer, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Dhruv Jurel, Nitish Rana, Yuvvir Singh, Jofra Archer, Maheesh Theekshana, Wanindu Hasaranga, Akash Madhwal, Kumar Kartikeya Singh, Tushar Deshpande, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Kwen Maphaka, Ashok Sharma, Sandeep Sharma.

We are not too worried about first game loss: Coach Arun

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Guwahati

Defending champions Kolkata Knight Riders are not too worried about their opening match defeat in the Indian Premier League and are hoping to bounce back in their clash against Rajasthan Royals here on Wednesday, said bowling coach Bharat Arun.

The Knight Riders lost by seven wickets against Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the tournament opener on March 22 while the Royals were given a 44-run drubbing by Sunrisers Hyderabad the following day.

"As a team, we are not too worried about it (first game). It's always good to win the first match, you gain the momentum. But there were a lot of positives from the first game, some lessons to be learnt from there," Arun said at the pre-match press conference on Tuesday.

"Just being game number one can happen, we could have capitalised, we could have got more runs had we not lost wickets towards the end of our batting. Whatever you do there is always an opportunity to bowl better. But this team is not too worried about it, we will learn from what happened in the last game and try to get better."

Arun is also not bothered about big

hitters Andre Russell and Rinku Singh not contributing much in KKR's total of 174 for 8, which RCB overhauled with 22 balls remaining.

"Sport is about failing. You fail more often, then you succeed. Of course, champions like Russell, I think it must be weighing in his mind that he failed last game and he is out to prove every single game. We are also hoping that he will really come good in tomorrow's game."

"Rinku has bated beautifully in the games leading up to the tournament. We are not too worried about his form."

He also felt that every team in the IPL is well-balanced and the ones which do better in crucial moments of the game will win.

"Every team is batting well, getting and chasing 250-plus scores. You can't say this team is better than the other team. Every team is evenly balanced, batting and bowling pretty well."

"Teams that snatch those crucial moments at any given point of time is going to win. How challenged you are to snatch those crucial moments of the game is important."

"All teams have some really fantastic batters. There is no point targeting one, we have to look at the whole team and devise a strategy accordingly. Our game plan is to win."

Whole year I focussed, visualised about finishing games, says Ashutosh Sharma

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Visakhapatnam

Ashutosh Sharma says he spent the whole year visualising the finishing line after pulling off a miraculous heist for Delhi Capitals against Lucknow Supergiants in Visakhapatnam.

Ashutosh attracted attention with his exemplary finishing skills last season when he turned up for Punjab Kings. However, he did not leave the season a fully satisfied man as he did not meet his own expectations.

It is early days in IPL 2025 but the 26-year-old, who plays for Railways in domestic cricket, was pleased with his stellar 66 not out off 41 balls that brought Delhi Capitals back from the dead on Monday night.

Ashutosh was quick to highlight the role played by IPL debutant Vipraj Nigam as the duo changed the course of the game after Delhi Capitals found themselves

down and out at 113 for six chasing 210.

It was the contentious Impact Player rule that allowed Ashutosh to play the innings of his life.

Last year was really good but that's history for me. I have taken the positives from there and worked on myself, to improve whatever weaknesses I had

— ASHUTOSH SHARMA, DC PLAYER

He changed gears dramatically after collecting 20 runs off the first 20 balls he faced.

The last 11 balls he faced yielded 46 runs as he finished the game with a six over the bowler's head and the majority of his five sixes came down the ground.

"Missed out on finishing the game on a couple of occasions in the previous season. The whole year I focussed and visualised it. Had the belief that if I play till

the last over, anything can happen.

"Well played to Vipraj. I asked him to keep hitting. He was very calm under pressure. Want to dedicate this award to my mentor Shikhar (Dhawan) paaji," said Ashutosh.

Ashutosh and Shashank Singh made a name for themselves with their exploits for Punjab Kings before the franchise released the former ahead of the auction.

To become part of a serious discussion in the context of Indian cricket, Ashutosh knew he could not sit on past performances.

"Last year was really good but that's history for me. I have taken the positives from there and worked on myself, to improve whatever weaknesses I had. I'm applying what I did in domestic cricket."

With number 11 on strike in the 20th over and six runs needed for a famous win, it is natural to be nervous but Ashutosh remained confident.

Dhoni not convinced about Impact Player rule in T20

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Former India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni was not quite convinced about the need for the Impact Player rule (IPR) when it was first introduced in the IPL but now sees it as a part of T20 cricket's evolution.

The 43-year-old, who remains a talismanic figure for the Chennai Super Kings despite relinquishing captaincy last year, said he does not consider himself an Impact Player as he remains the first-choice wicketkeeper of his side.

"When this rule was implemented, I felt it wasn't really needed at that time. In a way, it helps me, but at the same time, it doesn't. I still do my wicket-keeping, so I am not an impact player," Dhoni told JioStar.

"I have to be involved in the game. A lot of people say the rule has led to more

high-scoring games. I believe it's more due to the conditions and the comfort level of players," he added.

The rule has been criticised by the likes of India's Test and ODI skipper Rohit Sharma and star all-rounder Hardik Pandya, both of whom believe that it can affect the growth of all-rounders as teams tend to choose big-hitting batters for this role.

Dhoni said the rule does give teams the comfort of an extra batter for crunch situations.

"The number of runs being scored isn't just because of an extra batsman. It's about the mindset, teams now have the comfort of an extra batter, so they play more aggressively," he said.

"It's not that all four or five extra batters are being used, it's just the confidence of having them. This is how T20 cricket has evolved," he added.

We have to 'mix and match' until we get our players back: Lance Klusener

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Visakhapatnam

LSG assistant coach Lance Klusener says his injury-hit team has no option but to "mix and match" until it starts getting players back.

Injuries to as many as four fast bowlers — Avesh Khan, Mayank Yadav, Mohsin Khan and Akash Deep — have dealt a big setback to LSG. They failed to defend 209 against Delhi Capitals on Monday night with dew also playing a part.

"At the moment, we don't have a lot of reserves with the ball, so we're going to have to just probably mix and match until we start getting players back," Klusener said at the post-match media interaction.

"But that's just the nature of it. We're going to have to stand up and stand tall with the bat in Hyderabad [venue of their next game] as we saw in the first game."

"We're looking forward to that, but as I said, it's an opportunity for some youngsters as well, getting their first opportunity. I was really happy for Shardul Thakur (injury replacement) - two wickets in the first over," he added.

Though skipper Rishabh Pant felt LSG had enough runs on the board, Klusener felt they were 20 to 30 runs short.

"If I have to put a finger on it, I would like to say we've probably left 20 or 30 runs with the bat out there. That was probably why we ended up being under pressure with the ball. "I thought they [DC] finished well with the bat, but the reason why we're in that position is because we didn't score enough runs, which we should have."

"I thought when the bowlers got it right, there was a little bit of spin, so I thought it was a very good wicket. There was a little bit in there for everybody."

Ashutosh Sharma played a blinder for Delhi Capitals to pull off a famous one-wicket win.



If not cricketer, I would rather be a pilot, says Glenn Phillips

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

When he is done taking superhuman catches on a cricket field, Glenn Phillips, a man of multiple interests, would love to fly planes for a living. After all, flying has always been his passion and if he had all the money in the world, the New Zealand and Gujarat Titans all-rounder would rather be a pilot than a cricketer.

Speaking to PTI ahead of his maiden season with Gujarat Titans, Phillips also detailed how he uses his experience of playing a variety of sports in cricket, the hard work behind his gravity-defying catches, how playing in India has made him a better player of spin and why his fourth team in the IPL has already become his favourite one. But Phillips was most animated when asked about his love for flying, not very surprisingly either.

"Yeah, it's a huge passion of mine. If I wasn't playing cricket and I had all the money in the world growing up, I probably would have ended up being a pilot, to be fair. I love being in the air," said Phillips.

"I love all the procedures around being a pilot, the radio communications, but obviously the handling of the plane itself. And I don't really know why I love it so much, but I think anybody who's into aviation doesn't really know either."

"Obviously, the feeling of flying is something that humans have wanted all the time. So, I guess I'm no different from all those people." The 28-year-old South African-born player, who plays all three formats for New Zealand, still has a lot of cricket left in him and as he has not made

enough money by his retirement, he would happily take up the pilot's job.

"I guess if it comes down to wanting to do something that I enjoy after cricket. Ideally, I'd like to be able to go into the mountains and have absolutely no need for work and do all my hobbies."

"But if push comes to shove, it means that I still need to work, piloting would be my first option on the list," said Phillips, who has flown the two-seater Cessna 152 aircraft. With cricket now taking most of his time, his flying time is limited to simulators. Blend of natural talent and hard work has made him the flier that I am.

Phillips' remarkable reach and agility on the field can be attributed to genes and his stint as a gymnast in his growing up days.

His jaw-dropping catches, most recently seen in the Champions Trophy, are also a result of his dedication to fielding aspect of his all-round game.

"I think there is definitely a huge piece of it that comes down to genetics from a speed and agility perspective. So, I guess you can say a little bit naturally gifted, but at the end of the day, talent and natural gifts can only get you so far."

"So, the other half of it is working my butt off to try and be able to cover all my bases, to go out in the middle and understand that I've done the work. So if I do drop catches, it's not because I haven't put the effort in," said the Blackcaps all-rounder. His left-handed grab to dismiss Mohammad Rizwan and his right-handed stunner to get rid of Shubman Gill in the Champions Trophy are fresh in the minds of cricket followers but they don't feature in Phillips' top-three catches.

Smriti, Deepti retain spots in ICC rankings

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Dubai

India vice-captain Smriti Mandhana and all-rounder Deepti Sharma held on to their third positions respectively in the latest ICC Women's T20I batter and bowlers' rankings issued here on Tuesday. Besides Mandhana, no other Indian is in the top-10 with skipper Harmanpreet Kaur placed 11th position, Jemimah Rodrigues ranked 15th and Shafali Verma a rung below.

The batters' list is led by Australia's Beth Mooney, followed by teammate Tahlia McGrath.

Mooney increased her lead at the top following scores of 75 not and 70 against New Zealand. Phoebe Litchfield gained three places to move to 22nd overall following an innings of 32 in the second clash with the White Ferns.

Star all-rounder Melie Kerr gained two places on the list for T20I batters following her innings of 40 in the second match

Besides Mandhana, no other Indian is in the top-10 with skipper Harmanpreet Kaur placed 11th position, Jemimah Rodrigues ranked 15th and Shafali Verma a rung below

of the series against Australia, while fellow New Zealander Georgia Plimmer improved 20 spots to move to 50th on the back of some consistent innings at the top of the order over the last month.

Deepti continued to occupy her third spot among bowlers behind England's Sophie Ecclestone and Sadia Iqbal of Pakistan.

The plaudits continue to arrive for Annabel Sutherland as the Australian all-rounder reached a new career-high rating on the latest ICC Women's T20I bowling rankings.

Sutherland, who has featured in the

ICC Women's ODI Team of the Year in the last two years and won the ICC Women's Player of the Month award twice in 2024, reached a new personal best rating for T20I bowlers and leaped two places to the fourth spot after her four-wicket haul against New Zealand in Mount Maunganui.

The right-arm collected four wickets as Australia bowled the White Ferns out for just 122 in reply to their massive total of 204/3 and in the process opened up an unassailable 2-0 advantage in the three-game series.

Darcie Brown, meanwhile, moved 12 spots to reach 18th overall following figures of 2/23 against New Zealand in the second game of their series.

Kerr remains in second place behind West Indies' Hayley Matthews in the rankings for T20I all-rounders, with McGrath (up three rungs to 18th) and Sutherland (up one spot to 21st) among the biggest movers this week.

ICC retains Nitin Menon in Elite Panel of Umpires

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Dubai

The International Cricket Council (ICC) on Tuesday included Allahuddin Paleker of South Africa and England's Alex Wharf in the ICC Elite Panel of Umpires which features Nitin Menon as the only Indian, while Jayaraman Madangopal has been promoted to the Emerging Panel.

Michael Gough and Joel Wilson will make way for the two new entrants in Palekar and Wharf.

According to BCCI sources, the 50-year-old Madangopal has been promoted to the Emerging Panel which makes him eligible to officiate in overseas Tests and ODIs. Former Tamil Nadu player Madangopal has so far officiated in one Test, 22 ODIs and 42 T20Is. Meanwhile, Menon is ranked second behind Richard Illingworth in the Elite Panel of Umpires.

Paleker, a former first-class cricketer from South Africa, has officiated on-field in four Tests, 23 ODIs and 67 T20Is in men's international cricket and a total of 17 women's international games —

having also officiated at major ICC tournaments such as men's T20 World Cup 2024, and the Under-19 men's Cricket World Cup 2024.

Wharf brings a wealth of experience from his 16-year first-class career, having also featured in 13 ODIs for England.

Wharf has officiated on-field in seven Tests, 33 ODIs, and 45 T20Is in men's international cricket, and has stood at the recent ICC men's and women's World Cups, the respective men's and women's T20 World Cups in 2024 and the men's Champions Trophy in 2025.

ICC chairman Jay Shah gave his warm wishes to the two new entrants, Paleker and Wharf, while also thanking the outgoing umpires, Gough and Wilson.

"By definition, being an elite official brings with it scrutiny and pressure, but we are confident that both Allahuddin and Alex possess the temperament, experience and skill to deliver consistently at this very top level," Shah said in a statement. "On behalf of the ICC, I wish them all the best for the upcoming season as well as for the future. We would also like to

place on record our sincere thanks to both Joel and Michael for their services to the world game, over a number of years." Palekar expressed his gratitude for the promotion and acknowledged the support of his mentors, colleagues, and family. "This is a significant moment in my umpiring career. It's an honour to be named in the elite panel, and I look forward to reposing the faith shown in me. Being on this panel brings both pride and responsibility, but I am confident that my experience officiating across formats will stand me in good stead," he said.

<p>यूको बैंक</p> <p>भारत सरकार का उपक्रम</p> <p>सम्मान आपके विश्वास का</p>	<p>UCO BANK</p> <p>(A Govt. of India Undertaking)</p> <p>Honours Your Trust</p>	<p>JHUMRITILAIYA</p> <p>BRANCH</p>
<p>POSSESSION NOTICE</p> <p>(For Immovable Property)</p>		
<p>Whereas, The undersigned being the authorised officer of the UCO Bank, Jhumritilaya Branch under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 (No. 54 of 2002) and in exercise of powers conferred under section 13(12) read with Rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 issued a demand notice dated 04.01.2025 calling upon the Borrower Mr. Suraj Kumar S/o Belu Yadav, Village - Rajpura, Nawada Basti, Bye Pass Road, Jhumritilaya Koderma, Jharkhand - 825409 and Lachho Devi, W/o Belu Yadav, Village - Rajpura, Nawada Basti, Bye Pass Road, Jhumritilaya Koderma, Jharkhand - 825409 to repay the amount mentioned in the notice being Rs. 8,03,022.29/- (Rupees Eight Lakh Three Thousand Twenty Two and Twenty Nine Paise Only) within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notice.</p>		
<p>The Borrower having failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the borrower and the public in general that the undersigned has taken possession of the property described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him U/S 13(4) of Act read with Rule 8 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 on this 24th March 2025.</p>		
<p>The borrower in particular and the public in general in hereby cautioned not to deal with the property and any dealings with the property will be subject to the charge of the UCO Bank, Jhumritilaya Branch for an amount of Rs. 8,03,022.29/- (Rupees Eight Lakh Three Thousand Twenty Two and Twenty Nine Paise Only) as on 06.03.2025 (With interest upto 12.12.2024).</p>		
<p>The Borrower's attention is invited to the provision of Sub-section (8) of section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available to redeem the secured assets.</p>		
<p>Description of Immovable Property</p> <p>All that part and parcel of the Flat owned by Smt. Lachho Devi, W/o Sri Belu Yadav having a Property Bounded by : North - Arjun Yadav, South - Dhani Mahato, East - Road, West - Telak Mahato with address Village - Rajpura, Nawada Basti, Ward No. 19, Jhumritilaya, Koderma, Jharkhand with Plot No. 126, 131 and Khata No. 13 with Area 4.34 Decimal Land with Build up Area 1200 Sq.ft.</p>		
<p>Date : 24.03.2025 Place : Jhumritilaya</p>		<p>Authorised Officer UCO Bank</p>