

6 WORLD Bangladesh wants Hasina back, sends note verbale to India Trump threatens to try take back Panama Canal 8 NATION NC leader holds protests demanding rationalisation of reservation in J&K 'Situation in Bangladesh a matter of concern, govt closely monitoring it'

GOVT COMMITTED TO UPLIFTING LIVING STANDARDS AND EMPOWERING EVERY CITIZEN: CMO

'Development' campaign benefits 32 lakh people, claims CM

DIBRUGARH, Dec 23: Nearly 32 lakh people received benefits under various schemes during a special initiative by the Assam government which concluded on Monday, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said. The '12 Days of Development' campaign reached out to both the poor and middle-class sections of the state, he added. "We had started this campaign in Guwahati, and after 12 days, we are concluding it in Dibrugarh today," Sarma told reporters after attending a meeting. During the campaign, 20 lakh new ration cards were distributed, assistance was provided to six lakh flood-hit people, and meritorious students received scooters, bicycles, and other incentives under various schemes, the CM said. "About 30-32 lakh people have received benefits under government schemes during this period. We are confident that these schemes will help the poor and middle-class sections of the population," Sarma said. The chief minister's office (CMO), in a post on X, mentioned that grants and facilities under different departments were distributed by Sarma during the day. "On the final day of the #12DaysOfDevelopment campaign, HCM Dr. @himantabiswa attended an event at Mancotta Ground, Dibrugarh, to distribute benefits under various



government schemes," the post read. Grants and benefits under initiatives by the education, finance, revenue, disaster management, and industries and commerce departments were distributed. These included 2,593 students receiving

22 B'deshi infiltrators held, pushed back: Himanta

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: Twenty two Bangladeshis, including five children have been apprehended by Assam Police in two different operations for entering Indian territory illegally, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Monday. Sixteen Bangladeshis were apprehended in inter-state movement after arriving at Guwahati railway station from Bengaluru, they were moving towards South Salmara district, he said. The nationality of the apprehended was established to be Bangladeshis on investigation, he added. "The apprehended include seven male, four female, and five children and these people are being pushed back across the border," he said. "Inter-state movement of infiltrators busted; 16 Bangladeshis nabbed. In an excellent op carried out by @SSalmaraPolice, 16 illegal Bangladeshis who travelled from Bengaluru to Guwahati Railway Station and moved towards



South Salmara Mankachar dist border, where they were held. "No place for illegal infiltration in Assam, carrying out their strict monitoring against infiltration attempts. @assampolice apprehended 6 Bangladeshis nationals and pushed them across the border," the chief minister posted on X. Earlier in the day, six Bangladeshis have been apprehended by the Assam Police for entering the Indian territory illegally and handed over to the authorities of the neighbouring country, Sarma said. He, however, did not mention the sector of the India-Bangladesh

'Inflation rising faster than speed of bullet train'



NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The Congress on Monday took a swipe at the Modi government over "rising" prices of food items, saying the bullet train announced by it has not arrived but the inflation, which is spiralling upwards faster than the speed of a bullet train, has broken the back of the common person. Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh said the people want answers not more "jumlaabaazi (rhetoric)". He shared a media report on X which claimed that the rates of daily essential goods are increasing day by day and in the last one year, the prices of flour, oil, spices, and dry fruits have increased by one and a half to two times. "The bullet train announced by the Modi government has not arrived, but the inflation, which is spiralling upwards faster than the speed of a bullet train, has broken

the back of the common person," Ramesh said in his post in Hindi on X. "Inflation has doubled and tripled in the last ten and a half years. Vegetables, flour, oil, spices, and everyday items are becoming out of the reach of the common person. Everything is getting costlier under the rule of the Modi government which came to power by raising the slogan of 'Bahut hui mehngaai ki maar'," he said. "From potatoes to tomatoes, milk, spices and even cooking oil have now become like a dream for the common person. Are these the same 'achche din' that were promised? No more jumlaabaazi! The public wants answers," Ramesh said. The Congress has been attacking the government over its handling of the economy and raising concerns over "increasing" unemployment and price rise. (PTI)

HT BRIEFS

One held

GUWAHATI: One person was arrested with hornbill beaks worth ₹ 4 lakh at Rangapar north station in Assam's Sonitpur, officials said on Monday. The arrest and recovery were made during checking in the Guwahati-Murkongselek Lachit Express on Sunday by Railway Protection Force personnel, a Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) release said. "The seized items were being transported illegally and valued at around ₹ 4 lakh in the grey market," it said.

Quiz competition

GUWAHATI: The Assam State Museum, under the Directorate of Archaeology and the Department of Indigenous and Tribal Faith and Culture, will host a quiz competition on January 1, 2025, Chief Minister's Office (CMO) announced on Monday. The event, themed around "Heritage, Culture, and Museums," invites students from middle school to college levels across Assam to test their knowledge.

Govt clarification

GUWAHATI: The Assam Government has issued an important clarification regarding the Orunodoi 3.0 Scheme, highlighting that beneficiaries do not require an income certificate to apply for this welfare initiative, Chief Minister's Office (CMO) announced on Monday. Taking to the micro-blogging site X, the CMO stated, "There is no requirement of Income Certificate for beneficiaries to apply for Orunodoi 3.0."

Record govt jobs provided in one and a half years: PM Modi

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said his government has provided nearly 10 lakh permanent government jobs to youths in the last one or one and a half years which, he asserted, is a record. Addressing recruits at a Rozgar Mela through a virtual event, where over 71,000 people were given appointment letters, he said never before in the tenure of any previous government were jobs provided in such a "mission mode". The young population is at the centre of his government's policies and programmes, he said, adding honesty and transparency have driven the recruitment process. The Prime Minister said 'Rozgar Melas' (recruitment drives) are empowering the youth and unlocking their potential. "The youth of India today is full of new confidence, succeeding in every sector." Noting that a large number of recruits are women, Modi said it is the endeavour of his government that they become self-dependent in every field. The government's decision to grant 26-week maternity leave to women has helped them a lot in their careers, he said and underscored that women are the majority owners of the house constructed

under the 'PM Awas Yojana'. Women-led development is taking place in the country, he said. Modi said making maximum use of the Indian youths' abilities and talent is a priority of his government, and that they are at the centre of a host of schemes, be it start-up India, digital India or reforms in space and defence sectors. The National Education Policy has taken steps for the development of youngsters, he said, highlighting its emphasis on the use of mother tongues. His government has ensured that language is not a barrier by ensuring that youngsters can take recruitment exams in 13 Indian languages, he added. Noting that former Prime Minister Charan Singh, whose birth anniversary is being observed on Monday, stood for the development of rural India and for the country's progress, Modi said his government has followed this by creating job and self-employment opportunities in villages. It was his government's good fortune to bestow Bharat Ratna on Singh earlier this year, he said. Speaking at the event, Union minister Jitendra Singh said more than 29 per cent of the 71,000 recruited came from the Other Backward Classes category. The backward (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'No lapse' on our part during MPs scuffle: CISF

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The CISF on Monday said there was "no lapse" on its part when asked about the scuffle that took place among MPs in Parliament complex during the recently concluded Winter Session and added it will choose to "keep quiet" when allegations are levelled by lawmakers. The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) is tasked to guard the Parliament House Complex. "There was no lapse (on part of the force)...by lapse if you mean some weapons were allowed inside, then I can tell you that no weapon was allowed..." CISF Deputy Inspector General (operations) Shrikant Kishore told the press during a conference here. He said the force will choose to "keep quiet when the honourable members (MPs) make allegations." The officer was asked about the counter-allegations made by the parliamentarians on who pushed whom. He added the CISF was not conducting any inquiry into the incident that took place at the 'Makar Dwar' of the Parliament House Complex on December 19. BJP MPs Pratap Chandra Sarangi and Mukesh Rajput got injured during the scuffle between the opposition and ruling BJP MPs on the premises of Parliament. Delhi Police had filed an FIR against the leader of the opposition (LoP) and Congress MP Rahul Gandhi following BJP's complaint against him. Kishore said MPs who enter Parliament (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Bills on simultaneous polls referred to joint parliamentary panel

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The two bills that lay down the legal framework to hold simultaneous polls in the country are the latest in the series of draft laws to be referred to a joint committee of Parliament since 2015. The two bills referred together to the joint panel are the 12th since 2015 to be sent to a committee of the two Houses. With the opposition in Lok Sabha dubbing the measures as an attack on federalism, the government referred them to a joint committee of Parliament for detailed scrutiny and wider consultations. The Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill lays down the mechanism to hold Lok Sabha and assembly polls together. Since it seeks to amend the Constitution, it will require the support of two-thirds of the members present and voting. The Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill seeks to align the terms of the legislative assemblies of Delhi, Puducherry, and Jammu and Kashmir with other assemblies. The three UTs have legislative assemblies. It is an "ordinary" bill requiring a simple majority for passage. Prior to the 'one nation, one election' bills, the Waqf (Amendment) Bill was the last one to be referred to a joint committee for greater consultation. In case one House decides to refer a Bill to (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Veteran filmmaker Shyam Benegal dies at 90

MUMBAI, Dec 23: Veteran filmmaker Shyam Benegal, who heralded the Indian parallel cinema movement in the 1970s and 1980s with films such as "Ankur", "Nishant" and "Manthan", died on Monday, his daughter Pia said. He was 90. The filmmaker passed away at Mumbai's Wockhardt Hospital due to chronic kidney disease, Pia Benegal told PTI. "He passed away at 6.38 pm at Wockhardt Hospital Mumbai Central. He had been suffering from chronic kidney disease for several years but it had gotten very bad. That's the reason for his death," she said. Wockhardt Hospital sources said Benegal had been admitted to the ICU. In his prolific career, Benegal made films on diverse issues, documentaries and television serials, including "Bharat Ek Khoj" and "Samvidhaan". He celebrated his 90th birthday just 10 days ago on December 14. The director told PTI on the occasion that he had to frequently visit the hospital and was on dialysis. Benegal is survived by his wife Nira Benegal and daughter. His films include "Bhumika", "Junoon", "Mandi", "Suraj Ka Satvaan Ghoda", "Mammo", and "Sardari Begum", most counted as classics in Hindi cinema. The director's most recent work was the 2023 biographical "Mujib: The Making of a Nation". (PTI)

CM to toughen up against govt employees benefiting from Ouronodoi scheme

HT Correspondent DIBRUGARH, Dec 23: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday reiterated his commitment to take stricter actions against government employees benefiting from the Ouronodoi scheme. "We have noticed that in Ouronodoi 2.0, 684 government employees have taken benefits. We have already identified them and very soon we will take strict action against them," Sarma said while addressing a press conference in the CM secretariat in Dibrugarh. CM Sarma further announced that the Assam International Skill Centre will be set up in the state for training purposes of youths who went to other states for training. Talking to the media, the chief minister said, "We have taken a decision in today's Cabinet that we will open an Assam International Skill centre in the state where

youths of the state can take training. In Guwahati, we will set the main centre and in other areas, small centres will be opened." "We have seen that many youths of Assam go to other states for imparting training on skill development. After its opening, the youths can take the training in their own districts," he added. Sarma further said, "From January 2025, the Gaon Burahs of forest village will get a monthly stipend of Rs 9000. We have taken this decision because they are serving the society without any stipend." Sarma also mentioned about the upcoming Book fair to be organised in Guwahati. "The year 2025 will be observed as Book year. We will organise the Guwahati Book fair in Khanapara and every minister will participate in the fair and purchase books from the fair," he stated.

Passing out parade ceremony of 1946 constables of Manipur Police Capable and responsive police forces need of the hour: Guv Acharya

HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Dec 23: The Governor of Assam and Manipur, Lakshman Prasad Acharya said that the security challenges in the Northeast go much beyond the threat emanating from conventional borders and conventional crimes. Attending the passing out parade ceremony of 1946 newly recruited constables of Manipur Police at Lachit Barphukan Police Academy, Dergaon on Monday, Acharya said the contemporary problems demand capable and responsive police forces to ensure stability and peace, for the region to tread the path of progress and prosperity. "The 21st Century has ushered in its own set of challenges. Though turbulence and uncertainty have manifested all along the history of mankind, this century has witnessed challenges emanating from digital proliferation," Acharya said. He, thereby, asked the police forces to equip themselves with the art of policing required to deal with the challenges of the 21st century.



The intensive 44-week basic training course for 1,984 Manipur Police recruits commenced at the Assam Police Academy here in January. Acharya congratulated the newly trained constables, stating, "Today marks a momentous occasion in your lives. You have successfully

completed your rigorous training with hard work, dedication, and courage." Speaking on the institution where they received training, the Governor said that the legacy of Lachit Barphukan, the great Ahom commander, known for his extraordinary leadership and strategic prowess during the historic Battle of Saraighat in 1671, always stands as a testament to the heroics and patriotism of the Ahom commander. Urging them to emulate the heroics of Veer Lachit, Acharya said, "The spirit to serve the nation will help the police constables serve the people." He also extended his gratitude to the trainers and officers of the academy for their exceptional efforts in shaping the constables into strong and capable protectors. "Your service forms the foundation of our nation's security, peace, and prosperity. Your uniform symbolises your conduct, duty, and integrity. As protectors of (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Chhattisgarh receives investment proposals of ₹ 15,000 cr

Highest investment proposal of ₹ 11,500 crore came from Renew Power Limited

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Chhattisgarh has attracted investment proposals worth ₹ 15,184 crore by top companies in various sectors, including semiconductor, EV and renewable energy, an official statement said on Monday.

At the investors connect meet here, key industrialists from both India and abroad engaged in detailed discussion with Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai to explore investment opportunities in the state.

The discussions were focused on exploring potential investments that will boost the state's industrial growth and create thousands of employment opportunities, the statement from the state government said.

Investors from various sectors showed keen interest in setting up business in the state.

The highest investment proposal of ₹ 11,500 crore came from Renew Power Limited. Company's Chairman and CEO Sumant Sinha said the proposal was for setting up pump storage and green hydrogen projects in the state.

Other investment proposals include ₹ 1,650 crore by TWI group for setting up manufacturing unit for EV kits for bikes, logistics centre of excellence and bamboo park; ₹ 1,134 crore from Polymatech Electronics Limited MD Ishwar Nandan in the semiconductor sector. Teperformance COO Ashish



Johri shared an investment plan to set up a BPO centre by investing ₹ 300 crore.

Varun Beverages CEO Kamlesh Jain expressed his desire to invest ₹ 250 crore in PepsiCo bottling plant, Praveen Gupta of Paramount Communications promised an investment of ₹ 250 crore and ensuring about 1,000 jobs and Micromax's Rajesh Agarwal proposed an investment of Rs 100 crore in solar cell manufacturing unit.

"The Industry Department has streamlined subsidy issuance with a maximum of three levels and a time limit of seven days. This ensures a quick and efficient approval system," the chief minister said while highlighting the state's efforts to simplify and expedite the investment process.

He assured complete support to investors and also emphasised the state's commitment to providing timely approvals and facilitating ease of doing business.

To encourage industrial development, the state government is offering a 30 per cent subsidy for private industrial parks under the 'minimum government' concept. Moreover, industries seeking to establish operations will receive ready and developed plots within 60 days of application.

The state has signed an MoU with IIM Raipur, under which IIM graduates will be appointed as investment managers through the Chief Minister's Industrial Internship programme. These managers will provide remote assistance to industrialists, helping them simplify processes and offer tailored

support.

Addressing the gathering, Chhattisgarh Industry Secretary Rajat Kumar said Chhattisgarh is not just about mines and minerals, it is rapidly evolving into a significant hub for electric vehicle (EV) manufacturing.

He said that the state is diversifying its industrial base and has become a key player in the production of a wide range of products, from pharmaceuticals and train shells to televisions and lighting equipment.

"In an effort to further boost economic growth and attract investments, the Chhattisgarh government is actively introducing reforms in its policies. These reforms are designed to create a more favourable business environment, with incentives aimed at both domestic and international investors," Kumar said.

The initiative is expected to significantly contribute to the national goals of 'Make in India' and 'Digital India,' marking a key step in Chhattisgarh's economic development and industrialization.

Elaborating further on the initiatives taken by the state government, the chief minister said that the Industry Department has streamlined the subsidy issuance process with a maximum of three levels and a time limit of seven days, ensuring a fast and efficient approval system. (PTI)

Rupee falls 7 paise to close at 85.11 against US dollar

MUMBAI, Dec 23: The rupee depreciated 7 paise and settled for the day at 85.11 against the US dollar on Monday, amid continued strength in the dollar index bolstered by the Fed's policy stance.

According to forex traders, notwithstanding a positive trend in domestic equities, the rupee stayed weak due to significant dollar demand. Moreover, higher crude oil prices triggered by volatile geopolitical situation also dented sentiments.

They said the dollar index is expected to remain elevated as the US Federal Reserve indicated slower-than-expected rate cut in 2025.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 85.02 and touched the lowest level of 85.13 and settled for the day at 85.11 against the greenback, registering a loss of 7 paise over its previous close.

On Friday, the rupee saw some recovery from its all-time low level and settled 9 paise higher at 85.04 against the US dollar.

Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst - Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities, said the rupee traded weak amid continued strength in the dollar index bolstered by the Fed's policy stance.

"With the holiday season approaching, market participation is expected to thin out, potentially reducing volatility in the near-term. The rupee's trading range is projected between 84.85 and 85.25, as global cues and year-end market dynamics influence the sentiment," he said.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies,

was trading higher by 0.48 per cent at 108.13.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, fell 0.37 per cent to USD 72.67 per barrel in futures trade.

Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said the rupee fell amid strong demand for the American currency. Also, the US dollar gained on weakness in the Chinese yuan.

A rise in crude oil prices also pressured the rupee, though it was cushioned by positive domestic equities.

"FI outflows may also weigh on the rupee. However, a recovery in the domestic markets may support the rupee at lower levels. Traders may take cues from CB consumer confidence data from the US. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of 84.90 to 85.15," Choudhary added.

In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex closed higher by 498.58 points, or 0.64 per cent, at 78,540.17 points, while Nifty jumped 165.95 points, or 0.70 per cent to close at 23,753.45 points. Both the indices had ended sharply lower in the previous session on Friday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Monday, as they offloaded shares worth ₹ 168.71 crore, according to exchange data.

The latest RBI data showed India's forex reserves dropped by USD 1.988 billion to USD 652.869 billion for the week ended December 13. In the preceding week, the overall reserves had dropped by USD 3.235 billion to USD 654.857 billion. (PTI)

Gold snaps 3-day losing run, climbs ₹ 570 to ₹ 78,700 per 10 gm

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Gold prices recovered ₹ 570 to ₹ 78,700 per 10 grams in the national capital on Monday amid value buying by stockists and investors following a firm global trend, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

The precious metal ended at ₹ 78,130 per 10 grams on Friday.

Silver surged ₹ 1,850 to reclaim the ₹ 90,000 per kg-mark on increased offtake by industrial units and coin makers. The white metal finished at ₹ 88,150 per kg in the previous trading session.

The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity also jumped ₹ 570 to ₹ 78,300 per 10 grams on Monday. It closed at ₹ 77,730 per 10 grams in the previous session on Friday.

Value buying by stockists and jewellers for the ongoing wedding season supported the uptrend in both gold and silver prices, traders said.

In futures trade on the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX) on Monday, gold contracts for February delivery slipped ₹ 48, or 0.06 per cent, to ₹ 76,372 per 10 grams.

However, silver contracts for March delivery climbed ₹ 637, or 0.72 per cent, to ₹ 89,029 per kg on the commodities exchange.

Comex gold futures fell USD

6.70 per ounce, or 0.25 per cent, to USD 2,638.40 per ounce in the overseas markets.

"Gold and silver prices recovered from one-month and three-and-a-half month lows in a highly volatile session. The dollar index and the bond yields showed profit taking which supported precious metal," Rahul Kalantri, VP Commodities, Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

However, Comex silver futures in the Asian trading session traded 0.72 per cent higher at USD 30.18 per ounce.

On the macro front, US CB consumer confidence data will be released later on Monday which will provide more impetus on the trajectory of the bullion prices, said HDFC Securities' Senior Analyst of Commodities, Saumil Gandhi.

According to Praveen Singh, Associate VP of Fundamental Currencies and Commodities, Mirae Asset Sharekhan, gold is expected to trade with a slightly positive bias in very short term.

However, stellar US third quarter GDP growth rate and retail sales (November) data and the US Federal Reserve's hawkish shift will cap the upside. ETF flows are not much encouraging either, Singh added. (PTI)

Shreyas Media secures exclusive advertising rights for Maha Kumbh Mela

HYDERABAD, Dec 23: Shreyas Media, a division of Aadhyaasree Infotainment, on Monday announced that it bagged exclusive advertising rights for Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, scheduled to be held from January 13 to February 26, next year at Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh.

A press release from the city-based firm said it also secured rights for multiple other activities, including vending zones, an amusement zone and a food court at the world's largest spiritual congregation.

Indian companies are set to spend ₹ 3,000 crore on branding and marketing at the 45-day Maha Kumbh as brands see a massive consumption opportunity in the mega event held every 12 years, it said. Organised by the Uttar Pradesh government, Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 is expected to attract over 500 million devotees from around the world. Spread across a sprawling 4,000-hectare area, this year's mega event will be the grandest Kumbh Mela in history, the release further said.

Srinivas Rao, founder and chairman, Shreyas Group, said, "The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 is a phenomenon that unites spirituality and commerce".

HDFC Bank carries out first gold forward deal from GIFT City

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: With a deal executed by HDFC BANK GIFT City IBU in collaboration with Hindustan Platinum Pvt. Ltd., HDFC Bank has now become the first domestic bank to execute a gold forward deal from GIFT City, an official statement claimed.

Regulators have enabled on-shore entities with gold price exposure to hedge their risk through GIFT City.

The Bank's IBU in GIFT City serves as a trading and clearing member on the Indian International Bullion Exchange (IIBX). Speaking on the occasion, group head of the treasury, HDFC Bank, Arup Rakshit said, "We are delighted to announce the successful execution of the first gold forward deal from GIFT City. This achievement underscores our commitment to leveraging the opportunities offered by GIFT City to deliver innovative and efficient financial solutions".

He further said that, HDFC Bank will endeavour to provide tailored hedging solutions to the gems and jewellery sector, as well as various industrial sectors, to effectively manage their risks.

Markets stage sharp recovery after five days of fall; Sensex climbs 500 points

MUMBAI, Dec 23: Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty rebounded sharply on Monday after five days of steep decline amid value buying at lower levels and a supportive trend in global markets.

Besides, bargain hunting in blue chip stocks like ITC, HDFC Bank and Reliance Industries added to the optimism in the equity market, traders said.

The 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex jumped 498.58 points or 0.64 per cent to settle at 78,540.17. During the day, it soared 876.53 points or 1.12 per cent to 78,918.12.

The NSE Nifty surged 165.95 points or 0.70 per cent to 23,753.45.

"The Indian market demonstrated optimism following the recent sell-off.

The lower-than-expected US PCE print bolstered investor sentiment in interest rate-sensitive sectors. Broad-based buying was observed, with the metals sector notably benefiting from the anticipated increase in steel import taxes.

"Despite the positive market sentiment, the short-term outlook is expected to remain sideways due to a lack of new catalysts and the impact of the festive season and holidays," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

From the 30 blue-chip stocks, ITC, Tech Mahindra, HDFC Bank, Reliance Industries, IndusInd Bank, Titan, State Bank of India and ICICI Bank were the biggest gainers.

New entrant Zomato, Maruti, Nestle, HCL Tech, Bajaj Finserv and Tata Motors were among the laggards.

The BSE midcap gauge climbed 0.10 per cent, while smallcap index declined 0.60 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, realty jumped 1.39 per cent, bankex (1

per cent), metal (0.84 per cent), oil & gas (0.83 per cent), FMCG (0.75 per cent), energy (0.67 per cent) and services (0.64 per cent).

In contrast, consumer discretionary, industrials, telecommunication, and auto were the laggards.

"Indian equity markets rebounded on Monday, snapping a five-day losing streak... This recovery was driven by gains in financial and IT sectors, with HDFC Bank shares rising nearly 2 per cent. The positive sentiment was influenced by softer US inflation data, which buoyed regional markets.

"Investors are now focusing on the Reserve Bank of India's forthcoming monetary policy and the Union Budget 2025, anticipating policy measures that could further support economic growth and market stability. Over the next few days, trading volumes are expected to be thin due to this being a holiday-shortened week," Vikram Kasat, Head - Advisory, PL Capital - Prabhudas Lilladher, said.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, and Hong Kong settled in the positive territory while Shanghai ended lower.

European markets were trading mostly lower. Wall Street ended higher on Friday.

In the past five sessions last week, the BSE benchmark tanked 4,091.53 points or 4.98 per cent, and the Nifty slumped 1,180.8 points or 4.76 per cent.

Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹ 3,597.82 crore on Friday, according to exchange data.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.44 per cent to USD 73.26 a barrel.

The 30-share BSE benchmark tumbled 1,176.46 points or 1.49 per cent to settle at 78,041.59 on Friday. The Nifty tanked 364.20 points or 1.52 per cent to 23,587.50. (PTI)

More planes, flights, airports to brighten Indian aviation in 2025

NEW DELHI/MUMBAI, Dec 23: The trails of mega-mergers, tailwinds of expanding fleets, flights and airports will dot the fast-growing Indian aviation firmament in 2025, though the dark clouds of supply chain woes will persist longer.

Also, new airline takeoffs, the future trajectory of revised norms to tackle pilot fatigue and efforts to reduce carbon emissions will be on the radar.

And in 2024, two airlines flew into the sunset, one airline is on a liquidation taxiway, aircraft orders climbed, single-day domestic air passenger traffic soared past record 5 lakh at least twice, and airfare movements continued to raise concerns. Not to leave out 999 hoax bomb calls received by airlines till November 14 this year.

The aviation sector had its share of accidents in the form of a few trainer aircraft crashes and a roof collapse incident at Terminal 1 of the Delhi airport that killed one person.

For the "fascinating" Indian market, where the domestic air traffic is projected to jump to 164-170 million this fiscal ending March 2025, the larger long-term focus will be on increasing wide-body aircraft, providing more direct overseas flight connectivity and making the country a global aviation hub.

In the words of Akasa Air's chief Vinay Dube, prospects are exceptional for the Indian aviation market, and IATA chief Willie Walsh is of the view that there is a massive opportunity for Indian airlines.

The fleet of Indian carriers is more than 800 planes, including over 60 wide-body aircraft, and there are 157 airports. (PTI)

West Bengal's revenue expenditure outpaces capital spending in H1 FY25: Report

KOLKATA, Dec 23: West Bengal's fiscal performance in the first half of the 2024-25 fiscal reflects a growing imbalance between revenue and capital expenditure, aligning with broader trends observed across major Indian states, according to rating agency CareEdge. While the state recorded a 13.5-per cent year-on-year increase in revenue expenditure, its capital expenditure grew by only 7.7 per cent, significantly falling short of its budgeted targets, the agency's latest report on state and central finances said. Amit Mitra, principal chief advisor to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and the state's finance department, had recently said Bengal's capital spending had increased from ₹ 2,226 crore in 2010-11 to a budgeted amount of ₹ 35,865.55 crore in 2024-25.

"Revenue expenditure of states remained strong in H1 FY25. In aggregate, the top 20 states in our sample utilised 41.5 per cent of their budgeted revenue expenditure in H1 FY25, slightly higher than the 40 per cent utilisation in H1 FY24," the CareEdge report said. It noted that the possible reasons for such slippages could include the implementation of electoral promises, including measures like freebies, income assistance and loan waivers.

West Bengal's fiscal deficit stood at 3.7 per cent of its Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) in the first half (H1) of FY25, exceeding the 15th Finance Commission's recommended ceiling of 3 per cent, it

showed. This places the state in the higher fiscal deficit bracket among the country's top 20 states.

While the aggregate fiscal deficit for these states averaged 2.9 per cent of GSDP, West Bengal's figure underscores its ongoing fiscal challenges, driven by elevated revenue spending and slower-than-expected capital expenditure growth during the period, the agency said.

The analysis of state finances for the first half of FY25 revealed a mixed performance among the 20 major states, representing 93 per cent of the country's GDP. While revenue expenditure showed robust growth, capital expenditure (capex) remained sluggish, raising concerns over infrastructure development and long-term economic growth, the report said.

On the central finances front, during the first seven months of FY25, the Centre's fiscal deficit was recorded at ₹ 7.5 trillion (46.5 per cent of the budget estimate), it noted. On the receipts side, tax collections remained largely steady. However, on the expenditure side, the capex scenario was sluggish.

"As highlighted earlier, the general elections during the first quarter weighed on the overall capex during H1. Although we expect capex to pick up in the remainder of the fiscal year, the ratio of capital expenditure to revenue expenditure is expected to slightly trail below the budgeted level for FY25," the report added. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1..

22 B'deshi infiltrators

1,885 km-long India-Bangladesh border in the northeast region since the disturbances began in the neighbouring country. The Assam Police are also maintaining a high alert along the international border to ensure that no person can enter the state illegally, Director General of Police G P Singh had earlier said. (PTI)

Record govt jobs provided

classes recruitment has seen a 27 per cent rise under the Modi government compared to the UPA's 10 years in power, he said. The Schedules Castes and Scheduled Tribes accounted for 15.8 and 9.6 respectively for Monday's recruitments, Singh added.

In his address, Modi said the development of a country relies on the hard work, capability, and leadership of its youth, and India is committed to becoming a developed nation by 2047 as its policies and decisions focus on empowering its talented youth.

He said India is now the world's fifth-largest economy and the third-largest start-up ecosystem. Similarly, youths pursuing careers in sports have confidence that they will not fail because they now are supported by modern training facilities and tournaments. Modi said the country is undergoing a transformation across various sectors, becoming the second-largest in mobile manufacturing.

India is also making strides in renewable energy, organic farming, space, defence, tourism, and wellness, creating new opportunities and reaching new heights in each area, he added. (PTI)

'No lapse' on our part

"are not screened" (frisked) as per protocol. Asked about complaints against the force since it took charge of Parliament security in June this year, the officer said the MPs, employees working in the complex and visitors are "very satisfied and happy" with their work.

"We have trained our personnel for this duty (Parliament security) properly...everyone, including the MPs are contributing to further improving the security of the complex. Parliament security is paramount," he said. Kishore said the security department of Parliament will be competent to answer questions related to security, including recovery of cash from a seat in the House during the last session. (PTI)

Bills on simultaneous polls

a joint committee, it informs the other House to nominate members for the panel. The select or joint committee considers the Bill clause by clause just as the two Houses do. Amendments can be moved to various clauses by members of the committee. The committee can also take evidence from associations, public bodies, or experts who are interested in the Bill.

After the Bill has been considered, the committee submits its report to the House. Members who do not agree with the majority report can give a dissent to it. The bills referred to joint panels include the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (Second Amendment) Bill, 2015; the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2015; the Enforcement of Security Interest and Recovery of Debts Laws and Miscellaneous Provisions (Amendment) Bill, 2016; and the Bill to Amend The Citizenship Act, 1955.

Similar joint parliamentary panels were formed to scrutinise the Financial Resolution and Deposit Insurance Bill, 2017, and the Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2022.

The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023, was also referred to a joint panel. (PTI)

Capable and responsive police

people, you will become the voice of those in need," he further added. Highlighting the importance of Manipur's rich cultural, social, and historical heritage, Governor Acharya stressed the importance of working together as a cohesive team for the betterment of the state and country.

He also emphasised the need for a capable and responsive police force to address emerging challenges, including cybercrime and digital security. Acharya stated that the tougher conditions of Manipur demands the participation of youths in the defense sector. "More than ever before, at present, Manipur requires young men and women to take up the challenge of navigation through troubled waters and work tirelessly and selflessly even at the peril of their lives in the service of their state," he stressed.

The passing-out parade ceremony marked the culmination of the rigorous training program, which included physical fitness, small arms training, unarmed combat, crowd control, disaster management, law and policing, and soft skills.

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Assam Satra Mahasabha's Mid-Annual Conference concludes Govt committed to preserving Assam's cultural heritage: Jayanta Mallabaruah

HT Correspondent

HOJAI, Dec 23: Government is committed to protecting and preserving the rich culture of Assam, stated Jayanta Mallabaruah, minister of Public Health Engineering and Housing and Urban Affairs on Sunday.

He said this while addressing the open session of the Assam Satra Mahasabha Mid-Annual Conference at Gita Ashram, Hojai.

Speaking as the chief guest, the minister highlighted Assam's legacy as the land of Srimanta Sankardev and Madhavdev, where diverse communities coexist with mutual respect and cooperation.

Expressing his satisfaction, Mallabaruah commended the participation of members from various communities in the conference. He also credited chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's visionary leadership for Assam's rapid progress across various fronts and reaffirmed the government's dedication to safeguarding the state's cultural and heritage wealth.

The minister also lauded Shiladitya Dev, former MLA and president of the Organising Committee, along with his team, for systematically organising the three-day Assam Satra Mahasabha Conference, held for the first time in Hojai.



During the open session of the Assam Satra Mahasabha Mid-Annual Conference, several prominent dignitaries, including Jitendra Nath Pradhani, president of Assam Satra Mahasabha; Bhavananda Dev Goswami, executive president of Assam Satra Mahasabha; Manvendra Dutta Choudhury, vice chancellor of Rabindranath

Tagore University, Hojai; and Chaturthirani Biswas, chairperson of Hojai Municipal Board, shared the dais. All the guests addressed the gathering and praised the Assam Satra Mahasabha for its dedicated efforts in preserving Assam's cultural heritage.

Commenting on the occasion, Shiladitya Dev, president of the Organising Committee,

expressed pride in hosting the Assam Satra Mahasabha Conference in Hojai for the first time.

He emphasised the importance of following the ideals of spiritual leaders such as Srimanta Sankardev, Madhavdev, Chaitanyadev, Anukul Thakur, Ram Thakur, Guru Nanak Dev, Swami Vivekananda, and Ramakrishna Paramhans, who made invaluable contributions to strengthening religion and culture. "It is now our responsibility to emulate their ideals and pass them on to future generations," he added.

Shiladitya Dev also highlighted the grand cultural procession held earlier in the day, featuring participants from diverse communities, including Assamese, Bengali, Marwari, Bihari, Nepali, Manipuri, Karbi, Dimasa, Kachari, and Bhojpuri, dressed in their traditional attire.

The vibrant procession, symbolising mutual respect and cultural harmony, began from the Gita Ashram campus, traversed major routes in the town, and concluded at the same venue.

The three-day conference, which began on December 20, concluded on December 22, leaving a lasting impression on attendees and the community.

Dima Hasao holds workshop on 'Good Governance Week'

HT Correspondent

HAFLONG, Dec 23: The District Administration of Dima Hasao organised a workshop on Monday as part of the ongoing 'Good Governance Week' in Haflong.

The workshop was presided over by the District Commissioner (DC), Simanta Kr. Das. The event was further enriched by the presence of former MLA and retired Civil Servant, Bir Bhadra Hagier, who shared valuable insights on effective governance.

This workshop is a key component of the nationwide initiative, "Prashasan Gaon Ki Ore 2024" (Administration Towards the Village), which is divided into two phases: the preparatory phase and the implementation phase.

The week-long campaign focuses on conducting public grievance redressal camps across the district, ensuring that citizens have direct access to address their concerns.

Speaking at the workshop, Mr Hagier emphasised the critical principles of fairness, neutrality, and transparency in administration, urging officials to fulfill their responsibilities with diligence and integrity.

On the other hand, the district commissioner highlighted the importance of adopting corporate-like efficiency in public service delivery and encouraged departmental heads to implement transformative initiatives aimed at elevating the district's status from inspirational to inspirational.

Representatives from key departments, including Health, Social Welfare, Public Health Engineering (PHE), and Agriculture, shared their experiences and best practices in advancing good governance.

The Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG), Government of India, launched the fourth edition of Sushasan Saptah (Good Governance Week), observed from December 19 to 24, 2024.

This year's theme, "Prashasan Gaon Ki Ore", underscores the government's commitment to fostering effective governance in rural areas.

ADC Sangeeta Devi, serving as the nodal officer for the campaign, played an instrumental role in ensuring its smooth execution. She emphasized the significance of documenting and sharing effective governance practices through the Prashasan Gaon Ki Ore portal, as directed by the government.

In her concluding remarks, Devi expressed gratitude to all dignitaries and participants for their active involvement in making the campaign a success.

The workshop was attended by several notable officials, including Deputy Secretary of NCHAC, Ms. Rebecca Chngansan, ADC James Aind, and other distinguished representatives from various departments.

Meanwhile, along with the rest of the country, the said Good Governance Week was also celebrated in Morigaon district. In keeping with the celebration of Good Governance Day, a workshop was held at the Morigaon District Commissioner's (DC) Office on Monday.

The workshop was attended by retired administrative officer Harish Chandra Dutta and the current secretary to the government of Assam, Kabayashree Mahanta, as the chief guests.

3 poachers arrested

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Dec 23: In a major breakthrough, three poachers were apprehended on Sunday from 1 No Donga village near the India-Bhutan border in Tamulpur district. Authorities also seized two handmade rifles and an elephant tusk during the operation.

According to sources, acting on a tip-off, a joint team of police and forest officials conducted a raid at the residence of Chingari Hasda (60) in 1 No Donga village, where a handmade rifle was recovered. During interrogation, Chingari disclosed that an elephant tusk was hidden in the house of Sanu Hembram (60), a resident of the same village. The team subsequently raided Sanu Hembram's house, successfully recovering the elephant tusk. Further interrogation of Chingari and Sanu led to another operation at the residence of Baburam Soren (46) in Manjur village, Nagri-juli, where the team seized an additional handmade rifle.

The three accused were taken into custody, and the seized items, including two handmade rifles and the elephant tusk, were brought to Tamulpur Police Station.

"This was a significant step in apprehending poachers and recovering the elephant tusk and rifles used in illegal activities," said a senior forest official.

Wild elephants kill man in Demow

HT Correspondent

DEMOW, Dec 23: A man was killed by wild elephants in Demow's Nabil area while he was returning home from the Rajmai Weekly Bazar on Sunday evening.

The deceased, identified as Haren Murari (50) of Nabil Gaon. According to reports, Haren Murari encountered the wild elephants in a field on his way back, where he was fatally attacked.

Upon hearing the news, teams from the Forest Department and Demow police later arrived at the scene and recovered the body.

The incident has once again highlighted the growing conflict between humans and wildlife in the region. Locals report that wild elephants frequently create panic and destroy agricultural lands in Palengi, Saragua, Maharan, Pub Panidching, and Pachim Panidching areas of Demow constituency.

Over 1,300 new ration cards distributed across Kokrajhar LACs

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Dec 23: The ceremonial distribution of new ration cards under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) took place on Sunday at the Magurmari Durga Mandir Field in Kokrajhar where over 1,300 new ration cards were distributed to the beneficiaries.

Residents of No 3 Kokrajhar (ST) LAC and No 4 Baokhungri constituencies in Kokrajhar district were benefitted from the distribution.

Similar events were simultaneously held in 2 No Dotma LAC, Parbatjhora sub-division, and Gossagaon LACs.

"A total of 1,316 ration cards were distributed across the constituencies, with Gossagaon LAC receiving 526 cards, Dotma LAC (ST) 200, Kokrajhar (ST) 107, Baokhungri LAC 207, and Par-

batjhora LAC 276," an official statement said.

The remaining cards will be distributed in the coming days by area inspectors of the Food, Civil Supplies & Consumer Affairs Department, it added.

MLA Lawrence Isary graced the event at Magurmari as the chief guest, personally distributing ration cards to the beneficiaries.

In his address, MLA Lawrence Isary praised the leadership of chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, emphasising the government's commitment to uplifting the underprivileged. He also conveyed the sentiments of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) chief executive member Pramod Boro, who underscored the importance of ensuring that no deserving individual is left out of the scheme's benefits.



MLA Lawrence Isary urged the district administration, government officials, and stakeholders to remain dedicated to societal upliftment by supporting and implementing such impactful initiatives.

The program was attended by several dignitaries, including EMS Saikhong Basumatary and Arup Kumar Dey, MCLA Rajiv Kumar

Brahma, and Kokrajhar DC Masanda Magdalin Pertin, among others.

The newly enlisted ration card beneficiaries expressed their happiness and gratitude to BTR chief executive member Pramod Boro and chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for providing ration cards to support the needy across the state.

SITA and AAU launch poultry farming awareness program



GUWAHATI, Dec 23: The State Innovation and Transformation Aayog (SITA), government of Assam and Directorate of Research (Veterinary), Assam Agricultural University (AAU), Khanapara, organised an awareness-cum-input distribution program on Monday at the Bongsor-Gandhmow cluster in the Saalkuchi area of Kamrup district.

The event was led by Dr Mihir Sarma, principal investigator of the Samiddhi Poultry Phase-II project, who provided a detailed overview of the initiative.

Addressing the gathering, vice-

chairman of SITA, Narayan Chandra Borkatky, emphasised the importance of sustained efforts in farming and prudent savings for the future expansion of poultry businesses.

He also encouraged farmers to enhance their skills through training programs offered by Assam Agricultural University (AAU), Khanapara. Co-vice chairman of SITA, Dhruba Prasad Baishya, highlighted the potential of poultry farming in promoting self-employment and boosting egg production.

He underscored how increased egg production can improve family nutrition and strengthen household

economies. Dr Prabodh Borah, director of Research (Veterinary) at AAU, Khanapara, urged farmers to adopt scientific poultry rearing practices to achieve self-employment and empower women in the community.

The program concluded with the inauguration of two new poultry units by vice-chairman Narayan Chandra Borkatky. The event was also attended by Dr Rafiqul Islam, assistant professor of Poultry Science, Dr Sadananda Payeng, assistant professor of Extension Education, officials from SITA, and beneficiaries, marking a successful culmination of the initiative.

Proprietor of Mantu Book Stall passes away

HT Correspondent

NAGAON, Dec 23: Mantu Sheikh, the owner of 'Mantu Book Stall' at Panigaon Chariali, Nagaon, passed away on Sunday night following a prolonged illness. A resident of Panigaon, Sheikh was a respected businessman and a beloved figure in the community.

Known for his thriving book business, 'Mantu Book Stall' served as a cherished hub for readers and intellectuals.

Apart from his business acumen, Sheikh was actively involved in social and cultural initiatives. His amiable nature and dedication to community welfare earned him widespread admiration and respect.

News of his passing led to an outpouring of grief, with people from all walks of life gathering at his residence to pay their final respects.

He is survived by his wife, two daughters, and a large circle of family and friends.



RPF seizes smuggled hornbill beaks at Rangapara Station

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: The Railway Protection Force (RPF) of NF Railway, during a routine inspection at Rangapara North Railway Station, seized smuggled hornbill beaks being transported illegally.

The seized items, valued at approximately ₹ 4 lakh in the grey market, were confiscated on the spot. On Saturday, based on internal information, the Crime Prevention & Detection Squad (CPDS) team of RPF Rangapara North conducted a check on train no 15613 (Guwahati - Murkongselek), Lachit Express, at Rangapara North station.

During the check, a suspicious person was intercepted by the CPDS team from whom a bag containing 4 (four) hornbill beaks was recovered. The seized hornbill beaks were worth around ₹ 4 lakh. Afterwards, the bag with the hornbill beaks and the apprehended person was brought to the RPF Station. Later, the hornbill beaks and the apprehended person were handed over to the Forest Department of Assam under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 after completing all the legal formalities and documentation.

One injured in Human-elephant conflict

HT Correspondent

GOLAGHAT, Dec 23: Growing human-elephant conflict in Morongi area resulted again as one named -Badal of 2 no. Balijan, severely injured at Rungajan Tea Garden on Sunday. Such incidents take place every now and then in this area. As the parade often comes through the villages and tea gardens, not only at nights but during day time also, in search of food. The local people accused of the forest department as the department fails to control the disarray crowds in time. The garden authority has sent the injured immediately to Kushal Konwar Civil Hospital, Golaghat for medical care.

Vidya Bharati Prachar Vibhag meeting held

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: The Vidya Bharati North Eastern Region Prachar Vibhag held an important meeting on Monday at the Prakashan Bharati Hall, Zoo Road in Guwahati. The meeting was chaired by Dr Pawan Tiwari, organising secretary of Vidya Bharati North Eastern Region and attended by Nirav Ghelani, organising secretary of North Assam Region, Lalji Sonari, office secretary of the North Eastern Regional Office, Vikas Sharma, Prachar Pramukh of North Eastern Region and Mukuteswar Goswami, Prachar Pramukh of Shishu Shiksha Samiti, North Assam Region. Other attendees included Sanjeev Deka from the Prachar team, alumni journalist Indrajit Das and several other key members.

The meeting focused on the role of the Prachar Vibhag in organising the massive Samutkarsh Mahashivir to be held on 29th, 30th and 31st January 2025 at Sarusajai Stadium, where 5,000 Ghosh (Brass Band) performers will participate.

Awareness program under Green Bodoland Mission held in Chirang



HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Dec 23: A one-day awareness program on the topic of 'reclaiming the climate for a resilient and sustainable future' under the Green Bodoland Mission (GBM), was held at the Lowerpara Panbari under Bijnai subdivision of Chirang district on Monday. The event discussed at length on the building up of green, smart and peaceful Bodoland which was organised by the Green Bodoland Mission (GBM), an initiative of government of BTR that emphasising for bringing green, smart and peaceful Bodoland.

Notably, the Green Bodoland Mission was launched in July last, and till date 258 youth clubs across the BTR were engaged and ten villages have been adopted under the mission.

More than 1.2 lakh saplings have been planted at various places under the GBM mission in the plantation drive, particularly community land, forest land, village playground in the Bodoland region.

The GBM has adopted the Lowerpara village under Bijnai subdivision, and planned to plant more than two thousand saplings along the village itself.

The Lowerpara Panbari village is consisted of 74 families, and habited of more than 550 peoples behind the village in the area which is accepted as neat and clean village by the citizens. Hundreds of peoples cutting across the communities from the village participated, and shared views on the mission, and its importance towards the bringing green, smart and peaceful Bodoland. BTR executive member, Dhananjay Basumatary, mission director, Manaranjan Das, UPPL media secretary, Hantigiri Narzary, retired teacher, Kamal Kumar Basumatary were graced as guests on the occasion. EM Basumatary has lauded the initiative of Green Bodoland Mission while afforestation across the Bodoland region.

He said that the BTR government under the leadership of Pramod Boro, the CEM of BTR is working dedicatedly towards the welfare and development of the society since its inception in the reign of BTR. He stated that the GBM has received a good response from the common masses.

Mission Director Manaranjan Das told that several ten villages have been adopted under the Green Bodoland Mission across the entire Bodoland region, and accordingly awareness programs are organising involving youth clubs, local peoples, NGO members, mahila samities etc while creating awareness on the tree plantation, and it's maintenance. He also said that the citizens also made awareness on the initiatives of making plastic free environment along the villages with mission to have a congenial human well-being situation.

Cachar hosts vibrant Health and Nutrition Mela

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Dec 23: Office of the District Social Welfare Officer (DSWO) has hosted Vibrant Health and Nutrition Mela at Laboc Tea Estate here in the district.

The event was a major initiative under the Rajabazar ICDS Project, in collaboration with Poshan Abhiyaan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and various health teams.

The mela aimed to engage the community in celebrating and advancing health, nutrition, and education for women and children.

It was inaugurated by the district social welfare officer in-charge, Anjali Kumari, who highlighted the crucial role of such initiatives in raising awareness and promoting healthier communities. The mela offered a range of engaging and impactful activities tailored to meet the needs of attendees.

A dedicated T3 camp and a Mobile Medical Unit (MMU) provided essential medical services, while growth monitoring and RBSC screening camps focused on identifying cases of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and ensuring timely health referrals.

The mela also featured a Menstrual Hygiene Management Camp, emphasising the importance of menstrual health for adolescent girls. A PMMVY Registration Camp was organised to raise awareness about maternal and child welfare benefits, while the Kishori Sevika Got Camp contributed to the event's educational dimension. Adding a dynamic touch, a vibrant street play captivated the audience by showcasing themes of nutrition and the empowerment



of girls under the 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' campaign.

A highlight of the mela was the 'Healthy Child Award', introduced to encourage families to adopt improved nutritional practices. Awards were distributed across three age categories: 0-6 months, 6 months-3 years, and 3-6 years. This initiative aimed to inspire healthy competition among families while emphasising the critical role of balanced nutrition in child development.

An on-site Anaemia Detection Camp, organised by the MMU Health Team, provided essential diagnostic services. As part of the initiative, five adolescent girls with the highest haemoglobin levels were awarded the prestigious title of 'Miss Haemoglobin', celebrating their dedica-

tion to maintaining good health.

The Mela also included a recipe demonstration, aimed at encouraging families to embrace healthy and cost-effective cooking practices. Through its diverse activities, the event underscored the critical role of health and nutrition as the foundation of a thriving and prosperous society.

The Health and Nutrition Mela stood as a beacon of hope and awareness, inspiring families with an informed and proactive approach. By addressing critical health and nutritional challenges through engaging and interactive initiatives, the event emphasised the power of collective effort in shaping a brighter, healthier future for all.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Wonder is the feeling of the philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder. - Plato

Dissanayake's India visit

Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's recent trip to India is an important moment in strengthening the ties between the two neighbouring countries. This visit highlights the growing bond and cooperation between India and Sri Lanka. This was his first official trip abroad since becoming President in September, showing his dedication to strengthening economic relations with India while also tackling worries about China's growing role in Sri Lanka. In his meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Dissanayake thanked India for helping stabilize Sri Lanka's economy during its 2022 crisis. He also focused his vision for working together on economic growth, focusing on sustainable development and recovery. The visit ended with a joint statement that highlighted various plans for working together, including partnerships in energy and efforts to strengthen regional security. India's plan to provide liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Sri Lanka and work on renewable energy projects shows its continued support in helping Sri Lanka expand its energy options. One key announcement was the plan to build an energy pipeline linking India and Sri Lanka, with support from the United Arab Emirates. This pipeline, along with plans to develop Trincomalee (a port city in Sri Lanka) into a regional energy hub, shows India's aim to strengthen its presence in the Indian Ocean while helping Sri Lanka meet its urgent energy needs. Both countries also stressed the need to restart the passenger ferry service and repair important infrastructure, like the Kankesanthurai port (located in northern Sri Lanka, about 60 km from India), to improve connectivity between the two nations.

The agreements and announcements bring hope for the economic recovery of Sri Lanka and stronger ties between the two nations. However, there are concerns about how they might affect Sri Lanka's independence and control over its economy in the long run. With India's large workforce, especially in fields like medicine where many local doctors are already unemployed, Sri Lanka may end up struggling to safeguard jobs for its skilled workers. The FSP warned that this could impact not only skilled professionals but also small workers in sectors like transportation, barbering, and street vending. They fear that cheaper labour from India could flood the market and hurt local jobs. The energy sector, a major focus of the visit, has also faced criticism. While India's role in LNG supply, offshore wind power, and connecting power grids could help solve Sri Lanka's immediate energy problems, some worry that these partnerships might make Sri Lanka too dependent on India's energy systems.

India's financial help, including \$4 billion in aid for food, fuel, and medicines, was vital in helping Sri Lanka stabilize its economy during its toughest time. The agreements made during Dissanayake's first visit to New Delhi as President aims to strengthen this support by promoting investment partnerships, improving transport links, and boosting trade. India's proposal to promote trade settlements using the Indian Rupee (INR) and Sri Lankan Rupee (LKR) could help ease the pressure on Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves. President Dissanayake's government faces the challenge of balancing the advantages of these initiatives with the risks they bring with them. Critics believe Sri Lanka should carefully manage these partnerships to make sure they truly benefit its people and meet their needs.

Who is responsible for disruption in the Parliament?

The country is disappointed with what has been happening in Parliament for the last few days. Only by running the Parliament can the government answer the questions of the opposition in a proper manner. In an atmosphere of chaos, MPs do not get a chance to put forward their views. Even a child can understand how one can protest by going into the well and shouting slogans and creating a ruckus and obstructing the proceedings of the House. It will be considered a good thing when you put your questions clearly and the government is able to give clear answers. But what is even more worrying is that obstruction of Parliament proceedings has become the rule rather than the exception, and our politicians have no remorse for it. This decline has come very fast in the last few years. MPs shout at each other, snatch and tear legislative papers, and come to the middle of the House on a small issue. In the last few years, most of the bills have been passed without discussion. This is a misuse of the parliamentary system.

Now the opposition parties and some MPs have ruined the Parliament. It is common to stall the proceedings in both the houses by creating unproductive ruckus over personal agendas. Noise and chaos in the Parliament, shouting slogans in the well, making personal jibes at each other, and sometimes even getting into a scuffle is a common sight in the Parliament today. Why has the behavior of political parties and MPs become so chaotic? Have the vested interests of the parties turned the Parliament into a joke today?

Looking at the attitude of the MPs, it does not seem that they have the intention to allow plans for the development of the country to be made. It seems that the MPs have taken the entire parliamentary democracy hostage. Because the proceedings of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha are shown live on TV these days, the common man of the country also sees everything that is happening in the Parliament every day. After all, what image are the MPs presenting before the people? Just think what image of you is being formed in the minds of the people of the country. It is true that the reason for this decline is that politics has become a game of numbers today, due to which regional satraps exert pressure to get their will done. They not only believe in the politics of bullying but also make the parameter of a successful Parliament session 'jiski lathi, uski bhains' (the who has the stick) the key. Today size has become more important than content, due to which scenes like street fights are seen in Parliament. Therefore, in this declining political culture and moral values, parliamentary proceedings do not have content that can influence politics.

Overall, it seems that the Parliament has now become just a scoring club. Many people would know that Rs 2.5 lakhs are spent on one minute of proceedings in the Parliament. Thus, an average of Rs 6 crores is spent on a day's normal proceedings. The day the proceedings go on for longer, the expenses increase even more. Just think where this money comes from. Obviously, it comes from the pockets of the common people of the country. What could be a bigger joke in democracy than the fact that the proceedings of the Par-

liament are constantly stalled or there is uproar throughout the day, yet Rs 6 crores are spent in a day? Just think what all can be done with Rs 6 crores. The fortunes of thousands of villages can change with the money spent on one day's proceedings of the Parliament. Lakhs of poor girls can get married. The fortunes of thousands of youth can improve with small and cottage industries. But the MPs do not think about all this. Even if development plans are not made, personal interests must improve. Have the MPs become above the country?

One more thing: it is not true that all the MPs are rowdy. Those who are serious about work cannot do anything. The



DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Priyanka Saurabh

question is why do MPs not create an atmosphere every time? Do MPs come only to create a ruckus? MPs have crippled the Lok Sabha. The truth is that the people of democracy, that is, the people of the country, directly elect the Lok Sabha. In such a situation, the indirectly elected House should respect the dignity of the House of the people, that is, the Lok Sabha. It should not happen that every work done in the Lok Sabha is obstructed. All MPs should be allowed to speak about their constituencies for three minutes each on the fixed days in the Lok Sabha. MPs who repeatedly create a ruckus should be identified, and their list should be publicized. Such rules should be made that any action is automatically taken against an MP who enters the well or waves a pamphlet or creates any other kind of ruckus. Why do some MPs return to the House after walking out? They do this only to show off; they have nothing to do with the development of the country.

They are not able to do anything in the Parliament, and on the other hand, the people of their Lok Sabha constituency are distressed because they are not able to solve their problems because there is only uproar in the Parliament. Therefore, stop the Parliament from becoming an arena. Explain your point of view to the leadership; also, do not blindly follow their every order, right or wrong. It is the first duty of the MPs to protect the dignity of the sacred temple of democracy. Perhaps these people do not understand the dangerous dimensions of making the Parliament insignificant.

Our Parliament is the foundation of our nation, which represents the people and which is expected to keep a sovereign watch over our national interests. The government is accountable to the Parliament, and the existence of the government depends on the trust of the Lok Sabha in it. Therefore, the time has come that all our MPs should focus on how the parliamentary democracy can be strengthened. Otherwise the public itself will start mocking it. Our MPs should think about what kind of legacy they are leaving behind. Will they let the Parliament collapse under the weight of its decline? We are already seeing what is happening today. It is hoped that the country's MPs and those who run the Parliament soon realize how much hope the citizens of the country have for them. They are also held up as examples on many occasions. (The author is a Research Scholar in Political Science, poet, freelance journalist, and columnist)

Pakistan must reconcile with Bangladesh's 1971 painful legacy

By: Saleem Samad

After decades of hiatus, Bangladesh and Pakistan have made a major step toward a new era of regional cooperation in South Asia, riddled with suspicion, distrust, disrespect, and lack of neighbourliness among the eight countries.

When Nobel laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus, Chief Advisor of the Interim Government of Bangladesh embraced Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif with grins on their faces decided to put the bilateral relations at a new height.

Yunus and Sharif met on the sidelines of the D-8 Summit, which was held by developing nations in Cairo, Egypt. Shehbaz Sharif called for a strategic relationship between Dhaka and Islamabad and said "We are looking forward to strengthening our relationship with our brother-in-country Bangladesh."

Dr Yunus expressed his keenness to reactivate the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as "a top priority." "I am a big fan of the idea of SAARC. I keep harping on the issue. I want a summit of SAARC leaders even if it is only for a photo session because that will carry a strong message," the French news agency AFP quoted Yunus as telling Shehbaz. The moribund eight-nation SAARC (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) was largely stalled due to arguments between Islamabad and New Delhi.

Bangladesh and Pakistan are two wings of India and are not physically connected by land, rivers, and blue mountains. The two leaders expressed their desire to resolve outstanding grievances from the brutal birth of Bangladesh in 1971. December is an emotional month for Bangladesh.

The day is observed with due solemnity to respect the millions of martyrs at the gigantic National Martyrs Memorial on the outskirts of the capital Dhaka.

All organizations, professional bodies, and political parties assemble at dawn to pay homage at the site, except for the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami, which allegedly were henchmen and armed militia groups, which rampaged and pillaged thousands of villages during the nine months of liberation war.

On a historic day, Lieutenant General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, Commander of Eastern Command, Pakistan Army and Indian Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora of the Eastern Command, Indian Army flanked by a dozen Mukti Bahini commanders signed a historic 'instrument of surrender' in accordance to Geneva Convention.

An estimated 93,000 members of Pakistan's armed forces, other

auxiliary forces, civil officers, and their families surrendered on 16 December after a humiliating defeat, which created an independent Bangladesh.

It was the world's largest surrender in terms of number of personnel since World War II. The prisoners of war (POWs) were repatriated under the Tripartite Agreement signed in April 1974 by Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India in New Delhi. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held in Lahore, Pakistan in February 1974 helped resolve the issue of Bangladesh's recognition intervened by Egypt and Algeria.

According to textbook history, the eastern province of Pakistan (known as East Pakistan) plunged into a bloody civil war after the military junta refused to accept the people's mandate of the first-ever general elections in 1970.

The martial law government based in Rawalpindi launched a crackdown codenamed 'Operation Searchlight' in March 1971 after denying handing down political power to the elected representatives. In hours the Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was detained and the party banned.

When Mujib was picked up by the military in Dhaka, nearly 1,500 political and student leaders, intellectuals, acclaimed poets, senior lawyers, journalists and others were arrested from (western) Pakistan. Relations between the two countries experienced hiccups during the last five decades. The three military dictators General Ziaur Rahman, General H.M. Ershad and General Moeen U Ahmed went ahead to thaw the bilateral relations with their counterpart military junta in Pakistan, which were never sustainable in the see-saw diplomatic maneuver by the autocratic regimes in both countries.

During the democratic era, the two Begums failed to build up the relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan. The prestigious Pakistan newspaper The Dawn writes: In the years since the split (independence), Dhaka's leaders — especially the recently ousted regime of Sheikh Hasina — stayed firmly in the Indian camp, preferring to maintain close ties with New Delhi and keeping Islamabad at arm's length.

However, the newspaper wrote that ties between the two capitals have thawed ever since a popular uprising toppled Hasina's government in August, with trade and bilateral relations seeing a marked improvement.

They also agreed to expand and deepen bilateral cooperation in all areas of mutual interest and emphasized the need to align efforts to achieve mutually beneficial development objectives.

Yunus told AFP "The issues (of 1971) have kept coming again

and again. Let's settle those issues for us to move forward."

The two leaders acknowledged the importance of people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges including enhanced exchange of artists, sportspersons, academics, students, etc. Political historian Mohiuddin Ahmad said he does not see how the relationship would defrost the relationship which has deepened scars of the brutal independence war.

It is no denying that in Clause 13 of the Tripartite Agreement, Pakistan agreed to put 195 senior military officers on trial for war crimes, crimes against humanity and rape as a weapon of war.

Unfortunately, lack of a guarantee clause in the agreement, the military dictator and also President, General Ziaul Huq instead pardoned the accused, which was a serious breach of the Delhi agreement, said the Mukti Bahini veteran Mohiuddin Ahmad.

Sharif said the 1974 Tripartite Agreement involving Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India settled things, "but if there are other outstanding issues," he would be happy to look into it. Yunus said it would indeed be nice to resolve things "once and for all for the future generations."

Former Ambassador Humayun Kabir doubts that settling down on the 1971 issue, who is also a liberation war veteran said it would be not easy for the millions of people who joined the guerrillas (Mukti Bahini), those became war refugees, the genocide survivors and the rape victims would be able to forget the nightmare and pardon the perpetrators, who were unfortunately not punished for committing crimes in 1971.

When military usurper General Pervez Musharraf visited Bangladesh in July 2002, he was greeted by a general strike and Dhaka University students fought a pitched battle with riot police in the capital demanding Pakistan should seek an apology for what military troops had committed. He (Musharraf) regretted the excesses committed during Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence but called for burying the past in the spirit of friendship. Well, his statement was short of apology for the crimes committed during the war and said "Your brothers and sisters in Pakistan share the pains of the events of 1971."

Perhaps stating only one-word "apology" in public for crimes committed by the Pakistan military during 1971 would melt the ice once and for all, remarks Ambassador Kabir. (The author is an award-winning independent journalist based in Bangladesh. A media rights defender with the Reporters Without Borders (@RSF inter). Recipient of Ashoka Fellowship and Hellman-Hammett Award. He could be reached at saleemamad@hotmail.com; Twitter (X): @saleemamad)

UK economy seeking to strike a balance amidst GDP decline

By: Tirthankar Mitra

Consecutive monthly decline in GDP marking the first back to back contraction since the Covid-19 lockdown are signals to UK economy policymakers to clear the decks for a precarious balancing act. This is necessary to stabilise short-term economic performance while fostering long-term growth.

Systemic vulnerabilities are underscored by the latest data. Manufacturing and construction output has weakened. Trade figures reveal a dip in both imports and exports. The

services sector has stalled. An atmosphere of uncertainty, which is not improved by anticipation and immediate aftermath of a new fiscal policy, envelops the business sector. There is a modest tide in consumer confidence. But it is insufficient to offset broader economic stagnation. Indeed the UK economy is at a crossroads.

An ambitious government budget aiming to reinvigorate the economy lies at the heart of the matter. For it comes with difficult decisions like higher taxes for businesses and increased social security contributions. Such measures are necessary to ad-

dress the fiscal gaps and invest in public infrastructure. But at the same time it invites the risk of dampening business sentiment and deterring public sector activity in the short run. This is by no means an unprecedented approach as many advanced countries adopt austerity during economic adversity periods. To recalibrate sluggish growth adopting investment heavy strategies is not unheard of.

Reduced corporate activity and strained employer finances are some of the fallout of this game-plan of economic revival. But looked at through a broader lens, public invest-

ment in infrastructure, healthcare and education has the potential to deliver substantial economic dividends in the medium and long-term.

Besides stimulating domestic demand, these investments create an enabling atmosphere for business to thrive. But there has to be clarity and consistency in implementing these policies. UK's recovery had been sluggish compared to its peers in this period. Similarly burdened by energy costs and supply chain issues, only Germany fares worse in the growth metrics. With its cautious approach in monetary policy, the Bank of Eng-

land faces a difficult task. Interest rate cuts though tempting can shoot up inflationary pressure and in its turn destabilise an already fragile investor confidence. Growth aspirations have to be balanced with economic stability. To achieve this fiscal and monetary policies have to be deftly coordinated. Success depends on the government's ability to communicate its vision effectively. The powers that be has to reduce the hardship of both business and households. The road ahead may be rocky. But there is hope for a more resilient and inclusive economic future. (IPA Service)

Eliminating child marriage in Assam

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

Child marriage being a deep-rooted social problem in India is also not different to the state of Assam. Rooted in tradition and poverty and a lack of education, the practice disallows young girls from even having their childhood, the right to education, or scope for growth. It is often marked by cycles of poverty and gender inequality, leaving a lasting unhealable wound in the fabric of the society. In recent years, Assam has emerged as a frontline state in this fight against this harmful practice by implementing rigorous measures and reformative policies. The work is carried out at the state's end and it burdens the burden for its youth's protection and better future.

The alarmingly high prevalence of child marriage in Assam has been of national concern. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) conducted between 2019 and 2021 reports that about 31.8% of the women in Assam aged 20-24 were married before attaining the age of 18 years. This is above the national average and calls for immediate action. The practice not only is a violation of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, but also puts the girls at a risk of early pregnancy, health problems and lack of opportunities. Although these effects are not visible, for boys too, they are just as devastating since child marriage often takes away the educational and economic opportunities for them.

Confronting evil calls for a unified strategy including law enforcement, education, economic development, and social reconstruction. With this, the Assam state government is initiating a string of actions to effectively deal with practice of child marriage, in a planned manner. Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, Chief Minister of Assam, has driven such an attempted suppression by involving both enforcement and awareness campaigns. State initiatives have involved mass arrests of those indulging in underage marriages, community outreach programs, and greater vigilance by local authorities.

The most prominent action Assam has taken in its fight against child marriage was the massive crackdown initiated in February 2023. Thousands of people including grooms and grooms' relatives were detained for the violation of child marriage laws. While the move received mixed reactions, it clearly conveyed a message about the state's zero-tolerance policy. Critics did complain that membership arrests disrupted families and penalised the economically disadvantaged, but the government defended its actions emphasizing the importance of strong enforcement to discourage future violations.

Besides filing legal proceedings, Assam has also tried to do awareness activities regarding the negative consequences of child marriage. Campaigns Targeting rural and marginal areas where the practice is most prevalent have informed parents of the legal, medical, and social consequences of early marriage. The state has collaborated with NGOs, religious leaders, and local influencers to enhance awareness and behavioral change in these communities. Such co-operation has also been at the heart of efforts to undermine long-held deep cultural attitudes and promote community-supported answers.

Education is critical in the process of stopping child marriage. In order to break the practice education access, in a long term plan, improving girl's access should be encouraged. The scheme of providing free textbooks, bicycles and scholarships implemented by the state government is to encourage girls to complete their education. This initiative is, therefore, of crucial importance in relation to eradicating the main causes of child marriage since studies show that education has a direct relation with delayed marriages. It not only postpones marriage, therefore keeping girls in school, but also gives them opportunities for further education and work, which in turn leads to greater independence and self-sufficiency.

Economic empowerment is also one of the key aspects/factors of Assam strategy. Poverty is still considered as the most significant factor underlying child marriage as economically disadvantaged families usually see marriage as a solution to end their economic hardships. The state has also taken steps in the direction of enhancing livelihood prospects of such families, particularly in rural regions. Skill development and vocational training courses are also developed with the goal of providing alternative livelihood opportunities to reduce the economic pressure that is a contributing factor in early marriage.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist. Traditionally ingrained cultural practices and patriarchal expectations still constrain progress. Child marriage by many families, particularly those in rural communities, is seen as a way to save their daughters from social disapproval or to accumulate financial security through dowries. Such convictions frequently take precedence over legal issues and awareness campaigns and show that the key to success lies in a continuous and comprehensive approach.

The following challenge is to find a balance between severe regulation and awareness of socio-economic facts. Arrests and legal proceedings against offenders are obviously a worthwhile endeavor, but must not be the only thing, and should be supported by measures designed to help families caught up in the scandal. Counselling of the parents, rehabilitation, alternative provision for these children are important intervention measures to prevent the amplification of vulnerabilities of these children due to enforcement. The state also has a task to fill in the holes in the infrastructure and access to schools and health care, which is likely to play an important role in decreasing the occurrence of child marriage.

The role of community participation cannot be undermined. The success of child marriage abolition is not only in Assam, it also depends on collective efforts of all stakeholders. From parents and educators to religious authorities and legislators, each sector of society has its piece to play. Grassroots activism and community-based interventions are likely to make lasting impact by addressing the specific needs of the communities involved and promoting a feeling of ownership.

In the end, we can conclude that, Child marriage in Assam, therefore, serves as a remarkable illustration of the state's resolve to its children and their empowerment of future generations. Despite the advances made, it is still far from being there. Education, economic empowerment, community engagement, and legal enforcement are not mutually exclusive, and thoughtful attention needs to go to them in state, instead. Through identifying the underlying factors and fostering a culture of awareness and equity, Assam can unlock the potential for a society in which the potential of every child emerges to blossom. Child marriage abolition is not only legal responsibility but also moral responsibility, and work done in Assam serves as a model for others to adopt. (The writer is Editor in Chief of the Assamese E-Magazine SAMPROTIK who can be reached at himangshur1989@gmail.com)

What are the best drinks for losing weight?

By: Danielle Dresden

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 71.6% of people in the United States aged 20 or older are overweight or have obesity. However, when it comes to losing weight, there are no quick fixes.

Most often, weight loss involves changing eating, drinking, and exercise habits.

Increasing daily activity levels and consuming the right amounts of high quality, nutrient dense foods can help a person lose weight.

No specific drink leads to weight loss, but some drinks may support the necessary lifestyle changes.

In this article, we look at drinks that may help people lose weight. We also investigate which drinks to avoid and give other weight loss tips.

Drinks that may support weight loss

The following beverages may help promote weight loss if a person incorporates them into a healthful diet and activity plan:

Water

Water is a good choice for weight loss, as it contains no calories. Water is one of the most healthful drinks — it contains no calories, facilitates metabolic and physiologic processes and aids in detoxification, among many other benefits.

For people looking to manage their weight, many health organizations, including the CDC, recommend either choosing water instead of more caloric beverages or increasing overall water consumption.

Tea

Researchers have found links between regular consumption of green and black tea and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, some cancers, and diabetes.

Additional studies suggest that green tea can help people lose weight and keep it off because of two key ingredients: caffeine and a compound called epigallocatechin gallate.

However, a review of multiple studies found that, in most cases, weight loss resulting from green tea was not statistically significant.

When green tea did make a difference, the procedures involved were more complicated than simply drinking the tea.

Apple cider vinegar

Many people claim that apple cider vinegar has health benefits, including aiding weight loss. One small study found that participants

on a restricted-calorie diet who also took apple cider vinegar experienced more weight loss and lower cholesterol levels than others who only followed the diet.

Meal replacement shakes

People looking to lose weight may find meal replacement shakes a useful option, particularly if a busy lifestyle means that it is difficult to make time for healthful meals.

Eating a balanced, nutrient-dense meal or snack is ideal, but a replacement shake can be healthful and satisfying. Many of these shakes contain a range of important nutrients, protein, and fiber, with fewer calories than processed foods.

However, not all meal replacement shakes are healthful. It is important to be mindful of the ingredients and nutrition information.

If a person wishes to try meal replacement shakes, they should be sure to check the labels and avoid options that contain unhealthy ingredients, such as added sugars, artificial sweeteners, and corn syrups.

Some research suggests that meal replacement shakes can help people start to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight.

One 2011 review of studies reported evidence that shakes could lead to significant weight loss, while others studies in the analysis were inconclusive.

Protein shakes

Protein shakes do not contain the nutrition of a balanced meal or some meal replacement shakes. However, consuming a high amount of protein may help reduce hunger and maintain a feeling of fullness. As a result, a person may consume fewer calories after a protein shake, and this could help with weight loss.

It is important to be aware, however, that protein shakes also contain calories. As with meal replacement shakes, a person should check for unhealthy ingredients in protein shakes.

Drinks containing ginger

People have used ginger to improve digestive health for hundreds of years. Ginger has anti-inflammatory properties and can be a healthful addition to hot tea or sparkling water.

However, some ginger drinks have added sugar, which promotes inflammation and weight gain.

One small study found that drinking a beverage of hot tea and ginger powder decreased hunger, increased a feeling of fullness, and encouraged the body to burn calories.



As there were only 10 participants in the study, however, confirming the findings will require further research.

Carbonated water

Carbonated, or sparkling, water can be a good alternative to sugary carbonated beverages, such as sodas.

Carbonated water can encourage the body to feel full, which may lead a person to consume fewer calories.

Drinks to avoid

Experts have noted that people feel less full or satisfied after consuming calories in beverages, compared with those in solid foods.

Authors of a study from 2006 reported that people in the U.S. who are older than 2 years consumed 21% of their calories in beverages, while many drinks offer very little nutritional value.

Anyone looking to lose weight should avoid the following types of drinks:

Sweetened soft drinks

Full of calories and low in nutrients, sweetened, carbonated beverages such as sodas do not aid weight loss. A 12-ounce (oz) can of

soda can contain around 10–13 teaspoons (tsp) of sugar, depending on the drink.

Fruit juices and smoothies

Fruit juices have some nutritional benefits. However, though the sugar in them is naturally derived, juices contain so much sugar that they add a lot of calories to the diet.

A 12-oz serving of orange juice contains 10 tsp of sugar, while the same serving of a smoothie typically has even more sugar.

When a person opts for juice, it is important to choose 100% fruit juice with no added sugar and to be mindful of portion sizes.

Energy drinks

Energy and sports drinks also deliver some benefits, but they are typically high in calories. The following figures are for 12 oz of each type of drink:

- Sports drinks: 5–10 tsp of sugar
- Energy drinks: 10–14 tsp of sugar

Also, energy drinks often contain artificial sweeteners, which may not be healthful.

Coffee shop drinks

Rich drinks and sweetened teas can add plenty of sugar and calories to the diet. A 12-

oz serving of iced tea can have 3–8 tsp of sugar.

Coffee drinks often contain more sugar than the recommended amount for the whole day, which is 6 tsp for women and 9 tsp for men.

Alcohol

Alcohol does not mix well with weight loss for several reasons:

- Alcoholic drinks contain many calories — a 12-oz beer has 150 calories, while a 5-oz glass of white wine has 100 calories.

- Mixers, such as fruit juice or soda, increase the calorie count of each drink.

- Drinking can lower inhibitions, making it more likely for dieters to eat foods that they are trying to avoid.

- Drinking interferes with digestion and sleep, complicating weight loss.

Tips for making more healthful drink choices

Some drinks are less healthful than they seem. The following strategies can help a person make drink choices that support weight loss:

- Read nutrition labels to learn exactly how many calories are in each serving.

- Double-check serving sizes, as some small containers contain multiple servings.

- At a coffee shop, ask for a smaller size and lower-fat milk.

- Avoid flavored syrups and whipped cream.
- At a bar, alternate alcoholic drinks with water or low-calorie beverages.

Other general weight loss tips

Losing weight can be a difficult process, and the following tips can help:

- Look for long term solutions instead of quick fixes.

- Gradually make changes that can become part of a more healthful lifestyle, such as drinking water instead of sweet beverages with meals, walking more, and driving less.

- To make water more appealing, try adding lemon, lime, cucumber, or watermelon slices.

Summary

While no single drink can achieve weight loss, certain drinks and drinking strategies can help. Anyone looking to lose weight would benefit from favouring water and low-calorie beverages over drinks that contain sugars or fats.

It is worth noting that little, if any, scientific evidence suggests that drinks can further weight loss, including tea, apple cider vinegar, and ginger drinks. However, these tend to be more healthful and low in calories than other options. (Courtesy: *Medical News Today*)

The fascinating science behind dreams

By: Satvabrat Borah

Dreams are one of the most mysterious and fascinating aspects of human life. Every night, when we close our eyes and drift into sleep, we enter a world that is entirely our own. This world of dreams is full of colors, sounds, emotions, and experiences that often leave us wondering about their meaning and purpose. While dreams may seem random and fleeting, they are deeply rooted in the workings of our brain and have been studied by scientists, psychologists, and philosophers for centuries.

Dreams occur during a specific stage of sleep called the rapid eye movement (REM) phase. During this phase, our brain becomes highly active, almost as if we were awake. The body, however, is in a state of temporary paralysis, preventing us from acting out our dreams. This combination of an active brain and an immobile body creates the perfect condition for dreaming. The brain begins to weave together images, emotions, and fragments of memories, creating the unique and sometimes bizarre narratives we experience.

One of the most intriguing aspects of dreams is their connection to our subconscious mind. Dreams often reflect our thoughts, feelings, and desires that we may not fully understand when we are awake. They can reveal hidden fears, unresolved conflicts, or unspoken wishes. For example, a dream about being chased may reflect a feeling of being overwhelmed or anxious in real life. Similarly, a dream about flying might symbolize freedom or the desire to escape from daily stress. These connections make dreams a window into our inner world, allowing us to explore our own minds in ways that we cannot do during waking hours.

Another fascinating aspect of dreams is their creativity. The brain seems to have a unique ability to combine unrelated ideas and create new scenarios in dreams. This is why dreams often feel surreal and imaginative. Artists, writers, and inventors throughout history have credited their dreams with inspiring some of their greatest works. The famous composer Ludwig van Beethoven and the inventor Elias Howe, who created the sewing machine, are just two examples of people who drew inspiration from their dreams. Dreams seem to unlock a part of our creativity that is less accessible when we are awake.

While dreams can be a source of inspiration, they can also be puzzling. Many people experi-

ence recurring dreams, which are dreams that repeat over time with similar themes or settings. These dreams often point to unresolved issues or concerns in the dreamer's life. For instance, someone who repeatedly dreams about losing their teeth might be dealing with feelings of insecurity or fear of change. Understanding these patterns can provide valuable insights into one's emotions and experiences.

Nightmares are another type of dream that can be particularly intense and unsettling. They often involve feelings of fear, danger, or helplessness. Nightmares can be triggered by stress, trauma, or certain medications, but they also serve a purpose. Some scientists believe that nightmares help us process difficult emotions and prepare us to handle real-life challenges. By confronting frightening situations in our dreams, we may be better equipped to face them in the waking world.

Dreams are also thought to play a role in memory and learning. During sleep, the brain organizes and consolidates information from the day. Dreams may help us process these experiences and make sense of them. For example, if you've been practicing a new skill or studying for an exam, you might dream about it. This is the brain's way of reinforcing what you've learned and integrating it into your memory. Research has shown that people who dream about a task they've been working on often perform better at it the next day.

The science of dreams also explores why some people remember their dreams more vividly than others. Factors like age, stress levels, and sleep patterns can influence dream recall. People who wake up during or immediately after REM sleep are more likely to remember their dreams. Keeping a dream journal, where you write down your dreams as soon as you wake up, can also improve your ability to recall them. Over time, this practice can help you become more aware of your dreams and even influence the themes and content of what you dream about.

Lucid dreaming is another fascinating phenomenon that has captured the interest of many. In a lucid dream, the dreamer becomes aware that they are dreaming and may even gain control over the dream's events. This state of awareness can be both exciting and empowering, as it allows people to explore their dreams with a sense of purpose. Lucid dreaming has been used as a tool for personal growth, cre-

ativity, and even therapy. By practicing techniques like reality checks or keeping a dream journal, some people can increase their chances of having lucid dreams.

The science of dreams continues to evolve as researchers uncover more about the brain's activity during sleep. Advanced technology, like brain imaging, has allowed scientists to observe the patterns of brain waves and neural activity associated with dreaming. These studies have provided new insights into how dreams are formed and what they mean. However, there is still much to learn, and the mystery of dreams remains one of the most intriguing areas of study in neuroscience.

Cultural and historical perspectives on dreams add another layer of richness to our understanding of this phenomenon. Throughout history, people have interpreted dreams in various ways, often seeing them as messages from the divine or glimpses into the future. Ancient civilizations, like the Egyptians and Greeks, believed that dreams held profound meanings and could offer guidance. In modern times, psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have explored the psychological significance of dreams, viewing them as a way to understand the unconscious mind.

Despite all that we know, dreams remain deeply personal and unique to each individual. No two people will experience the same dream in exactly the same way. The emotions, symbols, and stories within dreams are shaped by our own experiences, thoughts, and feelings. This individuality makes dreams a source of endless fascination and a reminder of the complexity of the human mind. As we continue to study dreams, we gain not only a better understanding of the brain but also a deeper appreciation for the mysteries of our own consciousness. Dreams connect us to our innermost selves, offering a glimpse into the vast and intricate world that exists within each of us. They remind us that even in sleep, our minds are active, creative, and endlessly curious.

Dreams are more than just a series of images or emotions—they are a reflection of who we are. They challenge us, inspire us, and sometimes leave us with more questions than answers. But perhaps that is part of their magic. In the end, dreams remind us of the infinite possibilities of the human mind and the endless wonder of exploring our own inner worlds. (The author is an educationist)

The legacy of censorship continues, from Van Gogh to Oppenheimer

By: Heer Joshi

Emotions are intangible. We cannot see, hear, or touch them, yet we know they exist. Well, as someone who belongs to a field that relies entirely on proofs and evidence, there is one way through which we can see, touch, or hear those emotions. Art is one such medium that helps us in doing so. It is a medium through which one can understand the complexity of the feelings of a human mind. Artists can be considered as transparent because of this very reason. Their feelings are directly reflected in their art.

Moreover, art is an excellent tool for journalism as well. In a democratic country, the existence of free art is necessary, and it is indeed the strongest tool to change someone's perspective about any topic. A piece of poetry about war crimes and genocide is more likely to impact someone rather than listening to a speech about war crimes and genocide. A movie that portrays the inherent casteism in our society will help in fixating on it, despite such elements being in our society for hundreds of years. Artists have the power to transform and make the world a better place that is often underestimated.

With the passage of time and increasing popularity and interest in art, censorship has also emerged. Censorship involves removing or banning some elements of an artwork if it is felt that those elements might offend or hurt the sentiments of the audience. Censorship also happens in movies, wherein a selected group of people make the decision to filter out such details.

The practice of censoring art has been influenced by various factors, including political control, religious objections, social and cultural norms, and concerns about obscenity and indecency. Traces of censorship can be seen throughout history and therefore it isn't an emerging concept. Artists like Van Gogh and Michelangelo have also been victims of censorship. Their works were censored for going against the religion or hurting the sentiments of the audience.

Throughout history, religion has been a recurrent theme as a ground for censorship. In Europe, churches were usually rebelling against artworks. The artist was usually frowned upon and not given any respect by the common men. This could be a potential reason why these artists became immensely popular after their deaths but had trouble making ends meet in their lifetime. William Shakespeare, for instance, is a perfect example of this. His work did not gain much attention and was also banned once in the English Parliament. But today he is one of the greatest playwrights in history and his work is studied by students studying literature. Van Gogh's "Starry Night" is an inspiration and a marvel for every art enthusiast out there. But Van Gogh spent most of his adult life in poverty whose everyday diet consisted mainly of bread and coffee.

If we talk about censorship in cinema, obscenity is one recurrent reason. Certain scenes that are inappropriate for a larger audience are censored or in many cases, removed from the movie to make it available to a larger audience. The most recent example of this is Oppenheimer, a movie that



was released in July of last year.

It showcased a scene wherein a man was chanting holy verses while being intimate with his partner. This scene caused quite a stir online and angered a lot of people, following which Oppenheimer was later released differently in different countries. In some countries the scene was shown as it was, in others, it was shown by doing some changes, and in many countries, the scenes were completely removed from the movie.

Public opinion matters a lot in an artist's life, especially if the art is their only source of livelihood. As discussed earlier, art is an expression of thoughts, ideas, and actions. For people who are good with words, journalism is what they do when they're upset. People who love to draw, paint whenever they are flooded with any kind of emotion. Both of the mentioned creative works are a form of art and none of them is less important than the other.

It displays the individual in its raw form; the complexity of his mind and the creativity that he holds are rightly displayed at such moments. The validation to express themselves through art is given to them by Article 19 of the Indian constitution which guarantees freedom of speech and expression. Everyone is allowed to express their opinions. Free Art is a pioneer of Democracy and should be encouraged.

This article of freedom of speech and expression gets difficult to enforce properly when, in the context of art this right is extended to both, artists and the audience. On one side, it can be argued that artists have a right to express their opinions in whichever way they want. They are allowed to create and publish or showcase their art to other people since it falls under the purview of freedom of speech and expression.

Censorship directly affects this right. It restricts them from showcasing their work in its truest form. This obstructs the creativity of the artist. In such cases, they would hesitate while ideating. Art, in many ways also showcases the nit and grit of society; oftentimes it acts as a reality check for us. One such example of this is the political cartoons published in the newspapers. If they keep censoring such work, it would simply lead to the commercialization of art, a phenomenon that is happening

right now, where art is created not for the sake of reflection or expression, but only to appeal to a larger audience. The only purpose of such art is to make money, and while art has the power to transform and revolutionize the country, commercial art does not lead us anywhere and it does not in any way add to the society.

However, the other side narrates a different story. Censorship does put a restraint on the freedom of speech and expression, but does that mean artists have the power to create anything and get away with it? Certainly not. While creating anything, it is important to take note of the fact that a large group of audience is going to see that work, and that audience includes people from various age groups — ranging from children to senior citizens.

It is also going to include people from various backgrounds — different religions, castes, and states. If we talk about children, putting out something violent will have a direct impact on the child's psyche. Many people faint at the sight of blood whereas others cannot stand obscenity. It varies from person to person. Censorship draws a rational line and showcases the things that will work in favor of the majority i.e., something that appeals to the majority. Here, the audience can exercise their freedom of speech and expression and speak up if something is bothering them. After all, article 19 does have some limitations, and on this basis, artists cannot put out anything that may offend other people. A line needs to be drawn.

But will this debate ever end? Probably not. The debate of whether to censor or not has been an ongoing debate throughout history and we may never come at crossroads. But if in the future, in any way, the artist's freedom of speech is violated to the extent that every trace of creativity has vanished, it is a direct attack on the democracy of our country. A democratic country where artists are not allowed to critique is not a democratic country. But in return, artists also need to know their audience. They need to take cognizance of the fact that their work is going to be seen by a large group and thus there are some unwritten rules they need to follow. That is how a healthy democracy will continue to exist. (Courtesy: *Youth Ki Awaaz*)

Bangladesh wants Hasina back, sends note verbale to India

'We must ensure justice in every killing... we will also ask India to send back fallen autocrat Sheikh Hasina'

DHAKA, Dec 23: Bangladesh's interim government said on Monday that it has sent a diplomatic note to India to send back deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina to Dhaka.

Hasina, 77, has been living in exile in India since Aug 5 when she fled the country amid the student-led protests that toppled her 16-year regime. Bangladesh-based International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) has issued arrest warrants for Hasina and several former Cabinet ministers, advisers, and military and civil officials for "crimes against humanity and genocide".

"We have sent a note verbale to the Indian government saying that Bangladesh wants her back here for the judicial process," Foreign Affairs Adviser Touhid Hossain told reporters at his office.

Earlier in the morning, Home Advisor Jahangir Alam said his office has sent a letter to the foreign ministry to facilitate the ousted premier's extradition from India.



"We have sent a letter to the foreign ministry regarding her extradition. The process is currently underway," he told reporters in response to a query.

Alam said an extradition treaty between Dhaka and New Delhi already exists and Hasina could be brought back to Bangladesh under it.

Last month, in an address to the nation on the completion of 100

days of the interim government, Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus said it will seek the extradition of Hasina.

"We must ensure justice in every killing... We will also ask India to send back fallen autocrat Sheikh Hasina," he said.

Yunus, who assumed office on August 8, claimed that about 1,500 people, including students and workers, were killed while 19,931

others were wounded during the protest against the Hasina government.

In October, Law Adviser Asif Nazrul had reportedly said that Bangladesh would strongly protest if India tried to refuse Hasina's extradition by citing any provision in the treaty.

In an interview with PTI in Dhaka in September, Yunus had said that Hasina making political remarks from India is an "unfriendly gesture", asserting that she must remain silent to prevent discomfort to both countries until Dhaka requests her extradition.

"If India wants to keep her until the time Bangladesh (government) wants her back, the condition would be that she has to keep quiet," he said.

In recent weeks, Hasina has accused the Yunus-led interim government of perpetrating "genocide" and failing to protect minorities, especially Hindus, since her ouster. (PTI)

Trump threatens to try take back Panama Canal

PHOENIX, Dec 23: Donald Trump suggested Sunday that his new administration could try to regain control of the Panama Canal that the United States "foolishly" ceded to its Central American ally, contending that shippers are charged "ridiculous" fees to pass through the vital transportation channel linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Panama's conservative president José Raúl Mulino, who was elected in April on a pro-business platform, roundly rejected that notion as an affront to his country's sovereignty.

The Republican president-elect's comment came during his first major rally since winning the White House on Nov. 5. He also basked in his return to power as a large audience of conservatives cheered along. It was a display of party unity at odds with a just-concluded budget fight on Capitol Hill, where some GOP lawmakers openly defied their leader's demands.

Addressing supporters at Turning Point USA's AmericaFest in Arizona, Trump pledged that his "dream team Cabinet" would deliver a booming economy, seal U.S. borders and quickly settle wars in the Middle East and Ukraine.

"I can proudly proclaim that the Golden Age of America is upon us," Trump said. "There's a spirit that we have now that we didn't have just a short while ago."

His appearance capped a four-day pep rally that drew more than 20,000 activists and projected an image of Republican cohesion despite the past week's turbulence in Washington with Trump pulling strings from his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida as Congress worked to avoid a government shutdown heading into the holidays.



House Republicans spiked a bi-

partisan deal after Trump and Elon Musk, his billionaire ally, expressed their opposition on social media. Budget hawks flouted Trump's demand that they raise the nation's debt ceiling, which would have spared some new rounds of the same fight after he takes office on Jan. 20, with Republicans holding narrow control of the House and Senate. The final agreement did not address the issue and there was no shutdown.

Trump, in his remarks in Phoenix, did not mention the congressional drama, though he did reference Musk's growing power. To suggestions that "President Trump has ceded the presidency to Elon," Trump made clear, "No, no. That's not happening."

"He's not gonna be president," Trump said.

The president-elect opened the speech by saying that "we want to try to bring everybody together. We're going to try. We're going to really give it a shot." Then he suggested Democrats have "lost their confidence" and are "befuddled" after the election but eventually will "come over to our side because we want to have them."

Atop a list of grievances — some old, some new — was the

Panama Canal.

"We're being ripped off at the Panama Canal," he said, bemoaning that his country "foolishly gave it away." The United States built the canal in the early 1900s as it looked for ways to facilitate the transit of commercial and military vessels between its coasts. Washington relinquished control of the waterway to Panama on Dec. 31, 1999, under a treaty signed in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter.

The canal depends on reservoirs to operate its locks and was heavily affected by 2023 Central American droughts that forced it to substantially reduce the number of daily slots for crossing ships. With fewer ships using the canal each day, administrators also increased the fees that are charged all shippers for reserving a slot.

With weather returning to normal in the later months of this year, transit on the canal has normalized. But price increases are still expected for next year.

Mulino, Panama's president, has been described as a conservative populist who aligns with Trump on many issues. Panama is a strong U.S. ally and the canal is crucial for its economy, generating about one-fifth of that government's annual revenue. (AP)

Former Israeli spies describe attack using exploding electronic devices against Hezbollah



WASHINGTON, Dec 23: Two recently retired senior Israeli intelligence agents shared new details about a deadly clandestine operation years in the making that targeted Hezbollah militants in Lebanon and Syria using exploding pagers and walkie-talkies three months ago.

Hezbollah began striking Israel almost immediately after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack that sparked the Israel-Hamas war.

The agents spoke with CBS' "60 Minutes" in a segment aired Sunday night. They wore masks and spoke with altered voices to hide their identities.

One agent said the operation started 10 years ago using walkie-talkies laden with hidden explosives, which Hezbollah didn't realize it was buying from Israel, its enemy. The walkie-talkies were not detonated until September, a day after booby-trapped pagers were set off.

"We created a pretend world," said the officer, who went by the name "Michael."

Phase two of the plan, using the booby-trapped pagers, kicked in in 2022 after Israel's Mossad intelligence agency learned Hezbollah had been buying pagers from a Taiwan-based company, the second officer said.

The pagers had to be made slightly larger to accommodate the explosives hidden inside. They were tested on dummies multiple times to find the right amount of explosive that would hurt only the Hezbollah fighter and not anyone else in close proximity.

Mossad also tested numerous ring tones to find one that sounded urgent enough to make someone pull the pager out of their pocket.

The second agent, who went by the name "Gabriel," said it took two weeks to convince Hezbollah to switch to the heftier pager, in part by using false ads on YouTube promoting the devices as dustproof, waterproof, providing a long battery life and more. He described the use of shell companies, including one based in Hungary, to dupe the Taiwanese firm, Gold Apollo, into unknowingly partnering with the Mossad.

Hezbollah also was unaware it was working with Israel.

Gabriel compared the ruse to a 1998 psychological film about a man who has no clue that he is living in a false world and his family and friends are actors paid to keep up the illusion.

"When they are buying from us, they have zero clue that they are buying from the Mossad," Gabriel said. "We make like Truman Show, everything is controlled by us behind the scene. In their experience, everything is normal. Everything was 100% kosher including businessman, marketing, engineers, showroom, everything."

By September, Hezbollah militants had 5,000 pagers in their pockets.

Israel triggered the attack on Sept. 17, when pagers all over Lebanon started beeping. The devices would explode even if the person failed to push the buttons to read an incoming encrypted message.

The next day, Mossad activated the walkie-talkies, some of which exploded at funerals for some of the approximately 30 people who were killed in the pager attacks.

Gabriel said the goal was more about sending a message than actually killing Hezbollah fighters. "If he just dead, so he's dead. But if he's wounded, you have to take him to the hospital, take care of him. You need to invest money and efforts," he said. "And those people without hands and eyes are living proof, walking in Lebanon, of don't mess with us." They are walking proof of our superiority all around the Middle East."

In the days after the attack, Israel's air force hit targets across Lebanon, killing thousands. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, was assassinated when Israel dropped bombs on his bunker.

By November, the war between Israel and Hezbollah, a byproduct of the deadly attack by Hamas militants in southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, ended with a ceasefire. More than 45,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas militants, health officials have said.

The agent using the name "Michael" said that the day after the pager explosions, people in Lebanon were afraid to turn on their air conditioners out of fear that they would explode, too. (AP)

Magdeburg mourns Christmas market attack victims

MAGDEBURG (GERMANY), Dec 23: Mourners laid flowers near the scene of the deadly Christmas market attack on Monday as investigators puzzled over the motive of the suspect and fears swirled that the rampage could deepen divisions in German society. The Johanniskirche, a church a short walk from the scene of the attack, has become a central place of mourning since the suspect drove a car into the busy market on Friday evening, killing five people and injuring 200. A carpet of flowers now covers the broad sidewalk in front of the church.

Authorities have identified the suspect as a Saudi doctor who arrived in Germany in 2006 and had received permanent residency. They say he does not fit the usual profile of perpetrators of extremist attacks.

The man described himself as an ex-Muslim who was highly critical of Islam and in many posts on social media expressed support for the far-right. A picture has emerged of someone who had come to authorities' attention in the past for threatening behaviour and been the subject of tipoffs, but was not known to have committed any violence.

German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said Sunday that "the views and statements that the perpetrator expressed are being investigated, as are the tipoffs and proceedings with various authorities and the justice system." She said "the right conclusions" will then have to be drawn.

The country's vice chancellor voiced fears that the attack will fuel online misinformation ahead of a national election expected in late February. He urged people to "take time for the truth" and said: "Don't let yourselves be infected by hatred."

"There is still a lot we don't know and a lot is unexplained, including the exact motive," Robert Habeck said in a video posted Sunday. (AP)

China says Philippine plan to deploy midrange missiles would be 'extremely irresponsible'

BEIJING, Dec 23: China said a plan by the Philippines to deploy midrange missiles would be a provocative move that stokes regional tensions.

The Philippines top army official told reporters in Manila earlier on Monday that the military plans to acquire a mid-range system to defend the country's territory amid tensions with China in the South China Sea.

"Yes, there are plans, there are negotiations, because we see its feasibility and adaptability," Lt Gen Roy Galido said.

The US deployed its Typhon mid-range missile system in the northern Philippines in April and troops from both countries have been training jointly for the potential use of the heavy weaponry.

China opposes US military assistance to the Philippines and has been particularly alarmed by the deployment of the Typhon system. Under President Joe Biden, the US has strengthened an arc of military alliances in the Indo-Pacific to counter China, including in any confrontation over Taiwan.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that deployment of the weapon by the Philippines would intensify geopolitical confrontation and an arms race.

"It is an extremely irresponsible choice for the history and people of itself and the whole of Southeast Asia, as well as for the security of the region," she told a daily briefing.

The Philippines would not necessarily buy the Typhon system, Galido said.

The army is working not only with the United States but with other friendly countries on a long list of weapons platforms that it plans to acquire, he said.

The Philippines defence plan includes protecting its exclusive economic zone, which reaches 200 nautical miles (370 km).

"It is paramount for the army to be able to project its force up to that extent, in coordination, of course, with the Philippine navy and the Philippine air force," Galido said. (AP)

Albanian PM says TikTok ban was not 'rushed reaction to single incident'

TIRANA (ALBANIA), Dec 23: Albania's prime minister has said that the ban on TikTok his government announced on Saturday was "not a rushed reaction to a single incident".

Prime Minister Edi Rama said Saturday the government will shut down TikTok for one year, accusing the popular video service of inciting violence and bullying, especially among children.

Authorities have held 1,300 meetings with teachers and parents since the November stabbing death of a teenager by another teen after a quarrel that started on social media apps. Ninety per cent of them approve of the ban on TikTok.

"The ban on TikTok for one year in Albania is not a rushed reaction to a single incident, but a carefully considered decision made in consultation with par-

ent communities in schools across the country," said Rama on Sunday.

Following Tirana's decision, TikTok asked for "urgent clarity from the Albanian government" in the case of the stabbed teenager. The company said it had "found no evidence that the perpetrator or victim had TikTok accounts, and multiple reports have in fact confirmed videos leading up to this incident were being posted on another platform, not TikTok."

"To claim that the killing of the teenage boy has no connection to TikTok because the conflict didn't originate on the platform demonstrates a failure to grasp both the seriousness of the threat TikTok poses to children and youth today and the rationale behind our decision to take responsibility for ad-

ressing this threat," said Rama.

"Albania may be too small to demand that TikTok protect children and youth from the frightening pitfalls of its algorithm," he said, blaming TikTok for "the reproduction of the unending hell of the language of hatred, violence, bullying and so on."

Albanian children comprise the largest group of TikTok users in the country, according to domestic researchers.

Many youngsters in Albania did not approve of the ban. "We disclose our daily life and entertain ourselves, that is, we exploit it during our free time," said Samuel Sulmani, an 18-year-old in the town of Rreshen, 75 km north of the capital Tirana, on Sunday. "We do not agree with that because that's a deprivation for us." (AP)

Bethlehem plans another somber Christmas under the shadow of war

BETHLEHEM (WEST BANK), Dec 23: The Nativity Store in Manger Square has sold handmade olive wood carvings and religious items to people visiting the traditional birthplace of Jesus since 1927. But as Bethlehem prepares to mark its second Christmas under the shadow of the war in Gaza, there are almost no tourists, leaving the Nativity Store and other businesses unsure of how much longer they can hold on.

For the second straight year, Bethlehem's Christmas celebrations will be somber and muted, in deference to ongoing war in Gaza. There will be no giant Christmas tree in Manger Square, no raucous scout marching bands, no public lights twinkling and very few public decorations or displays.

"Last year before Christmas, we had more hope, but now again we are close to Christmas and we don't have anything," said Rony Tabash, the third-generation owner of Nativity Store.

Israel's war against Hamas has been raging for nearly 15 months, and there still is no end in sight. Repeated ceasefire efforts have stalled.

Since the war began, tourism to

Israel and the Israeli-occupied West Bank has plummeted. And after Israel barred entry to most of the 150,000 Palestinians in the West Bank who had jobs in Israel, the Palestinian economy contracted by 25% in the past year.

The yearly Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem — shared among Armenian, Catholic and Orthodox denominations — are usually major boons for the city, where tourism accounts for 70% of its yearly income. But the streets are empty this season.

Tabash said he continues to open the store every day, but often an entire week will go by without a sale. Tabash works with more than 25 local families who create hand-carved religious items out of the region's storied olive wood. But with no buyers, work has dried up for these families.

The number of visitors to the city plunged from a pre-COVID high of around 2 million visitors per year in 2019 to fewer than 100,000 visitors in 2024, said Jiries Qumsiyeh, the spokesperson for the Palestinian tourism ministry.

According to the Christmas store, Mary was forced to give birth to Jesus in a stable because



there was no room at the inn. Today, nearly all of Bethlehem's 5,500 hotel rooms are empty.

The city's hotel occupancy rate plunged from around 80% in early 2023 to around 3% today, said Elias Al Arja, the head of Bethlehem Hoteliers Association. At his own hotel, the Bethlehem Hotel, he said he has laid off a staff of more than 120 people and retains just five employees.

The city hosts more than 100 stores and 450 workshops dealing with traditional Palestinian handicraft, Qumsiyeh said. But just a

week before Christmas, when the city should be bursting with visitors, Manger Square was mostly empty save for a few locals selling coffee and tea. Only two of the eight stores in the main drag of the square were open for business.

Qumsiyeh worries that when the war ends and tourism eventually rebounds, many of the families that have handed down traditional skills for generations will no longer be making the items that reflect Palestinian heritage and culture.

Many are leaving the region en-

tirely. "We have witnessed a very high rate of emigration since the beginning of the aggression, especially among those working in the tourism sector," said Qumsiyeh.

Almost 500 families have left Bethlehem in the past year, said Mayor Anton Salman. And those are just the families who moved abroad with official residency visas. Many others have moved abroad on temporary tourist visas and are working illegally, and it's unclear if they will return, Salman said.

Around half of the population in the Bethlehem area, including nearby villages, works in either tourism or in jobs in Israel.

The unemployment rate in Bethlehem is roughly 50%, said Salman. Unemployment across the West Bank is around 30%, according to the Palestinian Economy Ministry.

Canceling Christmas festivities is one way to draw attention to the difficult situation in Bethlehem and across the Palestinian territories, said Salman. "This year we want to show the world that the Palestinian people are still suffering and they haven't the joy that everybody else in the world having," said Salman.

It is another blow to the Holy Land's dwindling population over the decade due to emigration and a low birthrate.

Christians are a small percentage of the population. There are about 182,000 in Israel, 50,000 in the West Bank and Jerusalem and 1,300 in Gaza, according to the U.S. State Department.

Father Issa Thalji, the parish priest of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Church of the Nativity, said many families are struggling financially, leaving them unable to pay rent or school fees, much less buy Christmas presents or celebrate the holiday in other ways. The church's social services have tried to help, but the needs are great, he said.

Thalji said his Christmas message this year focused on encouraging Palestinians in Bethlehem to stay despite the challenges.

"A church without Christians is not a church," he said, as workers hand-polished the ornate brass candleabras in the cavernous, empty church a week before the holiday.

"The light that was born when Jesus Christ was born here is the light that moves beyond darkness, so we have to wait, we have to be

patient, we have to pray a lot, and we have to stay with our roots because our roots are in Bethlehem," he said.

Some families are finding ways to bring back pockets of joy.

Bethlehem resident Nihal Bandak, 39, gave into her three children's requests to have a Christmas tree this year, after not having one last year. Decorating the tree is the favorite part of Christmas of her youngest daughter, 8-year-old Stephanie.

Mathew Bandak, 11 was thrilled his family brought back some of their traditions, but also torn.

"I was happy because we get to decorate and celebrate, but people are in Gaza who don't have anything to celebrate," he said.

Rony Tabash, the third-generation owner of Nativity Store, said he will continue to open the store, because it's part of his family's history.

"We are not feeling Christmas, but in the end, Christmas is in our hearts," he said, adding that the entire city was praying for a ceasefire and peace. "We have a big faith that always, when we see Christmas, it will give us the light in the night." (AP)

Union minister hands over appointment letters during 'Rozgar Mela' in Sikkim



GANGTOK, Dec 23: Union minister Prataprao Jadhav on Monday handed over appointment letters to 80 people at the 'Rozgar Mela 2024' held here, officials said. "The youths getting appointment letters today should take responsibility towards national development seriously," he said. The Union minister of state for AYUSH and health & family welfare also urged the new appointees to work hard and contribute towards a 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047. The 'Rozgar Mela' was initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in October 2022 with an aim to provide meaningful opportunities to youths for their participation in nation-building and self-empowerment. (PTI)

'Newly trained personnel will have to do everything together like they trained here'
Meitei, Kuki recruits in Manipur police to be posted together: Biren

DERGAON, Dec 23: Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh on Monday said the newly recruited police cadets, including those from Meitei and Kuki communities, will be posted together as a "team" in an attempt to bring back peace in the ethnic violence-hit north-eastern state. Nearly 2,000 recruits of the Manipur Police passed out from the Lachit Borphukan Police Academy here on Monday, strengthening the force in the state. Assam and Manipur Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya and Singh attended the ceremony as the chief guests. "The community-wise division took place due to the present situation. It was not like this earlier, and I will not allow this to happen in future," the CM told reporters after the ceremony. "We have to start working together to bring peace to the state. Their postings will be together. We will not break the team. We will try to restore the unity of earlier Manipur," Singh said.



Out of the 1,946 passed-out recruits of Manipur Police from the Lachit Borphukan Police Academy here, the caste distribution of them is diverse with 62 per cent being Meiteis, 12 per cent Kukis and the remaining 26 per cent belonging to the Naga and other tribes. Asked about the ongoing law and order situation in Manipur, Singh said it is complicated and will take time to normalise. "We all have seen that peace is returning to the state," he said. On the recent arrests of Bangladeshi nationals entering India illegally in Manipur, the CM said it is not his state's issue alone. "Bangladeshis illegally entering India are being arrested in Manipur, Assam, Tripura, Arunachal. We all have to tackle it together as it is our region's issue," Singh said. (PTI)

BSF apprehends 13 Bangladeshi smugglers

SHILLONG, Dec 23: Acting on specific intelligence on Sunday, vigilant troops of 4 Bn, BSF Meghalaya Frontier, apprehended 13 Bangladeshi nationals involved in smuggling activities, a BSF source said. In addition, BSF troops seized 35 bags of sugar along with other contraband items, including liquor, tea, copper wire, local cigarettes, skin cream, blankets, garlic, and other edible items. The total value of the seized items is estimated at Rs. 10.50 lakh, it further informed. The apprehended individuals were handed over to Dawki Police Station, West Jaintia Hills district, for further legal action after a medical examination at PHC Dawki. The special operations were conducted at various locations in the East Khasi Hills, East Jaintia Hills, and South Garo Hills districts. "The Border Security Force remains unwavering in its commitment to safeguarding India's borders and continues to combat cross-border illegal activities, including infiltration and smuggling," the BSF added. (ANN)

BJP elects two women for first time as mandal presidents

HT Correspondent
AGARTALA, Dec 23. In a significant move, the Tripura Pradesh Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has announced the names of its mandal presidents, marking a historic first with the induction of two women into the leadership positions. Notably, 95% of the appointees are fresh faces, with a focus on empowering youth leaders. BJP Office Secretary and State Returning Officer of the Sangathan Prava, Samarendra Deb, briefed reporters about the organisational changes, emphasizing that the restructuring process is aligned with the party's nationwide goals. "This organizational overhaul includes committees from the booth level to the state level. We initiated the

process in October, following an extensive membership drive that successfully enrolled additional members. Since November 11, we have conducted elections and formed booth-level committees across 3,352 booths in the state. This phase concluded with the announcement of booth-level presidents," Deb said. **95% NEW FACES** He further outlined the timeline, stating that Mandal Committees were formed between December 1 and 15. After detailed consultations and discussions, the party finalized 60 Mandal Presidents, one for each Mandal in Tripura. "Numerous candidates expressed in-

terest in the Mandal President posts. However, we implemented specific criteria, such as a maximum age limit of 45 years, to ensure the inclusion of young leaders. The selection process was rigorous and comprehensive," Deb added. Among the newly appointed Mandal Presidents, the representation includes 23.3% from the Scheduled Tribes (ST), 18.3% from the Scheduled Castes (SC), 36.7% from the General category, and 21.7% from the Other Backward Classes (OBC). "This marks the first time two women have been chosen as Mandal Presidents in the state. Our emphasis on fresh and youthful leadership is evident, with 95% of the newly elected Presidents being first-timers," Deb concluded.

Manipur CM congratulates PM for Kuwait's highest honour

IMPHAL, Dec 23: Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh on Monday congratulated Prime Minister Narendra Modi for being awarded Kuwait's highest honour, the 'Mubarak Al-Kabeer Order,' in recognition of his efforts to strengthen the ties between the two nations. Modi received the honour from Kuwait's Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah at the Bayan Palace in Kuwait City on Sunday. In a post on X, Singh said, "I congratulate Hon'ble Prime Minister, Shri @narendramodi ji on being conferred with Kuwait's highest honour, the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Order by His Highness, the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah." "This is another shining example of the global reverence shown upon Hon'ble PM, Shri @narendramodi ji's dynamic leadership and India's ever growing status and power in the world," Singh added. State's lone Rajya Sabha member Maharaja Leisemba Sanajaoba also congratulated Modi on receiving the honour. (PTI)

UP govt invites Arunachal Guv, CM to Maha Kumbh mela

ITANAGAR, Dec 23: The Uttar Pradesh government has extended an invitation to Arunachal Pradesh Governor Lt Gen K T Parmaik (Retd) and Chief Minister Pema Khandu to the Maha Kumbh mela at Prayagraj scheduled to be held early next year. Uttar Pradesh Tourism and Culture minister Jayveer Singh along with Minister of State for Environment, Forests and Climate Change Krishnapal Malik called on the governor at Raj Bhavan here on Monday and invited him on behalf of the UP government to the Kumbh mela to be held from January 13 to February 26. Accepting the invitation for the event, Parmaik thanked UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, an official communique said here on Monday. The governor hoped that the Prayagraj Mahakumbh would showcase India's vibrant cultural, devotional, and religious essence. Parmaik highlighted the religious events in the state and places of religious interest including Parasuram Kund, Malinithan, and Tangang Monastery. He extended an invitation to the ministers and the people of Uttar Pradesh to visit Arunachal. The UP ministers also invited Khandu to attend the religious event. "Happy to receive a formal invitation for the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 from Shri Jayveer Singh Ji, Hon Minister for Tourism & Culture and Shri KP Malik Ji, Hon Minister of State for Forest, Environment & Climate Change, Government of Uttar



Pradesh," Khandu said in a social media post. The Maha Kumbh mela, a festival that exemplifies the rich Sanatan heritage, is expected to witness a historic gathering of 40-45 crore devotees from India and abroad at the sacred confluence of Triveni Sangam. Scheduled from January 13, 2025 (Pausah Purnima Snaan) to February 26, 2025 (Maha Shivratni Snaan), this grand event embodies spiritual devotion and India's cultural grandeur, the chief minister said in a post on X. "Scientific precision, such as the astrological alignment of the sun, moon, and jupiter in the zodiac sign aquarius (kumbha), determines the auspicious timings of this celestial festival. This blend of faith and science makes Maha Kumbh a remarkable global event," he said. "I have urged the Hon'ble ministers to expand the scope of Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat activities between Uttar Pradesh and Arunachal," Khandu added. (PTI)

Tripura Board exams for Secondary and HS from Feb 24

HT Correspondent
AGARTALA, Dec 23: The Tripura Board of Secondary Education (TBSE) has announced the dates for the 2025 board examinations. The Higher Secondary (HS) exams will begin on February 24, 2025, while the Madhyamik (Class 10) exams will start on February 25, 2025. During a press conference on Monday, Dhananjay Gon Chowdhury, president of the TBSE, outlined the examination schedule. The Madhyamik

(Class 10) exams will commence on February 25, 2025, with English being the first paper. The exams will run from 12:00 noon to 3:15 pm, concluding on March 18, 2025. On the final day, students will take exams for 10 vocational subjects. The Alim Examination for secondary-level students will follow the same schedule, beginning on February 25 and ending with Theology on March 18, 2025. The Higher Secondary (Class 12) exams will start on February 24, 2025,

with English as the first subject. These exams will also be held from 12:00 noon to 3:15 pm and conclude on March 22, 2025, with vocational exams scheduled for the final day. The Fazil 12th Examination will begin on February 24 and finish on March 17, 2025. Gon Chowdhury added that the final number of students for the exams has not yet been confirmed, as the registration process is still underway. Examination centers will be decided based on the final student count.

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 adschills@gmail.com**

NOTICE

No.Addl.Est-2/SI.Com(Pt-VI)/2020-21/415: In pursuance to previous advertisements No. Addl.Est-2/Recruitment/(Pt-8) 2024-25/84 published by the DIPRO in the various local vernacular news papers on 08/06/2024, relating to recruitment of Grade IV posts in the Soil Conservation Department under Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, Diphu, it is hereby informed that the viva voce(interview) will be held on **09-01-2025**. Therefore, all qualified candidates are requested to collect their call letters from the Office of the Additional Director, Soil Conservation (Hills), Karbi Anglong, Diphu during Office hour 26/12/2024 onwards.

**Sd/-
 Member Secretary
 Cum
 Additional Director, Soil Conservation (Hills)
 Karbi Anglong, Diphu**

Memo No. Addl./ E-2/Recruitment/Pt-8/2024-25/ 629 Date 23/12/24

**GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM
 OFFICE OF THE ADDITIONAL DIRECTOR
 SOIL CONSERVATION (HILLS) KARBI ANGLONG, DIPHU
 adschills@gmail.com**

**Result for the Post Grade III under
 Soil Conservation Departments**

Dated : 23/12/24

Addl.E-2/SI.Com/Pt-III/2020-21/617 (A) The Candidates bearing roll numbers as shown below, who appeared in the written test for the post of Soil Conservation Demonstrator (Jr.)and Soil Conservation field Worker in four different location of schools in Diphu held on 08-09-2024 have been declared qualified for appearing in the viva-voce test (interview) which will be held on **10-01-2025 at The O/o. the Additional Director Soil Conservation (Hills), Diphu from 9 A.M to 5 P.M.**

Name of Post	Roll No
1. Soil Conservation Demonstrator (Jr.)=	25,27, 58, 70, 79, 80, 85, 86, 90, 103, 106, 129, 160, 205, 217, 252, 312, 344, 364, 411, 449, 489, 515, 523, 529, 532, 579, 604, 605, 623, 640, 644, 748, 756, 757, 810, 825, 897, 916, 923, 950, 985,1078, 1090, 1239,1241
2. Soil Conservation Field Worker =	05, 61, 81, 99, 116, 165, 225, 242, 309, 359, 377, 433, 443, 522, 523, 543, 544, 561, 575, 592, 625, 631, 633, 634, 644, 648, 664, 673, 679, 729, 769, 789, 836, 838, 846, 881, 899, 900, 906, 911, 923, 954, 957, 980, 1024, 1100, 1124, 1157, 1159, 1170, 1187, 1190, 1207, 1208, 1261, 1289, 1339, 1349, 1351, 1361, 1366, 1420, 1468, 1494, 1534, 1555, 1563, 1564, 1565, 1566, 1567, 1572, 1575, 1583, 1593, 1604, 1610, 1652, 1654, 1663, 1668, 1710, 1718, 1742, 1754, 1772, 1782, 1821, 1837, 1923.

All eligible candidates are requested to collect their call letters from the office of the Additional Director of soil Conservation (Hills), Karbi Anglong, Diphu during the office hour from 26/12/2024 onwards.

**Sd/-
 Chairman
 Selection Committee for appointment of
 Grade III Employees
 Soil Conservation Department, KAAC, Diphu**

Memo No.Addl./E-2/Recruitment/Pt-8/2024-25/628 Date: 23/12/24

No.DDB/BTC/Cultural/NIT-01/2024-25/ Dated: 16/12/2024

SHORT NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Sealed tenders affixing a non-refundable Court Fee Stamp of Rs. 8.25 (Rupees Eight & Twenty Five Paise) only with a validity period of 180 (One Hundred Eighty) days, which will subsequently to be converted and drawn up in the APWD's printed F-2 forms are invited from the registered contractors of class-II and class-I(A,B & C) category of Assam PWD (Roads & Building) and BTC, according to their eligibility for submitting tenders for the following works under Tribal & Affairs (P), (SOPD-G) fund for the year 2024-25. The Tenders will be received by the undersigned up to 01.00 P.M. on 08.01.2025 and will be opened on the same date & place at 01.30 P.M.

Sl. No.	Name of Work	Tender Value (Rs. In Lakh)	EMD/Bid Security. (in Rs. 1% ST, SC & 2% Oth)	Cost of Tender Paper	Time of Completion (Month)	Pre-bid Date & Time.	Last date & Time of Bid submission.	Date & Time of Bid Opening.
1	Const. of Anusushit Jati Cultural & Bikash Bhawan, Shankarpara Chithila under Binnachara VCDC, Kokrajhar under Tribal & Affairs (P) fund for the Financial year 2024-25.	Rs. 19.05,719/-	Rs.19,990.00	Rs.450/-	3 Months	02.01.2025 (10.30 A.M)	08.01.2025 (01.00 P.M.)	08.01.2025 (01.30 P.M.)

The Tender document can be seen/obtained from the undersigned during Office hours a and pre-bid meeting will be held as mentioned above. The address for the meeting is BDO's Chamber Dotma Dev. Block, Dotma. The bid will be opened in the Office of the undersigned as per the scheduled mentioned above. The TIA reserves the right of accepting of tenders paper or outright rejection of the same without assigning any reason therefore.

**Sd/-Block Development Officer,
 Dotma Development Block, Dotma**

IPR(BTC)/C/2024-25/1178

'Our demand not antithetical to affirmative action' NC leader holds protests demanding rationalisation of reservation in J&K

SRINAGAR, Dec 23: NC leader and Lok Sabha member from Srinagar Aga Ruhullah Mehdi on Monday led a peaceful protest outside the residence of Chief Minister Omar Abdullah to support the demand for rationalisation of reservation in Jammu and Kashmir.

The firebrand leader had on Sunday announced that he will be joining the peaceful protests against the existing reservation policy in Jammu and Kashmir implemented after the abrogation of Article 370.

With the Centre granting reservation to Pahari-speaking people in Jammu and Kashmir, the open merit category has been reduced to just 30 per cent while 70 per cent seats are reserved for various communities.

Students, especially those undergoing training in medicine and surgery, have been protesting against this policy, saying it promotes mediocrity where merit should reign supreme.

Several political leaders, includ-



ing Lok Sabha member from Baramulla Sheikh Abdul Rashid alias Engineer and arch-rival PDP leaders Waheed Para and Iltija Mufti, have supported the protest led by the NC leader against his own party government.

Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, the chairman of the separatist Hurriyat Conference, has also called for rationalisation of the reservation.

PDP MLA from Pulwama in a

post on X said he "wholeheartedly welcome Ruhullah's decision to stand with the youth in demanding rationality and fairness in reservation policies. This is a pivotal moment to address pressing grievances and ensure our policies are inclusive, youth-friendly, and just".

Para said at the heart of this matter lies the urgent and vehement demand for proportional rep-

resentation, a system that allocates opportunities based on the socio-economic realities of communities, ensuring no group is disproportionately favoured or left behind.

"Our demand is not antithetical to affirmative action. In fact, we are in favour of strengthening it. We believe that inclusion through reservation must go beyond tokenism to foster substantive equality. We believe in empowering marginalised communities to not just be present but to shape decisions and lead change.

"However, let's be clear: Merit must remain the bedrock of our systems. Reservations must serve only as targeted exceptions to bridge inequalities, not as tools for perpetual imbalance. Policies that reduce the majority to a minority are neither just nor sustainable," he added.

The Mirwaiz, in a post of X, said the issue of reservation should be addressed with justice and fairness by those in charge, safeguarding the interests of all

segments of society, not at the expense of any one group.

"The current status of reservations does that, by undermining the interests of the General/open merit category. Fervent appeal to address their concerns immediately! Support #openmeritstudentsassociation @OMSA_JK sit in protest," he said.

The Mirwaiz said he would be part of the protests if allowed by the authorities.

"Would be part of it if authorities allowed. My delegation will be there to support. Will also raise the issue in #JamaMasjid whenever permitted to go," he added.

Awami Ittehad Party MLA Sheikh Khurshid and chief spokesman Inam Nabi also joined the protests in support of rationalisation of reservations.

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Sunday said while his government has formed a sub-committee to review the reservation policy, it will abide by the court directions on the matter. (PTI)

CPI(M) rallies behind party member on his remarks against Rahul, Priyanka

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Dec 23: The ruling CPI(M) leaders on Monday rallied behind the party's politburo member A Vijayaraghavan in the raging political row over his controversial remarks on the Lok Sabha poll victories of Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra from Wayanad.

During a recent party event in Wayanad, Vijayaraghavan reportedly claimed that Rahul secured victory in the high-range segment twice with the support of communal forces and that extremist elements were present at Priyanka Gandhi's campaign rallies.

Prominent Marxist party leaders on Monday said that Vijayaraghavan didn't say anything wrong or against the party's policy and they would oppose minority communalism and majority communalism alike.

They also reiterated the charges raised by Vijayaraghavan against the Congress and accused the grand-old party of entering into an unholy nexus with communal outfits for electoral gains.

The CPI(M) leadership came out in support of the politburo member a day after the Congress and their United Democratic Front (UDF) ally, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), alleged that Vijayaraghavan was attempting to provoke majority communalism in society.

When his reaction was sought by the media, CPI(M) state secretary M V Govindan said what Vijayaraghavan had said was accurate and alleged that communal outfits like SDPI and Jamaat-e-Islami were acting like front partners of the UDF.

He charged that their nexus was evident during the recent Palakkad Assembly bypoll.

The criticism against the Jamaat-e-Islami was not against the Muslim community and the opposition against the RSS was not against the Hindus, he said, adding that the CPI(M) would not show any compromise in opposing both the mi-

nority and majority communalism.

Strongly supporting Vijayaraghavan, senior CPI(M) leader and ruling LDF convenor T P Ramakrishnan said the leader had criticised the stand of the Congress party, which forges a nexus with communal forces during elections.

"Vijayaraghavan has not taken any communal stand. His remarks were also not meant to promote communalism. He has taken a stand that can safeguard society from communal forces," he said.

Senior leader and former minister P K Sreemathi also said Vijayaraghavan had not said anything other than the Marxist party's policy and stand.

Pointing out that communal and extremist forces are gaining strength in the state, she said they cannot be allowed to flourish in Kerala.

"Whoever it is... whether it is Hindu communalism or Muslim extremism, the CPI(M) will take a strong stand against it," she said.

She also accused the Congress of forging ties with communal forces during elections.

On Sunday, Congress leaders accused Vijayaraghavan of making comments against Rahul and Priyanka to "please" the Sangh Parivar, while the IUML alleged that he was attempting to provoke majority communalism in society.

AICC general secretary K C Venugopal strongly criticised Vijayaraghavan, accusing him of using "communal" language that even the Sangh Parivar might hesitate to employ against Rahul. Venugopal also questioned whether the CPI(M) shared the same opinion.

Leader of Opposition, V D Satheesan, echoed similar sentiments, charging the CPI(M) with pushing the same communal agenda propagated by the Sangh Parivar.

Harshly criticising Vijayaraghavan, KPCC chief K Sudhakaran accused the ruling CPI(M) of "surrendering to extreme communalism and providing support to the RSS in the state". (PTI)

Bhujbal meets Fadnavis

CM hints at national stage for sulking leader

MUMBAI/PUNE, Dec 23: Senior NCP leader Chhagan Bhujbal, who is sulking over not being included in the new Mahayuti government in Maharashtra, met Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis here on Monday.

Talking to reporters after the meeting, Bhujbal said he had an elaborate discussion with the CM on the prevailing political and social atmosphere in the state. In Pune, Fadnavis said there are plans to send Bhujbal to the "national stage" since Deputy CM Ajit Pawar wants the NCP to become a "national party".

The former state minister was accompanied by his nephew Sameer Bhujbal during the nearly 30-minute meeting with Fadnavis at the latter's 'Sagar' bungalow in Mumbai.

"Fadnavis told me that the Other Backward Classes have played an important role in the landslide victory of the Mahayuti in the assembly elections (held on November 20) and he will take care that the OBC community's interest is not harmed," Chhagan Bhujbal said.

He also said Fadnavis has sought some time to think over the issues pertaining to OBCs.

"He (Fadnavis) said he would arrive at some decision in 10 to 12 days," the NCP leader added. OBC leaders are opposed to activist Manoj Jarange's demand for reservation for the Maratha community in the Other Backward

Class (Kunbi) category. Bhujbal has also been vocal about his opposition to the demand.

Asked if he was planning to switch over to the BJP, Chhagan Bhujbal refused to elaborate and said he has already spoken his mind on the issue of him being ignored in the ministry expansion.

Speaking to reporters in Pune, Chief Minister Fadnavis said there are discussions underway to send Bhujbal to the national stage.

"Bhujbal met me in Mumbai. He has already told you the reasons for which the visit was scheduled. He is our leader. Ajit Pawar cares about Bhujbal saheb. Ajit dada wants his party to become a national party. Thus, it was discussed to send Bhujbal saheb to the national stage," the CM said.

On Sunday, representatives of OBC organisations from different parts of Maharashtra met Bhujbal in the city.

The NCP leader, who represents Yevla constituency in Nashik district, did not attend the Winter Session of the state legislature that concluded in Nagpur on Saturday.

He left for Nashik on December 16, a day after 39 Mahayuti MLAs took oath as ministers.

The Mahayuti, comprising the BJP, Shiv Sena led by Eknath Shinde and Ajit Pawar's NCP, won 230 of the 288 seats in the state assembly polls held last month. (PTI)

Odisha Cong to stage protests over Shah's remarks on Ambedkar

BHUBANESWAR, Dec 23: The Congress will stage protests in all the districts of Odisha on Tuesday demanding Union Home Minister Amit Shah's resignation for his recent remark on B R Ambedkar during a debate in the Rajya Sabha.

Addressing a press conference at the Congress Bhawan here, Koraput MP Saptagiri Sankar Ulaka termed Shah's remark as an "insult to the dalits, tribals, and minorities".

Shah has come under fire from the opposition parties over his remark on Ambedkar in the Upper House of Parliament on December 17. "Abhi ek fashon ho gaya hai - Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar. Itna naam agar bhagwan ka lete to saat jannon tak swarg mil jata (It has become

a fashion to say Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar). If they had taken God's name so many times, they would have got a place in heaven," Shah had said.

"Ambedkar is like a god for the dalits, tribals, and minorities. A tribal man like me would have not been able to represent Koraput in Parliament without leaders like Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel," he said.

Commenting on the alleged physical assault on two BJP MPs in Parliament, the Congress MP said, "When our MPs were trying to enter Parliament, saffron party parliamentarians pushed Mallikarjun Kharge and tried to attack Priyanka Gandhi. (PTI)

BJP issues 'chargesheet' against Kejrival; vows to remove AAP from power



NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Senior BJP leader Anurag Thakur on Monday issued a "chargesheet" against AAP national convenor Arvind Kejriwal, accusing him of turning Delhi into a "corruption lab" through a series of "scams".

No immediate reaction was available from the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) over the allegations of the BJP leader.

Ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls, the state unit of the BJP has formed a "chargesheet committee" that has so far issued detailed reports listing the alleged failures of the ruling AAP MLAs.

"What kind of a party is this which came to power promising to give corruption-free government but was involved in eight to nine scams related to the liquor policy, Delhi Jal Board, DTC, Waqf Board," Thakur charged.

"Ghotale Pe Ghotala, Kejriwal Ne Banaya Delhi Ko Bhrashtachar Ki Prayogshala" (Kejriwal turned Delhi into a laboratory of corruption with scams), Thakur gave the slogan and asserted that

the BJP will remove the AAP from power in Delhi.

The elections for the 70-member Delhi Assembly are due to be held in February next year.

The former Union minister also targeted the AAP and Kejriwal over education and health, alleging it failed to open new Mohalla Clinics and hospitals and did not use the Centre's funds to boost the city's healthcare infrastructure.

He charged that the smog tower in Connaught Place, which was supposed to provide relief from air pollution, was lying defunct although the AAP government spent crores of rupees on advertisement.

He cited water shortage, lack of sanitation, damaged roads, and other issues to corner the ruling AAP.

Thakur also alleged that the AAP has been supporting "anti-national" forces and Kejriwal questioned India's surgical strikes. He said the party got the support of "Khalistani elements" during the Punjab polls. (PTI)

Today's Cong is 'duplicate Congress' led by 'fake Gandhis': Pralhad Joshi



HUBBALLI (KARNATAKA), Dec 23: Union Minister Pralhad Joshi on Monday alleged that the present Congress party is "duplicate Congress" led by fake "Gandhis" and noted that they were not the inheritors of party that was there during Mahatma Gandhi's time.

He also alleged that government money was being used by the ruling party for the centenary celebrations of the 1924 Indian National Congress session that was presided over by Mahatma Gandhi in Belagavi.

The 39th session of the Indian National Congress held in Belagavi was the only Congress session presided over by Mahatma Gandhi.

The centenary event is scheduled in Belagavi on December 26 and 27. "Today's Congress party is not the inheritors of the Congress party during Mahatma Gandhi's time. What is there now is a duplicate Congress and fake Gandhis (referring to Sonia and Rahul Gandhi)," Joshi said.

Speaking to reporters here, he alleged that thousands of rupees from the government is being spent and decorative light arrangements have been done by Hubballi Electricity Supply Company (HESCOM) in Belagavi for the celebrations. "Entirely government money."

"What is your relationship with Mahatma Gandhi's Congress? Your Congress is a duplicate Congress. Congress has got spoiled after getting split several times. What is there now is a group of thieves. You Gandhis are fake Gandhis. Why is government money spent on fake Gandhis' fake Congress? It has to be immediately stopped and the money spent has to be made public and the Congress party has to pay the money," he said.

Further noting that after getting to know about objections being raised over government money being spent for the event, the Congress is playing a new "drama" by trying to project it as an event of Mahatma Gandhi, who fought for the country's freedom, and started inviting everyone for it, Joshi said and added that "they are trying to give it a new twist, but people are not fools."

"There is a huge difference between this Congress and the then Congress. There is no relation between them. What is there today is a group of thieves, today's Gandhis are fake Gandhis," he added.

The party has decided to hold a meeting of the Congress Working Committee (CWC) on December 26 in Belagavi and a public meeting on December 27.

Deputy Chief Minister and state Congress chief D K Shivakumar had recently said that as part of the government programme there will be the unveiling of the statue of Mahatma Gandhi on December 26 on the premises of Suvarna Vidhana Soudha, by Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi and Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha and AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge. (PTI)

No question of forgiving BJP MLC Ravi: Minister Laxmi Hebbalkar

BELAGAVI (KARNATAKA), Dec 23: Karnataka Minister Laxmi Hebbalkar on Monday asserted that she will continue her legal fight seeking justice in connection with BJP MLC C T Ravi allegedly using a derogatory word against her and said that she will request Legislative Council Chairman Basavaraj Horatti and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah to ensure swift action.

There is no question of forgiving Ravi at any cost, she said, and added that she will also seek justice from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and would write a letter to President Droupadi Murmu.

"If I get an opportunity, I will meet the prime minister and bring to his notice the injustice that has happened to me," she said.

Ravi allegedly used a derogatory word against Hebbalkar in the Legislative Council on December 19 during an altercation between them, when the House was adjourned for a

while. He was arrested on the same day evening and taken into the police van from the premises of Suvarna Vidhana Soudha in Belagavi, where the legislature session was held, based on Hebbalkar's complaint.

"For two days, I had gone into silence because I was shocked. I had never heard such a thing from anybody. I have come forward in politics fighting injustice. There was no red carpet for me in my career. I have struggled for 26 years and come to this level," Hebbalkar told reporters here.

Hitting out at BJP, she said, she feels pity about -- state BJP president B Y Vijayendra, Leader of Opposition R Ashoka and saffron party leaders from her Panchamasali Lingayat community Basangouda Patil Yatra and Arvind Bellad -- for supporting a person who made a woman feel "disgusted".

"For the sake of politics and their party, they are doing it. The BJP leaders who chant Rama, Rama.. should be

ashamed. He (Ravi) said it (derogatory word) I was the one who heard it being used against me. But, Ravi is going across the state getting garlanded and is getting glorified," she said.

If he has any conscience, he should tell women in his family that he is feeling guilty, she demanded.

Stating that she was shocked for a couple of days, the minister said she won't stop her fight against "injustice".

"I will once again submit an appeal to the Chairman of the Legislative Council. He has said before the media that he has not got any video or audio recordings (about usage of derogatory word), as the recording was mute in the House, but has seen certain recordings in the media. I, too, have evidence. I will also release it," she said.

There is no question of forgiving Ravi at any cost, she further said. "I will fight and this Laxmi Hebbalkar won't rest until he is punished for insulting the women community by using this derogatory word," she added. (PTI)

Somnath Suryavanshi killed as he was Dalit and protecting Constitution: Rahul

PARBHANI, Dec 23: Congress MP Rahul Gandhi on Monday claimed Somnath Suryavanshi was killed because he was a Dalit and was protecting the Constitution, in the wake of the desecration of its replica in Maharashtra's Parbhani.

Police killed Suryavanshi, and it was a 'cent per cent custodial death', the leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha alleged after meeting Suryavanshi's family members in Parbhani.

Talking to reporters, Gandhi said he met Suryavanshi's family members who showed him the post-mortem report, as well as some photographs and videos.

Parbhani witnessed violence after a glass-enclosed replica of the Constitution near Dr Babasaheb

Ambedkar's statue outside the railway station in the city, located in Marathwada region, was vandalised on the evening of December 10.

Suryavanshi (35), a resident of Shankar Nagar in Parbhani, was among more than 50 persons arrested in connection with the violence. He died on December 15 at a state-run hospital where he was rushed after complaining of chest pain and uneasiness while he was in judicial custody and lodged at the Parbhani district central prison, as per police.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis has ordered a judicial probe into the Parbhani violence.

Fadnavis said in the state assembly recently that Suryavanshi had told a magistrate that he was not

tortured and the CCTV footage also doesn't show any evidence of brutality.

After meeting Suryavanshi's family, Gandhi claimed, "The youth was killed because he was a Dalit and was protecting the Constitution. This is a cent per cent custodial death. The police have murdered him."

"The chief minister lied in the assembly to give a message to the police. The RSS ideology is to wipe out the Constitution," the Congress leader charged.

Gandhi demanded that the matter be resolved and those who killed the man be punished.

"This is not politics, there has been a murder and action has to be taken," he said. (PTI)

Election rules amendment 'gravest' threat to fair polls: Stalin

CHENNAI, Dec 23: Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin on Monday alleged that democracy was facing its gravest threat under the BJP-led Centre as it has made a reckless amendment to the Conduct of Election Rules, to "kill transparency" and appealed to all political parties, to counter the "assault on free and fair" elections.

Stalin, also the president of ruling DMK said that consequent to the direction of the Punjab and Haryana High Court to furnish the CCTV footage of an election booth, the union government brought this amendment to prevent public inspection of election documents, including CCTV footage and thus "destroyed one of the basic features of the Con-



stitution." In a post on 'X,' he said: "Democracy is facing its gravest threat under the BJP-led Union

Government with the reckless amendment of Section 93(2)(a) of the Conduct of Election Rules, to kill the transparency in election."

Furthermore, he said: "The BJP-led Union Government's fear extends beyond Haryana, reflecting anxiety over Maharashtra, where their orchestrated and unholy victory in the recent assembly election has raised serious concerns.

It is shocking that the Election Commission of India, instead of fighting for institutional integrity, has willingly succumbed to the pressure of Prime Minister Modi's Government and happily involved in defacing its own child - the free and fair election! I appeal to all political parties, including those participating in the Union Government, to come forward and counter this undemocratic assault on the free and fair elections of our Nation." (PTI)

3 Khalistan Zindabad Force members gunned down in Pilibhit encounter

PILIBHIT/CHANDIGARH, Dec 23: Three suspected Khalistani terrorists allegedly involved in the grenade attack in Gurdaspur were killed in an encounter with police in Pilibhit early Monday, with Punjab's Director General of Police Gaurav Yadav terming it as a major breakthrough against a Pakistan-sponsored terror module.

The success comes after three blasts which took place in different districts of Punjab this month.

The gunfight between members of the Khalistan Zindabad Force (KZF) and a joint team of Uttar Pradesh Police and Punjab Police took place in Purnapur area of Pilibhit after three module members opened fire at the police party.

DGP Yadav said the three have been identified as Varinder Singh alias Ravi (23), Gurvinder Singh (25) and Jashanpreet Singh alias Partap Singh (18).

They are residents of Kalanaur police station and are accused of hurling a hand grenade at the Bakshiwal police post in Kalanaur in Punjab's Gurdaspur district on December 18, a Punjab police statement said on Monday. No one was injured in the Bakshiwal incident.

Terrorist organisation KZF had later used social media platform to claim the responsibility for this act of terror.

Amitabh Yash, Additional Director General (Law and Order), Uttar Pradesh Police said the trio was involved in the grenade attack on a police checkpoint in Gurdaspur.

"The three sustained serious injuries in the encounter and were immediately rushed to CHC Purnapur for treatment," he said.

The ADG told PTI that the three suspects later succumbed to their



injuries.

Two AK-47 rifles, two Glock pistols and a huge cache of ammunition were seized from them, he said.

In a major breakthrough against Pakistan ISI-sponsored KZF terror module, a joint operation of Punjab Police and Uttar Pradesh Police led to an encounter with three module members involved in grenade attack at Police establishment in Gurdaspur, said DGP Yadav.

According to a Punjab police statement, the DGP said said preliminary investigation has revealed that this terror module is controlled by Pak-based Ranjeet Singh Nita, the chief of KZF, and operated by Greece-based Jaswinder Singh Mannu, a native of village Agwan village in Kalanaur.

Accused Varinder alias Ravi, who was leading the module, also belongs to Agwan village. He was being further controlled and masterminded by UK-based Jagjeet Singh and was using assumed identity of Fateh Singh Baghi to also claim the responsibility of the grenade attack, the DGP said, according to the statement.

In a post on X, DGP Yadav said, "This module is controlled by Ranjeet Singh Nita... It is further controlled by Jagjeet Singh, based in the #UK and serving in the #British Army. Jagjeet Singh used the identity of Fateh Singh Baghi."

Investigations are underway to expose all the connections and members of the module and more recoveries and arrests are likely, he said.

Sharing operation details, Punjab's Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) Border Range Satinder Singh said following reliable inputs about suspects having fled to UP and taking shelter somewhere there at Pilibhit, the Gurdaspur Police immediately informed the Pilibhit police and also moved police teams from Gurdaspur to Pilibhit to launch a joint operation.

Police teams had successfully traced the accused persons who, when confronted, opened fire at the police teams, prompting the police parties to retaliate, Satinder Singh said. During the exchange of fire, the three accused persons sustained bullet injuries and were immediately taken to CHC Purnapur for

urgent medical treatment, he added.

Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP), Gurdaspur, Harish Dayama said further investigations are going on to expose all connections and members of this terror module and more arrests and recoveries likely in coming days.

A case FIR dated December 19 was already registered under sections 109 and 324 (4) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and section 4 (5) of the Explosive Act at Police Station at Kalanaur. Sections 13, 16, 17, 18-B, 20, 35 and 40 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act have now been added in the FIR, the police statement said.

Referring to the grenade attack, Congress MP Sukhjinder Randhawa said, "Till today, police were not accepting that there was an attack. They claimed that a tyre had exploded."

He alleged a "big conspiracy" is underway to destabilise Punjab and the state is being harmed. Industries are leaving, people don't want to work here, youngsters are leaving as they are afraid, he told PTI Videos.

The Punjab government and the BJP-led central government are hand in glove with each other, and the two are working towards the same goal -- how to finish Punjab, the MP alleged.

"Today drones and RDX are coming into Punjab from Pakistan. The IEDs that are planted, where are they coming from? Punjab Police has laid down arms before criminals. I have written to the Union home minister and I also request the chief minister of Punjab to protect the people of Punjab," he said. (PTI)

Maha Kumbh: 50,000 police personnel to ensure safety of pilgrims

LUCKNOW, Dec 23: The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 will see a strong force of 50,000 police personnel fanning out across Prayagraj to respond to potential terror threats, cyber attacks, rogue drones and human trafficking, Uttar Pradesh Director General of Police, Prashant Kumar said on Monday.

Held every 12 years, the Maha Kumbh will be organised in Prayagraj from January 13 to February 26. About 45 crore pilgrims are expected at the Maha Kumbh.

In an exclusive interview to PTI, the state DGP said he is personally overseeing measures for a safe and secure Kumbh.

Kumar said this Kumbh will be truly digital in which the police force will use modern technologies like AI enabled cameras, drones and effective strategy to detect and neutralise rogue drones.

With cyber crimes on the rise, police is also taking all measures to save pilgrims from cyber criminals.

"Ahead of the Mahakumbh, the police force has hired a team of private experts from the Future Crime Research Foundation and tied up with IIT Kanpur for cyber world patrolling to save pilgrims from cyber frauds and crimes," the DGP said.

"We have established a cyber police station in the Mahakumbh area for the first time. We have roped in national agencies like I4C and CERT-IN for cyber patrolling and analysing cyber security networks. They will also work on data protection," the officer added.

Asked about the police deployment, Kumar said this time there will be around 50,000 policemen on duty which is 40 per cent more than that last Kumbh in 2019.

About the crowd management



and traffic plan, which will be one of the most important aspects in the mela, Kumar said the traffic movement will be closely monitored and effective measures will be taken at the source of overcrowding.

"We have installed 2,700 CCTV cameras, including those having AI capabilities, and parameters have been fed in them to give alerts regarding crowd density, movement, flow, barricade jumping, fire and smoke alerts. With automatic number plate recognition capabilities, parking areas will be managed and estimate of number of vehicles coming to the city can be made," the DGP said.

The integrated command and control centre, having four wings -- three in mela area and one in the city -- will keep a 24-hour watch on the crowd movement.

Several diversion plans are also there for pilgrims in case of an emergency.

On VIP movement control, Kumar said anyone visiting will have to walk for one kilometer on normal days and 3 km on peak days of 'snan' (bath).

Asked about measures that are being taken to prevent and respond to potential terror threats and how intelligence is being strengthened

to counter them, Kumar said, "For anti-terror related preparedness, we have got NSG, ATS, STF besides civilian force".

"All central agencies have been roped in to gather intelligence regarding any threats. Armed forces will be there at strategic points and snipers will also be posted. Face recognition software is in place to recognise known international elements," the DGP said.

About disaster preparedness, he said several teams, including NDRF, SDRF and others, will be there on the ground and 54 SOPs for various disaster scenarios have been finalised.

On safety of devotees in and around water bodies, Kumar said deep water barricading, river lines, jetties, underwater drones, and specialist divers have been deployed.

"We are also getting robotic buoys to help people in distress mid-river," he added.

On being asked about strategies to deal with lost and found cases, Kumar said 10 digital lost and found centres have been established and local police will also be there to assist people in such cases.

Police is also preparing a network for lost mobile scenarios, he said. (PTI)

LG approves suspension of two DFS officers in Delhi

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Lieutenant Governor VK Saxena has approved immediate suspension of two Delhi Fire Services officers over alleged negligence of duty in connection with the death of three civil services aspirants in a flooded basement of a coaching centre here, his office said on Monday.

Divisional Officer Ved Pal and Assistant Divisional Officer Uday Vir Singh, both Group 'A' officers, face allegations of negligence and hiding of facts, the LG office said in a note.

According to the note, action on other erring officers of MCD and PWD is also under process following LG's directions.

"Ved Pal, Divisional Officer, and Uday Vir Singh, Assistant Divisional Officer, have been placed under suspension following a thorough investigation into the incident," the note said.

On July 27, the basement of Rau's IAS coaching centre in Old Rajender Nagar was flooded within minutes due to heavy rainfall, leading to the death of the three students trapped in the basement of the building which was being used as a library.

"A detailed inquiry conducted

by the District Magistrate (Central) revealed that the two suspended officers had inspected the premises for the issuance of a Fire Safety Certificate.

"However, they were found to have concealed information about the misuse of the basement as a library and failed to refer the matter to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD). Consequently, the Fire Safety Certificate was erroneously issued on July 9," the note said.

The investigation also pointed fingers at some MCD authorities, who were found to have neglected their duty to inspect and seal the illegally operating basement library and issued a completion-cum-occupancy certificate in September 2021, it said.

Strict action is also being initiated against other MCD and Public Works Department (PWD) officials, responsible for the poor drainage infrastructure in the area, it said.

Following the suspension orders, the matter will be referred to the National Capital Civil Service Authority for recommending further disciplinary action, the note added. (PTI)

Doctors' organisation protest in Esplanade allowed

KOLKATA, Dec 23: A division bench of the Calcutta High Court on Monday upheld a December 20 order that allowed an organisation of doctors to hold a demonstration here during the Christmas season to press their demand for speedy justice for RG Kar hospital medic who was allegedly raped and murdered in August.

During the course of the hearing, the bench observed that the R G Kar incident was "unprecedented, unimaginable and horrible".

The state had moved the division bench, challenging the order of the single bench of Justice Tirthankar Ghosh, which had permitted the Joint Forum of Doctors to hold the sit-in 50 feet away from Dorina Crossing at Esplanade in central Kolkata from December 20-26.

Such demonstrations on Christmas days would cause traffic snarls in the busy area and inconvenience revellers in the festive season, the state's counsel argued.

The division bench of Justice Harish Tandon and Justice Hiranmay Bhattacharya allowed the forum to continue its agitation at the same spot after the defence counsel assured that the number of protesters would be within the specified limit of 100.

The forum's counsel also submitted that the demonstrators wouldn't spill over the barricaded area earmarked for holding the sit-in as discussed with the state police and administration.

The court also asked the agitating doctors to respond to the state's

proposal of suspending the sit-in for a day on December 25 and instead defer it to December 27.

Justice Ghosh, in his December 20 order, had said that since the organisers were doctors, they were expected to take into account the possible hardships to commuters in the area during the demonstration.

The court had directed that the stage for holding the demonstration should not exceed 40 feet in length and 23 feet in width and the number of participants in the sit-in should not exceed 250 at a time.

In his submission before the division bench on Monday, state's counsel Kalyan Banerjee found little merit in holding the sit-in at Dorina Crossing against the alleged delay in the CBI probe during Christmas.

Doctors' counsel Bikash Bhattacharya countered his assertion, stating that the protests at Dorina Crossing for the past three days did not cause any traffic bottleneck or inconvenience to the public.

He also submitted a video clip of the ongoing demonstration to buttress his claims and contended that people go to Park Street to celebrate Christmas, not Esplanade.

The on-duty postgraduate trainee doctor's dead body was found in the seminar room of R G Kar Medical College and Hospital on August 9.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has filed a charge sheet against the prime accused, Sanjay Roy, in the rape and murder case of the on-duty doctor. (PTI)

NGT issues notices on Madhya Pradesh recording most stubble burning cases

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The National Green Tribunal has sought a response from pollution watchdog CAQM on Madhya Pradesh recording the highest stubble burning cases in the country.

The green body was hearing a matter in which it had taken suo motu cognisance of a media report about the state recording 11,382 stubble burning incidents, surpassing Punjab's 9,655.

In an order dated December 13, a bench of National Green Tribunal Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava and Expert Member A Senthil Vel said, "As per the article, the increase in stubble burning is linked to the rise in paddy cultivation, which has doubled over the

last decade. The worst-affected districts are Sheopur (2,424 cases) and Narmadapuram (1,462 cases), where the practice is most prevalent."

The bench noted in the report that some farmers alleged burning paddy was a compulsion without alternative methods to remove the stubble. It also noted that farmers of districts such as Betul and Balaghat had adopted sustainable practices to remove the stubble.

"The news items attract the provisions of the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981, and the Environment (Protection) Act. It raises substantial issues relating to compliance with the environmental norms," the tribunal said.

'Doctors can play important role in organ donation awareness'

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: President Droupadi Murmu on Monday said there is hesitancy among people towards organ donation and asserted that doctors can play an important role in building awareness of this noble cause.

Addressing the 6th Convocation of Vardhman Mahavir Medical College and Safdarjung Hospital in the national capital, she underlined that the list of people waiting for organ transplant is growing.

"To address this issue, development of artificial organs and organ donation by the families of the deceased is necessary," Murmu said.

"There is a kind of hesitancy among people towards organ donation. Doctors can play an important role in

removing this and can help build awareness to motivate people for the noble cause," she stated.

To boost organ donation, National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organization (NOTTO) was set up in this institute, she said. Growing use of technology in medical stream has made collaboration between engineering and medical institutes very important, she said.

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), mRNA technology, robotics and the likes are going to bring a major change in the field of medical science, she added.

Murmu mentioned that she recently inaugurated India's first CAR-T cell therapy developed through collaboration between the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay and Tata Memorial Hospital (TMH). (PTI)

Experts claim latest govt data on India's forests 'inflated'

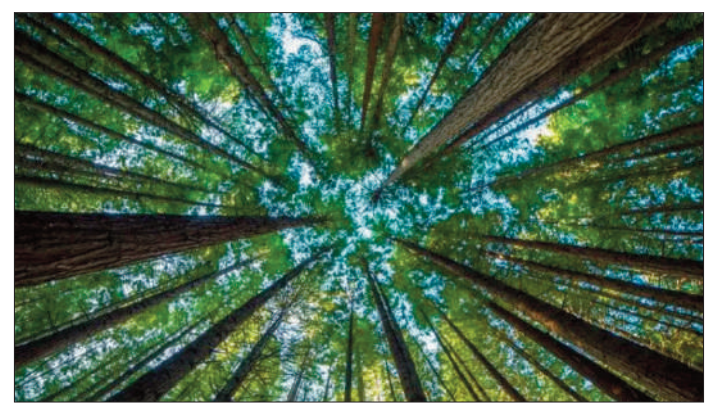
NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Several experts have claimed that the latest government data on India's forests is "inflated" as it includes bamboo plantations, coconut groves, and orchards among others as part of the forest cover.

The 'India State of Forests Report 2023' released on Saturday, after a delay of almost a year, said India's total forest and tree cover has increased by 1,445 sq km since 2021, reaching 25.17 per cent of the total geographical area in 2023.

However, the forest cover grew by just 156 sq km and most of the gain (149 sq km) occurred outside the Recorded Forest Area (RFA), which refers to areas designated as forests in government records.

The overall results could have been stronger, especially since the government included bamboo and smaller trees (5-10 cm diameter at breast height) in the tree cover estimates for ISFR 2023. The assessment also expanded to 751 districts, up from 636 in 2021.

Experts including Kerala's former principal chief conservator of forests Prakriti Srivastava, conservationist researcher Krithika Sampath and former National Board for Wildlife member Prerna Singh Bindra claimed that the government counted bamboo plantations, coconut groves, and orchards among others as part of the forest cover and produced "another



faulty report with inflated data".

They argued that such areas do not offer any ecological value for biodiversity and wildlife conservation. The increase in tree cover (1,289 sq km) is also mainly due to plantations of rubber, eucalyptus, acacia and mango, coconut, areca nut and shade trees in tea and coffee plantations.

Forest cover refers to all land that has a tree canopy density of more than 10 per cent and spans over an area of one hectare or more, regardless of the type of ownership or legal status. It includes natural forests as well as man-made plantations, orchards and tree patches in urban and rural areas that meet the size and canopy density criteria.

Tree cover is defined as patches of trees and isolated trees outside

RFA that are less than one hectare. "Mango contributes to 13.25 per cent of the tree cover," they pointed out.

They said according to government data, 1,488 sq km of unclassified forests have been lost between 2021 and 2023 but "there is no explanation for it" in the ISFR 2023.

"Unclassified forests' are non-notified forests under government ownership.

The experts also said the report does not establish a correlation between forest area (areas designated as forests in government records) and forest cover.

The report "clearly reflects that the data on both is not robust and therefore cannot be correlated", the experts said. They claimed that the report failed to comply with the

NHRC notice to TN govt, DGP over electrocution of 2 labourers during repair work



NEW DELHI, Dec 23: The NHRC on Monday said it has issued a notice to the Tamil Nadu government and the state's police chief over reports that two persons, working as contract labourers with the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation were electrocuted while repairing a high-tension overhead power line in Tiruchi.

The National Human Rights Commission in a statement said it has also noted that such incidents have occurred earlier too in the state. This is a "serious human rights violation" and a "matter of concern" for the rights panel.

The NHRC has taken "suo motu cognisance of a media report that two persons, working as contract labourers with the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation (Tangedco) died due to electrocution while repairing a high-tension overhead power line near Olaiyur Ring Road in KK Nagar, Tiruchi in Tamil Nadu on December 18, 2024," it said.

The Commission has observed that the contents of the media report, if true, "indicate gross negligence" on the part of the electricity department resulting in the death of two labourers.

Accordingly, it has issued notices to the chief secretary and the director general of police of Tamil Nadu, seeking a detailed report within two weeks.

"It is expected to include the status of the FIR registered in the matter and compensation, if any provided to the next of kin of the two victims. The Commission would also like to know the steps taken or proposed by the state government and Tangedco to ensure that such incidents do not recur," it added.

According to the media report, as per the preliminary investigations, the power supply to the cable was "not fully turned off during the repair work". The workers were on the job without any protective gear, the statement said, quoting the report.

In a similar incident, a worker was electrocuted while repairing a transformer in the Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu last year. Last month, a migrant worker was reportedly electrocuted during Cyclone Fengal and his body was found near an ATM in Muthialpet, the statement said. (PTI)

Supreme Court order in the La-farge case which called for digitisation of forest maps, geo-referencing of Recorded Forest Areas (RFA), and documentation of diverted forest lands. The absence of these elements weakens the report's credibility.

They also said that forest lands diverted for dams, roads, railways and other such permanent constructions are lost forever, but are not deleted from records, thus "inflating the figures".

Debadityo Sinha, who leads the climate and ecosystems team at the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, said India lost 30,808 sq km of open and scrub forests alongside 14,073 sq km of moderately dense forests and 1,816 sq km of dense forests to "non-forest" uses.

The report mentions the carbon sequestration potential of 406.05 million tonnes of carbon from these degraded lands but is silent on non-forest uses, Sinha posted on X.

"In my understanding, these areas are already home to some of the country's most significant engineering projects -- mines, highways, and strategic developments of national importance -- and many are being planned or approved following the latest amendments to the Forest Conservation Act," he said. The experts expressed concerns that the forest cover in the

hill districts is just 40 per cent of their geographical area against the Forest Policy mandated 66.6 per cent.

"This is very alarming as our soil health, ecological stability, ability to counter landslides, floods depends on forest cover in the hills," they said.

The increased number of landslides and floods can be traced to the loss of forest cover in the hills which is a poor reflection of efforts taken to ensure our ecological security, the experts said.

The FSI also analysed forest cover changes in the ecologically fragile Western Ghats over the past decade and found an overall loss of 58.22 sq km in forest cover.

In this region, the Nilgiris reported the steepest decline of 123 sq km. The mountain range, spread across Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, is known for its popular tourist spots.

The report showed a decrease of 327.30 sq km in forest cover in the northeastern region.

The country's total mangrove cover stands at 4,991.68 sq km, a net decrease of 7.43 sq km since 2021, according to the report.

Moderately dense forest and open forest categories saw declines of 1,043.23 sq km and 2,480.11 sq km, respectively, over the last decade, despite gains in very dense forest. (PTI)

Sanjay Mishra: I never liked dubbed English films

MUMBAI, Dec 23: Actor Sanjay Mishra, who voice stars as Pumbaa the warhog in the Hindi version of the Hollywood animated film "Mufasa: The Lion King", says the standard of dubbing in India has improved over the years with attention being paid to every word today. The film, directed by Barry Jenkins, serves as both a prequel and sequel to "The Lion King", the 2019 remake of the 1994 animated movie. It explores the journey of Mufasa from an orphaned cub to becoming the king of the jungle.

Superstar Shah Rukh Khan has voiced the title role of Mufasa in the Hindi dubbed version along with his elder son Aryan Khan lending his voice to Simba and his youngest son AbRam Khan as Mufasa, the cub. Mishra said he was motivated to dub for Pumbaa after he heard actor Shreyas Talpade record for the character of Timon, the meerkat. Timon and Pumbaa are the iconic duo who feature in "The Lion King" universe as friends and mentors of Simba, Mufasa's son. "I never liked dubbed English films because they (Hindi dubbed dialogues) sounded incomplete. Today, attention is paid to every word and not just on the first and last word. I was initially a bit worried. But when I heard the way Shreyas did it, I felt he did it the way it was required. So, I did it exactly on the basis of what was written in the script," Mishra told PTI. The actor said he simply followed the pace and rhythm set by Talpade to dub for his character.

"I ensure I dub after Shreyas because he is born and brought up in Mumbai so I believe he rather understands the character well. So, I just follow him, it helps me," he added, in a reference to using the local Mumbai dialect for voice acting in "Mufasa: The Lion King". Mishra, known for films such as "Ankhon Dekhi", "Dhamaal", "Vadh", and "Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3", said directors today are actively reaching out to him for various projects.

"That's the change that has happened. Like, 'Vadh' part two is being made, it was great working with the directors (Jaspal Singh Sandhu and Rajeev Barnwal). Then I'm working on the next part of 'Dhamaal'. I'm happy that directors today want to work with me," the 61-year-old actor said. For him, Mishra explained, the primary motivation to take on a film lies in the opportunity to collaborate with the right director. "I always had a wish of working with some directors. I had the desire to work with Mani Ratnam and I worked with him (in 'Dil Se', 'Saathiya', and 'Guru'), to work with Ketan Mehta and I did that (in 'Oh Darling! Yeh Hai India'). I wanted to work with Satyajit Ray but unfortunately, I couldn't." "So, when a film like 'Bhool Bhulaiyaa 2 or 3' is offered to me, I can only see the experience of working with Anees Bazmee. For actors, there's a lot to learn from directors like Anees or Rajkumar Santoshi," he added. (PTI)

POOJA BHATT MARKS 8 YEARS OF SOBRIETY: GRATITUDE, GRAVITAS, GRACE

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Actor-filmmaker Pooja Bhatt on Monday marked eight years of sobriety, saying she is grateful towards life.

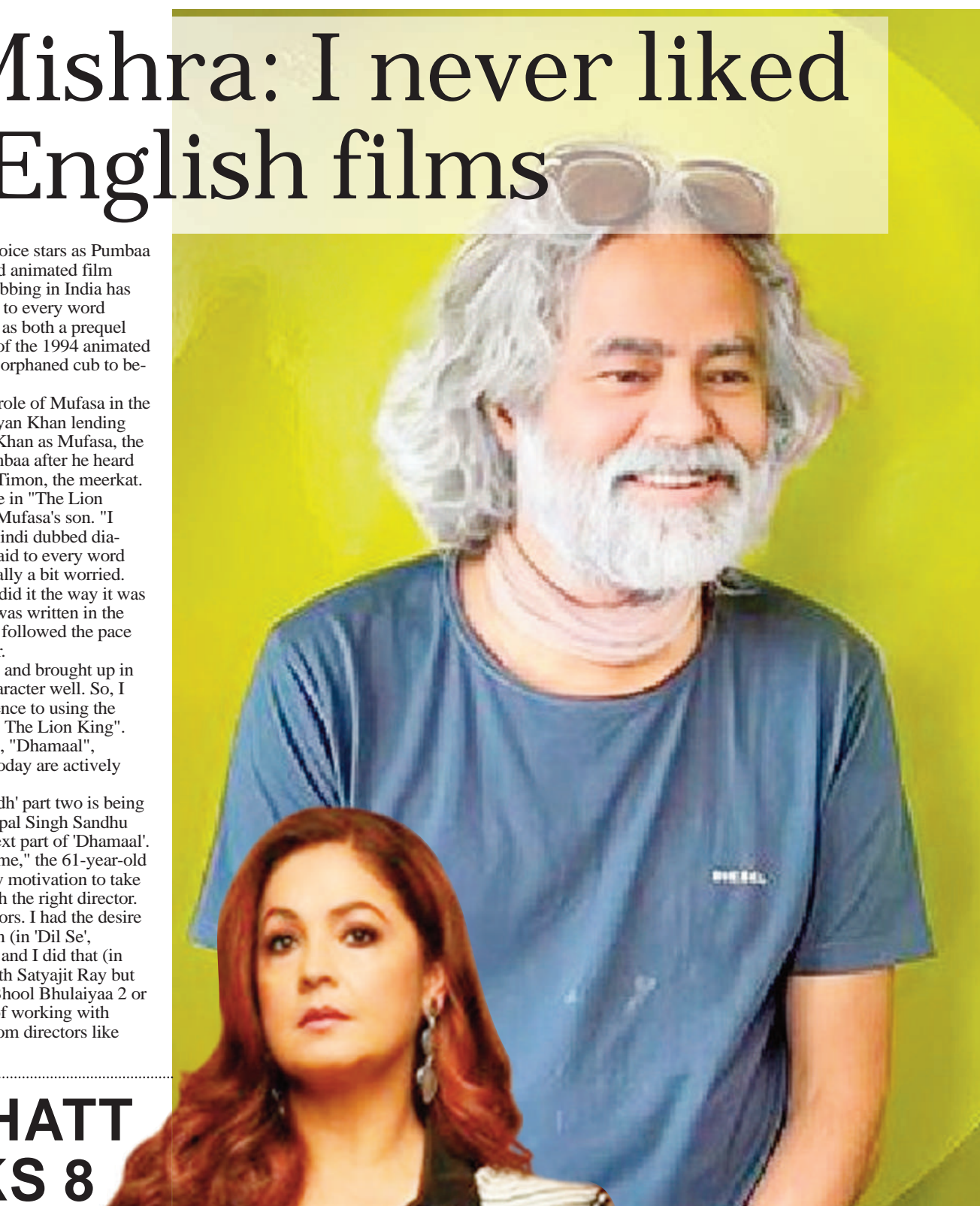
The '90s star, known for films such as "Daddy", "Dil Hai Ki Manta Nahin" and "Sadak", shared the life update on her official Instagram page.

Bhatt shared her selfie, which she captioned as: "8 years sober today. Gratitude. Gravitas. Grace." In the post, she also shared a quote by Scottish writer Johann Hari. "'You're not alone, we love you,' has to be at every level of how we respond to addicts socially, politically and individually."

"For one hundred years now, we've been singing war songs about addicts. I think all along we should have been singing love songs to them... because the opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection, Johann Hari," she wrote.

Bhatt, daughter of filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt, has been vocal about her struggles with alcohol.

She previously said she quit drinking because she thought she had fallen into the "trap of addiction myself and the only way to get out of it was to acknowledge it to myself". The actor will next feature alongside Suniel Shetty in an upcoming project from Lionsgate India. (PTI)



'Mali' touched my heart: Padmini Kolhapure



DEHRADUN, Dec 23: Bollywood actress Padmini Kolhapure sat among the public here on Sunday and watched the film 'Mali', made on the theme of environment and mental health, and said it touched her heart.

Interacting with the audience after a special screening of the film held at the 'Silver City' multiplex here, Kolhapure said, "This film has been shot beautifully in your state, Uttarakhand. This is a beautiful film which has been made on a beautiful subject."

She thanked the people who came to the theatre in large numbers to watch the film.

The actress said, "It feels good to see such a large audience."

She urged people to think for the future generation and contribute to environmental protection.

"If we go out today after watching this film and do something for the environment, then the purpose of this film will be achieved," she said.

The film has been produced by Kolhapure's husband Pradeep Sharma and directed by Shiv Shetty and Sonali Rana.

Most of the film has been shot in Dehradun and local actors like Sujata Sharma and Anita Negi have played roles in it. (PTI)

Junaid Khan on enduring legacy of Khan trio: They have stayed at the top for almost 40 years

LUCKNOW, Dec 23: Actor Junaid Khan says three of Bollywood's biggest icons -- his father Aamir Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, and Salman Khan -- have done "fantastic work" for decades and that's the reason behind their longevity in showbiz.

Junaid, who made his acting debut with the 2024 period drama "Maharaj", was recently in Lucknow for the staging of his play "Runaway Brides".

"They've all been at the top of their game not just for years but for almost three decades, close to 40 years. That is no small feat. They've done fantastic work for decades, which isn't easy," the actor told PTI when asked about the trio's enduring legacy.

Do comparisons with his father burden him?

Dismissing the notion, Junaid said: "It hasn't happened to me so far. Papa and I are physically very different, so we'd never play similar kinds of characters. It doesn't bother me, and I haven't experienced it yet."

The actor was in Lucknow for the

12th edition of the Repertwahr festival.

Junaid, 31, expressed delight at the reception of his comedy drama "Runaway Brides", directed by Faezeh Jalali.

"It was a lovely experience here. The energy was great, and the audience has been fantastic," he said.

This marked his third visit to the city, following previous trips for a friend's wedding and his 2019 play, "Bone of Contention", staged at the Sangeet Natak Akademi.

On balancing his passion for theatre with a growing film career, the newcomer said, "For stage plays, you need to dedicate about six to eight weeks. After that, it's about taking out a couple of days for rehearsals and performances."

Despite juggling projects across mediums, he emphasised that theatre remains his first love.

"Theatre is my passion. I've been performing in India since 2017, after training at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and briefly working for their repertory company. Since then, I've done about

seven to eight plays and a hundred shows," he added.

Junaid also shared his admiration for actors across generations.

"There are so many fantastic actors like (Amitabh) Bachchan sahab, Irrfan Khan, Shah Rukh, Kareena (Kapoor Khan), Rani (Mukerji), and Shabana Azmi, who excels both on screen and stage," he said.

However, assessing performances, especially in films, isn't something he engages in.

"A film performance depends so heavily on the director and the technical setup. On stage, you can evaluate a performance, but it doesn't hold much value for films," he remarked.

Junaid has two theatrical releases lined up for 2025.

"I have a film produced by Phantom Films releasing on February 7. It's a fun rom-com starring Khushi Kapoor, quite different from my last period drama 'Maharaj'," he said.

The other project is a film directed by Sunil Pandey and backed by his father's banner Aamir Khan Productions. (PTI)



Liverpool rout Spurs 6-3 to take 4-point lead into Christmas in Premier League

LONDON, Dec 23: Liverpool heads into Christmas with a four-point lead, a game in hand and as the overwhelming title favorite in the Premier League on the back of a wild 6-3 win at Tottenham.

As for Manchester United and its new manager Ruben Amorim, they stumble into the festive period in 13th place — as low as they've been at Christmas since the 1989-90 season — and with a familiar sinking feeling. United lost 3-0 at home to Bournemouth for the second straight season, the latest statistic to show just how far this English giant has fallen and the

job Amorim has to turn around its fortunes.

Worse for United, it seems like great rival Liverpool cannot be stopped.

Make that 21 games in all competitions without defeat after the Reds' biggest league win of the season, with Mohamed Salah netting two of the goals to move above Manchester City's Erling Haaland to the top of the scoring charts.

Liverpool has 39 points from 16 games and stretched its lead over second-place Chelsea, which could only draw 0-0 at Everton, to end a five-match winning streak in the league.

Salah now has 15 goals in the Premier League to break a tie with Haaland — and will leave London thinking he should have had more.

In an end-to-end contest resembling a basketball match, Liverpool scored more than five goals for the first time this season, with Luis Diaz (two), Alexis Mac Allister and Dominik Szoboszlai also netting.

"You can see quality players with top discipline," Tottenham captain Son Heung-min said. "There's a reason they are top. If you give them a mistake, they punish you."

Tottenham's injury-hit de-

fense was open at the back but its attack caused Liverpool's problems throughout, with James Maddison, Dejan Kulusevski and Dominic Solanke all finding the net.

Spurs are another big team in the bottom half, having slipped to 11th place.

The optimism that might have been generated by a last-gasp 2-1 derby win at Manchester City last weekend has disappeared for United, which lost 4-3 at Tottenham in the English League Cup quarterfinals on Thursday before being handed a defeat to Bournemouth by the same score as 12 months ago.

"We were a bit nervous, I felt it in the stadium," said Amorim, who has won four and lost four in all competitions since starting his United tenure with a draw at Ipswich on Nov. 24.

Dean Huijsen, Justin Kluivert — from the penalty spot — and Antoine Semenyo scored for Bournemouth, which climbed to fifth place in the standings and has now beaten Man City, Arsenal, Tottenham and United this season. Indeed, City has dropped to seventh place, an unthinkable unravelling for the winner of the last four Premier League titles.

United left out Marcus Rash-

ford for the third straight match.

At one point during Amorim's post-match press conference, water appeared to drip slowly from a ceiling light fitting on reporters sat in the front row of the Old Trafford media room.

After all the money spent on players — \$1.3 billion and counting — and the huge turnover of managers, Chelsea's American ownership could have seen the club atop the Premier League with a win at Everton — for a couple of hours at least.

However, a 0-0 draw ended Chelsea's eight-match winning run in all competitions and gave Liverpool the opportunity to

push four points clear.

Nicolas Jackson headed against the post in the first half for Chelsea, while Everton had the clearer chances in the second half. Everton also held Arsenal 0-0 last weekend.

"Sometimes you have to play a different game and we are learning to play a different game," Chelsea manager Enzo Maresca said. "They (Everton) are one of the best teams in Europe in terms of clean sheets."

Vitor Pereira got off to a great start as Wolverhampton manager, with his new team beating Leicester 3-0 in his first match in charge. (AP)

Mbappé scores again after hitting 'rock bottom' with Madrid

MADRID, Dec 23: Kylian Mbappé added to his scoring streak with a superb strike in Real Madrid's 4-2 win over Sevilla in the Spanish league to finish the year on a positive note after hitting what he called "rock bottom" in early December.

Mbappé sent a right-footed shot into the upper corner 10 minutes into the match for his fourth goal in as many games with Madrid in all competitions. It was Mbappé's sixth goal in his last eight matches with Madrid.

He struggled early on with his new club, and Mbappé said his lowest point came when he missed a penalty kick in the team's 2-1 league loss at Athletic Bilbao on Dec. 4. "I know I have a lot more to give," Mbappé said Sunday. "The last few games I've played better, I took a lot of positives from the Bilbao game, when I hit rock bottom." The France star said that made him realize "I have to give my all for this jersey and play with personality."

Mbappé said he feels his period of adjustment with the club is finally over.

"I think we now know each other better," he said. "I've joined the team and that changed a lot of things. The settling-in period is over, as the coach says. I feel very comfortable in the team and I play better with the others on the field. The team is playing much better."



Federico Valverde, Rodrygo and Brahim Díaz also scored in the comfortable home victory that allowed Madrid to finish the year one point behind Spanish league leader Atletico Madrid.

Atletico rallied to shock Barcelona 2-1 Saturday with a stoppage-time goal by Alexander

Sorloth. Third-place Barcelona is two points behind Madrid, having played an extra game.

Valverde scored in the 20th and Rodrygo in the 34th before Sevilla got on the board with Isaac Romero in the 35th. Díaz extended Madrid's lead in the 53rd and Dodi Lukebakio got the visitors' other

goal in the 85th at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium.

"It was a well-played game, with many scoring situations, a good end to the year," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "That was what we wanted, to be near the top and get some good rest for 2025." Madrid next faces Valencia

on Jan. 3 in a match postponed because of the deadly floods that hit Valencia in October.

Sevilla, sitting in 14th place, had won two of its last two games in all competitions.

It was the last game for Sevilla and Spain great Jesús Navas, who is officially retiring at the end of the year. The defender was honored by Sevilla and Madrid players and fans at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Players from both teams made a guard of honor for Navas before the match, lining up as he entered the field, and Madrid's veteran midfielder Luka Modric handed him a jersey of the club signed by players. Fans gave Navas a standing ovation during the ceremony.

Substitute Navas came on midway through the second half.

"What happened today was spectacular," the 39-year-old Navas said after the match, unable to hold back tears. "I had never seen anything like it in my life on a rival field. It was crazy. In those last few minutes I couldn't see anything. I was looking at the ground recalling all the moments I've went through and the joy I've been able to give to Sevilla and the national team."

Navas helped Sevilla win four Europa League titles and Spain clinch the 2010 World Cup and the 2012 and 2024 European Championships. (AP)

US Open doubles champion Max Purcell suspended for anti-doping breach

MELBOURNE, Dec 23: Two-time Grand Slam winning doubles player Max Purcell has entered a voluntary provisional suspension under tennis' anti-doping rules.

The International Tennis Integrity Agency announced the sanction in a statement on Monday after the 26-year-old Australian admitted to violating Article 2.2 of the Tennis Anti-Doping Program "relating to the use of a Prohibited Method".

Purcell posted a statement on Instagram saying he had "unknowingly received an IV infusion of vitamins above the allowable limit of 100 ml."

Purcell said he had told the medical clinic that the infusion needed to be below 100 ml because he was a professional athlete, but that the medical records he received back showed that the IV had been above that level.

"This news was devastating to me because I pride myself on

being an athlete who always makes sure that everything is WADA safe," Purcell wrote. "I volunteered this information to the ITIA and have been as transparent as possible in trying to put this whole situation behind me."

The ITIA said the suspension came into effect on 12 Dec., and time served under provisional suspension will be credited against any future sanction. The length of time of the voluntary suspension was not specified by

the ITIA.

"During the provisional suspension, Purcell is prohibited from playing in, coaching at, or attending any tennis event authorized or sanctioned by the members of the ITIA (ATP, ITF, WTA, Tennis Australia, Fédération Française de Tennis, Wimbledon and USTA) or any national association," the ITIA statement read.

Purcell, with compatriot Jordan Thompson, won the U.S.

Open in September and won Wimbledon with another Australian, Matthew Ebden, in 2022. He is currently ranked No. 12 in doubles.

He also finished as a runner-up in the Australian Open doubles final twice, in 2020 and 2022.

Purcell, ranked No. 105 in singles, was not listed on the Australian Open entry lists released earlier this month and did not receive a wildcard or feature on the qualifying entries. (AP)

Webster and Abbott: At ease with being the 'Men in Waiting' of Australian cricket

MELBOURNE, Dec 23: Sean Abbott and Beau Webster are linked by a common thread. They are just about there but not quite there when it comes to selection in Australia's final Test eleven.

They get summoned for national duty, attend nets and then go back to domestic commitments, only to be called back again raising hope of wearing that elusive Baggy Green.

Abbott, 32, has played 56 International games since his white ball debut a decade ago, but is still waiting to wear the whites and hold a red Kookaburra.

Webster, 31, is a proper domestic doyen with 93 games under his belt in which he has made 5297 runs and grabbed 148 wickets.

Webster knows he is good but also knows that the team thinks Mitch Marsh may be slightly better although the former looked way more assured with the willow than "Bison".

Similarly, Abbott accepts that he is not even the fourth but the fifth choice in pecking order of Australian pacers.

So, do you think you will get a

game tomorrow? Webster was asked and he gave a cautious reply.

"We have got main training tomorrow. We will see how boys go. We have already got an all-rounder and he is still in that spot," Webster said during his interaction at the MCG.

"He is a great player, a fantastic player, he has had some success across formats and I am just here to cover him if something goes wrong," he seemed to know his position.

Abbott was slightly more humorous with his take but acknowledged that it was a privilege to be in the Australian dressing room along with the big boys.

"Obviously, I think I'm not getting any games it's a good thing for the team because it means we're full strength. I think the guys are feeling quite good at the moment. I'm obviously here as cover for any of the bowlers," his answer sounded quite similar to that of Webster's.

"But I'm really enjoying it. I love being around this team as I have done with the Waffle set up



for a number of years, but you know this is Boxing Day, being involved with the Australian Test side."

So, is it an acceptance that with Pat Cummins (the skipper), Mitchell Starc (the left-arm) and Josh Hazlewood (ruled out of series) being around, it became all the more difficult for him?

Well, he finds solace in fellow pacer Scott Boland's situation and what former quick James Pattinson used to go through.

"I'd probably throw Scotty

(Boland) in there as well and make it four (pacers). Although he hasn't played a heap of cricket for Australia just yet, he's had three years of playing Test cricket every time he comes in and does well.

"I can tell you there were a lot of batters around the country heaving a sigh of relief when he came into the Test team and did what he did.

"I wouldn't say it's frustrating because they're great cricketers. Even when Jimmy Pattinson was

the other guy that was involved before Scotty, these are all guys that are unbelievable at what they do."

He accepts that it is hectic but enjoyable at the same time.

"Team is just something else altogether. So, I'm just enjoying my time. You know, it's been a little bit hectic flying in and out and getting BBL games done, having the young one arrive and all that sort of stuff. So, it's been a great time.

"But the way the group is, it's just a great sort of environment to be around."

For Webster, he has supreme confidence in his batting which is more about counter-punching while bowling is about maintaining the channel around the off-stump.

"With the ball, I just aim at consistency. Trying to hit the top of off-stump and try to run the ball back into the right-handers. If there's a bit of swing on offer, I think I can take that as well...It's just those simple things done over and over again, I think, is my strength," the lanky all-rounder said. (PTI)

Coaching crisis, heartbreaks and Olympic setbacks mark a disastrous year for Indian boxing

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Indian boxing endured a turbulent year marred by coaching turmoil, crushing defeats, and a medal-less Paris Olympics campaign, all of it made worse by the national federation's negligence that brought unprecedented embarrassment to the country. There were very few positives to count in a year when, after a widely successful 2023, expectations were sky high.

Yet no boxer was able to add to the three bronze medals — Vijender Singh (2008), M C Mary Kom (2012) and Lovlina Borgohain (2021) — that India had secured in the previous editions of the Olympics.

Nishant Dev, unlucky to miss out on an Olympic medal, was India's top performer but the likes of world champions Nikhat Zareen and Lovlina disappointed despite widely held belief that fortunes of women's boxing were following an upward trajectory.

Outside the ring, the Boxing Federation of India's (BFI) negligence cost India an Olympic quota even as administrators globally scrambled to retain the sport on the Olympic roster.

The dismal performance at the first World Qualifying Tournament, where all nine boxers failed to secure a spot at the Paris Games, prompted High Performance Director Bernard Dunne to resign from his position while still in Italy, less than four months before the Olympics.

It wasn't just the defeats that were troubling, but the manner in which the boxers lost that was truly disheartening. Frequent knockouts and RSC out-classed defeats pointed to inherent technical flaws which had not been addressed. With the exception of Nishant, there was hardly any name in Indian boxing who could be spoken about as a success story.

Adding to the woes, the country soon lost the women's 57kg

Olympic quota, won by Parveen Hooda at the Asian Games last year, after the boxer was handed a 22-month suspension by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) for three whereabouts failures within a year. The 2022 World Championship bronze-medallist failed to submit her whereabouts for the period between April 2022 and March 2023, as mandated by WADA regulations. The BFI was also to blame for this unprecedented embarrassment given that federation is duly notified of such a lapse by the international body.

The federation ought to have intervened to ensure that the athlete submitted the required details on time. As a result, India had to fight afresh for qualification in the women's 57kg category, the spot ultimately going to Jaismine Lamboria in the final Olympic Qualifiers. There were wholesale changes for this event with former Asian Games gold-medallist Amit Panghal replacing Deepak Bhoria in the 51kg category.

Eventually Panghal and Nishant made the cut for the quadrennial spectacle along with Jaismine, adding to the three quotas won by Nikhat Zareen (50kg), Preeti Pawar (54kg) and Lovlina (75kg) last year.

In all, six boxers qualified for Paris, a decline from the five men and four women who represented India in the 2021 Tokyo Games.

Heading into the big event on the back of two consecutive World Championship titles, Zareen was hailed as one of India's strongest medal contenders.

However, in the fiercely competitive 50kg category, the Telangana boxer was completely outclassed by China's Wu Yu in a brutally one-sided bout.

Zareen, unable to match the relentless pace of her opponent, later said that she had "not eaten for the last two days to maintain weight" and felt weak. (PTI)

Kho Kho World Cup to feature 21 men's and 20 women's teams after increased participation

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: A total of 21 men's teams and 20 women outfits will compete in next month's Kho Kho World Cup with the sport's governing body increasing the number of participating teams due to an overwhelming interest.

India will host the inaugural edition of the event at the IGI Stadium from January 13 to 19. Initially, 16 men's and 16 women's teams were scheduled to participate.

Teams from six continents — Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Europe, and Oceania — will feature in the much-anticipated tournament.

"We are keeping the facilities with the foreign delegates in mind. We have devised meals and diet plan for our guests as per their dietary requirements and we are also providing entire logistics, stay, and transport facilities for them, so that they do not face any issues during their stay here," KKF President Sudhanshu Mittal said in a release.

"We have also made provisions for all countries to stay till the end of the tournament, irrespective of the results."

The opening ceremony will take place on January 13, followed by the first match of the tournament

between India and Pakistan. The league stage will run from January 14 to 16, with the quarterfinals and semifinals scheduled for January 17 and 18. The final will be held on January 19.

Participating nations in Kho Kho World Cup 2025:

Africa:
Men's: Ghana, Kenya, South Africa
Women's: Kenya, South Africa, Uganda
Asia:
Men's: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India (host), Iran, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka
Women's: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India (host), Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka
Europe:
Men's: England, Germany, Netherlands, Poland
Women's: England, Germany, Netherlands, Poland
North America:
Men's: United States of America
South America:
Men's: Argentina, Brazil, Peru
Women's: Peru
Oceania:
Men's: Australia
Women's: Australia, New Zealand. (PTI)

Momentum on their side, India eye series win against West Indies

VADODARA, Dec 23: Coming off one of their biggest wins in terms of runs, fancied India will look to guard against complacency when they take on a beleaguered West Indies side with an aim to bag the three-match series in the second Women's ODI here on Tuesday.

India will be entering the game on the back of a massive 211-run victory over the visitors in the series opener in which the Harmanpreet Kaur-led team ticked almost all the boxes.

Every match the teams play in the coming months will be significant as the ICC World Cup is scheduled to be held in the country next year.

India, who have never won a women's World Cup, are desperate to end their ICC title drought at home and they are aware that a strong build-up is extremely important for them to head into the mega event as one of the contenders alongside the 'usual suspects', Australia and England.

Though India have not begun their preparations for the big tournament in earnest, having suffered a 0-3 whitewash in Australia, they bounced back in style, albeit against a much weaker opposition in the West Indies.

In between the ongoing ODI series and the one against Australia,



India registered a 2-1 victory in a T20I rubber against the team from the Caribbean islands, which was their first home series win in the shortest format in over five years, but their failure to qualify for the semi-final of the last T20 World Cup has left a lot to be desired.

The team has been on an experimentation spree since the debacle in the UAE and has handed international debuts to as many as

seven players, including Titas Sadhu, Priya Mishra and Pratika Rawal.

Playing in her first ever international match, Delhi's Pratika impressed with a 40-run knock off 69 balls during a century-plus opening partnership with vice-captain Smriti Mandhana.

The lone worry for India before the series opener was the fitness of Kaur, who missed the last two T20Is with a knee niggle, but with

her clean hitting and running between the wickets, the skipper has laid all concerns to rest.

Mandhana, who led India in Kaur's absence and struck three fifties in a row in the T20Is, was again in her element in the first ODI and made a classy 91 off 102 balls while laying the foundation for an imposing total.

The left-handed opener will be keen to continue in the same vein in the remaining one-day-

ers as well.

Play of the Match in the first ODI, Renuka Singh will be high on confidence having returned a five-for and she will once again look to inflict maximum damage on the Windies with the new ball.

As far as the West Indies are concerned, they will have to lift their game several notches and the likes of Hayley Matthews, Deandra Dottin, Shemaine Campbelle and Afy Fletcher, the squad's senior players with years of experience, will need to lead from the front.

Teams:
India: Harmanpreet Kaur (captain), Smriti Mandhana (vice captain), Pratika Rawal, Jemimah Rodrigues, Harleen Deol, Richa Ghosh (WK), Uma Chetry (WK), Tejal Hasabnis, Deepti Sharma, Minnu Mani, Priya Mishra, Tanuja Kanwer, Titas Sadhu, Saima Thakor, Renuka Singh Thakur.

West Indies: Hayley Matthews (captain), Shemaine Campbelle (vice captain), Aaliyah Alleyne, Shamila Connell, Nerissa Crafton, Deandra Dottin, Afy Fletcher, Shabika Gajabi, Chinelle Henry, Zaida James, Qiana Joseph, Mandy Mangru, Ashmini Munisar, Karishma Ramharack, Rashada Williams.

Match starts at 1.30 pm. (PTI)

Indians unhappy with 'used' practice pitches; MCG curator says protocol followed



MELBOURNE, Dec 23: The Indian team has expressed dissatisfaction with the practice pitches ahead of the fourth Test against Australia here, blaming their variable bounce for the hit that Rohit Sharma took on his knee but MCG curator Matt Page has defended the tracks by saying that "standard protocol" has been followed.

Rohit developed swelling on his left knee as he tried to play a throw-down from support staff member Dayanand Garani and didn't take further part in the nets on Sunday. The side opted not to practice on Monday. It was learnt the skipper needed icing at night and the team think-tank held the used pitch's uneven bounce responsible for the injury scare.

The Indian team had sent its training schedule two months ago but the MCG curator stuck to the standard operating procedure of giving a new practice track only three days prior to the Test match, which begins on December 26 in this case.

"So for us, three days out, we prepare pitches for here. If teams come and play before that, they get what pitches we've had," Page told reporters about why India didn't get a pitch that would resemble the centre strip.

"So today, we're on fresh pitches. If we needed to play this morning, they would have been on those fresh pitches. Stock standard procedure for us, three days out. We do our pitches that we're going to have for our Test match," Page defended the move.

When asked if he has had the Indian schedule and BCCI had correspondence with Cricket Australia, he responded in affirmative.

"Yes, they gave us schedule. There has been correspondence be-

tween CA and Indian board and the extent of those conversations, I don't know," Page informed.

The iconic MCG won't have the bounce of Perth or the seam movement of Gabba but it will still be pace-friendly with 6mm of grass covering. Page said it won't crack up enough to help the spinners.

"Seven years ago, we were quite flat, we want to create exciting contest and exciting Test matches, so we will leave more grass, that brings the bowlers into equation."

"But it is still good for batting once the new ball goes off. We keep 6mm grass and we would monitor that as we get in," Page elaborated. The decision to make it bowler-friendly was taken in 2017 after the MCG track was deemed as a flat deck.

"In 2017, we sat down as an organisation and discussed where we wanted to go and we agreed that it was about producing wickets for thrilling Test matches."

"It gives bowlers a chance to come into the game but also batters if they play well."

So will Jasprit Bumrah be excited after having a look at the track?

"All quick bowlers get excited when they come here now although it is not as quick as Perth and Brisbane but we have managed to get some pace on it," Page answered.

"Every wicket in Australia is different and we have also got our unique character."

While Ravindra Jadeja is more of a batting all-rounder in overseas conditions, Page said there is not much help for spinners now.

"Doesn't really break for spinners here and if you see long-format games over the last four to five years, you will see, it has been more seam-friendly than spin," Page observed. (PTI)

Former AIFF secretary lodges complaint against Chaubey

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Dec 23: Shaji Prabhakaran, the former secretary of the All India Football Federation (AIFF), has lodged a formal complaint against AIFF president Kalyan Chaubey with the Ethical Committees of the AIFF, the Asian Football Confederation, and FIFA, alleging "unethical practices" that have caused financial losses.

In his formal complaint dated December 22, 2024, Prabhakaran also accused Chaubey of nepotism and even misusing the brand of FIFA without prior approval from the international body. When contacted by PTI for a reaction on Prabhakaran's allegations and the formal complaint, Chaubey declined to comment. Prabhakaran's allegations against Chaubey included conflict of interest, actions causing financial loss and reputational damage to AIFF, bribery attempt by a political functionary, misrepresentation and misinformation, use of AIFF platforms to further his political career and interference in administrative matters and losing the trust of AIFF employees. (PTI)

Pakistan completes a 3-0 sweep of ODI series against South Africa

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 23: Pakistan completed a 3-0 sweep of its ODI series against South Africa, winning the third match by 36 runs under the DLS method.

Opener Saim Ayub hit 101 runs in 94 balls as Pakistan scored 308-9 at the Wanderers in a game reduced to 47 overs by rain. South Africa was all out for 271 in 42 overs in pursuit of a winning target of 308.

Pakistan batted first after losing the toss and was 1-1 when it lost Abdullah Shafique in the first over. The innings took off with Ayub involved in two key stands — 114 runs for the second wicket with Babar Azam (52 in 71), and 93 runs for the third with captain Mohammad Rizwan (53 in 52).

The 22-year-old Ayub, who scored 109 in the first ODI, was caught behind against debutant Corbin Bosch. Ayub hit two sixes and 13 fours. Middle-order batter Salman Agha padded the total with a 33-ball 48.

South Africa pacer Kagiso Rabada took 3-56.

In reply, Heinrich Klaassen top scored for the hosts with 81 runs in 43 balls, and Bosch finished 40 not out. Pakistan spinner Sufiyan



Muqem took 4-52 in eight overs.

Pakistan had already secured the one-day international series, winning the opener by three wickets and the second ODI by 81 runs. South Africa won the three-match Twenty20

series 2-0. The teams will play two tests, starting Thursday at Centurion.

Pakistan's fifth successive bilateral ODI series win puts it in good stead for the Champions Trophy it will host in February. (AP)

Strike rotation and solid defence key to face Bumrah, says Simon Katich

MELBOURNE, Dec 23: Former cricketer Simon Katich has advised Australian batters to concentrate on rotating the strike and maintaining a solid defence to succeed against the peerless Indian pacer Jasprit Bumrah.

Katich noted that since Bumrah rarely bowls loose deliveries, the Australians must be strategically good in their approach.

"I know all the talk is around having more positive intent, and I think that's all well and good and it is certainly something they have to be mindful of. But against someone like Bumrah intent is not about just blazing him for fours, because he doesn't bowl many bad balls," Katich told SEN 1116.

"So a lot of that intent has to be about rotating strike and being able to defend really well, because you're not gonna be able to play with any intent if you aren't there after the tenth over. That's the challenge for all of these guys," Katich added.

To illustrate his point, Katich made a reference to Australia's second innings in the third Test at Brisbane, where the hosts attempted an aggressive approach but ultimately lost their wickets.

"We saw it in the second innings in Brisbane. Australians came out with really positive intent, trying to score more quickly and look what happened, 7/80 in no time."

"It's not easy to do against the red ball that moves around off the seam in a wearing wicket which the Gabba was starting to become with cracks."

"The top order has to be very careful and mindful of how they go about it. You're not going to score

many runs if you're trying to take him on off the length, because he is so good," he added.

For the remaining two Tests, Australia has opted to place their trust in teenage sensation Sam Konstas, replacing opener Nathan McSweeney, who was given a maiden call-up ahead of the series.

I know the young kid's (Konstas) got a lot of potential, and a lot of ability, but it'll be a challenge because not many guys around the world have been able to do that to that quality of bowling," Katich said. Katich also felt Mitchell Marsh's inability to bowl the expected volume of overs suggests he isn't "100%" fit and should be replaced by uncapped rookie Beau Webster for the Boxing Day Test against India.

Marsh has been dealing with recurring back stiffness since the white-ball tour of the UK in September. During the Perth Test, he bowled 17 overs in total, taking two wickets on the opening day but later pulled up sore.

In Adelaide, he bowled four overs while in Brisbane he rolled his arm for two overs.

"I've been saying for a couple Tests, Mitch Marsh has not been able to bowl the volume of overs that everyone expected of him. Given the conditions and given he is a wicket taker," Katich said on 'SEN Breakfast'.

"We saw that in Perth, he bowled well on day one. Took some key wickets and then struggled to back up. I mean obviously the Aussie hierarchy know better then we do around where his fitness is at. (PTI)

Rugby Premier League set to start next year

NEW DELHI, Dec 23: Rugby India, the sport's national governing body, is all set to launch the Rugby Premier League (RPL) next year. The tournament, the world's first franchise-based rugby league, featuring six city-based teams, will be a part of a 10-year strategic partnership between Rugby India and GMR Sports. The RPL will be a platform for top players from elite rugby nations around the world to showcase their talent and skills.

"The Rugby Premier League is a game-changer for rugby in India. With World Rugby's support and GMR Sports' expertise, we are set to deliver a league that showcases the finest talent and professionalism," Rahul Bose, president of Rugby India, said in a release.

"Fans can expect nothing less than world-class rugby action that will inspire the next generation of athletes in our country."

The league aims to lay a solid foundation for the growth of rugby in India. By exposing young Indian talent to international players and top-tier coaching, the RPL will work towards creating a sustainable ecosystem for the sport. (PTI)

The ability to take 20 wickets is not that good in Indian team: Cheteshwar Pujara

MELBOURNE, Dec 23: The Indian team in Australia lacks a bowling attack that is good enough to take 20 wickets in a Test, Cheteshwar Pujara said on Monday and called it the side's biggest concern heading into the last two matches of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

The five-match series is currently levelled at 1-1 with everything to play for in the Tests in Melbourne and Sydney.

The visitors have been relying heavily on pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah to get their wickets and while he has been a great success with both the red and pink ball, the peerless fast bowler has not received enough support from the other end, something that has plagued India besides their top-order batting woes.

"My biggest question and the reason for a little bit of concern is that the Indian bowling is looking a little weak," Pujara told Star Sports.

"Batting is a little better, like the top five didn't do well, but the middle order and lower middle order, Ravindra Jadeja, Nitish (Reddy),

and even tailenders, Bumrah and Akash Deep contributed with the bat.

"Now, there is a weakness in the bowling, so what will you feed the team? That is the biggest question, because you can't drop Nitish, you can't drop Jadeja, so what will be the team combination?"

Pujara felt that Nitish Reddy and Ravindra Jadeja are not able to do the job of being the side's fourth and fifth bowler.

"Ashwin has taken retirement, so two spinners, I don't think they will play in Melbourne. So, how will you strengthen the bowling? Because the three seamers are very good, but their supporting role, fourth and fifth seamer, Nitesh Kumar is the fourth seamer and Ravindra Jadeja is the fifth bowler. If you add both of them together, the bowling is not that good."

"We will have to think about that, because if you want to win a Test match, then you have to take 20 wickets, and the ability to take 20 wickets is not that good, the sup-



porting role of the other bowlers is not good, so we will have to improve that as soon as possible, and how that will be, I don't know, but that is a big question."

With the exception of opener KL Rahul, the top-order batting has also been a big letdown so far in the series, and Pujara said it has got to do a lot with their inability to see off Mitchell Starc's initial spells with

the new ball.

"He has been the best bowler for them in this series. And the way Mitchell Starc has played in the last 1-1.5 years, he has brought a lot of improvement. And he has a lot of ability."

"If I talk about my personal experience, when he used to play in the last series in 2018 or 2021, I used to feel that if he plays against

me, I will get runs.

"And now, it feels like he will take wickets. So what is the difference? The difference is that his line length, his accuracy has increased a lot. He is bowling very less loose deliveries. He is playing on the stump. Every ball is hitting on the good length spot. He is getting swing."

Starc has so far taken 14 wickets in the series, the most by an Australian bowler and only behind Bumrah across two teams.

Pujara observed, "The change he has brought in his game has made him a different player. And he is looking more dangerous than Cummins and Hazlewood. So we will have to take care of his game, especially from the new games."

"In the first five overs, his first spell, he has taken the most wickets there. So if there is a good batting in the first five overs, bring him for the second or third spell. Because he gets tired. So the batting of the top order so far, our top order has never played in the third or fourth spell. (PTI)