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WILL MODI MAGIC WORK
IN THE SOUTH?

WORLD 9
ISRAELI STRIKE KILLS ELITE
HEZBOLLAH COMMANDER

MONEY 10
SENSEX, NIFTY TUMBLE NEARLY 1
PER CENT ON GLOBAL WEAKNESS

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INDIA WOMEN
EYE MAIDEN T20I
SERIES WIN
12 SPORTS

SC sends Bilkis rapists back to jail

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

In a massive setback to the Gujarat Government, the Supreme Court on Monday quashed the remission it had granted to 11 convicts in the high-profile gang-rape case of Bilkis Bano and the killing of her seven family members, while slamming the state for being "complicit" with an accused and abusing its discretion. It ordered all the convicts, who were released prematurely on Independence Day in 2022, to be sent back to jail within two weeks.

Excoriating the Gujarat Government, the apex court said it "usurped" the power of the Maharashtra Government to grant remission to the convicts.

It held as nullity the May 13, 2022 judgment of another bench of the apex court, which had directed the Gujarat Government to consider the remission applications of the 11 convicts in the case, saying it was obtained by "playing fraud on court".

"This is a classic case where the order of this court dated May 13, 2022, has been used for violating the rule of law while passing orders of remission in favour of respondent nos 3 to 13 (convicts) in the absence of any jurisdiction by the State of Gujarat. Therefore, without going into the manner in which the power of remission has been exercised, we strike



down the orders of remission on the ground of usurpation of powers by the State of Gujarat not vested in it. The orders of remission are hence quashed," a bench of Justices BV Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan said.

It asked whether "heinous crimes against women permit remission" irrespective of the faith she may follow or creed she may belong to.

Bilkis Bano was 21 years old and five months pregnant when she was raped while fleeing the horror of the communal riots that broke out after the Godhra train burning incident in February 2002. Her three-year-old daughter was among the seven family members killed.

In its 251-page judgment, the Supreme Court said the

Gujarat Government had no jurisdiction to entertain the applications for remission of sentences and only the government of the State where the offenders were sentenced was competent to consider an application for remission and pass an order.

"Government of State of Gujarat (respondent No. 1 herein) had no jurisdiction to entertain the applications for remission or pass the orders of remission on August 10, 2022 in favour of respondent No. 3 to 13 (convicts) herein as it was not the appropriate government within the meaning of sub-section (7) of Section 432 of the CrPC," the bench said.

The Supreme Court said just as an order passed by a court without jurisdiction is a

nullity, in the same vein, an order passed or action taken by an authority lacking in jurisdiction is a nullity and is non est (does not exist) in the eye of law.

"On that short ground alone the orders of remission have to be quashed. This aspect of competency of the Government of State of Gujarat to pass the impugned orders of remission goes to the root of the matter and the impugned orders of remission are lacking in competency and hence a nullity. The writ petition filed by the victim would have to succeed on this reasoning," the bench said.

The top court said if the Gujarat Government really had in mind the provisions of law and had adhered to the rule of law, it would have filed

a review petition against the May 13, 2022 judgment of another bench of the apex court by contending that it was not the appropriate government.

While holding as nullity the May 13, 2022 judgment of the apex court, which had directed the Gujarat Government to consider the remission applications of the 11 convicts, the Supreme Court said on Monday it was obtained by "playing fraud on court".

In its previous verdict, a bench comprising Justices Ajay Rastogi (now retired) and Vikram Nath had asked the Gujarat Government to consider the plea of convict Radheshyam Shah for premature release in terms of its remission policy of July 9, 1992, holding that the Government of the State where the offence had taken place has the jurisdiction to decide the application.

On Monday, the top court noted that Shah had initially approached the Gujarat High Court in 2019 for a direction to consider his application for remission.

"By order dated July 17, 2019 the High Court disposed of Criminal Application by observing that he should approach the appropriate Government being the State of Maharashtra. His second such application before the Gujarat High Court was also dismissed in 2020," it said.

Continued on Page 8

Maldives loses traction, tourists head to Lakshadweep

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In the midst of an escalating dispute between India and the Maldives, the hashtag #BoycottMaldives gained traction on social media as Indian tourists began canceling their scheduled vacations to the island nation. The travel agency firm EaseMyTrip has suspended all flight bookings to the Maldives on its website, while the Confederation of All India Traders has urged traders and exporters to refrain from conducting business dealings with the Maldives.

The Indian Association of Tour Operators predicts that the repercussions of recent events and the call for a boycott will become apparent within the next 20-25 days. Meanwhile, MakeMyTrip announced on Monday that it has observed a 3,400 per cent increase in on-platform searches for Lakshadweep ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the islands.

In a series of posts on the social media platform X, EaseMyTrip CEO Nishant Pitti said, "The water and beaches of Lakshadweep are as good as those in Maldives/Seychelles. We, at @EaseMyTrip, will come up with crazy special offers to promote this pristine



destination that our PM @narendramodi has recently visited!"

The EaseMyTrip CEO also urged travellers "to discover the enchanting beauty of Ayodhya and the pristine allure of Lakshadweep" and encouraged them to "say no to Maldives bookings and explore the wonders of Ayodhya and Lakshadweep".

Indian tourists constituted the highest number of visitors to the Maldives until December 2023, according to data from the country's tourism ministry. Out of the total 17.57 lakh tourists who travelled to the island nation, India had the highest share in terms of the number of visitors at 2,09,198 lakh, followed by Russia (2,09,146) and China (1,87,118). The number was more than 2.4 lakh in 2022, while over 2.11 lakh Indians flew to the Maldives in 2021. The Maldives was also one of the few countries open for

international tourists during the pandemic, and nearly 63,000 Indians visited the country in that period.

In 2018, India was the fifth-largest source of tourist arrivals in the Maldives, with 90,474 visitors. In 2019, India reached the second spot with nearly double the number (1,66,030).

The Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC) has urged all tour and flight operators to boycott the Maldives and redirect their focus to the Lakshadweep and Andaman Islands. Additionally, the ICC has called upon the Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India and the Hotel Association of India to explore investment opportunities in the Lakshadweep Islands, promising better returns compared to the Maldives.

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P8: India summons Maldives envoy, condemns barb

JD(U) raps Congress for bid to usurp INDIA turf

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

Nitish Kumar-led JD(U), the major stakeholder of the INDIA bloc, threw a spanner into the ongoing process of talks over seat sharing between the Congress and other constituents of the coalition on Monday.

The allocation of seats has become pivotal for the Congress after the recent setback in the Assembly polls when the party had planned to flex its muscles but had to settle with only one spectacular win in Telangana. Major stakeholders like TMC, Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena, and now the JD(U-RJD) combine have asserted their intention to contest on more seats.

Simultaneously, JD(U) has also questioned why the Congress is organising a Yatra of its own instead of turning it into a show of strength by the entire Opposition. The remark refers to Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra scheduled to be undertaken from January 14 to March 20.

Senior JD(U) leader and party spokesman KC Tyagi said that the Congress should focus where it is strong and should not press for States like Bihar where JD(U) and RJD are strong. Congress is part of an alliance with JD(U), RJD, and left parties in the Nitish Kumar-led Government in Bihar.

It is alright for Congress to desire to contest on more seats where they are strong, but it is completely impractical if they

demand more seats in States where they are not in a powerful position," Tyagi said.

He mentioned that both the ruling alliance partners — JD(U) and RJD — are strong and in a position to counter the BJP in Bihar, hence there will be no compromise on this.

Nitish, who has been aiming to be the convener of the bloc, axed his trusted man Lalan Singh from the post of the party's presidentship last week. The former is believed to be annoyed with the latter's growing proximity to RJD and Congress. Nitish was also displeased when, in the last INDIA bloc meeting, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge became a talking point for the Prime Ministerial candidate.

In fact, Nitish had walked out



from the NDA and was instrumental in forming the Opposition coalition with high ambitions to be the PM candi-

date against the BJP led by PM Narendra Modi.

JD(U) also expressed displeasure at the delay by

Congress in appointing a convener for the INDIA bloc.

Tyagi said that Kharge's announcement that the INDIA alliance would meet in "10 to 15 days" to decide appointments to key posts has not "been well-received" by the party. He noted that the INDIA bloc is "running out of time and ideas" to counter the BJP.

Tyagi emphasised that while the BJP has gained an advantage over the Opposition with a significant build-up for the Ram Temple inauguration, the Opposition also needs to present a compelling counter-narrative, especially regarding the demand for a caste census and other issues.

In preparation for the 2024 Lok Sabha election, Congress has initiated seat-sharing talks

in some States with like-minded parties within the INDIA bloc. Sources indicate that senior leaders of the party have been instructed to engage with leaders from other alliance parties, and talks with some parties have already commenced.

The Congress National Alliance Committee discussed the seat-sharing formula for Bihar with RJD Rajya Sabha MP Manoj Jha on Sunday. The meeting took place at the residence of Congress leader and convener of the Congress National Alliance Committee, Mukul Wasonik, in the national capital. NAC members Ashok Gehlot and Salman Khurshid were also present.

Additionally, Congress leaders held a meeting with functionaries of the JMM's Odisha

unit to discuss the sharing of seats for the Lok Sabha elections and Assembly polls, which are being held simultaneously in the state.

Sources indicate that this was the preliminary round of meetings, involving an exchange of views on the strengths and weaknesses of both parties, as well as major stakeholders like JD(U) and other INDIA bloc partners in the State. "It was a meeting between the Congress and RJD, and similar separate meetings will be held between the Congress and JD(U) and Left partners. Reaching a consensus on such aspects takes time as it is a tedious process considering the minutest of electoral factors," explained a Congress office bearer.

Empowering poor, women must for a strong India: PM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said that an empowered India would be ensured when the poor, farmers, women, and youth are empowered. Noting that his government has made all-round efforts to alleviate the difficulties of farmers, and beneficiaries has received ₹30,000 crore under the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned that the governments in the past had a "narrow ambit" regarding issues linked to farmers.

The Prime Minister highlighted that Toor Arhar dal farmers can now sell their produce directly to the government online, ensuring purchases at MSP and better prices in the market. The scope of this scheme will be extended to other pulses as well, he added. "Our effort is to make the money we send abroad to buy pulses available to the farmers of the country," said the Prime Minister.

Addressing the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra (VBSY) via video conferencing, Modi said the biggest objective of the Yatra is to ensure that no rightful beneficiary of government schemes is left



out. Thousands of Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra beneficiaries from across the country, along with Union Ministers, MPs, MLAs, and local-level representatives, joined the event.

Prime Minister Modi noted that the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra recently completed 50 days and has connected with about 11 crore people. "Vikas Bharat Sankalp Yatra has become not only the Government's journey but also the country's journey," he said. The Prime Minister mentioned, "Modi Ki Guarantee ki Gadi is reaching every nook and corner of the country. The poor, who spent their lives waiting to benefit from government schemes, are

experiencing meaningful change today. The Government is reaching the doorsteps of the beneficiaries and proactively providing benefits. Along with Modi Ki Guarantee ki Gadi, government offices and people's representatives are reaching the people."

Referring to the bus about "Modi ki guarantee," the Prime Minister emphasised the mission-mode approach to cover beneficiaries and highlighted the link between the resolution of "Viksit Bharat" (developed Bharat) and the saturation of scheme coverage.

Earlier, Modi interacted with beneficiaries of Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra via video conferencing, where

they praised government initiatives. Prime Minister Modi highlighted the enduring struggles of the poor, youth, women, and farmers over many generations. "Our government aims to spare present and future generations from the hardships endured by earlier ones. We aspire to liberate a significant portion of the population from the daily struggles for basic needs," Modi said.

"For us, the empowerment of the poor, farmers, women, and youth is paramount. These are the four primary pillars of our nation. When these segments are empowered, the country will become stronger," he said.

Since the Yatra began, we have received 12 lakh new applications for Ujjwala connections, along with numerous applications for Suraksha Bima Yojana, Jeevan Jyoti Yojana, and PM SVANidhi, Modi reported.

Highlighting the Yatra's impact, the Prime Minister mentioned health checkups for over two crore people, including one crore TB checkups and 22 lakh sickle cell checkups. Doctors are reaching the doorsteps of the poor, Dalits, deprived, and tribals, overcoming challenges faced by previous governments, Modi said.

He emphasised Ayushman Yojna, providing ₹5 lakh health insurance, free dialysis, and low-cost medicines at Jan Aushadhi Kendras. "Ayushman Aarogya Mandirs across the country have become significant health centres for villages and the poor."

Modi underscored the government's impact on women empowerment, citing loans through the Mudra Yojna, women serving as Bank Mitras, Pashu Sakhis, and Asha workers. Over the last decade, 10 crore women have joined self-help groups, receiving over ₹7.5 lakh crore. As a result, many sisters have become 'Lakshpati Didis'.

Swindlers invoke business tycoons to con gullible

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

A massive fraud is underway through social media, aiming to deceive gullible Indians of their hard-earned savings. The modus operandi of these fly-by-night operators is to exploit the words of industrialist Ratan Tata and corporate wizards NR Narayana Murthy and Nandan Nilekani, who are allegedly endorsing a business proposal by a company called BTC Ai Evex. This company claims to be an automated trading platform aimed at improving the lives of regular Indians.

Vijay Mohan Valiathan, a leading chartered accountant in Kerala, told *The Pioneer* that the entire operation reeks of a major financial scam and deceit. The company, BTC Ai Evex, in advertisements, disguised as news reports, quotes Narayana Murthy addressing an investors' meeting (with the date and place of the meeting remaining a mystery) and attributes to him the statement: "BTC Ai Evex is our brainchild, offering substantial earning potential for countless Indians."

The advertisement, presenting itself as a news report, claims that the



publication featuring the news decided to revisit a few details related to investing on Narayana Murthy's platform and contacted the entrepreneur on the same day. The dubious report posted on the portal of a leading newspaper based in New Delhi states, "Before doing so, we agreed that we were entitled to publish an interview for our publication. So now readers can listen to our call with exclusive information."

"We began creating an account on the official BTC Ai Evex website. The process, taking a mere 90 seconds, revealed a reduced minimum deposit, confirming Murthy's claims. With ₹21,000 deposited, our video operator Rahul Kumar was promptly assigned a personal manager who provided insights, even during the late evening hours.

"The following day witnessed a surge in our balance to ₹32,385, a revelation that left our team astounded. Engaging our

personal manager, we delved into understanding BTC Ai Evex operations. Bolstered by this confidence, we tested the platform's withdrawal process, successfully transferring funds to our video operator Rahul Kumar's bank account within minutes. The statement of accounts issued by the public sector Bank of India has been posted to substantiate their claim.

"Our internal investigation unequivocally affirms BTC Ai Evex authenticity. Without any prior trading experience, our team effortlessly accrued ₹23,886 in three days," claims the so-called news report.

"Key advantages include accessibility, simplicity, responsive client support, minimal risk, and unwavering trustworthiness," claims the so-called news report.

Continued on Page 8

NGO owner held for financing anti-national activities

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The sleuths of the Anti-Terror Squad (ATS) claimed to have achieved a major success by arresting the owner of a non-

governmental organisation (NGO) which financed anti-national elements to enter India and execute subversive activities in the country.

According to an official communiqué, the UP ATS was receiving intelligence that a syndicate had been formed by some persons, which hid the identities and got illegal infiltrators settled in India on the basis of fake Indian documents and by giving them financial support, promoted anti-national activities.

This intelligence was developed by UP ATS through physical and electronic surveillance. On the basis of the intelligence, a case was registered at the UP ATS police station under sections 120B, 419, 420, 467, 468, 471, 370 of the Indian Penal Code, Section 14 of Foreigners Act, 1946 and sections 12(1), 12(2) of the Passport Act, 1967.

Three accused were arrested on October 11 last year and two more on November 7 and one on December 18 last year. They were identified as Adilur Rahman Asrafi, a resident of Dhaka, Bangladesh; Abu Huraira Ghazi, a resident of North 24 Parganas, West Bengal; Sheikh Najibul Haq hailing from 24 Parganas

South, West Bengal; Tania Mandal, a native of Pirojpur, Bangladesh; Ibrahim Khan, a native of Bangladesh; and Mohammad Abdul Awal, a resident of district Goalpara, Assam.

The ATS claimed that on the information extracted from these accused during interrogations, it managed to arrest a key member of the gang, identified as Abu Saleh Mandal, a resident of Swarnnagar in North 24 Parganas of West Bengal. He is about 50-years old and had completed his studies from Darul Uloom Madrasa, Deoband.

Abu Saleh Mandal was arrested near Alambagh Inter College in Manak Nagar, Lucknow on Sunday evening and Rs 1,16,976 in cash, two Aadhaar cards in Abu Saleh Mandal's name having different dates of birth, and two mobile phones were recovered from his possession.

On being grilled, Abu Saleh revealed that he was the director of trusts named Haroa-al Jamiatul Islamia Darul Uloom Madrasa and Kabirbagh Millat Academy.

A huge amount of funding of about Rs 58 crore has been received from abroad (Ummah Welfare Trust, UK) in the

FCRA accounts of these trusts from the year 2018 to 2022. Information has also been received that earlier some operatives of Ummah Welfare Trust accused of involvement in terror funding, were arrested by the UK forces.

The ATS claimed that a large part of the foreign funds received by trusts was in cash by making fake bills by Abu Saleh's team members. Apart from this, billing was also done by creating a fake firm named Ghazi Foods Supply and Ghazi Masonries in collaboration with a person named Abdulla Ghazi. This firm exists only on paper.

Besides, some money was received in cash through hawala and it was used for illegally infiltrating Rohingyas and Bangladeshis into India through the syndicate and for providing financial assistance to Rohingyas and Bangladeshis living illegally in India. The syndicate also made fake Indian documents and sent money to India through hawala. This money was sent to different states and used in anti-national activities.

The ATS will now seek police remand of Abu Saleh to grill him further to extract details of the gang.

SP student leaders allege damage to Lohia statue



PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Members of the student wing of Samajwadi Party on Monday staged a protest, claiming that the statue of Dr Ram Manohar Lohia installed at Lucknow University was damaged. However, the university authorities denied any damage to the statue.

Mahendra Yadav, a Samajwadi Party student leader, alleged that the Lohia statue was vandalised and the LU administration were making efforts to repair the dam-

aged part.

"One ear of the statue is still missing and it is a clear sign of vandalism. If corrective steps are not taken and the culprits are not arrested, we will stage a bigger protest," he said.

"Dr Ram Manohar Lohia was a great leader and has been the biggest source of inspiration for the Samajwadi Party. A team from the proctorial board reached out to the protesting students belonging to Samajwadi Party Chhatra Sangh and asked them to end the protest," he said.

He added that they were demanding an inquiry. "There are several cameras installed near the commerce building where the statue is installed and proper scanning of the footage can unmask the perpetrators, who should be caught and sent to jail," he said, adding: "We also want the statue to be properly renovated."

However, LU spokesperson Durgesh Srivastava insisted that the statue was not vandalised. "The statue may be weathering but it has not been damaged," he said.

Cop thrashed, uniform torn for intervening in brawl

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Two brothers and their family members allegedly thrashed a sub-inspector and tore his uniform after he intervened in a brawl with their opponent in Para police station area on Saturday evening.

The sub-inspector, Raj Sonkar, filed a complaint in this connection and identified the accused as brother duo Arjun Rawat & Karan Rawat, their mother Phool Dulari, sister Kanchan and her husband Anil Rawat. The police booked the accused for rioting, abusing, thrashing and hindering a public servant from discharging his duty.

As per reports, the SI was on patrol in the area when he got a distress call from Shivam Gautam of Malihabad. It was alleged that Arjun, Karan and their family members surrounded Sonkar and a constable in his team when they reached the scene. They allegedly pounced on the sub-inspector and thrashed him. The accused allegedly snatched the name badge and also tore the uniform. When the constable intervened, he also was beaten up. Locals flocked to the scene and rescued the sub-inspector.

Preliminary investigations revealed that Shivam Gautam of Malihabad and his friend Vijay had taken on rent a shop owned by Arjun's father Ram Kumar and they had a brawl over tenancy. As Arjun and his family members wanted to get the shop vacated, Shivam lodged a complaint at IGRS seeking police intervention.

A police spokesman said Shivam and Ram Kumar had a contract which was scheduled to expire in October 2024.

Despite that, Arjun and others were forcing Shivam to vacate the shop. They had also locked the shop. On the interference of locals, they agreed to give the goods to Shivam but later reneged from their promise. This led to a brawl between Arjun and Shivam and Shivam called the police.



सूचना

सूचित हो कि मैंने अपनी पुत्री रवीना चौरसिया को उनके गलत आचरण व चाल-चलन के कारण अपनी समस्त चल-अचल सम्पत्ति से वेदखल एवं संबंध विच्छेद कर लिया है भविष्य में अपने कर्त्यों के लिए वे स्वयं जिम्मेदार होंगी। सुरेन्द्र चौरसिया निवासी 9 श्रुति विहार पानी की टंकी-02 इंदिरा नगर लखनऊ।

NOTICE

I, Taru Lata Singh D/O Daya Ram Sagar, w/o Jaypal Singh, R/O 2/310 Vinamra Khand, Gomtinagar, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh 226010, declare that my name was formerly Km Tarulata Sagar after marriage my name has become Tarulata Singh. I am known and recognized by both the names and both are the same woman.

NOTICE

I have changed my name from ASFAQ to ASHFAQ ALAM. In future I shall be known as ASHFAQ ALAM. ASHFAQ ALAM S/o Maqsood Alam, 60-A, Begum Sarai, Dhoomanganji, Prayagraj

NOTICE

It is informed to the general public that I have changed the name of my son from Arjun Barriya to Arjun Gupta. In future he should be known as Arjun Gupta. Ajay Gupta, son of Late Ram Niwas Gupta, resident of 15/3 Itki Mohalla, Aishbagh, Nadan Mahal Road, Lucknow

सूचना

मैं डा० हर स्वरूप यदुवंशी निवासी 69, तुलसी विहार, इन्दिरानगर, लखनऊ, यह घोषणा करता हूँ कि मेरे पुत्र व उसकी पत्नी के दुर्व्यवहार के कारण तथा मेरे पुत्र द्वारा आर्थिक दबाव बनाने एवं मुझसे घृणा करने एवं अपशब्दों का प्रयोग करने के कारण अपने पुत्र मनीश यदुवंशी को अपनी चल-अचल सम्पत्ति से वेदखल करता हूँ। आज से मेरा अपने पुत्र मनीश यदुवंशी तथा उसके परिवार के किसी भी सदस्य से किसी प्रकार का संबंध नहीं होगा।

आवश्यकता हैं

डॉ० राजेन्द्र प्रसाद शिक्षण संस्थान
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प्राचार्य एवं प्रवक्ताओं की आवश्यकता है
प्राचार्य-01 पद
स्नातक कला संकाय- हिन्दी, शिक्षाशास्त्र, अंग्रेजी, गृहविज्ञान, राजनीतिशास्त्र, समाजशास्त्र, मनोविज्ञान-01-01 पद
स्नातक विज्ञान संकाय- भौतिक विज्ञान, रसायन विज्ञान, जन्तु विज्ञान, वनस्पति विज्ञान व गणित-01-01 पद
योग्यता एवं वेतनमान- सुश्री/सीओ एवं डी० सम्मानांतर लोहिया अकादमि विश्वविद्यालय अध्यापिका की पतिनिर्णयवली के अनुसार।
इच्छुक अभ्यर्थी विज्ञापन से 15 कार्य दिवस के अन्दर उपरोक्त पते पर सम्पर्क करें। प्रबन्धक

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(Syed Naved Ahmad) Manager

Couple end lives after families say no to marriage

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

A lovelorn couple poisoned themselves to death after their families gave a thumbs down to their marriage, under Mall police area on Monday.

"Villagers told us that the youth and the girl were in love and they consumed some poisonous substance after failing to get the consent of their respective families for marriage as both belonged to different castes. Further probe is underway," the Mall ACP said.

Reports said that the couple met somewhere in the locality on Sunday and con-

sumed some poisonous substance after reaching the conclusion that they could not get approval from their families for marriage. They went back to their respective homes, but kept mum.

The youth's family members said he fell unconscious while having dinner and was rushed to the CHC. He was referred to Balrampur hospital where he died on Monday morning.

The girl retired to her room after dinner. When she did not wake up on Monday morning, her brother found her unresponsive. She was

rushed to a hospital where she was pronounced dead.

A spokesman said no suicide notes were recovered and it was not clear why they ended their lives. The bodies were sent for autopsy, whose report was awaited.

Sources said that the couple were despondent after their families refused to approve their marriage and they consumed poisonous substance to end their lives.

Meanwhile, dejected following the death of his wife, a man ended his life in Banthra police station area on Monday. Sandeep Pal (27) of

Dhawapur village was a native of Unnao and drove an autorickshaw to make ends meet. He had been despondent since his wife died two years ago due to some illness. On Monday morning, he went to relieve himself but did not return from the field. His brother Manish later found him hanging from a tree.

He said his brother had become a liquor addict after his wife's death and ended his life under a bout of depression.

In another case, a youth was found dead at his maternal uncle's house in PGI police station area. Shiv Kumar (20)

was found hanging from the ceiling with a muffler tied around his neck.

Meanwhile in Ballia district, a burnt body was found lying in Diyar hamlet of Adhisjhua village under Revati police station of Ballia district.

The police reached the spot on being informed by farmers who had gone to work in the fields, and took possession of the body and sent it for post-mortem. The victim could not be identified. It was also not clear whether the body was of a man or a woman as it was burnt almost 90 per cent. Police station incharge of

Revati, Rohan Rakesh Singh, said as the area where the body was recovered bordered Chapra district of Bihar, the victim could be of the neighbouring state.

Meanwhile, two men died and a woman was severely injured in a head-on collision between two motorcycles on the Nawabganj-Dhemwa Ghat road in Gonda, police said on Monday. The accident occurred in the Nawabganj police station area Sunday evening, they said, adding that the deceased were identified as Sohan Lal (26) and Manish Barwar (23).

Etawah man, kin booked for abetment after female constable found hanging

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

An Etawah native and his family were on Monday booked for abetment to suicide after a 2019 batch woman constable, Anshi Tiwari, was found hanging at her rented accommodation in Subhash Mohal in Cantonment police station area on January 3 morning.

Her brother said Anshi (27) came in contact with the accused, Akhil Tripathi, through Facebook in 2019 when she got her first posting in Bahraich. Akhil was doing BTech and he expressed his wish to marry Anshi, who shared this with her family members. Since there was no social hindrance, Anshi's family agreed for the marriage. It was alleged that Akhil

visited Bahraich where he met Anshi and also took money from her. He also asked her to buy a gold chain for him from her Diwali bonus. Her family alleged that Akhil took her to Vrindavan for 'darshan'. "He then took her to his native house in Etawah where he also had physical relations with her. He also promised to marry her in December 2023," the family alleged.

In due course of time, Akhil started distancing himself from her and she came to know that he was dating another girl. "Akhil's family later declined the marriage proposal, saying they did not want a policewoman as Akhil's wife. However, as a condition for marriage, they demanded Rs 11 lakh in cash, a car and gold

ornaments in dowry. On the fateful day, Akhil called me and told me that Anshi was not attending his calls following a verbal spat between them," the deceased's brother alleged.

He said his sister ended her life due to being tortured mentally by Akhil and his family members. A relative of Anshi went to her house on the fateful day on being called by her brother and later informed police about the incident.

Anshi was attached with UP Police Recruitment and Promotion Board in Bahraich police lines and lived all alone.

Meanwhile, a sum of Rs 80,000 was stolen from a youth who was going to repay the loan to a trader in Wazirganj police station area on Sunday. Reports said Harishyam of

Para was going to the trader's shop by an auto and the accused joined him at the Medical College crossing. A little later, the auto driver asked them to get off, saying he had to go elsewhere. "I got down and checked my pocket only to find the cash and accused missing," he said.

Meanwhile, with the arrest of five people, including a woman, the Krishna Nagar police claimed to have worked out several cases on Monday. Those arrested were identified as Firoz Khan, Sahil, Munna aka Sameer, Nilofar aka Gitta (all of Talkatora), and Deepanshu of Bazaarkhala. The police recovered a stolen motorcycle & scooter, wires and a submersible electric motor pump.

LDA seeks NOC for hi-tech township and education hub

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Lucknow Development Authority on Monday sought the Environment department's approval to issue a non-objection certificate (NOC) for the plan to develop a hi-tech township and education hub on Mohan road. The proposed project, delayed for one and a half years, anticipates receiving the NOC by the first week of the upcoming week, allowing the immediate commencement of plotting residential plots and marking the education hub. Approximately 2,500 plots would be demarcated, according to LDA Vice-Chairman Indramani Tripathi.

He mentioned that while the land in Kaliaya Kheda has been fully acquired by the development authority, farmers in Pyarepur have resisted transferring their land, citing inadequate compensation compared to market prices. The state government has assembled a joint team, including officers from the PWD depart-

ment, Forest, and Horticulture departments, along with the VC, to assess the cost of houses built on agricultural land and the number of private tubewells in Pyarepur.

A thorough physical inspection of the area will commence on Thursday and continue for three or four days, with the findings submitted to the state government within 10 days. Once these formalities are completed, the proposed project is expected to launch by April next year, following a private partner participation model. The VC emphasised that the education hub within the project would host some of the best institutes for higher studies. Academic institutes opting to establish their presence there will receive land rebates. Several educational trusts and institutes have already expressed interest in setting up at the proposed hub, which will encompass housing schemes, commercial establishments, and the education hub.

Study shows negative impact of increased screen time on kids

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

A study conducted by an associate professor at Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Institute of Medical Sciences (RMLIMS) highlights the detrimental effects of increased screen time on children.

"The digital media expansion and COVID-19 pandemic have amplified children's reliance on screens, both as a necessity and a habit. Parents' poor awareness regarding the negative impact of excessive screen time is also a reason, with many considering it a normal part of daily life, especially in the post-COVID era where education shifted to digital platforms," Dr Neha Rai pointed out. She said that the pandemic prompted a significant shift in education delivery, with children as young as two years engaging in prolonged online schooling. The absence of stringent screen time guidelines in India, coupled with the increased use of digital media for education and recreation, led to concerning consequences.

The study was aimed at

The study was aimed to document burden of screen time on kids aged 2-5 years, assess its health consequences, and advocate for separate guidelines for educational, recreational screen time

documenting the burden of screen time on children aged 2-5 years, assessing its health consequences, and advocating for separate guidelines for educational and recreational screen time. Using multistage random sampling in Lucknow, the study found that children aged 2-5 exceeded the recommended screen time limit by about three hours. The introduction to screens before the recommended age of two years was prevalent among 77.4% of children, with 60% using screen devices at night.

Parental awareness about limiting screen time and screen-free days was limited. The study

has underscored the need for national guidelines due to the observed associations between screen time and negative impacts on psychosocial health, sleep cycles, and ophthalmologic problems in children. The researcher acknowledged the study's limitations as a cross-sectional survey and emphasised on the urgent need for informed parental counselling regarding screen use.

"Easy availability of gadgets with low data rates led to the digital boom. World over, literature is available on unrestricted and unmonitored gadget use leading to several adverse effects. However, post COVID-19, use of gadgets for education as well as recreation was justified so much so that parents thought it's a necessity of every child. Excessive screen time disrupts sleep cycle, causes behavioural additions and predisposes to attention deficit disorders. UNICEF also recognised the need of counselling parents as they believed parental patterns of gadget use will be reflected in their children. Similar findings were seen in our study," she added.

CITYBRIEFS

KMCLU CONVOCATION ON JANUARY 13
Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti Language University is gearing up for its eighth convocation ceremony on January 13. Governor and Chancellor Anandiben Patel will be present on the occasion. As many as 138 medals will be awarded, including 57 gold, 40 silver, and 41 bronze. Kerala Governor Arif Mohammad Khan will be the chief guest on the occasion. Minister for Higher Education Yogendra Upadhyay and State Minister Rajni Tiwari will also be present on the dais.

TRAINING PROGRAMME
Seth MR Jaipuria Schools organised training programmes for marketing and admission staff, and academic leaders at its campus in Gomti Nagar here from January 4 to 7, 2024. Speaking on the occasion, Jaipuria Group vice-chairperson Shreevats Jaipuria stressed on aligning the vision, building culture, talent density, innovation and self-development in developing leadership. Vice-chairperson Anjali Jaipuria shared insights on inner transformation. She said the true purpose of education remained instilling and reinforcing a robust value system. Director Kanak Gupta conducted a workshop for JAIP participants on 'Growth Mindset' Using case studies, he delved into topics such as the transition from profit to purpose, collaborative leadership, and changing mindsets to prioritise networks over hierarchy.

BANGALI ADDA PICNIC
Bangali Adda organised a fun-filled picnic as its sixth meet at S a m b o d h i F a r m h o u s e: Alibagh Resort in Lucknow on January 7. Welcoming 2024 with boating in Gomti river and games alongwith sumptuous meal with nearly 60 members made it a memorable day.



UP will achieve \$1-trillion target: Yogi

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, on Monday, said the intentions of the state government were clear, the goals were well defined, and with the right policy and precise implementation, the government would achieve the \$1-trillion target.

The chief minister said the state index of education, health, economic condition of families and industry would be prepared. He said it was necessary to collect data with accuracy for expected results.

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Monday reviewed the ongoing efforts, current outcomes and future policies aimed at achieving the ambitious goal of establishing Uttar Pradesh as a one-trillion-dollar economy.

The chief minister said that a proposal be invited for the establishment of a pharmaceutical research and innovation institute near Lucknow. He said UP had the potential and favourable opportunities and must take full advantage of this.

Several ministers attended the meeting, organised by the Planning department. In the meeting, the principal secretary (Planning) and representatives from financial consulting company Deloitte presented detailed information about the current economic environment of the state. They elaborated on the present situation and potential future outcomes, industry expectations and other relevant details sector-wise. The chief minister issued major guidelines in the special meeting. Due to the planned efforts of the last six and a half years, the economy of Uttar Pradesh is in its best condition today. The state's total GDP (gross domestic product), which stood at Rs 16.45 lakh crore in 2021-22, has now



Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and other ministers in a meeting organised by the Planning department

surged to over Rs 22.58 lakh crore in 2022-23. With a 9.2 per cent contribution to the national income, Uttar Pradesh has emerged as the second-largest economy in the country, playing a pivotal role as the growth engine of the country.

An assessment of the state's growth rate compared to the national standards has also revealed positive results. Uttar Pradesh's growth rate at current prices and constant prices in 2021-22 was 20.1 per cent and 9.8 per cent against the country's growth rate of 18.4 per cent and 9.1 per cent respectively. Similarly, in 2022-23, the national growth rate at constant prices was recorded at 7.2 per cent against the state's growth rate of 9.8 per cent while the state's growth rate of current prices was recorded at 14.3 per cent during the period.

In the present scenario, the GDP of the state is estimated to be more than Rs 25.55 lakh crore in 2023-24. To reach the one-trillion-dollar target by 2027, it is imperative that all departments escalate their efforts. Enhanced planning and coordination are essential.

The state's intentions are clear, and the goal is well-defined, and everyone will have to work together with the right policy and planned implementation.

For the planning to be in line with the target, it is crucial to gather accurate data, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath pointed out. "Organise workshops/training for statistical officers at each department level to ensure proper assessment of the situation in various sectors," he said.

The chief minister said, "We possess significant potential, and the current landscape offers favorable opportunities. We will have to take full advantage of this. The progress of all departments should be reviewed every month by the Planning department against the targets set for economic betterment."

The chief minister pointed out that digital technology has been incorporated to improve the primary segment of the economy, with initiatives such as digital crop surveys being successfully implemented. "This has to be implemented effectively in all 75 districts,"

said.

Notably, the area of cultivation and production of sugarcane increased by 26.8 per cent in 2021-22 while horticultural crop production saw a substantial rise of 31.9 per cent. State-sponsored schemes aimed at achieving self-sufficiency in pulses and oilseeds in Uttar Pradesh are yielding favorable results. However, there is a need to further enhance crop diversification and improve supply chain management.

Once again, the state has secured the top position in milk production. Additionally, it ranks third in terms of progress in egg production, achieving an annual growth rate of 12.80 per cent. This progress was satisfactory, the chief minister said.

Industrial power consumption in the secondary segment has increased by 17.0 per cent. Survey of units established in the industrial authority area, identification of unused plots, and establishment of a new industrial corridor are underway. Pledge Parks are being established at 10 places.

The state is experiencing rapid growth in the tertiary sector, encompassing hotels/restaurants, transport, communication, real estate, professional services, public services, defence, and other services. There has been unprecedented development in services related to the tourism sector. According to the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India's report in 2023, Uttar Pradesh has got the distinction of having the highest number of tourist arrivals in 2022.

In the financial year 2022-23, the state welcomed over 31.8 crore tourists, with Varanasi, Mathura and Ayodhya emerging as major centres. This positive trend is expected to continue in the coming days.

The chief minister pointed out that in addition to catering to domestic tourists, it is imperative to develop a comprehensive action plan to attract foreign tourists. This involves identifying potential countries and formulating a tailored policy for branding the state in alignment with the preferences and interests of these countries.

Maya feels 'unsafe', demands shifting of BSP office

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The State Guest House attack again seems to have come to haunt Bahujan Samaj Party president Mayawati, who, on Monday, urged the Yogi Adityanath government to allot an alternative office for her party as she apprehended an untoward incident taking place in the present Mall Avenue office of the party in the state capital. In a series of tweets on Monday, Mayawati claimed that she felt "unsafe" in the present office which had a flyover running almost parallel to it.

"Policemen are deployed whenever there is an event at the party office. As such I am forced to conduct the majority of the meetings at my residence," she tweeted. Without naming the Samajwadi Party, Mayawati accused the "conspirators" of making the bridge higher than the BSP office and termed such forces as "anti-Dalit".

Mayawati said that she had already shifted the status of Dalit icons to her residence so that they could not be vandalised by "such forces".

The flyover adjacent to the BSP office was built during the regime of Akhilesh Yadav.

Mayawati also recalled that the same forces (read SP) were responsible for the infamous June 2 State Guest House incident of 1995 in which she and her supporters were attacked by Samajwadi Party men.

Meanwhile, Bharatiya Janata Party spokesman Rakesh Tripathi said that there was no threat to the security of Mayawati since the Yogi Adityanath government had ensured the safety of all. "As far as shifting of the office is con-



cerned, she can apply to the government and action will be taken according to rules," he said.

It may be mentioned that both SP chief Akhilesh Yadav and former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mayawati have already locked horns over move of major parties of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) to include the BSP in the opposition alliance to take on the BJP in the coming parliamentary elections scheduled sometime around April this year.

Interestingly, Akhilesh on Sunday warned that his party would prefer to go it alone if the BSP joined the INDIA bloc while Mayawati advised the SP chief to first see his own past when his party founder Mulayam Singh Yadav had congratulated BJP for winning the parliamentary elections in 2019. Mayawati had earlier announced that her party would go it alone in the Lok Sabha polls and would not join any major political party. Some Congress leaders in UP, however, are advocating to include the BSP in the INDIA bloc instead of SP, which created a rift between the two major non-BJP parties that ruled UP.

UP to shine yet again in Swachh Survekshan

Lucknow (PNS): Uttar Pradesh is set to shine in the Swachh Survekshan-2023 for yet another year. While Prayagraj and Varanasi are set to bag the prestigious President's Award, a total of six cities of Uttar Pradesh will be awarded in different categories, the Urban Development department disclosed.

The Swachh Survekshan Awards will be announced on January 11 in New Delhi.

Notably, Noida at the state level and Barwar, Anupshahr and Gajraula at the area level will also be honoured for their commendable efforts in promoting cleanliness.

This year marks a significant positive progress, with 648 cities of the state receiving the Open Defecation Free (ODF) certificate, a notable increase from the 588 cities awarded last year.

Swachh Survekshan-2023 results reveal that 129 cities in Uttar Pradesh have achieved ODF++ status, reflecting adherence to open defecation-free standards and sustainable waste management practices. Apart from this, 435 cities in the state have attained ODF+ status, showcasing the commitment of the Yogi Adityanath government towards cleanliness in the state.

Apart from this, in terms of 'Garbage-Free City Certificate', the strides made in Uttar Pradesh are truly noteworthy. Last year, 11 cities secured the esteemed Garbage-Free City title; this year, the number has surged to 65 cities. Noida has achieved a remarkable 5-star rating.

Furthermore, eight cities, including Lucknow, Gorakhpur, Varanasi, Kanpur, Ghaziabad, Aligarh, Jhansi, and Firozabad, have earned a 3-star rating.

Consecration broadening BJP outreach to Dalits, Backwards

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

In a strategic move to broaden their outreach to Dalits and Backward communities, the Bharatiya Janata Party and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh are using Ram Lalla consecration ceremony scheduled on January 22 to extend its reach into Dalit and backward class settlements.

The Dalit community has played a pivotal role in the journey from the inception of the Ram temple construction. Kameshwar Chaupal, a dedicated volunteer from Bihar, laid the first foundation stone of the temple and currently serves as a member of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra trust.

The sacred premises of the Shri Ram Temple will house temples dedicated to Maharishi Valmiki, Mata Shabari and Nishadraj.

In a noteworthy development, the Central government has added a new dimension to this narrative by naming the

international airport in Ayodhya after Maharishi Valmiki.

Preparations are in full swing to ensure the Pran Pratishtha ceremony becomes a grand spectacle in all Dalit and Valmiki settlements. To encapsulate the spirit of inclusivity, people from diverse religious backgrounds, including Jain, Buddhist, Parsi, Hindu and Sikh communities, are being actively involved in the temple events.

On the day of Pran Pratishtha, there is a strategic plan to conduct puja and aarti in the temples, featuring active participation from individuals belonging to the Dalit community. An official from RSS emphasised that Dalits and backward classes are being appraised of the profound message conveyed by the Central government through the naming of the airport after Maharishi Valmiki. The settlements are being enlightened about the significant role played by Maharishi Valmiki's

Ramayana in making the lore of Lord Ram accessible to the masses.

Additionally, the backward classes are being reminded of the crucial role played by Nishadraj, the boatman who aided Lord Ram in crossing the river during his exile, and how the Lord, after the victory in Lanka, first visited the boatman's dwelling.

The efforts towards social harmony are yielding heartening results, as evidenced during the door-to-door distribution of 'akshat' in Valmiki settlements in the Awadh province. In instances where the picture of Shri Ram reached homes for the first time, families expressed overwhelming emotions.

During an 'akshat' distribution event in a village in Ambedkar Nagar, the Valmiki community welcomed the picture of Shri Ram into their homes, partaking in a ritual bath and displaying deep emotions while accepting the invitation.

RJB chief priest against inviting 'disbelievers'

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Acharya Satyendra Das, the chief priest of Ram Janmabhoomi, has expressed his displeasure, saying that individuals not acknowledging Lord Ram and harbouring anti-Hindu sentiments should not receive invitations for the Pran Pratishtha ceremony.

This reaction was prompted by the invitations extended to Congress national president Mallikarjun Kharge and former party chief Sonia Gandhi for the ceremony.

Acharya Satyendra Das voiced his disapproval, highlighting that these individuals had previously denied the existence of Lord Ram.

In a statement in Ayodhya, the Ram Janmabhoomi chief priest asserted, "There is no need to invite such critics and anti-Hindu elements to the sacred event."

"The Pran Pratishtha ceremony, scheduled at Ram

Janmabhoomi, holds immense significance for the Hindu community. Excluding those who express skepticism about the existence of Lord Ram aligns with the goal of maintaining the sanctity of the event and ensuring that only those who genuinely revere Lord Ram participate in it," he emphasised.

Acharya Das stressed that the presence of individuals contradicting the essence of Lord Ram's existence goes against the spiritual significance of the ceremony.

Earlier, Congress president Kharge and former president Sonia Gandhi received invitations from the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra trust for the consecration function in Ayodhya on January 22. While these leaders are yet to confirm their participation, over 100 Congress leaders from Uttar Pradesh are expected to pay their obeisance to Ram Lalla in Ayodhya on January 14 and 15.

ITMS to ensure smooth flow of traffic in Ayodhya

Lucknow (PNS): The Yogi Adityanath government has installed the Intelligent Traffic Management System (ITMS) to ensure safe travel for visitors and smooth flow of traffic.

Set up at an estimated cost of Rs 47.74 crore, the project under the Smart City Scheme was started in October 2021. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath inaugurated the project on January 17, 2022.

The ITMS project has started at 20 locations in Ayodhya, with plans to extend it to the new bus station in Ayodhya and the currently under-construction airport road. The areas under vigilant traffic monitoring include Riqabganj, Civil Line, Hanuman Cave, Shri Ram Hospital, Naya Ghat, Saket Petrol Pump, Devkali bypass, Sultanpur bypass, Rae Bareilly bypass, Sahadatganj bypass, Guru Gobind Singh Square, Police Lines, Tedhi Bazaar, Udaya Square, Devkali Tiraha, Gudri Bazaar, Post Office Square, Naka Tiraha, Guru Gobind Singh, Sahadatganj Hanuman Garhi Square and DM Square.

Following the completion of this expansion, traffic signals have been activated to streamline vehicle movement. Technosys Security System Pvt. Ltd. spearheaded the execution of this project and the monitoring operations are coordinated from the temporary control command centre in Amaniganj Jalkal Parishad. Additionally, survey work is in progress at the Mangal Pandey intersection.

Project Manager Nikhil Srivastava highlighted the integration of cameras with the traffic signals for enhanced surveillance. Proactive measures, including public announcements, have been implemented to keep the traffic smooth and to raise awareness about traffic rules among the residents.

Besides, the government has installed an extensive public address system across 14 strategic locations in Ayodhya. This initiative serves as a vital channel for disseminating timely information about traffic rules to commuters.

Notably, the monitoring room issues warnings promptly in the event of a signal violation. Also, the government has strategically placed emergency call boxes at 20 key locations. These boxes will relay crucial information to the central control room in an emergency, offering valuable assistance.

People to defeat BJP in LS polls: Akhilesh



Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav addressing mediapersons in Lucknow on Monday

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav said that the people had made up their mind to defeat the Bharatiya Janata Party in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections due to the anti-people policies of the ruling party.

"The BJP has consistently pursued the strategy to divert the attention of the people from pressing issues. The BJP is mocking the Constitution and democratic political order of the country. This strategy of the BJP is all set to fail in the Lok Sabha elections as inflation, unemployment, corruption and crime against women will be the major issues during the polls," Akhilesh Yadav said here on Monday while addressing a meeting of the party's district and city president.

Claiming that the SP will play a very significant role in the coming Lok Sabha elections, Akhilesh Yadav said the party trusted its cadre and organisation base and was working to further strengthen the organisation at the grassroots level.

He directed the party cadre to keep a close watch on addition and deletion of names of the voters in the electoral rolls. He cautioned the party leaders that the BJP could manipulate the voters' list and could exert pressure on the Election Commission of India for its advantage.

The SP chief alleged that over one lakh farmers had committed suicide across the country during the 10-year rule of Narendra Modi. He said neither the BJP government could double the income of farmers in the last 10 years nor could it provide employment to jobless youth. He alleged that the BJP was using public money to paint a rosy picture on the Indian economy.

Akhilesh Yadav accused Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath of making false claims of signing memorandums of understanding (MoUs) for investment of over Rs 40 lakh crore in the state during the Global Investors Summit. He claimed that none of the MoUs has translated on the ground and not a single factory has so far been established in the state.

Padma awardee artistes to perform in Ayodhya

Lucknow (PNS): In a move celebrating artistic diversity, Uttar Pradesh's Principal Secretary (Culture and Tourism) Mukesh Meshram announced on Monday that a distinguished group of Padma awardees in performing arts had been invited to showcase their talent in Ayodhya.

The performances are scheduled to take place between January 14 and March 24, emphasising the inclusive nature of the cultural event.

Meshram clarified that the invited artistes, recipients of the prestigious Padma awards, will be remunerated according to the rates determined by the state government, irrespective of their individual fee structures.

"They will have the option to accept or decline the invitation from the Department of Culture to perform in Ayodhya," Meshram stated.

The responsibility of reaching out to artistes has been entrusted to Sanget Natak Akademi (SNA) Chairperson Dr Sandhya Purecha and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). Meshram reiterated that there would be no discrimination in extending invi-

tations, emphasising that artistes of all faiths would be included. SNA head Dr Sandhya Purecha, who is a distinguished Bharatanatyam exponent and author, highlighted the significance of the cultural exchange.

"Artistes are still being contacted and the list is being finalised. Most of the Padma awardees will be invited to perform in Ayodhya," she said, underlining the commitment to represent diverse artistic expressions.

Insiders suggest that the list includes several Padma awardees from the film industry. However, there are reservations about the participation of major film personalities due to financial considerations. A state government official, requesting anonymity, said, "While there are Padma awardees in the film industry, the likelihood of their acceptance is uncertain, primarily due to monetary reasons." This cultural initiative echoes the belief that art transcends religious boundaries, fostering a platform where artistes from all faiths can come together to share their creativity and contribute to the rich cultural tapestry of Ayodhya.

Guptar Ghat emerges as major tourist attraction of Ayodhya

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Guptar Ghat of Ayodhya, the place which was chosen by Lord Ram to proceed to heaven as per popular belief and which has a rich spiritual heritage, has emerged as a major tourist attraction of Ayodhya with the Yogi Adityanath government's initiatives to rejuvenate it, including launch of water sports and boating activities, after years of neglect by previous regimes during which it was reduced to become a shelter for stray animals.

The Yogi government has taken steps to both restore the ghat's ancient spiritual and historical glory as well as to establish it as an attractive tourist destination in Ayodhya by equipping it with modern civic amenities.

Prior to 2017, Guptar Ghat was considered a dilapidated stretch of the riverbank, primarily known for some ancient temples and meditation sites of saints, where stray animals were often found amid litter strewn all around.

Presently, the Lakshman Path connecting Rajghat to Guptar Ghat, has been transformed into a four-lane road through encroachment control and expansion. In addition, various attractions, including water sports, have been developed here, turning the serene banks of the spiritually rich Sarayu into a place that not only provides spiritual solace but also fills visitors with excitement and joy.

Two phases of the Guptar Ghat beautification drive have been completed while the third phase is in the final stage of completion. So far in the third phase of the drive, work on various amenities and attractions have been completed, including an open-air theatre, an aesthetically designed park with modern

facilities, attractive sculptures, entrance gates, meditation-cum-yoga centre, kiosks, toilet blocks, interpretation centre, cafeteria, play park for children, closed-circuit television camera (CCTV) surveillance for security, and more. These projects have been accomplished at the cost of Rs 16.65 crore.

The overall expenditure on beautification processes in Guptar Ghat, encompassing both phases, has been Rs 76.73 crore. This includes the construction of a 1.150 km embankment from Guptar Ghat to Jamthara Ghat at a cost of Rs 39.63 crore as well as development of various projects at a cost of Rs 37.10 crore.

The configuration of the Sarayu river's bed at Guptar Ghat posed challenges to maintaining the necessary water levels for conducting regular water activities. Therefore, the government is working on construction of embankments and the restoration of barrages to address this issue. Now, in addition to traditional boating, jetties are also operating in the river.

Ravindra Jaiswal reviews development works

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

UP Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Stamp and Court Registration Fees Ravindra Jaiswal held a review meeting of the ongoing development works in Varanasi district at Circuit House here on Monday. He directed the Smart City to properly organise the night market located at Cantt and to equip it with ODOT products of Banaras so that the passengers coming to the station can purchase local products.

He directed to make proper arrangements regarding night rest, toilets, tents and bonfire for pilgrims coming during the Antargrih Parikrama Yatra. The minister directed to name the major crossings of the city after great personalities and beautify them. He instructed the officers to improve the lighting system of the city and instal lights on the identified black spots. He said the campaign to eliminate all potholes from the roads should also be launched rapidly. On the request of the Commissioner of Police (CP), the minister assured help from his own funds to instal traffic lights at some crossings.

In the meeting the PWD officials informed that the work of five big and 43 small roads is being done in the city by the PWD which will be completed by January. The Setu Nigam officers informed that at present a total of four projects are going on in which 68 per cent



UP Minister for State (Independent Charge) Stamp and Court Fee, Registration, Ravindra Jaiswal reviewing progress of development works in Varanasi on Monday.

work of Kajjapura flyover has been completed and it will be completed by June. The NHAI officers informed that there is a project pending in Varanasi area which is of Ring Road, which will be completed by March. The minister directed to build a service road on Paharia-Bela Road to reach the Ring Road. He directed the Jal Nigam to prepare DPR to prevent possible accidents on Varanasi-Sultanpur road and to lay sewer from Circuit House to Sadar tehsil. Expressing displeasure over repeated extension of time by NHAI, Divisional Commissioner (DC) Kaushal Raj Sharma directed to instal signboards and diversion boards on all the roads entering Varanasi, on which NHAI officials agreed to instal them in the next 10 days. He, while reviewing the progress of ropeway station being built at Godowlia crossing, directed DCP (Traffic) and related departments to establish proper coordination with the ropeway officials so that the work can be expedited.

The Traffic Police officials

explained in detail about the 12 points identified in the city where traffic jams occurred, in which various suggestions were given regarding Benia, Manduadih, Rath Yatra, Gilat Bazaar, BHU, Pandeypur Kali Mandir crossings etc. Giving information about two projects pending in the city by Jal Nigam, the work of Bhelupur WTP renovation has been completed by 82 per cent and under Namami Gange, a sewerage treatment plant of 55 MLD capacity is being built in Bhagwanpur. It was told by Jalkal that currently the work of reboring of 400 hand pumps and installation of 200 new hand pumps is being done and the sewerage problem is being rectified at 34 places in five wards. CP Ashok Mutha Jain, District Magistrate S Rajalingam, Municipal Commissioner Akshat Verma, Varanasi Development Authority Vice-Chairman Pulkit Garg, Chief Development Officer Himanshu Nagpal and officials of various departments were present in the meeting.

AK Verma assumes charge as CORE GM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

Ashok Kumar Verma, an officer of Indian Railway Stores Service (IRSS), assumed the charge as General Manager of Central Organisation for Railway Electrification (CORE) here. The new GM is a 1987 batch officer and has served Indian Railways in various capacities.

Before assuming the charge as the general manager here, Verma was working as principal chief material manager in North Western Railway.



Apart from his vast experience in stores related issues, he also has a vast experience in general administration. Verma has worked as divisional railway manager of Bengaluru Division of South Western Railway and additional divisional railway manager of Jhansi division. He also previously served as Executive Director Railway Stores in Railway Board. He holds a degree in Civil Engineering from Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology (MNNIT), Prayagraj and an MBA degree from IIM Kolkata. He has done his diploma in Public Procurement (Public Procurement in Multilateral Agencies funded Projects) from Indian Railway Institute of Logistics and Material Management and PG Diploma in Alternate Dispute Resolution Mechanism from National Academy of Legal Studies and Research University. He has vast experience in Finance and Public Procurement. After assuming charge, a meeting was convened here on Monday with all Senior Officers at CORE/HQ and chief project directors and a detailed review of the remaining electrification works was undertaken by the new GM. In the review meeting Chief Administrative Officer Anupam Singh, Senior Deputy General Manager VK Garg, Chief Signal and Telecommunication Engineer RN Singh, Principal Chief Engineer AK Singh Shaiwal, Principal Chief Personnel Officer KK Singh, Chief Electrical Engineer JCS Bora etc. participated.

UP among top 3 states as significant contributor to MSME sector: Report

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Uttar Pradesh (UP) has emerged among the top three states in India as a significant contributor to Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector with a nine per cent share. This was disclosed in a report 'MSMEs: Unleashing the Engines of Economic Prosperity' announced at Pt Deen Dayal Hastkala Sankul (Trade Facilitation Centre) at Bada Lalpur here on Sunday in the presence of UP Minister for State (Independent Charge) Stamp and Court Fee, Registration, Chairman and CEO (India, Southeast Asia, Middle East and Africa) CBRE Anshuman Magazine and senior CBRE, CREDAI officials.

The report underscores the crucial contribution of MSMEs in shaping India's economy. It highlights a regional concentration of MSME activity with states such as Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh constituting a substantial portion of the country's MSME landscape. "The three states account for nearly 40 per cent of the total MSMEs registered in India. This emphasises not only the diverse distribution of MSMEs across the nation but also the significance of these states in driving the overall vibrancy and economic impact of the sector," the report says.

According to report, the



policy initiatives which supported the MSME ecosystem in UP are 50 per cent interest subsidy for micro units capped at INR 25 lakh; approved projects with 10 acres or more eligible for annual infrastructure interest subsidy of up to 50 per cent, capped at INR 2 crore annually; and 100 per cent stamp duty exemption in select regions; also women entrepreneurs and MSME industrial park developers. Additionally, the report emphasises the pivotal role played by the Udyam scheme, a government initiative designed to promote and foster the growth of MSMEs, particularly in UP. The report explores the significant shifts underway in India's MSME financing scene, driven by technological advancements and collaborative partnerships.

The report also says that

several cities in UP have emerged as MSME clusters, with Agra, Kanpur, Varanasi, Lucknow, Meerut and Ghaziabad leading in enrolling for the Udyam scheme.

To further incentivise MSMEs, the UP government has implemented a range of schemes. These strategic measures complemented by the state's proactive incentives, have been instrumental in driving the expansion of India's MSME sector. In addition, by holding a significant position in the microsegment and establishing a robust presence in rural areas, the MSME sector is strategically positioning itself to meet the demands of rural markets and cater to low-income consumers. This strategic alignment positions the sector as a central force in alleviating regional disparities and

promoting a more equitable income distribution.

Further, the report highlights the construction sector, contributing approximately eight per cent to the GDP as a strategic opportunity for Indian MSMEs. With the construction sector poised to become the third largest globally in the next three years, unorganised firms in this domain are expected to derive significant benefits by registering under the MSME ambit.

Anshuman Magazine said, "As the MSME sector continues to play a pivotal role in shaping India's economic tapestry, UP's emergence as a powerhouse reaffirms its significance in driving growth and reducing regional imbalances. The transformative shift in MSME financing, fuelled by technology and collaborative partnerships, is dismantling barriers and fostering a resilient, innovative entrepreneurial landscape. Together, strategic initiatives and technological advancements herald a future where MSMEs not only contribute substantially to GDP, employment and exports but also stand as beacons of inclusive and sustainable economic development." Boman Irani, CMD, Rustomjee Group, and National President, CREDAI, stated, "UP's dominance in the MSME sector is a testament to the state's vibrant entrepreneurial landscape and the efficacy of government initiatives."

Gold biscuits worth over ₹2 cr recovered; 2 held

PTI ■ VARANASI

A team of the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) has arrested two smugglers here after recovering gold biscuits worth over ₹2 crore from them, officials said on Monday. The accused had allegedly illegally sourced the gold biscuits from Myanmar, they added. The directorate officials said

they received information about a consignment of gold being smuggled from Myanmar and being taken to Delhi by the Brahmaputra Express on Sunday.

Based on the tip-off, the officials of Varanasi DRI unit boarded the train near Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya station and looked for the suspects. Upon searching 20 gold bis-

uits wrapped in brown tape were recovered from Arvind (51) of Maharashtra and Amit (24) of Tamil Nadu, who were travelling in the H-1 bogie of the train.

The price of the gold biscuits is said to be over ₹2.07 crore, according to the officials. A case has been registered against the accused and the duo has been sent to jail, they added.

OBCs to play big role in LS polls: Patel

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Regional President (Kashi) of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Dilip Patel, while addressing the workshop of party's OBC Morcha (Kashi Region) at the BJP regional office in Rohaniya here on Monday said that this time the OBC Samaj will do the work of making Narendra Modi the Prime Minister again with a pledge of more than 400 seats. "The way the OBCs stood strongly with the BJP in the last elections, in the same way in the Lok Sabha elections of 2024 they will stand even stronger and play a major role in forming a government with a strong majority at the Centre," he said.

Patel, while discussing in detail about the upcoming campaigns of the OBC Morcha for the Lok Sabha elections to be held this year, said that the organisational structure of the Morcha has to be strengthened in a week. "In the upcoming campaigns, social conferences of four big castes will be organised at the

district level," he said, adding that the work of taking the policies, schemes and programmes of the central government to the general public among the OBC community through the OBC Youth Dialogue Programme and NaMo App workshop will be done by the OBC Morcha. He said the OBC Morcha will implement the basic mantra of the PM's 'Sabka Saath - Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas and Sabka Paryas'. In the workshop, state social media head Praveen Kushwaha threw detailed light on NaMo app and social media. The meeting was presided over by regional president of OBC Morcha, Ashwini Kumar Singh Patel.

State treasurer Omprakash Gupta, state media co-incharge Vivek Yadav, regional vice-president Ashok Sharma, Vinay Maurya, Monu Gupta, Deepika Singh Patel, Ashish Pal, Arvind Prajapati, Shobhanath Maurya, Vijayaraj Yadav, district presidents and regional office-bearers of all 16 districts of Kashi Region took part in the event.

Siblings gravely hurt in accident

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

A seriously injured when their uncontrolled car collided with a road divider near Shivrajpur toll plaza on Monday morning. After hitting the divider the car overturned and caught fire.

The residents immediately rushed to the spot and rescued the brother-sister duo. Both of them were admitted to the community health centre (CHC), Shivrajpur, in a critical condition.

According to a report received here, Nikhil Gupta, son of Uma Shanker, of Tirwa (Kannauj) along with sister Anchal Gupta was coming towards Kanpur on Monday morning. He suddenly lost control over his car near the Shivrajpur toll plaza amidst the dense fog which, after hitting the road divider, overturned and caught fire. The residents rescued them and informed the police about the incident.

Both of them were admitted to the Shivrajpur CHC and are undergoing treatment there. The toll plaza staff extinguished the fire.

Man's body found under mysterious circumstances

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The body of a man was found under mysterious circumstances in Chakghanshyam Das New Bazaar area under Karma police post of Ghurpur police station area here on Monday. The cause of death could not be known. The police is investigating the matter. Mubarak Ali was not seen by the villagers for a week. He also used to consume alcohol. The mental condition of the wife is not good. They have two children. The boy works in Mumbai. The door of the house of the deceased was closed for several days. Ghoorpur SHO Chandrapal Singh said on Monday the police was informed about foul smell coming from the house. Thereafter the police climbed onto the roof of the other house, went inside and opened the door and found that a body was lying in the room. His wife was also sitting in a corner of the closed room. The police sent the body for an autopsy. The details of the death will be known after the autopsy report comes, he added.

DRIVE: The Allahabad University administration launched a campaign against illegal students living in its hostels from Monday. It was started from Dr Tara Chand (TC) Hostel. When a large force reached the hostel in the afternoon a panic gripped the inmates. The university administration had received information that a large number of stu-

dents who are not students of the university or have completed their course are occupying the hostels. Along with Tarachand, the campaign was also conducted in Shatabdi Boys and KPUC hostels.

Chief Proctor of Allahabad University, Professor RK Singh said soon the process of allotting rooms to bona fide students will be started. He said this campaign will be run in 10 hostels of the university for four consecutive days.

The campaign will be run at Diamond Jubilee Hostel and AN Jha Hostel on January 9, GN Jha Hostel and PCCB Hostel on January 10 and SRK Hostel, Sir Sunder Lal Hostel and Holland Hall Hostel on January 11 and video recording will also be done.

YOUTH HELD: The GRP team on Sunday arrested a youth involved in theft at railway stations and in trains. Two mobile phones have also been recovered from him. A special campaign is being run under the direction of Additional Director General of Police (Railways) Jai Narayan Singh, Senior Superintendent of Police, Railways AP Singh and Deputy Superintendent of Police, Railways Prayagraj Sunita Singh. The GRP team formed by Prayagraj GRP in-charge inspector Rajiv Ranjan Upadhyay was monitoring platform number 1 of Prayagraj Junction and the accused belonging to Mahmoodpur Manauri under Pipri police station of Kaushambi was arrested during checking.

ACS for developing Varanasi as solar industrial area

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Additional Chief Secretary (Energy and Additional Energy Source Department) Mahesh Kumar Gupta stressed the need for developing Varanasi as a solar industrial area. "Kashi is the Lok Sabha constituency of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi so we need a continuous campaign which should be conducted in mission mode to achieve it," he said while presiding over a review meeting here on Monday to promote the 'Har Ghar Solar Rooftop Scheme'.

He encouraged the officials to promote this scheme by involving various departments and various vendors, associations etc related to them. The ACS (Energy) was informed in the meeting that till now 27



ACS (Energy) MK Gupta reviewing progress of solar energy in Varanasi on Monday.

MW capacity rooftop solar units have been installed by 664 consumers in Varanasi. He directed the officials to publicise this scheme on NEDA website and also answer the questions there.

The ACS (Energy) said this scheme should cover all educational institutions along with residential as well as various other buildings. "The

focus should not be only on residential accommodation," he said, directing the VDA vice-chairman to look at the NoCs regarding the solar scheme even while passing the maps of the buildings. Addressing it DC Kaushal Raj Sharma directed the Nagar Nigam to hold talks with corporators in all wards about this scheme and to coordinate with

zonal officers, corporators etc of the eight identified wards to promote this scheme. District Magistrate (DM) S Rajalingam also directed various departments to fix the target of this scheme and give information about the increase on daily basis. The meeting was informed that Surya Rath will be run and Surya Mitras will also be appointed. Information was also given regarding providing training to the Common Service Centres, distributing pamphlets for this scheme door to door, etc. Managing Director of Purvanchal Vidyan Vitran Nigam Limited (PVVNL) Shambhu Kumar, Municipal Commissioner Akshat Verma, CDO Himanshu Nagpal, Director UPNEDA Anupam Shukla and officials of various departments were also present.

'Laddu' of Hanuman Garhi Temple may get GI tag soon: Dr Rajnikant

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The famous 'laddu' of Hanuman Garhi Temple in Ram Janmabhoomi, Ayodhya, may get Geographical Identification (GI) soon as the application for the same has already been received by the GI headquarters in Chennai on Monday.

Giving this information, GI expert and President of Human Welfare Association (HWA) Padma Shri Dr

Rajnikant said if Hanuman Garhi's 'laddu' gets the GI tag under the Indian Property Rights (IPR), it will be the second 'laddu' product after Tirupati Temple of the South to get GI certification.

He informed that the HWA in the association with financial support of SIDBI, Lucknow, and Halwai Kalyan Samiti of Ayodhya made great efforts to prepare the application.

He said that Halwai

Kalyan Samiti is an applicant. "If Ayodhya's laddu gets the GI tag, my dreams will come true as since 2005, I am busy in this field and with my efforts several traditional and agricultural products of UP, including Varanasi and Purvanchal (eastern UP), have already got GI certification," he said.

Dr Rajnikant said the GI tag will not only improve quality of products but also promote its packaging, publicity, marketing and exports.

Farmer battered to death

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

A farmer guarding the mustard crop in his field was battered to death in the Bighapur Kotwali police station area of Unnao on Sunday night. On Monday morning the other farmers going to their field found the iron doors of his room broken and the body lying under the 'takhat' (cot). They informed the farmer's younger brother who rushed to the spot and fell unconscious. The circle officer (CO) and station officer (SO) also reached with the dog squad and field unit. The dog squad went up to 500 metres away to fields of Tikaria village and returned from there. This confirmed that the assailants may have escaped towards Tikaria village. The police sent the body for autopsy.

According to a report, Gendalal (60) of Sarson village had taken the field of Vinod Tewari on sharing basis. Apart from installation of a tubewell, a room was also built there. Gendalal used to sleep in that room to take care of the crop.



Police carrying out a probe into the murder of a farmer in Bighapur (Unnao) on Sunday night

On Sunday night also after dinner with younger brother Ram Khilawan, he went to sleep in the field. Late at night unidentified persons broke open the door and killed him. Assailants made multiple attacks on his head with the stick. His clothes were soaked in blood. On hearing about the incident, his wife Rajkumari living in her parents' house in Akbabad, son Sandeep and mother Sukhdehi rushed to the spot. They denied that the deceased had enmity with anyone. The police apprehend that the farmer was killed

during an argument with people consuming liquor with him. A probe is on in the matter.

SUSPENDED: City police commissioner has suspended two PRV constables for their alleged involvement in the cutting of an official sheesham tree and selling it in the Chaubepur police station area. On the complaint of villagers, DCP had set up a probe against both the constables. On finding the allegations true, they were placed under suspension on Sunday night.

Driver killed as dumpers collide

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

A dumper driver was killed when his vehicle collided head on with another dumper in Patara under the Ghatampur police station area late on Sunday night. After the incident, he got stuck in the dumper cabin and kept on crying for one-and-a-half hours. On getting information the police rushed to the spot which, with the help of crane, rescued the driver and sent him to the Patara CHC where the doctors declared him dead. After informing the kin of the deceased, the police sent the body for an autopsy. Meanwhile, a massive traffic jam prevailed on both the sides of the road which could be restored after around two hours. Reports said Jitendra alias Jatin of Chawar, Ghatampur, was a dumper dri-

ver. Father Ramjit Singh said when his son was returning to Ghatampur with empty dumper, it collided head on with another dumper carrying pebbles dumper near Panki Ki Tanki in Patara. The driver of another dumper escaped after the incident while Jitendra alias Jatin got entangled in the cabin of his vehicle. The passers-by informed the police which rushed to the spot and rescued him with the help of a crane. Ghatampur inspector Pradip Kumar Singh said on the basis of complaint, further action will be taken in the matter. The eyewitnesses said on hearing the loud sound they rushed out of their houses and found the driver trapped in the dumper's cabin. They informed the police and 108 ambulance.

TRAFFIC SYSTEM: Women police officers have been assigned the job of

streamlining the traffic system of the city. At a meeting of top police officers, including the city police commissioner, held on Sunday evening, it was decided that Salman Taj Patil, hitherto assigned the additional charge of traffic, will continue as DCP (Crime) and Arpi Singh was now made the ACP (Traffic). She will be assisted by other women colleagues Anika Sharma, Shiva Singh as ADCP (Traffic) and Shrishti as ACP (Traffic). City police commissioner Akhil Kumar along with both the JCPs Nilabza Chaudhary and Anand Prakash Tewari will carry out rounds of prominent crossing and roads and seek suggestions from general masses from time to time. Besides, DCPs, ADCPs, ACPs, SHO, Beat police officers and outpost incharges will get the encroachments removed in their respective areas.

Israel backs India in row with Maldives

Israeli Embassy in India advocates for promoting tourism in Lakshadweep



to the external affairs ministry on Monday and conveyed strong concern over the remarks against Modi in social media by a number of ministers of the Maldives.

The Maldivian government suspended three of its deputy ministers on Sunday after they criticised Modi for his post on X following his visit to Lakshadweep, inferring that it was an attempt to project the Union Territory as an alternative tourist destination to the Maldives.

The Maldivian foreign ministry said the government is aware of "derogatory remarks" made on social media platforms against foreign leaders and that the personal views do not represent the country's position.

desalination program. Israel is ready to commence working on this project tomorrow. For those who are yet to witness the pristine and majestic underwater beauty of Lakshadweep islands, here are a few pictures showing this island's enchanting allure," the Israeli embassy wrote on X.

It also shared pictures of the pristine beaches and marine life in Lakshadweep.

Meanwhile, the Maldivian envoy to India was summoned

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Amid a diplomatic row between India and Maldives, the Israeli Embassy in India on Monday pitched for promoting tourism in Lakshadweep on Monday amid a diplomatic row between India and the Maldives over disparaging remarks made by Maldivian Ministers following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the islands.

"We were in Lakshadweep last year upon the federal government's request to initiate the

True leaders empower those around them: IAF Chief

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Air Force chief VR Chaudhari said here on Monday true leaders empower those around them and their influence extends far beyond parade grounds and urged National Cadet Corps (NCC) to join the armed forces and live a life of "unity and discipline".

Addressing the cadets at the NCC R-Day Camp 2024 here, Chaudhari also underlined that Republic Day is a "reminder of the struggles, sacrifices, and aspirations" that have shaped India's journey as a democratic republic.

The camp was inaugurated by Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on January 5. It will culminate on January 28.

"Our nation is a mosaic of different cultures, languages, and customs, which converge into a shared commitment towards preserving democracy and inclusive progress," the IAF chief said.

"As a premier uniform youth organisation of our country, the



National Cadet Corps has contributed significantly in transforming the lives of millions by inculcating the quality of discipline, leadership, camaraderie, team spirit, adventure, and national integration," he said. NCC Director General Lt Gen Gurbirpal Singh was present on the occasion.

A total of 2,274 cadets will take part in the NCC Republic Day Camp 2024, which will see enhanced participation of female cadets, Singh said on January 3.

In his address, Air Chief Marshal Chaudhari also asserted that discipline, a cornerstone of the NCC's ethos, is not merely a set of rules but a way of life. "It is a conscious choice to adhere to a code of conduct, to prioritise duty over convenience, and to exhibit restraint even in the face of challenges. In cultivating discipline, you are not just shaping your destiny, but contributing to the larger tapestry of a disciplined and orderly society," he said. "Leadership, another key



facet of your NCC training, is not confined to rank or hierarchy. It is about inspiring others through your actions, fostering esprit de corps, and looking after those placed under you. Remember, true leaders empower those around them and their influence extends far beyond parade grounds," the IAF chief added.

He also praised the legacy of the NCC and the values it ingrains among cadets.

"I am aware that many of you want to join the armed forces. It is undoubtedly one of the best

professions today, offering a quality life full of adventure and action. I call upon you to join the armed forces and live a life full of unity and discipline, the motto of the National Cadet Corps," Chaudhari said.

India will on January 26 mark the 75th anniversary of its Republic Day.

The IAF chief said the Republic Day holds "profound significance and so does this Republic Day camp".

"It is a reminder of the struggles, sacrifices, and aspirations that have shaped our journey as a democratic republic. Remember that you are a part, and an integrated part of this narrative, contributing to the ongoing saga of a vibrant and resilient India," he added.

"Selflessness is the third pillar of the NCC's philosophy. It is a quality that separates you from the rest of the country," Chaudhari said.

"You will cherish the time spent here not just for the memories, but also for the personal growth and resilience the NCC has imbibed in you," he added.

Rajnath approves proposal to raise more NCC units in UTs of J&K, Ladakh



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has approved a proposal to raise four more National Cadet Corps (NCC) units in the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, Defence Ministry officials said here on Monday. The approval includes one Mixed (Boys & Girls) Army Battalion each at Udhampur (J&K), Kupwara (J&K) and Kargil (Ladakh), and one Air

Squadron at Udhampur (J&K).

Resultantly, in addition to the existing 27,870 cadets, the strength in J&K and Ladakh will increase by 12,860, which is a 46.1 per cent rise.

Currently, the Directorate has two Group Headquarters, with a total of 10 NCC Units, covering all the three geographical regions. The expansion will boost the morale of the youth in the region, who will contribute significantly to nation building.

Generic medicines helped poor save ₹26,000 crore

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Jan Aushadhi Kendras selling generic medicines at affordable rates have helped urban poor saving approximately ₹26,000 crores in the last nine years, now rural poor and farmers too can avail such benefits as around 241 Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS) have been permitted to open such outlets in villages, Union Cooperative and Home Minister Amit Shah said on Monday here.

Addressing a national mega conclave here on "PACS as Pradhan Mantri Bharatiya Jan Aushadhi Kendra", he informed that in the last six months, 4,470 applications from PACS were received. Out of these, in-principle approval has been given to 2,373 PACS while 241 have already taken up such venture. Shah emphasised that the Government has streamlined Jan Aushadhi Kendras to ensure the poor get medicines at lower rates and allowed



PACS to expand their business activities to open Jan Aushadhi Kendras due to changes brought in their byelaws.

He said about 40 field officers have been deputed to help PACS in running these kendras. Shah said PACS were only confined to agri-credit business as their byelaws permitted them to do this only. But

after formation of a separate cooperation ministry, the Government took 56 initiatives to diversify their business activities and came out with a model byelaw. The model byelaw was framed to prevent closing down of PACS, Shah pointed out.

At the event jointly organised by the Union

Cooperation Ministry and National Cooperative Development Cooperation, Shah also gave away the Jan Aushadhi Kendra 'store code' certificates to five PACS representatives from Jammu & Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. At present, there are around 63,000 functional PACS

in the country. The Government has taken several steps to strengthen PACS including their computerisation, diversifying their business activities, and putting in place model byelaws. The Government has aim to open around 2 lakh PACS across the country. Health and Pharmaceuticals and Fertilisers Minister Mansukh Mandaviya who was also present at the event added, "with these outlets being opened in rural areas, people can now buy generic medicines at affordable rates. For instance, cancer medicines, which cost about ₹2,250 in the open market are sold at ₹250. Even rural girls can buy sanitary napkins at Re 1 from these kendras."

Minister of State for Cooperation B L Verma, Cooperation and Gyanesh Kumar, Secretary, Ministry of Cooperation, Arunish Chawla, Secretary, Dept. of Pharmaceuticals, Union Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilisers and representatives

of Jan Aushadhi Kendras and PACS from across the country were present at the event.

Dr Mandaviya informed that "more than 10,500 Jan Aushadhi Kendras are operating in the country which are providing more than 1,965 high-quality medicines and 293 surgical and other products at 50 to 90 percent of the cost of branded medicines available in the market". Addressing the gathering, Dr Mansukh Mandaviya informed that "in the first phase, 2,000 Jan Aushadhi Kendras are planned to be opened through PACS".

He also informed that the Dept. of Pharmaceuticals have already approved more than 2,300 applications from PACS for opening Jan Aushadhi Kendras in the country, of which 500 are already functional at present. The Minister asserted that opening Jan Aushadhi Kendras through PACS would strengthen PACS as a cooperative organisation besides expanding the reach of quality and affordable medicines in the country.

Tourists cancelling trips to hill destinations due to lack of snow

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Where is the snow? Tourists have started asking the travel agents to call off trips to hill destinations whether it is Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. In fact, the anticipated white blanket that tourists were eager to witness at tourist destinations such as Gulmarg and Pahalgam were disappointed as the region have received almost no snow while the hills have below-average snowfall.

Experts say that the El Nino effect is throwing spanners across the northwest Himalayas with an unusually dry winter and no immediate relief in the offing, if one goes by the observation by the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO).

It said that 2023 was the warmest-on-record year and the warming El Nino event is likely to further fuel the heat in 2024. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) too has attributed low snowfall to the absence of Western Disturbances (WDs). "Almost no major snowfall is likely till mid-January with even the expected January 9-10 WD not likely to help much," it said. The El Nino phenomenon occurs when sea surface temperatures (SSTs) are higher than average in the eastern tropical Pacific, and there is a simultaneous weakening of trade winds. The absence of snowfall is not a one-time thing but affects the annual cycle of snow.

Reetu Jain, Director of Coterie Tours Pvt said that such unpredictable weather is not good for the tourism sector. It has been double whammy for the tour operators particularly in North India. "In November we were facing low turnout of international travellers due to high rise in pollution. Many of our bookings could not take place or were postponed, especially elderly travelers who refrained them-



selves to North India. Now with almost nil snow falls in the upper reaches of Himalayas, newly married couples and those seeking adventures in snows too are having second thoughts about their plans of visiting the hilly tourist hotspots," she added.

At the same time, glaciologist and Himalayan researcher A N Dimri told a news agency about social and economic implications of poor snow falls. "If it continues longer, it can have a huge cascading effect on socio-economic benefits. If you don't get (enough) snow, you don't get replenishment of water, it will impact agriculture, your health and can, in turn, impact your economy," he said.

"Bizarre dry winters so far over hills due to prolonged dry spell & nothing major expected from upcoming Western Disturbance on 9-10th Jan," amateur meteorologist 'Weatherman Shubham' posted on X on Saturday along with a photo of Kedarnath temple and surroundings sans any snow. A picture showing Gulmarg as a barren patch has also gone viral on the social media with netizens blaming the rapid urbanization and high temperature-induced climate change for the "grim situation." Gulmarg is a world-famous skiing resort, attracting hundreds of national and international skiers who travel to Kashmir for skiing adventures.

"So far a number of bookings have been canceled by the international skiers and if the situation remains the same,

nobody will come here this season for skiing," said Farhat Naik, a snowboarding instructor in Gulmarg. On social media, showing snowless scenes of Gulmarg, he said, "It's heartbreaking to see Gulmarg in such conditions during this time of the year, especially if you have never witnessed something like this before. Indeed, the weather patterns have been quite erratic & unpredictable in recent years, leading to unusual occurrences like this," he posted.

He said that the skiers have canceled the January slot as of now, and if there is snowfall, they might consider coming in February.

Scientists say that the replenishment of water sources for the southern Himalayan region will bear the brunt. "The water system will collapse. We are drifting towards living in a dryer system," Dimri warned. In fact, not only India's Himalayas, the world saw another year full of extreme weather events resulting from climate change in 2022, from intense storms to soaring temperatures and rising sea levels. Antarctica was no exception, according to research last year.

"My hope is that the public starts to see both the fragility and complexity of these polar regions," said Rajashree Tri Datta, a research associate in the Department of Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences who contributed to sections of the report related to Antarctica and the Southern Ocean.

Covid subvariant JN.1 cases rise to 682 since January 7



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Covid-19 sub-variant JN.1 has made its presence felt in at least 12 States from January 7 till date on Monday as the incidents rose to 682, official sources said on Monday. They said 199 cases have been reported from Karnataka, 148 from Kerala, 139 from Maharashtra, 47 from Goa, 36 from Gujarat, 30 from Andhra Pradesh, 30 from Rajasthan, 26 from Tamil Nadu, 21 from Delhi, three from Odisha, two from Telangana and one from Haryana. Even though the number of cases is rising and the JN.1 sub-variant has been detected in the country, there is no cause of immediate concern as the majority of those infected are opting for home-based treatment, indicating mild illness, officials said.

In the meantime, India has logged 605 new cases of Covid, while the number of active cases of the infection stood at 4,002. Four deaths -- two from Kerala and one each from Karnataka and Tripura -- have been reported in a span of 24 hours, according to the ministry's data updated at 8 am.

The number of daily cases had dropped to double-digits till December 5, 2023 but cases began to increase after emergence of a new variant and cold weather conditions. After December 5, 841 new cases were reported on December 31, 2023 which was 0.2 per cent of the peak cases reported in May 2021, official sources said.

Of the total active cases, a large majority of these (around 92 per cent) are recovering under home isolation.

"The currently available data suggests that the JN.1 variant is neither leading to an exponential rise in the new cases nor a surge in hospitalisation and mortality," the sources stated.

India has witnessed three waves of Covid-19 in the past with the peak incidence of daily new cases and deaths being reported during the Delta wave during April-June 2021. At its peak, 414,188 new cases and 3,915 deaths were reported on May 7, 2021.

Since the pandemic began in early 2020, more than 4.5 crore people have got infected and over 5.3 lakh deaths have died in about four years since then across the country.

The number of people who have recuperated from the disease stands at over 4.4 crore with a national recovery rate of 98.81 per cent, according to the ministry's website.

According to the ministry website, 220.67 crore doses of Covid vaccines have so far been administered in the country. The Centre has asked the states and Union territories to maintain a constant vigil amid an uptick in the number of Covid cases and the detection of the JN.1 sub-variant in the country.

States have been urged to ensure effective compliance with the detailed operational guidelines for revised surveillance strategy for COVID-19 shared by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

Winter chill continues to numb northern India

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The winter chill continued to numb the northern part of the country including the national capital with a dense layer of fog and 'severe' cold. Delhi woke up to another chilly morning with the maximum temperature dropped to 17.5 degree Celsius, two notches below the normal while the minimum temperature settled at 5.3 degrees Celsius, two notches below the season's average. Ayanagar recorded a minimum temperature of 4.3 degree Celsius, three notches below the season's normal.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) data showed the maximum temperature was recorded of 11.9 degree Celsius in Mangeshpur, 12.1 degree Celsius in Jafarpur, 14 degree Celsius in Narela, 14.3 degree Celsius in SPS Mayur Vihar, 14.8 degree Celsius in Palam, 16.4 degree Celsius in Lodhi Road, 15 degree Celsius in Ridge, 15.8 degree Celsius in Ayanagar, 16 degree Celsius in Pitampura, 16.4 degree Celsius in Pusa. Similarly, the maximum temperature of Gurugram was recorded 14.7 degree Celsius and 17.6 degree Celsius in Faridabad. CDO Ghaziabad was recorded the maximum temperature of 13.8 degree Celsius and NCMRWF Noida recorded 14.7 degree Celsius.

A satellite image of North India, released by the weather department, showed very dense fog cover in isolated pockets of Punjab, Haryana-Chandigarh, Delhi, south Rajasthan and in many pockets over east Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and 4-7 degree above normal over many parts of Bihar and Jharkhand." It further predicted no significant change in minimum temperatures likely over northern parts of the country during the next five days, while cold wave conditions are very likely in isolated pockets of north Rajasthan on Friday and Saturday.



humidity at 8.30 am was recorded at 95 per cent.

In its advisory, the IMD has asked people do not ignore shivering, wear several layers of loose fitting, light weight; warm woollen clothing; cover head, neck, hands and toes adequately as majority of heat loss occurs through these body parts. "Wear several layers of loose fitting, light weight; warm woollen clothing rather than one layer of heavy cloth," it added.

In its daily bulletin, the weather forecast agency said minimum temperatures were in the range of 4-8 degree Celsius over Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, west Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan; 9-12 degrees over parts of east Uttar Pradesh and northwest Madhya Pradesh.

"It is above normal by 1-3 degree in isolated pockets over Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, south Rajasthan and in many pockets over east Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and 4-7 degree above normal over many parts of Bihar and Jharkhand." It further predicted no significant change in minimum temperatures likely over northern parts of the country during the next five days, while cold wave conditions are very likely in isolated pockets of north Rajasthan on Friday and Saturday.

According to IMD, there was slight respite from the intense cold wave conditions in Jammu and Kashmir but the minimum temperatures remained several degrees below the freezing point across the valley, owing to clear sky.

Srinagar, is yet to experience snowfall this year. Gulmarg, known for its ski slopes, remains devoid of the usual winter snow, disappointing enthusiasts from India and abroad.

This January marks the first time in recent public memory that Gulmarg and Pahalgam, renowned for their snowy landscapes, have seen no snow. The plains have received no snowfall, and the hilly areas have seen below-average snowfall, contributing to a 79 per cent rainfall deficit throughout December in the Kashmir Valley.

Experts warn that this reduction in snowfall might lead to water scarcity and a potential food crisis in the region. "In Kashmir, El Nino's impact is evident through prolonged dry spells, milder winters, and diminished snowfall," they said.

Kashmir is currently under the grip of "Chilla-i-Kalan", a 40-day harsh winter period, when a cold wave sweeps the region and temperatures drop considerably leading to the freezing of water bodies as well as water in pipes.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Facile victory

Sheikh Hasina wins fourth term as Bangladesh PM, Opposition gives poll a miss

The just-concluded election in neighbouring Bangladesh, notable for yet another boycott by the Opposition, saw the Awami League emerging victorious and Sheikh Hasina securing a landmark fourth term as the Prime Minister. The poll, however, remains embroiled in controversy over allegations of lack of fairness levelled by the Khaleda Zia-led main Opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The election was held against the backdrop of violence during the campaign. Though the Awami League secured 222 of the 300 seats, it is interesting to note that no party came second; the 'independents' --- Awami League's own candidates who were allowed to contest the poll to give it the semblance of a "competition" --- finished as runners-up. While 63 such 'independents' made it to the House, the third largest party in the country, the Jatiya Party, could win just 11 seats. It will be interesting to see who is anointed the official Opposition in Parliament. The fate of the poll was decided the day the BNP, the arch-rival of the Awami League, announced its decision to boycott the election. In her win, Hasina has defeated not only the Opposition but also democracy. However, it goes to her credit that Bangladesh has emerged as a strong economy and the abject poverty it once had has been considerably reduced. However, her Government has faced criticism for alleged human rights abuses and its crackdown on the Opposition. Hasina's career has been characterised by a mix of economic development initiatives and political dominance, and the Awami League has been in power since 2009.



A robust democratic system relies on a healthy Opposition to ensure checks and balances. The absence of a formidable Opposition can potentially impact the democratic fabric of Bangladesh, leading to concerns about the concentration of power in the hands of one political party. Hasina's supporters argue that her leadership has been pivotal in driving economic growth and social progress, justifying the measures taken to secure her victory. International observers and human rights organisations have, however, raised concerns about the fairness of the electoral proceedings. The Government's control over key institutions and the media has also been criticised for limiting the space for dissent. Back home, the victory of Hasina is good news as she is a known supporter of India and enjoys good rapport with the Indian Prime Minister. Bangladesh holds strategic importance for India due to shared historical, cultural and economic ties. The bilateral relationship has seen positive developments in recent years in areas such as trade, security and connectivity. Hasina's continued leadership is likely to maintain stability and foster cooperative endeavours between India and Bangladesh. For its part, India must convince her to allow space to the Opposition and let the democratic institutions run independently. It would be good for her and Bangladesh in the long run.

PICTALK



Devotees participate in a 'Ram Rath Yatra' ahead of the consecration ceremony of Ayodhya Ram temple, in Ranchi

Policy reforms crucial to make India a manufacturing hub

India requires a comprehensive and coordinated effort from the Government and industry players to become global manufacturing hub

With the swift expansion of India's manufacturing sector, the country is poised to become a leading global manufacturing force. Currently positioned among the top three preferred global manufacturing locations, India has the potential to boost its exports to an impressive \$1 trillion USD by 2030. [1] However, within the spectrum of various supply chains, the challenges and opportunities of Indian manufacturing are evident in the wooden pallet sector. To consolidate its position in the pallet industry, essential policy reforms are necessary for sustainable growth and global leadership. Infrastructure Development



In the era of increasing environmental awareness, sustainable and eco-friendly manufacturing practices are becoming imperative. The government should encourage manufacturers to adopt green technologies and sustainable processes by providing incentives and enforcing regulations that promote environmental responsibility. This not only aligns with global trends but also enhances the reputation of Indian products in international markets.

Simplified Regulations: The regulatory environment in India is complex, and businesses face bureaucratic hurdles. Streamlining regulations and creating a more business-friendly environment will encourage investment and growth in the manufacturing

sector. Implementing a single-window system for approvals, clearances, and licenses can facilitate ease of doing business.

Skilled Labour Development: India's education system needs to adapt to the changing needs of the economy by providing relevant skills training. Addressing the shortage of skilled workers in the manufacturing sector is crucial for its growth. The government should focus on creating appropriate skill sets among the workforce to meet the demands of modern manufacturing.

Government schemes: The government has introduced Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes to promote domestic manufacturing and increase India's share of global exports. These schemes encourage investments in manufacturing and provide incentives for various sectors, contributing to the growth of the manufacturing industry.

Trade Policies and Foreign Investment: India's trade policies and foreign investment regulations play a significant role in attracting global manufacturers. The government should continue to

focus on policies that promote domestic manufacturing, reduce import dependence, and encourage foreign investment in the manufacturing sector.

Tax Reforms
A competitive and stable tax regime is essential for attracting investment. India needs to rationalise its tax structure, ensuring that it is transparent and predictable. Reducing corporate tax rates, providing incentives for research and development, and promoting innovation through tax breaks will encourage manufacturing companies to invest and operate in India.

Conclusion: By implementing the suggested policy reforms, India can create an environment conducive to manufacturing growth, attract investments, and position itself as a key player in the global manufacturing landscape. The success of these reforms will not only boost the economy but also create employment opportunities and enhance India's standing in the world of international trade and commerce.

(The writer is CEO of Jay Wood Industry, views are personal)



JAY SHAH

Will Modi magic work in the south?

Can the enormous popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi help the Bharatiya Janata Party achieve electoral success in the southern states?

The Party is seeking to gain more voters in the challenging southern region. Its presence is limited in states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. Since it has already peaked in the northern states, the BJP needs to secure more seats in the South. Last week, Modi began his election campaign for the 2024 elections in the southern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Lakshadweep. He also inaugurated several multi-crore projects.

The BJP has access to unlimited funds and has well-organised party workers on the ground. To achieve the Party's objective, 40 central ministers had been fielded in the South. In Telangana, the Bharatiya Rashtriya Samithi (BRS) has been present since its establishment in 2014 but recently lost the State to Congress. Kerala is ruled by Congress or Left-led fronts, while Tamil Nadu alternates between Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Karnataka, Janata Dal (Secular), Congress, and BJP have all had a turn in power. Several factors influence voters in the region. They include caste, money, power, ideology, cinema, and liquor. In Tamil Nadu, political figures such as CN Annadurai, M Karunanidhi, MGR, and Jayalalitha have significantly influenced voters. In the past, N.T. Rama Rao played a crucial role in united Andhra Pradesh. However, the B.J.P. currently lacks prominent leaders in the southern states. With the passing of influential leaders like M Karunanidhi and Jayalalitha, the BJP is trying to fill the political void.

The BJP won 29 of the 130 regional seats in the 2019 elections, including 25 in Karnataka and four in Telangana. However, the Party lost the state to the Congress in last year's assembly polls.

The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) was a significant ally of the BJP. However, they ended their alliance three months ago, and neither Party has attempted to reconcile since then.



The southern states of India are known for their unique cultures. One noticeable difference is the language divide between the North and South. While Hindi is the preferred language in the North, the South predominantly uses English and local languages. Dravidian Parties in Tamil Nadu oppose the use of Hindi and follow an atheistic ideology. On the other hand, Kerala has a robust communist presence and alternates between Left Front and Congress-led coalitions.

The method of using population as a measure for constituency delimitation has led to the South feeling mistreated. This is because the population control measures implemented by Southern states have resulted in a decline in population compared to the North, leading to a sense of unfairness. As a result, the North, which has yet to enforce any population control measures, will be allocated more parliamentary constituencies than the South.

A possible solution to address the delimitation issue is to consider changing the composition of the Rajya Sabha.



RELIGION IS NOT A MAJOR POLITICAL ISSUE IN SOUTH INDIA. THE BJP'S VIEWS ON CHRISTIAN CONVERSIONS OR HOSTILITY TOWARDS ISLAM HAVE YET TO GAIN ANY TRACTION IN THE REGION

This can be inspired by the US Senate's approach of guaranteeing equal representation of all states. However, this proposal could face resistance from bigger states in the US. Prime Minister Modi is attempting to change the perception that the BJP is not aligned with the culture of South India. The BJP must still reach a mutual understanding with Southern states. The opposition coalition, INDIA, controls most of the Southern States. They are determined to unseat Modi in 2024.

The BJP has a strong focus on Hindutva, the construction of the Ayodhya Ram temple, and an anti-Muslim stance. However, these views may be less popular among voters in southern regions of India. The Opposition parties like DMK, AIADMK, TDP, and BRS hold dominant positions in their respective states. Specific communities such as Vanniyars, Thevurs, and Gounders have influential roles in Tamil Nadu. In Karnataka, Vokkaligas and Lingayats have influence, while Reddys and Kammas are rivals in Andhra Pradesh. However, Brahmins have lost

power. In Kerala, Communists opposed the rival Congress in the state, which is also a member of the INDIA coalition. In Telangana, K. Chandrababu Naidu, a Velama leader, held sway, but in 2023, Congress snatched the state. Religion is not a major political issue in South India. The BJP's views on Christian conversions or hostility towards Islam have yet to gain any traction in the region. The southern states have not experienced any religious conflicts. This is because the minorities have assimilated themselves with the local population. For the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to gain success in South India, they need to adapt to the local cultural norms and political strategies. They must form alliances and regain the support of former partners. To achieve this, the BJP should revise its election strategy and develop a new narrative. Failing to do so will result in the opposition coalition INDIA becoming stronger and posing a significant threat to the BJP.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

GOVERNOR CANNOT DISMISS MINISTER

Sir — A Governor is the Head of the State, and a Chief Minister is the Head of the Government. The governor is bound by the advice of the council of ministers headed by the Chief Minister. The Supreme Court has correctly observed that a Governor is not vested with powers to dismiss a minister. When the law and order of a state break down, making it impossible to run the government by the provisions of the Constitution, the Governor can recommend the President's rule in the state. During President's rule, the Governor rules the state on behalf of the President. All authorities vested in the hands of a Chief Minister are transferred to the Governor during this period. Essentially, during President's rule, the Governor assumes the role of a Chief Minister. While the Governor administers the oath of office to the Chief Minister, they have no authority to dismiss the Chief Minister or their ministers. Governors, the Attorney General the Council of Ministers, and the Prime Minister hold office at the pleasure of the President, and the Chief Minister and their Ministers hold office at the pleasure of the Governor. In practice, the President acts at the pleasure of the Prime Minister, and the Governor acts at the pleasure of the Chief Minister.

The President and the Governors of states cannot withhold assent to a Bill. The Constitution does not grant any powers to the President to act unilaterally, even when the interest of the nation demands. While a Prime Minister cannot sign a Bill into law, the President cannot refuse to sign. The President or Governor can return the Bill with observations for reconsideration. The Supreme Court, in the case of Senthil Balaji, has ruled that a Governor cannot dismiss a minister. This ruling aligns exactly with the provisions of the Constitution. However, prima facie, the term "pleasure" appears perplexing. Both the Prime Minister and Chief Minister function when they enjoy the pleasure of the majority of the MPs and MLAs.

K V Seetharamaiah | Bengaluru

WORLD DAY OF WAR ORPHANS 2024



Every year on January 6th, the World Day of War Orphans is commemorated. The purpose of the day is to raise public awareness concerning children who have become orphaned as a result of wars. The World Day of War Orphans spread information about their plight and emphasised the psychological, social, and physical obstacles that children experience as

they grow up it is clear that civilians in several nations around the globe have become victims of the war. Amongst them, the children are the silent victims. Millions of children have grown up in war zones, and ethnic strife with no families. The orphans are forced to not only look after themselves but their younger siblings too. Palestinian children have been killed by Israeli forces in Gaza since October 7, the government's media office says. Thousands more are missing under the rubble amid relentless bombardment and it is sad. Many children lost their parents and lived in relief camps for survival. In conclusion, World Day of War Orphans 2024 is a day of both reflection and action. It's a day to stand in solidarity with those who have lost their families to war and to work towards a future where no child has to bear the scars of conflict.

C K Subramaniam | Chennai

SHORTEST TEST MATCH

Sir — India defeated South Africa by 7 wickets in the second and last Test match, leveling the series 1-1. The bowlers dominated the match, which concluded in just two days. Bumrah and Siraj each took six wickets. With this, a new record has been set in Test cricket history. This is the shortest Test match in cricket history in terms of total balls played. The Cape Town Test concluded in just 642 balls (107 overs in total). India became the first Asian team to win a Test match against South Africa in Cape Town. This is a promising start for Team India in the new year. We hope this momentum continues and India will triumph in the T20 World Cup. Players should continue practicing, as the more they practice, the better they will perform.

Mohammad Taukirk | Champaran

ALASKA EMERGENCY

Sir — The Alaska emergency is a new threat to the airline industry and poses imminent danger in mid-air. An Alaska Airlines flight traveling from Portland, Oregon, to

Ontario, California, had to make an emergency landing after a portion of the aircraft blew out mid-air. The aircraft reached approximately 16,000 feet about six minutes into the flight before beginning its descent. The jet had 174 passengers and six crew members aboard.

In a statement provided to CBS News, Alaska Airlines said that Flight No. 1282 experienced an incident soon after departure and "landed safely back" in Portland, but it was a miraculous escape for the passengers on board. This type of aircraft comes equipped with a rear emergency exit door, mainly used by international airlines, and has a seat configuration that allows for more passengers on the plane. Most US airlines don't use that configuration and design the area to appear as a window from the inside of the aircraft. Somehow, the plane averted disaster, and the pilot deserves all credit.

C K Ramani | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

A JEALOUS AND POSSESSIVE MIND

Human minds have fallen prey to the traits of jealousy, envy and possessiveness



RAVI VALLURI

There were twenty theatre enthusiasts of a college who participated in the audition for staging the annual college day play. All six roles were up for grabs, which included one female and five male characters.

As a safety valve, the well-feted and cerebral director handpicked one additional female lead and two male characters. The first choice was a female lead who was attractive, vivacious and bubbling with talent. She felt wretched sharing stage space with another plucky woman. Her covetous and jealous mind, instead of concentrating on the character and performance, kept plotting strategies to run down her perceived opponent, much to the consternation of the director. At his wife's end, the director opted for the alternative and assigned her to the lead role. The tempestuous woman burning with envy was clearly responsible for the loss.

Companies, countries and communities have all become wary of the material success of their 'competitors' and in the process compromise with their goals and objectives. Consequently, they resort to shortcuts in order to emerge triumphant and victorious. "You can be the moon and still be jealous of the stars," writes the American musician Garry Allen. The attribute of jealousy arises in an individual when the mind is possessive of certain belongings. Interestingly, envy in many also arises out of shortages. There can be a lack of aptitude, talent, resources, connections, opportunities, or because of unfavourable outcomes. Individuals subsumed by jealousy build walls of possessiveness and false security walls around their personalities. Such minds feel cheery about their possessions.



As per the epic, The Mahabharata, Karna was extremely jealous of Arjuna, which eventually proved to be his nemesis. The jealous and possessive mind is acquisitive by nature, taking both animate and inanimate objects for granted and getting attached to things like an addiction to alcohol or marijuana. For instance, in the case of the college theatre mentioned earlier, the more talented actress became fearful and was gripped with hatred and greed. Jealous and envious minds have become laboratories of antagonism that spew hatred. How do we overcome attributes such as jealousy, envy and possessiveness? At one end of the spectrum are organizations and authorities which need to take up this responsibility. This includes proper parenting, where children are brought up on ideals of inherent goodness, an effective educational system that imparts values as part of their pedagogy, governments that take up the responsibility of providing equal opportunities to the citizens and make an attempt to carve out an egalitarian system, and a society that addresses the core issues of humaneness amongst its citizenry. Vasudeva Kutumbakam is the net result.

This may appear altruistic but is an effort to restore some semblance of sanity in society, which otherwise is plagued by avarice and jealousy. The spiritual touch is an important colour in the rainbow of goodness. One can practice any faith, but we need to be tolerant of other peoples' points of view. Spirituality succeeds where religions draw the fault lines and wave red flags. Globalisation has made the world flat, but has resulted in an exponential increase in crass commercialization and human minds have fallen prey to the traits of jealousy, envy and possessiveness. The vicious tendencies of jealousy and possessiveness can be tackled by following the two-fold approach highlighted so that the chasm between individuals diminishes.

Manifest plainness, Embrace simplicity, Reduce selfishness, Have few desires — Lao Tzu

(Ravi Valluri is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and is a faculty of the Art of Living. Views are personal)

Hiring based on skills is now a standard practice



DINESH SOOD

As India enters this transformative phase in hiring practices, both employers and job seekers need to embrace the opportunities presented by skills-based hiring



The job market in India is constantly changing, and we are now witnessing a significant shift towards skills-based hiring. The old-fashioned approach to hiring, which relied on academic qualifications and work experience, is giving way to a more dynamic method that prioritizes specific skills. The new skills-first approach enables professionals to explore unconventional career pathways and places greater emphasis on their abilities rather than their educational background. This shift reflects a wider recognition that skills, rather than just degrees, are the key to success in today's highly competitive job market.

A skills-first hiring approach gives priority to a candidate's practical abilities over traditional qualifications. This trend is growing rapidly in India as employers realize the value of diverse skill sets. It is relevant today because it provides equal opportunities for all, allowing talent to shine beyond academic labels. The advantages of this approach include a more inclusive job market and the ability to tap into hidden talent.

This approach values merit over formalities, enabling professionals from diverse backgrounds to contribute on a global scale. Every foreign job market has a specific skill shortage that they are looking to fill, and this approach helps to fill that gap. According to a report titled 'The State of Skills-Based Hiring 2023', 86 per cent of employees believe that they are more likely to secure their dream job when the hiring process includes skills-based hiring. The latest data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) is alarming: a whopping 86% of individuals aged between 15 and 59 years have not received any form of vocational training. This is unacceptable! It is high time that we focus our efforts on converting this pool of individuals into skilled human capital.

The current trend in hiring prioritizes skills. Therefore, high schools and post-secondary education institutions must design their curriculum to focus on these skills. The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 rightly emphasizes the need for standardized vocational training courses in high schools, with a range of experiences aimed at developing a bundle of skill competencies.

To achieve the goal set by the NEP of



THE LATEST DATA FROM THE PERIODIC LABOUR FORCE SURVEY (PLFS) IS ALARMING: A WHOPPING 86% OF INDIVIDUALS AGED BETWEEN 15 AND 59 YEARS HAVE NOT RECEIVED ANY FORM OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING

increasing the gross enrolment ratio in higher education, including vocational education, to 50% by 2035, further action is needed. This requires the addition of 3.5 crore new seats to higher education institutions (HEIs) and focusing on a flexible curriculum with creative combinations of subjects. We must integrate vocational education with mainstream education and allow for multiple entries and exits with appropriate certification. To provide our students with the best possible skills, it is imperative to establish Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs) at par with the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs).

However, accurately assessing these skills may pose challenges. Nevertheless, the future outlook suggests continued growth, fostering innovation and adaptability in a workforce where skills, not just degrees, define success. This reflects a dynamic shift towards meritocracy in the evolving employment landscape. The growing integration of advanced technologies like generative AI, machine learning, cloud computing, and data science across these sectors drives the trend. As these technologies continue to propel business and alter business operations, the demand for upskilling in technology remains robust. Companies are increasingly seeking professionals with specific skills to fill key roles in areas such as valuation analysis, financial research, investor relations management, and risk analysis within this domain.

Skills-first hiring is a new approach that is dismantling traditional barriers to offer global work opportunities irrespective of educational background or regional certifications. For instance, a cyber security expert equipped with practical knowledge and certifications can now find doors opening abroad, as security needs transcend geograph-

ical confines.

IBM India has adopted a 'skill-first' approach where college degrees do not matter. In 2012, IBM implemented this approach in the US by removing the four-year college degree requirement from about 50% of its jobs. Ten years later, 29% of the present IBM US workforce in hardware, software, and consulting does not have a college degree. However, companies like Oracle had 100%, followed by Intel (94%), HP (92%), and Apple (90%). A study conducted between 2017 and 2022 showed that US employers reduced degree requirements for 46% of middle-skill positions and 31% of high-skill positions. Various studies highlight that for the job of software quality-assurance engineer, only 26% of Accenture's postings for the position contained a degree requirement.

The rise of skills-based hiring can be attributed to several factors, each contributing to a more comprehensive and efficient employment ecosystem. One of the key drivers is the fast-paced evolution of technology, which has made some skill sets obsolete while creating an insatiable demand for new ones. As industries digitize and automate, employers are looking for candidates who have the technical expertise required to navigate this new world.

Skills-based hiring is not only about technical prowess but also about fostering inclusivity in the workplace. By focusing on skills, employers can tap into a broader talent pool, breaking down barriers related to age, gender, or educational background. This approach enables individuals with non-traditional career trajectories to showcase their abilities, ultimately leading to a more diverse and innovative workforce. In a country as diverse as India, this inclusive hiring model is crucial for unlocking the full potential of the population. It allows for the recognition and utilisation of a rich tapestry of skills that may be over-

looked in a more rigid, qualification-centric system.

When individuals are hired based on their skills instead of solely on academic qualifications, there is a higher likelihood of job satisfaction and engagement. Employees who feel that their skills are valued are more likely to invest in their professional development, leading to a continuous improvement loop. This paradigm shift challenges the traditional notion that a candidate's potential is solely based on their educational background. It acknowledges that skills are dynamic, and the ability to learn and adapt is highly valued in today's fast-paced work environment.

As India transitions to this transformative phase in hiring practices, both employers and job seekers need to embrace the opportunities presented by skills-based hiring. Job seekers should focus on acquiring and showcasing relevant skills, whether through formal education, online courses, or on-the-job experience. Employers, on the other hand, should refine their recruitment processes to ensure that they identify and nurture the diverse talents that the Indian workforce has to offer.

In conclusion, skills-based hiring in India marks a pivotal moment in the country's employment landscape. It is a departure from traditional norms, a response to technological evolution, and a step toward a more inclusive and dynamic professional future. As India continues to embrace this shift, the workforce will be characterised not just by degrees but by a mosaic of skills that power innovation and drive success in an ever-changing global economy.

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

Confronting cancer: Are we winning the war against it?

With the growing incidents of cancer, it is crucial for health authorities to prioritise early detection, cost-effective treatment and preventive measures

Cancer, often referred to as the "emperor of maladies," continues to be a formidable challenge for medical researchers and scientists worldwide. Despite significant advancements in the field of medicine and biomedical science, cancer remains a relentless adversary, and its burden is escalating rapidly in India. India is facing a mounting crisis, with alarming statistics indicating a surge in cancer cases and mortality rates. As we delve into the current scenario, it becomes evident that immediate action is imperative to strengthen cancer care infrastructure, improve early detection and enhance preventive measures. The cancer burden in India is reaching unprecedented levels.



BISHAL KUMAR SAHA

According to a recent report presented in Parliament, there were 14.61 lakh cancer cases detected in 2022, an increase of 35,000 cases from the previous year.

Even more concerning is the mortality rate, with 8.08 lakh patients succumbing to cancer in 2022 compared to 7.89 lakh in 2021. The projections estimate a staggering 29.8 million cancer patients in

India by 2025. These figures paint a bleak picture, sounding an alarm for both healthcare authorities and the general public. Despite improvements in cancer treatment, the incidence of cancer and mortality rates persistently rise in India. The country faces multiple challenges in combatting cancer effectively. The most prevalent types of cancer in India include breast, lung, colon, rectum and prostate cancer. Moreover, India has one of the highest mortality-to-incidence ratios for cancer globally, indicating a need for early detection and accessible treatment facilities.

The actual incidence of cancer in India could be significantly higher than the official figures, as highlighted by a

2022 study conducted by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry and Ernst & Young (FICCI-EY). This suggests that the situation is more dire than what the statistics portray, making it all the more urgent to address this issue promptly.

One of the central issues contributing to the cancer crisis in India is the lack of easy access to specialized hospitals equipped with experienced oncologists and state-of-the-art machinery. Timely detection of the disease and affordable treatment are critical factors that need immediate attention.

The government must prioritize the establishment of cancer institutes and tertiary care centres to cater to the



growing demand for quality cancer care. While the public healthcare system is overburdened, private hospitals often provide treatments that are financially out of reach for many patients. Raising pub-

lic awareness about cancer detection and prevention is a key aspect of tackling this crisis effectively. Beyond the well-known risk factors such as tobacco and alcohol consumption, obesity and seden-

tary lifestyles, environmental factors also play a significant role in the rising disease burden. For instance, the consumption of processed and packaged foods with preservatives has been linked to cancer. Promoting healthy habits, including regular exercise, can be instrumental in reducing cancer risk.

Among women of reproductive age, breast and cervical cancers are the leading causes of cancer-related mortality. These cancers, however, are largely preventable through early screening and timely interventions. Public health campaigns aimed at encouraging regular screenings and educating women about the importance of early detection can save many lives. Cancer continues to cast a

dark shadow over India's healthcare landscape.

As the cancer burden increases, it becomes vital for health authorities to focus on early detection, affordable treatments and preventive measures. The establishment of specialized hospitals coupled with heightened public awareness campaigns, can significantly alleviate the challenges posed by cancer. The time for action is now, as India must stand united in its fight against the dreaded emperor of maladies. Only through collective efforts, we can hope to turn the tide and provide a brighter future for cancer patients in the country.

(The writer studies at Delhi University and is a freelance writer, views are personal)

ED: PDS scam in Bengal likely ₹10,000 crore

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Friday's attack on the Enforcement Directorate officials conducting raids in North 24 Parganas Trinamool Congress strongman Shahjehan Sheikh's house has wider angle than, ED sources say.

According to the ED officials the attack relates a larger "across the border money-smuggling racket" in which a number of TMC leaders including Shahjehan and Shankar Adhya a former chairman of Bongaon municipality are allegedly involved.

Most of such money siphoning is connected to ratio distribution and recruitment scams say agency sources adding the officials had raided Shahjehan and Adhya's houses on Friday after getting specific leads regarding the matter.

A chance retrieval of a secret letter allegedly written by former Food Minister (presently State Forest Minister) Jyotipriya Mallick --- presently in jail custody for his alleged links to the ratio scam --- led to the raids, an official said. "The letter was written by Mallick who is presently in SSKM Hospital ... in the letter he had directed someone to



collect cash from Adhya and Shahjehan ... this further confirmed the suspicion and a raid was planned," a sources said.

In a parallel development, a report submitted by the ED to the Calcutta High Court says that the ratio scam could go beyond ₹10,000 crore mark considering the fact that Mallick was Food Minister for about 10 years.

"This ₹10,000 crore is exclusive of the money generated from rice smuggling ... and consider the fact that rice being the staple food is preferred to wheat both in Bengal and Bangladesh," an official said. Out of the ₹10,000 crore about ₹2,700 crore was siphoned out by Shankar Adhya to Dubai where a number of ruling Trinamool Congress leaders have their business interests or properties, ED has told the High Court.

Like Shahjehan, Shankar Adhya who was arrested on Friday night too has business

interests on both sides of the borders. "He used 19 money transferring agencies --- out of which some were his own --- to convert Indian currencies into foreign currencies ... besides both these men used what they call carriers locally to smuggle out packets of currency notes to Bangladesh," the ED has said.

"If the TMC runs on the theory of 75 per cent and 25 per cent policy where 75 per cent of the ill-gotten money has to be sent to the topmost leadership and if Jyotipriya Mallick has generated ₹10,000 crore then you can consider the magnitude of the scams they perpetuated in Bengal," State Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari said.

According to sources both the leaders who were raided on Friday have their business interests including star hotels at Digha, Puri and other tourists places as well as on both sides of the border. Besides, Shahjehan runs slaughter houses, numerous brick kilns, sand and earth queries, ferries. According to sources they earn cut money from lottery agents too. "Each lottery table has to give ₹1,000 per day ... multiply with the number of agents working in a district," said ED officials.

Attempts at defaming Bengal, says Mamata



SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Three days after the Friday's attack on the ED officials during a raid at the house of Trinamool Congress strongman Shahjehan Sheikh's house at Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas, Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Monday spoke up saying there were attempts at defaming Bengal on the question of law and order.

"People have started raising questions on the law and order situation of the State which is wrong ... I do not mind people calling me names because I am used to it and I have been suffering such attacks from my very childhood ... but I feel hurt when they give my State bad name," Banerjee told at a government function organized for students. "Very recently Serampore

Police Station in our State has been adjudged the best police station in India ... and Kolkata has been adjudged the safest city in the country ... if the State's law and order situation had been bad then how would we get such accolades ... so this attempt at defaming the State must be stopped and the people of the State must unite against this disinformation campaign," she said adding how the Centre had stopped funding the fast track courts and how her Government had to bear the costs of running them. "The Centre has not been giving funds for these fast track and POSCO courts but as we are committed to the purpose we are still funding from our meager resources," Banerjee said. She would not however directly raise the issue of Friday's attack on the ED officials.

India summons Maldives envoy, condemns barb

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A day after Maldives suspended three of its ministers for their disparaging remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India summoned the Maldives envoy to New Delhi and expressed strong concern over the comments.

In a related development, Maldives Foreign Minister Moosa Sameer criticised the derogatory remarks, labeling them as "unacceptable." He emphasised that these remarks do not reflect the official position of the Maldives Government.

Sameer stated that Maldives remains committed to fostering a "positive and constructive dialogue" with all its partners, particularly its neighbours.

In a post shared on X, Moosa Sameer said, "The recent remarks against foreign leaders and our close neighbors are unacceptable and do not reflect the official position of the Government of Maldives. We remain committed to fostering a positive and constructive dialogue with all our partners, especially our neighbours, based on mutual respect and

understanding."

A massive uproar erupted after a Maldivian deputy minister, along with other cabinet members and government officials, made disparaging and unsavory references to Modi's recent visit to Lakshadweep.

On January 2, he visited the Union Territory of Lakshadweep and shared several pictures, including an "exhilarating experience" of him trying his hand at snorkeling.

In a series of posts on X, Prime Minister Modi shared pictures of the white beaches, the pristine blue skies, and the ocean and tagged them with a message that read, "For those who wish to embrace the adventurer in them, Lakshadweep has to be on your list."

In a post that has now been deleted, the Maldivian Deputy Minister of Youth Empowerment, Mariyam Shiuna, made a mocking and disrespectful reference to the Modi over his visit to the Indian island cluster.

On Sunday, former Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih condemned the use of "hateful language" against India by Government officials on social media,

saying New Delhi has always been a good friend to the island nation. Taking to his official handle on social media platform X, Solih posted, "I condemn the use of hateful language against India by Maldivian government officials on social media."

He stressed that "India has always been a good friend to the Maldives and we must not allow such callous remarks to negatively impact the age-old friendship between our two countries."

Meanwhile, former Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdullah Shahid said the objectionable remarks against the former and fellow Indian natives on social media are 'reprehensible' and 'odious'.

Calling on the Maldivian government to identify the officials responsible and reprimand them, the former Foreign minister on his official X handle posted, "Derogatory remarks made by two Deputy Ministers of the current Maldives Government, and a member of a political party in the ruling coalition, towards Prime Minister @narendramodi and the people of India in social media is reprehensible and odious."

Uttar Purvi Mahotsav in Delhi from January 13

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Rich diversity of North East India, blending traditional arts, crafts, and cultures under one vibrant umbrella 'Uttar Purvi Mahotsav 2024' will be showcased at Bharat Mandapam at Pragati Maidan, New Delhi, from January 13 to January 17.

The five-day cultural extravaganza promises an enchanting journey through traditional dances, mesmerizing performances, and a showcase of the region's rich cultural heritage, said Chanchal Kumar, Secretary, Union Ministry of Development of North East Region recently while sharing details of the event with the media. He said that the festival which aims to foster exchanges in traditional handicrafts, handlooms, agro products, and tourism offerings, becoming a catalyst for the region's growth and development will witness participation of more than 250 weavers, farmers, and entrepreneurs.

"It will also serve as a platform to showcase the unique aspects that make the NorthEast Region a cultural jewel. The Mahotsav aims to present the best of Northeast India under one roof with

exquisite, handcrafted products, handloom & textiles, sustainable handicrafts, bouquet of GI products - indigenous fruits and organic products of Northeast India," said the official.

One of the interesting features of the fest will be panel discussion on "Women Leaders in the Northeast" which will dwell into the diverse contributions of women leaders, recognizing their important role in laying the groundwork for resilient and sustainable communities in the region. At the same time, under the theme "Northeast in Action," the panel on "Youth, Workforce, and the Economic Tapestry of India" aims to unravel the compelling dimensions brought to the table by the youth and workforce of the Northeast. Exploring their contributions, aspirations, and challenges, the discussion will provide insights into how this dynamic demographic can significantly shape the economic tapestry of India.

To bolster the economy of the region and as a part of its Act East Policy to reach out to the Northeast habitants, the festival will provide a conducive platform for significant buyer-seller meets, fostering valuable interactions across various sectors.

Come clean on MVA LS seat sharing: Ambedkar to Uddhav

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Miffed by the delay in finalising the seat-adjustments by the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) chief Prakash Ambedkar on Monday asked his party's ally Shiv Sena (UBT) to "come clean" on the electoral understanding it had reached with two other MVA partners - Congress and NCP (Sharad Pawar).

Fearing that his party might be short-changed in the "seat-sharing" pact for 48 Lok Sabha seats to be arrived at among three MVA constituents in Maharashtra, Ambedkar sought to know Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray as to what kind of seat-sharing arrangement was being reached among the three MVA partners - Sena (UBT), Congress and NCP (SP).

As per the understanding reached among the MVA partners, the VBA will be allotted a seat or two from the Shiv Sena (UBT) quota.

Within hours after Sena spokesperson and MP Sanjay Raut went to town saying that the VBA could



contest the Akola LS seat and none of the MVA allies would object to it, Ambedkar upped the ante on the lack of clarity in the seat-sharing formula being worked out among the MVA partners.

Joining issue with Raut, Ambedkar wanted to know as to why the SS-UBT kept harping only on the Akola seat when he could contest any seat in the state. The VBA chief, it may be recalled, was elected twice from Akola and later served a term in Rajya Sabha.

"Why are you talking about only Akola?... Let anybody contest it, I can stand for election from Mumbai, or Pune, or even from Badayuni (Badaun) in Uttar Pradesh...

Nobody can stop me... But first you spell out to us what agreement has been reached with the Congress and NCP (SP)?" Ambedkar asked.

Ambedkar - who had threatened to contest all the 48 seats in the state if VBA's claims were ignored in the seat-sharing talks - said, "Our understanding with the Sena (UBT) is clear... If the Congress-NCP (SP) do not respond, then VBA and Shiv Sena (UBT) will each contest 24 seats each in Maharashtra".

On their part, the Congress and NCP (SP) have chosen not to respond to the repeated outbursts by Ambedkar. Their stand is clear that it is for the Sena (UBT) to deal with its ally - VBA.

CAPF to take precaution after attack

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA

Following the Friday's attack on the ED officials and Central forces at Sandeshkhali when they went to raid the house of a TMC leader Shahjehan Sheikh the administrative authorities have mandatorily directed the central forces personnel to take certain precautionary measures before conducting such raids. Accordingly the central forces would have to wear helmets, body guards and carry lathis in addition to their guns, sources said.

This, apart from other "important measures" taken as per protocol, sources added. Meanwhile, sending a stern message the Nabanna - State administrative headquarters - to act on the Shahjehan Sheikh case Bengal Governor CV Ananda Bose has called for a report on the Friday's incident, Raj Bhavan sources said on Monday.

The governor has also directed the state government to fix responsibility for the failure of law and order and punished the police officers who failed in their duties," said an official.

Ram temple pran pratistha invitation cards to be hand delivered to all guests

PTI ■ AYODHYA

Invitation cards for the consecration ceremony of the Ram temple in Ayodhya will be "hand-delivered to all the guests" through representatives of the temple trust and a large number of volunteers, official sources said.

Besides, various representatives of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and their allies are also aiding in hand-delivering the invitations. Some of the guests have already received the invitation card.

The invitation card has an imposing image of the temple and also Lord Ram. Besides the large, aesthetically-designed cards, the invitation also includes a booklet carrying brief profiles of some of the key people who were involved in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement.

Over 7,000 people are on the invitee list of the temple trust and they include cricket legends Sachin Tendulkar and Virat Kohli, Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan, an billionaire industrialists Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani.

"We have invited people from different walks of life, from space exploration to arts and some forgotten tribals to architects. Besides, some of the prominent names being among the invitees, there are several others who have made a mark in their lives. They have been invited too," a senior member of the temple trust told PTI. Invitations have been sent out to different sects and communities for the grand 'pran pratistha' of the Ram temple on January 22, the sources said.

Ayodhya is being decked up for the event and Prime Minister Narendra Modi will attend the ceremony.

"We have a huge network of people and volunteers. And, each guest will receive the invitation card by hand and not through postal or courier delivery service," the temple trust member said.

Invitations were recently also sent to Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and senior Congress leader Sonia Gandhi.

Party sources said the invitation cards were hand-delivered to both of them by a senior representative of the temple trust. The trust has also invited 4,000 seers from across the country and 50 guests from foreign countries.

The invitees from abroad will also receive invitation cards by hand, a top source in the trust said.

"Similar to our network of people in India, we have volunteers in foreign countries too. We will send the cards to them from India and representatives will then travel to hand-deliver it to the guests," the source added.

Iqbal Ansari, a litigant in the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid case, on January 5, also received his invitation for the consecration ceremony. A representative of the trust hand-delivered it to him at his house in Kotia Panjaitola near the Ram Path in Ayodhya.

Ansari, who is in his late 50s, on December 31 told PTI in an interview that the Muslim community respected the 2019 Supreme Court verdict on the Ram temple issue.

The apex court in a historic verdict settled the fractious issue that goes back more than a century, and backed the construction of a Ram temple by a trust at the disputed site in Ayodhya and ruled that an alternative five-acre plot must be found for a mosque.

Actors Arun Govil and Dipika Chikhlia, who played the roles of Lord Ram and Goddess Sita in the famous TV serial "Ramayan", have also been invited to the ceremony.

Invitation cards have been printed in "both Hindi and English". Each invitation set carries the main invitation card, the "Pran Pratishtha" programme card and a booklet on the journey of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and people who played a part in it, directly or indirectly.

Maldives loses traction, tourists head to Lakshadweep

From Page 1

In another post on platform X, Pitti wrote: "Embark on a journey with @EaseMyTrip to discover the enchanting beauty of Ayodhya and the pristine allure of Lakshadweep! Immerse yourself in rich culture and breathtaking landscapes. Say no to Maldives bookings and explore the wonders of Ayodhya and Lakshadweep. Watch our video on the new website to ignite your wanderlust! #ExploreWithEase #Ayodhya #Lakshadweep".

"In solidarity with our nation, @EaseMyTrip has suspended all Maldives flight bookings.

The move comes close on the heels of the Maldives government suspending three of its ministers following a row over derogatory social media posts against Prime Minister Narendra Modi over his visit to Lakshadweep.

Pitti said that every year 3 lakh people visit Maldives from India. Many Indians who already had made bookings to Maldives took to social media to announce cancellation of their travel plans to Maldives and posted pictures of cancelled flights and hotel reservations. Some unverified reports on Indian social media claimed that more than 8000-10,000 hotel bookings and 2,500-3000 flight tickets to the Maldives were cancelled. Tour operators in India are gearing up for an impact of calls for a cancellation of holidays in the Maldives as they said that there are "no new inquiries by people" for visits to the island nation. The Indian Association of Tour Operators predicts that the repercussions of recent events and the call for a boycott will become apparent within the next 20-25 days.

An Indian traveller who had made bookings to Maldives for travel between March 31 to April 2 posted a screenshot on X, showing that he has cancelled the trip. Singh also said that

he is "atmanirbhar" with domestic destinations like Lakshadweep.

Meanwhile Vistara has said it will monitor the demand for flights between the two countries as the "situation is evolving right now". Vistara operates one flight each daily from Mumbai and Delhi to Male. Airline's Chief Commercial Officer Deepak Rajawat said it has not cancelled anything as of now and will monitor the demand for flights. Air India, IndiGo and SpiceJet also operate flights to the Maldives. There were no comments from the three airlines on the current situation. Meanwhile, MakeMyTrip on Monday said it has observed a 3,400 per cent increase in on-platform searches for Lakshadweep ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the islands.

"We have observed a 3400 per cent increase in on-platform searches for Lakshadweep ever since the Honorable PM's visit. This interest in Indian beaches has inspired us to launch a 'Beaches of India' campaign on the platform with offers and discounts to encourage Indian travellers to explore the country's stunning beaches. Keep watching this space!", MakeMyTrip said in a post on social media platform X.

A row erupted on social media last week when a minister and some other leaders in the Maldives used derogatory remarks against PM Modi after he posted a video of him on a beach in Lakshadweep.

The post by Mariyam Shiuna - which has now been deleted - featured the pictures of PM Modi from his recent visit to Lakshadweep. The Deputy Minister of Youth Empowerment, Information and Arts, referred to the Indian Prime Minister as a 'clown' and a 'puppet of Israel'.

SC sends...

From Page 1

The Supreme Court said Shah later moved the SC but did not disclose that he had, within 14 days of the order dated July 17, 2019, approached the Maharashtra government with his application for remission, and that the CBI and the Special Judge (CBI), Mumbai had given a negative recommendation in his case.

The apex court said when the opinions were found to be negative, Shah filed a petition before the SC in 2022 seeking a direction to the state of Gujarat to consider his remission application suppressing the above material facts. "This he could not have done, thereby misrepresenting and suppressing relevant facts, thus playing fraud on this court," the bench said.

"Taking advantage of May 13, 2022 order of this court, other convicts also filed remission applications... Gujarat was complicit and acted in tandem with respondent no. 3 (one of the convicts) in this case. This Court was misled by suppressing facts," the bench said.

Reacting to the verdict, senior advocate Vrinda Grover, who appeared for retired IPS officer of

Maharashtra cadre Meeran Chadha Borwankar and others, termed it a very good judgment.

"... (it) has upheld the rule of law and the faith of the people of this country, particularly women, in the legal system, the courts, and that there is an assurance for justice," Grover told reporters.

Celebrations erupted in Devgadh Baria town in Gujarat's Dahod district, with relatives of Bilkis Bano bursting firecrackers.

"I am happy the Supreme Court has quashed the Gujarat government's decision and asked the convicts to surrender. I feel we have received justice today," a witness in the case and Bilkis Bano's uncle Abdul Rasqa Mansuri told reporters in Devgadh Baria.

The SC refused to accept the plea of "protection of the liberty" of the convicts.

"One cannot lose sight of the fact that the said respondents were all in prison for a little over fourteen years (with liberal paroles and furloughs granted to them from time to time). They had lost their right to liberty once they were convicted and were imprisoned.

"But, they were released pursuant to the impugned

remission orders which have been quashed by us. Consequently, the status quo ante must be restored. We say so for another reason in the event convicts are inclined to seek remission in accordance with law, they have to be in prison as they cannot seek remission when on bail or outside the jail," the bench said. Besides the petition filed by Bilkis Bano contesting the remission, several other PILs, including one by CPI(M) leader Subhashini Ali, independent journalist Revati Lul and former vice-chancellor of Lucknow University Roop Rekha Verma, had challenged the relief to the convicts. TMC leader Mahua Moitra had also filed a PIL against the remission and premature release of the convicts.

Swindlers invoke...

From Page 1

"The audio recording posted on the portal has many inherent flaws.

While attempting to register with BTC Ai Evex, this writer was redirected to X Pro Market, a completely unfamiliar company. Although the effort to register with the company did not succeed, the prospective investor received at least two dozen phone calls from numbers registered in the

United Kingdom, urging to expedite the registration process and invest the first installment of Rs 24,000 at the earliest.

The numbers from where the calls were made include + 4 4 7 9 0 6 6 0 6 9 6 4 , + 4 4 7 9 8 5 6 4 5 2 2 9 , +447983292634, etc. Interestingly, their supposed support center is in Turkey, from where a person (probably a Keralite, as per his accent)

called, urging to speed up the payment. All these international calls aimed to persuade the investor to part with Rs 24,000, revealing their ulterior motive.

This is the first time in the history of India that names of top industrialists and corporate barons are being used to convince investors about the "seriousness" behind a company's investment potential.

Blinken brings US push on post-war Gaza planning

AP ■ ABU DHABI

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has opened his third day of meetings on an urgent Mideast diplomatic mission to prevent Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza from exploding into a broader regional conflict.

Blinken was meeting Monday with United Arab Emirates leader Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed before travelling to Saudi Arabia for talks with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman aimed at enlisting the key Arab leaders in a push to not only keep the war contained but also prepare for post-conflict Gaza's future.

With Sheikh Mohammed in Abu Dhabi Blinken "emphasised the importance of preventing further spread of the conflict and stressed continued US commitment to securing lasting regional peace that ensures Israel's security and advances the establishment of an independent Palestinian

state," the State Department said.

Blinken arrived in Abu Dhabi from similar meetings in Qatar, Jordan, Turkey and Greece, where he claimed at least modest success in his mission with pledges from those countries to consider contributing to the effort to plan for Gaza's reconstruction and governance once the fighting has ended.

Gaza has been decimated by three months of Israeli bombardments that have sparked anger around the world for the massive damage and huge number of civilian casualties. Financial and in-kind support from the UAE and Saudi Arabia will be essential to the success of any such plan and US officials said Blinken on his fourth trip to the region since the war began in October hoped to overcome initial Arab resistance to considering "day after" scenarios for Gaza.

Arab countries have been pressing for an immediate

cease-fire and an end to civilian deaths before discussing such plans.

But after his first meetings on his latest tour, Blinken said he had been speaking with officials about contributions they could make to post-war plans and about using their influence to tamp down resurgent fears that the conflict could expand and potentially draw in direct US involvement. "This is a conflict that could easily metastasize, causing even more insecurity and even more suffering," Blinken told reporters during a joint news conference in Doha with Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani.

"So from day one, among other priorities, we have been intensely focused on working to prevent the conflict from spreading," he said. "We share a commitment to ensure that the conflict does not expand." He said his talks had also included "not necessarily easy discussions" of what each country can do once the con-

flict is over "to provide the assurances and the incentives required to build a more secure and more stable, more peaceful future for the region."

"And my takeaway from the discussions so far, including here with our friends in Qatar, is that our partners are willing to have these difficult conversations and to make hard decisions. All of us feel a stake in forging the way forward," Blinken said.

Arab states have been highly critical of Israel's actions and have eschewed public support for long-term planning, arguing that the fighting must end before such discussions can begin. They have been demanding a cease-fire since mid-October as civilian casualties began to skyrocket.

After his talks with Blinken, Sheikh Mohammed called for an immediate cease-fire, saying the constant images of death and destruction in Gaza are de-sensitising people to the horrors of what is happening.

Israeli strike kills elite Hezbollah commander

AP ■ BEIRUT

An Israeli airstrike killed an elite Hezbollah commander in southern Lebanon on Monday, the latest in an escalating exchange of strikes along the border that have raised fears of another Mideast war even as the fighting in Gaza exacts a mounting toll on civilians. The strike on an SUV killed a commander in a secretive Hezbollah force that operates along the border, according to a Lebanese security official, who spoke on condition of anonymity according to regulations. Hezbollah identified the slain fighter as Wissam al-Tawil without providing details. He is the most senior militant in the armed group to have been killed since Hamas' October 7 attack into southern Israel triggered all-out war in Gaza and lower-intensity fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, which has escalated since an Israeli strike killed a senior Hamas leader in Beirut last week.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is back in the region this week, appears to be trying to head off a wider conflict.

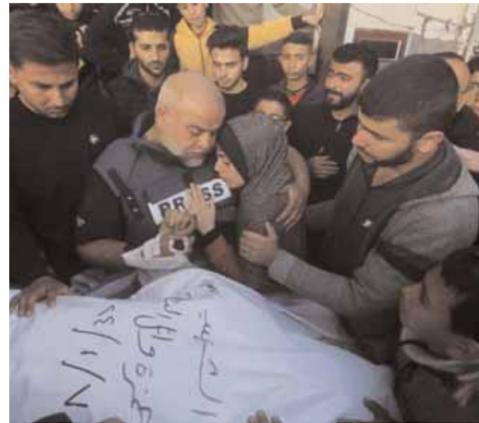
Israel says it has largely wrapped up major operations in northern Gaza and is now focusing on the central region and the southern city of Khan Younis. Israeli officials have said the fighting will continue for many more months as the army seeks to dismantle Hamas and return scores of hostages taken during the militant group's October 7 attack that triggered the war.

The offensive has already killed over 23,000 Palestinians, devastated vast swaths of the Gaza Strip, displaced nearly 85 per cent of its population of 2.3 million and left a quarter of its residents facing starvation.

'SICKENING SCENES' IN GAZA'S HOSPITALS

Medics, patients and displaced people fled from the main hospital in central Gaza as the fighting drew closer, witnesses said Monday. Losing the facility would be another major blow to a health system shattered by three months of war.

Doctors Without Borders and other aid groups withdrew from Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital



Al Jazeera journalist Wael Dahdoudh holds the hand of his son Hamza, who also worked for Al Jazeera and who was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Rafah, Gaza Strip, Sunday. Dahdoudh lost his wife, two other children and a grandson earlier in the war and was nearly killed himself.

in Deir al-Balah in recent days, saying it was too dangerous. That spread panic among people sheltering there, causing many to join the hundreds of thousands who have fled to the south of the besieged territory. Tens of thousands of people have sought shelter in Gaza's hospitals, which are also struggling to treat dozens of people wounded each day in Israeli strikes. Only 13 of Gaza's 36 hospitals are even partially functioning, according to the UN humanitarian office.

Omar al-Darawi, an employee at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, said the facility has been struck multiple times in recent days. He said thousands of people left after the aid groups pulled out, and that patients have been concentrated on one floor so the remaining doctors can tend to them more easily.

"We have large numbers of wounded who can't move," he said. "They need special care, which is unavailable." More dead and wounded arrive each day as Israeli forces advance in central Gaza following heavy airstrikes. Gaza's Health Ministry said Monday that 249 Palestinians have been killed and 510 others were wounded across the territory in the last 24 hours. World Health Organisation staff who visited Sunday saw "sickening scenes of people of all ages being treated on blood-streaked

floors and in chaotic corridors," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the head of the UN agency, said in a statement. "The bloodbath in Gaza must end."

DIRE CONDITIONS IN THE ISOLATED NORTH THE situation is even more dire in northern Gaza, which Israeli forces cut off from the rest of the territory in late October. Entire neighbourhoods have been demolished, and hundreds of thousands of people have fled, while those who remain face severe shortages of food and water. The WHO said late on Sunday it has not been able to deliver supplies to northern Gaza in 12 days.

Even there, Israel is still battling what it describes as pockets of militants. An airstrike early on Sunday flattened a four-story home filled with displaced people in the urban Jabaliya refugee camp, killing at least 70, including women and children, according to Mahmoud Bassal, a spokesman for Gaza's civil defence.

There was no immediate confirmation from the Health Ministry, which has struggled to maintain its operations in the north. Search efforts were still underway on Monday. The civil defense circulated a graphic video showing the aftermath of attack, with several bodies scattered among the rubble.

China detains man accused of spying for Britain

AP ■ BEIJING

China says it has detained an individual accused of collecting state secrets on behalf of Britain's foreign intelligence agency MI6.

The Ministry of State Security posted on social media on Monday that Britain had been cooperating since 2015 with the person, who it said was a citizen of a third nation and had the surname Huang.

The ministry said Huang had received training in intelligence gathering, provided with equipment and had collected numerous state secrets on repeated visits to China. No further information on the intelligence gathered was given, nor did the ministry say when he or she had been detained or where they were being held.

The definition of state secrets is not clearly defined under China's opaque political and legal system, and many consulting and advisory firms have been investigated for obtaining data that would ordinarily be in the public record, particularly if they were shared with foreign entities.

The British government has yet to comment on the allegations, but they follow a deterioration of relations between the sides sparked in part by British opposition to Chinese investments in the country, especially in the power and communications industries where the ruling Communist Party exercises strong influence.

London has also been highly critical of China's curtailment of political rights in Hong Kong, a former British colony where violent anti-government protests in 2019 were met with Beijing's imposition of a sweeping national security law and electoral changes.

Those have largely eliminated any political opposition to Beijing's decrees and silenced freedom of speech in what had been one of Asia's most dynamic societies and a major financial centre.

Sunak denies doubting Rwanda migrant scheme as chancellor

PTI ■ LONDON

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has denied reports that he had doubts in the past over the deterrent effect of the country's Rwanda scheme, which will see illegal migrants deported to the East African nation while their asylum applications are processed.

A BBC report based on papers it has seen from two years ago claimed last week that Sunak was concerned about the cost of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda and wanted to limit the numbers initially in his role as chancellor under Boris Johnson's premiership.

On Sunday, he was questioned by the news channel about these documents when he admitted pushing back to ensure the value of taxpayer money but denied he had doubts over its deterrent effect.



"Just because someone's asking tough questions doesn't mean that they don't believe in the proposal," said Sunak.

"My job is to ask probing questions of every proposal that crosses my desk as chancellor."

Whether you have doubts about it or not, you shouldn't come to it with a preconceived notion that everything is fine when you're spending taxpayers' money... But to infer from

that that I don't believe in the scheme or the principle of deterrence is wrong. I was doing my job to get good value for money for taxpayers," he said. "I went through that process, funded this scheme with the (then) prime minister and as Prime Minister myself, as you can see, I've made sure that we have a similar deterrent working with Albania," he added, about an illegal migrant returns agreement with the south-east European country. The No. 10 documents referenced by the BBC were prepared in March 2022 as former prime minister Boris Johnson was trying to persuade Sunak - his chancellor - to sign off on more funding for the plan. This was shortly before the agreement with the Rwandan government to process migrants in the African country was signed.

US Defence secy remains hospitalised

Washington (AP): Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin remained in the hospital Sunday as more details emerged about key decision-makers, even President Joe Biden, being kept in the dark for days that the Pentagon chief had been in the intensive care unit at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The Pentagon's failure to disclose Austin's hospitalisation reflects a stunning lack of transparency about his illness, how serious it was and when he may be released. Such secrecy, at a time when the United States is juggling myriad national security crises, runs counter to normal practice with the president and other senior US officials and Cabinet members. A senior defence official said Deputy Secretary was not notified until Thursday that Austin had been hospitalised since January 1.

Boeing jetliner was restricted over warning light concern

Portland (US) (AP): The Boeing jetliner that suffered an inflight blowout over Oregon was not being used for flights to Hawaii after a warning light that could have indicated a pressurisation problem lit up on three different flights, a federal official said on Sunday. Alaska Airlines decided to restrict the aircraft from long flights over water so the plane "could return very quickly to an airport" if the warning light reappeared, said Jennifer Homendy, chair of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).

Homendy cautioned that the pressurisation light might be unrelated to Friday's incident in which a plug covering an unused exit door blew off the Boeing 737 Max 9 as it cruised about three miles (4.8 kilometres) over Oregon.

The warning light came on during three previous flights: on December 7, January 3 and January 4 - the day before the door plug broke off. Homendy said she didn't have all the details regarding the December 7 incident but specified the light came on during a flight on January 3 and on January 4 after the plane had landed.

The NTSB said the lost door plug was found on Sunday near Portland, Oregon, by a school teacher - for now, known only as Bob - who discovered it in his backyard and sent two photos to the safety board. Investigators will examine the plug, which is 26 by 48 inches (66 by 121 centimetres) and weighs 63 pounds (28.5 kilograms), for signs of how it broke free. Investigators will not have the benefit of hearing what was going on in the cockpit during the flight. The cockpit voice recorder - one of two so-called black boxes - recorded over the flight's sounds after two hours, Homendy said.

Japan quake renders thousands homeless

AP ■ WAJIMA

Thousands of people made homeless overnight are living in weariness and uncertainty on the western coast of Japan a week after a powerful earthquake left at least 168 dead and dozens missing. The rescue effort since the magnitude 7.6 New Year's Day quake has drawn thousands of troops, firefighters and police who picked through collapsed buildings Monday hoping to find survivors.

Authorities warned of the danger of landslides, exacerbated by a heavy snowfall, throughout the quake's epicentre on the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa prefecture. The landscape blanketed in fluffy white revealed burned and crumbled houses, ashen blocks of a city, highways with gaping holes and cracks.

The deaths included 70 people in Wajima, 70 in Suzu, 18 in Anamizu and the rest

were spread among four other towns. At least 323 people were still unaccounted for, a jump from some 100 earlier in the day as rescuers pour over a list of the region's population. Another 565 people were injured, and 1,390 homes were destroyed or seriously damaged.

A tsunami of several metres (feet) followed the initial major quake, adding to the damage. Aftershocks have continued daily. Japanese meteorological officials warned strong quakes could persist for another month. Their frequency, while gradually diminishing, remained high compared to past quakes, totalling more than 1,000. For the residents, recovery work has barely started.

Shuji Yoshiura, a fisherman, said his boats were damaged and he could not go out on the sea. Before the quake, Wajima was a tourist town with a shopping street offering

seafood and traditional crafts. Much of it was destroyed in the fires that broke out after the January 1 disaster.

Kentarō Mitsumori, who runs a corner grocery shop, slept in his car with his wife to guard against looting. Their store still stands but has no lock, electricity or running water. Everything sold out in three days. But he plans to close his business.

"Even if I manage to fix up the place, there just aren't going to be enough customers. I don't know how Wajima can survive," he said.

Nearly 30,000 people staying in schools, auditoriums and other evacuation centres worried about infections as cases of COVID-19 and other illnesses popped up.

In the shelters, people were still sleeping on cold floors. After initial help of a piece of bread and a cup of water for each person a day, more aid is allowing some facilities to begin serving hot

food cooked in huge pots. People were delighted by the temporary bathing facilities set up by soldiers, sitting in the hot water they had missed for days.

Still, exhaustion and stress are wearing them down. Many are in mourning. The main quake struck on New Year's Day, a time for families to gather in Japan. Some survivors said they were all alone because they lost their loved ones.

Mizue Kaba, 79, was lucky she survived, as did her daughter, son-in-law and grandson, who were visiting on New Year's from Osaka in central Japan.

Kaba is sleeping at a school, and no one is sure what might happen when schools open in a week after the New Year's break.

Three stoves were not enough to heat the school's big hall, and more heaters arrived. "It's so cold," Kaba said.



Firefighters search for missing people in the snow in Wajima, Ishikawa prefecture, Sunday. Rescue teams worked through snow to deliver supplies to isolated hamlets Monday, a week after a powerful earthquake hit western Japan.

Pope calls for global ban on surrogacy

Rome (AP): Pope Francis called Monday for a universal ban on the "despicable" practice of surrogate motherhood, as he included the "commercialisation" of pregnancy in an annual speech listing threats to global peace and human dignity. In a foreign policy address to ambassadors accredited to the Holy See, Francis lamented that 2024 had dawned at a time in history in which peace is "increasingly threatened, weakened and in some part lost."



But Francis also listed smaller-scale issues that he said were threats to peace and human dignity, including surrogacy. Francis said the life of the unborn child must be protected and not "suppressed or turned into an object of trafficking." "I consider despicable the practice of so-called surrogate motherhood, which represents a grave violation of the dignity of the woman and the child, based on the exploitation of situations of the mother's material needs," he said.

N Korea's Kim turns 40

AP ■ SEOUL

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un turned 40 on Monday with no announced public celebrations at home, after he entered the new year with artillery barrages into the sea and vows to expand his nuclear arsenal.

Since taking power in late 2011, Kim, the third generation of his family to rule North Korea, is believed to have established an absolute leadership similar to his predecessors. But his birthday has yet to be officially celebrated, unlike his late father Kim Jong Il and grandfather Kim Il Sung.

Their birthdays are two of the North's biggest holidays and are marked with great fanfare, loyalty campaigns and sometimes massive military parades.

On Monday, North Korea's state news agency published a lengthy article extolling Kim's



guidance of major construction projects in the past decade. It also reported Kim visited a chicken farm with his daughter the previous day. But it made no mention of his birthday.

Some observers speculate Kim may think he's still relatively young or needs bigger achievements to hold such lavish birthday festivities. Others say the lack of a public birthday bash may be related to his concerns about attention to his late Japan-born mother.

Huge car rally planned in US to celebrate Ram Mandir consecration

New York (PTI): The Indian-American diaspora is gearing up to commemorate the consecration ceremony of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, with plans to hold car rallies in the US to celebrate the occasion.

The group "California Indians" is organising a special car rally on January 20 to celebrate "Bhagwan Shri Ram Ji's homecoming". The organisers said that more than 400 cars will join the rally that is expected to go from South Bay to the iconic Golden Gate Bridge. The organisers said in a press release that "Indians of Northern California are coming together to celebrate the biggest and proudest event in the modern

history of India." Local temples and diaspora organisations across the US are planning to hold special celebrations in the days leading up to January 22, when the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya will be inaugurated.

Car rallies have been held in Washington, Chicago and other US cities over the past several weeks.

Community leaders including Rohit Sharma, Mani Keeran, Param Desai, Daipayana Deb, Deepak Bajaj and Bimal Bhagwat are planning the California rally, the organisers said. "We cannot go to Ayodhya but Ram ji is in our hearts and this is our contribution to his homecoming," the organisers said.

Sensex, Nifty tumble nearly 1 per cent on global weakness

PTI ■ MUMBAI
Equity benchmarks Sensex and Nifty surrendered early gains to close with deep losses on Monday, snapping their two-day winning streak as investors pared exposure to banking, metal and FMCG stocks amid a weak trend in global markets. The 30-share BSE Sensex tanked 670.93 points or 0.93 per cent to settle at 71,355.22. During the day, it fell 725.11 points or 1 per cent to 71,301.04. The Nifty declined 197.80 points or 0.91 per cent to 21,513.00. "Nifty snapped a two-session rally to end lower after opening with marginal gains. Global stocks slipped on Monday ahead of a busy week of inflation and economic data and



amid the diminishing prospect of a cut in US interest rates in the first quarter. Stocks fell ahead of a corporate reporting season where robust results are needed to justify high valuations," said Deepak Jasani, Head of Retail Research at HDFC Securities. Among the Sensex firms, State Bank of India, ITC, Nestle, Asian Paints, Tech Mahindra, Mahindra & Mahindra, Tata Consultancy Services and Hindustan Unilever were the major laggards. In contrast, HCL Technologies, Power Grid, Sun Pharma, NTPC, Bajaj Finance and Titan were the gainers. In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge declined 0.87 per cent and smallcap index dipped 0.36 per cent. (1.42 per cent), metal 1.40 per cent, financial services (1.05 per cent), telecommunication (0.93 per cent), IT (0.90 per cent) and

sequent rise in the US 10-year yield. "In the near term, investors' trade positions will be more inclined towards the upcoming result season. While the outset may be tempered by lower expectations in the IT sector, the overall forecast for earnings growth remains optimistic, projecting double-digit figures," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services. In Asian markets, Seoul, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled lower. Japan's Nikkei was closed for a holiday. European markets were trading lower. The US markets ended marginally up on Friday. "The market witnessed widespread selling as the euphoria over early rate cuts may diminish due to the better-than-expected non-farm payroll data from the US and the consequent rise in the US 10-year yield. In the near term, investors' trade positions will be more inclined towards the upcoming result season," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services. Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 1.21 per cent to USD 77.81 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 1,696.86 crore on Friday, according to exchange data. The BSE benchmark jumped 178.58 points or 0.25 per cent to settle at 72,026.15 on Friday. The Nifty climbed 52.20 points or 0.24 per cent to 21,710.80.

K-shaped recovery narrative flawed and prejudiced: SBI report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The repeated argument that India witnessed a K-shaped recovery post-pandemic is "flawed, prejudiced, and ill-considered," said a research report by SBI on Monday. According to the report, post-pandemic, households are reconfiguring their savings towards physical assets, including real estate, it said. "The oft-repeated conundrum debating a K-shaped recovery post-pandemic seems at best flawed, prejudiced, ill-considered and fanning interests of select quarters to whom India's remarkable ascendance, signalling more the renaissance of the new global south, is quite unpalatable," the report said. K-shaped recovery reflects uneven recovery where certain sectors of the economy thrives while other sectors continue to decline or struggle to recover. It further said post-pandemic, there has been two-way shift between savings channelised into physical assets from financial assets in consonance with the global trend to take advantage of lower interest rates. However, it said, recent data shows that there is a shift towards financial assets since 2023 onwards. "Gini coefficient estimated using ITR data of taxable income of individuals shows that individual income inequality has significantly declined from 0.472 to 0.402 during FY14-FY22," it said. There is a change in income pattern of MSMEs, too, reflecting the changing contours of industry/services as formalisation drive brings more entities into the net. Around 19.5 per cent of majorly micro-sized firms have been able to shift their income upwards, to classify them into small, medium and large-sized firms, it said. Of these, it said, 4.8 per cent firms have transitioned themselves into small firms, around 6.1 per cent firms transitioned into medium-sized firms, and around 9.3 per cent firms are transitioned into large-sized firms. This clearly indicates MSME units are getting bigger and getting integrated into larger value chains with initiatives like Production Linked Incentive (PLI), it added.

DGCA revises duty time limitations norms for flight crew, raises weekly rest periods to 48 hrs

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Aviation safety regulator DGCA on Monday came out with revised Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL) norms for flight crew, entailing increased weekly rest periods to 48 hours, extension of night hours, and limiting the number of night landings to only two as against six earlier. These regulations have been instrumental in managing fatigue-related aviation safety risks for more than a decade now, an official statement said. Airlines are required to comply with the revised norms latest by June 1, it said. With a view to address and mitigate concerns on pilot fatigue through a data-driven approach, Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) collected and analysed extensive numbers of pilot rosters, along with pilot fatigue reports submitted by airline operators, it said. Based on the study and analysis, some of the key areas inducing fatigue, such as maximum flight duty period, night duty, weekly rest period, flight duty period extension, among others, were identified, it said. The revised FDTL regulations have been formulated after extensive data analysis and feedback from various stakeholders, including airline operators, pilot associations and individuals, as per the statement. It also said the best practices in the world — FAA in the US, and EASA in the



European Union — have also been taken into consideration in amending the regulations, while keeping in mind the specific operating environment in India. The revised regulations mandate increased weekly rest periods from 36 hours to 48 hours for flight crew, thus ensuring sufficient time for recovery from cumulative fatigue, it said. Moreover, the definition of night has been amended and it now covers the period of 0000-0600 hours in the revised regulations vis-a-vis the period of 0000-0500 hours under the previous regulations. This enhancement of one hour during the early morning will ensure adequate rest and also align the night duty period, which



ONGC starts oil production from delayed USD 5 billion deep-water project

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
State-controlled Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) has started oil production from its much-delayed flagship deep-sea project in Krishna Godavari basin in Bay of Bengal, helping reverse years of decline in output, the company said. ONGC has started producing from the Cluster-2 project in KG-DWN-98/2 block and will slowly ramp up output. Oil Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said "first oil production commences from complex and difficult" block. He did not indicate the current output but said "production is expected to be 45,000 barrels per day and over 10 million standard cubic metres per day of gas". Cluster-2 oil production should have begun by November 2021 but was delayed because of the Covid pandemic. ONGC has hired floating vessel Armada Sterling-V, owned 70 per cent by SPOG (Shapoorji Pallonji Oil & Gas) and 30 per cent by Malaysia's Bumi Armada, for producing oil from below seabed. The FPSO (floating production, storage and offloading vessel), Armada Sterling-V, has been waiting to receive oil since January 2, 2023, after she was hooked up on December 27, 2022. ONGC previously set May 2023 as the first Cluster-2 oil deadline, extended to August 2023, September 2023, October 2023 and finally December 2023. ONGC's KG-DWN-98/2 or KG-D5 block, which sits next to Reliance Industries' KG-D6 block in the KG basin, has a number of discoveries that have been clubbed into clusters. It is situated offshore the Godavari river delta in the Bay of Bengal. It is located 35 kilometres off the coast of Andhra Pradesh in water depths ranging from 300-3,200 metres. The discoveries in the block are divided into three clusters — Cluster-1, 2 and 3. Cluster 2 is being put to production first. Cluster 2 field is divided into two blocks namely 2A and 2B, which as per the original investment decision were expected to produce 23.52 million metric tonnes of oil and 50.70 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas over the life of the field. Cluster 2A was estimated to contain reserves of 94.26 million tonnes of crude oil and 21.75 bcm of associated gas, while Cluster 2B is estimated to host 51.98 bcm of gas reserves. Cluster 2A was anticipated to produce 77,305 barrels of oil per day (bopd) and associated gas at a rate of 3.81 million metric standard cubic metres per day (mmscmd) over 15 years. Cluster 2B is expected to produce free gas of 12.75 mmscmd from eight wells and has a 16-year life. But now the output estimate is lower — 45,000 bpd of oil and associated gas up to 2.5 mmscmd from Cluster 2A and around 9 mmscmd from Cluster 2B.

India's coal import rises 11.7 per cent to 21 MT in Nov

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The country registered an 11.7 per cent rise in coal imports to 20.95 Million Tonnes (MT) in November as compared to the year-ago period. The country's coal imports in November 2022 was 18.75 MT, according to data compiled by B2B e-commerce company junction services. However, coal import in the April-November period of the current financial year dropped to 169.98 MT from 173.47 MT in the year-ago period. There was reduction in coal imports due to ample domestic supply and a slowdown in demand after the festive season in October, mjunction MD and CEO Vinaya Varma said. The demand for imported coal, he said, is likely to remain subdued in the coming months. Of the total import in November 2023, non-coking coal import was at 14.37 MT, against 11.88 MT in the same month the previous year. Coking coal import was at 4.23 MT, against 3.90 MT imported in November 2022. During the April-November period in 2023, non-coking coal import stood at 108.90 MT, lower than 116.28 MT imported during the same period in the previous fiscal. Coking coal import was at 37.97 MT during the April-November period, up against 36.64 MT recorded in the year-ago period.

Agri exports likely to double to USD 100 bn by 2030: Commerce Secretary

PTI ■ GREATER NOIDA
India's agriculture exports, which stood at over USD 50 billion at present, are expected to double by 2030 and reach USD 100 billion, Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal said on Monday. He said that the country is targeting USD 2 trillion worth of exports of goods and services by 2030. "I am very sure that this USD 50 billion exports of India today will see a doubling of our exports by 2030 to almost USD 100 billion," he said at the IndusFood Show 2024 here. This is the largest food and beverage show in South Asia. The secretary said that areas like the ready-to-eat food segment have huge potential to grow. He also urged the industry to focus on the technical standard requirements of importing countries. Inaugurating the show, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said that this fiscal year, the country's agri exports will be more than last year's level of USD 53 billion, despite restrictions imposed on shipments of certain key commodities, including rice, wheat and sugar. Earlier, an official said that the export ban and restrictions on these commodities may hit exports of about USD 4-5 billion this fiscal. The government has prohibited exports of wheat and non-



Ramdas, Grand Hypermarket, Nesto, Mustafa, X5, Lulu, Almaya Group, and Spar, are also participating, he added. Goyal also said there is a need for large-scale food processing, product branding, and export focus to provide better value to farmers, generate employment, and enhance the country's earnings. He added that as many as 158 food and agri products have been granted Geographical Indications (GIs) tags, and 708 food items have been identified under the One District One Product (ODOP) initiative for their promotion. He urged the industry to focus on frozen, packaged, and ready-to-eat foods, encouraging skill development, university exchange programmes, and startups in the sector. The industry should also prioritise quality, nutrition, organic ingredients, and eco-friendly packaging, underscoring the significance of promoting food nutrition and sustainability, the minister said.

MF industry assets surge by ₹11 lakh crore in 2023, crosses ₹50 lakh crore mark

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
After a lackluster performance in 2022, the mutual fund industry saw a substantial rebound in 2023 with its asset base surging by nearly Rs 11 lakh crore, reaching over Rs 50 lakh crore-mark fuelled by an optimistic equity market, steady interest rates, and a robust economic expansion. The year 2023 has seen a substantial increase in overall inflow, data from the Association of Mutual Fund Industry (Amfi) showed on Monday. The inflow has pushed the assets under management (AUM) of the mutual fund industry by 27 per cent, adding Rs 10.9 lakh crore in 2023. This was higher than the 5.7 per cent growth and Rs 2.65 lakh crore increase in AUM observed throughout 2022, as well as the nearly 22 per cent growth and close to Rs 7 lakh crore addition to the asset base in 2021. The asset base rose from Rs 39.88 lakh crore in 2022 to an all-time high of Rs 50.78 lakh crore in 2023, the data showed. The asset base stood at Rs 37.72 lakh crore at the end of December 2021 and Rs 31 lakh crore in December 2020.

Gold slips ₹250; silver slumps ₹400

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Gold prices slipped Rs 250 to Rs 63,200 per 10 grams in the national capital on Monday amid a decline in precious metal prices internationally, according to HDFC Securities. The precious metal had settled at Rs 63,450 per 10 grams in the previous close. Silver also slumped Rs 400 to Rs 76,300 per kilogram. In the previous trade, silver closed at Rs 76,700 per kg. In the futures trade on the MCX, the February contract of gold plunged Rs 355 to Rs 62,202 per 10 grams. Also, the March contract of silver tumbled Rs 415 to Rs 72,172 per kg on the bourse. In the overseas markets, both gold and silver were trading lower at USD 2,029 per

ounce and USD 22.95 per ounce, respectively. "Following strong US labour market data which stoked investor anticipation that the Federal Reserve might delay interest rate cuts led to a decline in gold prices," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said. Spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,029 per ounce, down by USD 16 from the previous close in the international markets. "Focus this week will be on the US Consumer Price Index (CPI) and Producer Price Index (PPI) data which could provide further clarity on the Fed's monetary policy interest rate path ahead," Navneet Damani, Senior VP of commodity research at Motilal Oswal Financial Services, said.



BUSINESS BRIEF

SRM GLOBAL HOSPITAL EXCELS IN SERVICE
CHENNAI: Being the Times Healthcare Achievers of 2023, SRM Global Hospitals, Kattankulathur serves its excellence on a scale of effective critical services and delivering salient features through world-class equipped amenities and patient care. The President of SRM Group of Companies, Dr. P. Sathyanarayan feels that the SRM Global Hospitals indulge in offering seamless compassion towards the art of healing medical ailments. The stupendous brand ambassadors of each speciality provide a legacy of healthcare services over the years. With immense pride, he introduced the miscellaneous crew of 4 cardiologists, 5+ gastroenterologists over a supported 15+ doctors for the emergency and critical care services onboard.



Mercedes Benz lines up ₹200 cr investment, to launch over 12 products in 2024

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
German luxury carmaker Mercedes-Benz will invest Rs 200 crore in India this year on new products, manufacturing operations and digitisation, to strengthen its position after posting record sales of 17,408 units in 2023, a top company official said on Monday. Mercedes-Benz India will have more than 12 launches in 2024, including three electric vehicles, out of which half will be in the top end vehicle segment (TEV) and will be priced Rs 1.5 crore onwards. "This year marks a special year as we celebrate 30 years of Mercedes-Benz in India. We are going to invest Rs 200 crore more into our factory in Pune. This takes a total investment of Rs 3,000 crore in India now. So that's a strong statement of intent," Mercedes-Benz India Managing Director & CEO Santosh Iyer told PTI in an interview.



These investments will be towards manufacturing operations, new product startups and digitisation of the manufacturing process, he added. In 2023, Iyer said, the company recorded its best-ever year in its history in India with sales of 17,408 units, a growth of 10 per cent. Mercedes-Benz India had posted its previous best-ever sales in 2022 when it clocked 15,822 units. On the outlook for 2024, Iyer said the company is looking for "double-digit" growth despite volatility in both supply and demand sides. Currently, the company's order bank stands at 3,000 units. On the product launch plan, Iyer said, "We are looking at 12-plus new car lines to be launched in '24 and 50 per cent of them will be in the top end vehicle segment. These will include three new electric vehicles." The TEV segment continues to drive aspiration for the brand, Iyer said, adding that three new EVs to be launched in 2024 will build up the company's EV portfolio. "EVs now comprise 4 per cent of our total sales and the segment witnessed a trebling of growth in 2023," he added.

INDIAN WOMEN HOCKEY TEAM CONFIDENT

OF MAKING 3RD SUCCESSIVE OLYMPICS



standing the conditions. The Indian members also visited and trained at some venues in Kunti district. "We also went and trained in Kunti district which is home to some of our teammates and it was incredible to see the excitement on the children's faces

who had come to cheer us," Navneet said.

Placed in Pool B, India's campaign kicks off with a clash against the United States on Saturday, followed by their match against New Zealand the next day. After a day's rest, India face Italy on January 16. Pool A comprises World No 5 Germany, former Asian Games Champions Japan, Chile, and Czech Republic.

"We are upbeat and eager to get on with our campaign. After our Tokyo Olympics performance, the expectations are high and we want to live up to the billing. We are well-prepared for the event and are confident of a good show," Navneet said.

The top two teams from each Pool will qualify for the semi-finals and the teams that finish in top-3 will earn a ticket to Paris 2024.

The semi-finals are scheduled for January 18, with the grand final and bronze play-off set to take place on January 19.

The event was originally slated to be held in China, but Hockey India requested FIH to shift the venue to India after China Women's directly qualified for the Paris Olympics.

SHOOTING

Varun, Esha seal Olympic quota places

With 10m air pistol golds at Asian Qualifiers

PTI ■ JAKARTA

Young Indian shooters Varun Tomar and Esha Singh on Monday secured two Olympic quota places for the country with gold medals in the men's and women's 10m Air Pistol events of the Asian Qualifiers here.

The duo's qualification took the total number of Indian shooters bound for Paris to 15, equalling the highest-ever tally that was achieved in the Tokyo Games.

India can add more to the group headed for the Games in July-August this year when the remaining qualifiers are held.

India secured six medals on Monday, including two team golds, at the continental event.

The 20-year-old Tomar shot 239.6 in the final to claim the top position, while Arjun Cheema won the silver medal with a score of 237.3. Mongolian Davaakhuu Enkhitaivan (217.2) won the bronze medal.

Earlier, Tomar (586), Cheema (579) and Ujjawal Malik (575) shot a total of 1740 to win the 10m air pistol team gold, while Iran and Korea claimed the silver and bronze medals respectively. Tomar, a former junior world champion, is the cousin of Tokyo Olympian Saurabh Chaudhary, who won a gold medal in the 2018 Asian Games. "It helped that I had someone



like Saurabh to take guidance from as I don't have anyone in the family who is a shooter," Tomar, who comes from a farming family, told PTI.

The 19-year-old Esha then grabbed the gold in the women's event with a score of 243.1. The silver went to Pakistan's Kishmala Talat (236.3), while the bronze was grabbed by Esha's compatriot Rhythm Sangwan (214.5). The 21-year-old Talat also earned a quota for the Paris Games, becoming the third Pakistani shooter to achieve the feat.

Esha, Rhythm and Surbhi Rao also won the team gold medal with a combined score of 1736. Esha is a world champion gold-medallist in the 10m air pistol mixed team and 25m pistol team events. "She can also win a medal, possibly gold, in 25m sports pis-

tol here. But an individual can bag only one quota place for the country. Her bagging the quota in 10m air pistol means she can also compete in 25m sports pistol in Paris," said Esha's father Sachin Singh.

A total of 16 quota places for the Paris Olympics are available at the continental showpiece here.

The 10m air pistol events for men and women have four quotas on offer with a maximum of three for the Indian shooters.

As many as 385 athletes from 26 countries are in action at the Senayan Shooting Range in Jakarta for 256 medals (84 gold, 84 silver and 88 bronze medals), besides the Paris quotas.

Ahead of this tournament, India had won 13 Olympic quota places in shooting across rifle, pistol and shotgun disciplines.



BAI to fund 28 shuttlers for international exposure

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Badminton Association of India (BAI) will fund 28 Indian shuttlers, including senior national men's and women's champions Chirag Sen and Anmol Kharb, for international tournaments this year.

Indian players ranked between 26 and 75 in BWF world rankings and top performers from the Senior National championships, who are not part of the national camp, will benefit from this opportunity.

The funds will come as part of BAI's partnership with Rural Electrification Corporation (REC).

Abu Dhabi Masters champion Unnati Hooda and 2023 Badminton Asia U-17 Junior championships silver medallist Tanvi Sharma are among the 28 players across singles and doubles categories who have been chosen based on their performances in multiple tournaments.

"BAI is committed to ensure promising talents get much-needed support to showcase their potential as the national campers even if they are not part of the national camp," said BAI Secretary Sanjay Mishra in a release on Monday.

"Our partnership with REC will not only help us broad base these opportunities and give shuttlers more and more opportunities to participate in multiple international challenger events as well as Super 300s and thereby better their rankings as well as gain experience of playing against foreign players.

"This initiative aligns with our goals to create strong opportunities for more players to show their abilities as well as compete and benefit from the national badminton structure."

The selected players have been

given an option to choose three tournaments, including two Super 300 events - the Orleans Masters and Swiss Open - from a total of eight tournaments, for which BAI will extend complete financial support to each of the shuttlers.

FULL LIST OF PLAYERS:

MEN'S SINGLES:

1. Sathish Kumar Karunakaran (World Rank 51)
2. S Sankar Muthusamy Subramanian (WR 71)
3. Sameer Verma (WR 74)
4. Chirag Sen (Senior Nationals champion)
5. Tharun Manneppalli (Senior Nationals runner-up)

WOMEN'S SINGLES:

1. Aakarshi Kashyap (WR 40)
2. Malvika Bansod (WR 52)
3. Unnati Hooda (WR 56)
4. Tanya Hemanth (WR 69)
5. Tasnim Mir (WR 73)
6. Imad Farooqui Samiya (WR 74)

MEN'S DOUBLES:

1. Hariharan Amsakaran/Ruban Kumar Rethinasabapathi (WR 70)
2. P.S Ravikrishna/Sankar Prasad Udayakumar (WR 75)
3. Suraj Goala/Pruthvi Krishnamurthy Roy (Senior Nationals champions)

WOMEN'S DOUBLES:

1. Ashwini Bhat K/Shikha Gautam (WR 49)
2. Rutaparna Panda/Swetaparna Panda (WR 52)
3. Simran Singh/Ritika Thaker (WR 63)
4. Priya Konjengbam/Shruti Mishra (Senior National champions)

MIXED DOUBLES:

1. Sathish Kumar Karunakaran/Aadya Variyath (WR 64).

Was inspired by Saurabhs: Varun

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Promising shooter Varun Tomar always wanted to be like his cousin, Olympian Saurabh Chaudhary, and on Monday the 20-year-old took a giant step towards achieving his goal by securing a quota for the 2024 Paris Games by winning gold medal at the Asian Olympic Qualifiers in Jakarta.

Tomar, who initially trained with multiple-time World Cup gold medallist and 2018 Asian Games champion Chaudhary at his home range in Baghpat district of UP, said the individual gold medal will motivate him to train harder for the 2024 Paris Games.

"I took up shooting seven years back watching my senior cousin Saurabh. He has been my motivation, having struck success early in his career. I always wanted to be like him and achieve international success," Tomar told PTI from Jakarta.

"I started shooting a year after Saurabh and we both initially had the same coach (Amit Sheoran) in Benoli village of Baghpat," said Tomar, a former junior world championship gold medallist in team event.

Tomar, who hails from Garhi Kangran village in Baghpat, secured India's 14th Olympic quota place on the opening day



of the competition, clinching both the individual and team gold. The 20-year-old shot 239.6 in the final of the 10m air pistol event to claim the top position in individual category ahead of compatriot Arjun Cheema (237.3).

Earlier, Tomar (586), Cheema (579) and Ujjawal Malik (575) shot a total of 1740 to win the 10m air pistol team gold.

"It helped that I had someone like Saurabh to take guidance from as I don't have anyone in the family who is a shooter," said Tomar, who comes from a farming family.

After nearly seven years of training, Tomar finally got success last year, winning individual bronze medals at the World Cups in Bhopal and Cairo.

Soon he was selected for training at the National Centre of Excellence (NCOE) at the

Karni Singh Ranges here and is now employed with the Indian Army.

"I have always appreciated Varun for his calm nature. He is a copy of Saurabh. He hardly interacts with anyone at the range and just keeps to himself, training hard," said national rifle coach Deepak Dubey here. "He is still a junior but is learning fast. The success in the two World Cups last year and the individual gold medal today are an indication that he really has a sound technique and temperament," said Dubey.

"I know for a fact that he got inspired by Saurabh. He came into NCOE about 5-6 months back. He made a place in the Indian team last year and won two medals in World Cups. He has shot some really good scores last year.

"His selection by the Army Marksmanship Unit has given his career a big boost. The fact that he has come up on his own without having a personal coach is indeed creditworthy," said Dubey.

"He only shoots 10m air pistol and not 25m rapid fire, which helps him give undivided attention to just one discipline. He is just like Saurabh, doesn't talk much, very disciplined, hard working and very obedient," added Dubey.

Theegala misses win by one shot, finishes 2nd

PTI ■ KAPALUA

Indian-American golfer Sahith Theegala missed a 10 foot putt on the 18th hole to finish second in the Sentry, the opening event of the 2024 PGA TOUR season.

Theegala fired a sizzling 10-under 63 to finish at 28-under but Chris Kirk, the overnight leader playing in the final group, carded 8-under 65 to finish at 29-under, that included a superb second shot to set up a birdie on the 17th to go one ahead.

He parred the 18th and won the title. Akshay Bhatia, the other Indian-American in the field, who was second after 54 holes, had a double bogey start after two bogey-free days and finished with 2-under 71 to drop to Tied-14th place.

Bhatia, one shot behind at the start, drove his opening tee shot into the native grass and never contended thereafter.

Theegala missed a 10-foot birdie chance at the par-5 closing hole and shot 63, while Jordan Spieth, whose tee shot

BHATIA 14TH AS KIRK WINS SENTRY



on the 16th plugged under the lip of a bunker for a bogey, missed a 15-foot eagle putt on the 18th and shot 65 to finish third at 27-under.

Korean Byeong-Hun-An (66) was fourth at 26-under.

"Yeah, I really wish I could have had that second shot on 18 back. It's not how it works."

Theegala had a great final day. After four birdies in a row from second to sixth, he added one on ninth to turn in 5-under. Another birdie followed on 11th and four more came in a row from 13th to the 16th. That birdie on the 16th gave him a one-shot lead.

Then he parred 17th and missed a 10-footer for the 11th birdie of the day and finished one behind.

Sungjae Im got into the PGA TOUR record books with 34 birdies, beating Jon Rahm's mark of 32 set last year.

While he was delighted with his record, Im was still somewhat disappointed with his third round of 73 on Saturday which knocked him out of contention in his search for a third PGA TOUR title.

This is the second birdie record on TOUR which Im now proudly holds as in 2021, he snared 498 birdies to set a new record for most birdies during a season, breaking the previous mark of 493 by Steve Flesch in 2000.

Malaysia Open: Indian shuttlers hope for bright start in high stake Olympic year

PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR

With the Paris Olympic qualification at stake, top Indian shuttlers, including HS Prannoy and Lakshya Sen, will hope to begin the new season on a bright note when they start their campaign at the Malaysia Open Super 1000 badminton tournament here on Tuesday.

A lot will be on the line for Indian shuttlers in the next four months as they zoom through a hectic calendar, hoping to get inside the world's top-16 by April end to book their berths for the Paris Games.

Frontrunner in the Olympic race, world no. 8 Prannoy, had a sensational season with maiden bronze medals at the World Championships and the Asian Games and a title-run at the Malaysia Masters super 500. He also registered a final finish at the

Australia Open super 500.

The 31-year-old, seeded 8th, will hope to continue his rich vein of form when he opens against Denmark's Anders Antonsen, who made a successful comeback from an injury by winning the Korea Open in 2023. All eyes will also be on Lakshya and Kidambi Srikanth as they fight to get inside the top 16 after enduring contrasting fates last season.

While world no. 16 Sen claimed the Canada Open super 500 before losing his form in the back end, Srikanth, ranked 24, has looked subdued and had just four quarterfinal finishes to show in 2023.

Things are not going to be easy for Sen and Srikanth as they face tough competitors in China's Weng Hong Yang and sixth seed Jonatan Christie of Indonesia respectively in the opening round here.



Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty have looked in ominous form in the men's doubles arena. They went on a record-breaking spree to emerge as the best-performing Indian shuttlers in 2023.

In a span of 12 months, they won an Asian Games gold, a super 1000 crown in Indonesia, the Korea Open super 500 and the Swiss Open super 300 before grabbing a career-best ranking of World No.1, albeit for a brief time. The second-seeded pair, which reached the semifinals in 2023, will look to continue the good run and go deep in the draw when they open against the Indonesian combination of Muhammad Shohibul Fikri and Bagas Maulana.

Brimming with confidence after making three finals in December, the women's doubles pair of Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto will

now look to make the right moves this season to crack the global top 16.

The duo is currently placed 21st in the Olympic Games Qualification rankings, ahead of Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, who are at the 27th spot. Ashwini and Tanisha, who claimed the Guwahati Masters super 100 title, will face USA's Francesca Corbett and Allison Lee in the opening round. With two-time Olympic medallist P V Sindhu recovering from a knee injury, India will have no representation in women's singles. There are also no Indians competing in mixed doubles.

Malaysia Open is one of the four BWF World Tour Super 1000 tournaments, having gained the status last year. All England Championships, China Open and Indonesian Open are the other three in the world circuit.

Meb named brand ambassador of Tata Mumbai Marathon

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Celebrated long distance runner Meb Keflezighi, who won a silver medal in the 2004 Athens Olympics, has been named brand ambassador of the 19th Tata Mumbai Marathon scheduled to be held on Sunday. The race is a World Athletics Gold Label event and Procram International is the promoter of the event.

"The Tata Mumbai Marathon has been on my bucket list for the longest time, and finally being able to witness Mumbai's indomitable spirit, is indeed exciting," Keflezighi, an Eritrean-born American, was quoted as saying in a press release.

"This event inspired a country to run and changed mindsets, that is the true legacy of a sporting event. Mumbai's incredible energy and enthusiasm, combined with the dedication of its runners, embodies the universal language of endurance."

"I will only say this... remember to run with purpose, embrace the journey, and move ahead together. In every stride, find the strength to go the distance and make a difference to what you believe in."

Keflezighi has several record-breaking accolades in his career. He scripted history when he became the only runner to win an Olympic medal (2004), the New York City Marathon (2009) and the Boston Marathon (2014). In 2009, Keflezighi became the first American since 1982 to win the New York City Marathon. He has achieved the feat of being in the top 10 in the New York Marathon for a total of eight times in his career.

In 2015, he set a TCS New York City Marathon masters event record with a timing of 2:13:32sec. In 2014 he won the Boston Marathon (2:08:37), the first American male to do so since 1983, and the first American since 1985.

Since 1930, Keflezighi has held the record for being the oldest winner of the Boston Marathon as he triumphed there when he was 39 years old.

He is also a former USA National 10,000m track record holder. The Tata Mumbai Marathon will flag off from the iconic Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus on Sunday.

ROHIT, KOHLI GET FINAL SHOT AT T20 GLORY

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The selectors have clearly gone for the status quo rather than addressing the elephant in the room by picking Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli for their first T20 series in 14 months. Will it have a bearing on India's chances in another T20 World Cup?
Only time can tell.
Having endured a heartbreak in the previous two editions of the T20 World Cup, the two greats of the game can't be faulted for wanting a final shot at glory in the format. But the same can't be said about the selectors, who picked a fresh bunch of players to take the team forward since the crushing semifinal loss to England in November 2022.
Now that Rohit and Kohli have been picked for the home series against Afghanistan beginning on January 11, it is a given that the famed duo will be

a part of India's squad for the ICC showpiece in the US and Caribbean in June.
It also means that India, who have been guilty of playing conservative cricket at the top of the order, are also back to square one as far as their planning for the T20 mega event is concerned. The two superstars played a massive role in taking India to the ODI World Cup final but can they step up to the demands of the shortest format where one needs to go after the bowlers from ball one?
Rohit, who did not score tons of runs in the recently held ODI showpiece but yet managed to make a compelling impact with his high risk game, will most likely carry on in the same vein when the Afghanistan series begins in Mohali.
On the other hand, Kohli's game is tailor-made for the 50-over format but he has also managed to maintain more than a decent strike rate of 137.96 over

148 T20s. Rohit strikes at almost 140 in T20s but he too will need to bat at a higher clip to keep up with the fast changing demands of the modern game.
In contrast, their teammate and world's best T20 batter, Suryakumar Yadav, bats at a 170 plus strike rate.
The likes of Yashvir Jaiswal and Ruturaj Gaikwad showed promise in the opportunities they got in the absence of senior players but there is no substitute to experience at an ICC event. It's a sentiment that has been unanimously voiced by former players including Sunil Gavaskar and Sourav Ganguly, who have backed the inclusion of Rohit and Kohli in the T20 squad.
Former India selector Sarandeep Singh too feels Rohit and Kohli are best suited for the job. "It is the right call. In ICC events, you need players who can handle pressure well. They both were great in the ODI World Cup and are in top form.

But will selectors safe approach cost India another WC?



However, this development means it would be very difficult to accommodate Jaiswal and Ruturaj," he told PTI.
He also justified the celebratory pair not playing the shortest format since November 2022.
"You have to prepare bench strength also. In all probability this will be their last T20 World Cup. If Rohit and Virat were not rested, you could not have tried the likes of Jaiswal, Ruturaj, Jitesh (Sharma) and others.
"Having said that, these two greats don't need to play the shortest format to make a comeback. Eventually, the performance of all the World Cup probables in the IPL will make the picture clearer for the subsequent World Cup," the former India spinner added.
With Rohit and Kohli's inclusion, it is amply clear that selectors did not want to rock the boat. Former India opener Akash Chopra feels the selectors had to pick both the greats as they could not have left one and included the other.
"It seemed they won't play another T20 World Cup (after 2022) as they had not been playing since the previous edition. Both are in the same boat. Even if the selectors thought about leaving out one of the two, I don't think they would have been able to do that. It was always about picking both or otherwise," Chopra said on his youtube channel.
Hardik Pandya had led the T20 side in Rohit's absence and was expected to lead the team in the US and Caribbean but another injury setback seems to have cost him that chance.
Rohit is back as captain and will have Kohli by his side to rely on when India take on the sprightly bunch of Afghans in the three-match series. But most significantly, will they finally be able to land an elusive ICC title? That question will be answered in five months' time.



India women eye maiden T20I series win over Australia

PTI ■ NAVI MUMBAI
The culmination of a long and mixed home season brings the Indian women's cricket team one last opportunity to register a maiden T20I series triumph over Australia at home when the two sides square off in the series-decider here on Tuesday. With the three-match affair levelled 1-1, Harmanpreet Kaur's India have a chance to beat the reigning world champions Australia in their own den and kick off the 2024 T20I World Cup year in style.
India have only one series win to show against Australia's four in their five-series bilateral T20I history. Their triumph in an away affair in 2015-16 sits atop in the list of achievements for this side. However, having registered historic wins in one-off Tests earlier this season against both Australia and England, India would want to make this one last opportunity count.
India were on a roll in the first game and thrashed Australia by a record margin of nine wickets but their batters cut a sorry figure in the second. A tricky pitch here at the DY Patil Stadium on Sunday did not allow batters to flourish.
While heavy dew in the first half of the game assisted India's charge with the bat, the absence of it in the second made the job of containing the Australian batters difficult.
But to their credit, the Indian

bowlers did well to take the game as deep as possible with some tight lines and sharp fielding. However, the home team's fielding has only been sporadically good.
Kaur's own form with the bat will remain a huge concern for the hosts, who were humbled by six wickets in the second game.
The Indian captain has not made a fifty yet in 10 matches so far across formats in these games. She has seven single-digit scores now in 11 innings including the first T20I wherein her services were not required.
"Every player cannot have a good day everyday, but suddenly anyone can have a very good day. It is not the case that we are (right away) aiming for big shots but we are trying to play (as per the) merit of the ball," all-rounder Deepti Sharma told the media after the match when asked if Kaur's form was a concern for the team.
Deepti waged a lone battle of sorts with a combative all-round performance in the second game, scoring a 27-ball 31 in a faltering Indian innings to give them some late impetus, and also fought hard with the ball to take the first two wickets of the four Australian wickets to fall.
The pitches for the two T20Is so far have not allowed batters to go berserk especially in the first innings, allowing the bowlers to dominate the proceedings.
"It has been a really good con-

test between bat and ball, there is something in it for both the batters and the bowlers," said Australia's player of the match on Sunday Kim Garth.
"Especially, coming from the wicket that we played on the Test match, (it) was a lot more challenging for the batters, so it has been really pleasing that there has been a bit in it for the bowlers, particularly with the new ball," she added.
Deepti also found the pitch for the second game a challenging one to bat on.
"...It was not an easy wicket to bat on. The ball was turning as well as getting slow (off the surface). I think we were about 15 runs short..." she replied when asked what went wrong for India.
SQUADS:
INDIA: Harmanpreet Kaur (c), Smriti Mandhana (vc), Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Deepti Sharma, Yastika Bhatia (wk), Richa Ghosh (wk), Amanjot Kaur, Shreyanka Patil, Mannat Kashyap, Saika Ishaque, Renuka Singh Thakur, Titas Sadhu, Pooja Vastrakar, Kanika Ahuja, Minnu Mani.
AUSTRALIA: Darcie Brown, Heather Graham, Ashleigh Gardner, Kim Garth, Grace Harris, Alyssa Healy (c&wk), Jess Jonassen, Alana King, Phoebe Litchfield, Tahlia McGrath (vc), Beth Mooney (wk), Ellyse Perry, Megan Schutt, Annabel Sutherland, Georgia Wareham.

Heinrich announces Test retirement

PTI ■ PRETORIA (SOUTH AFRICA)
South African wicketkeeper-batter Heinrich Klaassen has announced his retirement from red-ball cricket, bringing curtains to his brief stint in the format.
Having made his debut against India in Ranchi in 2019, the 32-year-old played four matches in his brief Test career with his final outing against the West Indies in Johannesburg last year. He has scored 104 runs at an average of 13.00, while his top score was 35 against Australia in Sydney.
Klaassen will continue to be available for the Proteas in white-ball cricket.
"After a few sleepless nights wondering if I am making the right decision, I have decided to retire from red ball cricket," he said in a statement.
"It's a difficult decision that I have made because it is by far my favourite format of the game."
"The battles that I faced on and off the field has made me the cricketer I am today.
"But for now, a new challenge awaits and looking forward to it."
It is understood that the explosive batter is keen on the T20 franchise leagues with his commitments in the IPL, Hundred, and MLC.
"My baggy Test cap is the most precious cap I have ever been handed.
He has become the second



South African player to retire from red-ball cricket within a week.
Dean Elgar also hung up his boots following the conclusion of the two-Test series against India that ended in a 1-1 draw last week.
Klaassen was dropped for the India series, as head coach Shukri Conrad went ahead with Kyle Verreynne.



England still comes first: Liam

PTI ■ CAPE TOWN
He is an acclaimed T20 free-lancer but white ball commitments for England is still a priority for Liam Livingstone, one of the world's most destructive batters in the shortest format.
Livingstone, who has played 25 ODIs and 38 T20Is for England, has already plied his trade in IPL (Rajasthan Royals and Punjab Kings), Birmingham Phoenix in The Hundred, Perth Scorchers in Big Bash League (BBL) of Australia and Peshawar Zalmi in Pakistan Super League (PSL) to name a few. In the second edition of SA20, Livingstone will play for MI Cape Town and he, along with Kagiso Rabada and skipper Kieron Pollard, will be the guiding light for the franchise.
How does he balance his calendar in terms of playing for franchise leagues and English white ball commitments?
"Yeah, I think England comes first. We see our calendar at the start of the year and see where we have gaps. If we feel like it's a good opportunity for us to go away and play franchise cricket, then we'll do that," Livingstone replied to a query from PTI.
"If we feel like we need a rest and it's going to hinder our international cricket, then we'll probably have a rest. So I guess at the start of the year, you just try and work out when you can play and where you can go and go from there," he added.
Livingstone believes that a league like SA20 will help youngsters stake claim for national berth in their respective countries.
"Yeah, international cricket is very different from franchise cricket. It is what it is. I think it's different for the young boys coming up compared to the older boys who are already playing international cricket. It's a great chance for young boys to make a name for themselves and showcase their talent.
"I think it's a little bit different for the older ones of us, shall I say that? We've already played international cricket for a while now," the 30-year-old said.
Playing for a legacy franchise like MI, what's his expectations?
"Hopefully, lots of entertainment, win games of cricket. I guess that probably will be the two biggest things in a franchise tournament. You want to entertain people that pay money to come and watch and you want to win games of cricket for your franchise.
"So yeah, hopefully we can do both. You've got to try and get everybody together, everybody on the same wavelength. Hopefully, we can do that over the next couple of days and start the season really strong," Livingstone concluded.

Dhull loses captaincy after defeat in Ranji Trophy opener

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Yash Dhull was on Monday removed as Delhi captain, hours after the team suffered a heavy defeat against Puducherry in their Ranji Trophy opening match.
Senior batter Himmat Singh will now lead the side that takes on Jammu and Kashmir in an away game from January 12.
In an attempt to revive Delhi's flagging fortunes, U-19 World Cup-winning captain Dhull was made the skipper of the side in December 2022.
Since making his debut in February 2022, Dhull has made 1185 runs at an average of 43.88. Dhull made two and 23 in the nine-wicket loss to Puducherry at home.
The 21-year-old had also led the side in the white-ball tournaments earlier in the season.

Himmat Singh is new skipper



reluctant to open the innings.
Himmat had led Delhi to a momentous win over Mumbai in the former's absence last season. The 27-year-old has played 22 first-class games, having made his debut back in 2017.
The team manages to court unwanted attention season after season. Last year, senior players Nitish Rana and Dhruv Shorey left Delhi and moved to UP and Vidarbha respectively.
Senior pacers Navdeep Saini, who was named in the India A squad to face visiting England Lions, and Ishant Sharma won't be travelling with the team to Jammu.
It has been learnt that veteran pacer Ishant will only be available for Delhi's home games.
Delhi, who have won Ranji Trophy seven times, last lifted the coveted trophy back in 2007-08.
"Yash is a talented player but is out of form. We wanted him to do well as a batter, that is why we have relieved him of captaincy duties. Himmat is our senior player and has done very well for us. He will captain the side," DDCA joint secretary Rajan Manchanda told PTI.
Dhull has struggled against fast bowlers, of late and was

RANJI TROPHY

Seamers set up Mumbai outright win over Bihar

PTI ■ PATNA
Seamers Shivam Dube (4/10) and Royston Dias (3/35) powered Mumbai's outright win over Bihar by an innings and 51 runs in their Ranji Trophy 2023-24 season opener here on Monday. Bihar's fate was decided on the third day evening itself when they were reduced to 91/6 following-on, having made 100 in their first innings in reply to Mumbai's 251, with Mohit Avasthi returning 6/27. Bihar could not manage a run more than that in their second attempt and lost heavily as Mumbai walked away with seven points.
Dube, who was named in India's squad for three T20Is against Afghanistan, celebrated his call-up

with a superb 11-4-10-7 after 6-3-13-2 in the first innings. In another game, Chhattisgarh also clinched an outright win and seven points following a 10-wicket hammering of Assam, for whom Rryan Parag produced a record century. Parag cracked 12 sixes and 11 fours to make 155 from 87 balls for the second fastest century in the Ranji Trophy history, but his outstanding effort had no say in the outcome. Chhattisgarh, who made 327 in the first innings, bowled out Assam for 159 in reply and Parag's ton could only take his side to 254 in the second essay. Chhattisgarh remained unscathed in their 87-run chase.
However, at Visakhapatnam, Ricky Bhui's marathon 347-ball 175 (23x4s, 1x6s) helped Andhra

force a draw against Bengal who made 409 batting first.
Bhui's ton, combined with fifties from Hanuma Vihari (51) and Shoaib Khan (56) took Andhra to 445 in reply with a slender 36-run first-innings lead, thus giving them three points from the tame draw in which Bengal reached 87/1 in their second essay. At Alappuzha, the visitors Uttar Pradesh team walked off with a draw and three points against hosts Kerala in a hard-fought contest. UP took a 59-run lead in the first innings, for they dismissed Kerala at 243. In the second innings, Priyam Garg (106) followed Aryan Juyal (115) in completing a three-figure mark as UP declared at 323/3, taking an overall lead of 382 runs.

In reply, Kerala were 72/2.
BRIEF SCORES:
AT PATNA: Mumbai 251 beat Bihar 100 & 100 (Sharmar Nigrodh 40; Shivam Dube 4/10, Royston Dias 3/35) by an innings and 51 runs. **AT RAIPUR: Chhattisgarh** 327 & 87/0 (Eknath Kerkar 31*, Rishabh 48*) beat Assam 159 & 254 (Rryan Parag 155; Vashudev Bareth 3/59, Jivesh Butte 3/37) by 10 wickets. **AT VISAKHAPATNAM: Bengal** 409 & 82/1 (Sourav Paul 30*; Shoaib Md Khan 1/16) drew with Andhra 445 (Hanuma Vihari 51, Ricky Bhui 175, Shoaib Khan 56; Mohammed Kaif 3/62). **AT ALAPPUZHA: Uttar Pradesh** 302 & 323/3d (Aryan Juyal 115, Priyam Garg 106; Basil Thampi 1/30) drew with Kerala 243 & 72/2 (Rohan 42; Kuldeep Yadav 1/19).

Matthew grabs maiden five wickets haul as Puducherry win easy against Delhi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Medium-pacer Abin Matthew hogged the limelight with a maiden five-wicket haul as Puducherry bowlers came up with an exceptional performance to orchestrate a commanding nine-wicket win over hosts Delhi in their Ranji Trophy opener here on Monday. Resuming on 126/8 in their second innings, Delhi managed to add 19 more runs before being bowled out for 145. Mathew claimed a career best 5/39 to dismantle the Delhi batting order.
Gaurav Yadav (3/49) and Saurabh Yadav (2/43) also contributed to Delhi's downfall to give them an easy 51-run chase. In reply, Puducherry lost opener Akash Kargave (23) with seven runs shy from the target. Jay Pande (21 not

out) and Marimuthu Vikneshwaran (7 not out) then sealed the chase in the very next over.
BARODA WIN EASY VERSUS ODISHA
Off-spinner Mahesh Pithiya's impressive five-wicket haul complemented Shashwat Rawat's stellar 102 in the second innings as hosts Baroda defeated Odisha by 147 runs in Vadodara.
Set a tall chase of 432, Odisha were bundled out for 284. In only his fifth Ranji match, the budding 22-year-old Pithiya showcased immense skill and determination to return figures of 5/61.
Brief Scores
AT DELHI: Delhi 148 and 145; 46.4 overs (Abin Mathew 5/39, Gaurav Yadav 3/49, Saurabh Yadav 2/43). **Puducherry** 244 and 51/1; 13.4 overs. Puducherry won by nine wickets. Points: Puducherry 6, Delhi 0.
AT VADODARA: Baroda 351 and 258/4 declared. **Odisha** 178 and 284; 101.5 overs (Shantanu Mishra 78, Anurag Sarangi 56, Sandeep Pattnaik 51, Suryakant Pradhan 46; Mahesh Pithiya 5/61). Baroda won by 147 runs. Points: Baroda 6, Odisha 0.
AT JAMMU: Jammu & Kashmir 100. **Himachal Pradesh** 120/1. Match drawn. Points Himachal Pradesh 3, Jammu & Kashmir 1.
AT DEHRADUN: Madhya Pradesh 323 and 243/3 declared. **Uttarakhand** 192 and 266/8; 95 overs (Pirayanshu Khanduri 62, Aditya Tare 51, Kunal Chandela 50; Kumar Kartikeya 4/73, Saransh Jain 3/77). Match drawn. Points MP 3, Uttarakhand 1.

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