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Congress projected to make no significant gains Several exit polls predict victory for BJP in Delhi

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Several exit polls on Wednesday predicted a victory for the BJP over the ruling AAP in the Delhi assembly polls, while the Congress was projected to make no significant gains from last elections.

Two exit polls, however, predicted a victory for the Aam Admi Party (AAP), and as many showed a close contest between them, with an edge for the BJP.

The Election Commission will announce the official results after the counting of on February 8. Exit polls are projections made by election survey agencies based on interviews of voters as they come out after casting their votes. These may vary widely from the actual results. In the 2020 Delhi polls, most exit polls got their predictions wrong.

Among the exit polls that predicted a BJP victory, the People's Pulse showed the NDA was likely to get 51 to 60 seats, while the AAP may get 10-19 seats. The Congress, it claimed, will not be able to open its account.

According to People's Insight



exit poll, the NDA is likely to get 40 to 44 seats, the AAP 25 to 29 seats, and the Congress 0-1 seat.

The P-Marq exit poll predicted 39-49 seats for the BJP and its allies, 21-31 seats for AAP and 0-1 for the Congress. The JVC exit poll said the BJP and allies would get 39-45, the AAP 22-31 seats and the Congress 0-2.

Similarly, the Poll Diary predicted 42-50 seats of the BJP and allies, while giving the AAP 18-25 seats, 0-2 for the Congress and 0-1 for others.

Chanky Strategies exit poll said the BJP and allies are likely to get 39-44 seats, the AAP is likely to get 25-28, while Congress may get 2-3.

Two surveys predicted AAP's victory - Wee Preside, which gave 46-52 seats for AAP, 18-23 for BJP and 0-1 for Congress, and Mind Brink Media predicted 44-49 seats for AAP, 21-25 for BJP and 0-1 for the Congress.

Matrise exit poll predicted a close contest, giving the BJP led NDA 35-40 seats, while the AAP was said to get 32 to 37 seats. The survey gave Congress 0-1 seats.

The DV Research exit polls predicted 26-34 seats for the AAP, and 36-44 for the BJP and allies, giving zero seats to the Congress. In the 70 member Delhi assembly, 36 is the majority mark. The AAP currently has 62 MLAs, the BJP has eight, and the Congress none.

The Delhi assembly polls were held on Wednesday, and results would be declared on February 8. There are 1.55 crore voters in Delhi, out of which nearly 58 per cent exercised their franchise till 5 pm on Wednesday. Several AAP leaders rejected the exit polls, while BJP leaders said they are confident of their victory. (PTI)

Under PM Modi's leadership, India moved on from UPA's lost decade: BJP

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: The BJP Wednesday slammed Rahul Gandhi over his comments on the Centre's Make in India initiative and said the Congress leader may have finally admitted the failures of the UPA rule but India has already moved on from that "lost decade" under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.

The ruling party's reaction came after Gandhi, in a post on X, said Prime Minister Modi did not mention Make in India in his speech in the Lok Sabha and asserted that he must acknowledge that the initiative was a failure.

The Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha also said that no government in recent times -- the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) or the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) -- had been able to meet at scale the national challenge of providing jobs.

Hitting back, BJP IT department head Amit Malviya cited data to underline the progress made by the country in various sectors under the Modi government.

In a post on X, he said, "The numbers speak for themselves -- manufacturing is growing, jobs are being created, and India is becoming a global production powerhouse."

"Rahul Gandhi may have finally admitted the UPA's failures, but India has already moved on from that lost

decade," he added.

"It is good that Rahul Gandhi has finally acknowledged a fact the entire nation already knew that even after a decade in power, the UPA utterly failed to create jobs or strengthen India's manufacturing base," the BJP leader said.

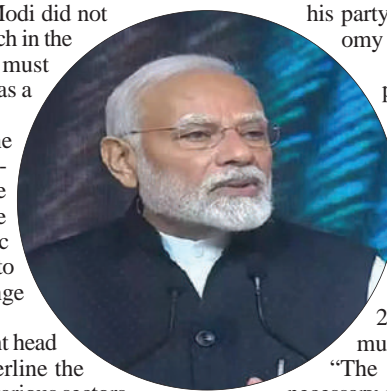
However, what Gandhi "conveniently" ignored is that his party did nothing to prepare India's economy for the future, he charged.

After stifling India's manufacturing potential for decades through license quota raj, the Congress-led UPA continued its legacy of policy paralysis, rampant cronyism, and complete neglect of industrial growth, Malviya alleged.

He said a "perfect example" of the Congress "disastrous approach" to manufacturing is what happened in 2006 when Intel sought to establish a multi-billion-dollar chip plant in India. "The UPA government kept delaying the necessary policy decisions, forcing Intel to take its investment to China and Vietnam instead."

That single failure set India back by decades in semiconductor manufacturing, the BJP leader alleged.

"Now, under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, India is aggressively building its chip manufacturing ecosystem, ensuring such costly mistakes are never repeated," he added. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



Mizoram poll panel pardons minister for election code breach

AIZAWL, Feb 5: The Mizoram State Election Commission (SEC) on Wednesday pardoned Public Works Department (PWD) Minister Vanlalhlana for violating the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) ahead of the village council (VC) and local council (LC) elections scheduled for February 12, an official said on Wednesday.

This decision came after the SEC served show-cause notices to both Vanlalhlana and Labour, Employment, Skill Development, and Entrepreneurship Minister Lainglinglova Hmar, following a complaint filed by the opposition Mizo National Front (MNF).

In an order on Tuesday, the SEC noted that Vanlalhlana had apologised for his actions, claiming he was unaware that releasing a video from his office on social media would breach (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

BJP-EKADC hails MP Amarsing Tisso's push for implementation of Article 244(A)

DIPHU, Feb 5: The BJP-East Karbi Anglong District Committee (BJP-EKADC) has praised the lone Member of Parliament (MP), Amarsing Tisso, after he reiterated the demand for the implementation of Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution.

While participating in the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address on the fourth day of the ongoing budget session on Tuesday, Tisso informed the House about the demand for implementing Article 244(A) to grant an Autonomous State for the hill districts of Assam, a longstanding demand of the people.

The MP also urged the members of the House to fully implement the clauses of the MoU and MoS 1 and 2, to upgrade Assam University's Diphu Campus into a full-



fledged university, and to exempt the MIL subject in the UPSC examination for candidates from the districts of Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong, and Dima Hasao. Tisso called on all MPs to support his demands and made an appeal for the passage of the 125th Constitutional Amendment Bill in the interest of the hill districts, as informed by Roland Killing. Welcoming Tisso's address,

BJP-EKADC president Roland Killing, in a press meeting held at the party's office, emphasized that the demand for an Autonomous State has been long-standing in the hill districts. "For 40 years, the people of these districts have been demanding this," he said.

"By raising the matter in the House, MP Amarsing Tisso has given due importance to the immediate implementation of Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution. The BJP party here welcomes this initiative. It was also fortunate for our MP, as the Prime Minister, Home Minister, and Defence Minister were present during the speech, and they heard the grievances of the hill districts." Killing added. The district party president also mentioned that the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Karbi (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'Making all efforts to bring back Hasina and others from India'

DHAKA, Feb 5: Bangladesh's interim government is making all efforts to bring back ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina and others from India under the extradition treaty, Home Adviser Lt Gen (ret.) Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury said on Wednesday.

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

Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) has issued arrest warrants for Hasina and several former Cabinet ministers, advisers, and military and civil officials for "crimes against hu-



manity and genocide". "We are trying to bring back those who are under trial on charges of crimes against humanity

at the ICT," Chowdhury was quoted as saying by state-run BSS news agency. He made the remarks while replying to a question on steps taken by the government to arrest over 100 accused against whom the ICT has issued arrest warrant.

Last year, Dhaka sent a diplomatic note to New Delhi seeking the extradition of Hasina.

The Home Adviser said they are arresting those staying in the country while efforts are on to bring back others who are staying abroad.

"We're arresting those who are staying in the country. The main person (Hasina) is not in the country. How we would arrest them who are abroad?" he said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'Pictures of Indians getting handcuffed while being deported from US saddening'

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: The Congress on Wednesday expressed sadness over "pictures of Indians getting handcuffed and humiliated" while being deported from the US and recalled that America had to express regret over the treatment meted out to India diplomat Devyani Khobragade in 2013 after the then UPA government retaliated sharply.

A military transport aircraft of the US is bringing a group of Indian migrants, in the first such deportation to India as part of the big crackdown on illegal immigrants by President Donald Trump in his second term at the White House.

Without directly commenting on the deportation flight carrying the Indians, a spokesperson at the US embassy in New Delhi said on Tuesday that Washington is tightening immigration laws and removing illegal migrants.

Congress' media and publicity department head Pawan Khera said, "Looking at the pictures of Indians

getting handcuffed and humiliated while being deported from the US saddens me as an Indian."

"I remember in December of 2013, an Indian diplomat Devyani Khobragade was handcuffed and strip searched in America. Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh registered a strong protest with US Ambassador Nancy Powell," Khera said in a post on X.

"The UPA government retaliated sharply. Leaders like Ms Meira Kumar, Sushil Kumar Shinde & Rahul Gandhi refused to meet the US Congressional delegation (George Holding, Pete Olson, David Schweikert, Rob Woodall and Madeleine Bordallo) that was visiting India at that time," he recalled.

Khera said then PM Manmohan Singh termed the US action 'deplorable'.

India withdrew several perks given to the US embassy, including imports of food and alcohol at concessional rates by embassy staff, he said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

'Complaints include outdated content, inflexible teaching, and poor infrastructure'

Less than 4 pc students completed SWAYAM courses since 2017: Par panel

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Less than four per cent of students enrolled for SWAYAM courses have completed the programme since 2017, with complaints including outdated content, inflexible teaching, and poor infrastructure, a parliamentary panel has pointed out.

Headed by Rajya Sabha MP Digvijaya Singh, the committee has noted that digital initiatives in education would only provide lukewarm response in terms of engagement unless the Union education ministry proactively assisted in placements, wherever possible, or established a platform associated with SWAYAM for connecting recruiters to students.

The Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports presented its report in the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday on "Review of Education Standards, Accreditation Process, Research, Examination Reforms and Academic Environment in Deemed,



Private Universities and other Higher Education Institutions".

The SWAYAM platform facilitates hosting of courses, taught in classrooms from Class 9 till post-graduation, to be accessed by anyone, anywhere at any time. All the courses are interactive and available free of cost to learners.

"The committee observes that the

National Digital University (NDU) promises inclusive, flexible, and affordable education aligned with NEP (National Education Policy) goals. However, its foundation, SWAYAM, faces significant challenges. Since 2017, less than 4 per cent of enrolled students have completed SWAYAM courses," the panel said in its report.

PATNA, Feb 5: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday alleged that the Constitution was under "attack" from the BJP-RSS combine, which was trying to hoodwink people by a show of deference towards Dalit icons like B R Ambedkar.

The statement from the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha came at a function in the Bihar capital, organised on the birth anniversary of Dalit freedom fighter and Congress activist Jaglal Choudhary. "Today, Delhi assembly polls are underway. But, I believed this function was equally important. So I

folded down after casting my vote," said the 54-year-old leader.

In a speech that lasted close to 30 minutes, Gandhi spoke extensively of the need to ensure better "bhagi-daari" (participation) of Dalits, tribals and OBCs in all walks of life, asserting that mere political representation was not enough.

"I want to see the day when Dalits, tribals and backwards become leaders, not just footsoldiers, in bureaucracy and the private sector," said the former Congress president. Waving a pocket-size edition of the Constitution, he alleged, "As long as this (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Constitution under 'attack' from BJP-RSS combine: Rahul



HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Feb 5: Chief Minister Himanta Sarma on Wednesday inaugurated the upgraded project at Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International (LGBI) Airport to enhance the passenger convenience, experience and ease of travel.

Speaking on the occasion, Sarma said that the entire work has been planned and executed in two months with a view to promote LGBI airport and welcome all the delegates for Advantage Assam 2.0 in a decked up environment.

He also expressed hope that the new terminal being constructed at the LGBI Airport will also be completed in the last part of the current year.

"The LGBI airport with its new terminal once becomes fully operational will become an important centre of the gateway of South East Asian nations," an official statement quoted him as saying.

It may be noted that as part of the upgradation of the refreshed terminal, entry lanes increased from eight to 14.

Moreover, departure lanes have also been increased from three to four, along with four new DigiYatra Gates. Security check-in area expanded from 300 to 450 sq. m., with added screening queues and new furniture. A 140-meter archi-

HT BRIEFS

Minor recovered

GUWAHATI: A team from Chandmari PS successfully traced and recovered a minor girl from Dighalipukhuri. The minor was recovered after her family reported her missing since Tuesday evening. She has been safely reunited with her family. Notably, the minor was recovered within 2 hours of reporting.

3-wheeler recovered

GUWAHATI: A team from Lataisi PS recovered one reported stolen 3-wheeler carrier (AS01JC4265) from the possession of Deep Rabha Hajong (26) & Baloram Das (35). Both the accused were arrested as per the official sources. The vehicle was reported stolen from near Kharghuli Unnayan Samitee.

Complain lodged

GUWAHATI: The Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption received a complaint regarding an alleged bribe incident on Wednesday. The accused, Siba Prasad Saikia, demanded ₹ 15,000 as a bribe from the complainant for clearance of MGN-REGA bills. The complainant didn't give in to the demand and registered a complaint with to take necessary legal action against Saikia. The tainted black money was recovered from Saikia and seized in the presence of independent witnesses. Notably, Saikia is an assistant engineer in the office of Block Development Officer, Jorhat.

Three arrested

GUWAHATI: In connection with the investigation of Basistha PS case no 82/25 u/s 305(b) BNS, 3 bike lifters named Dibya Jyoti Saikia, Ajay Singh, and Dipu Teron Malinga were arrested on Tuesday at Sixmille. During the course of interrogation, the dreaded bike lifters Saikia and Singh confessed and agreed to show the hidden place where they had kept 3 stolen bikes concealed.

'India should also monitor INR-yuan rate'

Rupee depreciation due to stronger USD: Arvind Virmani

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: NITI Aayog member Arvind Virmani has said the recent depreciation of the rupee is due to the strengthening of US dollar and opined that in this period of global uncertainty, India should also look at the rupee-yuan rate.

In an interview with PTI, Virmani said the RBI's stated policy is that it does not target a specific exchange rate but intervenes in the market to check 'excess' volatility.

"When we talk about the rupee-dollar rate, there are two elements to it—one is the appreciation of the US dollar... and much of what you see... is now due to the US (dollar) appreciation.

"So that is really not under our control, and not something our policymakers have to worry about," he said. The rupee has been falling in recent weeks, and on Monday touched an all-time intraday low of 87.29 against the American currency. The other element, Virmani said, is the depreciation with respect to the index, and one way to measure that is to compare it to other countries because the general appreciation of the rupee affects everybody. "As somebody suggested recently, we should look more closely at the rupee-yuan rate, that's a good suggestion."

"Of course, we have to look broadly at our competitors, also in this period of uncertainty," the NITI Aayog member noted.



The Indian rupee has been under pressure in the last few months but it continues to be the least volatile currency against the US dollar among its Asian and global peers.

The reasons for the rupee hitting record lows almost on a daily basis against the US dollar range from a widening trade deficit to a surge in the dollar index after the US Federal Reserve hinted at fewer rate cuts in 2025.

Asked since the finance minister has maintained fiscal discipline, and is aiming to lower debt, does it create room for interest rate cut by RBI, Virmani said, "if we look at our own history and others, it is generally a bad idea to tighten both fiscal and monetary policy together in a period of shocks."

"So one has to be a lot more targeted. That doesn't mean one does

term lending rate) unchanged at 6.5 per cent since February 2023.

The last time the RBI had reduced the rate was during the Covid times (May 2020) and thereafter, it was gradually raised to 6.5 per cent.

Newly-appointed Reserve Bank Governor Sanjay Malhotra will be chairing his first Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting starting Wednesday.

Responding to a question on the trade war started by US President Donald Trump, Virmani pointed out that the new US President in his latest statement has said many countries have taken advantage of the USA, but not all.

"I think we fall in that 'not all' category...So, given that history and that statement, I am not worried about the direct consequences."

"But as I said, the indirect uncertainty has gone up, and we have to take account of that," he opined.

Trump on Saturday signed an order to impose stiff tariffs on imports from Mexico, Canada and China, fulfilling a campaign promise by raising the prospect of increased prices for American consumers. Trump is declaring an economic emergency to put duties of 10 per cent on all imports from China and 25 per cent on imports from Mexico and Canada - America's largest trading partners - except for a 10 per cent rate on Canadian oil. (PTI)

only fiscal or only monetary, but the coordination has to be carefully done," he added. Virmani pointed out that there is some information which suggests monetary and fiscal policies may have been too tight during the first two quarters of the current fiscal year.

"So I think that balance has to be restored to what I would say is more appropriate," he said.

Sitharaman, in her Budget for the fiscal year beginning in April, trod a fine line between fiscal prudence and providing a thrust to growth. She not only gave the middle class the biggest-ever tax relief but also unveiled a glide path for reducing fiscal deficit next year and lowering debt as a percentage of GDP by 2031.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has kept the repo rate (short-

Sensex drops 312 pts on selling in consumption stocks ahead of RBI policy

MUMBAI, Feb 5: Taking a breather after recent rally, stock markets closed lower on Wednesday as investors turned cautious ahead of the RBI's monetary policy decision later this week and trade war concerns.

The 30-share BSE Sensex declined 312.53 points or 0.40 per cent to settle at 78,271.28 with 21 of constituents closing down and nine with gains. During the day, it went lower by 367.56 points or 0.46 per cent to 78,216.25.

The NSE Nifty dropped 42.95 points or 0.18 per cent to 23,696.30. The index moved between a high of 23,807.30 and a low of 23,680.45 during the day. Profit-taking after Tuesday's rally and the rupee plunging to record low levels also hit market sentiment. Sensex had jumped 1,397.07 points and Nifty soared 378.20 points to settle at one-month highs on Tuesday following firm global trends.

From the 30-share Sensex pack, Asian Paints dropped over 3 per cent after the firm reported a 23.5 per cent decline in consolidated net profit at ₹ 1,128.43 crore for the third quarter ended December 2024 amid downtrading due to muted demand and weak festive season.

Titan, Nestle, Hindustan Unilever, State Bank of India, Larsen & Toubro, ITC, Zomato and Bajaj Finserv were also among the laggards.

Adani Ports, IndusInd Bank, Tata Motors and HDFC Bank were among the major gainers. "Markets mirrored weak global cues and ended lower amid selling in select banking, auto, realty and FMCG stocks. While all eyes will be on Friday's monetary policy announcement, intra-day volatility could intensify over next few sessions," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

"The domestic market traded within a narrow range in negative terrain. Investors are weighing the improved domestic outlook, buoyed by a favourable budget, against lingering global uncertainties stemming from the tariff war. While declining US bond yields and lower crude oil prices have supported market sentiment, the rupee's depreciation could offset these gains," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

The BSE smallcap gauge jumped 1.42 per cent and mid-cap index climbed 0.69 per cent.

Among BSE sectoral indices, realty declined 1.66 per

India important market for AI & OpenAI, should be among leaders of AI revolution: CEO

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: OpenAI CEO Sam Altman on Wednesday said that the country is important for Artificial Intelligence and OpenAI, and added that India - with its full stack model - should be among the leaders of the AI revolution.

Altman, during a fireside chat with IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, said OpenAI tripled its users here in the last year. He gave a ringing endorsement to India's efforts in building on AI at all levels of the stack, chips, models and "the incredible applications".

"India is an incredibly important market for AI in general, for open AI in particular, it's our second biggest market. Tripled users here in the last year, but mostly seeing what people in India are building with AI at all levels of the stack, chips, models, you know, all of the incredible applications," Altman, who is on a whirlwind India tour, said. Altman advocated India to go all out in its AI play.

"I think India should be one of the leaders of the AI revolution. But it's really quite amazing to see what the country has done... embraced the technology and is building the entire stack of things on top of it," Altman said.

Asked about his advice, as India looks to have a global voice in AI and take a leadership position, Altman said "it seems to me like it's working". Altman's bullish view on India's AI efforts is a telling statement given that he had faced a backlash in 2023, when he had expressed doubts about powerful AI models emerging outside of the United States.

During the fireside chat on Wednesday, IT Minister Vaishnaw said that innovation can come from anywhere in the world "why shouldn't it come from India".

Altman's visit, his second one in two years, comes at an interesting juncture when OpenAI's



(and indeed the western world's) dominance in artificial intelligence has abruptly been challenged by Chinese upstart DeepSeek, which turned heads with its low-cost AI model R1, built at less than USD 6 million and guzzling a fraction of compute power when compared to popular models like ChatGPT.

Deepseek overtook ChatGPT as the top-ranked free app on Apple's App Store, as the US tech industry -- that has long-justified injecting billions of dollars into AI investments -- watched in sheer disbelief last week. AI chip-maker and Wall Street superstar Nvidia shed USD 590 billion in market capitalisation last Monday, suffering the single greatest one-day value wipeout of any firm in history. Ahead of Altman's visit, a 2023 video of him -- where he had expressed doubts about powerful AI models emerging outside of the United States -- has also resurfaced.

The US has been accelerating its AI efforts and just last month, President Donald Trump announced up to USD 500 billion private sector investment to fund artificial intelligence infra-

structure. The new company, Stargate, which is being created in partnership with Oracle, SoftBank and Microsoft-backed Open AI, would add to tech companies' large investments in US data centres, huge buildings full of servers that provide massive computing power.

On Monday, Japanese technology giant SoftBank Group and OpenAI stepped up their AI partnership with a 50:50 held company -- SB OpenAI Japan. Altman's visit also assumes significance as OpenAI is facing legal hurdles in India, including cases involving claims of copyright breaches.

OpenAI has, however, reportedly maintained it only uses publicly available data and has argued that Indian courts have no jurisdiction to hear the matter. With the global tech landscape becoming increasingly dynamic and complex, India is fortifying its sovereign interests with its own AI model.

Last week, India outlined global AI ambitions with plans to build its own 'foundational model' that could take on the might of ChatGPT, DeepSeek R1, and others, as it lined up "most affordable" common compute facility powered by 18,693 GPUs to be used by startups and researchers, for creating Artificial Intelligence applications, and new algorithms.

IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw announced that India is all set to launch its own safe and secure indigenous AI model at an affordable cost. He said compared to global models costing USD 2.5-3 per hour of usage, India's AI Model will cost less than ₹ 100 per hour (USD 1.16 per hour) after 40 per cent government subsidy.

The minister had exuded confidence that India will build a foundational model that is world class, and that it will be able to compete with best models across the globe. (PTI)

India's services sector growth sees slowest pace of growth in over 2 years in Jan: PMI

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: India's services sector activity expanded at the slowest pace in over two years in January amid softer increases in sales and output, a monthly survey said on Wednesday.

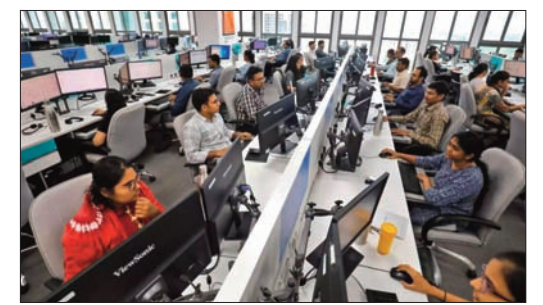
The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Services PMI Business Activity Index fell from 59.3 in December to 56.5 in January -- its lowest level since November in the Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) parlance, a print above 50 means expansion, while a score below 50 denotes contraction.

"India's services sector lost growth momentum in January, although the PMI remained well above the 50-break-even level. The business activity and new business PMI indices eased to their lowest levels since November 2022 and November 2023 respectively," Pranjul Bhandari, Chief India Economist at HSBC, said.

In contrast to the trend for total new orders, there was a quicker increase in international sales. Survey participants noted gains from clients in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the Americas. The overall rate of expansion hit a five-month high.

"... New export business partly countered the downturn and continued to rebound from a dip in late-2024, in line with official data which showed India's services exports shining in December and capturing a larger share of global trade," Bhandari said.

The survey noted that ongoing improvements in new business intakes and rising capacity pressures prompted service providers to recruit additional staff at the start of the last fiscal quarter.



According to them, full- and part-time positions had been filled. The rate of job creation accelerated from December and was among the fastest seen since data collection started in December 2005.

Service providers in India were confident of a rise in business activity over the course of the coming 12 months. Some of the reasons listed for upbeat forecasts include advertising, efforts to price competitively and new client enquiries.

On the price front, services companies noted another uptick in their expenses largely due to rising staff costs, but also greater food prices. As a result of rising cost burdens and demand resilience, prices charged for the provision of Indian services increased further at the start of 2025.

Meanwhile, India's private sector economy lost some growth momentum in January, as a quicker increase in factory production was more than offset by a softer expansion in services activity. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

Under PM Modi's leadership

Referring to RBI KLEMS data, the BJP leader said it has shown that employment in the manufacturing sector grew at twice the pace in the last decade compared to the UPA era.

From 2014 to 2024, an additional 17.9 crore jobs were created as compared to just 2.9 crore jobs from 2004 to 2014, he added. "Unlike the Congress' decades of mere sloganeering, the NDA government is actively investing in capacity building for critical technologies," Malviya said.

In addition to eliminating 1,550 outdated laws and 40,000 unnecessary compliances, the government has also introduced "bold reforms" such as the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme "which is boosting 14 key sectors and cutting-edge technologies", he said. "The Congress' approach was to lament problems. The Modi government solves them," Malviya added. (PTI)

BJP-EKADC hails MP Amarsing

Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Tuliram Ronghang, along with his team, is currently in New Delhi meeting with central ministers and MPs to garner support for the issues raised by MP Tisso. The BJP-EKADC greatly appreciates MP Tisso's bold initiative in speaking up for the development of the hill districts in Parliament and hopes he will continue to do so in the future. Killing stated.

Echoing Killing's sentiments, party spokesperson Chomang Kro explained that the people of the hill districts are essentially demanding a "state within a state," meaning Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao would remain part of Assam while having more autonomy.

"The BJP has openly declared its support for the implementation of Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution, and Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma is also in favor of it. CEM Ronghang has also been discussing the implementation of Article 244(A) with the Prime Minister," Kro stated.

Mizoram poll panel pardons

the MCC. The minister clarified that violating the poll code was never his intention. After considering the matter, the SEC decided to pardon Vanlalhlana, citing that it was his first violation and that he had promised not to repeat it. The minister was instructed to delete the video and submit proof of the action within three days.

In a separate order, the SEC also said it did not find any violation of the MCC from Hmar as he was explaining development projects that have been already taken up by the government before party leaders. (PTI)

'Making all efforts to bring back

adding that legal efforts are going on to bring them back. When asked about the progress of issuing red notices against them, police chief Baharul Alam said he hoped that Interpol would soon issue notice against the persons wanted by the ICT. "As the red notice has been issued by the ICT, the host country is liable to arrest them," he said.

The interim government has already revoked the passports of Hasina and 96 others over their alleged involvement in enforced disappearances and the July killings.

In December, Bangladesh officially sought Hasina's repatriation to stand trial on charges of mass killings during the Anti-Discrimination Student's Movement dubbed as the July-August uprising.

Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal, originally formed to try the hardened collaborators of atrocities of Pakistani troops during its 1971 Liberation War, so far has issued two arrest warrants ordering authorities to arrest her and ensure her court appearance by February 12 as she was also accused of enforced disappearances during the past 16-year rule.

Meanwhile, the High Court on Wednesday acquitted all 47 people convicted in a case filed over an attack on a train carrying Hasina, the then-leader of the opposition, in Ishwardi on September 23, 1994, the news agency reported. A bench of Justices Muhammad Mahbub Ul Islam and Md Hamidur Rahman pronounced the judgment after hearing the convicts' death references and jail appeals.

Terminating the lower court judgment inhuman, the High Court ordered the immediate release of the acquitted people. The lower court had sentenced nine people to death, 25 people to life imprisonment and 13 others to 10 years in jail. Hasina was travelling from Khulna to Syedpur via train when it was attacked with crude bombs and gunshots. Police filed a charge sheet against 52 Bangladesh Nationalist Party activists on April 4, 1997. (PTI)

Constitution under 'attack'

is in force, Dalits and other deprived sections of the society can hope for a better life. The BJP-RSS knows this, so they attack the Constitution, but not overtly." "You can see Prime Minister Narendra Modi bowing before the Constitution and the statue of Ambedkar. Today, many RSS leaders can also be seen singing peans to Ambedkar. They do so while working against the very ideals that Ambedkar espoused," claimed Gandhi.

"Modi says representation is being given to deprived classes and cites the number of tickets they get in elections. But, he has snatched away all powers from MLAs and MPs. Even his ministers function with an OSD appointed on recommendation of the RSS breathing down their necks," alleged the Congress leader.

Gandhi also asserted that the number of Dalits is negligible in the media, a reason why their issues do not get highlighted. In educational institutions, Dalits have still not reached the stage where "we can see them setting the question papers", he said.

"The public health network in the country, which was meant to serve the needs of common people, is giving way to private hospitals that are owned by Ambani, Adani and their ilk. Needless to say, there is no Dalit among the country's billionaires," Gandhi claimed. The former Congress chief said the first step in the direction of better participation of the depressed classes would be a caste census, "a veritable X-ray of the society... which the Modi government wants to avoid but we are determined to push through".

He also wanted that the caste survey in Bihar, ruled by the BJP-led NDA, was not up to the mark, unlike a similar exercise undertaken by his party's government in Telangana. During his speech, Gandhi cited the example of the change that came about in the US when "Blacks started having a say in the system". (PTI)

'Pictures of Indians getting

Khera said Income Tax department started investigating the American Embassy school.

"John Kerry expressed regrets at the treatment given to Devyani Khobragade. The US administration called up foreign secretary Sujatha Singh to convey the regrets of the USA," he said. A 1999-batch IFS officer, Khobragade was arrested in New York on visa fraud charges, triggering a row between the two countries with India retaliating by downgrading privileges of certain categories of US diplomats among other steps.

Congress MP Shashi Tharoor on Tuesday said the media kerfuffle over the deportation of 150 plus illegal Indian migrants from the United States obscures a few facts.

"This is not the first such paneload, nor is it directly related to the ascent of @realDonaldTrump. There were 1100 Indians deported in the previous fiscal year (ending September 2024), under Biden, not Trump. As of 2022, there were 725,000 undocumented Indian immigrants in the US -- the third-largest group, outnumbered only by nationals of Mexico and El Salvador, he said.

"Since October 2020, US Customs and Border Protection officials have detained nearly 170,000 Indian migrants attempting to cross the border illegally from either Canada or Mexico. They are all subject to deportation," Tharoor said. The US action comes in the midst of India and the US finalising various elements of a likely visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Washington from February 12 to 13.

It is learnt a C-17 Globemaster aircraft of the US Air Force took off with the deported Indians from an airbase near Texas. However there is no clarity on the number of people on board the plane. (PTI)

Less than 4 pc students

students. "The committee, therefore, recommends that the department should also take steps to ensure courses are completed by candidates, since major private online platforms suffer from this," it said. "The department should also consider establishing a separate cell for ensuring greater participation of students from underprivileged sections of society and should also monitor their enrolment and progress diligently," it added. (PTI)

Inaugurates buyer-seller meet cum international conclave

Minister Bimal Bora lays stress on agricultural exports

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 5: In a significant move to enhance agricultural and processed food exports from Assam and the North-Eastern Region (NER) of India, the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) in collaboration with the Government of Assam hosted an International Conclave cum Buyer-Seller Meet (BSM) in Guwahati recently.

The event brought together key stakeholders, policymakers, exporters, international buyers, Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) and Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) to explore new opportunities and strengthen the region's agri-export ecosystem.

The International Conclave cum Buyer Seller Meet (IBSM) was graced by industries, commerce & PE department minister Bimal Bora, agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry & veterinary minister Atul Bora and senior government officers among others.

Bora emphasised, "To realise the vision of Hon'ble PM Modi and Hon'ble chief minister of Assam, Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma to make Assam the growth engine of the North Eastern Region and one of the top 5 states in the nation, several amendments have been made to the Industrial policy of the region."

He highlighted Assam's rich



agro-climatic potential and its growing importance in India's agricultural export strategy. He said, "Assam aims to be the Hub of High Quality Agri Exports benefiting farmers and the people of Assam."

Joining the stakeholders virtually Atul Bora said that, "There are several potential agricultural products from Assam like Litchi, Orange, Ginger, Pineapple and Natural Honey as well as mentioned that Pineapple, Mandarins and Bananas are in high demand from Assam in global markets." He mentioned, "The IBSMs and BSMs facilitated by APEDA have been a gamechanger for FPOs and FPCs of Assam."

The Commissioner & Secretary to the Govt. of Assam, Agriculture Department and Agriculture Production Commissioner (APC), Govt. of Assam, Smt. Aruna Rajorja stated, "Due to the global demand of sustainable consumption,

NPOP certification facility will be made available in the state of Assam itself from the upcoming financial year so FPOs/ FPCs do not have to spend time and money in travelling to get certified. The Agriculture University of Assam will host the processes of certification." She added, "Custom Clearance Facility has been established at Guwahati Airport which will further aid in enhancing the Agri Exports from the region." She said, "Value Added Products like Tea Wine, Pineapple Wine and Rice Beer as well as Pulp based products such as Pumpkin Pulp and Pineapple Pulp may be explored from Assam for production and export. Since export ban on non-basmati white rice has been removed, sticky rice, black rice, purple rice and Joha rice variety indigenous to the region can be a potential product for exports from Assam."

The commissioner & secretary to the govt of Assam, Virendra

Mittal said, "Assam has emerged as the largest Agri Exporter from the North Eastern region with fruits, vegetables and spices as the leading products." He remarked that, "Northeast region of India has seen over 85% increase in agricultural product exports over the past six years, with significant growth in exports to neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan and markets in the Middle East, Europe and the UK."

Chairman of APEDA, Abhishek Dev gave the inaugural message virtually. He highlighted, "Assam has significant potential in the exports of agricultural products such as Assam Lemon, Pineapples, Ginger, Red rice, Assam tea and also a lot of Organic products." He further stated that, "To overcome logistic constraints and the cost for internal transportation from production area to central hub location, APEDA and CONCOR have jointly come up with a potential solution of transportation through Ice Battery Trucks. Through the Ice Battery Truck, one will be able to transport the produce to the ICD in Dabdi and from there, it will go to the final port of exit in Mumbai. It has been determined that this method will ensure that the product stays fresh throughout the way and reduce the cost of transportation and logistics. We hope that this small step can be a game changer for the region."

Missing Autonomous Council delegation visits BTR

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Feb 5: A delegation team from the Missing Autonomous Council (MAC), comprising executive member (EM) and general members of the council along with weavers, are on an exposure visit to the Bodoland Territorial Region.

The visit is meant to study the Bodoland Handloom Mission and other handloom developmental initiatives.

The delegation team on Tuesday arrived and visited the Integrated Textile Park (ITP) Karujan, Baska and the ANT campus in Chirang, where they engaged with experts and gained firsthand insights into innovative handloom practices.

The visit was facilitated by the department of handloom & textiles, govt of Bodoland Territorial Region ensuring meaningful discussions on key aspects of BTR's



handloom ecosystem, production techniques, and market linkages.

The visit aims to foster knowledge exchange and collaboration between the two regions, helping the MAC delegation explore strategies to enhance the handloom sector in Missing areas.

The MAC team members have expressed their gratitude and

thanks to the BTR government authorities and concerned departmental officials for according warm welcome and felicitation during their schedule visit.

"We are hopeful that the visit is boosting a strong communication between the two regions in days to come," said an official of the Missing Autonomous Council.

Celebrated writer Jagannath Das felicitated

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Feb 5: Assam Pradesh Harijan League organised a special function at the Guwahati Press Club at Ambari in Guwahati on January 30, to felicitate Jagannath Das, who was awarded the Sahityashri Rashtriya Samman by the Dalit Sahitya Akademi in Delhi. The function was attended by Assam Pradesh Harijan League president Janmejyay Das; Shiksha Prachar Samiti president and retired Indian Administrative Service Officer Langki Phangcho and many other dignitaries.

It is worth mentioning that due to his literary talent and as a poet-litérateur-journalist-social worker Das has already been awarded various national awards such as the Ideal Poet, Dr. Ambedkar Sahitya Ratna, Mahatma Gandhi Peace Award, Sahitya Shri Rashtriya Samman, Kavyaratna etc.

Das was also able to gain special closeness and affection from the president of the country, the former Governor of Assam and chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

Das is son of late Nanigopal Das and late Niru Das of Ranipukhuri village, Hojai.

Gracy Marak receives warm welcome

HT Correspondent

DOKMOKA, Feb 5: Gracy Marak received warm welcome in Karbi Anglong on Wednesday.

Marak, the proud daughter of Karbi Anglong, led the NCC contingent in the Prime Minister's parade on the occasion of 76th Republic Day celebration in New Delhi and winning the 'Best Commander' award was warmly welcomed by the people of her home town Parokhuwa with traditional dance songs of the Garo community, along with beating of drums and other musical instruments.

Foreign cigarettes disposed

HT Correspondent

MORIGAON, Feb 5: A total 25 cartons (Gudan Garam Jof foreign cigarettes, made in Indonesia (Approx value- 30 lakhs) were disposed through deep burial at Paddy fields in Morigaon.

The disposal took place under Mikirbheta PS campus in the presence of ASP (Crime), executive magistrate, Mikirbheta, OC Mikirbheta, COVDO of VDP, Gaonpradhan of Mikirbheta, PS staff and local public.

"As per the order passed by hon'ble court of Chief Judicial Magistrate, Morigaon and as proposed by the Pollution Control Board, Assam, Regional Office, Nagaon in connection with Mikirbheta PS, Morigaon case no. 39/24 U/S 120(B)/420/379/411 IPC R/W Sec 2(2)(2) of COTPA Act/2023 (PRC 977/24)," a PR stated.

Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura

The inauguration programme was held on January 18 on online mode which was followed by 10 days of online sessions conducted by T P Saikia, chief scientist and course director, AAU-SMAPRS, Buralikson and five other course instructors viz., Snigdha Bhattacharjee, Joshila Enghipi, Bhabhesh Gogoi, Manjurima Gogoi and Hunmlti Terangi.

Five invited speakers also delivered talks. The hands-on practical training programme started from February 1 at AAU-Zonal Research Station, here. A three day practical classes were conducted under the guidance of Scientists from AAU-Zonal Research Station here. During the practical training the participants conducted a base-

line survey on an existing Jhum farming system in the Dhansiri village.

They also visited the Ejangpo Integrated Farm near Taralango and local markets on Jhum and organic products to study their marketing potentialities. The valedictory function and certificate distribution programme was held on Wednesday which was graced by H K Bhattacharyya, associate director extension (Vety), AAU, Khanapara as chief guest and was attended by R K Thakuria, director, AAU-ODL; T P Saikia, course director, K D Singha; chief scientist, AAU-ZRS, Diphu, S Maibangsa; head, KVK, Karbi Anglong, Diphu, M K Kalita; professor, AAU-ODL and the scientists from AAU-ZRS, Diphu and AAU-SMAPRS, Buralikson.

Certificate course on Jhum farming concludes

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Feb 5: A 14 day online and distance learning certificate course on 'Maintenance of a sustainable jhum farming system for the scientists of Krishi Vigyan Kendras under ATARI Zone VII of North East India has successfully concluded here at Assam Agriculture University - Zonal Research Station (AAU-ZRS) on Wednesday.

The certificate course was designed and conducted by the AAU-Sugarcane, Medicinal & Aromatic Plants Research Station (AAU-SMAPRS), Buralikson, Golaghat under the ODL directorate of the Assam Agricultural University.

The programme was attended by 25 scientists from various KVKs located in Nagaland, Meghalaya,

Session on law held

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Feb 5: A special session on "Law as a Career" was organised on Wednesday at PM Shri Kendriya Vidyalaya Diphu for Class 12 students. Chief judicial magistrate, Nayan Jyoti Chaudhury and judicial magistrate first class Khusboo Damani enlightened the students about career opportunities in law.

Sunder Singh, principal of PM Shri KV Diphu, welcomed the guests and emphasised the importance of legal awareness. Nayan Jyoti Chaudhury elaborated on the importance of knowing law in daily life. While Khusboo guided the students for a career in law, and provided insights into the judicial system, legal education, and entrance exams like CLAT. The interactive session was informative and inspiring, with students showing enthusiasm for law as a career.

Minister Singhal takes stock of preparation of Jhumoir Binandini 2025

HT Correspondent

TEZPUR, Feb 5: The minister of health & family welfare and irrigation Ashok Singhal, was present during the first Zonal Level performance of Jhumoir Binandini (Mega Jhumoir) 2025, held on Tuesday at Church Field, Tezpur. This zonal-level rehearsal and performance witnessed enthusiastic participation from 512 performers from Sonitpur, 224 from Biswanath, and 225 from Nagaon, along with musicians, master trainers, and members of the Expert Committee from each of the three participating districts.

Addressing the performers and the audience, minister Singhal emphasised that the Jhumoir Binandini performance, scheduled for February 24 at Sarusajai, Guwahati in the esteemed presence of Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, is not just a celebration of the traditional dance of the tea tribe and Adivasi community but also a grand showcase of its rich cultural heritage, indomitable spirit, and deep-rooted traditions.

During the event, minister Singhal felicitated central choreographers of Jhumoir Binandini (Mega Jhumoir) 2025 Ranjit Gogoi, Sajan Nayak and Mangal Nayak, for their invaluable contributions.

In his welcome address, the district commissioner of Sonitpur, Ankur Bharali, congratulated all participants and expressed confidence that they were preparing to be part of a historic event.

Additional chief secretary to the government of Assam, Labour welfare department B Kalyan Chakravarty, commended the dedication and enthusiasm of the performers and extended his best wishes for their grand performance on February 24. The event was attended by MLA of Tezpur Prithiraj Rava, MLA of Biswanath Promod Borthakur, and MLA of Behali Diganta Ghatowal, along with CEO of Sonitpur Zilla Parishad, Karabi Saikia Karan, other distinguished dignitaries, leading citizens, and members of the local community.

Civic Action Programme organised

HT Correspondent

DALGAON, Feb 5: The 61st Battalion Sashastra Seema Bal organised a Civic Action Programme at Brokplanchen village on February 5. The programme aimed to improve the living standards of people residing at the borders by promoting economic development through agriculture, horticulture, environmental awareness, tree plantation, and animal husbandry. The programme included training sessions on scientific methods of horticulture and agriculture, conducted by Harish Chandra Patel, in-charge of Horticulture Development Office Kalakatang. Good quality plants and seeds were also distributed to the farmers. A veterinary camp was also organised, where animals were treated and free medicines were distributed. The programme was attended by Chandra Sheemaar Bhan, second-in-command, officiating commandant 61st BN SSB, and other dignitaries.

This initiative demonstrates the Sashastra Seema Bal's commitment to improving the lives of border communities and promoting environmental conservation.

Rana Jyoti Neog awarded 'Best Organiser' title

HT Correspondent

MARGHERITA, Feb 5: Ledo Xakha Sahitya Sabha on Wednesday organised a felicitation ceremony at its branch to honour Rana Jyoti Neog, who was recently awarded the "Best Organiser" title by the Asom Sahitya Sabha at Patshala. Rana Jyoti Neog, the current vice-president of the Ledo Xakha Sahitya Sabha has been instrumental in leading the organisation since 2003 where on Wednesday he was felicitated by over 30 organisations and individuals for his outstanding contributions. The felicitation ceremony, held at Ledo Xakha Sahitya Sabha office was presided by Dr Ranjit Dutta president of Ledo Xakha Sahitya Sabha where prominent personalities and distinguished persons such as Dr Kripa Prasad Upadhyay principal of Ledo College, Phulmai Phukan principal of Ledo Junior College, Jagat Changmai veteran journalist, among others offered phoolam Gamosha, Xapi, Korai and other token of gifts.

Karbi Anglong celebrates Lokhimon Karcho

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Feb 5: Lokhimon Karcho commemorating the 67th foundation day of Lokhimon faith was celebrated in Karbi Anglong and in other districts of Assam on Wednesday.

It is a five day religious event starting from February 3 to 7. The religion was founded on February 5, 1995 by priest Lokhon Engti Hensek with its main centre located at Bapuram Tokbi village, No 2 Dolamara in Karbi Anglong.

Within 30 years from its inception the religion has spread to different parts of Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong and to other districts of the state like in Tezpur, North Lakhimpur, Sonitpur and in Arunachal Pradesh.

There are 114 Lokhimon adovan (temples) with more than 1 lakh believers. There are four ashrams: the first is at No 2 Dolamara, near Bapuram Tokbi village, second at Japralango, third at Kokila, Arunachal Pradesh and fourth is at Rongnagar, Bakulia. The Ashrams are also called as Doavan Longri Anei.

The celebration started in the morning at home by lighting lamps and cleaning up the kitchen and utensils, agriculture tools and vehicles by sprinkling basil leaves and

dipped water.

At Rengsajir Lokhimon adovan and unlike other days everyone was seen dressed in their religious attire. The married men and women were dressed in green and yellow garments, while the unmarried boys and girls including children were dressed in their white attire symbolising purity. The devotees would take from home prepared edible items made out of rice, sweets and fruits to the temple to be offered to the priest.

The morning devotion was conducted with songs and prayers. Kangthir methek was performed, where the priest burns the holy fire and the faithful revolve around it chanting the name of Hemphu Lokhimon through songs and musical instruments.

Participating in the celebration at Rengsajir Lokhimon Adovan, 5 miles, Lumding Road, here, was member of autonomous council (MAC) of Lumbajong MAC constituency, Johnny Timung, who himself is a devotee of Lokhimon. He said, "For us February 5 is an important date as on this particular day the Lokhimon religion was established. It is a four day celebration and on the third day i.e. February 5 we come together to talk about our beliefs and to worship and celebrate together."

Literature extravaganza adopting Africa as central theme underway

Writers, thinkers, scholars enlighten 2nd DU Literature Festival

HT Correspondent

DIBRUGARH, Feb 5: The second edition of Dibrugarh University Literature Festival (DU Lifest) started on Wednesday with much fanfare in the presence of writers coming from across the globe.

The writers, including novelists, poets, story writers, critics, essayists, and travelogue writers representing over 25 countries from Asia, Africa, and Europe.

The four-day festival will see around 120 best of brains in literature exchanging their ideas and experiences in the four-day event.

This first-of-its-kind convergence of global authors in eastern Assam started last year in a joint effort between Foundation for Culture, Arts & Literature (FOCAL) and Dibrugarh University.

Addressing the inaugural function held at Rang Ghar auditorium, 84-year-old explorer-writer Tete-Michel Kpomassie narrated his life journey as to how he landed up in Greenland, far away from his homeland in Togo, West Africa. In his eight-year-long journey, he took up various types of work in several European countries while remaining focused on his goal of reaching Greenland. He wrote his life adven-



ture including his experience of living with indigenous people in Greenland in his book "An African in Greenland".

Explaining his own mistake about 'igloo', which in Greenland local terms simply means house and not just house built with ice as he had understood, he cautioned travellers about different contexts of words in different places.

Earlier, in his welcome address, Dibrugarh University vice-chancellor Prof Jiten Hazarika expressed gratitude to FOCAL and its trustees, including renowned writ-

er Mantri Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA).

The university also organised record number of national and international conferences this year, said the vice-chancellor while urging the students and scholars to take full advantage of these events to gain academic excellence.

Sahitya Akademi Award winner and former professor of Dibrugarh University Nagen Saikia in his address briefed on utmost importance of understanding the temporal existence of human lives.

He referred to classic drama "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett to explain his point of how God in various prominent religions remains an invisible character.

Saikia also drove home the point that "inner human being is still working" amid the drastic materialistic changes in the outer world.

VB Pyarelal, one of the managing trustees of FOCAL and a former bureaucrat, urged the students and scholars of the university to reap the maximum benefits from the festival by ensuring their participation in the over 50 sessions planned in the four-day event.

FOCAL trustees - renowned

filmmaker and Padma Bhushan awardee Jahnur Baruah, eminent writer Dhruba Hazarika, and festival chief coordinator Rahul Jain - and university Registrar Parmananda Sonowal were also present on the occasion.

Later in the day, seven literary sessions were held simultaneously in five different venues with participation of literateurs from different genres. The sessions started with "It's Time for Africa: Perspective on the continent, people and literature" at Rang Ghar auditorium.

It may be mentioned here that Africa being the festival theme, several writers from African nations have been participating in the over 50 literary sessions scheduled in the four-day literary extravaganza.

A documentary on Africa prepared by students and teachers of Dibrugarh University showing different aspects of the continent from rich culture to technological advancements also marked the occasion.

A scintillating cultural performance by over a dozen African students studying in the prestigious university enthralled the audience, culminating the inaugural function.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference. - Winston Churchill

India's maritime power

In a rare and powerful display of naval strength, India's two major naval forces—the Western and Eastern Fleets—came together during the ongoing TROPEX-25 exercise. This marks a major shift in India's approach to maritime security, showing that the country is prepared to respond to threats in the Indian Ocean with a unified force.

While China is the dominant challenge, India cannot ignore Pakistan and Bangladesh's evolving maritime posturing. Pakistan's Naval Expansion: Pakistan has been modernising its navy, acquiring advanced submarines and frigates from China.

The ability of India's Eastern and Western Fleets to operate as a unified force means that India can swiftly neutralise any minor provocations and maintain dominance in its surrounding waters.

Big talks on budgetary support to agriculture, but small increase in funds

By: Dr. Gyan Pathak

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman talked big during her budget speech emphasizing "Agriculture as the first Engine" for India's development journey announcing a slew of measures to spur agriculture growth and productivity benefitting the Annadata.



for the demand in BE 2025-26 is ₹ 128290.16 crore (₹ 127290.16 crore plus ₹ 1000 crore). The Additional ₹ 1000 crore in BE 2025-26 is to be met from the balances from Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Fund (AIDF) for PMFBY & RKVY Scheme, the amount which the Centre could not spend in 2024-25, which is a proof of a dismal performance in both the schemes.

The Centre has been reducing its establishment expenditure for the Union Ministry for Agriculture and Farmers Welfare. It was ₹ 974 crore in 2023-24, which was reduced to ₹ 858 crore in 2024-25 (RE), and now it has been proposed to further reduce to ₹ 795 crore in 2025-26.

As for the Central sector schemes and projects for Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, there is a proposed cut in expenditure, which was ₹ 1,16,598 crore in 2024-25 (RE), but now will be ₹ 1,08,910 crore, even after announcement of several new schemes, such as Cotton Technology Mission worth ₹ 500 crore, Mission for Pulses worth ₹ 1000 crore, Mission for Vegetables and Fruits worth ₹ 500 crore, National Mission on Hybrid Seeds worth ₹ 100 crore, and Support for Makhana Board worth ₹ 100 crore.

It is puzzling for common people how the Centre is claiming helping the agriculture to grow and farmers to get larger benefit than now, when the Centre is actually reducing its expenditure on Central sector schemes and projects?

Under the Crop Insurance Scheme which included transfer to Transfer to Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Fund and Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, the net expenditure is estimated for 2025-26 is ₹ 12,242 which is less than ₹ 15,864 crore in 2024-25 (RE).

The Union Budget 2025-26 has just abolished the Market Intervention Scheme and Price Support Scheme

Union Budget 2025: A blueprint for economic growth and inclusivity

The Union Budget 2025, presented by the Finance Minister, has set the tone for India's economic trajectory amidst an evolving global landscape. Against the backdrop of post-pandemic recovery, geopolitical uncertainties, and the imperatives of achieving sustainable development, this budget reflects a delicate balance between growth aspirations and fiscal prudence.

At its core, the Union Budget 2025 prioritizes infrastructure development as the cornerstone of economic progress. A significant increase in capital expenditure allocation reflects the government's commitment to creating a robust foundation for long-term growth.

The budget also marks a significant step toward boosting India's self-reliance in critical sectors such as energy, technology, and defense. The government's ambitious push for renewable energy has been further strengthened with increased funding for solar, wind, and green hydrogen projects.

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), the backbone of India's economy, have received a significant boost in this year's budget. Targeted measures such as interest rate subsidies, credit guarantees, and tax relief aim to revitalize the sector, which continues to face challenges from the aftermath of the pandemic and global economic uncertainties.

Education and skill development are pivotal components of the Union Budget 2025, reflecting the government's focus on human capital development. Increased allocations for school and higher ed-



DEGREE OF THOUGHT By: Mowsam Hazarika

education, along with targeted programs for teacher training and digital learning infrastructure, aim to bridge educational disparities and enhance the quality of education. Skill development initiatives, particularly in high-demand areas such as information technology, renewable energy, and advanced manufacturing, are designed to equip India's youth with the capabilities needed for emerging job markets.

The healthcare sector has also witnessed significant attention in the budget, with increased funding for public health infrastructure, medical research, and disease prevention programs. The expansion of the Ayushman Bharat scheme and the establishment of new medical colleges and hospitals aim to improve access to quality healthcare, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Social welfare and inclusion remain integral to the Union Budget 2025, with targeted measures to uplift marginalized communities

and reduce inequalities. Enhanced allocations for rural development programs, affordable housing, and social security schemes aim to improve living standards and create opportunities for the underprivileged. The focus on women's empowerment is evident through initiatives promoting female entrepreneurship, education, and healthcare. These measures are expected to contribute to greater gender equity and economic participation, unlocking the potential of India's diverse population.

Environmental sustainability has emerged as a central theme in the Union Budget 2025, aligning with India's commitments to global climate goals. Increased funding for afforestation, biodiversity conservation, and pollution control programs underscores the government's resolve to address pressing environmental challenges. The promotion of electric vehicles, energy-efficient appliances, and green building practices highlights the focus on reducing carbon emissions and promoting sustainable living.

Fiscal management has been a critical consideration in the Union Budget 2025, reflecting the government's commitment to maintaining macroeconomic stability while pursuing developmental goals. The budget targets a moderate fiscal deficit, achieved through

The relevance of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha

On the Occasion of The 94th Jorhat Conference of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha

By: Himangshu Ranjan Bhuyan

The Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, established in 1930, is one of the most influential socio-religious organisations in Assam. Deeply rooted in the teachings of Srimanta Sankaradeva, the 15th-century saint-reformer, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha has played a vital role in shaping Assamese culture, spirituality, and social unity.

The early twentieth century was a time of social change in Assam. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's freedom movement, several intellectuals and reformers sought to eliminate social evils, caste divisions, and religious superstitions. They recognized that the egalitarian message of Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva provided a path toward social unity and spiritual upliftment.

Since its inception, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha has worked towards promoting Eka Sarana Nama Dharma, the monotheistic faith introduced by Sankaradeva, which emphasizes devotion to one supreme God, rejection of idol worship, and collective prayer through naam-kirtan.

One of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha's most remarkable contributions has been in the field of education. Recognizing the importance of value-based learning, it has established several schools where students receive both general education and spiritual training. These institutions aim to instill ethical values while promoting academic excellence.

Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha has also played a key role in preserving and promoting Assamese cultural traditions. Srimanta Sankaradeva was not only a religious leader but also a poet, dramatist, and musician who laid the foundation for Assamese literature and performing arts.

tions, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha has helped revive and sustain these art forms, making them relevant in contemporary society.

In addition to its cultural contributions, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha has been a leading force in social reform. It has consistently opposed superstitions, caste discrimination, and exploitative religious practices that contradict Sankaradeva's core teachings.

Festivals and religious gatherings organised by Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha have further reinforced its significance. Events like the birth anniversaries of Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, as well as Raas Utsav, bring together thousands of devotees and cultural enthusiasts.

Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha's impact has also extended beyond Assam. It has established branches in other states like West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya, where Assamese communities continue to practice and promote Sankari traditions.

Despite being deeply rooted in tradition, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha has shown remarkable flexibility in addressing modern societal challenges. It has actively promoted interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence in an era marked by religious and social tensions.

As the world continues to change, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha's role remains crucial in preserving Assamese culture, strengthening ethical values, and fostering unity. By staying true to Sankaradeva's principles while embracing modern advancements, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha continues to inspire generations. Its commitment to social service, education, and cultural preservation ensures that the legacy of Srimanta Sankaradeva remains a living tradition.

The present state of India's forest: Key findings and initiatives

By: **Diganta Barooh**

The Ministry for Environment, Forest and Climate Change recently released the 18th India State of Forest Report 2023 (ISFR 2023). The Forest Survey of India (FSI) has been brought out by ISFR on a biennial basis since 1987. Main Findings of ISFR 2023 :

1. Total 25.17% of total geographical area of India is under Forest and Tree cover, that is about 8,27,356.95 square kilometres.
2. Total 21.76% of total geographical area or about 7,15,342.61 square kilometres area are under Forest cover.
3. Total 3.41% of total geographical area or about 1,12,014.34 square kilometres area are under Tree cover.
4. Total 1.33% of total geographical area or about 43,622.64 square kilometres area are under scrub.
5. Total 73.50% of total geographical area or about 24,16,489.29 square kilometres area fall under Non-Forest Area.
6. There is an overall rise of 1,445.81 square kilometres area under Forest and Tree Cover including 156.41 square kilometres rise in Forest cover since 2021.
7. Chattisgarh leads in increase in Forest and Tree Cover with a rise of 684 square kilometres area since 2021 followed by Uttar Pradesh (559 square kilometres rise), Odisha (559 square kilometres rise) and Rajasthan (394 square kilometres rise). They are the Top Three States in this category.
8. Mizoram leads in increase in Forest Cover with a rise of 242 square kilometres area since 2021 followed by Gujarat (180 square kilometres rise) and Odisha (152 square kilometres rise). They are the Top Three States in this category.
9. Madhya Pradesh leads in

largest decrease in Forest and Tree Cover with a decrease of 612.41 square kilometres area since 2021 followed by Karnataka (459.36 square kilometres decrease), Ladakh (159.26 square kilometres decrease) and Nagaland (125.22 square kilometres decrease). They are the Top Four States in this category.

10. Area wise Madhya Pradesh is the Top Forest Cover state with an area of 77,073 square kilometres under Forest Cover followed by Arunachal Pradesh (65,882 square kilometres) and Chattisgarh (55,812 square kilometres). They are the Top Three states in this category.

11. Percentage wise Lakshadweep is the Top Forest Cover state with 91.33% area under Forest Cover followed by Mizoram (85.34%) and Andaman & Nicobar Islands (81.62%). They are the Top Three states in this category.

12. 19 States and Union Territories have over 33% of their total area under Forest Cover.

13. 8 States and Union Territories have over 75% of their total geographical area under Forest Cover. They are Lakshadweep, Mizoram, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura.

14. Total Carbon Stock according to the ISFR 2023 is 7,285.5 million tonnes which shows a rise of 81.5 million tonnes since 2021 report.

15. Arunachal Pradesh tops the list in contributing to the Carbon Stock with 1021 million tonnes followed by Madhya Pradesh (608 million tonnes), Chattisgarh (505 million tonnes) and Maharashtra (465 million tonnes).

16. India's Carbon Stock reached 30.43 billion tonnes of Carbon Dioxide equivalent, nearing the 2030 target of an increase of 2.5-3.0 billion tonnes.

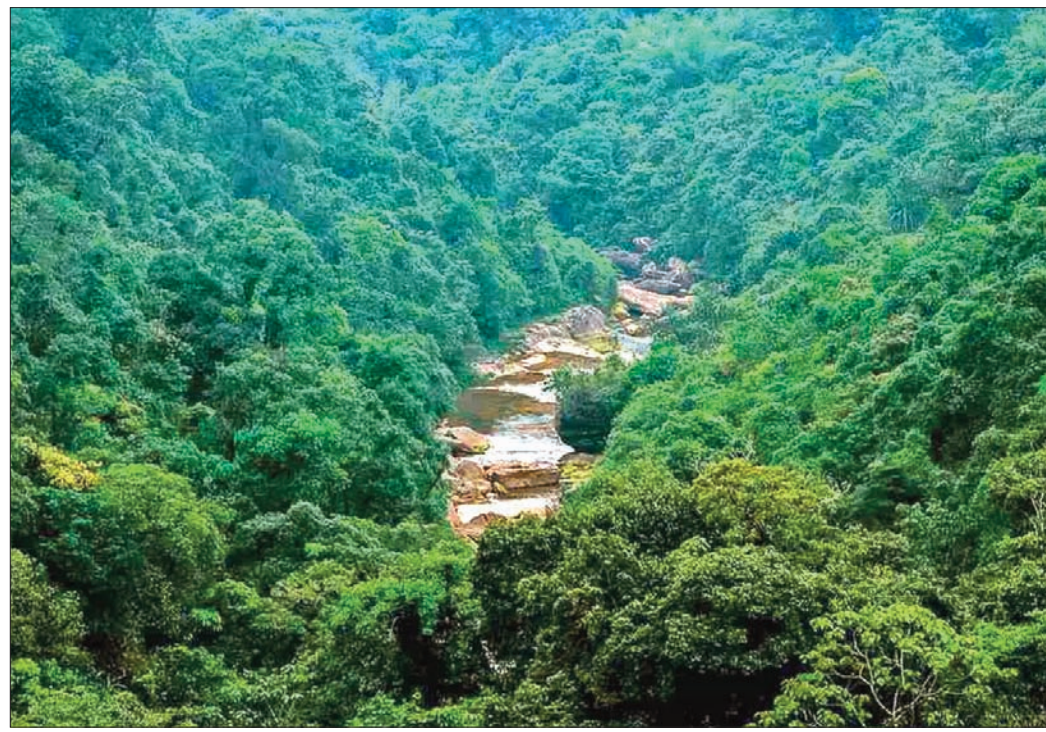
17. Looking at the Regional Performance Western Ghats covers 73% of total geographical area or 60,285 square kilometres area under Forest Cover while the North Eastern Region covers 67% of total geographical area or 1,74,394.70 square kilometres area under Forest Cover.

18. Looking at Soil Health Improvements, shallow to deep soil proportion increased to 87.16% in ISFR 2023 from 83.53% in 2013. Soil organic carbon rose from 55.85 tonnes per hectare to 56.08 tonnes per hectare enhancing soil structure and stability.

19. Uttarakhand, Odisha and Chattisgarh are the Top Three States with Forest Fire incidences in 2023-24.

20. According to ISFR 2023, total 4,991.68 square kilometres of area or 0.15% of India's geographical area are under Mangrove Forest Cover.

The Forest Survey of India



(FSI) was established on 1st June, 1981 succeeding the Pre-Investment Survey of Forest Resources (PISFR) initiated in 1965. The National Commission on Agriculture (NCA) recommended in 1976 for establishing a National Forest Survey Organisation which led to the creation of FSI. PISFR was initiated in 1965 by the Government of India with the sponsorship of FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation) and UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). FSI assesses and monitors the forest resources of India regularly. Moreover it is also engaged in providing the services of training, research and extension. FSI has headquarters at Dehradun and has pan India presence with four regional offices at Shimla, Kolkata, Nagpur and Bengaluru. The Eastern Zone has a sub centre at Burnihat (Meghalaya). The ISFR 2023 report claims an increase of 1,446 sq.

km. in forest and tree cover since 2021, comprising a forest cover increase of 156 sq. km. (0.2%) and a tree cover increase of 1,289 sq. km. (1.16%). It categorises forest data into recorded forest areas (RFA) which largely consists of the reserved forests and protected forests and non-notified forests. While RFAs show a minor increase of 7.28 sq. km., 20 states and union territories report a decline in RFA category. States like Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and the majority of north-east states have registered negative growth in the recorded forest area. In contrast, non-notified forests have increased by 149 sq. km. The ISFR 2023 paints a rosy picture, claiming an overall forest and tree cover increase. However, eco-sensitive zones like the Western Ghats, Himalayan states, and the An-

dam & Nicobar Islands have witnessed a decline in forest cover. Over the past decade, the Western Ghats Eco-Sensitive Areas (WGESAs) have lost 58.22 sq. km. of forest cover, while the latest assessment shows 327 sq. km. decrease in the northeastern region. Recorded forest areas in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands have also declined. The report also provides a glimpse into deforestation trends in last decade from 2011 to 2021, through its tree canopy density classification. Forests are categorised as Very Dense Forest (VDF, >70% canopy density), Moderately Dense Forest (MDF, 40-70% canopy density), and Open Forest (OF, 10-40% canopy density). Alarming, 46,707 sq. km. of VDF, MDF, and OF have degraded into non-forest areas, while 5,573 sq. km. have turned into scrub. Over the past decade, 40,709 sq. km. of forests have lost density, shifting from VDF and MDF to OF. The report estimates the total tree cover under agroforestry in 2023 at 1,27,590 sq. km., including trees with a Diameter at Breast Height (DBH) of 5 to 10 cm and bamboo. Agroforestry has grown by 20.02% over the past decade, from 2013 to 2023. The total growing stock (sum of all trees by number or volume) under agroforestry in the country is estimated at 1,291.68 M m³ in 2023, an increase of 286.94 M m³ (28.56%) since 2013. Maharashtra, Karnataka, Odisha, and Rajasthan have the highest growing stock under agroforestry among states, while Jammu & Kashmir, Andaman & Nicobar, Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu lead among UTs. On the other hand, the report highlights a decrease in mangrove cover. India's total mangrove cover is 4,991 sq. km., accounting for 0.15% of the country's geographical area. Very dense mangroves constitute 29.33%, moderately dense mangroves represent 30.07%, and open mangroves comprise 40.60%. Since 2021, mangrove cover has decreased by 7.43 sq. km., with notable declines of 36.39 sq. km. in Gujarat and reductions of 4.65 sq. km. in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. However, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra have seen increases of 13.01 sq. km. and 12.39 sq. km., respectively. India's forests support the livelihoods of about 17% of the global human population and 18% of the world's total livestock. As per Global Forest Resource Assessment (GFRA 2020) published by Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), India is ranked amongst the Top Ten countries of the world in terms of forest area and India holds the third position for highest annual net gain in forest cover between 2010 and 2020. In the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) commitments made at the Paris Climate Change Agreement, India has resolved to create an additional carbon sink 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of Carbon Dioxide equivalent through additional Forest and Tree Cover by 2030. India has also pledged to bring in 26 million hectares of degraded land under restoration by 2030 as part of Bonn Challenge. The World's Forest report of 2024 shows a decline in deforestation rates compared to previous decades. The report highlights the challenges forests face due to climate change. It provides a comprehensive analysis of forest conditions and trends. The World's Forest report outlines strategies for reducing deforestation. *(The author is an Assistant Development Officer, Evaluation & Monitoring Division, Transformation & Development Department, Government of Assam. He can be reached at digantabarooah@yahoo.com)*

India's rising temperatures: Understanding the impacts and finding solutions

Urbanisation, sewage, microplastics: Why many Indian wetlands are under threat

By: **Pradeep MS & Anushiya J**

Approximately 4.86% of India's land area is covered by wetlands – ecosystems that are often referred to as the "Earth's kidneys" because they are crucial for maintaining an ecological balance. However, many of India's wetlands are under threat due to urbanisation, domestic and industrial pollution, and unscientific land-use practices. Urban wetlands in major cities are particularly at a high risk due to rapid urbanisation and unchecked discharges from nearby dumpsites or sewage.

Since 1997, World Wetlands Day has been celebrated on February 2 every year to highlight why these ecosystems are vital for people and the health of the planet. Given that wetlands are the Earth's most threatened ecosystem, this year's theme is "protecting wetlands for our common future".

Wetlands are natural sponges that prevent flooding and soil erosion by absorbing excess water runoff. They also trap a significant amount of carbon and are natural waste-water treatment systems. In addition, they are home to a wide range of life forms, including microbes, plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. India has a substantial number of ecologically important wetlands, ranging from the high-altitude Himalayan wetlands to coastal marshes, inland lakes, and riverine wetlands plains.

But not all of them have been recognised and listed in the Ramsar Convention – an international treaty on the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. In 2024, India added five new wetlands to the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance, bringing the country's total to an impressive 85 sites. And on January 31, four more wetlands got the Ramsar tag, taking the total to 89.

Prominent Ramsar sites in India include the Sundarbans in West Bengal, Chilika Lake in Odisha, Keoladeo National Park in Rajasthan, Vembanad-Kol Wetland in Kerala and the Renuka Wetland in Himachal Pradesh.

Expanding land use

However, many Indian wetlands are under threat. The Chatra Wetland in eastern India, for instance, has reported approximately 60% degradation over the past 28 years, primarily due to suburban expansion. The Harike wetland in Punjab, meanwhile, serves as a stark example of wetland-area reduction caused by agricultural land expansion: it shrank by 13% between 1989 and 2010. Sewage effluents that contain fibres and microplastic fragments are increasingly entering the wetland environments. Kerala's Vembanad-Kol Wetland has revealed high levels of microplastic accumulation in water and sediments, often associated with organic matter.

Similarly, a study of mangrove sediments in Mumbai, published earlier this year in the Journal of Hazardous Materials Advances, documented an alarming average of 6.730 microplastic pieces per kilogram of dry sediment. This primarily consisted of fibres from synthetic clothing and polyethylene from plastic waste. Such pollution harms a wetland's physical environment as well as the organisms that depend on it.

Open defecation also intensifies pollution, and, combined with poor waste-management practices, has led to the proliferation of invasive plant species that displace the native vegetation and alter ecosystem functions. Poor water-quality regulations exacerbate the effects of pollution, weakening the resilience of wetland ecosystems and impairing their ability to recover from disturbances.

In Assam's Deepor Beel, wetlands are being filled for habitation, while pollution, fishing, and poaching of migratory birds further threaten this ecosystem.

In addition to these challenges, changes in precipitation patterns and the increase in drought frequency due to climate change are disrupting wetland ecosystems. Alterations in river flows and evaporation rates can destabilise hydrological cycles, leading to habitat degradation.

An IIT Indore study on Thane Creek, Kolluru Lake, Pallikaranai Marsh Reserve Forest, and Tampara Lake, published in 2024, indicates a high risk from extreme precipitation events. Wetlands in southern, central, and eastern India are particularly susceptible to recurring droughts, which historically occurred every four years to five years but may intensify and become more frequent due to climate change.

Rising sea levels
Accelerated sea-level rise is also expected to cause shifts in species composition, reduced wetland productivity, and loss of ecosystem functions.

A recent study by the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy also highlights the increase in inundation risk due to sea-level rise in coastal cities by the end of the century, which could cause saltwater intrusion (movement of saline water into freshwater habitats), leading to the degradation of urban wetlands. Several initiatives in India, such as the National Wetlands Conservation Programme and the National Mission for Clean Ganga, aim to protect and restore wetlands, while also promoting sustainable management of these systems.

Most state wetland authorities have also introduced policies and programmes either as part of national frameworks or under state-level programmes. Tamil Nadu has brought in a dedicated wetlands mission.

However, protecting and restoring wetlands remains a challenge, mainly due to a lack of awareness about the importance of wetlands, conflicting demands for land use, insufficient monitoring systems and weak legal frameworks.

Currently, two Ramsar wetlands: Loktak Lake and Keoladeo National Park are in the Montreux Record – a record of those Ramsar sites where unfavourable changes in ecological character have occurred, are occurring or are likely to occur. This underscores the need for integrated approach, innovative strategies, long-term planning, effective policies and strict laws to protect these systems. *(Courtesy: Scroll.in)*

January 2025 warmest on record with 1.75°C anomaly, despite La Nina

By: **Akshat Sangomla**

January 2025 was likely the warmest January month on record with an average monthly temperature anomaly of 1.75°C above the pre-industrial (1850-1900) average for the month, according to data from the ERA5 dataset analysed by climate scientists.

The record anomaly is also evidenced by the warmer-than-normal temperatures around the world in the past month, both in the northern (wintertime) and southern hemispheres (summertime).

As recent as on January 31, temperature records were broken in Jamaica in the northern hemisphere and Madagascar in the southern hemisphere, according to data collated and shared on social media platform X by weather historian M Herrera.

The ERA5 dataset is provided by the European Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting (ECMWF) which also implements the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) for the European Commission.

This unusual January warmth happened despite an ongoing La Nina phenomenon in the equatorial Pacific Ocean which generally leads to cooler-than-normal temperatures around the world. This was also the first time that January temperatures were much warmer-than-normal than the surrounding El Nino or neutral years. "January 2025 was quite unexpectedly the warmest January on record at 1.75°C above pre-industrial, beating the prior record set in 2024," wrote Zeke Hausfather, climate scientist at

By: **Heramba Nath**

India, with its vast and diverse geography, is one of the countries most vulnerable to the impacts of rising global temperatures. The gradual increase in average temperatures over the past century has set off a cascade of changes that affect almost every aspect of life. The country has already experienced significant warming, with an average rise of 0.6 degrees Celsius since 1901, and projections indicate further increases that could have catastrophic consequences. The impact of rising temperatures on human health is profound. Prolonged heatwaves, which have become more frequent and severe, lead to an alarming rise in heat-related illnesses such as heatstroke, dehydration, and heat exhaustion. These health challenges disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including the elderly, children, and those with pre-existing health conditions.

Furthermore, prolonged exposure to high temperatures increases the risk of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Urban areas, due to the urban heat island effect, experience even higher temperatures, exacerbating health risks for residents. Agriculture, the backbone of India's economy and the primary source of livelihood for millions, is severely affected by changing climatic patterns. Rising temperatures and shifting rainfall patterns are reducing crop yields and increasing the frequency of extreme weather events such as droughts and floods. Staple crops like rice, wheat, and pulses are particularly vulnerable to heat stress and water scarcity, threatening food security for millions. The agricultural sector, already grappling with low productivity and farmer distress, faces heightened risks from climate-induced disruptions, leading to significant economic losses.

Water scarcity is another critical issue aggravated by rising temperatures. Higher evaporation rates, coupled with irregular rainfall, are depleting water resources. Glaciers in the Himalayas, which act as a crucial water source for rivers like the Ganges, are melting at unprecedented rates. This not only reduces water availability for drinking, irrigation, and industrial use but also poses long-term risks to hydropower generation and aquatic ecosystems. Urban areas across India are also experiencing acute water shortages, forcing millions to rely on over-exploited groundwater reserves, further deepening the crisis.

India's biodiversity is under severe threat due to climate change. Rising temperatures and altered precipitation patterns are disrupting ecosystems and habitats, leading to a decline in flora and fauna. Iconic biodiversity hotspots like the Western Ghats and the Sundarbans are particularly vulnerable. Many species face the risk of extinction as their habitats become unsuitable or disappear altogether. The disruption of ecological balance also affects livelihoods dependent on biodiversity, such as fishing and forestry, adding to the socioeconomic challenges. Coastal regions in India are experiencing the dual impact of rising sea levels and intensifying cyclones.

The warming of ocean waters contributes to higher sea levels, leading to coastal erosion, saline intrusion, and displacement of communities. Cities like Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata face significant risks of flooding, which not only endangers lives but also causes extensive damage to infrastructure and property. Fishermen and coastal communities, whose livelihoods are intricately linked to marine resources, are among the worst affected. The Indian government has made notable efforts to address climate change, including commitments under the

Paris Agreement. Initiatives such as the National Solar Mission, aimed at expanding renewable energy capacity, and afforestation programs under the National Mission for a Green India are steps in the right direction. However, much more needs to be done to adapt to the challenges posed by rising temperatures. Strengthening disaster preparedness, enhancing water resource management, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices are crucial. At the same time, large-scale investment in renewable energy and energy-efficient technologies is essential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Public awareness and participation play a vital role in combating climate change. Citizens can contribute by adopting sustainable lifestyles, reducing energy consumption, and supporting conservation efforts. Businesses, too, have a significant role in transitioning to sustainable practices and technologies that minimize environmental impact. Collaborative efforts among government, industry, and civil society are essential to build resilience against the effects of rising temperatures. India's rich cultural heritage and natural beauty are at stake as the impacts of climate change grow more pronounced. The rising global temperatures threaten not only the environment but also the social and economic fabric of the nation. Immediate and sustained action is required to mitigate these impacts and build a more sustainable future. By transitioning to renewable energy, promoting sustainable development, and conserving natural resources, India can safeguard its people and ecosystems from the devastating effects of climate change. The challenge is immense, but with collective effort, it is possible to adapt and thrive in the face of this global crisis. *(The author can be reached at herambanath2222@gmail.com)*

sil fuel led greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions fuelled warming may not relent in 2025, despite the La Nina. Earth's natural climatic cycles such as the ENSO are increasingly being trumped and even slightly modified by GHG emissions caused warming.

With the ongoing La Nina phenomenon, climate scientists were expecting a cooler 2025. But the temperatures in January indicate that to not be the case.

"Both 2023 and 2024 were exceptionally warm years, at just below and above 1.5C relative to preindustrial in the WMO composite of surface temperature records, respectively," wrote Hausfather on his website The Climate Brink.

"While we are still working to assess the full set of drivers of this warmth, it is clear that a sizable portion of 2024's elevated temperatures were driven by a moderately strong El Niño event that peaked in November 2023. For this reason many of us expect that 2025 will be cooler than both 2023 and 2024, and is unlikely to be the warmest year in the instrumental record," he added.

The world is in modest La Nina conditions that should, all things being equal, result in lower global temperatures, as per Hausfather. But he writes, "Global temperature over the past few months have exceeded or been at the upper end of what we've seen after any other El Niño event in the historical record." All January months with an ongoing La Nina have been cooler than their surrounding years with El Niño or ENSO neutral conditions, except for January 2025. *(Courtesy: Down to Earth)*



Israel and the US have accused the Human Rights Council of maligning Israel
Trump announces withdrawal from UN Human Rights Council

NEW YORK, Feb 5: President Donald Trump signed an executive order withdrawing the US from the UN Human Rights Council, prohibiting any future funding for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees.



Trump on Tuesday also directed the US to review its participation in the UN's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the body that uses culture and history as a bridge-building mechanism between nations.

"The United States helped found the United Nations (UN) after World War II to prevent future global conflicts and promote international peace and security. But some of the UN's agencies and bodies have drifted from this mission and instead act contrary to the interests of the United States while attacking our allies and propagating anti-Semitism," the Executive Order said.

The executive order said that as in 2018, when the US withdrew from the UNHRC, the US will reevaluate its commitment to these institutions and three UN organisations that deserve renewed scrutiny are the UNHRC; the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO); and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Israel and the US have accused the Human Rights Council of unfairly targeting and maligning Israel. In 2019, the US and Is-

rael withdrew from UNESCO, with Israel criticising the agency as "erasing" Jewish history within Israel's borders.

The Executive Order will prohibit the US from "providing any additional funding to UNRWA, which has consistently shown itself to be anti-Semitic and anti-Israel, as evidenced by the number of its staff members who took part in the horrific October 7 terrorist attacks against Israel," a fact sheet on the Executive Order said.

Trump halted funds for UNRWA during his first term. President Joe Biden put a block on US funds for UNRWA in January 2024 over allegations that staff for the agency participated in Hamas's October 7,

2023, attack against Israel. Those funds were never reinstated when Biden left office.

It said UNRWA facilities have repeatedly been used by Hamas and other terrorist groups to store weapons and build tunnels.

"UNRWA has reportedly been infiltrated by members of groups long designated by the Secretary of State (Secretary) as foreign terrorist organisations, and UNRWA employees were involved in the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel," the Executive Order said.

It added that UNHRC has protected human rights abusers by allowing them to use the organisation to shield themselves from scrutiny, while UNESCO has demonstrated failure to reform itself, has continually demonstrated anti-Israel sentiment over the past decade, and has failed to address concerns over mounting arrears.

The fact sheet issued by the White House said that countries such as "Iran, China, and Cuba" use the UNHRC to shield themselves despite having egregious records of human rights violations and abuses.

"The UNHRC has demonstrated consistent bias against Israel, focusing on it unfairly and disproportionately in council proceedings. In 2018, the year President Trump withdrew from the UNHRC in his first administration, the organisation passed

more resolutions condemning Israel than Syria, Iran, and North Korea combined," it said.

As per the Executive Order, the United States will not participate in the UNHRC and will not seek election to that body.

The office of United States Representative to the UNHRC and any positions primarily dedicated to supporting the United States Representative to the UNHRC will be terminated.

The US will also conduct a review of its membership in UNESCO.

"The review will include an evaluation of how and if UNESCO supports United States interests. In particular, the review will include an analysis of any anti-Semitism or anti-Israel sentiment within the organisation."

Following the executive order, UN secretary general Antonio Guterres and the leadership of UNRWA and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights will be notified that the United States will not fund UNRWA or the UNHRC and that the US will not satisfy any claims to pay 2025 assessments or prior arrears by these organisations.

Trump had said in 2017 that "the UN must reform if it is to be an effective partner in confronting threats to sovereignty, security, and prosperity." (PTI)

Sri Lanka intensifies patrolling to prevent illegal bottom trawling

COLOMBO, Feb 5: Sri Lanka announced on Wednesday that its Navy has intensified patrolling around the international maritime borders to prevent Indian fishermen from engaging in illegal bottom trawling in the island nation's territorial waters.

Fishermen from both countries are arrested frequently for inadvertently trespassing into each other's waters.

"We have increased patrolling and arrests," government spokesperson and Minister of Information Nalinda Jayathissa told reporters here.

"Our actions will continue while having talks with the Indian authorities on the issue," Jayathissa said in response to a query.

The fishermen issue is a contentious one in the ties between India and Sri Lanka, with Lankan Navy personnel even firing at Indian fishermen in the Palk Strait and seizing their boats in several alleged incidents of illegally entering Sri Lankan territorial waters.

On January 28, five Indian fishermen were injured, including two seriously, during the apprehension of 13 Indian fishermen in the proximity of Delft Island by the Sri Lankan Navy.

The incident triggered a strong reaction from India. Sri Lanka's acting high commissioner in New Delhi was summoned to the Ministry of External Affairs, and a strong protest was lodged with the top diplomat over the incident.

India said the use of force is not "acceptable" under any circumstances whatsoever.

The Indian High Commission in Colombo also raised the matter with the Sri Lankan foreign ministry.

Vice Admiral Kanchana Banagoda, the Commander of the Sri Lanka Navy, said that the two Indian fishermen were injured due to the accidental discharge of a firearm by a Navy personnel.

In 2024, the Sri Lankan Navy arrested over 550 Indian fishermen for alleged illegal fishing, with over 60 arrested last month. (PTI)

Trump's US 'take over' of Gaza Strip suggestion rejected by allies, adversaries

DUBAI, Feb 5: President Donald Trump's proposal that the United States "take over" the Gaza Strip and permanently resettle its Palestinian residents was swiftly rejected and denounced on Wednesday by American allies and adversaries alike. Trump's suggestion came at a White House news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who smiled several times as the president detailed a plan to build new settlements for Palestinians outside the Gaza Strip, and for the US to take "ownership" in redeveloping the war-torn territory into "the Riviera of the Middle East."

"The US will take over the Gaza Strip, and we will do a job with it too," Trump said. "We'll own it and be responsible for dismantling all of the dangerous unexploded bombs and other weapons on the site, level the site, and get rid of the destroyed buildings, level it out, create an economic development that will supply unlimited numbers of jobs."

The comments came amid a fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, during which the militant group has been turning over hostages in exchange for the release of prisoners held by Israel.

Egypt, Jordan and other American allies in the Middle East have already rejected the idea of relocating more than 2 million Palestinians from Gaza elsewhere in the region.

Following Trump's remarks, Egypt's Foreign Ministry issued a statement stressing the need for rebuilding "without moving the Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip."

Saudi Arabia, an important American ally, weighed in quickly on Trump's expanded idea to take over the Gaza Strip in a sharply worded statement, noting that its long call for an independent Palestinian state was a "firm, steadfast and unwavering position."

"The kingdom of Saudi Arabia also stresses what it had previously announced regarding its absolute rejection of infringement on the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, whether through Israeli settlement policies, annexation of Palestinian lands or efforts to displace the Palestinian people from their land," the statement said.

Similarly, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese told reporters in Canberra, Australia, that his country has long supported a two-state solution in the Middle East and that nothing had changed.

"Australia's position is the same as it was this morning, as it was last year, as it was 10 years ago," he said.

Trump has already made waves — and upset longtime allies — suggesting the purchase of Greenland, the annexation of Canada and the possible takeover of the Panama Canal. It was not immediately clear

whether the idea of taking over the Gaza Strip was a well thought out plan, or an opening gambit in negotiations.

Albanese, whose country is one of the strongest American allies in the Asia-Pacific region, seemed frustrated to even be asked about the Gaza plan, underscoring that his policies "will be consistent."

"I'm not going to, as Australia's prime minister, give a daily commentary on statements by the US president," he said. "My job is to support Australia's position."

New Zealand's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that its "long-standing support for a two-state solution is on the record" and added that it, too, "won't be commenting on every proposal that is put forward."

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian also underscored Beijing's longstanding support for a two-state solution.

"We oppose the forced relocation of people in Gaza and hope that the relevant parties will take the ceasefire and post-war governance in Gaza as an opportunity to push the Palestinian issue back on the right track," he said.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told state-run Anadolu Agency that Trump's proposal on "deportations from Gaza is not something that either the region or we would accept."

"Even thinking about it, in my opinion, is wrong and absurd," Fidan said.

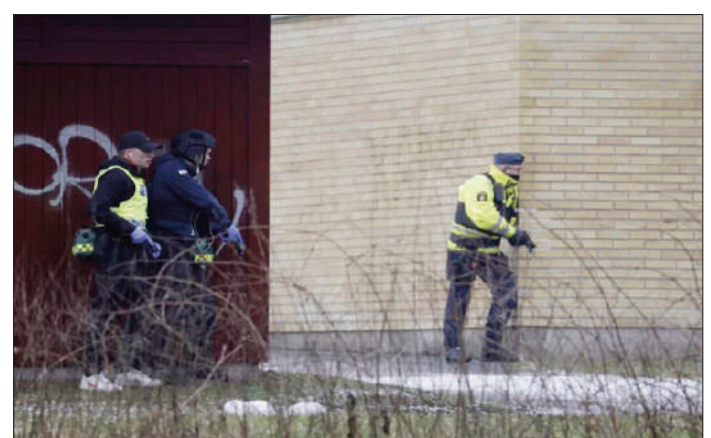
Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas called for the United Nations to "protect the Palestinian people and their inalienable rights," saying that what Trump wanted to do would be "a serious violation of international law."

Hamas, which sparked the war with its October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, said Trump's proposal was a "recipe for creating chaos and tension in the region."

"Instead of holding the Zionist occupation accountable for the crime of genocide and displacement, it is being rewarded, not punished," the militant group said in a statement. In its attack on Israel, Hamas killed some 1,200 people, primarily civilians, and took about 250 hostages.

Israel's ensuing air and ground war has killed over 47,000 Palestinians, more than half of them women and children, according to local health authorities who do not say how many of the dead were fighters. The war has left large parts of several cities in ruins and displaced around 90 per cent of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people.

Sweden's worst mass shooting leaves at least 11 dead, 5 seriously wounded at adult education centre



OREBRO (SWEDEN), Feb 5: Sweden's worst mass shooting left at least 11 people dead, including the gunman, and at least five seriously wounded at an adult education centre west of Stockholm as officials warned that the death toll could rise.

at the Royal Palace and government buildings. The Swedish news agency TT reported that officials have planned a news conference for Wednesday morning.

The shooting started Tuesday afternoon after many students had gone home following a national exam. Students sheltered in nearby buildings, and other parts of the school were evacuated following the shooting.

Authorities were working to identify the deceased, and police said the toll could rise. Roberto Eid Forest, head of the local police, told reporters that the suspected gunman was among the dead.

There were no warnings beforehand, and police believe the perpetrator acted alone. Police haven't said if the man was a student at the school. They haven't released a possible motive, but authorities said there were no suspected connections to terrorism at this point.

Police raided the suspect's home after Tuesday's shooting, but it wasn't immediately clear what they found.

"Today, we have witnessed brutal, deadly violence against completely innocent people," the prime minister told reporters in Stockholm late Tuesday. "This is the worst mass shooting in Swedish history. Many questions remain unanswered, and I cannot provide those answers either."

"But the time will come when we will know what happened, how it could occur, and what motives may have been behind it. Let us not speculate," he said.

While gun violence at schools is very rare in Sweden, people were wounded or killed with other weapons such as knives or axes in several incidents in recent years. (AP)

Philippine vice president impeached by House, faces Senate trial

MANILA, Feb 5: Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte was impeached by the House of Representatives Wednesday after more than the required number of legislators, many of them allies of the president with whom she has had a bitter political feud, signed a petition to remove her from office.

House of Representatives Secretary General Reginald Velasco told a plenary meeting of the lower chamber of Congress that at least 215 lawmakers have signed a petition to impeach Duterte, more than enough for the powerful House to impeach her.

With enough endorsements by House legislators, the impeachment complaint was ordered transmitted to the Senate, which will serve as an impeachment tribunal that would

try the vice president, the daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte. The vice president, who didn't immediately react to the House move to impeach her, and her father have been politically at odds with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and his camp, including a majority of House legislators.

The vice president, regarded as a possible presidential candidate after Marcos's term ends in 2028, has faced at least four impeachment complaints by several legislators and left-wing activist groups over a range of issues.

Those included a death threat she made against the president, his wife and House Speaker Martin Romualdez last year, irregularities in the use of her office's intelligence funds and her failure to stand up to

Chinese aggression in the disputed South China Sea.

Only the latest impeachment complaint, accusing the vice president of violating the constitution, betraying the public trust, corruption and other high crimes, and signed by the 215 legislators would be sent to the Senate for her trial, according to legislators.

Efforts to impeach the vice president may be hampered by a lack of time. The House impeachment came on the last day of congressional session before campaigning begins for midterm elections in May that would select new legislators for the House and Senate. A special session could be called to allow the Senate to bring Duterte to a rapid trial.

The vice president's legal troubles have unfolded with the back-



drop of her increasingly bitter political feud with the president and his allies. She said in online news conference on November 23 that she has contracted an assassin to kill Marcos, his wife and Speaker Mar-

tin Romualdez if she were killed, a threat she warned wasn't a joke. She later said that she wasn't threatening him, but was expressing concern for her own safety.

The House has been investigating the alleged misuse of 612.5 million pesos (USD 10.3 million) of confidential and intelligence funds received by Duterte's offices as vice president and education secretary. She has since left the education post after her political differences with Marcos deepened.

She has refused to respond to questions in detail in tense televised hearings last year. Duterte also vehemently protested when her chief of staff, Zuleika Lopez, was ordered temporarily detained for allegedly hampering the inquiry. Lopez has since been released from hospital

detention.

Duterte has accused Marcos, his wife and Romualdez of corruption, weak leadership and attempting to muzzle her because of speculation she may seek the presidency in 2028. The National Bureau of Investigation subpoenaed Duterte last year to face investigators about her threats against them.

The police, military and the national security adviser immediately boosted the security of the Marcos family after the threats.

Marcos and Duterte won landslide victories as running mates in the 2022 election, but have since fallen out over key differences. The two offices are elected separately in the Philippines, which has resulted in rivals occupying the country's top political posts. (AP)

Iran praises US for cutting foreign aid funding as it looks for Trump message on nuclear talks

TEHRAN, Feb 5: Iran's government seems to be welcoming some recent decisions by the United States — even though they happen to come from a man Iranian operatives have allegedly been plotting to assassinate.

President Donald Trump's moves to freeze spending on foreign aid and overhaul, maybe even end, the US Agency for International Development have been lauded in Iranian state media.

The reports say the decisions will halt funding for opponents of the country's Shiite theocracy — pro-democracy activists and others supported through programmes as part of US government's efforts to help democracy worldwide.

At the same time, Iranian officials appear to be signalling that they are waiting for a message from Trump on whether he wants to negotiate over Tehran's rapidly advancing nuclear programme.

At stake are potentially billions of dollars withheld from Iran through crushing sanctions and the future of a programme on the precipice of enriching weapons-grade uranium.

And even when signing an executive order to reimpose his "maximum pressure on Iran" on Tuesday, Trump suggested he wanted to deal with Tehran.

Meanwhile, ordinary Iranians worry what all this could mean for them. On

Wednesday, Iran's currency, the rial, plunged to a record low of 850,000 to USD 1 after Trump's order, showing the ongoing economic volatility they face. A decade ago, it stood at 32,000 rials to USD 1.

"It encourages hard-liners inside Iran to continue repressions because they feel the US would have less capability in supporting Iranian people who seek freedom," said Maryam Faraji, a 27-year-old waitress in a coffee shop in northern Tehran.

Iranian media say Trump's cuts could stop the opposition in Iran

The state-run IRNA news agency said that "cutting the budget of foreign-based opposition" could "affect the sphere of relations" between Tehran and Washington.

Newspapers, like the conservative Hamsshari daily, described Iran's opposition as "counterrevolutionaries" who had been "celebrating" Trump's election as heralding the "last days of life of the Islamic Republic."

They then "suddenly faced the surprise of cut funding from their employer," the newspaper crowed.

Even the reformist newspaper Hammi-han compared it to a "cold shower" for opponents of Iran's theocracy abroad, an idea also expressed by the Foreign Ministry.



"Those financial resources are not charity donations," Esmail Bagahei, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, said during a briefing with reporters on Monday. "They are wages paid in exchange for services."

"This is a clear sign of America's interventionist policy particularly during the Biden administration, which tried to pressure Iran and meddle in its domestic affairs through financial aid," Bagahei added.

It remains unclear how funding for Iranian activists and opposition figures would be affected by the USAID decision.

The lion's share of money for civil society in Iran has come through the US State Department's Near East Regional Democracy fund, known by the acronym NERD, which grew as an American response to the Green Movement protests in 2009.

Iran repeatedly hints it's ready to talk to Trump

Iran also noticed that the US avoided direct criticism of the Islamic Republic during a review by the United Nations Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva last week. For those in Iran's government, there's anticipation this could mean that Trump is willing to negotiate, something he repeatedly brought up in his election campaign as a possibility.

Even Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has final say on all state matters, in a speech in September opened the door to talks with the US, saying there is "no harm" in engaging with the "enemy." More recently, he tempered that, warning that sinister plots could still be "concealed behind diplomatic smiles."

"We must be careful about who we are dealing with, who we are negotiating with, and who we are speaking to,"

Khamenei said last week.

While Bagahei, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, acknowledged Iran hasn't seen any "green light" yet for talks, Iran is trying to do everything it can to signal it wants them.

The country's reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian, who campaigned on outreach to the West, urged officials on Monday to listen to dissent from the Iranian people and avoid further crackdowns like those that followed the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini.

"The enemies are hoping that by stirring up disputes within the country, they will throw people into the streets and then ride the wave of protests themselves," Pezeshkian said.

As he signed the executive order on Iran on Tuesday, Trump warned the country would be "obliterated" if he was assassinated by Tehran. But he still left the door open for talks.

"I'm going to sign it, but hopefully we're not going to have to use it very much," he said from the Oval Office. "We will see whether or not we can arrange or work out a deal with Iran."

"We don't want to be tough on Iran. We don't want to be tough on anybody," Trump added. "But they just can't have a nuclear bomb."

However, factions within Iran's theo-

cracy are still likely to oppose talks, whether out of their own self interest or over anger that Trump ordered the 2020 drone strike that killed Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the country's top general and a revered figure.

That killing fuelled Iranian calls for Trump's assassination — and alleged plots against him. In November, the Justice Department disclosed an Iranian murder-for-hire plot to kill Trump. While Iran denied being involved, Tehran has a history of plotting the killing of opponents abroad.

"This will not have any impact on the factions that oppose talks with the US but maybe some moderates find it as an excuse to say that Trump is taking some steps," Iranian political analyst Ahmad Zeiabadi said.

For now though, much of this can seem as conjecture and theorising to many of Iran's over 80 million people who continue to struggle in the grips of the country's ailing economy.

Tehran taxi driver Gholanhossein Akbari, 27, insisted Iranians like him never benefitted from US support of Iran's pro-democracy activists abroad.

"We did not see any result from the funds the US paid to foreign-based Iranian activists who only make comments in the media," Akbari said. (AP)

Tripura distributes job offers to 2806

State sees drop in unemployment, transparent policy is priority: CM

HT Correspondent

AGARTALA, Feb 5: In a significant move to strengthen employment opportunities in Tripura, Chief Minister Manik Saha reaffirmed the state government's commitment to a merit-based and transparent recruitment process.

Speaking at an appointment ceremony at Swami Vivekananda Maidan, Agartala today in the presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah who was virtually present, he outlined the government's sustained efforts to create a corruption-free and inclusive job market.

Nine candidates were formally handed appointment letters during the event, symbolizing the government's dedication to fair employment practices.

Saha emphasized that recruitment in Tripura now operates without political bias, ensuring deserving candidates secure positions purely on the basis of merit. He credited the Joint Recruitment Board Tripura (JRBT) for its role in conducting seamless hiring processes across various departments, including 2,437 Multi-Tasking Staff (Group D) positions and 369 Pharmacist and Lab Technician posts in the Health Department.

"The days when job seekers had to move court for justice are over. We have ensured that recruitments are transparent, streamlined, and based on qualifications alone," he stated. He further highlighted



the significant employment push in 2023, when 1,980 individuals secured positions through JRBT in Group C and Agriculture Assistant categories, reinforcing the administration's efforts to expand career opportunities.

In a bid to prioritize local talent, the state government introduced the Permanent Resident Certificate (PRTC) as a mandatory requirement for government job applicants—a move aimed at securing more opportunities for Tripura's youth. From 2018 to 2024, 16,411 individuals have been recruited across government departments, with an additional 5,771 engaged through contractual or outsourcing arrangements.

Saha also detailed the government's focus on skill development and entrepreneurship, stating that three Model Career Centers have been set up in Agartala, Dharmanagar, and Kailashahar. The state has hosted 96 job fairs since 2018-19, helping over 2,135 youth secure private-

sector jobs. Additionally, 52,460 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are actively supporting the livelihoods of nearly 4,73,000 individuals. The Mukhyamantri Dakhyata Unnayan Prakalpa, launched in 2023-24, has enabled over 22,000 young people to find employment outside the state, reflecting a multi-faceted approach to economic empowerment.

Citing data from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Dr. Saha highlighted that Tripura's unemployment rate, which exceeded the national average in 2018-19, has seen a sharp decline. "Today, our unemployment rate stands at 1.7%, significantly lower than the national average of 3.2%. This is a testament to our commitment to providing jobs and securing livelihoods," he said.

The Chief Minister concluded by aligning the state's employment policies with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of a corruption-free nation. "Government employees are the backbone of administration and development. We remain steadfast in our mission to uphold transparency, fairness, and efficiency in all recruitment processes," he asserted.

With a structured and accountable employment framework, Tripura continues to pave the way for sustainable economic growth, ensuring that youth in the state have access to diverse career opportuni-

Congress slams govt over 'thoughtless clearance for Teesta dam rebuild'

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: The Congress on Wednesday opposed the Centre's reported nod to building a dam for the Teesta III hydel project in place of the dam washed away in 2023's glacial lake flood, claiming it was a "thoughtless clearance" as the threat of disaster continued to persist at the dam site.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh shared on X a media report that claimed the BJP's Sikkim unit chief would meet Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav later this month to raise its pitch over safety concerns surrounding the clearance to build a dam for the Teesta III hydel project.

"The INC (Indian National Congress) also opposes this thoughtless clearance. The threat of disaster persists at the dam site. There are also cas-



cad and multiplying effects on habitations downstream," Ramesh said.

He also shared the Congress' statement from last August in which the opposition party had hit out at the government and said hydel projects in ecologically fragile regions had been coming up over the

and future generations.

In the August statement, Ramesh had said a series of landslide disasters in Sikkim had substantially damaged the Teesta V, a 510 MW hydel power station on the river.

This disaster comes on the heels of the Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOF) and riverine floods in the Teesta river basin in October 2023, which caused massive devastation in Sikkim and Kalimpong in West Bengal, he had noted.

A spate of hydro projects on the Teesta has caused the river to become more flood-prone, washing away sections of National Highway-10, the Congress general secretary had said.

The October 2023 disaster was provoked by the GLOF but it only reached catastrophic scales due to the failure of the Teesta III dam, the Congress leader had said. (PTI)

Four militants arrested from Imphal valley districts

IMPHAL, Feb 5: Manipur Police arrested four militants belonging to three proscribed outfits from Imphal East, Imphal West and Bishnupur districts, an officer said on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, two active members of the banned Kangleipak Communist Party (Peoples War Group) were arrested from the Mahabali area in Imphal East district, police said on Wednesday.

They were involved in extortion activities in greater Imphal area.

Police also arrested a cadre of United National Liberation Front (UNLF) from Takyel Kolom Leikai area in Imphal West district on Tuesday, the officer said, adding that the arrested person was involved in extortion activities in Imphal area.

One cadre of banned outfit People's Liberation Army (PLA) involved in extortion activity was arrested from Ningthoukhong area in Bishnupur district on Tuesday, the officer added. (PTI)

Three Bangladeshi nationals, Indian tout held in Tripura

AGARTALA, Feb 5: Security forces arrested three Bangladeshi nationals and an Indian tout at Agartala Railway Station while they were traveling to Gujarat, officials said today.

According to Officer-in-Charge of the Government Railway Police (GRP) at Agartala Railway Station, Tapas Das, the arrest was made during a joint operation by the GRP, Railway Protection Force (RPF), and Border Security Force (BSF).

"The three Bangladeshi nationals had illegally entered Tripura by crossing the international border and were attempting to leave the state by train. During preliminary questioning, they revealed plans to travel to Gujarat via Kolkata," Das said.

The arrested individuals have been identified as Chinu Mog, Sakhi Akhter, and Bhagita Deb-nath from Bangladesh. The Indian tout, identified as Shyamal Das, is a resident of East Duku in West Tripura District.

Minister stresses on preservation of Meyor's cultural identity

HT Correspondent

WALONG, Feb 5: Cultural Affairs Minister Dasanglu Pul on Wednesday emphasised to preserve and promote the cultural identity of the Meyor community while attending the 17th Lha Chhut Festival at Tinai in Walong circle, Anjaw district.

Addressing a large gathering, Pul said, "The Lha Chhut Festival is an important occasion that reflects the rich traditions and spiritual values of the Meyor community. It is our collective responsibility to safeguard and pass these traditions to future generations."

The minister also underlined the importance of environmental conservation, particularly in protecting the

region's pine forests.

"Preserving the natural beauty of our landscape is crucial not only for ecological balance but also to sustain tourism in this picturesque region," she said.

As part of the festival, Pul launched six pictorial glossaries on the Meyor language under the theme "Let Us Learn Meyor", aimed at linguistic preservation. She also unveiled a documentary film on the festival, produced by the Department of Indigenous Affairs, highlighting the significance of the event.

The festival, marked by traditional dances, rituals, and community feasts, was attended by several dignitaries, including Indigenous Affairs director Sokhep Kri, Anjaw Zilla Parishad Chair-

person Sobleem Pul, Anjaw Deputy Commissioner Millo Kojin, Superintendent of Police Rike Kamsi and Zilla Parishad Members Anjoy Ama and Dangelepu Pul, along with heads of various departments and officials.

Indigenous Affairs director Sokhep Kri commended the Meyor community's commitment to cultural preservation.

"Festivals like Lha Chhut play a crucial role in keeping our traditions alive and fostering a sense of pride among younger generations," he said.

The Lha Chhut Festival, celebrated annually, continues to be a symbol of unity, spiritual devotion, and cultural heritage for the Meyor community.

APYO demands separate and independent narcotic department

HT Correspondent

ITANAGAR, Feb 5: The All Arunachal Pradesh Youth Organisation (AAPYO) on Wednesday demanded for a separate and an independent narcotic department in the state citing the rise in drug addiction cases and crimes related with drugs in the state.

Addressing the newscaster at a press conference here, at Arunachal Press Club (APC), the AAPYO president Adv Kipa Kanam informed that due to lack of dedicated manpower and resources to deal with drug addiction, crimes related to drugs and lack of sufficient rehabilitation centers in the state, the drug menace is overwhelmingly increasing in an alarming rate.

"It's not only the responsibility of the government and departments but in case the separate Narcotic department would be able to

reduce drug addiction cases among youths, crimes related to drugs, drug trafficking etc," said Kanam. Claiming drug menace is rising alarmingly across the state, Kanam urged the Home Minister to create separate Narcotic Department and bifurcate the manpower who are dealing with drug cases. By establishing separate narcotic department, it can lay out urgent action plans to combat drug menace.

Kanam urged upon the state government specially the Home Minister to establish more and adequate rehabilitation centres across various districts of state. "We are ready to spearhead the anti-drug campaign to educate youths of the deadly effect of drugs which has been at rise among the youths of state. We will also coordinate with other NGOs and society based organisations for the greater cause of welfare of youths," he said.

Nagaland cops continue war against drugs

HT Correspondent

DIMAPUR, Feb 5: Noting that Nagaland is being used as a transit route by peddlers to traffic drugs from Myanmar via Manipur to other states, the state police have continued their efforts to prevent and deter entry of synthetic drugs and psychotropic substances by intensive checking of vehicles and conducting raids and checking of hotels, restaurants, etc. to prevent any such illegal activity.

Addressing a press conference at Chumoukedima police complex on Wednesday, IGP (CID) Vikram Khalate said the Nagaland police are deeply committed to tackling the menace of drugs and related crimes, saying that multiple systems are in place that are helping them to analyse and operate in real time whenever any information is received regarding the transport of drugs through Nagaland.

He said more than two kgs of heroin, valued at more than ₹ 15 crore in the market, were seized and seven cases were registered in the last two weeks. Three of these were registered under the Dimapur commissioner of police and four in Kohima. He said 14 people were arrested in this connection.

In 2024, Khalate said 199 cases of drug trafficking were registered and 343 persons were arrested. Out of them, 60 main drug traffickers were sent for detention under the NDPS Act. The seizures last year included 545.3 kg ganja, 1010.9 kg opium, 15 kg heroin, 1.99 kg brown sugar, 694 gm crystal meth, 57,794 tablets, 1,91,956 synthetic drugs and 17,290 bottles of cough syrup.

Khalate said the drug suppliers are basically based in Manipur, adding these drugs are supplied to Nagaland, Assam and other states using Nagaland as a transit route.

Dimapur commissioner of police Kevithuto Sophie said Nagaland has become a transit point for drug trafficking, adding the state is not the final destination of peddlers.

He said these narcotic drugs come from Maynamar to Manipur and transported to places like Manza and Lahorjain in Karbi Anglong district of Assam via Dimapur.

Sophie appealed to the public to inform the police when they come across any suspicious activities by just making a phone call in the contact numbers displayed in prominent places. He affirmed that the identity of callers would never be revealed.

CM Sangma launches CM Impact Meghalaya Class Readiness Program

SHILLONG, Feb 5:

Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma on Wednesday launched the CM Impact Meghalaya Class Readiness Program e-Books for building bridges between grades for greater success. Also present during the launch were chief secretary, D P Wahlang, commissioner & secretary, Education Vijay Mantri and chairman, MIDC, James K Sangma.

The Meghalaya Class Readiness Program is a transformative initiative designed for empowering students and to strengthen the educational system. The program aims to bridge the learning gaps and to build strong foundations for a lifetime of learning bridging the gaps in the foundational literacy and quality outcome across the grades of



and quality education for all. Speaking during the launch, Conrad K Sangma said that the government has been working hard to transform the education sector for a very long time. "There are lots of challenges in the education sector relating to teachers, infrastructure, different categories of schools etc and while we have been dealing with these challenges we have also been focusing on ensuring to improve the pass percentage in secondary school examination and that has been the focal point for us to move forward," he said. He also informed that while multiple strategies have been adopted to that effect the Meghalaya Class Readiness Program is also a step towards improving the quality of learning not

only in the secondary level but also at the primary and upper primary levels.

He also informed that there has to be a systematic change in the learning and the teaching that takes place in the classroom itself. "I hope with steps like these we will have some impact at different levels and bridge the gaps and help us achieve goals we have set in the education sector," he said.

"For the first month all teachers from Class 1 to 10 will do this program to help the students be class ready and help them in smooth transition from one level to another," he added. He also informed that the Directorate will have a webinar for the teachers to train them on the Meghalaya Class Readiness Program. (NNN)

OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT & SESSIONS JUDGE, HOJAI :: ASSAM

NOTIFICATION

Memo No. DJHJ/25/454

Pursuant to the advertisement No. DJHJ/24/1075-1078 Dated : 03/05/2024 and DJHJ/24/2036-2039 Dated : 02/08/2024 in connection with the direct recruitment of 03 (Three) sanctioned vacant posts of **Process Server** for The establishment of The District & Sessions Judge, Hojai, Assam. The written examination would be held as per the following schedule:

Date	Time	Venue
16/02/2025 (Sunday)	10.00 am - 12 noon	Rabindranath Tagore University, Hojai

Candidates are hereby advised to download their admit cards from the official website (<https://hojai.dcourts.gov.in/>) Starting from 10th February 2025, at 3:00 PM onwards. In case any candidate is unable to download the admit card from the website, they may collect it from the Office of the District & Sessions Judge on or before 14th February 2025. They are further instructed to regularly visit the official website for updates.

Candidature of the candidates shall be further scrutinized and the Authority reserves the right to reject the candidature of any candidate on detection of any ineligibility at any stage. The Candidature of the candidates shall be subject to fulfillment of all the criteria mentioned in the advertisement. No TA/DA will be paid for appearing in the said examination.

Sd/-
District & Sessions Judge
Hojai, Assam

Janasanyog /D/12321/24/6-Feb-25

No. DPDI/NIT/2024-25/56

Date 04/02/2025

SHORT NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Sealed tender in the prescribed form affixing non-refundable court fee stamp of Rs. 8.25 (Rupees eight and paise twenty five) only in prescribed form subsequently to be drawn in APWD F-2 form of Tender Agreement are hereby invited from the intending registered contractors of Irrigation Department, Assam for the following work and will be received upto 2.00 PM on 24-02-2025 and will be opened at 3.00 PM in the same place and date by under signed or officers authorized to open in presence of the intending tenderers or their authorized agents who wish to be present

In the event of closure of office on the date due to some reason, the next working day of office will be the date of receiving and opening of the tenders.

Sl. No.	Name of Work	Approx value of Work	Earnest Money	Time of Completion
1	Repairing of breached canal embankment at B4M canal along with repairing of regulator gates at Dhansiri Irrigation Project under M&R for the year 2024-25	Rs. 9,51,743.00 (Rupees Nine Lakhs Fifty One Thousand Seven Hundred Forty Three) only	2% of approximate value of works (1% in case of SC/ST/OBC etc.)	30 days

Details NIT particulars may be seen in the office of the Dhansiri Project Division (Irrigation), Bhairabkunda, on all working days. Tender paper may be obtained on written request from the aforesaid office on payment of Rs. 100.00 (Rupees One Hundred) only for EE's Group as mentioned in the group list in the form of I.P.O. only pledged to the Executive Engineer, Dhansiri Project Division (Irrigation), Bhairabkunda upto 1.00 PM on 24-02-2025.

The acceptance of Tender is subject to acceptance of AA & TS. The preliminary and formal work order shall be issued only after the acceptance of T.S.

Tender paper must be filled up addressing to all points/terms specified with the tender form, otherwise tender will be treated as cancelled

The undersigned reserves the right to accept or reject any or all of the tenders without assigning any reason thereof.

Sd/- Executive Engineer,
Dhansiri Project Division
(Irrigation), Bhairabkunda

IPR(BTC)-2023-24/1422

DELHI POLLS

AAP, BJP indulge in blame game; level fake voting, money distribution charges

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: The Aam Aadmi Party and BJP indulged in intense blame game with both sides alleging voting malpractices in different constituencies as polling for 70 Assembly seats in Delhi progressed on Wednesday.

Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) of Delhi told PTI around noon that the polling process was going on "smoothly". A few EVMs were replaced during mock polls and actual voting also, the CEO said.

"We have a sufficient number of reserve EVMs. A strong technical team along with sector officers are sorting out EVM-related issues then and there," she said.

High drama unfolded in Seelampur when a BJP leader alleged that some people wearing burqas were attempting fraudulent voting. However, police denied any fake voting in the area. In Kasturba Nagar, police sources said two men allegedly attempted to vote fraudulently. They have been apprehended and were being interrogated, they said.

Following allegations of fake voting by the BJP in Seelampur, AAP workers resorted to slogan shouting. The Delhi Police, however, dismissed the charges, pointing to security deployed in the area. Additional police and paramilitary forces were also deployed, they said.



Seelampur resident Safdar Ali told PTI that BJP candidate Anil Gaur alleged that people were indulging in fraudulent voting.

"We asked him how was that possible when there are several layers of checking. The officials are checking voter ID cards of everyone and allowing only valid voters inside the polling booth. Later, he left the area and the situation is now normal," he said.

Senior AAP leader Manish Sisodia alleged that money was being distributed from a house in Jangpura and shared a video of the purported act on X.

Allegations of voter bribery in Sarai Kale Khan were promptly investigated, said the Deputy Commissioner of Police (southeast) Ankit Chauhan in a post on X. The officer also said that police along with an executive

magistrate and a flying squad team thoroughly verified the complaint and no evidence was found to substantiate the charges.

AAP candidate from Greater Kailash Saurabh Bharadwaj claimed police had barricaded the Chirag Dilli area, preventing people from voting. He shared a video on X showing a woman sitting alone in an autorickshaw near a barricade, alleging that the obstruction was deliberately placed to prevent access to the polling station.

DCP Chauhan said only the elderly and those who cannot walk were allowed to go to polling booth in vehicles but others were stopped outside the Election Commission-mandated 200-metre radius.

The Delhi BJP, in a post on X, alleged that AAP workers torched the shanty of a party worker at Kalandar Colony in Shahdara constituency.

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva claimed that the AAP has stooped to "fake voting" as it was rattled by its "imminent defeat". He urged people to be wary of the Arvind Kejriwal-led party's "manipulations".

New Delhi district election office said in a post on X that some alleged instances of relievers of polling agents not being allowed inside polling booths were reported by political parties.

"However, on-ground verification revealed that polling agents inside were unwilling to come out, which prevented relievers from being accommodated. Sector officers and presiding officers have been sensitized to ensure the smooth relieving of polling agents," it said.

The BJP's New Delhi seat candidate Parvesh Verma took to X to accuse Sisodia of resorting to "hooliganism" as he shared a video purportedly showing the AAP leader angrily demanding action against BJP workers. Scared of defeat, AAP leaders are now showing "pettiness", he charged.

In Kasturba Nagar, police received information that two men allegedly attempted fake voting at Sarvodaya Vidyalaya in the Andrews Ganj area. They were caught by the Delhi Police and were being interrogated, police sources said.

Police received another PCR call from a woman who alleged that someone had cast a vote in her name at a polling booth in the Aryan Public School of Jafraabad under the Seelampur Assembly segment. Police, however, found out that another woman with a similar name, who lived in the complainant's house as a tenant, had cast the vote.

After verification, the presiding officer allowed both of them to vote, police said. (PTI)

Erode witnesses brisk, peaceful polling

ERODE (TAMIL NADU), Feb 5: People turned up enthusiastically at the polling stations here on Wednesday to cast their votes in the bypoll to the Erode East Assembly constituency and an election official said the voting percentage crossed 42 per cent by 1 pm.

Polling was peaceful and incident free. District Collector and District Election Officer, Raja Gopal Sunkara said, adding that till 1 pm, 42.41 per cent of polling was recorded in 237 polling booths and official sources said the percentage crossed 50 per cent by 2.15 pm.

Three EVMs were used as 46 candidates, including 44 independents, are in the fray and the contest appears to be only between the ruling DMK's VC Chandirakumar and Tamil nationalist party, Naam Tamizhar Katchi's M K Seethalakshmi.

Opposition parties, including the main opposition AIADMK, have boycotted the polls.

State police and personnel from the Central Armed Police Forces were deployed in adequate numbers.

Erode East segment has a total of 2,27,546 voters and nine booths have been declared sensitive and additional security personnel have been posted there.

Officials said polling was stopped for ten minutes at the Brahmanna Periya Agharam polling station due to a technical fault in an EVM and it was replaced with another machine. When a woman claimed she was not allowed to vote as another woman had already cast her vote, it briefly led to a flutter and she argued with officials before leaving the polling station.

Voting began at 7 am and it will end at 6 pm. The bypoll was necessitated due to the death of Congress legislator EVKS Elangovan in 2024. (PTI)

PM should acknowledge Make in India a failure: Rahul

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday said Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not mention Make in India in his speech in the House and asserted he must acknowledge that the initiative was a failure.

The Congress leader said no government in recent times -- the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) or the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) -- had been able to meet at scale the national challenge of providing jobs.

"Prime minister, in your speech, you didn't even mention 'Make in India'! The prime minister should acknowledge that 'Make in India', although a good initiative, is a failure. Manufacturing has fallen from 15.3 per cent of GDP in 2014 to 12.6 per cent -- the lowest in the last 60 years," Gandhi said in a post on X.

"India's youth desperately need jobs. No government in recent times, UPA or NDA, has been able to meet this national challenge at scale. We need a vision to address what's holding our manufacturing sector back, and prepare it to be competitive in the global economy of the future," the former Congress chief said.

Gandhi said this vision for production in India must also have a specific focus on emergent technologies such as electric motors, batteries, optics, and artificial intelligence. (PTI)

CPI(ML) Liberation MP writes to Jaishankar on US deporting 'illegal' Indian immigrants

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: CPI(ML) Liberation MP Raja Ram Singh has sought the Centre's intervention to safeguard the interest of Indians in the US and urged the government to clarify its stance on the deportation of suspected illegal immigrants.

In a letter to External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, the MP from Bihar's Karakat said the Indian government's assurance to the US to take back 18,000 immigrants labelled as "illegal" set a dangerous precedent.

"This development, deeply ironic, given the historical and economic context of immigration in the US. Indian professionals and workers have been instrumental in driving innovation, growth, and profitability for US corporations, particularly in sectors such as IT, health care, and engineering. It is ironic that US companies and economy has thrived and made profits on the back of immigration," Singh said in the letter dated February 4.

"Since the time Donald Trump, the current

president of the US, has taken oath, a spectre of xenophobic hate against immigrants was seen. His election speeches and promises made to the American public were filled with anti-immigrant hate, especially on issues like H-1B visa and others that affect Indians," he said.

Singh's appeal comes in the wake of US law enforcement agencies launching a crackdown on illegal immigrants after Trump took office as president last month.

Sources on Wednesday said a US military aircraft carrying 104 illegal Indian immigrants -- the first batch to be deported from that country -- landed at the Amritsar airport.

Singh also noted that Trump had threatened imposing "massive tariffs" on Colombia for its reluctance to take back deported immigrants of Colombian origin, saying it raised questions about rule of law and justice.

"Under these circumstances, rather than standing by its people, why has India compromised its independent foreign policy to placate the new

President Trump?" he questioned.

While US companies continue to lobby to ease policy restrictions for entry of capital, human labour from "third world" countries, especially India, faces all kinds of restrictions, he said.

"When capital can move borders freely, why can't labour?" he asked.

Singh said it was important for the Indian government to clarify its stance, stand by its people and not bow down to the "imperial policies" of the US.

"It is important to note that these individuals are not mere statistics; common citizens pay high sums to move to other parts of the world in order to secure livelihood. To label them as 'illegal' and demand their return is a violation of their fundamental rights and an affront to the spirit of inclusivity that the US has long championed," he said in the letter to Jaishankar.

He urged the Indian government to clarify its stance on the issue and ensure that the rights and dignity of Indian citizens were protected. (PTI)

Presiding officers in Milkipur bypoll trying to meet 'fake voting target' for BJP, claims Akhilesh

LUCKNOW, Feb 5: Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav shared an audio clip, claiming it shows that presiding officers in the Milkipur bypoll are trying to meet a "target" of "fake voting" to help the ruling BJP.

Yadav made the allegations in a post on X and attached what he said was the audio clip of a "sting operation".

He said elections overseen by the presiding officers should be cancelled immediately and should be suspended on the basis of "prima facie audio evidence".

The SP chief also called on the Election Commission and Supreme Court to take cognisance of such "enemies of democracy".

"This is a sting operation exposing the truth of presiding officers who are completing targets of fake voting for the ruling party. Elections at their booths should be cancelled immediately and they should be suspended on the basis of prima facie audio evidence and then dismissed after proper judicial action," Yadav said.

"More such videos and audios of election rigging and manipulation by the officers are coming out. When they lose their jobs and get defamed in the society, maybe then



their integrity and conscience will wake up," he said.

The government, the former chief minister said, will "wash its hands off them after using them", but the officers will be in jails and will live "a life of disgrace in the eyes of their society, their family and children".

Yadav added that all honest and truthful officers who refused to participate in the "target of fake voting" "given by the BJP office" should be praised.

In another post earlier with photographs, Yadav claimed that police personnel were checking voters' IDs in the Milkipur constituency, where polling is underway for the assembly by-election, to "create fear" among them and urged the

Election Commission to immediately remove them.

In a post on X, Yadav shared a picture of a police officer checking the ID card of a person outside a polling booth.

"The Election Commission should immediately take cognisance of the pictures related to this news that Ayodhya Police is checking the ID cards of voters in Milkipur, in which senior police officers are also involved," Yadav said in his post in Hindi.

"This is a murder of democracy by indirectly influencing voting by creating fear among voters. Such people should be removed immediately and punitive action should be taken," he said.

Ayodhya Senior Superintendent

Delhi polls: Pak Hindu refugees use right to franchise for first time

Voters queue polling stations with high hopes



NEW DELHI, Feb 5: At a polling booth in Delhi's Majnu Ka Tilla, Reshma pressed the button on an electronic voting machine on Wednesday with a sense of pride as a smile spread across her face.

For the first time in her life, the 50-year-old woman cast her vote -- not just to choose a candidate, but for her family's future.

Reshma is one of 186 Pakistani Hindu refugees who, after years of uncertainty, exercised their voting right for the first time in the Delhi Assembly polls, marking a powerful moment in their journey from statelessness to citizenship.

They all got Indian citizenship under the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Dharamveer Solanki, president of the Pakistani Hindu refugee community, expressed hope that their struggles would lessen.

"Now, we won't have to constantly change our location. We will finally get permanent homes and a stable means of livelihood," he said.

Solanki said that people from our community were so excited that they queued up outside the polling booth in Majnu Ka Tilla -- a resettlement colony for the refugees.

"I have lived here for 17 years but today, for the first time, I truly feel like I am part of Hindustan," Chandrama said as she became emotional.

"After a long struggle, now I have hope that my children will get a better life," she added.

For decades, thousands of Pakistani Hindus have sought refuge in India, fleeing religious persecution. Many settled in Delhi's Majnu Ka Tilla, living in makeshift shelters, and taking up daily wage work.

Twenty seven-year-old Yashoda was the first to receive Indian citi-

zenship in her group and even had the chance to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Today, standing in a queue at the polling booth, she could hardly contain her excitement.

"We have spent years working as daily wage labourers, struggling to survive. Now that we have Indian citizenship, we hope for proper jobs, homes, and a dignified life," she said.

On March 11 last year, the Central government announced the implementation of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, paving the way for undocumented non-Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who arrived in India before December 31, 2014, to obtain Indian citizenship.

For Maina, 23, who travelled from Faridabad to cast her vote in Majnu Ka Tilla, the experience was entirely new.

"When I entered the polling booth, I had no idea how to vote or which party represented whom. But once I pressed the button, I felt the shift -- I finally had a voice," she said.

Despite their newfound rights, many still face basic struggles. Maina also said that electricity is getting cheaper for others, but we still pay more.

"We don't have access to clean water. Our homes are broken, and we live in harsh conditions. We hope the new government will finally address our problems," she added.

Among the voters was Ranju, in her 70s, who has spent more than half her life in India, but never had the right to vote until now.

"I have seen hardship my entire life -- struggles for water, employment, identity. Many people here still don't have Aadhaar cards. Prices are rising, and we are just trying to survive," she said.

But despite it all, today, Ranju stood proud.

"I have faith. If I can vote today, maybe tomorrow I will get all the other rights I have waited for."

For these newly naturalised citizens, casting a vote was not just a civic duty -- it was a declaration that they finally belong. (PTI)

Congress MLAs create uproar in Rajasthan Assembly over dissolution of new districts

JAIPUR, Feb 5: Opposition Congress MLAs created uproar in the Rajasthan Assembly on Wednesday over the state government's dissolution of new districts. Due to the pandemonium, the House proceedings were adjourned for 15 minutes.

Assembly Speaker Vasudev Devnani later ruled that the two MLAs who made the adjournment motion on this issue would be allowed to speak for two minutes each on Thursday. He added that the government would give a brief statement on this matter.

During Zero Hour, the Speaker said Congress MLA Suresh Modi and 30 other members had given adjournment motions regarding the situation arising out of the dissolution of three newly formed divisions and nine districts of the state. He said MLAs Suresh Modi and Ramkesh, also a Congress legislator, would be allowed to speak for two minutes each on the subject matter of their motion.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Jogaram Patel said the dissolution of districts and divisions case is pending in the high court and there has been a tradition of not discussing any issue pending in the court in the Assembly. He requested the Chair not to discuss the adjournment motion.

Leader of Opposition Tikaram Jolly objected to this and said the

matter of only two districts is in the court. "We will not mention the two districts here. There should be no problem in discussing the rest of the districts," he said.

The Speaker decided not to discuss the issue on Wednesday. The opposition expressed displeasure and created uproar. Amidst the din, the Speaker adjourned the proceedings for 15 minutes. The uproar continued even after the House resumed the proceedings.

After the lunch break, Speaker Devnani ruled, "The two members whose names were announced today to speak on this adjournment motion will be allowed to express their views on Thursday. At the same time, a minister will answer on behalf of the government."

Later, House proceedings continued. The previous Gehlot government had issued a notification to create 17 new districts and three new divisions. Besides, three new districts were announced but its notification was not issued.

The present BJP government led by Chief Minister Bhajanlal Sharma decided in December to dissolve the nine districts and three new divisions formed by the Gehlot government. However, eight new districts have been retained. (PTI)

Failure of democratic system if Governor doesn't grant assent to bills second time: TN to SC

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: The Tamil Nadu government has informed the Supreme Court that Governor R N Ravi withholding its assent to bills passed by the legislative assembly for the second time would lead to failure of democratic system in the country.

A bench of Justices J B Pardiwala and R Mahadevan was hearing two petitions filed by the Tamil Nadu government over its lingering confrontation with the Governor on the issue of assent to bills passed by the assembly.

The top court said due to the dispute between the parties, people and the state were suffering.

Senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi, appearing for the state government on February 4, said under the law, if the state legislature passes the bill, the Governor could ask for a reconsideration.

"However, if the same bill is re-enacted and presented before the Governor for the second time, the Governor has no other option but to grant assent. This is the procedure laid down in our constitutional framework. If he still does not give his assent or failure to give his assent, then it is the failure of our democratic system," Rohatgi argued.



Constitutional provisions were very clear to the effect that the Governor was duty bound to give his assent in the second round, he added.

Senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, also appearing for Tamil Nadu government, submitted the option to refer the

bills to the President had to be done at the first instance and couldn't be done as an afterthought.

He submitted after the reenactment of the bill and on being presented to the Governor, he had no other option but to grant assent and couldn't reserve the bill

in the second round for the President's consideration.

The hearing remained inconclusive and the bench posted the matter on February 6 saying it would first hear counsel for Tamil Nadu government and then Attorney General R Venkataramani representing the Governor.

The state government moved the top court in 2023 alleging delay by Ravi in granting assent to bills.

Tensions between Ravi and the M K Stalin government escalated when the state assembly re-adopted 10 bills returned by him.

On December 13, 2023, observing the business of governance must go on, the top court said it did not want to restrain the President of India from acting on the bills re-adopted by the Tamil Nadu assembly and forwarded to her by Governor Ravi for consideration.

It noted the submissions of the counsel for the state government and the attorney general that Chief Minister M K Stalin and Governor Ravi had agreed to meet, as asked by the apex court, and resolve the impasse over the bills not getting gubernatorial assent after its passage by the state legislature.

The key question was whether the Governor of a state could refer the bills passed by the legislature and re-adopted by it, for presidential assent, the state government contended.

The top court has said the Governor of a state couldn't refer bills passed by the legislature and re-adopted by it for presidential assent, and asked the Tamil Nadu Governor to hold a meeting with the chief minister in an effort to end the impasse over 10 such pending bills.

The top court had questioned the delay on the part of Ravi in granting assent to several bills passed by the state assembly, asking why should governors wait for parties to move the top court with their grievances.

Questioning him, it observed the bills were pending since January 2020.

The top court said the Governor's office received 181 bills and he assented to 152 whereas five bills were withdrawn by the government. Nine bills were reserved for presidential assent and consent to 10 others was withheld, the court had noted.

The bills related to different departments including law, agriculture and higher education. (PTI)

'Blessed to be at Maha Kumbh': PM Modi takes holy dip at Sangam

MAHAKUMBH NAGAR, Feb 5: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday took a holy dip at the Triveni Sangam and said he felt "blessed to be at the Maha Kumbh" where he was "filled with a spirit of devotion".

The prime minister held 'rudraksh' beads in his hand during the bathing ritual. Dressed in a deep orange jersey and blue lowers, he offered prayers to the sun and the Ganga amid the chanting of mantras.

"Blessed to be at the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj. The Snan at the Sangam is a moment of divine connection, and like the crores of others who have taken part in it, I was also filled with a spirit of devotion," Modi posted on X.

"May Maa Ganga bless all with peace, wisdom, good health and harmony," he added.

In another post in Hindi, he said, "Today I got the great fortune of performing Puja archana after nothing in the holy Sangam at Prayagraj Maha Kumbh. I got immense peace and satisfaction from the blessings of Maa Ganga. I prayed to her for the happiness, prosperity, health and well-being of all the countrymen. Har-Har Gange."

He also shared some pictures of his visit, captioning the post: "The confluence of faith, devotion and

spirituality in the divine and grand Maha Kumbh of Prayagraj is overwhelming everyone."

His trip lasted around 90 minutes during which there was minimal use of the road -? barely 3 km in the car. He travelled from Prayagraj airport to a helipad near Sangam in a helicopter and later used motor boat to and fro the confluence of the sacred rivers from Arail Ghat.

This trip was much shorter than Modi's February 2019 visit to Kumbh when he, in a unique gesture, washed the feet of several sanitation workers as a mark of appreciation for their work and spent around five hours in the Mela.

After landing in Prayagraj around 10.30 am Wednesday, Modi took a boat ride from Arail ghat to the Triveni Sangam, the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati. He was accompanied by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath.

Adityanath also shared pictures of Modi's visit on social media, saying he offered prayers as per rituals for the "happiness, peace and prosperity" of countrymen.

On the way, he acknowledged the greetings of crowds that had lined up on both sides of the riverbanks to catch a glimpse of him.

After the holy dip, the prime minister performed rituals, includ-



ing an 'aarti' as he got on board a floater, a specially built makeshift platform on the river.

He was dressed in a black jacket, white pyjamas, a saffron stole and a Himachali cap for the 'aarti' during which he offered milk and flowers to the holy rivers. He also offered a 'chunari' at the confluence of the rivers. A priest guided the prime minister in the rituals.

Security was stepped up for the prime minister's visit, which comes on a day assembly polls are underway in Delhi and there are bypolls in Milkpur in Uttar Pradesh. The visit also falls five days after a stampede at Sangam claimed lives of at least 30 pilgrims

and left another 60 injured.

However, barring some portions mandatory for security protocols, devotees continued to take a dip at other ghats during the VIP visit, officials said.

By 2 pm, nearly 60 lakh devotees had taken a dip on Wednesday, they added.

Rahul Sharma, who came from Jaipur to take a bath in Sangam, said, "Today, while taking a bath, it did not feel that our prime minister was present in the Sangam area because no policeman stopped anyone from going to the ghat and the bath was very comfortable."

Being held after 12 years, the Maha Kumbh started on January

13 and will continue till February 26. It is considered among the holiest pilgrimages by Hindus.

While all three Amrit Snan of January 14 (Makar Sankranti), January 29 (Mauni Amavasya) and February 3 (Basant Panchami) are over, two more special bathing dates remain - February 12 (Maghi Purnima) and February 26 (Mahashivratri). These special bathing dates, which depend on celestial alignments and Hindi calendar, draw major crowds.

According to the Uttar Pradesh government, more than 38 crore pilgrims have visited the Maha Kumbh since January 13.

On Tuesday, Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck visited the Maha Kumbh and took a dip at the Triveni Sangam. Accompanied by Adityanath, the king performed rituals like offering 'arghya' to the sun before taking the dip.

On February 1, a delegation of 73 diplomats and foreign guests from different countries also arrived at the Maha Kumbh, some of whom took a holy dip.

Earlier Union ministers Rajnath Singh, Amit Shah, Kiren Rijiju, among several others also visited the Maha Kumbh. On January 22, the Uttar Pradesh cabinet led by Adityanath had its official meeting at Maha Kumbh.

Celebrities from the film industry and other walks of life including international artiste Chris Martin of British rock band Coldplay have also made appearances at the Maha Kumbh.

An official statement said Modi's ritual bath at the Sangam coincided with an auspicious alignment of celestial events -?Gupt Navratri and Bhishmashtami.

While Gupta Navratri is dedicated to worshipping the goddess, Bhishmashtami is observed for ancestral 'Tarpan' and 'Shradha'. This convergence of faith and tradition further enriched the sanctity of the occasion, it added.

In his previous visit to Prayagraj on December 13, Modi inaugurated 167 projects worth Rs 5,500 crore.

These projects encompassed major railway station upgrades, ROB flyovers, road widening, strengthening, and beautification.

Additionally, he inaugurated permanent ghats, riverfront development, sewerage and drinking water facilities, and power supply projects. Among the key religious and cultural developments were the Akshayvat Corridor, Saraswati Koop Corridor, Bade Hanuman Mandir Corridor, Bhardwaj Rishi Ashram Corridor, and Shringverpur Dham Corridor, the statement said. (PTI)

104 Indian migrants deported from US land at Amritsar airport

AMRITSAR, Feb 5: A US military aircraft carrying 104 illegal Indian immigrants landed at the Shri Guru Ramdas Ji International Airport here on Wednesday afternoon, sources said.

While 30 of the deportees are from Punjab, 33 each are from Haryana and Gujarat, three each from Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, and two from Chandigarh, the sources said.

An official confirmation on the number of deportees is awaited.

Earlier reports claimed that US military plane C-17 was bringing back 205 illegal immigrants.

The flight landed at 1.55 pm. There was heavy barricading outside the airport and police personnel were deployed in large numbers.

This is the first batch of illegal Indian immigrants to have been deported by the US government.

According to the sources, the deportees are expected to be allowed to go home following verification and background checks.

Police will focus on identifying any deportee with a criminal record, the sources said.

Punjab Director General of Police (DGP) Gaurav Yadav said on Tuesday that the state government would receive the immigrants and set up counters at the airport.

Punjab NRI Affairs Minister Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal on Tuesday expressed disappointment over the US government's decision and said these individuals, who contributed to that country's economy, should have been granted permanent residency instead of being deported.

He said many Indians entered the US on work permits which later expired, making them illegal immigrants.

The minister said he plans to meet External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar next week to discuss the concerns and interests of Punjabis living in the US.

Dhaliwal had also appealed to Punjabis not to travel abroad through illegal means, emphasising the importance of acquiring skills and education to access opportunities worldwide.

He encouraged people to research legal ways and acquire education and language skills before travelling abroad.

After Donald Trump assumed office as the US President last month, the country's law enforcement agencies have launched a crackdown against illegal immigrants.

Many people from Punjab, who entered the US through "donkey routes" or other illegal means by spending lakhs of rupees, are now facing deportation. (PTI)

Woman jumps from first floor to escape sexual assault, hotelier held

KOZHIKODE (KERALA), Feb 5: A hotelier, who had been absconding after a woman employee jumped from the first floor of a building here while resisting his alleged sexual assault attempt, was held from Thrissur district, police said on Wednesday.

The accused, identified as Devadas, was nabbed by the Mukkam police from Kunnamkulam during a bus journey on Tuesday night.

A source said the investigators received a tip-off about his movements, and a team of police personnel followed him and held him after stopping the bus midway.

He was brought to Mukkam police station in the early hours of Wednesday.

According to police, Devadas, who runs a moderate hotel in the district, was accused of barging into the room of a woman employee at her rented house here on Saturday night.

His accomplices, Riyas and Suresh, who were also with him at the time of the alleged sexual assault attempt, remain at large, and a manhunt is underway to apprehend them, the police said.

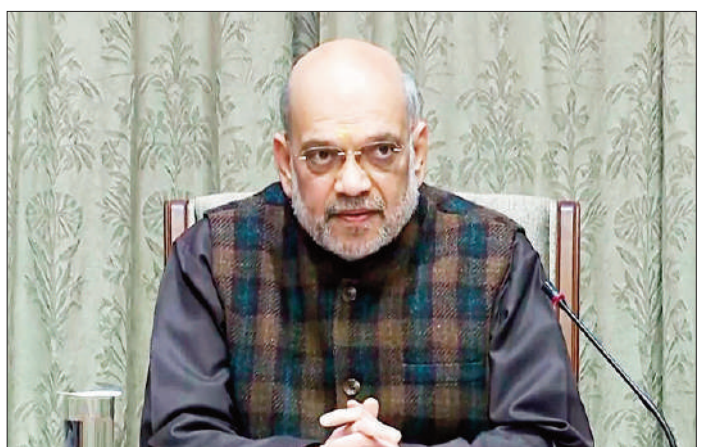
The shocking incident came to light after the woman, who sustained serious injuries from jumping from the first floor of the building to escape the assault, shared her harrowing experience with the police.

Hailing from Payyannur in Kanur, the victim had joined the hotel owned by Devadas a few months ago. She gave the statement that she was watching a video game on her phone, and she had no other way but to jump down the building to escape the assault.

After hearing her cries, neighbours and local people rushed to the spot and soon shifted her to a nearby hospital.

Devadas was arrested a day after the victim's family released some mobile visuals purportedly showing the trio's assault bid and the woman's attempt to escape from them. (PTI)

Step up fight against terrorism in J&K, Amit Shah tells security agencies



NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Union Home Minister Amit Shah Wednesday directed all security agencies to step up the fight against terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir with the goal of achieving 'zero infiltration'.

Chairing two high-level review meetings in as many days here on the security situation in Jammu and Kashmir, he also said the ecosystem of terror in the Union Territory has been weakened due to the sustained and coordinated efforts of the Narendra Modi government.

He asked all security agencies to take more stringent action on infiltration and acts of terror with a ruthless approach, saying the goal should be to uproot the existence of terrorists.

The home minister directed them to step up the fight against terrorism with the goal of 'zero infiltration', according to an official statement.

Shah said under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the government is committed to wiping out terrorism from Jammu and Kashmir.

He emphasised the Modi government's policy of zero tolerance against terrorism to achieve the goal of a terrorism-free Jammu and Kashmir and directed all security agencies to remain vigilant and continue to work in synergy to eliminate terrorism in the Union Territory.

The home minister said the narco network is providing support to infiltrators and terrorists to carry out

their activities.

"There is a need to take prompt action against terror funding from the proceeds of the narcotics trade with alacrity and rigour," he said.

Shah directed the agencies to make new appointments in the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) in view of the timely implementation of the new criminal laws.

He also appreciated the efforts of the security agencies for significant improvement in all parameters of the security scenario in Jammu and Kashmir.

The home minister reviewed the security situation of Jammu and Kashmir with top officials of the Army, police, paramilitary forces and others in two back-to-back meetings held on Tuesday and Wednesday. This was for the first time that the home minister had such such threadbare discussions on security situation in Jammu and Kashmir in two consecutive days.

Those who attended the meetings include Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan, Director of Intelligence Bureau Tapan Deka, DGP Nalin Prabhakar, Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi and other top army, police and civil officials.

The meetings were held in the wake of a terror attack in south Kashmir's Kulgam district, in which ex-serviceman Manzoor Ahmad Wagay was killed and his wife and niece were injured. (PTI)

Aga Khan IV was a visionary dedicated to service: PM Modi

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday condoled the death of Aga Khan IV, spiritual leader of Ismaili Muslims, describing him as a visionary who dedicated his life to service and spirituality. "Deeply saddened by the passing of His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan IV. He was a visionary, who dedicated his life to service and spirituality. His contributions in areas like health, education, rural development and women empowerment will continue to inspire several people," Modi said on X.

The prime minister said he will always cherish their interactions. "My heartfelt condolences to his family and the millions of followers and admirers across the world," he added. Aga Khan IV, who became the spiritual leader of the world's millions of Ismaili Muslims at the age of 20 as a Harvard undergraduate and poured a material empire built on billions of dollars in tithes into building homes, hospitals and schools in developing countries, died Tuesday. He was 88.

His Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili religious community announced that His Highness Prince Karim Al-Hussaini, the Aga Khan IV and 49th hereditary imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, died in Portugal surrounded by his family. (PTI)

Goa gov invites applications from school children for Young Innovator's Awards

PANAJI, Feb 5: The Goa government on Wednesday invited applications for its annual 'Goa Young Innovators' Award 2024-25' aimed at fostering a culture of innovation and creativity among school children.

The winners of the awards will be announced next month.

Talking to reporters in Margao city, Goa's Director of Science, Technology and Waste Management Ankit Yadav said the awards will be given in two categories - students of Class 5 to 7 and Class 8 to 9.

These awards are instituted by the Goa State Innovation Council under the Department of Science, Technology and Waste Management, he said.

"The awards aim to foster a culture of innovation, creativity and problem-solving among the youth. Innovation is the backbone of progress and it is crucial that we instil the spirit of creativity in our students at an early age. Our young minds are full of ideas, and with the right guidance and platform, they can provide transformative solu-

tions to address real-world challenges," Yadav said.

The best projects will receive mentorship and access to facilities to further refine and develop their ideas, he said.

"This initiative aims to provide students with an opportunity to engage with experts, gain hands-on experience and schools to encourage maximum participation," Yadav said.

The last date for online submission of ideas is February 28, according to him.

Chairman of Goa State Innovation Council Jose Manuel Noronha said that the less number of patents applied in India was a cause of concern.

The country like China has 1.6 million patents filed annually while the number in India is hardly 50,000, he said.

"To increase the number of patent filing and innovation, we have to strengthen the level of education," he said, adding that when students have better knowledge of science and technology, their ability of patenting will also increase. (PTI)

Lack of chlorine in water supplied to GBS patients' houses in Pune: Officials

PUNE, Feb 5: A water quality survey held around Nanded village, the epicentre of Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS) in Pune city, has found there was lack of chlorine in the drinking water supplied to households of 26 patients of this nerve disorder, officials said.

GBS is a rare condition that causes sudden numbness and muscle weakness, with symptoms including severe weakness in the limbs.

On Tuesday, three fresh cases of GBS were reported in Maharashtra's Pune city, taking the overall tally to 166, they said.

Officials of the Rapid Response Team (RRT), formed to probe the outbreak of the GBS cases in Nanded and adjoining localities in Sinhadag Road area, said there were 77 GBS patients in Nanded. Of them, the households of 62 patients were visited to take the drinking water samples.

The findings of the house-to-house survey about lack of chlorine in drinking water was discussed in the RRT's meeting.

Experts have now urged the Pune Municipal Corporation's (PMC) water supply department to take immediate action to maintain chlorine level of 0.2 ppm (parts per million) in the household water supply to ensure public health safety.

"While water at the source (well)



was found to be adequately purified with sufficient chlorine levels, zero chlorine was detected in households of 26 patients out of 62," an RRT member said.

The water supply department should take immediate action to maintain a minimum chlorine level of 0.2 ppm in household water supply, he said.

Last week, Maharashtra Health Minister Prakash Aitkar said 80 per cent of the suspected GBS cases in Pune have been reported from areas located around a mega well in Nanded.

He had noted that high number of cases in certain areas appeared to be linked to suspected water contamination.

When contacted, PMC's water supply department head Nandkishor Jagtap said the water from the well (in Nanded, which supplies to four to five villages) is adequately purified with sufficient chlorine levels.

"The reasons for zero level of chlorine level could be that the households must be sourcing water from other sources, such as private tankers or non-cleaning of overhead water tanks at the residential society or individual household," he said.

There is another reason that if the water is stored in large quantities, the levels of chlorine could go volatile, the official said.

Jagtap said his department also collected samples in which chlorine was not found in some and Es-

cherichia coli or E. coli bacteria was found.

"After we found E. coli in some of the water samples collected from the tankers, their operators have been issued notices and they have been instructed to use bleaching power solutions provided by the PMC to ensure the bacteria is contained," he said.

Some of the private water ATMs were seized after E. coli was found in their samples, he added.

Meanwhile, Dr Radhakishan Pawar, deputy director of the state health department and chairman of the RRT, said the outbreak of GBS is subsiding now.

"There are around 165 cases, of which 77 are cluster cases which are from Nanded village area. The remaining cases are from other parts of Pune and other districts and they are not epidemiologically related to Nanded area," he said.

"We consider these 77 cases in Nanded and adjoining areas as an outbreak as they are more than normal and accordingly, the investigations and sample collection of water, stool, poultry, food was going on," Pawar said.

A decline in the number of GBS cases has been observed now, he added.

"There was a peak around January 18 and 19 but now a decline has been recorded," he said. (PTI)

Turkish Ambassador Firat Sunel, author Durjoy Datta to participate in The White Owl Lit Fest

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Turkish Ambassador Firat Sunel, former Indian cricketer Syed Kirmani, best-selling author Durjoy Datta, and award-winning author Lavanya Karthik, are among the eminent personalities taking part at the second edition of The White Owl Literature Festival and Book Fair in Nagaland, starting February 17.

Having the theme of "Inspire, Imagine, Inscribe", the literary event will be held at the Zone Niathu by The Park in Dimapur. It aims to showcase the rich literary and storytelling traditions of the Northeast.

With a focus on inculcating a love for literature, the three-day festival this year will feature a mix of renowned speakers, local authors, workshops, and discussions spanning literary topics, history, pop culture, and more.

It is organised by Penguin Random House India (PRHI) in collaboration with The White Owl, a literary institute and book lounge in Nagaland.

"This year's festival is an invitation to discover stories in every form — books, films, sports, and culture. We've curated a programme that speaks to every kind of audience, from passionate readers to curious minds. Sessions that revisit India's first World Cup victory and explore the new-age rules of romance promise engaging conversations.

"With a perfect blend of Northeast voices and global perspectives, we're creating a space where storytelling thrives. Most importantly, our exclusive programming for young readers is our small contribution to shaping a new generation that finds joy in books, authors, and the magic of reading," said Deepthi Talwar, programme director and executive editor of Ebury Press at PRHI, in a statement.

The literary event will feature discussions on a range of topics such as preserving indigeniety, food

cultures, Indo-Myanmar borderlands and romance in pop culture, film, storytelling, poetry and sports.

Other speakers in The White Owl Literature Festival and Book Fair include the likes of culinary author Rohini Rana, Tech Mahindra's chief people officer Richard Lobo, illustrator and art director at Pratham Books Canato Jimo and children's author from Mizoram Hannah Lalhalanpuui.

In addition to literary discussions, the gala will also host art and writing workshops as well as interactive sessions on topics such as art of expression, stories in pictures, mental health, inclusivity and diversity.

"The festival not only celebrates Nagaland's vibrant storytelling heritage but also emphasises the fundamental importance of reading, listening, and writing in our lives, advocating for a renewed commitment to literacy and creative expression, inspiring future generations to read, listen, and write with passion and purpose," added Viketuno Rio, festival director and proprietor of The White Owl. The event will come to a close on February 19. (PTI)

Northern Command of Indian Army to hold investiture ceremony at Mathura on Feb 12

JAMMU, Feb 5: The Northern Command of the Indian Army will hold a prestigious investiture ceremony at Mathura Military Station in Uttar Pradesh on February 12 to felicitate officers and soldiers of the command with gallantry and distinguished service awards for their acts of bravery beyond the call of duty and distinguished service to the nation. The Northern Command is set to pay tribute to its gallant and distinguished soldiers and units during the ceremony, a defence spokesperson said.

Lieutenant General M V Suchindra Kumar, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C), Northern Command, will felicitate the officers and soldiers of the Northern Command with gallantry and distinguished service awards for their acts of bravery beyond the call of duty and distinguished service to the nation, he said.

Various units will also be conferred with GOC-in-C Unit Appreciation in recognition of their exceptional professionalism and unparalleled achievements, the spokesperson added.

This event will serve as a platform to honour and recognise the awardees for their extraordinary acts of bravery, unwavering dedication to duty and distinguished service to the nation, he said. The soldiers of the Northern Command and units have displayed exceptional courage, often putting their lives on the line to safeguard the sovereignty and security of their homeland. "Their remarkable deeds and sacrifices exemplify the highest standards of resilience, dedication and commitment that define the ethos of the Indian Army," the spokesperson said.

Through this ceremony, the Army not only celebrates the individual and collective achievements of its personnel but also underscores the values of loyalty, selflessness and patriotism that are integral to its mission, he emphasised.

"The investiture ceremony is a solemn reminder of the critical role played by these heroes in upholding the safety and freedom of the nation, inspiring future generations to continue the legacy of excellence and service," he concluded. (PTI)

NAME CHANGE

I, Nidip Kr Nath, S/O Umesh Ch. Nath, R/O vill-Hatibat, P.O. - Naga-b a n d h a , P . S - Mikirbhet, Dist- Morigaon, Assam have changed my daughter's name from Tirtha Devi to Devanshi Yogi through Morigaon District & Session Judge on 05-02-2025. Devanshi Yogi and Tirtha Devi is the same and one person.



Neil Nitin Mukesh on playing grey roles: 'It is a conscious decision'

'Should I be doing something similar?' What happens is that subconsciously there are similar traits. But when I heard the story, I felt there was yet another flavour that I could offer. My character is not just a bad guy, who's doing bad things, he is somebody who believes what he's doing is right. He is all doing it with conviction and it has been presented in a comedic way," Neil added.

Also featuring Kirti Kulhari and Rashmi Desai, "Hisaab Barabar" is described as "a gripping narrative of financial fraud, corruption and the

MUMBAI, Feb 5: Actor Neil Nitin Mukesh says he made a "conscious decision" to take on grey roles right from his 2007 debut with Sriram Raghavan's "Johnny Gaddaar".

His latest film "Hisaab Barabar", which is streaming on ZEE5, is another addition to his filmography populated by anti-hero roles in movies, including "Players", "7 Khoon Maaf", "Prem Ratan Dhan Payo", "Wazir", "Kaththi" (Tamil), and "Kavacham".

"Hisaab Barabar" features R Madhavan in the role of Radhe Mohan Sharma, a railway ticket checker who uncovers a small discrepancy in his bank account. It soon leads to a dangerous journey filled with fraud, deceit and corruption. Neil portrays Mickey Mehta, a ruthless banker in the movie. "I love playing such (grey) roles. This is a conscious decision from the very beginning of my career. As an actor, you have to be aware of your strengths, weaknesses, what your audience expects of you and what you want to do, and also be reminded that it's not easy because every shade of grey is different, every character is very different. Every shade and character will have its own trait," Neil told PTI in an interview.

Citing the example of Hollywood stars Jack Nicholson and Heath Ledger, the actor said it's great to see top actors playing antagonists.

"Today, your heroes only want to play dark roles," he added. Even then, Neil wants to maintain a balance between "good and bad roles".

"I like that range. I try to get some kind of human element into my shade of grey like some guys are bad, and some have a human side to them. With this character of Mickey Mehta, I've tried to imbibe a certain human element into him." The actor said he was initially sceptical about boarding the cast of "Hisaab Barabar" as the plot appeared similar to his Tamil film "Kaththi". Fronted by Vijay, the 2014 movie also had a "common man versus system" kind of commentary. "I was like,

His latest film "Hisaab Barabar", which is streaming on ZEE5, is another addition to his filmography populated by anti-hero roles in movies, including "Players", "7 Khoon Maaf", "Prem Ratan Dhan Payo", "Wazir", "Kaththi" (Tamil), and "Kavacham". "Hisaab Barabar" features R Madhavan in the role of Radhe Mohan Sharma, a railway ticket checker who uncovers a small discrepancy in his bank account

relentless pursuit of justice".

"It has a very strong message that needs to reach a certain audience, and also tries to make them aware of a certain situation that might happen. It is being told in a very comical way, in a satirist way, and it layered the film beautifully," the actor said.

"Hisaab Barabar" is directed by Ashwini Dhir, known for "One Two Three", "Atithi Tum Kab Jaoge?" and "Son of Sardaar". Produced by Jio Studios and SP Cinecorp, the film has been released in Hindi, Tamil and Telugu. (PTI)

BRITISH SINGER ED SHEERAN MEETS A R RAHMAN AHEAD OF HIS CHENNAI CONCERT

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Music maestro A R Rahman and his son A R Ameen met British musician Ed Sheeran ahead of the singer's Chennai concert on Wednesday.

Sheeran will perform in Chennai at the YMCA grounds, Nandanam. Ameen, also a singer, shared a series of pictures with Sheeran and Rahman on his Instagram page on Tuesday, tagging Sheeran in the caption with many heart emoticons.

In one of the photos, Sheeran can be seen posing with Rahman and Ameen. The other image shows the British singer-songwriter clicking a picture of Rahman as he worked on his music in the studio.

Sheeran, who is currently on the India leg of 'The Mathematics (+)=x) Tour', also shared a video on Instagram in which he can be seen singing his love ballad "Perfect" with the students of Rahman's KM College of Music & Technology.

"Singing perfect with the amazing choir at @kmmchennai here in Chennai today, wowsers (flip sideways for the full experience gang) (sic)" the singer captioned the clip.

Previously, a fan club of the singer-songwriter shared a video of him getting a head massage in Chennai.

"Ed getting a head massage in Chennai," the caption read. In the clip, Sheeran can be jokingly heard saying "this is abuse".

Sheeran also shared the video of the massage on his Instagram Stories with a cheeky note: "This kinda slaps".

At the Chennai show, the singer will be joined by Jonita Gandhi on stage.

He will conclude his tour in the country on February 15 in Delhi-NCR. (PTI)



BHANSALI PRODUCTIONS MARKS 20 YEARS OF 'BLACK'



NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Bhansali Productions on Tuesday marked the 20th release anniversary of director Sanjay Leela Bhansali's acclaimed drama "Black", describing it as a story that paved a path of possibilities from "darkness to light".

Based on the real-life story of Helen Keller, the film released in theatres on February 4, 2005. Also produced by Applause Entertainment, "Black" starred Rani Mukerji and Amitabh Bachchan in the lead.

It featured Mukerji as a deafblind and mute woman called Michelle, to whom Bachchan played the teacher, Debraj.

Bhansali Productions shared a series of stills from the film on its Instagram page on the milestone anniversary.

"Debraj and Michelle's journey has been an inspiration to all of us! Celebrating a story that beautifully paved the path of possibilities from darkness to light with #20YearsOfBlack #SanjayLeelaBhansali #Black @SrBachchan #RaniMukerji @ApplauseSocial #Bollywood #IndianCinema," the banner said in the post.

For his role in "Black", Bachchan received his second National Film Award in the best actor category. The movie won two more National Awards: best feature film in Hindi and best costume design for Sabyasachi Mukherjee. (PTI)



Sikandar Kher joins Sriram Raghavan's 'Ikkis'

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: Actor Sikandar Kher has boarded the cast of director Sriram Raghavan's upcoming war drama "Ikkis".

Based on the life of the youngest Param Vir Chakra recipient Arun Khetarpal, the film features "The Archies" actor Agasty Nanda and veteran star Dharmendra. It is produced by Dinesh Vijan via Maddock Films.

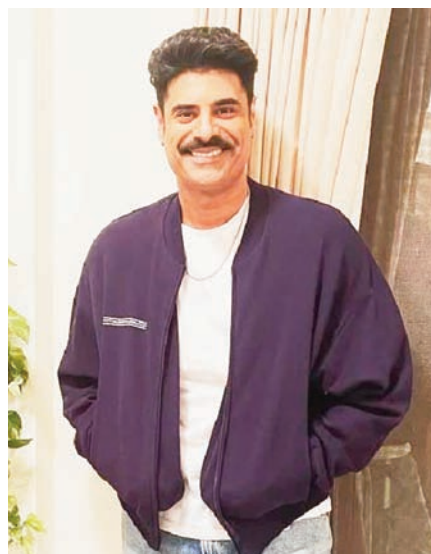
In "Ikkis", Kher is set to play a "dedicated Army man, bringing to the screen the resilience, discipline and heroism synonymous with the Indian armed forces".

The 43-year-old actor said he always wanted to work with Raghavan, known for films such as "Ek Hasina Thi", "Badlapur", and "Andhadhun".

"He has his own language of film-making... It's a unique perspective on a story, the way it unfolds is so gripping, and for me as an actor I've always wanted to be a part of his cinematic universe. The cool thing about being an actor is getting a chance to do things you normally wouldn't get to do.

"You see and learn so many things that you wouldn't otherwise experience. That's exactly what's happening on 'Ikkis'... the background of the armed forces, the war and especially the heroes we are playing is not just an honour but a privilege. I'm lucky to be a part of this film, and I hope I do well," Kher said in a statement.

The actor most recently starred in Prime Video series "Citadel: Honey Bunny", which premiered in November 2024. (PTI)



For me, important films are those I saw when I was not a filmmaker: Imtiaz Ali

JAIPUR, Feb 5: Films that you make are like houses that you live in on rent but the ones that you grew up watching are your own, says filmmaker Imtiaz Ali who would defend "Sholay" over his movies "Rockstar" or "Tamasha" any day. Ali, whose films have a fandom of their own, particularly "Rockstar" and "Tamasha", said these films may not have done well during their release weekend but over the years, they have acquired a certain power and fans get mad at any kind of criticism against them.

The filmmaker was speaking at the Jaipur Literature Festival on Monday.

Asked whether he finds it amusing that people defend these films with such vehemence, the filmmaker recalled his own formative years as a movie buff.

"I think what happens with a filmmaker is that you make the film, then you move on. For me, the important films are not 'Tamasha', 'Rockstar', 'Highway' and all of that. The important films are the films that I saw when I was not a filmmaker. "So, somebody says something wrong about 'Sholay', and I will protest. Ramesh Sippy, he won't even know. I have told Dharmendra about a scene. He doesn't remember it, he only remembers Dilip Kumar's scenes. So, the films that you watch are your own. The films that you make are just like houses that you live in on rent," the filmmaker said during a session hosted by film critic Anupama Chopra.

Ali said he has often been told that his



films are ahead of time, something that he would like to change. "There was a girl in the lift right now and she said, 'Sir, do you think you are ahead of your time? I am trying very hard to not be. And this whole thing that your movie doesn't do very well on the first day of release and then it does better later, I am working to change that. I am trying to learn all the tricks possible," the director, who last made critically-acclaimed "Amar Singh Chamkila" for Netflix, said.

Ali said he was not being modest by admitting that it is his incapacity as a filmmaker that his films gain popularity later.

"What happens is, it is your inability to tell the story simply that makes it seem like if you watch it for three times, you really enjoy it most. It is my inability and I am working to dispel that. So that every layer, everything that one enjoys in a movie, why can't it be seen and enjoyed in the first viewing? It should be. But for that, I need to have the ability of the storyteller to tell it simply," he said. Citing the example of "Mahabharata", the filmmaker said everyone understands its text. "I am not making anything bigger or more complicated than that. If that can be understood, then my movies can also be understood. There is no such thing as rocket science. But obviously, as a filmmaker and as a storyteller, one needs to try to have that ability that Ved Vyas, Valmiki or Homer and all of these people have had." (PTI)

'Conditions in India similar to Pakistan, trying to adapt'

India tour is as good a preparation as you can have for CT: Buttler

NAGPUR, Feb 5: It hasn't quite gone the way England would have liked but skipper Jos Buttler on Wednesday said the ongoing tour of India is "as good a preparation as you can have" for this month's Champions Trophy given the similarities in conditions with Pakistan where his team will be based for the event.

Buttler also believes that veteran batter Joe Root will play a pivotal role in both the ODI series against India, starting Thursday, and the upcoming Champions Trophy, given his experience.

England, coming off a disappointing 1-4 T20I series loss, has received a much-needed boost with Root's return. The seasoned batter, who has 171 ODIs under his belt, recently enjoyed a successful stint in SA20 with Paarl Royals, further reinforcing his form.

"Root is one of the great players of the game, so in all the formats here he's obviously been a vital part of ODI cricket for England for a long time," Buttler told reporters on the eve of the first ODI here.

"He's got loads of experience in ODI cricket, which would be great for some of the guys who haven't played as much in our group. He's been a vital player for England in all formats, and we feel like he's



got a crucial role for us to play in these games."

The ODI series serves as England's final preparation before the Champions Trophy, where Buttler and his team will begin their campaign against Australia on Febru-

ary 22 in Lahore.

"As preparation goes for any tournament, I think taking on India in India is always going to be a great challenge and as good a preparation as you can have," Buttler said.

"The conditions here in India may be similar (to those in Pakistan). Each ground that we play at always has its own nuances and a little bit of difference. We're always trying to adapt to that," he added.

The England captain reaffirmed his team's commitment to the aggressive brand of cricket that has come to define it.

"We want to find ways to put pressure on the opposition with the bat. You've got to take wickets, I think, and it's crucial you see how, if you let guys back for a period of time, they can go on to hurt you."

"So, we'll be desperate to try and find ways of taking wickets," he said.

"It's always about execution, really. Whether you want to be aggressive, you want to be measured, you've still got to go out there and execute it and play it well," he added. Buttler was all praise for under-fire India skipper Rohit Sharma, who will look to regain form in the series.

"If I look back at that World Cup (2023), the two teams in the final were playing a really positive and aggressive round of cricket, you think of the way Travis Head took that final on with the bats, so you

see it can be successful," he said. "Obviously, Rohit takes a lot of credit for the way he's come out and played himself as a captain and pushed India more towards that style of cricket, so absolutely, we want to be exactly the same."

The growth of T20 cricket and the resurgence of Tests has raised serious questions over the relevance of the 50-over game, and concerns for its future. Buttler said he too understands the doubts.

"I'm unsure (about ODI's future). I've really enjoyed 50-over cricket. It's always been one of my favourite formats. But it's certainly been pushed a little bit towards the margins in recent years and the way scheduling is, and obviously the rise of T20 and franchise cricket.

"But I still believe if you talk to guys about winning a World Cup, they'd probably say a 50-over World Cup ahead of a T20 World Cup at the moment. Whether that continues to be the case moving forward, I don't know," he said.

"But the schedules are always the thing. If you can get the best players on the park, playing against each other in whatever the format, I think people are always going to be excited to watch it," Buttler added. (PTI)

Lindsey Vonn's new titanium knee holds up fine in 1st training

VIENNA, Feb 5: Big jumps. Lots of terrain. Steep pitches. The downhill course at the Alpine skiing world championships would have been a challenge for Lindsey Vonn's aching legs before she retired in 2019.

Now that she's replaced part of her right knee with titanium? No problem.

"This is probably the worst hill for someone with bad knees, but I felt great," Vonn said after placing 20th in the opening training session Tuesday. "None of the landings hurt at all."

Vonn returned to the skiing circuit in December at the age of 40 and she wasn't initially planning on racing at the worlds. But she's made so much progress that she's going to enter the super-G on Thursday, the downhill on Saturday and the team combined event next week.

So what did the American stand-out make of her training performance?

"I was just taking it easy," she said. "I thought it was a really fun course, actually. Reminds me of when I was learning how to ski downhill at Vail. We had a lot of terrain that we built like this, so it's fun."

Lara Gut-Behrami, Breezy Johnson and Federica Brignone placed 1-2-3 in the training session.

There are two more training sessions before Saturday's downhill race. "I really put zero weight into training runs because I'm testing things," she said. "I have my jacket on. I have all my pads on. I'm trying different boots and in the training runs I've never done that before."

Vonn told The Associated Press in a recent interview that the main goal of her comeback is to compete at next season's Milan-Cortina Olympics — after which she'll head back into retirement.

"This season," Vonn said, "is all about figuring out what it's going to take to be successful next year." (AP)

Focussed on present: Rohit plays down speculations on future

NAGPUR, Feb 5: Indian captain Rohit Sharma on Wednesday played down speculations about his future in international cricket, saying it is irrelevant to talk about his career at a time when he is "focussed" on the three ODIs against England and the ICC Champions Trophy.

India will tune up for the Champions Trophy, starting February 19, with the three One-Day Internationals against England beginning with the first one here on Thursday.

"How it is relevant that I talk about my future plans when there are three ODIs and a Champions Trophy? The reports (on my future) are going on for a number of years and I am not here to clarify

those reports," Rohit said at the pre-match press conference.

"For me, the three games (against England) and the Champions Trophy is very important. My focus is on these games and I will see what happens thereafter," the India skipper added.

Rohit has been battling poor form for a while now with the batter managing only 31 runs across five innings at an abysmal average of 6.20 in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy in Australia.

While there is no doubt that he is not looking to walk into international sunset anytime soon, there were reports that the BCCI has asked him to spell out his future plans after the Champions Trophy. (PTI)

IGF objects to IOA's interference in IGU polls

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: The International Golf Federation (IGF) has strongly objected to the Indian Olympic Association's interference in the Indian Golf Union elections, and recognised the rival faction led by Harish Kumar Shetty, saying the IOA has "no jurisdiction" over the federation's poll process.

The IOA had given recognition to the IGU led by Shetty while declaring the other body, headed by Brijinder Singh, void in a letter issued on December 30.

In a strongly-worded letter to IOA president PT Usha, IGF executive director Antony Scanlon said the world body fully supports the election won by the Singh faction held on December 15.

Shetty and Singh held separate elections and AGMs under different Returning Officers (ROs).

The election of Shetty's faction was conducted by retired Allahabad High Court judge OP Garg while Singh was re-elected in polls conducted by retired Punjab and Haryana High Court judge, Rameshwar Malik.

"We write to object in the

strongest terms to your interference and that of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) in the recent Annual General Meeting and election of office bearers of our National Federation member, the Indian Golf Union (IGU)," Scanlon wrote in his letter.

"The IGF has found no reason to question the legitimacy of the IGU Annual General Meeting and election of the office bearers held on 15 December 2024 at Tamarind Hall, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi (where Singh was elected president) and believe they were held in accordance with their constitution and the procedures of the National Sports Development Code of India, 2011.

"As such, we recognise and fully support the office bearers announced by the Returning Officer HJ Rameshwar Singh Malik and ratified by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports. We contend that neither the IOA nor you as President of the IOA has any jurisdiction over the IGU Annual General Meeting nor its electoral process." (PTI)



India names 17-member junior squad for Dutch and German badminton meets

NEW DELHI, Feb 5: National U-17 champion Gnana Dattu T will lead India's 17-member squad at the Dutch Junior International and German Junior badminton tournaments to be played in February and March this year.

The squad also includes junior world number six Raunak Chouhan, Adarshini Shri, and doubles specialists Bhavya Chhabra and Param Chaudhary, among others. The Dutch Junior International will be played in Haarlem, Netherlands from February 26 to March 2, while the German Junior will be held in Mulheim an der Ruhr from March 5-9.

The Indian contingent consists of four boys and girls singles players each, two boys doubles and two girls doubles combinations, and two mixed doubles pairs.

The squad was selected based on the BAI selection committee's guidelines, granting direct entry to winners of the All India Junior Ranking Tournament (U-19) in Hyderabad, while the remaining spots were filled through selection trials held in New Delhi, featuring top-ranked players and semifinalists from the Hyderabad event.

"The Dutch Junior International and the German Junior competitions have been important tournaments as stepping stones for the development of young athletes. Indian players have been making a mark in these competitions over the last few years before transitioning to

the senior circuit," Badminton Association of India General Secretary, Sanjay Mishra said in a release.

"This augurs well for the junior development plan that BAI has been focusing on for the last few years, especially with 10 players currently in the top 10 of the BWF World Junior Rankings." Surya Charisma Tamiri had bagged the girls' singles bronze medal in the 2024 German Junior, while Ayush Shetty had won the boys' singles bronze medal a year earlier before going on to clinch the 2023 world junior bronze.

RMV Gurusai Dutt is the only Indian boy's singles player to win the Dutch Junior International gold medal back in 2008 -- the same year he also clinched the Commonwealth Youth Games gold and the world junior bronze medal.

India squad:
Boys Singles: Rounak Chouhan, Gnana Dattu TT, Suryaksh Rawat, Pranav Ram N

Girls Singles: Adarshini Shri, Tanoo Chandra, Rujula Ramu, Tanvi Reddy Andluri

Boys Doubles: Bhavya Chhabra/Param Chaudhary, Mithlesh PK/Vishnu Kedar Kode

Girls Doubles: Pragati Parida/Vishakha Toppo, Anaya Bisht/Angel Punera

Mixed Doubles: Bhavya Chhabra/Angel Punera, Lairsamsanga C/Vishakha Toppo. (PTI)



Alexander-Arnold to miss second leg of League Cup semis with injury



LIVERPOOL, Feb 5: Liverpool right-back Trent Alexander-Arnold will miss the second leg against Tottenham in the English League Cup semifinals on Thursday because of an injury sustained at the weekend.

Liverpool trails Tottenham 1-0 from the first leg on Jan 8. The return match is at Anfield, with Liverpool looking to retain its trophy.

Alexander-Arnold came off in the 70th minute of the 2-0 win at Bournemouth in the Premier League on Saturday because of a suspected thigh injury.

"He is going to miss the game

tomorrow," Liverpool manager Arne Slot said Wednesday. "and we have to see if he is able to play on Sunday."

Liverpool plays Plymouth in the FA Cup on Sunday before a Merseyside derby at Everton in the Premier League next Wednesday.

Asked for more details about Alexander-Arnold's injury, Slot said: "I think you saw that he left the pitch with a bit of pain in his leg, so that's why he misses the game tomorrow."

"But he is already on the pitch, not with the team but with the rehab coach, so let's see how long it is going to take." (AP)

Undav shoots Stuttgart into the German Cup semifinals

STUTTGART, Feb 5: Deniz Undav fired Stuttgart into the German Cup semifinals with a 1-0 victory over Augsburg on Tuesday.

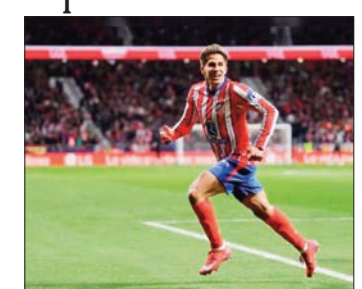
The Germany forward scored in the 30th minute after being set up by former Augsburg forward Ermedin Demirovic.

Augsburg had made the better start to the quarterfinal match, and the visitors also missed good chances to equalise in the second half with substitute Mert Kõmür drawing a good save from Alexander Nübel and failing to make the most of another chance.

Stuttgart ended a three-game losing streak. However, the game ended with an injury to Stuttgart midfielder Enzo Millot after a foul from Dimitrios Giannoulis, who was booked. Millot needed support to limp off the field.

Defending champion Bayer Leverkusen hosts local rival Cologne in a quarterfinal on Wednesday. Stuttgart next faces Borussia Dortmund away in the Bundesliga on Saturday. (AP)

Simeone scores brace as Atletico reaches Copa semifinals



MADRID, Feb 5: Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone's son, Giuliano, scored two early goals as the team eased into the Copa del Rey semifinals with a 5-0 home victory over Getafe on Tuesday.

The 22-year-old Simeone netted twice in the first 17 minutes as Atletico reached the last-four of the Copa for the second straight season.

Samuel Lino also scored a first-half goal for the hosts at the Metropolitan stadium, and Angel Correa and Alexander Sorloth added second-half goals.

Atletico, which last won the Copa in 2012-13, was eliminated by eventual champion Athletic Bilbao last season.

In the other quarterfinals, Real Madrid visits Leganes on Wednesday, while on Thursday, it will be Real Sociedad welcoming Osasuna and Barcelona playing at Valencia.

Simeone opened the scoring with a header in the eighth minute and doubled the lead from inside the area in a breakaway in the 17th. Lino scored the third goal after a neat move to clear a defender and find the far corner with a low shot in the 42nd. Correa made it 4-0 with a low strike from outside the area in the 78th, and Sorloth closed the rout in the 86th.

Coach Diego Simeone used a few reserve players ahead of the team's crucial Spanish league match at first-place Real Madrid on Saturday. Atletico trails Madrid by one point.

Getafe, which had only one attempt on target in the first half, has only one win in its last four matches across all competitions. It hasn't made it to the Copa semifinals since 2009-10. (AP)

Castro's late goal takes Bologna to last 8

BERGAMO, Feb 5: Santiago Castro had an immediate impact off the bench as he scored the goal to send Bologna into the Italian Cup semifinals for the first time in 26 years.

Bologna won 1-0 at last year's runner-up Atalanta on Tuesday and will play either holder Juventus or Empoli in the final four. Juventus hosts Empoli in their quarterfinal on Feb 26.

The last time Bologna was in the semifinal was in 1999 when it lost 4-2 to Fiorentina.

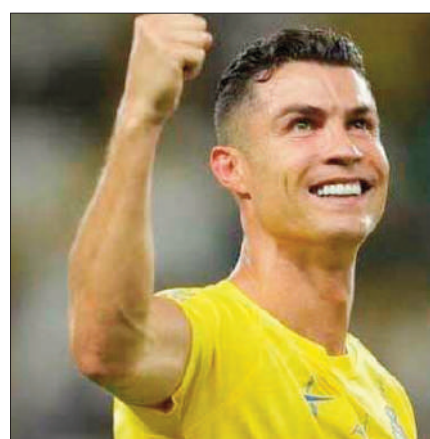
There were chances for both sides in a high-tempo match in Bergamo but it was Bologna that broke the deadlock, 10 minutes from time when Castro escaped his marker at the far post to head in Charalampos Lykogiannis' perfectly weighted free kick.

The 20-year-old Argentinian had come off the bench less than two minutes earlier. The cup exit continued a poor start to the new year for Atalanta, which has only beaten Sturm Graz and Como in its 10 matches since the beginning of 2025.

AC Milan hosts Roma in Wednesday's quarterfinal, with Lazio playing at Inter Milan in the other, on Feb. 25. (AP)



'I am the greatest scorer in history' 40 years, one legacy: Ronaldo creates sensation on eve of his birthday



MADRID, Feb 5: Cristiano Ronaldo turned 40 with the same confidence and self-esteem as he has always boasted throughout his successful career.

Ronaldo, the former Real Madrid star who now plays in Saudi Arabia, turned 40 on Wednesday and apparently has no doubt about who should be considered the best soccer player ever.

"I am the greatest scorer in history," Ronaldo said in an interview with Spanish television channel La Sexta. "Although I am not left-footed, I am in the top 10 in history for goals scored with the left foot. These are numbers, I am the most complete player who has ever existed."

"I play well with my head, I take good free kicks, I am fast, I am strong, I jump... I have never seen anyone better than me."

The Portugal star holds the most scoring records in men's international soccer, including most appearances with 217 and most goals with 135.

He had said it before, more than once, that he feels he will go out as the best ever in the history of soccer. Whenever he was asked about the discussion of who is better, him or Lionel Messi, he always praised the Argentine but ended up siding with himself.

Ronaldo's most recent comments prompted a few reactions in the soccer world.

"I have a lot of respect for Cristiano and I don't have to analyse his opinions. It's what he thinks. I have my own thoughts and it isn't that," said Javier Mascherano, a former teammate of Messi and his current coach at Inter Miami. (AP)

Combination concerns: India look for balance against England in last CT tune-up

NAGPUR, Feb 5: Form and fitness of seasoned stars are under the scanner as India enters the final phase of their Champions Trophy preparations with the three-match ODI series against England starting here on Thursday, aiming to find the right balance for some specific slots in the line-up.

The likes of skipper Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli have been under tremendous scrutiny after their dismal run in red-ball cricket.

The two stars, after making hyped but disappointing appearances in the Ranji Trophy last month, will be eyeing strong performances in a format that they have dominated for several years.

They were the top two run-getters of the 2023 World Cup with Kohli scoring 765 and Rohit smashing 597.

Since that World Cup, which India let slip in the final after going unbeaten throughout, the two have only featured in a three-match ODI series loss to Sri Lanka where Rohit scored two fifties while Kohli didn't have a great run.

The slump intensified in Tests and in the last three months, the two heroes of India's most recent T20 World Cup triumph have faced numerous calls to decide on their future.

The ODI series against England is India's only tune-up tournament for the Champions Trophy, to be held in Pakistan and Dubai from February 19. The eight-team competition could be a make-or-break event for the two stalwarts who have already retired from T20Is.



However, their form is not a solitary concern for the outfit.

One of the grey areas is the wicketkeeper's slot. Who among KL Rahul and Rishabh Pant should get the nod for the playing XI? With skipper Rohit and his deputy Shubman Gill likely to open, followed by Kohli Shreyas Iyer and Hardik Pandya, the wicketkeeper-batter is likely to slot in at number five.

Rahul, who kept wickets in Pant's absence during the 2023 World Cup, performed admirably, scoring 452 runs and proving to be one of India's most consistent middle-order batters.

His stability has been instrumental in creating a formidable

ODI setup, but his strike rotation in the middle overs remains a concern.

On the other hand, the left-handed Pant offers variety in India's right-hand-dominated top order. Additionally, his unpredictability, raw power, and ability to clear with breathtaking ease make him the X-factor.

The Indian think tank could always go with both but that would likely come at the expense of Iyer, who despite under-performing in the Sri Lanka series, has been a prolific contributor. His exploits in the domestic season are hard to ignore.

The series will also test the pre-emptiveness of veteran pacer Mohammed Shami and wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav, both of whom had been laid low by injuries and could be key to India's success in the Champions Trophy. While Shami played two T20s against England in the recently concluded series, Kuldeep hasn't donned the India colours since the first Test against New Zealand in October.

Spearhead Jasprit Bumrah was never in contention for this series due to a back problem.

In-form mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy is expected to get a debut to strengthen his case for inclusion in the Champions Trophy squad.

He troubled the England batters in the T20Is after bamboozling Bangladesh in another home series last October. The team management also has to make a tough choice for the spin all-rounder's position. Ravindra Jadeja, who hasn't played an ODI since the 2023 ODI World Cup final, Axar Patel and Washington Sundar are all in contention and it is not yet clear how this will be settled.

England too will look to iron out the chinks in their armour and present a stronger challenge. But the task is easier said than done given that they have lost back-to-back 50-over series against Australia (in September) and West Indies (in November).

Joe Root is the only addition to the team to their batting line-up which will largely be the same as the one that struggled in the T20s.

Wicketkeeper Jamie Smith is likely to miss the first two ODIs due to a calf issue.

Squads: India: Rohit Sharma (C), Shubman Gill (VC), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul (WK), Rishabh Pant (WK), Hardik Pandya, Ravindra Jadeja, Washington Sundar, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Harshit Rana, Mohd. Shami, Arshdeep Singh, Varun Chakravarthy.

England: Jos Buttler (c), Harry Brook, Ben Duckett, Joe Root, Philip Salt, Jamie Smith, Jacob Bethell, Brydon Carse, Liam Livingstone, Jamie Overton, Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Saqib Mahmood, Adil Rashid, Mark Wood.

The match starts at 1:30 pm IST. (PTI)

Alphonso Davies puts pen to paper amid rumours



MUNICH, Feb 5: Canada wing-back Alphonso Davies has finally signed a contract extension with Bayern Munich.

The Bavarian powerhouse announced Tuesday that the 24-year-old Davies signed a deal through June 2030. His contract was set to expire at the end of this season.

"Phonzy has been playing for Bayern since he was 18 and quickly embraced the club," Bayern's board member for sport Max Eberl said in the team's announcement. "We see him as one of the figures in the new generation of our team who are increasingly taking on responsibility. He's grown up here and will continue to grow with the team."

Talks between the club and the player were protracted amid reported interest from Real Madrid. Eberl said in March 2024 that Bayern had made its final offer to Davies for an extension. But Madrid failed to act decisively on

its supposed interest and Davies finally opted to stay at the club that he joined in 2018 for a then-record MLS fee from the Vancouver Whitecaps.

"I came to FC Bayern when I was 18 and just wanted to learn as much as possible every day to become one of the best in my position," Davies said. "Now I'm looking forward to another five years together. I've already achieved a lot here, but there's more to come."

Davies was born in the Buduburam refugee camp west of Accra in Ghana to parents who had fled civil war in Monrovia, Liberia. They moved in 2006 when he was 5 to Edmonton, where Davies began playing soccer, first at school, then at a free after-school league for inner-city children.

Davies joined the Whitecaps residency program when he was 14, going on to become the youngest player to appear in the United Soccer League and the firstborn this century to play in the MLS.

Davies has made 220 competitive appearances for the Bavarian team, scoring 12 goals and setting up 34 more. He has won five Bundesliga titles, two German Cup titles, and the Champions League with the club. He also has played 56 games for Canada.

Davies' extension comes a day after veteran goalkeeper Manuel Neuer signed a one-year extension.

Bayern midfielder Joshua Kimmich and forwards Leroy Sané and Thomas Müller all have contracts expiring at the end of the season.

There are also questions over the future of star attacking midfielder Jamal Musiala, whose deal expires next season. (AP)

District-Level Khel Maharan begins in Kokrajhar

HT Correspondent

KOKRAJHAR, Feb 5: The district-level Khel Maharan 2.0 commenced on Wednesday at Kokrajhar with enthusiastic participation from athletes across the entire district with a two-day event. The BTC executive member for the sports & youth welfare department, Daobaisa Boro inaugurated the event in the presence of Kokrajhar District Commissioner, Masanda Magdalin Pertin, and other sports officials.

More than 1000 participants from five LACs - Kokrajhar, Dotma, Gosagaigaon Baokhungri and Parbhajthora are competing in a diverse range of sports, including athletics, kabaddi, volleyball, football, chess, etc.

The Khel Maharan 2.0 has been aimed at promoting grassroots sports and providing a platform for young athletes to showcase their talent. The competition is expected to bring forth emerging talents from the district.

EM Boro said that the Khel Maharan is a sporting event where people cutting across the communities are participating. He said, "The event received a good response from the participants across the region. The enthusiastic sports event is organised to hunt sporting talents amongst the citizens in the state."

India's ICC elite panel umpire Menon opts out of CT

DUBAI, Feb 5: India's only representative in the ICC Elite Panel of Umpires, Nitin Menon, has opted out of officiating in the Champions Trophy in Pakistan this month due to personal reasons.

The ICC on Wednesday announced a list of 15 match officials, including three match referees and 12 umpires for the marquee tournament, scheduled to commence in Karachi on February 19 with the final on March 9. Australian legend David Boon, Sri Lankan great Ranjan Madugalle and Zimbabwe's Andrew Pycroft were named as match referees for the eight-team tournament.

The event will be held at three venues in Pakistan -- Karachi, Lahore, and Rawalpindi --, while India will play all their matches in Dubai, starting with a clash against Bangladesh on February 20, owing to security concerns.

"The ICC wanted to put him (Menon) on the Champions Trophy roster. But he decided against travelling to Pakistan due to personal reasons," a BCCI source told PTI.

Menon could not have stood in the matches in Dubai as the ICC follows the policy of appointing neutral umpires. The world body did not comment on Menon in its statement to unveil the list of officials.

All the three-match referees chosen for the tournament are experienced. Boon has featured in the 2017 Champions Trophy final, while Madugalle is back after officiating the 2013 final. Pycroft also featured in the 2017 tournament.

"A distinguished panel of 12 umpires will officiate the eight-team event, with six returning officials from the 2017 edition, including Richard Kettleborough, who stood in the final of the previous Champions Trophy in the UK," the ICC said in a release.

Kettleborough, a veteran of 108 ODIs, will be joined by fellow umpires Chris Gaffaney, Kumar Dharmasena, Richard Illingworth, Paul Reiffel, and Rod Tucker, who also officiated in the 2017 tournament.

"Dharmasena will be extending his stint of officiating 132 ODIs at the upcoming tournament, a record for an umpire from Sri Lanka in the One-Day format." (PTI)

Not having Bumrah will reduce India's chances by 30-35% in CT: Shastri

DUBAI, Feb 5: Former skipper Ravi Shastri reckons that Jasprit Bumrah's potential absence could severely weaken the Indian team in the Champions Trophy but advised against rushing the premier fast bowler's return to the national side.

Bumrah suffered back spasms in the fifth Test against Australia in Sydney in January and did not bowl in the second innings. He hasn't bowled for India since then, though he has been included in the initial squad for the prestigious ODI tournament.

Bumrah is undergoing rehabilitation at the NCA and is not in the ODI squad for the three-match series against England beginning Thursday.

The sports science experts are expected to provide an update on his fitness to the BCCI after which a call would be taken on the Champions Trophy, which will be held in Pakistan and UAE.

The opening game is scheduled in Karachi on February 19 while India will play all their games in Dubai.



"Bumrah not fit will reduce India's chances (of winning the Champions Trophy) by 30%, literally by 30-35%," Shastri said in the latest edition of ICC Review.

"With a fully fit Bumrah playing, you are guaranteed of those deathovers. It would've been a different ball game altogether," opined Shastri.

Bumrah, who had a sensational last year to claim the Sir Garfield Sobers Trophy for ICC Men's Cricketer of the Year as well as

the ICC Men's Test Cricketer of the Year, played a pivotal role in India winning the 2024 T20 World Cup held in the West Indies and the USA.

He also claimed 32 wickets, the highest from both sides, in the five-match Border-Gavaskar Tests in Australia.

Shastri warned against rushing the stalwart back.

"I think it's high risk. There's too much big cricket coming up for India. And at this stage of his career, I think he's too precious to be just called on for one game out of the blue and asked to deliver."

"The expectations will be so much. They'll think that he'll come in straight away and set the world on fire. It's never that easy when you come back from injury," said Shastri.

Legendary Australian cricketer Ponting said Bumrah's absence could shift the focus on Shami, who recently returned to the India side following a 14-month injury layoff and rehabilitation.

He felt the back spasms Bumrah suffered in Australia could be

due to the pacer not getting the support of Shami.

"My biggest concern about India when they came for Australia in the Test series was Bumrah not having Shami there as a backup and him having to burden most of the load," Ponting said on The ICC Review.

"And that's probably what happened, and might even have something to do with why he (Bumrah) got hurt. He probably ended up having to bowl a bit more in that series with Shami not being there. So look, if Shami's fit, that's a positive," said Ponting.

Shastri said Shami's fitness would be keenly followed in the ODI series against England.

"It will be interesting to see if India plays him out in all three, or they give him the first one and the third one and then ease him into the Champions Trophy."

"But he'll be watched very closely because 10 overs is totally different to four overs, and then you're going to see how he pulls up in the field as well having bowled those 10 overs." (PTI)

Simona Halep announces retirement after two Grand Slam titles

BUCHAREST, Feb 5: Two-time Grand Slam champion Simona Halep announced her retirement from tennis at age 33 after a first-round loss at a tournament in her home country of Romania on Tuesday, ending an injury-filled comeback from a doping suspension.

"I don't know if it's with sadness or joy — I think I'm feeling both — but my soul is at peace with this decision, and I've always been realistic with myself. My body can no longer handle as much as it used to, to get me where I probably once was," Halep said, using a microphone to address the crowd in Cluj, Romania, following her 6-1, 6-1 loss to Lucia Bronzetti in the Transylvania Open.

"It's very hard to reach that level, and I know what it takes to get there," Halep said. "That's why I wanted to be here today, in Cluj, to play in front of you and say goodbye on the tennis court, even if my performance wasn't great."

It was the first match of the year for Halep, who reached No. 1 in the WTA rankings for the first time in 2017 but is now 870th and was given a wild-card invitation to play in Romania.

She had pulled out of qualify-



ing for the Australian Open and a tuneup tournament in Auckland, New Zealand, last month because of pain in her knee and shoulder, the latest interruption of her career.

Halep once stood atop women's tennis, winning major singles trophies at Wimbledon in 2019 by beating Serena Williams in the final and at the French Open in 2018 by beating Sloane Stephens in the final.

She also was a three-time runner-up at Grand Slam tournaments — at the Australian Open in 2018 and

the French Open in 2014 and 2017.

But her last appearance at a major event came at the 2022 U.S. Open. That was where Halep lost in the first round to Daria Snigur of Ukraine 6-2, 0-6, 6-4 and tested positive for the banned drug Roxadustat.

Roxadustat was approved for use in the European Union in 2021 to treat the symptoms of anaemia caused by chronic kidney failure. It stimulates the body to produce more of the natural hormone erythropoietin, or EPO, which has long been a doping product

favoured by cyclists and distance runners to boost stamina.

Halep initially was given a four-year ban that would have expired in 2026. But she appealed, and the Court of Arbitration for Sport reduced the penalty to nine months in March 2024.

She argued that she was exposed to a contaminated supplement that caused her to fail the test. CAS determined that Halep bore "some level of fault or negligence" for not exercising "sufficient care" while using the supplement, but "she bore no significant fault or negligence." So that is why, CAS said, "her antidoping rule violations were not intentional."

Halep made her return to the tour later that month at the Miami Open but has played a total of only six matches since then.

She leaves the sport with 24 singles titles and more than \$40 million in prize money.

"To be competitive again requires much more, and at this moment, it's no longer possible," Halep said Tuesday. "I don't want to cry — this is something beautiful. I reached world No. 1, I won Grand Slams; it's everything I ever wanted." (AP)

AKS Panibeel and Rajmai FCC enter Bordoloi Trophy final

HT CORRESPONDENT

SIVASAGAR, Feb 5: Rajmai FCC defeated Mohabahu FCC, Desangmukh 3-1 in the first semifinal of the 70th Bordoloi Trophy Football Tournament, Sivasagar lag, played in the Peoli Phukan Stadium on Wednesday morning.

In the second semifinal, AKS Panibeel defeated Sivasagar Children's Football Coaching Centre 1-0. Riki Bhumij scored the only goal through a penalty for AKS Panibeel in the 59th minute. The final will be played on Feb 7.

Albania and Serbia to co-host European U21 Championship

NYON, Feb 5: Albania and Serbia will co-host the European Under-21 Championship in a move that could help ease political tensions between the nations. On Tuesday, UEFA confirmed the 2027 tournament would be shared between the Balkan neighbours. Historic tensions had been heightened by the 1990s Balkans conflicts and especially since 2008 when the majority of ethnic Albanians declared independence in the former Serbian province of Kosovo. Serbia refuses to recognise that independence and considers Kosovo the cradle of its statehood. (AP)

ABHISHEK SKYROCKETS TO SECOND SPOT IN T20 BATTERS' RANKING

DUBAI, Feb 5: In-form India opener Abhishek Sharma leapfrogged 38 places to the second spot in the ICC Men's T20I Player Rankings for batters, while his teammate Tilak Verma dropped a rung to the third place on Wednesday.

Abhishek produced the best innings of his fledgling international career when he smashed a quick-fire 135 in the fifth and final T20 against England in Mumbai, leading India to a thumping 4-1 series win.

Abhishek's innings came off just 54 deliveries and was adorned with 13 sixes. It was the highest score by an Indian men's player in the shortest format.

As a result, the 24-year-old zoomed to the second spot in the latest ranking.

Australia star Travis Head continues to lead the T20I batters' chart, but Abhishek is just 26 rating points behind him following his record-breaking effort at Wankhede.

Skipper Suryakumar Yadav is placed fifth and all within striking distance of Head, while his India teammates Hardik Pandya (up five runs to equal 51st) and Shivam Dube (up 38 spots to 58th) also

moved up the rankings chart following some good scores against England.

It's a similar story on the bowlers' rankings with spinner Varun Chakravarthy moving up three places to joint second with Adil Rashid on the back of his 14 wickets and player-of-the-series effort against England.

Fellow spinner Ravi Bishnoi (up four places to sixth) also climbed the list after taking five wickets in the series against England. Left-arm pacer Arshdeep Singh also finds himself in the top 10 at ninth place.

West Indies spinner Akeal Hosen re-claims his spot as the No. 1 bowler after he lost the mantle to Rashid a week earlier.

A host of Australian players gained ground in the latest Test rankings following their impressive effort in defeating Sri Lanka by an innings and 242 runs during the recent first Test in Galle.

Stand-in skipper Steve Smith gained three places to move up to fifth following his 35th Test century, while opener Usman Khawaja climbed six places to 11th after contributing his highest Test score of 232 during the romp. (PTI)