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TOURISM GROWTH IN 2024

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Delhi Govt depts disown AAP's Mahila Samman Yojana, Sanjeevani schemes

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

In an unprecedented move, two departments of Delhi Government have released public notices and disowned the registration process started by Chief Minister Atishi and former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for two schemes announced by the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the National Capital. The Delhi government's Health and Family Welfare department and Women and Child Development department on Wednesday issued public notices disowning the existence of schemes, Mahila Samman Yojana and Sanjeevani Yojana and cautioned citizens against falling for "misleading schemes" launched by the AAP. Meanwhile, Chief Minister Atishi has stated that strict administrative action will be taken against two officers who released public notices to disown the registration process started by her and former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal for two schemes. The officers in question are a joint director of the Department of Woman and Child Development and the special secretary of the Health and Family Welfare Department. Atishi, addressing a press conference at the AAP headquarters, strongly condemned the notices, claiming that the officers were under pressure from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). She insisted that the public notices were false and part of a larger conspiracy by the BJP to undermine the AAP's initiatives, which had gained significant public support. She added that the party would take legal action, including a Delhi Police inquiry, against the officers for issuing misleading statements. During the press conference, Atishi also shared an official notification from the Cabinet that approved the Rs 1,000 allowance for women under the Mahila Samman



Delhi Chief Minister Atishi and AAP National Convener Arvind Kejriwal during a press conference. Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

Yojana, reaffirming the legitimacy of the scheme. The fresh controversy will add another dimension to the ongoing tussle between the AAP and the bureaucracy, with accusations flying between parties. The move underlines the tenuous relationship between the bureaucracy and the elected Delhi Government after an amendment to the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) Act, the services department comes under the control of the Lieutenant Governor. The latest flashpoint, which comes weeks ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls, sparked a slugfest between the AAP and BJP leaders. The BJP has accused the ruling party of duping people, since the two schemes have not been approved yet. The Department of Women and Child Development (WCD), in a public notice in newspapers, has said the Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana does not exist and has not been approved by the Delhi government. It has urged

citizens to refrain from sharing personal information with individuals or groups claiming association with this "fake scheme", as it could result in identity theft or financial fraud. "As, if and when such a scheme is notified, the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD), GNCTD, will launch a digital portal for eligible individuals to submit their applications online as per the approved guidelines. The eligibility conditions and modalities will be clearly notified by the department as and when it happens. It is emphasised that since no such scheme exists, the question of physical forms / applications for the registration under this non-existent scheme does not arise," it said, adding that any individual collecting forms or information in the name of this scheme is "fraudulent and without any authority". The department has warned that sharing personal information in the public domain may lead to people falling prey to cybercrime.

Vajpayee's Ken-Betwa interlinking vision sees light on his centenary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/KHAJURAHO (MP)

The ambitious first of its kind interlinking of the Ken-Betwa River as desired by former Prime Minister late Atal Bihari Vajpayee two decades ago, finally kick started with the foundation stone laying by PM Narendra Modi on Wednesday which also marked the birth anniversary of the political stalwart Bharat Ratna Vajpayee. The Vajpayee government had proposed river linking as a solution for irrigation needs as well as for dealing with floods. Modi laid the foundation stone of the Rs 44,600 crore Ken-Betwa River Link Project at Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh and said the river linking will open new doors of prosperity and happiness in the Bundelkhand region. Union Water Resources Minister C R Patil and Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav handed over two kalash (urns) containing water from Betwa and Ken rivers, respectively, to Modi, who poured it over a model of the project to launch the river linking work. As per the initial estimation of the project, nearly 44 lakh people in 10 districts of Madhya Pradesh and 21 lakh in Uttar Pradesh will get drinking water under the project. Nearly 7.18 lakh agricultural families in 2,000 villages will benefit from the project, which will also generate 103 MW of



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Union Minister CR Patil during the foundation stone laying ceremony of Ken-Betwa River Linking Project, in Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh. PTI

hydropower and 27 MW of solar energy, officials involved in the project said. Addressing the event Modi said that in the 21st century, only the nations with adequate and well-managed water resources can advance. "The major challenge of the 21st century is water security. In the 21st century only those countries who have adequate water resources with proper management will move forward," he said. The PM also released a commemorative stamp and a coin in the memory of Vajpayee. Modi also performed 'bhumi puja' or ground-breaking ceremony for the construction of 1,153

Atal Gram Sewa Sadans costing Rs 437 crore at the Khajuraho program. Under the Ken Betwa project, a 77-metre high and 2.13 kilometres long Daudhan dam and two tunnels (upper level 1.9 km and lower level 1.1 km) will be constructed on the Ken river in the Panna Tiger Reserve. The dam will store 2,853 million cubic metres of water, the chief minister said. The surplus Ken water will be transferred to the Betwa river through the 221-km-long link canal from Daudhan dam, providing irrigation and drinking water facilities in both the states, he said.



The wreckage of Azerbaijan Airlines Embraer 190 on the ground near the airport of Aktau, Kazakhstan. AP/PTI

Over 30 dead in Azerbaijani airliner crash

AP ■ MOSCOW

An Azerbaijani airliner with 67 people onboard crashed Wednesday in the Kazakhstani city of Aktau, leaving at least 32 survivors, according to officials. More than 30 people are likely dead. Kazakhstan's Emergency Ministry said in a Telegram statement that those on board included five crew. At least 29 have been hospitalised, the ministry told Russia's state news agency RIA Novosti. Russian news agency Interfax quoted medical workers as saying that four bodies have been recovered and emergency workers at the scene as saying that both pilots, according to a preliminary assessment, died in the crash. The Embraer 190 aircraft made an emergency landing three kilometres from the city, Azerbaijan Airlines said earlier.

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ED investigating some Canadian colleges, Indian entities in human trafficking case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Tuesday said it is investigating the "involvement" of some Canadian colleges and a few Indian entities in a money laundering case linked to the trafficking of Indians into the United States from the Canada border. The investigation is linked to the death of a four-member Indian family, hailing from Dingucha village of Gujarat. The four died of extreme cold while trying to illegally cross the Canada-US border on January 19, 2022. The ED took cognisance of an Ahmedabad Police FIR against Bhavesh Ashokbhai Patel, who emerged as the main accused in the matter, and a few others, to file a complaint under the criminal sections of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Patel and others have "hatched a well-planned conspiracy to send people (Indians) to the USA through Canada via illegal channels thereby committing the offence of human trafficking," it said. The agency had earlier found that as part of the racket, the accused "arranged" admission for people, desirous to go to



the US illegally, in colleges and universities based in Canada. A Canadian student visa was applied for such people and once they reached that country, instead of joining the college, they "illegally" crossed the US-Canada border and never joined the Canadian college, the agency said in a statement. "In view of this, the fee received by colleges based in Canada was remitted back to the individuals' account," said ED, adding that Indians were "lured" into the racket and charged between Rs 55 and Rs 60 lakh per person, according to the ED. The agency said it undertook fresh searches in this case on December 10 and December 19 at eight locations in Mumbai, Nagpur, Gandhinagar and Vadodara. It was found, the ED said, two

"entities", one based in Mumbai and the other in Nagpur, entered into an "agreement" for admission of Indians in universities based in foreign countries on a commission basis. The agency said the latest searches found that about 25,000 students are being referred by one entity and more than 10,000 students by the other to various colleges based outside India every year. "Further, it is gathered that there are around 1,700 agents/partners based in Gujarat and around 3,500 agents/partners of other entities all over India out of which around 800 are active. It is further revealed that around 112 colleges based in Canada have entered into an agreement with one entity and more than 150 with another entity. Their involvement in the instant case is under investigation," the ED said. The agency suspects that out of the total 262 such colleges in Canada, a few, which are geographically located near the Canada-US border, are involved in the trafficking of Indian nationals. The ED said it froze bank deposits worth Rs 19 lakh, some "incriminating" documents and digital devices, and seized two vehicles in connection with its probe.

UP man self-immolates near Sansad Bhavan

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

In a shocking incident, a man in his early 30s tried to immolate himself on Wednesday afternoon opposite the high security zone Sansad Bhavan premises, the police recovered a singed note from the victim, identified as Jitendra. It hints at Uttar Pradesh's government's inaction in a case relating to the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe Act. An official of the Delhi Fire Service said that a call regarding the incident near the Railway Bhawan opposite the Sansad Bhavan was received at around 3.35 pm on Wednesday, and a fire tender was pressed into service. The security personnel deployed near Sansad Bhavan rushed the man identified as Jitendra, a resident of Baghpat in Uttar Pradesh, to the Ram Manohar Lohia (RML) Hospital. "He set himself on fire at the roundabout near Rail Bhawan. The local police and railway police along with some people immediately extinguished the fire and the person was sent to the hospital," an official statement said.

Ready to spar on Boxing Day: India fret on Rohit's batting position

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Divine intervention and a wagging tail might have lifted India's sagging spirits in Brisbane but an out-of-form skipper Rohit Sharma's batting position will be in focus against a dangerous Australia bracing to deliver the knockout punch in the 'Boxing Day' Test starting here on Thursday. The Indian skipper was the last to hit the nets on Christmas eve and there is speculation doing rounds that he could replace the team's most assured opener, KL Rahul, at the top of the order. If that happens, Rahul will come in at No. 3 while Shubman Gill could either play in the middle order or make way for a Dhruv Jurel in the playing eleven. The series is currently locked 1-1. The Indian skipper stopped batting in the middle order after being elevated to the opening slot back in 2019. But he chose to come down in Adelaide and Brisbane to accommodate



an in-form Rahul and first-Test centurion Yashasvi Jaiswal. The move was a spectacular failure and it remains to be seen how the team adjusts in case Rohit opens and Gill is either dropped or bats at number five. Asked about his batting position during the pre-

match press conference, he was borderline irritated. "Let's not worry about that. I think who bats where, we should be discussing that within ourselves and I shouldn't be answering this question in every press conference," the skipper just about held his composure. Both captains feel that 1-1 after three games is a fair reflection of the competition between the sides but things can quickly change at the MCG. The rain-affected draw at the Gabba was like a soothing balm for India after the Pink Test debacle in Adelaide. But now, India are back at one of their favourite Australian venues where they have remained undefeated in Tests since the 2014 series. The last two (2018-19 and 2020-21) of the three Tests (other being 2014-15) resulted in Indian wins where solid batting played its part.

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158 absentee doctors terminated by Health dept in Uttarakhand

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Taking a stern action on absenteeism of doctors, the State health department has terminated the services of 158 medical officers who were

ed to the hospital since their appointment while 59 doctors are absconding from their duty for a long period of time. A total of 39 doctors were not

Champawat and Uttarkashi districts. Nine doctors from Dehradun and Bageshwar, 10 from Pauri, seven in Rudraprayag, six from Haridwar and five from Pithoragarh districts were also terminated. The absence of the doctors was affecting health services in the remote and mountainous areas of the State. After removing the absentee doctors, the Health department is planning to start a recruitment drive to fill the vacant posts of doctors in the State health services. The health minister Dhan Singh Rawat said that all these doctors were absent from their work for a long period of time due to which the health services were being affected. He said that the State government will not tolerate absentee and irresponsible doctors.



absconding from their duty for a long period of time. The State government has approved the proposal of the department to terminate these doctors. As per the department data, a total of 60 doctors had not report-

reporting to the place of their appointment during their training period. The terminated doctors include 21 from Udham Singh Nagar district, 13 each from Chamoli and Tehri, 12 from Almora and 11 each from Nainital,

BJP to organize year long programmes to mark Vajpayee's birth centenary

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The president of Uttarakhand BJP, Mahendra Bhatt has said that the party will organize year long programmes to mark the birth centenary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Addressing a seminar organized at the State

president of BJP said that he remained calm when his meeting was disturbed and had assured the people that a separate State of Uttarakhand would be created once BJP comes into power. Vajpayee fulfilled his promise when the BJP came to power and he became the PM.

will celebrate the birth centenary of Vajpayee for one year. Bhatt said that seminars and exhibitions will be organized in different areas of the State. The party will undertake social service activities and lecture series in the memory of the great leader. The State general



headquarters of the party, Bhatt said that Vajpayee has a special place in the heart of every individual of Uttarakhand. Remembering the public meeting of the former PM in Dehradun, the State

Bhatt said that Vajpayee gave a special industrial package to Uttarakhand and linked the cities with the golden quadrilateral scheme.

secretary organization Ajey Kumar, cabinet ministers Dhan Singh Rawat, MLAs Savita Kapoor, Anil Nautiyal, Durgeshwar Lal, Dilip Rawat and others attended the programme.

He said that the BJP

HP Governor and Dhami unveil Vajpayee's statue on his birth centenary

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The governor of Himachal Pradesh Shiv Pratap Shukla and Uttarakhand chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami unveiled the statue of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in Lekhak village of Thanu, Dehradun district on the occasion of his birth centenary on Wednesday. They also inaugurated the Nalanda Library and Research Centre along with former CM Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' and noted journalist Rajat Sharma.

mentioned that Vajpayee was the first PM to deliver a speech in Hindi at the United Nations and expressed hope that the lecture series in Lekhak Village

Dhami also spoke of Vajpayee's significant role as a poet, orator and visionary leader, whose actions, thoughts, and foresight always

Four dead, 25 injured as Roadways bus plunges into gorge in Bhimtal

PNS ■ HALDWANI

Four people lost their lives and 25 others sustained serious injuries when an Uttarakhand Roadways bus fell into a 100-metre-deep gorge in Bhimtal, Nainital district on Wednesday. The accident occurred around 1:30 PM near Aamdali in Bhimtal where the roadways bus, bearing registration number UK07PA 2822 and carrying 29 passengers, was headed toward Haldwani from Pithoragarh. The bus veered off course and plunged into the deep gorge. The officials said that upon receiving information from the Nainital district control room, authorities mobilised rescue teams. Two teams from the State Disaster Response Force (SDRF), led by sub-inspector Manish Bhakuni, were dis-



patched from Khairna and Nainital posts under the direction of SDRF Commandant Arpan Yaduvanshi. The officials said that the teams collaborated with local police, fire services, and villagers in a coordinated rescue operation. According to them, the rescue operation involved a challenging effort to extricate the

injured and deceased from the steep gorge. The rescue operation was completed by 3 PM. Four passengers were found dead, including two men aged 45 and 60 years old, a woman aged about 45 years and a 12-year-old child. The bodies of the deceased were handed over to the local police for further procedures. The officials said that the injured passengers were rushed to nearby medical facilities, who later were referred to the higher centre in Haldwani due to their critical injuries. The officials said that 24 injured were admitted in Sushila Tiwari Hospital in Haldwani and one was admitted in Krishna hospital for advanced care. The cabinet minister Rekha Arya and Kumaon Commissioner Deepak Rawat also visited Sushila Tiwari Hospital to meet injured passengers and assess their condition later in the evening. Rawat said that the hospital administration has been directed to give the best treatment and care to the injured.

CM announces ex-gratia to Bhimtal accident victims

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami has expressed grief on the death of passengers in the Bhimtal bus accident. He announced ex gratia payment of Rs 10 lakh to kin of dead in the accident. Dhami said that a sum of Rs three lakh each will be given to the seriously injured people in the accident while an amount ranging between Rs 15,000 to Rs 25,000 will be given to the passengers with

minor injuries. In a statement the CM also praised local people and personnel of State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) personnel for helping the injured in the accident. He said that the presence of local people in the rescue operation highlights the love and care the people of the State have towards one another. Dhami also expressed gratitude to the rescue team which saved precious lives in the accident.

Government to train SC youth in drone service technician trade

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The Youth Welfare minister Rekha Arya said that the department will provide training to Scheduled Caste youths in the drone service technician trade under the Special Component Plan. The official government order has already been issued, marking a signif-

icant step towards empowering the youth of the state, she said. er our youth with the skills needed to build a brighter future, contributing to the vision of developed villages and a progressive state," she said. The minister extended her gratitude to Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami for supporting this initiative and conveyed her congratulations and best wishes to all SC youth in the State.



er our youth with the skills needed to build a brighter future, contributing to the vision of developed villages and a progressive state," she said.

Arya shared that the government has allocated Rs 63.17 lakh for this initiative. While funds previously earmarked for certificate in software technology and training on drone application trades remained unutilised, they have now been repurposed to train SC youth

Congress accuses Arya of violating MCC, asks EC to take action

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The chief spokesperson of Uttarakhand Congress Garima Mehra Dasauni accused that Sports and Youth Welfare minister and BJP leader Rekha Arya violated the model code of conduct (MCC) by inaugurating projects at the International Sports Complex Stadium in Gaulapar, Haldwani on Wednesday. According to her, Arya inaugurated a football ground constructed on the pre-existing cricket field at a cost of Rs 288.06 lakh and another project involving the construction of the International Haldwani Sports Complex Stadium worth Rs 1,510.93 lakh. Currently, MCC is in force in all urban local bodies of Uttarakhand as civic bodies elections are scheduled to be held on January 23, 2025. Dasauni questioned whether separate rules and regulations apply to the ruling and opposition parties in Uttarakhand. She pointed out that MCC has been in effect since the announcement of the municipal election schedule on Monday, which has restricted political programmes of opposition parties. However,



the ruling party appears un deterred, allegedly continuing such activities unabated, Dasauni claimed. She stated that this situation raises serious concerns about the double standards in law enforcement within the State. She criticised the Dhami-led government, stating that the ruling party is blatantly disregarding election protocols. "All eyes are now on the State Election Commission that needs to address the issue

of VIP culture by taking strict action against Minister Arya," she said. Dasauni stated that failure to act against Arya will set a dangerous precedent, encouraging political parties to disregard the EC's guidelines in the future. "Favouring one's own and discriminating against others is not a healthy practice for the State," Dasauni said, appealing for a swift and impartial response from the EC.

Parents share mixed reaction on abolition of no-detention policy

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The parents The Pioneer approached have shared mixed opinions regarding the Central government's recent decision to abolish the no-detention policy for Classes V and VIII.



On Monday, a significant change in the primary education system was announced with the Centre having fixed this policy for the aforementioned classes. Defending this decision, the Centre had said that this would enhance learning outcomes for the students.

who fail amounts to failing them in future life," he added.

While some of the parents spoken to have lent their wholehearted support the rest have voiced their opposition.

Another parent, Harish Kumar echoed the same view, stating that the termination of the non-detention policy would definitely enhance the learning process for children. "Promotional lollipops in the formative time of the children have been done away with for their betterment. I, as a parent, welcome it. The anxiety of being promoted to the next class with adequate preparation and learning will foster a positive increase in their academic seriousness. This will stand them in good stead in their future life," he added.

Kamlesh Rawat appreciated the recent decision to discontinue the non-detention policy for students in classes V and VIII. "I am happy because I believe that this will motivate the students to take their studies more seriously as they will no longer have the assurance of promotion regardless of their academic effort. I am a father of two. I love to see my children study diligently and perform. We need improvement in the quality of learning. Promoting those

However, the number of parents who articulated their opposition to the Central decision is not small either. And their logic carries



will offer insights into the many facets of his life.

steered the country in new directions. He acknowledged

state of Uttarakhand was formed, turning the dreams of

In the event, Shukla praised the unveiling of Vajpayee's statue and the organisation of a lecture series in his memory, calling it a commendable initiative. He emphasised that such events will serve to educate future generations about Vajpayee's invaluable contributions across various fields for the nation. Shukla stated that Vajpayee was a man of exceptional personality and the works initiated by him for the nation are being carried forward by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He further

PM Modi, President Murmu join prayer ceremony to pay tributes to Vajpayee on birth centenary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI /IMPHAL /BHUBANESWAR/LUCKNOW

President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi were among the dignitaries who joined a prayer ceremony at the memorial of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Wednesday to pay tributes to him on his birth centenary. Union ministers, including Amit Shah and J P Nadda, besides BJP allies such as Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and Union ministers Lalan Singh of the JD(U) and Jitendra Ram Manjhi of HAM(S) paid homage to the BJP stalwart at 'Sadaiv Atal'.

of how Vajpayee preserved constitutional values and gave new direction and momentum to the country will remain forever. Union Home Minister Shah in his tributes said his dedication towards good governance and public welfare will continue to guide future generations. After paying tributes to Vajpayee at his memorial, 'Sadaiv Atal', here, Shah said Vajpayee ushered in a new era of development and good governance in the country with his dedication towards ideology and value-based politics. "Atal ji's dedication towards good governance and public welfare will continue to guide future generations," the minister said in a social media post in Hindi. He said Vajpayee made cultural nationalism a work culture and always kept the country's security and public welfare paramount. "Atal ji

will continue to guide the countrymen on the path of national service till eternity like the Pole Star," Shah said. In his tributes, Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh said the former Prime Minister's principles and teachings have inspired the building of a robust economy for this nation. Singh said in a social media post "Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji has been a pivotal figure in shaping India's diplomacy and national security, while continuing to serve as a source of guidance and wisdom to all of us.. "His principles and teachings have inspired the building of a robust economy for this nation, serving as an enduring source of motivation for the generations to come" Singh added.. Singh in another post also extended his greetings on the occasion of Good Governance Day.



He said "This day, observed in honour of the birth anniversary of former PM and Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee Ji, reminds us of the importance of transparent, accountable, and people-centric governance. Let us reaffirm our dedication to building a state where governance empowers every citizen and paves the way for a brighter future."

scaled new heights under his leadership. The government recounted some major developmental projects, including the establishment of AIIMS Bhubaneswar, an oil refinery at Paradip and creation of the East Coast Railway (ECoR) division with its headquarters in Bhubaneswar, undertaken during the tenure of the former Prime Minister. The construction of 400 km of highways in Odisha under the Golden Quadrilateral project, and road network of more than 18,000 km (PMSY) to connect the unconnected stand testament to the eponym 'Vikas Purush', it said. On the occasion of Good Governance Day, the people of Odisha pay heartfelt tribute to Vajpayee, the architect of administrative excellence, it added. In a social media, Chief Minister Majhi paid tributes

to the former prime minister and extended heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to everyone on the occasion of Good Governance Day. Several senior political leaders from Odisha, including Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, Union Minister for Tribal Affairs Jual Oram, and state BJP president Manmohan Samal paid respects to Vajpayee on his birth centenary. "Humble tributes to former Prime Minister of India, #AtalBihariVajpayee on his birth anniversary. #Atal ji was a distinguished statesman, outstanding parliamentarian, a renowned poet and orator. His contribution to the nation building will continue to inspire," former chief minister Naveen Patnaik wrote in a social media post. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said Vajpayee's good governance and foresight gave India a new direction in the

field of roads, telecom and rural development. Elaborating on the definition of good governance, Rajnath Singh said it is one where every person's needs are fulfilled, he feels safe and has the opportunity to express his views. "This was Atal ji's vision, which is being carried forward by Prime Minister Narendra Modi today," Singh said addressing the birth centenary celebrations of Vajpayee with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in Lucknow. The leaders paid floral tributes to the statue of the former prime minister in Lok Bhavan. Vajpayee's birth anniversary is observed as 'Good Governance' Day. The defence minister also praised Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on the issue of law and order and the implementation of welfare schemes.

Row over Waqf land: Karnataka State officials to appear before Parliamentary Panel

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Amid a row over Waqf land in Karnataka, officials from the state government are scheduled to appear before the parliamentary panel examining the Waqf Amendment Bill on Thursday. The Joint Committee on the Waqf Amendment Bill, chaired by BJP member Jagadambika Pal, is scheduled to hear views from representatives of the governments of Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Delhi in sittings spread over two days beginning Thursday. Delhi's Food and Supply Minister Imran Hussain is also scheduled to address the committee on Friday, followed by the recording of evidence by the representatives of the Delhi government. The deposition of officials from the Congress-led Karnataka government comes in the wake of a row over claims by BJP leaders that over 1,500 acres of land belonging to farmers in the state were being taken over by



the Waqf board. Pal had visited Karnataka and interacted with the farmers who had received notices from the state government regarding encroachment over properties belonging to the Waqf Board. The committee had also written to state governments seeking details of Waqf properties occupied by them in an unauthorised manner as per the Sachar panel report. The UPA government constituted the Sachar Committee in 2005 to study the social, economic and educational

CRPF has done a commendable job in tackling Naxalism, says Shah

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday said the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) has done a commendable job in tackling Naxalism and restoring peace and stability in the Northeastern states and Jammu and Kashmir. Shah also said the CRPF is playing an important role in ensuring internal security and peace in the country, according to an official statement. The home minister said this while visiting the CRPF headquarters where he met senior officers of the force, including its Director General Anish Dayal Singh, it said. During the visit, Shah had a comprehensive review of the operations and administrative efficiency of the world's largest paramilitary force. The CRPF has done a commendable job in tackling Naxalism and restoring peace and stability in the Northeastern states and Jammu and Kashmir, he said. The CRPF chief apprised the



home minister about the various welfare schemes being implemented for the families of martyred jawans of the force, including compassionate appointments in the CRPF. Shah emphasised the importance of promoting Hindi in the daily functioning of the force to strengthen linguistic unity. Along with emphasising the use of more and more 'Shri Ann' (Millets) for better health of the soldiers, the home minister also called upon the soldiers to extract the benefits of Ayurveda and

PM Modi greets people on Christmas

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted people on Christmas on Wednesday. He said in a social media post, "Wishing you all a Merry Christmas. May the teachings of Lord Jesus Christ show everyone the path of peace and prosperity." Nadda added that he prayed for happiness and well-being of all fellow countrymen. He said, "May our nation continue to progress on the path of development, guided by the mantra of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas, and reach our destination of Viksit Bharat 2047 with the contribution of all Indians. Wishing you all a Merry Christmas!"

Governance reforms must begin at grassroots level to bring about lasting change, says Jitendra

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union Minister Jitendra Singh on Wednesday said that the governance reforms must begin at the grassroots level to bring about long-lasting and meaningful change. In a significant step towards strengthening grassroots governance, he launched the 'Viksit Panchayat Karmayogi' initiative on Good Governance Day, celebrated every year to mark birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The initiative, which is part of the broader 'Prashasan Gaon Ki Aur' campaign, aims to enhance the capacity and competence of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) by equipping elected representatives and officials with the tools and knowledge required for effective governance and par-

ticipatory planning, said Singh, the Minister of State for Personnel. He emphasised "that governance reforms must begin at the grassroots to bring about long-lasting and meaningful change as well as to fill up the capacity gaps". Piloted in Odisha, Assam, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh, the initiative leverages e-learning platforms, AI-powered chatbots, and mobile apps to bridge knowledge gaps and enhance service delivery, Singh said. He said that this program aligns with the government's broader mission to decentralise governance and foster participatory decision-making at the grassroots level. The initiative is expected to create scalable models of citizen-centric governance, enabling PRIs to drive equitable and sustainable development across rural India, according to a Personnel

Ministry statement. The minister also launched a series of transformative initiatives on the occasion of the Good Governance Day. The first initiative unveiled by Singh was the launch of a new dashboard on the iGOT (integrated government online training) Karmayogi platform, along with the milestone introduction of the 1600th e-learning course. The enhanced dashboard is designed to empower ministries, departments, and state administrators with advanced tools to monitor user registrations, course completions, and overall progress in capacity-building efforts. With customisable views and robust data filtration capabilities, the dashboard provides detailed insights to improve decision-making and optimize training initiatives, the statement said. Additionally, the introduction

of the 1600th course on the platform underscores the government's commitment to fostering a diverse and comprehensive learning ecosystem, it said. The minister also launched CPGRAMS (Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System) Annual Report 2024. As the world's largest citizen interface platform, CPGRAMS has redefined grievance redressal by integrating advanced technologies, multilingual support, and comprehensive tracking mechanisms. The CPGRAMS allows citizens to raise grievances against government departments online. The report showcases key achievements, including the resolution of over 25 lakh grievances annually and the implementation of the Grievance Redressal Assessment and Index (GRAI), the statement said.

Potato plants naturally produce SGAs, which are harmful if humans consume them

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Did you know that potato plants naturally produce chemicals called steroidal glycoalkaloids (SGAs), which are found in high quantities in the green parts of the potato peels and in the sprouting areas? While these compounds help the plants protect themselves from insects, these are harmful in case consumed by humans. Now, scientists have discovered a way to remove these toxic compounds from potatoes, making them safer to eat and easier to store. This breakthrough could reduce food waste and enhance crop farming in space and other extreme environments. "These compounds are critical for plants to ward off insects, but they make certain parts of these crops inedible," said Adam Jozwiak, a UCR molec-



ular biochemist who led the study. "Now that we've uncovered the biosynthetic pathway, we can potentially create plants that produce these compounds only in the leaves while keeping the edible parts safe." Sunlight can induce the production of SGAs in potato tubers—the part of the potato plant that is eaten—even after they've been harvested. By identifying a key genetic mechanism in SGA production, UC Riverside researchers may be able to reduce potatoes' toxic-

ity while preserving the plants' natural defenses. Removing SGAs from potatoes will also make them easier to store and transport in open air. The research, published in Science, focuses on a protein called "GAME15," which plays a key role in directing the plant's production of SGAs. This protein acts both as an enzyme and a scaffold, organizing other enzymes into a "conversion factory" that efficiently produces SGAs while preventing toxic compounds from leaking into other parts of plant cells, where they would cause damage. By engineering plants to control when and where SGAs are produced—such as in the leaves but not in the potatoes themselves—the researchers envision crops that can be stored without the risk of toxicity from sunlight exposure. "You could store the potatoes in

your kitchen and not worry about exposure to the sun, which makes them produce more SGAs. Then, you could eat them whenever you want, reducing food waste," Jozwiak said. Additionally, the findings could enable the use of other plant parts, such as leaves, for food in limited-space environments like space missions or vertical farming systems. "For space farming, where every part of a plant may need to be edible, these findings are especially promising," Jozwiak added. "Our work demonstrates that plants have evolved ingenious ways to balance growth, reproduction, and defense," Jozwiak said. This research involved scientists from the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel, as well as Kobe University, the RIKEN Center for Sustainable Resource Science, and Osaka University in Japan.

NDA leaders meet at BJP president Nadda's residence

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Amid heightened attacks from the Congress and the INDIA bloc over Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on B.R. Ambedkar, National Democratic Alliance (NDA) leaders met here at BJP president J P Nadda's residence on Wednesday on the birth centenary of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. According to sources, Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP president J P Nadda discussed the constitutional issues raised by the Congress party in detail during the meeting with NDA leaders. Sources said the BJP's central message to its allies was clear: the NDA must present a unified front to neutralise the Opposition's attacks effectively. Notably absent from the meeting were Bihar Chief

Minister Nitish Kumar and Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. The JD(U) was represented by Union Minister Rajiv Ranjan, also known as Lalan Singh, while the Shiv Sena sent Union MoS Prataprao Ganpatrao Jadhav. Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) president and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, Union Civil Aviation Minister Ram Mohan Naidu Kinjarapu, and Union ministers from various NDA constituents such as Apna Dal (S) president Anupriya Patel, and JD(S) leader H D Kumaraswamy, were present. Bihar's Hindustani Awam Morcha (S) leader Jitan Ram Manjhi, also a minister in the Modi government, Rashtriya Lok Morcha (RLM) president Upendra Kushwaha, a Rajya Sabha MP, and Thushar



Vellappally, president of Bharath Dharmha Jana Sena, were also present at the meeting. "Attended the NDA leaders' meeting in New Delhi today. Under the visionary leadership of PM Narendra Modi, India is achieving unprecedented milestones and has positioned itself as a global superpower," Nadda said in a

post on X after the meeting. "The NDA government remains steadfast in its pursuit of the vision of 'Viksit Bharat@2047', ensuring a brighter and more prosperous future for all," he added. During the discussions, Shah reportedly reflected on recent political developments, particularly lessons drawn from the Winter Session of Parliament. He accused the Congress of historically disregarding Ambedkar's legacy while now attempting to appropriate it for political gain. He underscored the need for the BJP and its allies to respond robustly and in unison to such manoeuvres. Uttar Pradesh's NISHAD Party chief Sanjay Nishad said it was an "informal" meeting of the NDA leaders on the occasion of the birth centenary of Vajpayee. "Our future strategy is to move for-

ward together. We have to show unity in all the upcoming elections...Everyone congratulated (the BJP leaders) in the meeting for the victory in Haryana and Maharashtra assembly polls," he told reporters when asked about the meeting. Nishad said the meeting also discussed coalition strategy to ensure that "all the work" done by Prime Minister Modi reaches the ground and "promises made to people during elections" are fulfilled. The issue of giving reservation to the fishing community was also raised at the meeting, he said. "I gave 30-37 page evidence on the issue of giving reservation to the fishing community since it was a poll promise. They will call (us) after a week and discuss it," Nishad said. Asked if issue of Shah's remarks on Ambedkar

came up at the meeting, the NISHAD Party chief said, "...We have come for people's welfare. How to get success in that, energy needs to be spent on that." "There is no need to respond to their narrative and negative thoughts," he added in an apparent reference to the Congress and other opposition parties who are up in arms against Shah over his remarks. Though there was no official word on the agenda of the meeting, sources said good governance and political issues were discussed. The NDA meeting comes amid the alliance's focus on simultaneous elections, with all constituents lending support to the proposal. A Joint Committee of Parliament, constituted to scrutinise two bills for simultaneous polls, is expected to meet on January 8.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Extradition dilemma

Bangladesh's request to extradite Sheikh Hasina raises critical questions about India's role as a key player in South Asian politics

Bangladesh has formally requested India to extradite former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who fled to India following her ouster on August 5, 2024. The request, conveyed through a diplomatic "note verbale," places India in a delicate position, requiring a careful balancing of international law, bilateral relations, and regional stability. This article explores the background of the situation, the implications of such an extradition, and the options available to India. Sheikh Hasina, a towering figure in Bangladeshi politics and leader of the Awami League, was ousted from power after a student-led movement erupted into nationwide protests. Despite the government meeting the protesters' demands, unrest persisted, which Hasina claims was orchestrated by Muhammad Yunus, Chief Adviser to Bangladesh's interim government. The protests culminated in her removal from power, prompting her to flee to India. The diplomatic note issued by Bangladesh's interim government reflects its intention to bring Sheikh Hasina back to face accountability or to address the political turmoil she left behind.



India and Bangladesh share a complex relationship shaped by historical ties, mutual interests, and occasional tensions. Extraditing Sheikh Hasina could be seen as India's support for the interim government, potentially straining ties with the Awami League, one of Bangladesh's major political forces. The political crisis in Bangladesh has already created ripples in South Asia. Any decision by India regarding the extradition could influence the region's political dynamics, including relations with other South Asian nations. Sheikh Hasina's safety and the fairness of any trial

are also suspect as she might face attrition upon her return. India would need to weigh these concerns against its international obligations under extradition treaties and agreements. How India handles this case may affect India's stance as a regional power and its commitment to democratic principles. India could provide asylum to Sheikh Hasina, citing humanitarian grounds or concerns about the fairness of legal proceedings in Bangladesh. This would align with India's historical role as a refuge for political exiles but might antagonise the interim Bangladeshi government. India could agree to extradite Hasina with conditions ensuring her safety, fair trial, and adherence to international legal norms. Such a move might help India maintain its relations with both the interim government and Hasina's supporters. India can also delay the extradition while engaging diplomatically with Bangladesh to seek a mutually acceptable solution. This would allow India to assess the evolving political situation and minimize potential fallout. While India's decision will undoubtedly influence India-Bangladesh relations, its impact will also resonate across the region. India must weigh its options carefully, prioritising both the immediate political implications and its long-term vision for South Asian stability.

PICTALK



The Jakhu Temple and its premises covered with snow after fresh snowfall, in Shimla

PTI

ONOP: A bold reform or a political gamble?

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi pushes forward with his vision of 'One Nation, One Poll' the nation waits to see whether this proposal will unite or divide



KALYANI SHANKAR

The introduction of a controversial bill, 'One Nation One Poll,' has created more controversy than acceptance. The BJP has been talking about it but introduced it, which has been sent to the joint select committee of the Parliament. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in a hurry to fulfil the BJP's unfinished agenda. He had already opened the Ayodhya temple and got the revocation of Article 370 of the Constitution, which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir. This long-awaited bill aims to streamline the electoral process for 28 states and eight union territories, with an electorate of nearly a billion voters. The bill has triggered widespread debate, significant interest, and Opposition from various parties.

Though momentum is building for simultaneous elections, some questions need answers. They include whether Modi has the required two-thirds majority to pass the bill in Parliament. Is there a political consensus? Will the Opposition come on board? Is the timing of the bill right? Most Opposition parties reject the idea of simultaneous polls. They include the Congress, the Left parties, the Trinamool Congress, and regional and smaller parties. They reject it mainly to settle political scores and apprehension that they may benefit the BJP. Former President Ram Nath Kovind chaired a nine-member committee recommending simultaneous polls last year, labelling it a 'game changer'. Thirty-two parties supported the concept, and 15 rejected it. The panel also advised that the Centre form a panel to oversee the implementation of this proposal. Also, there should be a joint electoral roll for all elections so that voters will use the same list for national, state, and local polls. Over the years, elections have become a standard feature, but the 'One Nation, One Poll' bill has the potential to reshape our election process. Proponents of the bill argue that it could



significantly reduce campaign costs, alleviate the strain on administrative resources, and streamline governance. This could ultimately benefit the public by reducing the frequency of elections, a prospect that should inspire optimism. Elections in India are held at different levels. The first is panchayat, followed by the district level, the state assembly level, and finally, the national level. They happen at different times, and the government wants to streamline the system. Interestingly, the idea of simultaneous polls is not new. Historically, it was a synchronised poll from 1952 to 1967. The premature dismissal of various governments and the consequential dissolution of Assemblies led to staggered polls. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dismissed many Opposition-ruled state governments. The most important thing is that the BJP needs the support of the allies and friendly parties. In the recent 2024 polls, the BJP was 40 short of a majority in the house and could form the government only with the help of JD (U) and Telugu Desam. Most opposing parties reject simultaneous polls, including Congress, the Left parties,



HISTORICALLY, IT WAS A SYNCHRONISED POLL FROM 1952 TO 1967. THE PREMATURE DISMISSAL OF VARIOUS GOVERNMENTS AND THE CONSEQUENTIAL DISSOLUTION OF ASSEMBLIES LED TO STAGGARD POLLS

the Trinamool Congress, and regional and smaller parties. Even in the BJP, 20 MPs were absent while the bill was introduced. The Kovind panel also suggested having the votes in two parts. The first will be for Lok Sabha and Assembly votes, and the second for local groups. The bill faces significant constitutional, legal, and political challenges. The Kovind panel suggests amending Articles 83 and 172 to allow simultaneous elections. However, the BJP lacks the two-thirds majority for this amendment, and the Constitution needs clarification on concurrent polls. The potential impact on the federal structure of the country and the logistical challenges of conducting simultaneous elections for a billion voters are crucial factors to consider. Prime Minister Modi's main challenge is to gather enough support in Parliament. At the same time, the government must build political consensus and persuade the Opposition to agree. The Opposition has rejected simultaneous polls, fearing it might benefit the BJP. The 15 opposing parties hold 205 MPs, while Modi needs 362 votes to proceed.

A legal framework for simultaneous elections is essential to address mid-term government collapses and central political manoeuvring. The one nation, one poll approach reduces waste and election frequency, so the Opposition should consider it carefully and present any alternative proposals for public discussion. The One Nation One poll has been one of the poll promises of the BJP. Some core issues have already been addressed, such as the revocation of Article 370 and the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. In his third term, Modi wants to finish the unfinished agenda. Modi presents this legislation with a clear strategy: Whether he succeeds or not, he benefits. If the bill gets passed, it will be an advantage for the BJP government. If it fails, he can claim that he tried to enact reform but faced Opposition obstruction. Despite potential delays, it's important to debate the bill, as election spending ultimately comes from taxpayers' money. Now that the bill has been sent to a joint select committee, we must wait for its report. (The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

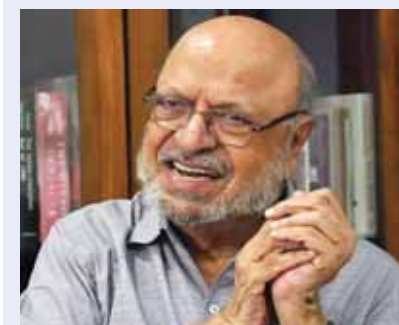
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRUMP'S ACQUISITION PLANS

Madam — Trump is on a shopping spree to buy Canada, the Panama Canal and Greenland, desiring to make Canada its 51st state with Trudeau as its governor. He wants the gifted Panama Canal back to his country. The Panama president has, however, expressed his disagreement with both his conditions, thereby creating another contentious issue ready to be dealt with in the near future. He is also eyeing Greenland to gain its strategic advantage for monitoring the missiles launched from Russia and China on the US and alternatively using it as a launching pad for the US missiles on them. Greenland being rich in minerals like uranium is another factor for its advantage to the US. More so, the greatest island on this planet is not green but mostly ice-filled, comprising glaciers that create many new waterways on its melting due to global warming each year, giving a wider area for its exploration. He is also creating a powerful force by enriching it with the recruitment of capitalists like Elon Musk and AI experts in his cabinet to act as resources for implementing his future plans. Indian brain drain forms a substantial part of his team, like Sriram Ramakrishnan, the AI expert, and such other talents that India has lost to another country at its cost for its inability to identify and hold them at the appropriate time. If this happens, the demography will start taking a new shape, and interrelation equations of friends and foes will change. India needs to withhold its talent by stopping its brain drain at any cost by providing them better than what they get abroad to discourage their move to foreign lands. However, the unpredictable nature of Donald Trump will keep the world guessing with fingers crossed till it actually happens in reality after he takes over as president, as for all you know, he may suddenly say one day "I was just joking."

R S Narula | Patiala

Shyam Benegal passes away at 90



The sad demise of legendary filmmaker and stalwart of Indian cinema Shyam Benegal at the age of 90 is an irreparable loss for both the cinema and the society. His historic contribution to parallel cinema will be written in golden words in the history of Indian cinema. He was the vanguard of the movement

of realistic and issue-based filmmaking, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. His directorial debut movie, 'Ankur,' in 1974 itself was a landmark in Indian cinema. Along with his timeless movies, he launched the careers of many highly accomplished actors, including Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi. Besides his contribution to cinema, Shyam Benegal was a man of great values who never hesitated to speak his mind. Despite his ideological differences with the right wing and the Modi government, he opposed returning national awards as a mark of protest against the alleged increase in intolerance in India. He, himself a two-time chairman of FTII, did not support the strike of students of the institute against the appointment of TV actor Gajendra Chauhan as its chairman.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

office bearer of the Mumbai Cricket Association, "Shaw is his own enemy"

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

CONCERN OVER SHAMI'S FITNESS Madam — The team India has been endeavouring for over a period to gain the ground, where it's seen the bowlers and batters are totally at sea. Then, everyone wishing for Shami's comeback, which can drastically strengthen the tie of the team, especially the bowling attack, as he showcased his back-to-back top-notch performance in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, leading bowling length effectively. But once again, BCCI's update about his fitness, that he has been deemed not fit for selection in the remaining two tests due to concern over left knee swelling, has ruined countless hopes. Our wishes for his speedy recovery and the team's unparalleled persistence to heal up the millions' fresh wounded hearts.

Jakir Hussain | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Lessons from yesterday: Reflections that shape a lifetime

The past is a treasure trove of memories and lessons, each shaping who we are and guiding us into the future

The past shapes our present. The present is past the next moment, to make way for the future. We are left with fond memories. These memories also teach us invaluable lessons. I was prone to my share of mischief as a child for which I would get scolded by my parents. At such times, I was assured of a haven hiding behind my grandmother. She was impartial to both sides as she counselled my parents to be more indulgent and taught us to be well-behaved. I remember another afternoon. I returned from school excited about my outstanding results in the examinations. Unmindful of my mother's much-needed siesta, I woke her up. Still groggy, she hugged and blessed me, before continuing with her interrupted sleep. That one spontaneous gesture was my reward which would continue to inspire me throughout my life. My father usually rested and slept on Sunday afternoons. We tried not to disturb his sleep. One day, we might have been noisier than usual and ended up soundly thrashed by our father. I wit-



nessed a different facet of my father's personality later in the evening, as he gently expressed his regret for the outburst. I would remember in times to come that there was no shame in accepting if I was wrong. I remember the day I met the young girl who became my wife and life partner in the next few months. After the initial heady days, we buckled up to the serious business of making a life together. We have been married for 40 years. These have not been easy decades faced with the harsh realities of life. We never give up, whatever the setbacks. We continue to strive towards the common goal of leading a happy and contented life together. It is easier to face challenges and find solutions as a team. Another nostalgic memory is

from a long-ago holiday to the beach town of Puri. Our guest house was a couple of hundred meters from the beach. Our daughters were much younger. I was, and continue to be, a protective father, worrying about their safety. That one day, I sat on the veranda, fondly looking at the two children playing with sand on the beach. Their innocent efforts, many of which were unsuccessful, to mould a work of art out of the slippery sand, taught me not to give up. My mother kept a copy of Ramcharitmanas in her prayer corner. I read somewhere that you could find a solution to any problem in the epic. All you had to do was open any page, and the top line would help you find ways to tackle your most pressing

issue. I also tried it sometimes. I remember that a simple reading of the lines was not enough. What mattered was the action plan that I arrived at based on my interpretation, and the determination with which I pursued. Fair play, guiding the team members, impartiality, giving undivided time to team members however busy one might be, empathy, working for the team, pride in the performance of the team members, and out-of-box thinking, were only a few of the invaluable lessons that my experiences taught me. They have stood me in good stead through the rough and tumble of life. The words of psychiatrist, Abraham Twerski would resonate with many, "Ruminating about the past will get you nowhere. So go ahead and learn from the past whatever you can, and then put it behind you. Remember, there is nothing you can do to change it, but you can use its lessons to improve your future." (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA



FIRST COLUMN

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MANTRAS

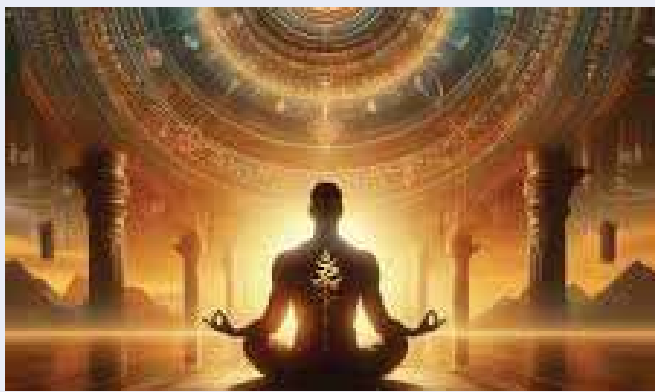
The Divya Chikitsa Mantras stand out as a remarkable system for channelising divine energy



ASHWANI GURU JI

You might have heard of Sanjeevani Vidya given by Guru Shukracharya, which could bring back the dead to life, or of a certain herb called Sanjeevani buti, which brought back Lakshman to life. You may have also heard of the Madhu Vidya or Brahmadevi as possessed by Sage Dadhichi which could enable one to attain immortality, or the Chyawanprasha prepared by the Ashvini Kumars to restore the youth of Sage Chyawan.

These are not tales or works of fiction, the Vedic rishis were masters of Creation, the human body being a microscopic part of that. The proof that these were not fiction lies in the fact that most of the modern scientific discoveries have come from the Vedic shastras. You may visit www.dhyanfoundation.com to know which scientific discovery has come from which shastra. While most of the ancient Vedic healing sciences are lost in the dust of kaliyuga and most herbs have become extinct, a fraction of them still can be accessed and even that fraction is enough



to achieve amazing results. Divya Chikitsa Mantras as detailed in Sanatan Kriya is one such gem from the treasure trove of Vedic gyan. Divya Chikitsa Mantras use sound and vibrations to bring about the desired effect and changes in your body.

When done right their healing and transformational effects are apparent for all to see. A combination of 7 mantras they work to unplug certain nadis (energy channels) and awaken specific centres, to channelise the force of divine energies for a practitioner. It is said that the body of a deva resides in the mantra. This has been practically experienced by each one who has attended a yagya at Dhyan Ashram where complete forms of the deities were invoked through specific chants manifested in the Yagya Agni. For the mantra to bear fruit, it has to be received from a Guru who is Siddha in the mantra, in line with the ancient Guru Shishya Parampara. Guru channelises the force of the respective deity in the mantra and also imparts the dhvani (correct pronunciation) of the mantra. The efficacy of a Vedic mantra depends on the correctness of its chant; faulty pronunciation of even a single syllable changes the entire meaning.

Taittiriya Samhita narrates the story of Tvashta in this regard. Tvashta performed a sacrifice to destroy Indra. He used the mantra, 'indrashatru' to manifest his thought. However, he placed a lofty note on the word 'Indra' instead of 'shatru' because of which the meaning of the word changed from 'slayer of indra' to 'the one who will be slain by indra' and thus the son, Vrutra, so born to him was defeated by Indra, just because of a pronunciation defect. To quote from Panini Shiksha, a mantra devoid of the correct vowels (svar) and consonants (vama) is faulty and does not convey its intended meaning. It is like a verbal thunderbolt that harms the one who is chanting, as had happened in the case of erroneous pronunciation of the word, Indrashatru). The Vedic seers had mastered this incredible science of sound in the form of mantras, they were well aware of the high degree of specificity and precision that is required to harness the power of sound.

Shiksha, one of the six vendangas, deals with the science of proper pronunciation of words and laws of euphony. Volumes have been written on Shiksha by Panini, Yadnyavalkya and Vasishtha. Shatpath Brahman states that every alphabet of a word possesses some kind of strength and explains the secret of every alphabet. Therefore it is important that one partakes the vidya of mantras from a Guru. Reading from books /internet or hearing on television/social media and starting self-practice may have detrimental effects if the chant is not proper.

(The writer is a spiritual Guru; views are personal)

State budgets on the brink: RBI sounds alarm



UTTAM GUPTA

With outstanding debts exceeding the prudential threshold, the RBI urges states to adopt "next-generation" fiscal rules to ensure sustainable financial management

According to a report on 'State Finances: A Study of Budgets of 2024-25' released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on December 19, 2024, the consolidated gross fiscal deficit (GFD) of all State governments was contained within 3 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) during the financial years (FY) 2022-23 and 2023-24. For 2024-25, their GFD has been budgeted at 3.2 per cent of GDP. They have complied with the stipulation under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003 which requires them to keep it within the 3 per cent cap. But, the good news ends here. The report reveals that the total outstanding liabilities of States were 28.5 per cent of the GDP in March 2024. Though lower than the peak of 31 per cent reached as of March-end 2021, it remained significantly above the prudential debt-GDP ratio of 20 per cent mandated for the states under the Act.

Another measure of how a State government is managing its budget is its revenue expenditure (RE) about capital outlay (CO). While, the RE being on items such as salaries, wages, pension bills, subsidies etc essentially goes towards non-asset creating spending, CO results in the generation of capital assets thereby providing a foundation for income stream over some time. Greater emphasis on the latter is considered fiscally prudent whereas more of the former can lead to fiscal destabilisation. The record of many states on this crucial parameter is disconcerting. For all states, the total expenditure increased from around Rs 3428,000 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 5760,000 crore during 2024-25 (budget estimate). As regards RE, it increased from Rs 3018,000 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 4840,000 crore in 2024-25. The CO increased from Rs 410,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 920,000 crore during 2024-25. These numbers yield a ratio of RE to CO or RECO of 5.2 (4840,000/920,000).

In several states, the RECO is much higher than even this national average. For instance, in Punjab, at 17.1 it is more than three times followed by Puducherry (14.1), Kerala (10.6) and Delhi (10.3). There are some better-performing states too such as Manipur having the best ratio (2.4), followed by Gujarat (2.9) and Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh (3.1). However, the abnormally high RECO of other states pushes up the national average. **How does it compare with the Centre?** The total expenditure of the Central Government increased from Rs 3042,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 4820,000 crore during 2024-25. Of this, the RE increased from Rs 2603,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 3709,000 crore during 2024-25. On the other hand, its CO increased from Rs 439,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 1111,000 crore during 2024-25. So, RECO for the Centre is 3.3 in 2024-25 (3709,000/1111000) against 5.2 for the States.

Barring a couple of good performers like Gujarat which is doing even better than the Centre, most of the states have been reckless in their revenue



BARRING A COUPLE OF GOOD PERFORMERS LIKE GUJARAT WHICH IS DOING EVEN BETTER THAN THE CENTRE, MOST OF THE STATES HAVE BEEN RECKLESS IN THEIR REVENUE SPENDING AND THAT INCLUDES A SHARP RISE IN EXPENDITURE ON SUBSIDIES

spending and that includes a sharp rise in expenditure on subsidies. Since 2018-19, subsidies given by the states have grown 2.5 times to over Rs 470,000 crore being the budget estimate for FY 2024-25). The RBI cites farm loan waivers, free or subsidised services like electricity, transport, gas cylinders, and cash transfers to farmers, youth and women as key areas of incipient stress. It suggests that states need to adopt "next-generation" fiscal rules, time-bound glide paths for fiscal consolidation, and rein in subsidies and freebies so that it doesn't crowd out more productive expenditures. Such exhortations have been made umpteen times in the past not just by the RBI but also by several committees set by the government on 'expenditure reforms' from time to time. Now, we have more jargon like "next-generation" fiscal rules to convey the same message with greater intensity. The RBI posits these rules as "combining the medium-term fiscal sustainability objective with short-term flexibility allowing state governments more maneuverability in dealing with exogenous economic shocks". The banking regulator goes on "these will involve inter alia, the use of data analytics, including machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI); improved data transparency and disclosure practices; and strengthening the institution of State Finance Commissions to deliver public services more effectively and scale up social and physical infrastructure." Put simply, the RBI expects the State governments to not just bring about policy reforms and refinements to better target welfare schemes – focusing primarily on the poor

sections of the society but also to galvanise the administrative machinery and institutions to deliver benefits efficiently and prevent misuse/diversion by making the best use of technology interventions. **Do the States understand?** The answer is a categorical 'no'. Forget a finely crafted system desired by the RBI and government committees, most of the states have put in place crude and non-transparent subsidy regimes call them freebies - a jargon for "something given free of charge" – all aimed at alluring voters and winning elections. The political parties have sought to cover under 'something' literally everything that touches the life of a person. It includes free food, free health, free education, free LPG cylinder, free laptops, free transport, state support for marriage, and pilgrimage for the elderly; it's an unending list. In the last couple of years, the freebies promised by them have become more brazen with parties coming out with 'cash transfers' to the account of voters. Such schemes mostly directed at women have won elections for the concerned parties in elections held during 2023 and 2024 in Madhya Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Haryana. The parties compete with each other in offering more. A common refrain is 'Who will promise more'? Look at this. In the budget for 2024-25, Delhi finance minister Atishi announced the Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana (MMSY) under which, the AAP government will give Rs 1000 per month to all the women

above the age of 18 in the national capital. Now, ex-Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has increased the amount to Rs 2100 per month. In response, the BJP has reportedly promised a still higher cash transfer of Rs 2500 per month. Let us be clear. Unlike 'normal' budget expenses which are planned and backed by well-orchestrated efforts to garner revenue, additional financial liabilities imposed by the freebies promised in the election manifesto affect the budgetary position of the State in a totally 'uncontrolled' and 'unplanned' manner. Moreover, these freebies don't have a sunset date meaning they will continue to be given 'eternally' – no matter which party rules. This is the surest invitation to fiscal catastrophe. Take the case of Delhi. Already, without the MMSY, the financial position of the Delhi government has come to such a pass that CM Atishi has recently forwarded a request to the Centre seeking a loan of Rs 10,000 crore from the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF). Now, if AAP were to come to power yet again, MMSY @Rs 2100 a month would cost the exchequer an additional Rs 17,000 crore per annum. Since 2018-19, state subsidies have grown 2.5 times to over Rs 470,000 crore (2024-25), courtesy freebies cult. This will increase exponentially, destabilising State budgets, and making a mockery of the much-touted fiscal consolidation drive. The Supreme Court has on several occasions observed that 'freebies are bad'. Will it force parliamentarians to enact a law to curb them?

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

Festive cheer meets smart choices: Navigating the real estate boom of 2024

By evaluating long-term financial goals, buyers can turn festive opportunities into lasting investments

With the festive season ongoing in full swing, there is a surge in consumer spending. This time is often marked by a flurry of purchases fuelled by tradition and sentiment. While the allure of buying a home can be particularly enticing during this festive period, buyers must approach such decisions with careful consideration. They must look beyond the festive fervour and reflect on key aspects that can guide them to make informed decisions.

Decoding Festive Demand As per a report 'Unravelling the Trends Shaping India's Real Estate Market in 2024' by CBRE, from January to September, the luxury housing category collectively constituted 16 per cent of the overall



RAHUL MEHROTRA

housing demand. This growth has spurred developers to launch new projects, resulting in the category representing 19 per cent of the total new launches during the first nine months of 2024. This trend is only going to grow further spurred by the festive season as buyers are investing in end-products that

offer better amenities such as club-house, larger living spaces, and modern facilities. Metro cities, in particular, have seen a wave of new project launches by developers this year, catering to various buyer segments. While luxury properties grab headlines, the affordable housing sector remains the backbone of India's real estate market as this is where buyers purchasing their first home find the most value. Having said that, many first-time homebuyers are compelled to buy a property given the abundant promotional offers and incentives provided by realtors. It is so because the festive season spurs confidence as it often coincides with salary increments, bonuses, and a general uptick in eco-

nomics activity. However, buyers much before they scout for a property, should evaluate the long-term aspects. Questions such as "Can I support paying the EMI?" or "Is it the right approach" may seem overwhelming at first, but assessing one's worth is very crucial at this stage. **Interest Rate Matters** The interest rate set by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is a huge factor in deciding other crucial interest rates. The repo rate is unchanged for the 10th consecutive time, and this implies that the Equated Monthly Installments (EMIs) are likely to remain manageable. Further to this, I believe there would be a pickup in demand for housing loans as the festive season progresses. Recent data from the RBI



reveals a remarkable 40 per cent increase in home loan deployment, highlighting the diminishing gap between monthly rents and EMIs. Additionally, 80 per cent of aspiring homeowners preferred home loans as the top choice for property acquisition this year.

Typically, possessions and property deliveries are scheduled in the latter half of November, aligning perfectly with the festive momentum. In addition to stable interest rates and EMIs, the array of offers and discounts available during the festive season can be another key factor of consid-

eration. However, it's essential to look for transparent offers that can help avoid hidden fees and unexpected costs. One should seek out reduced processing fees, flexible repayment plans, cashback schemes, and opportunities for negotiation that can make the festive season an advantageous time to invest. **What Should Buyers And Investors Do?** Investors and buyers must focus on long-term value by evaluating their income and cash flows to ensure manageable EMIs. The festive season can be an opportunity to reduce upfront costs and select properties in developing areas with strong amenities and connectivity for better appreciation. The predictability in EMI

outflows coupled with festive discounts can make the dream of homeownership more achievable. First-time buyers, particularly in the affordable housing segment, must rely on loans to bridge the financial gap as well as look for special offers and discounts. While festive discounts are great, buyers should align their decisions with pragmatic goals rather than being swayed by just sentiment. Buying a property during a festive season is certainly the start of a prosperous journey, but to truly benefit, one needs to have a stable financial plan – whether it's the first home or adding to one's portfolio. (The writer is MD & CEO, RHD/FCL; views are personal)

Fate of Trump's Cabinet picks unclear as Republicans prepare to take power in Senate

AP ■ WASHINGTON

The fate of President-elect Donald Trump's Cabinet is still unclear after Republican senators spent much of December carefully dodging questions about Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s views on vaccines, accusations of sexual misconduct against Pete Hegseth and Tulsi Gabbard's 2017 meeting with then-President Bashar Assad of Syria.



For the more controversial nominees, though, party unity will be key. One of Trump's most embattled picks is Hegseth, a Fox News host and veteran who some see as inexperienced and has publicly questioned whether women should serve in combat.

Hegseth has faced particular pressure from Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst, herself a combat veteran who has worked to address sexual assault in the military. She has met with Hegseth several times, and has not yet said she will support him.

While some GOP senators have indicated they are all-in for Trump's picks, others have withheld support, for now, especially on some of his more controversial nominees.

He has also faced allegations of sexual assault and excessive drinking that he has denied. But it's all given some senators pause, despite Trump's enthusiastic support.

of Alaska, Susan Collins of Maine and incoming freshman Sen. John Curtis of Utah. "Anybody who wants to give me heat for doing my job, bring it on," Curtis said Sunday on ABC's "This Week" when asked about vetting Trump's nominees.

Russia targets Ukrainian energy infrastructure on Christmas Day

AP ■ KYIV

Russia launched a massive missile and drone barrage targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure on Wednesday, striking a thermal power plant and prompting Ukrainians to take shelter in metro stations on Christmas morning.



The strikes on Ukrainian fuel and energy sources included 78 air, ground, and sea-launched missiles as well as 106 Shaheds and other types of drones, Ukraine's air force said.

It claimed to have intercepted 59 missiles and 54 drones, with 52 more drones being jammed. In Russia, meanwhile, one woman died and three people were wounded after falling debris from a downed drone sparked a fire in a shopping mall in the city of Vladikavkaz.

Ukrainian Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko said Russia again "massively attacks energy infrastructure." Ukraine's air force said that multiple missiles had been fired at the Kharkiv, Dnipro and Poltava regions in the east of the country.

Timchenko, CEO of DTEK wrote on his X account. At least seven strikes targeted Kharkiv, sparking fires across the city, regional head Oleh Syniehubov wrote on Telegram.

Dutch citizen sentenced to three years prison in Russia for punching police officer



AP ■ MOSCOW

A Russian court sentenced a Dutch citizen to three years in prison on Wednesday after he was found guilty of punching a police officer.

high-profile cases in Russia in recent years. Some analysts have said that Moscow may be using jailed Westerners as bargaining chips as tensions remain high over the Kremlin's military operation in Ukraine.

Hasina's son claims Yunus govt weaponising judiciary for 'political witch hunt'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Sanjeeb Wazed, son of deposed Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina, has accused the Muhammad Yunus led interim government of "weaponising the judiciary" for carrying out a "political witch hunt" against the Awami League leadership.

India. Hasina, 77, has been living in India since August 5 when she fled Bangladesh following a massive student-led protest that toppled her Awami League's (AL) 16-year regime.

farcical trial process through International Crimes Tribunal makes it a political witch hunt that forsakes justice and marks another ongoing onslaught to persecute Awami League leadership," Wazed said in his post on Tuesday.

ation of thousands by law enforcement and violent attacks including looting vandalism and arson going on with impunity everyday fuelled by denial of the regime," he added.

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS

LOST & FOUND

I, Kiran Aggarwal D/o Satpal Aggarwal R/O 425, Kohat Enclave, Pitampura, Delhi-110034 have lost cancelled lease deed of the Property No. 425, Kohat Enclave, Pitampura, Delhi 110034.

CHANGE OF NAME

I, Anju Bala C/o Anil Sharma R/O P-33 Krishan Vihar, Sultanpuri C-Block North West Delhi-110086 have changed my name to Anju to Anju Bala for all purposes.

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS

I, RAVI KUMAR TANWAR S/o RATTAN SINGH R/O WZ-1420, Nangal Raya New Delhi, South West Delhi, Delhi-110046 have changed the name of my minor son RUDRAKSH TANWAR aged 12 years and he shall hereafter be known as VEDANSH TANWAR.

I, hitherto known as RAJAN KUMAR alias RAJA BABU S/O SURENDRA SINGH, R/O WZ-856, Nangal Raya, South West Delhi, Delhi-110046, have changed my name and shall hereafter be known as RAJA BABU.

M.P. POWER GENERATING COMPANY LIMITED. NOTICE INVITING E-TENDER (Website : mppgcl.mp.gov.in). Table with columns: Tender Particulars/Tender Number, Estimated Cost (Rs.) including GST, Tender Cost & EMD in Rs., Last Date and Time for closing of Online submission.

DOON UNIVERSITY. E-TENDER NOTICE. Doon University, Dehradun invites separate e-tender for the Supply and Installation of Nanofiber Electrospinning Unit at Doon University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand.

PUBLIC NOTICE. This is to inform all concerned that SH. BHOOP SINGH son of Sh. Manuwa, R/o Village-Illahabas, Dadri, Sector-86, Phase-II, NOIDA, had executed a WILL on Dt. 13.02.2024 in respect of Residential Plot No.5U-12, Sector-86, Noida, Distt. Gautam Budh Nagar-U.P. area measuring 127.0 Sq.Mtrs. duly allotted by the Noida Authority against 5% Villager Quota against Khet No.193 & 310, Village-Suthiana, Noida, Distt. Gautam Budh Nagar-U.P., in our favour which is regd. Whereas Sh. Bhoop Singh died on 26.05.2024 and after his death we, Manvir S/o Sh. Ramu, R/o 158, Vill. Behloipur, Sector-65, Noida & Kirti Bhatti S/o Sh. Dinesh Bhatti, R/o 7118, Vill. Shahdara, Sector-141, NOIDA, want to get mutation of the said property on the basis of WILL in our favour.

Office of the Superintending Engineer 1st Circle, Public Works Department, Almora

Letter No. : 5833(I)/ Nivida-01/2024-25 Dated : 23/12/2024 NATIONAL COMPETITIVE BIDDING (E-Tendering) E-TENDER NOTICE

The Superintending Engineer, 1st Circle, PWD Almora invites tender through E-Tendering (Two Bid System) in anticipation of sanction on behalf of Honourable Governor of Uttarakhand for following works. All other information will be available from dated 27/12/2024 & onwards on website http://www.uktenders.gov.in

Table with columns: Sl. No., Name of Work, Cost of Tender Form, Earnest Money (Rupee in lakh), Validity of Tender, Time of Completion, Contractor's Category of Registration for tendering. Contains 3 items related to road improvement and Damarikaran work.

I, Magi Devi, Mother of No.15808086M L/NK Jagdish Prasad Saran, R/O-Vill- Charnisara, Post-Gudha Bhagwandas, Dist-Nagaur, Rajasthan, have changed my name from Magi Devi to Mangi Devi, vide affidavit dated 25/12/2024 before Notary Public Delhi.

I, Sunita, W/o- JC-472281L Sub Sunil Kumar Nunia, R/O- Vill+Po- Nunia Gothra, Teh-Chirawa, Dist-Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan-333026, have changed my name from Sunita to Sunita Devi, vide affidavit dated 25/12/2024 before Notary Public Delhi.

I, RAJINA, W/O. JAMIL AKHTAR, R/O, C- 584, JAHANGIRPURI DELHI-110033, HAVE CHANGED MY NAME TO RAJEENA KHATOON. RAJINA AND RAJEENA KHATOON IS THE SAME PERSON

I, Anju Bala C/o Anil Sharma R/O P-33 Krishan Vihar, Sultanpuri C-Block North West Delhi-110086 have changed my name to Anju to Anju Bala for all purposes.

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M.P. ROAD DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION LTD. (M.P. State Highway Authority) (Govt. of M.P. Undertaking). 45-A, Arera Hills, Bhopal-462011 (CIN : U45203MP2004SGC016758) Ph. No. : 0755-2597290, 2765205, Fax : 0755-2572643, Website : mprdc.gov.in

NOTICE INVITING TENDERS Madhya Pradesh Road Development Corporation Limited (MPRDC) Bhopal invites online tender for Upgradation of following roads in the state of Madhya Pradesh under proposed NDB Loan :-

Table with columns: Pkg. No., Name of Road, Length (in Km), Estimated Project Cost (in Rs. Cr.), Bid Security (in INR Cr.), Cost of Bid Document (in Rs.), Period of Completion (in Months). Contains 5 items for road upgradation.

The dates for purchase, submission, etc. are mentioned in the key dates. Tender forms can be purchased online only up to 15:30 hrs. on 04.02.2025 from website www.mptenders.gov.in. The Addendum/Corrigendum (if any) shall only be published on the website of www.mptenders.gov.in only.

Infrastructure projects, marketing campaigns drive tourism growth in 2024

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, undertook several key initiatives in 2024 to boost tourism in the country. These included infrastructure development projects under Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD schemes, promotion and marketing campaigns like 'Bharat Parv' and 'Dekho Apna Desh,' and participation in international travel fairs to showcase India's diverse tourism offerings to the global market.

■ Ministry of Tourism has sanctioned a total of 76 projects for an amount of Rs.5287.90 Crore under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, out of which 75 projects are physically complete.

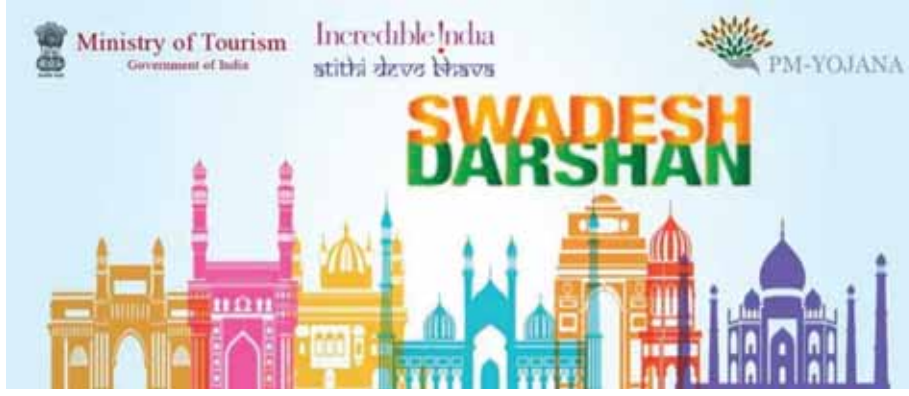
■ Ministry of Tourism has revamped its Swadesh Darshan Scheme as Swadesh Darshan 2.0 (SD2.0) with the objective to develop sustainable and responsible destinations following a tourist & destination centric approach. 34 projects have

been sanctioned for Rs.793.20 Crore under SD2.0.

■ Ministry of Tourism has sanctioned a total of 48 projects for an amount of Rs.1646.99 Crore under the PRASHAD Scheme, out of which 23 projects have been completed.

■ A total of 65 projects for an amount of Rs 937.56 Crore have been sanctioned under the Assistance to Central Agencies Scheme, out of which 38 projects have been physically completed.

■ Ministry of Tourism has formulated guidelines for 'Challenge Based Destination Development' as sub scheme of Swadesh Darshan 2.0 Scheme to enhance tourist experience across all points of the tourist value chain. Under this scheme, proposals have been invited under four thematic categories (i) Spiritual Tourism, (ii) Culture & Heritage, (iii) Vibrant Village Program, (iv) Ecotourism and Amrit Dharohar Sites. The Ministry of Tourism has selected 42 destinations under various



tourism themes for development under the scheme.

■ As a follow up to the Budget Announcements 2024-25, a total of 40 projects across 23 States have been sanctioned for an amount of Rs. 3295.76 Crore under the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI) - Development of Iconic Tourist Centres to Global Scale to infuse long term interest free loans for a period of 50 years to States for comprehensive development of iconic tourist centers in the country and branding & marketing them at global scale.

■ Ministry of Tourism organized 'Bharat Parv' event at the Red Fort grounds, Delhi, as part of the Republic Day Celebrations from 23rd to 31st January, 2024. Thematic Pavilions of States/UTs were setup to showcase diverse tourist attractions of the country. Cultural performances by various regional cultural associations were also organized. The

event promoted Vocal for Local, through the participation of local artisans from across the country by displaying and selling their products.

■ Launched 'Dekho Apna Desh People's Choice 2024' - a Nationwide poll to identify the most preferred tourist attractions under 5 categories. It is also an effort to identify attractions and destinations for development in mission mode, contributing to India's journey towards Viksit Bharat@2047.

■ Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with the Ministry of Education is organizing a nation-wide Dekho Apna Desh Schools Contest for Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV) and Navodaya Vidyalaya (NV) Schools. The students are expected to create physical brochure of their District's tourism attractions, destinations, experiences, and other offerings. The initiative aims to make the students aware about the tourism wonders and attractions

present in each district of the country.

■ Chalo India Global Diaspora Campaign was launched to enable Indian diaspora members become Incredible India ambassadors. The campaign has been implemented in the spirit of Jan Bhagidari for an Atulya and Viksit Bharat to encourage the Indian diaspora to invite their 5 non-Indian friends to travel to India every year. One lakh free e-visas for foreign tourists visiting India under 'Chalo India' campaign have been announced for the remaining part of the current Financial Year.

■ On the occasion of the 46th Session of the World Heritage Committee held at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi in July 2024, an 'Incredible India' exhibition was set up at Bharat Mandapam to highlight India's rich cultural heritage, age-old civilization, geographical diversity, hidden gems in tourism along with modern developments, for the delegates.

Government committed to improve quality spending in FY26: Finmin report amid legal tussle with SEBI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The government will continue its focus on improving quality spending, strengthening the social security net and bring down the fiscal deficit to 4.5 per cent of the GDP in FY26, a finance ministry document said.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is scheduled to present the Budget for 2025-26 in Parliament on February 1.

The Union government is committed to pursuing the glide path of fiscal consolidation as announced in the Budget for FY 2021-22 and to attain a level of fiscal deficit lower than 4.5 per cent of GDP by FY 2025-26, according to finance ministry statements on the half yearly review of the trends in receipts and expenditure and deviation in meeting the



obligations of the government under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, 2003. The statements were tabled in the Lok Sabha last week.

"The thrust will be on improving the quality of public spending, while at the same time, strengthening the social security net for the poor and needy. This

approach would help further strengthen the nation's macro-economic fundamentals and ensure overall financial stability," it said.

According to the statements, the Budget 2024-25 was presented in the backdrop of global uncertainties caused by the wars in Europe and the Middle East.

India's sound macro-economic fundamentals have cushioned the country from the vagaries afflicting the global economy.

"It has also helped the nation pursue growth with fiscal consolidation. As a result, India retains its pride of place as one of the fastest growing economies in the world. However, risks to growth still remain," it said.

Total expenditure was estimated at about Rs 48.21 lakh crore, of which, expenditure on revenue account and capital account were estimated at about Rs 37.09 lakh crore and Rs 11.11 lakh crore, respectively, as per the Budget Estimate (BE) of 2024-25.

As against total expenditure of Rs 48.21 lakh crore, the expenditure in first half of FY25 was Rs 21.11 lakh crore or about 43.8 per cent of BE. Taking into account the grant

for creation of capital assets, the effective capital expenditure (Capex) was projected at Rs 15.02 lakh crore.

Gross Tax Revenue (GTR) was estimated at about Rs 38.40 lakh crore with an implied tax-GDP ratio of 11.8 per cent.

Total non-debt receipt of the Centre was estimated at about Rs 32.07 lakh crore. It comprised tax revenue (net to Centre) of about Rs 25.83 lakh crore, non-tax revenue of about Rs 5.46 lakh crore, and miscellaneous capital receipts of Rs 0.78 lakh crore.

With above estimates of receipts and expenditure, the fiscal deficit was pegged at about Rs 16.13 lakh crore in BE 2024-25 or 4.9 per cent of GDP.

In H1 of FY25, the fiscal deficit is estimated at Rs 4.75 lakh crore, or about 29.4 per cent of BE.

BPCL picks Andhra Pradesh for India's last greenfield refinery project

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
State-owned Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) has picked Andhra Pradesh for setting up a new oil refinery-cum-petrochemical complex, which may be the last greenfield project in India which has detailed a very ambitious energy transition plan to net zero emissions.

In a stock exchange filing, BPCL said its board at a meeting on Tuesday "accorded its approval to commence pre project activities for setting up of a greenfield refinery cum petrochemical complex in east coast at Andhra Pradesh at an estimated cost of Rs 6,100 crore".

The pre-project activities include initial studies, land identification, and acquisition, preparation of detailed feasibility report,



environment impact assessment, basic design engineering package, and front-end engineering design, it said.

While the firm did not reveal the capacity or the timelines for completing the project, the refinery could be at least 9 million tonnes (180,000 barrels per day) capacity. BPCL is India's third largest oil refiner behind state-owned Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) and Reliance Industries Ltd. It currently owns refineries at Mumbai (12 million tonnes a year capacity), Kochi in Kerala (15.5 million tonnes) and Bina

in Madhya Pradesh (7.8 million tonnes). It had lost a fourth oil refinery to Oil India Ltd in the aborted privatisation plan.

BPCL had to give up its Numaligarh refinery in Assam to Oil India Ltd when the government was attempting to privatise the company. The transfer was to keep the Numaligarh unit within the public sector to honour the Assam Accord. But BPCL privatisation was aborted due to lack of interest by bidders.

The planned unit in Andhra Pradesh is being touted as India's last greenfield refinery project. BPCL is part of a consortium that is pursuing a 60 million tonnes a year refinery-cum-petrochemical complex on west coast in Maharashtra that was conceived six years back but is yet to get off the drawing board due to land acquisition woes.



Government extends duty-free import of yellow peas

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The government has extended the import of yellow peas without duty and MIP (minimum import price) till February next year.

However, the imports are subjected to registration under online Import Monitoring System, with immediate effect, for all import consignments where Bill of Lading (Shipped on Board) is issued on or before

February 28, 2025.

"Import of yellow peas...is free without the MIP condition and without port restriction, subject to registration under online import monitoring system, with immediate effect, for all import consignments where the bill of lading (shipped on board) is issued on or before February 28, 2025," the directorate general of foreign trade (DGFT) has said in a notification.

Cement industry looks for better growth in 2025

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The Indian cement industry, witnessing a consolidation and heightened rivalry between two corporate houses snapping smaller players, pins its hope on 2025 for an improvement in sales realisation, higher margins and acceleration in demand, expecting around 8 per cent sales growth helped by an increased government spendings on big-ticket infra projects.

Over 50 MTPA (million tonnes per annum) capacity are being acquired for USD 4.5 billion by two leading players - Aditya Birla group firm UltraTech Cement and billionaire Gautam Adani-led Ambuja Cements, besides organic expansion of the existing units as they have kept their war chest ready prowling for opportunities.

The industry faced challenges on numerous fronts in 2024, right from moderate capacity utilisation to lower sales



realisation, which impacted the topline of several makers, contraction of margins and slower volume growth.

However, 2024 would also be known for big-ticket acquisitions by UltraTech and Adani Cement to consolidate their positions and achieve their targeted growth ahead of time.

Adani Cements, a lateral entrant in the sector, completed the acquisition of Saurashtra-based Sanghi Industries, Penna Industries and recently announced to

acquire CK Birla group firm Orient Cement as part of its inorganic growth strategy.

Besides, it has also snapped up small players facilities as My Home and its subsidiary ACC has also acquired Asian Concretes and Cements.

These acquisitions and expansions helped Adani Cement to cross a 100 MTPA capacity with a pan-India presence in 2024 within two years of entry in the sector, with 70 MTPA acquired capacity from Swiss firm Holcim.

The Adani group has plans in the works to raise this to 140 MTPA by FY28, just a shade below market leader UltraTech's current capacity of 156.66 MTPA grey cement.

Aditya Birla group is also firing on all cylinders to maintain its lead, and has plans for 200 MTPA capacity by FY27. In 2024 it announced acquisition of South-based India Cements Ltd and is in the process of acquiring Kesoram Industries' Cement Business.

According to Deloitte India Partner Rakesh Surana, 2024 was a year of consolidation for the cement industry, marked by significant mergers and acquisitions.

"This trend has highlighted a structural shift in the sector, with the largest companies accounting for a substantial share of the overall capacity. Currently, the top five cement producers collectively command an estimated 60-65 per cent of the industry's capacity," he said.



Ola Electric expands pan-India network

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Ola Electric on Wednesday said it has expanded its network to 4,000 stores nationwide, a four-fold increase from its existing network. The company has opened over 3,200 new stores co-located with service facilities. The expansion spans beyond metros and Tier I and II cities into smaller towns

and tehsils, Ola Electric said in a statement.

"With our newly opened stores co-located with service centres, we have completely redefined EV purchase and ownership experience, setting new benchmarks with our #SavingsWalaScooter campaign," Ola Electric Chairman & Managing Director Bhavish Aggarwal said.

Swan ties up with AG&P for India FSRU

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Business tycoon Nikhil Merchant-run Swan Energy has lined up a floating LNG receipt and regasification unit for its proposed liquefied natural gas import project at Jafraabad in Gujarat, the firm said in a regulatory filing.

Swan signed a Heads of Agreement with Singapore's AG&P Terminals and Logistics to form joint venture companies to provide a floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) and a floating storage unit to operate the Jafraabad terminal as well as for supplying LNG.

A joint venture company (LNG supply company) will be incorporated "for the purpose of supplying LNG in India or any other jurisdiction", Swan said in the



filing, adding it will hold 51 per cent equity stake and the balance 49 per cent equity stake shall be held by AG&P LNG.

Another joint venture company (vessel company) will be incorporated "for the purpose of providing floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) and floating storage

unit (FSU) to operate Swan LNG Pvt Ltd's LNG Terminal. AG&P LNG will hold a 51 per cent equity stake and Swan will hold 49 per cent equity stake in the company, it said.

AG&P LNG will also collaborate with Swan for regasification of LNG into RLNG. "There is also an option with AG&P LNG to

have equity participation in Swan Energy's LNG Terminal," it said.

With domestic natural gas production meeting barely half of the country's needs, the fuel in its supercooled, liquid form is imported to meet feedstock demand for generating electricity, making fertiliser and CNG sales. The country has seven LNG import facilities -- 3 in Gujarat (Dabje, Hazira and Mundra), and one each in Maharashtra (Dabhol), Kerala (Kochi), Tamil Nadu (Ennore) and Odisha (Dhamra).

Swan said all the transactions with AG&P are subject to due diligence by both the parties; and the terms and conditions for the proposed deals will be decided post due diligence.

Swan in August announced plans to divest for USD 399 million its majority 51 per

cent stake in the 5 million tonnes per annum LNG FSRU, Vasant One, to Turkey's state-owned gas company Botas. The remaining 49 per cent stake is held by Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative (IFFCO) but it is not known if the fertiliser company plans to divest its share.

The FSRU, which was built by then-Hyundai Heavy Industries, was delivered to Swan four years ago and was originally destined for its Jafraabad import terminal. But project timelines were delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic that was followed by a typhoon.

The FSRU subsequently was leased by Swan subsidiary Triumph Offshore to Botas under a one-year bareboat charter with a reported day rate of USD 250,000.

GoMechanic eyes over 3-fold business growth by 2027

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Car services and repair platform GoMechanic expects over three-fold rise in net revenue to Rs 700 crore by 2027 and thereafter go for public listing, a top official of the company said.

GoMechanic Co-Founder and CEO Himanshu Arora told PTI that the company at present has around 3 per cent market share and aims to raise it to 10 per cent in the next three years.

The company is also looking to diversify offerings, foraying into the two-wheeler and electric vehicle services segment.

"We sit at about 3 per cent of the market share right now and to be servicing every 1 car out of ten would be around 10 per cent by 2027. By 2027, we expect our brand to generate approximately Rs 700 crore in revenue. We believe that an IPO is a natural next step for GoMechanic's growth story," Arora said.

The company at present provides services through 800 garages across 125 cities and plans to scale up to 2,500 garages across 500 cities by



2027.

GoMechanic was acquired by Servizy, a subsidiary of the Lifelong Group, in March 2023 after anomalies in its financial records were found under previous management and the firm was put on sale by the investors.

"It has been only about 20 months since we acquired the brand... The trajectory clearly indicates that an IPO is on our roadmap," Arora said.

GoMechanic posted a revenue of Rs 210 crore in the financial year 2023-24 and a revenue of Rs 85 crore in the April-June 2024 quarter.

"Our spares and accessories are also growing fast. We should be clocking about Rs 432 crore this financial year in gross merchandise value and roughly around Rs 200 crore in the net revenue," Arora said.

Anupati, Raju emerge winners at Junior National Equestrian Championship

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Young riders Anupati Navyashree Sai and Raju Singh emerged the best performers in the show jumping and dressage categories respectively on the concluding day of the first half of Junior National Equestrian Championships. In the young rider category, Anupati, who was astride Abra ka Dabra, secured 32.60 marks without conceding any penalty in the showjumping two-phase event on Tuesday. She finished ahead of Avik Bhatia, Geetika Tikshetty, and Monu Kumar to be adjudged the best in her event. In dressage freestyle, Raju, who rode Louk, did extremely well in his event, securing 65.18 marks. It was a very competitive event in which Javeer Verma, Geetika and Navyashree ran him close. "It was extremely satisfying to see in this junior championship the talent



India has. It gives EFI hope and confidence that the game will grow fast in the country. Almost all the categories saw very close competition. The margin that separated the winners and other participants was very thin," Equestrian Federation of India secretary general Javeer Singh said. "I am sure that the second half of the championship will also produce high-octane competitions that will conclude on December 29," he said. In the children dressage

category, Subh Chowdhri, astride Furstentanz, trumped the challenge of Pranav Deepak, Punnet Jakhar and Jaiwant Nawle while in the children show jumping event, Mogil Anbu pipped Divyaraj Singh Rathore, Sresh Raju Mantena and Era Shree Harsha to emerge winner. Adding to the accolades in the children I category, Javeer Singh Nagra was awarded the best rider title for his exceptional performances throughout the competition, cementing his place as one of the brightest young talents in Indian equestrian sports. Sahil, astride Candy, logged 93.5 points to emerge winner in the overall individual tent pegging event, finishing ahead of Mohammad Alhamad Chishty (80), Shahrulkh Khan (79) and Adeel Ahkter (76). The action will next resume on December 27 with junior (age group 14-18) and children II (age group 10-12) category events.

Mohun Bagan's set-piece proficiency gives them edge against Punjab FC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Armed with a strong all-around team most proficient at set-pieces, Mohun Bagan Super Giant will fancy their chances when they face Punjab FC in the Indian Super League here on Thursday. The Mariners have won both their previous ISL matches against Punjab FC. However, Punjab FC have already beaten two sides, Mumbai City FC and Odisha FC, who managed the double over them last season, showing their ability to bounce back. Mohun Bagan enter this match after an eight-game unbeaten run that was ended with a defeat to FC Goa in their last fixture. Head coach Jose Molina has never lost consecutive games in ISL history, and the Mariners themselves have not suffered back-to-back away defeats in a single season. Punjab FC, on the other hand, have lost their last two matches on the road, conceding six goals across these outings, as many as they conceded in their previous five games combined. However, their home record



has been solid, with four wins in five games, including a 2-0 victory against Mohammedan SC in their last home outing. Right now, Mohun Bagan lead the points table with 26 points from 12 games, whereas Punjab FC are positioned seventh, having garnered 18 points from 11 matches. Punjab FC have conceded only one goal in the opening 15 minutes of matches this season, the joint lowest in the league alongside Odisha FC. This defensive strength could give them an early foothold against the Mariners. Punjab FC's Nikhil Prabhu (33) and Tekcham Singh (28) rank first and second, respectively, in interceptions this season. Their defensive awareness will be key in countering Mohun Bagan's attacking threats. Mohun Bagan have scored six goals from corners this season, the most by any team in the ISL. Contrastingly, Punjab are the only side yet to score from a corner this campaign. Mohun Bagan's goal difference of +11 after 12 games is their best-ever in ISL history at this stage, underscoring their balanced performance across attack and defence.

PKL eliminators: UP Yoddhas to take on Jaipur Pink Panthers, Patna Pirates face U Mumba

PTI ■ PUNE
UP Yoddhas will play Jaipur Pink Panthers, while Patna Pirates will be up against U Mumbai in the eliminators of the Pro Kabaddi League here on Thursday. In the fray for the top prize are Haryana Steelers and UP Yoddhas, both of whom have never won the title, and along with them are three-time champions Patna Pirates, season 8 winners Dabang Delhi KC, season 1 and 9 title holders Jaipur Pink Panthers, and season 2 champions U Mumba, who sealed qualification for the playoffs with the last game of the league stage. The winners of the eliminators will take on Haryana Steelers and Dabang



Delhi KC in the semifinals scheduled for Friday. Table toppers Haryana Steelers, who are through to the semi-finals, are gunning for their first PKL title while Dabang Delhi KC have been one of the best teams this season and have stitched together a 15-match unbeaten streak, which helped them secure the second position on the points table. UP Yoddhas, who had to go back to the drawing board before the season began, have seen their young raiders and

the defence step up in style and U Mumba stormed into the PKL Season 11 playoffs with a superb win against the Bengal Warriorz in the final league stage game this season. Among the highlights for U Mumba this season has been that the young brigade have led from the front. Having finished sixth on the points table, Jaipur Pink Panthers are looking for their third title. And coach Sanjeev Baliyan believes that the mentality and preparations for the playoff week has to be different. "The playoff is a different kettle of fish and there are no second chances like during the league stage. And moreover, to win the PKL title again, the whole squad has to play well, and support Arjun Deshwal."

Former Chelsea player Oscar returns to Brazil's Sao Paulo from China

AP ■ SAO PAULO
Former Chelsea midfielder Oscar is returning to his Brazilian boyhood club Sao Paulo after 14 years, which included a long spell in Chinese soccer. Sao Paulo president Julio Casares posted photos Tuesday on his social media channels which showed him with the 33-year-old former Brazil international. Casares described the move as "a super transfer." Minutes later, Oscar thanked China's Shanghai Port, where he played for eight seasons, for his time at the Chinese Super League club. "Today I finish a cycle that marked my life forever," he said. "I leave with my heart full of gratitude and pride for everything we achieved



together." Oscar joined Sao Paulo on a free transfer. Neither the Brazilian club nor the player disclosed the duration of their deal, but local media reports said he signed a three-year contract. Oscar is returning to a club he sued to leave for another Brazilian team, Internacional, in 2010. In 2012, Oscar joined Chelsea and won one Europa League title and two Premier League trophies at the English club. Oscar joined Shanghai in the middle of Chelsea's 2016-17 season for a transfer fee reported to be \$73 million. He won three Super League titles in China and became a fan favorite in Asia.



Valencia hires Carlos Corberan as its new head coach

AP ■ VALENCIA
Relegation-threatened Valencia has hired West Bromwich Albion manager Carlos Corberan as its new head coach through June 2027. Valencia fired Rubén Baraja on Monday after another setback in La Liga left the Spanish club stuck in the relegation zone and sparked renewed protests against Singaporean owner Peter Lim. "Carlos Corberan has been appointed as coach of Valencia CF, signing a contract through to 2027," a statement on Valencia's website said early Wednesday. "A buy-out option in his contract with West Bromwich Albion was taken up to allow him to leave." No official figure was given but the compensation for the former Valencia youth player was reported to be in the region of \$3 million. The Spaniard led West Brom to its current seventh place in England's second-tier Championship. West Brom earlier said in a statement that the 41-year-old Corberan "is set to return to his homeland with the club's gratitude and best wishes following a two-year tenure at The Hawthorns." Chris Brunt, Damia Abella and Boaz Myhill "will oversee first-team duties until further notice."

NADA update on Hima Das suspension creates confusion

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Asian Games gold medallist sprinter Hima Das, who was exonerated for a 'whereabouts' failure by the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA), was handed a retrospective suspension by the same body in an unusual turn of events. The 16-month suspension period ran from July 22, 2023 to November 21, 2024 and the athlete is now free to take part in tournaments but what has created a flutter is that she had been competing in events as recently as in June this year. NADA has recently announced that she was suspended by its anti-doping panels for failing to provide her



whereabouts. Known as the 'Dhing Express', she was handed the suspension under a case resolution agreement as per the NADA website. She is currently training in Thiruvananthapuram. The timeline around her suspension has created confusion as the athlete has been competing since April this year, including

participating in the Indian Grand Prix meet in Bengaluru and the National Inter-State meet in Panchkula in June even as her suspension was till November 21, 2024. The most intriguing thing is that she ran four races in June. When PTI reached out to her after her training session on Wednesday, Hima declined to comment on the issue. An Athletics Federation of India (AFI) source also confirmed that her suspension got over in November. A 'case resolution agreement' is made between the anti-doping agency and the athlete when both parties consent, and the athlete agrees to accept the consequences imposed without pursuing further appeals.

Former Manchester City player Benjani Mwaruware challenges ruling in bid to lead Zimbabwe soccer federation

AP ■ HARARE
Former Manchester City forward Benjani Mwaruware on Tuesday challenged a ruling to block him from potentially becoming the new head of Zimbabwe's soccer federation. Benjani, who also played for Portsmouth, Sunderland and Blackburn in the Premier League, last week filed his nomination to become the next president of the Zimbabwe Football Association (ZIFA). But an ethics committee of the association on Monday didn't include the 46-year-old among those eligible to contest the January elections, without immediately giving a reason.



"Our client is aggrieved by your committee's decision and he intends to appeal ... Without any further delay," the player's lawyers wrote to ZIFA's interim boss Lincoln Mutasa. "We are instructed by our client to humbly request that you urgently provide us with full written reasons why your committee concluded that Mr. Benjani Mwaruware

fails to meet eligibility criteria stipulated in the ZIFA statutes." Zimbabwe has been under a FIFA-appointed normalization committee since July 2023 when soccer's governing body lifted the southern African country's 17-month international ban caused by government interference. A new executive will be elected in late January. Former Zimbabwe international Benjani still has a chance, however, through an appeals committee of the federation. Another prospective ZIFA president barred by the ethics committee is a controversial but popular local cleric, Walter Magaya.

Indian cricket in 2024: Painful trophy wait ends before rare loss at home triggers transition talk

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The monkey was finally off India's back in a roller-coaster 2024 when the financial giants of international cricket ended a 13-year wait for a world title, lost a rare Test series at home and dealt with transition triggered by both expected and unexpected retirements by the stalwarts of the game. There was plenty of action over the last 12 months that kept the loyal Indian fan interested. World Cup triumph; T20 farewell to Rohit and Kohli. The Indian cricket team and its unparalleled fan base were desperate for an ICC trophy after repeatedly faltering in the knock-out stages over the past decade, most recently in the ODI World Cup final at home last year. The trophy finally came home after Rohit Sharma and Co. Played a near perfect tournament to become the T20 World Cup champions in the

USA and the Caribbean. India's clarity of thought throughout the one-month long event was remarkable and with a little bit of luck on their side, especially in the final at Barbados, they were able to go the distance. On undercooked pitches in New York, they were pace heavy before unleashing their trump card Kuldeep Yadav from the Super 8 stage of the tournament. India picked as many as four spinners in the squad but played three in Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel and Kuldeep. With Jadeja not getting to do much with both bat and ball, Axar came of age in the competition producing match-winning performances with both bat and ball. The pace duo of Jasprit Bumrah and Arshdeep Singh also played their part to perfection collecting 15 and 17 wickets respectively. In the batting department, Rohit led from the front with a

fearless approach that demoralised opposition attacks. His approach was best summed up in the Super 8 game against Australia where he tore into the likes of Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins to make all the difference in the game. His opening partner Kohli was not able to make the contributions that were expected out of him but the superstar came up with an innings of immense substance when it mattered the most -- his not-so-fluent 76 of 59 balls kept India in the final after a poor start. The contributions from all-rounder Hardik Pandya, future captain Suryakumar Yadav and Rishabh Pant, playing his first international event following his comeback from a life-threatening car accident, were also noteworthy. A better script could not have been written for the likes of Rohit and Kohli, who got to say goodbye to the T20 format



with the coveted trophy in their hands. It was also a fitting farewell for head coach Rahul Dravid, whose tenure drew to a close. Change of guard in coaching: Surya's unexpected elevation With Rohit calling it a day, it was expected that Hardik will lead the T20 side into the transition phase, having captained the side in the former's absence. However, Dravid's successor Gautam Gambhir had a different line of thinking as he played a major hand in elevating India's best T20 batter Suryakumar to the leadership position ahead of the series in

Sri Lanka. To be fair to Suryakumar, the team has ticked all the boxes since he took over, also witnessing the rise of Tilak Verma and rebirth of the likes of Sanju Samson and Varun Chakaravathy. All three were simply sensational in India's recent T20 series in South Africa. Alongside Samson, Abhishek Sharma has also shown the talent and resolve at the top of the order and could serve India for long. India hit rock bottom against Kiwis While India moved on from the mighty duo of Rohit and Kohli in the shortest format rather quickly, the same is unlikely in the Test team. The chatter around the future of senior players in the Test team has gained momentum after India's first whitewash at home in a three-match series and more recently, the sudden retirement of premier off-spinner R Ashwin.

India's loss to New Zealand in their own backyard was easily one of the most embarrassing outcomes for the team in Test cricket over the past decade. Having slayed 'Bazball' earlier in the year against England, India blanked Bangladesh and were expected to hand out a similar treatment to the visiting Black Caps. However, in a stunning turn of events, the spirited Kiwis out-batted and out-bowled Rohit and Co. To script their biggest series wins overseas. The Indian batters' weakness against the turning ball was exposed threadbare and the duo of Ashwin and Jadeja, who run through sides for fun at home, were bettered by Mitchell Santner and Ajaz Patel. It was only after landing in Australia, Ashwin made up his mind on retirement but his underwhelming outing against New Zealand may have contributed to his big decision. With Ashwin gone and Mohammed Shami not

available, a Test transition is well underway Down Under. The outcome of the remaining two Tests will determine where the Indian batting stands. Jay Shah becomes youngest ICC chairman India is the engine of the global game and its influence on the sport increased further with the elevation of Jay Shah as ICC chairman, making him the fifth from the country at the helm of the governing body after Jagmohan Dalmiya, Sharad Pawar, N Srinivasan and Shashank Manohar. Shah took over in early December and has already made his presence felt by ending the deadlock over the hosting of the Champions Trophy in Pakistan by ensuring consensus for a reciprocal hybrid model in which India will not be required to travel across the border for any ICC event till 2028. Likewise, Pakistan too will get a neutral venue in case of an event in India.

Visitors have exploited Australia's 'brittle' top order: Shastri

PTI ■ MELBOURNE
Former coach Ravi Shastri has backed India to win the Boxing Day Test, saying the visitors have exploited Australia's "brittle" top order to have their "nose ahead" in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Shastri added that Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah is "almost single-handedly" responsible for the visitors keeping the series levelled at 1-1. "I think India would take this, the way the series is poised. Any overseas team being 1-1, especially with the games being in Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane, they would take this. "Going 1-1 into Boxing Day is the best case scenario. I would say India have their nose ahead," Shastri told news.Com.Au. Australia's top order comprising Usman Khawaja, Nathan McSweeney and Marnus Labuschagne have been unable to

score against Bumrah. It has forced them to hand a debut to teenage sensation Sam Konstas while dropping rookie opener Nathan McSweeney. "It's been pretty brittle. When you look at this Australian line-up, it's been a long time since I've seen an Australian line-up where the top order is that brittle. India have exploited that and continue to exploit it," Shastri said. All-rounder Mitchell Marsh has also largely struggled for runs. In the last year, Labuschagne, Marsh, Khawaja and Steve Smith all had average less than 30 in Test cricket. "India is 1-1 in the series and that man (Bumrah) has almost single-handedly got India into that position," Shastri said. "As far as Konstas goes, I think he's very refreshing. He's got flair, he's got flamboyance. But Test cricket is Test cricket. His technique will tighten up and he will be the future for Australia." Shastri feels McSweeney was



unfortunate to have been axed after just three Tests. "McSweeney was very unfortunate. He did the hard yards but he's a middle order batsman. I see him travelling to Sri Lanka when the Australian team go there and rebuild his career from there. "But I think it's a good move getting Konstas in because you need someone who can take the attack to the Indian team, because the punches were coming from nowhere." India have won the last two series in Australia and now have the opportunity to become only the third touring side to win three consecutive series Down Under, joining the West Indies (1984/85, 1988/89, 1992/93) and South Africa (2008/09, 2012/13, 2016/17). "Massive. No team has done that in a long time. Australia hammers sides when they come here. For India to pull off three on the trot will be something special. "But they'll have to play good cricket. I see Australia coming hard in this Test match, especially with the bowlers. It's the batting that'll be the challenge for Australia more than anything else." Shastri feels India has come to Australia with a strong intent to win. "India have come here to win, they haven't come here to fill in the numbers. Even when I was the coach, our mantra was to play extremely hard, fair and to win. "You have to think of a method to beat Australia and not just compete. You've got to plan properly, how to take your 20 wickets. India have done that and been very aggressive. "They've been in the face of Australia and give as good as they get. It's been entertaining and feisty stuff. The first day of the Boxing Day Test will determine which way the series will go," he added.

Cummins' message for Konstas: Have fun and don't overthink



PTI ■ MELBOURNE
Australia skipper Pat Cummins understands what a teenager goes through on a high-profile Test debut and knows what he needs to tell a young Sam Konstas: "Have fun and don't overthink." Konstas, 19, is all set to make his debut against India in the Boxing Day Test, starting Thursday. Konstas has created a lot of buzz in Australian domestic cricket and his Test debut at the expense of Nathan McSweeney has become quite an event. When the skipper was asked about his feelings during his Test debut at 18, Cummins spoke about an element of naivety that can stop a kid from overthinking about how big a deal it is. "I spent a bit of the time wondering why or how I was there, how it happened so quick. I just remember being really excited and I think it's similar to Sammy (Konstas) this week. "There's a level of naivety that you just want to go out and play like you do when you're a kid in the backyard," Cummins said during the pre-match press interaction. "You just want to take the game on, have fun and not overthink. So that's the message to Sam. That's definitely how I felt as an 18-year-old, I was just really excited," Cummins fondly recollected. Cummins shared with Konstas, how he, as a teenager, handled his debut back in 2011. "I was saying this to Sam the other day, I remember as an 18 year old I was thinking if I didn't have a great game it wasn't my fault, it was the selector's fault for picking me. "I was like, well they're the idiots that picked an 18 year old. You're so young starting out your career it's just its boxing day doesn't get any better than this so just enjoy the moment," he laughed. For Cummins, having 38-year-old opener Usman Khawaja, who is exactly double Konstas' age is a boon for the youngster as he will have calming influence at the other end even as youngsters with uncluttered mind always have an edge. "There's so much value in

having experience and you've seen everything before. But there's almost just as many positives in having that freedom and naivety just to go out and see the ball and hit the ball." Indians can throw some challenges at some point Even in a slump, Virat Kohli and Rishabh Pant are players whom this Australian team really respects. There are two Test matches and there could be a pushback round the corner. "I really hope not but you know they're good players so no doubt they'll throw some challenges at us at some point." Asked if his opposite number Rohit Sharma's poor form is an advantage, Cummins reminded Rahane's century as a stand-in skipper at Melbourne. "Look, hard to say. It was a good Test match here a few years ago. I think Rahane got 100 from memory. So yeah, it always seems like a boxing day every year is a cracking test match. Last year was a great Test match against Pakistan as well." The Indian team is in transition but Cummins wants to keep focus intact on his set of players. "Every team always has something they're kind of grappling with or trying to improve on. As I said previously, I'm really happy our team's travelling. "I thought after Perth we bounced back brilliantly in Adelaide and last week in Queensland. So for us it's about focusing on what we do well and getting excited for a great week." Head fit, Lyon is king at MCG, Boland is world class Head coach Andrew McDonald has already spoken about Travis Head being fit and the left-hander's extended net session was an indicator. Head had sustained a quadriceps niggle while batting in the second innings in Brisbane. "Trav is good to go. So he'll play. He just ticked off some final things today and yesterday. No stress, no kind of worries about injury with Trav. So he'll go into the game fully fit." With heat wave and forecast of 40 degree centigrade on Boxing Day, the obvious

question of extra spinner was asked. "It's just a really well balanced wicket here at the MCG. So yeah, wouldn't be surprised if there's a little bit on offer for spin. The pitch looks really good, quite consistent to what it has here for the last few years I think. A bit of grass coverage, feels nice and firm. "See how the heat changes it, I don't know really. We'll get to the ground tomorrow and kind of assess but yeah it looks like a good wicket."

Government of India

The entire nation is celebrating

Veer Baal Diwas

26 December 2024, Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi

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will

Interact with recipients of the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar

Address children from across the country

And

Launch the Suposhit Gram Panchayat Abhiyan

The top 1,000 Gram Panchayats will be awarded

<p>50% of the prize money will be given to Anganwadi workers/ helpers and Gram Panchayats</p>	<p>50% of the prize money will be spent on improving nutrition in Anganwadi centres</p>
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Watch the live broadcast on DD News from 12 PM onwards

Cristiano Ronaldo takes family to Lapland for Christmas vacation

AP ■ HELSINKI
Soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo said it was "just a little cold" as he posed bare-chested in the snow before taking an icy dip in a pool during a Christmas vacation in Finland's Lapland region. The 39-year-old Portuguese international traveled with partner Georgina Rodriguez and their children, who met Santa Claus in a 10-minute video posted online by Ronaldo on Tuesday. The former Real Madrid and Manchester United great appeared to decline to ski with his family. He wished his followers — including 645 million on Instagram — a "Merry Christmas" in Spanish.

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