#### YOUR OPINION, OUR EFFORTS

# THE PERFECT VOICE



Opposition walks out over Amit Shah's remarks

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Indian economy to grow 6.6 pc in FY26

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CM DEVENDRA FADNAVIS SAYS 101 RESCUED, SEVERAL PEOPLE STILL MISSING



The Man who never played safe

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# 13 dead near Elephanta

A NAVY SPEED BOAT RAMS INTO THE FERRY OFF MUMBAI COAST CAUSING THE ACCIDENT



#### By Correspondent

**Mumbai:** Thirteen persons died and 101 others were rescued after a Navy craft crashed into a ferry off the Mumbai coast on Wednesday, the Navy said.

At about 4 pm, a Navy craft undergoing engine trials lost control and collided with passenger ferry Neel Kamal off Karanja near Mumbai, the Navy said in a statement. The ferry was carrying passengers from the Gateway of India to Elephanta Island, a popular tourist destination.

"Search and Rescue efforts were immediately launched by the Navy in coordination with the Coast Guard and Marine Police. Four naval helicopters, 11 naval craft, one Coast Guard boat and three Marine Police boats were involved in the rescue efforts." the Navy said.

cue efforts," the Navy said. Personnel from police, Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority and fishermen in

the area were also involved in the rescue work.

"The survivors picked up by Navy and civil craft in the area have been transferred to jetties and hospitals in the vicinity. So far 99 survivors have been res-

cued," it added.

The accident led to the loss of 13 lives, including a Naval personnel and two from the OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) on board the Naval craft, the Navy said.

Following the tragedy near a jetty off the Butcher island, police stopped tourists entry at the Gateway of India and suspended boat services, docking them at their designated spots. However, the Mumbai-Alibaug boat services, remained operational till the evening.

A musical event of a private financial institution was going on at the Gateway of India even as anxious relatives of the missing persons waited outside the police post to know updates about their near and dear ones.

Offices of tourist boat operators, teeming with people on normal days, were closed. These included the office of the operators whose boat had capsized following the crash. Tourists looked disappointed as the entry was restricted for them.

Police have heightened security in the area and ambulances were seen parked at the Gateway of India. The crash cast a sombre shadow over the landmark's vicinity. Khalashis (assistants) and boat drivers were seen discussing the incident or going about their routine tasks such as preparing food and fetching fresh water in their boats.

#### What the Navy said

At about 1600 hours on Wednesday, a Navy craft undergoing engine trials lost control and collided with a passenger ferry Neel Kamal off Karanja, Mumbai. The ferry was carrying passengers from Gate Way of India to Elephanta Island.

Search and Rescue efforts were immediately launched by the Navy in coordination with the Coast Guard and Marine Police. Four naval helicopters, 11 naval craft, one Coast Guard boat and three Marine Police boats are undertaking rescue efforts.

The accident has reportedly led to the tragic loss of 13 lives including one Naval personnel and 2 OEM onboard the Naval craft.



I was sure Navy craft will crash into us, says ferry passenger: Page 3

#### What CM Fadnavis said

"According to information received from Vice Admiral Sanjay Jagjeet Singh till 7.30 pm, though 101 passengers on board the Neelkamal tourist boat have been saved, the search and rescue operations are still on and the final tally will be known only by Thursday morning," Fadnavis said. He also said that two passengers are still serious and are being treated at the Navy hospital. According to preliminary reports, the Navy boat was being tested in the waters after being fitted with a new machine and during the test it developed a technical snag with throttle and collided with the passenger vessel. The CM announced an ex gratia amount of Rs 5 lakh for the next to kin of the deceased and said that a thorough investigation will be conducted.

### Kiran Jadhav wins national rifle crown

**OLYMPIC BRONZE WINNER KUSALE THIRD** 

Bhopal: Indian Navy's Kiran Ankush Jadhav beat Paris Olympic bronze medallist Swapnil Kusale and another Olympian Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar to clinch the men's 50m rifle 3 positions (3P) title at the 67th National Shooting Championship Competitions (NSCC) here on Wednesday.

Jadhav shot 465.8 in the final to leave Aishwary Pratap (463.1) of the home state in second place at the M.P. State Academy Shooting range.

Swapnil of Railways led the 45-shot final till the 40th shot but bowed out in third ahead of the final gold-deciding shot, with a tally of

Earlier, Swapnil had topped the qualification with a world-class score of 593, leaving Aishwary a point behind in second. Jadhav had qualified fourth with a solid 590.

After leading at every stage of the final, Swapnil could not hit the 10-ring af-

ter his 40th shot. His last four shots in the final Standing position read 9.2, 9.4, 8.9 and 9.5, putting paid to his title hopes.

Jadhav was in third place till the 40-shot stage, before finishing with a series of 10.6, 10.4, 10.6, 10.0 and 10.8 to strike gold. Home favourite Aish-

wary's 41st shot for a 9.9 meant he could not take advantage of Swapnil's slip, holding on to second.

In the junior final, West Bengal's Adriyan Karmakar, son of Olympian Jaideep Karmakar, triumphed over Madhya Pradesh's Kushagra Singh Rajawat comfortably with a score of 462.0, a full four points ahead of the local boy.

Rajasthan's Deependra Singh Shekhawat was third with a score of 445.6.

Adriyan had qualified third for the final with a score of 586 while Haryana's Rohit Kanyan, who made both the finals, was on top of the qualification pile with a score of 587. -PTI

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A child get his face painted as he prepares to dress up as Lord Shiva to attract tourists to Ganga ghat in Varanasi on Wednesday.

# 'Laapataa Ladies' out of race

New Delhi: "Laapataa Ladies", India's official entry in the Best International Feature category at the 97th Academy Awards, is out of the Oscars race but Sandhya Suri's Hindi film "Santosh", representing the UK, has advanced to the

Directed by Kiran Rao,
"Laapataa Ladies" ("Lost
Ladies" in English) failed to
make it to the shortlist of 15
films that will be vying for
a spot in the final five, the
Academy of Motion Picture

Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) announced on Wednesday.

The final Oscar nominations will be announced on January 17. According to the Academy, 85 countries or regions had submitted films that were eligible for consideration in the International Feature Film category for the 97th Academy

"'Laapataa Ladies' did not make it to the Academy Awards shortlist this year, and we are of course disappointed, but equally we are immensely grateful for the incredible support and belief we've received throughout this journey," Aamir Khan Productions, Jio Studios and Kindling Productions, which backed the movie.

"Santosh", a Hindi-language crime drama from British-Indian filmmaker Suri and featuring acclaimed actors Shahana Goswami and Sunita Rajwar, has found a spot in the final 15 as the official entry from the UK.

#### Williams' more time in space

Cape Canaveral: NASA's two stuck astronauts just got their space mission extended again. That means they won't be back on Earth until spring, 10 months after rocketing into orbit on

Boeing's Starliner capsule. NASA announced the latest delay in Indian-origin Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore's homecoming on Tuesday. The two test pilots planned on being away just a week or so when they blasted off June 5 on Boeing's first astronaut flight to the International Space Station. Their mission grew from eight days to eight months after NASA decided to send the company's problem-plagued Starliner capsule back empty in September.

Now the pair won't return until the end of March or even April because of a delay in launching their replacements, according to NASA. A fresh crew needs to launch before Wilmore and Williams can return and the next mission has been bumped more than a month, according to NASA.

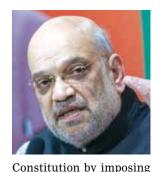
# Congress twisted facts, distorted my statement: Shah

New Delhi: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday accused the Congress of twisting facts and distorting his comments in the Rajya Sabha related to B R Ambedkar after BJP leaders "exposed" the opposition party's repeated "insults" to the architect of the Constitution.

Shah alleged that the Congress in the past has also misrepresented his and even PM Narendra Modi's comments to spread confusion.

"I condemn the Congress for twisting facts. Why did it happen? It happened because BJP leaders spoke on how the NDA governments upheld the Constitution and established with facts that the Congress is anti-Ambedkar, anti-Constitution and anti-reservation," Shah told reporters here.

The senior BJP leader said the Congress also insulted Veer Savarkar and blew to smithereens the values enshrined in the



these facts came out, the Congress used its old tricks and made an effort to mislead the society by presenting twisted facts." Shah said he comes from

Emergency. "When all

Shah said he comes from a party that can never insult Ambedkar.

Asked about Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge's demand for his resignation, the home minister said in a lighter vein that he can quit if this will make the Congress president happy but it will never solve his problems. He has to remain in his chair, a reference to his party being in the opposition, for 15 more years.

# Bhujbal episode sparks debate on BJP's OBC prospects

Mumbai: Senior NCP leader Chhagan Bhujbal, who is extremely unhappy because after not being included in the state cabinet, revealed his future strategy at a rally in Nashik on Wednesday, saying that he shall

been trying to turn the wheel of equality backwards.

Bhujbal, without even mentioning Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis or his party leader DCM Ajit Pawar in his speech, blasted the leaders. He

also revealed that even though the state BJP president Chandrashekhar Bawankule was in favour of his inclusion, he was not included in the state cabinet. "I've worked even as a leader of opposition. Hence, I am not worried about the ministerial berth. But, I'm worried as to who shall not fight for the issues of the community? Who shall protect our people? Hence, I've decided to fight for them,"

Bhujbal said at the rally.

While giving clear signals of rebellion. Bhuibal asked why the OBCs are being neglected even while everybody knows that the 'Ladki Bahin' (scheme) along didn't help you win the elections. Earlier, Bhujbal had said that he lost the cabinet berth because he spoke against Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange-Patil. He also hinted that he shall consult OBC leaders from across the Indian and shall tour all parts of the state and the nation to raise awareness among the community members. This makes it clear that he shall try to snatch away the massive support of OBC communities that the BJP enjoys today. The question is whether he, or even other BJP leaders like Sudhir Mungantiwar and Dr Sanjay Kute who too have expressed unhappiness over not getting a chance in the state cabinet, would be able to dissociate the OBC communities from the BJP.

BJP insiders, however, feel that the rebellion is a temporary phase and shall be pacified very soon. They also point out at the dismal performance by the leaders in their own constituencies, to support their argument that they are unlikely to make any major difference for the party as the people in their own constituencies are more with the party than with the leaders. Bhujbal couldn't save the two Lok Sabha seats in Nashik district while Mungantiwar couldn't save the Chandrapur Lok Sabha seats even though he was contesting it, the party insiders say while stressing

that their dissatisfaction is unlikely to make much of a difference even in their own constituencies, let alone the other parts of the state.

Secondly, the state cabinet has 16 OBC ministers. Saying that none of them would be able to protect the interests of the community won't go well with the support base of all these leaders, the BJP insiders feel. Also, they say that once the portfolio allocation is complete and the government beings rolling out its decisions, the dissidents will start falling in line.

Meanwhile, Mungantiwar who left for Chandrapur after not being included in the state cabinet, made it clear today that he was hurt because the leaders didn't speak to him clearly. "Till 13th

evening, when I met Bawankule, I was assured that my name was there on the list. But, it was dropped on 15th when the list was announced. I never expected this to happen to me." Mungantiwar said. He also said that 196 MLAs in the state assembly didn't get a chance to be a minister and that this time he is one of them. "Millions have made sacrifices for the party. I shall see to it that none of my actions damage the party in any manner," he clarified while speaking to media later. Dr Sanjay Kute too has expressed similar sentiments in a long letter written to his followers and released on social media. This leaves Bhujbal and a few other Maratha leaders from the Shiv Sena who might still be in a state



Maharashtra Dy CM Eknath Shinde arrives at Winter session of the Legislative Assembly in Nagpur. Pic:PTI

#### Janet Vidhi storms into second round

Mumbai: Former champion Janet Vidhi of India overcame a strong challenge from Malaysia's Vinikasheinie Kulasegaran posting a 3-0 win in a women's first-round match of the 79th Western India Slam, a USD 9,000 prizemoney Professional Squash Association (PSA) Challenger event.

Vidhi found the going tough initially and won the first game over extra points. She then won a close second game before she got into her stride and comfortably won the third game to complete a 12-10, 11-8, and 11-3 win in 21 minutes to advance to second round.

Tanvi Khanna of India also progressed to the second round defeating Serbia's Jelena Dutina 11-4, 11-2, and 11-2 in just 14

In men's action, India's Rahul Baitha defeated Sri Lanka's Tuwin Nilakshana Herath 11-3, 11-8, and 11-7 in 27 minutes.

## Bill aimed at curbing 'urban Naxalism' re-introduced

Devendra Fadnavis on Wednesday re-introduced the Special Public Security Bill in the state assembly, and said the proposed law is not aimed at suppressing genuine dissenting voices, but to close down the dens of urban Naxals

The previous Maharashtra government led by Eknath Shinde had in July this year tabled this bill. named as 'Maharashtra Special Public Security Act, 2024', in the assembly during the monsoon session. However, it could not be passed at that time.

With the new government led by Fadnavis at the helm after the November 20 assembly elections, he reintroduced the bill in the

Fadnavis said the bill will be referred to the joint select committee of the state legislature so that all doubts related to it can be cleared.

Views of the stakehold-

ers will be considered and the bill will be cleared in the monsoon session of the state legislature to be held in July next year in Mumbai,

"Naxalism is not restricted to remote rural parts alone, but frontal organisations have come up in urban areas as well which work towards creating distrust about the country and its institutions," Fadnavis said.

"Even the anti-Naxal squads in Maharashtra wanted such a law to stop the activities of urban Naxals. This proposed law is not aimed at suppressing genuine dissenting voices, but to close down the dens of urban Naxals.'

Congress leader Nana Patole questioned the need for a separate Act when existing laws have provisions to tackle Naxalism.

To this, Fadnavis replied that Maharashtra does not have a law to tackle

nal Code) and UAPA (Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act). UAPA is for handling cases related to terror activities," he said.

Fadnavis said Chhatisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha have enacted Public Security Acts for effective prevention of unlawful activities, and banned 48 frontal organisations.

All offences under the proposed act will be cognisable and non-bailable. The offences will be investigated by a police officer not below the rank of a sub-inspector.

The bill describes unlawful activities as indulging in or propagating acts of violence, vandalism or other acts generating fear and apprehension in the public. Indulging in or encouraging use of firearms, explosives or devices, encouraging disobedience to established law and its institutions unlawful.

# **Opposition** walks out over Amit Shah's remarks

Nagpur: Opposition members walked out of the Maharashtra legislative council on Wednesday after not being allowed to discuss Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on B R

The matter also figured in the state assembly where Congress leader Nitin Raut said they will not tolerate "insult" of Ambedkar whom they revere as God.

Notably, the Congress has alleged that Shah's remarks in the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday during a debate on the Constitution show the BJP and the RSS leaders have a "lot of hatred" for Ambedkar and demanded an apology

When the Maharashtra legislative council proceedings began on Wednesday, Leader of Opposition Ambadas Danve raised the point of information to discuss Shah's comments on Ambedkar.

However, members of the ruling parties objected to Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Danve's move.

Deputy chairperson Neelam Gorhe said the happenings in Parliament cannot be discussed in the state council and added that they (opposition members) were doing politics on the

Members of the opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) gathered near the well of the House.

They raised slogans demanding a discussion over Shah's comments and then staged a walkout

In the legislative assembly, Con-

gress leader Nitin Raut criticised the purported remarks made in the Rajya

"We will not tolerate insult of Ambedkar who is like God to us," he

State minister Ashish Shelar (BJP) objected to Raut and demanded that the Congress leader's comments be expunged.



Leader of Opposition in Maharashtra Legislative Council Ambadas Danve speaks with the media during the winter session of Assembly in Nagpur on Wednesday.

#### Show old mentality of BJP: Ambedkar

Pune: Babasaheb Ambedkar's grandson Prakash Ambedkar alleged on Wednesday that Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on the father of the Constitution reflected the BJP's "same old mentality". "Before the BJP came into existence, its forerunners Jan Sangh and RSS had opposed Babasaheb while the Constitution was being adopted," Prakash Ambedkar, who heads Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi, told reporters in Pune. He said Shah's statement has brought the same old mentality of BJP to the fore. "There is nothing new in the statement. They are not able to execute their old plans. Not because of Congress, but because of Babasaheb Ambedkar and they will continue to sulk," said Prakash Ambedkar.

"How can one discuss proceedings of the Rajya Sabha in the assembly?"

Shah attacked the Congress in the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday, saying the party treated the Constitution as the "private fiefdom" of one family and "played fraud" with Parliament.

Concluding a two-day debate on the "Glorious Journey of 75 Years of the Constitution of India", Shah had ripped into the Congress for its appeasement politics and claimed the party wanted to breach the 50 per cent quota limit to provide reservation to Muslims.

# MLAs deplore Beed sarpanch's murder

across party lines in the claimed he was "mentally Legislative Assembly on unstable". Wednesday condemned the gruesome murder of a village sarpanch in Beed district and the desecration of a Constitution replica in Parbhani district.

Legislators appeared stunned and shocked when Suresh Dhas (BJP) shared in the house details of the abduction and brutal murder of Massajog village sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh.

Members demanded a high-level probe into both incidents, which took place in the last fortnight in the central Maharashtra districts, and strict action against the culprits.

Initiating debate in the lower house, Nitin Raut (Congress) said Sopan Pawar, the man allegedly involved in the desecration of the Constitution replica in Parbhani, should be booked for treason.

Raut demanded a judicial or special investigation team (SIT) probe into the Parbhani incident and added 'even (Nathuram) Godse was called mentally unstable when he killed Mahatma Gandhi"

The Parbhani police af-

Raut condemned police lathi-charge on peaceful protesters who were demonstrating against the desecration of the Constitution replica.

He said law student Somnath Survayanshi, arrested in connection with violence in Parbhani over the desecration of the Constitution replica, later died, while a woman, Vatsala Manvate, an onlooker, was beaten up mercilessly by police.

Suryawanshi died in judicial custody after he was arrested.

Raj Kumar Badole (NCP) also condemned the vandalization incident and demanded a thorough probe into it by an SIT. He maintained it should be checked whether accused Pawar was really "mentally unstable".

Namita Mundada, the BJP MLA from Kaij in Beed district, raised the issue of murder of sarpanch Deshmukh. She lamented that the people of Beed district have lost trust in elected representatives and the local police.

There is tremendous fear

Nagpur: Members cutting ter arresting Pawar had about the Beed police and people wonder who controls them. Police know the killers, but after 10 days, only four of the seven accused have been arrested, said the ruling party legislator.

"Let the murder of sarpanch Deshmukh be the last such incident in Beed district," she said.

Suresh Dhas (BJP) said Deshmukh was a threetime sarpanch who intervened to resolve a fight in the village where a Dalit community watchman was beaten up.

Dhas, the MLA from Ashti in Beed district, narrated the entire sequence of events related to the murder of Deshmukh and demanded that the scope of probe cover the role of "higher ups" involved in protecting the accused.

The Massajog village sarpanch was abducted from his car near a toll plaza, and his body was later found in the Daithana area of Kej tehsil.

The state CID is investigating the murder.

The sarpanch was also the local BJP booth committee president.

-PTI



Vice President and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar with NCP(SP) chief Sharad Pawar during a meeting at Parliament House in New Delhi on Wednesday.

### Pawar meets Modi along with two farmers

New Delhi: NCP-SP chief Sharad Pawar met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday, weeks after the Maha Vikas Aghadi was trounced in the assembly elections in Maharashtra by the BJP-led Mahayuti.

Pawar met the prime minister in his office in Parliament House along with two farmers from Phaltan in western Maharashtra and presented him with a box of pomegranates

Pawar had recently written to the prime minister, inviting him to inaugurate the 98th Marathi Sahitya Sammelan scheduled to be held at Talkatora Stadium in the national capital in February.

"I did not broach the topic of Sahitya Sammelan," Pawar said after the meeting with the prime minister.

In a post on X, the Prime Minister's Office said Sharad Pawar, along with a group of farmers, met PM Modi on Wednesday. It also posted pictures of the NCP-SP chief presenting pomegranates to PM Modi.

In the Maharashtra assembly elections last month, the Congress-NCP(SP)-Shiv Sena(UBT) alliance -- MVA -- faced a humiliating defeat at the hands of BJP-Shiv Sena-NCP's Mahatuti alliance. The Mahayuti won 235 seats, while the MVA was restricted to 46 in the 288-mem-

# Old clip on Fadnavis falsely shared as recent

"Elections are not over yet. **Elections to local** bodies are due. Do not forget that **OBCs support in** recent assembly elections paved



the way for the grand success of Mahayuti, besides the role of Ladki Bahin scheme."

**QUOTE OF THE DAY** 

Chhagan Bhujbal, Leader, NCP

New Delhi: A video recently went viral on social media showing a differently abled girl performing 'aarti' and applying a 'tilak' on BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis' forehead with her toe. Those sharing the video claimed that it was shot recently after Fadnavis took oath as the Maharashtra chief minister on December 5. An investigation by the PTI Fact Check Desk

revealed that the viral video is not a recent one but from June 2023, when Fadnavis was the deputy chief minister in the previous Maharashtra government.

A Facebook user named 'Bimal Kumar Jain' shared the video on December 10 and wrote, "A Divyang girl performed aarti of Devendra Fadnavis, who was elected Chief Minister of Maharashtra. Both are great."

Considering the video to be recent, many other users shared it with the same claim.



To verify the claim, the desk reversesearched the keyframes of the video. We found information related to this in a report published on Dainik Bhaskar's website on June 27,

According to the report, Fadnavis was in Jalgaon at that time when a differently abled girl at the Deepstambh Foundation honoured him by applying a 'tilak' on his forehead and performing his 'aarti'.

The foundation helps differently abled, orphaned and poor children and works to provide quality education to them.

Meanwhile, a report by News18 stated that the girl's name is Laxmi Shinde.

Fadnavis also posted this video on his X (formerly Twitter) handle. Sharing the video on June 27, 2023, he described the incident as an emotional moment of his life.

The investigation made it clear that the viral video is not a recent one. Users are sharing this video on social media with the misleading claim that it is a recent clip.

-PTI

#### MD wins cricket title

Mumbai: Maharshi Dayanand (MD) of Parel won the Statelevel Under-19 School Cricket Tournament held at the Pacific Cricket Ground, Hinganghat,

In the final, MD College defeated Kolhapur by three runs in a very close match to win the title for the first time. Batting first, MD College scored 91/6 in 10 overs as Yash Jadhav scored 42 runs to help the team build a respectable total. His teammate Tamir Chauhan added 19

Kolhapur team also played strongly and scored 88/6 runs in 10 overs. In the last over, Kolhapur needed 6 runs to win. However, Aryan Deshmukh howled wonderfully and gave away only two runs in six balls to help MD College win by 3 runs. Deshmukh was declared the man of the final.

In the semi-final, MD College had defeated Nagpur. After Nagpur scored 81/6 runs in 10 overs, the MD College chased the target by scoring 85 runs without loss in 10 overs. Deshmukh scored 75 runs in 32 balls. He also took two wickets for 14 runs in 2 overs.

In this competition, the winning teams from eight divisions namely Mumbai, Latur, Pune, Nagpur, Nashik, Amravati, Ch. Sambhajinagar and Kolhapur played in a knockout

The MD College team had been trying to establish itself in cricket for the last several years, but its efforts had failed short. In the last three years,

#### **CHANGE OF NAME**

RENU DEVI has changed her name to RENU AJAY KUMAR SHARMA as per document.

# I was sure Navy craft will crash into us, says ferry passenger

old Ganesh saw the speed boat-like craft rushing towards the ferry on whose deck he was standing, a thought crossed his mind that the inevitable will happen -- and it did.

Thirteen persons died and 99 others were rescued after a Navy speed boat crashed into the ferry off Mumbai coast late Wednesday afternoon.

"The boat, which later turned out to be a naval craft, was moving in circles in the Arabian Sea, while our ferry was on the way to Elephanta Island, a popular tourist attraction near Mumbai. I had boarded the ferry around 3.30 pm," Ganesh said.

"There was a brief thought in my mind that the naval craft could hit our boat, and it happened within the next few seconds," said Ganesh, who was standing on the deck of the ill-fated Neel Kamal ferry.

The eyewitness, who hailing from Hyderabad, was among the first of the 99 persons rescued after the collision.

There were more than 100 passengers, including children, on board the ferry, he said. "I boarded the ferry after purchasing the ticket around 3.30 pm and went on the deck," he said.

"While I was observing the Arabian Sea and Mumbai skyline while the ferry was around 8 to 10 km from the coast, I saw the speed boat-like vessel making cir-







Passengers after being rescued in a joint operation by the Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard after a ferry capsized off Mumbai coast. Pic: Bhushan Koyande

cles with full speed near our ferry," he said.

A Navy personnel in the craft died after his leg was cut in the accident, he said.

"As soon as the boat hit our ferry, sea water started coming into our vessel, after which the captain of the boat told the passengers to wear a life jacket as it started capsizing," he said.

"I took a life jacket, went up and jumped into the sea," he said, adding that he had been swimming for 15 minutes when he was rescued by another boat,

which was in the vicinity,

and brought to the Gateway

of India along with others. The rescue teams of Navy, Coast Guard and Marine Police had approached

the ferry within half an hour of the collision, he

"I was in the first lot of 10passengers to be rescued," he said.

Another survivor, Vinayak Mattham from Bengaluru, told PTI that he was on board the ill-fated ferry along with two of his colleagues. "At first I thought

that the Navy craft personnel were out for a joy ride, going by the way their boat was circling our ferry," he

"The ferry did not have enough life jackets," he said. "When passengers boarded the ferry, they should have been made to wear life jackets," he added.

#### Hoardings: No concrete steps, says HC

Mumbai: The Bombay High Court on Wednesday expressed displeasure over illegal hoardings and banners in Mumbai, noting that civic officials have not taken concrete measures despite instructions and that political parties seemingly lack respect for the court's orders.

A division bench of Chief Justice Devendra Upadhyaya and Justice Amit Borkar took note of several photographs submitted by advocate Manoj Shirsat, representing intervenor ac-

The images depicted a "swell of hoardings" at several places including the one in front of the high court premises in Fort area after the results of Maharashtra assembly polls were announced.

The bench is hearing a plea against illegal hoardings being put up by different individuals and organisations

"Despite our explicit and clear directions issued earlier, it appears that concrete steps are not being taken by the civic body and other concerned authorities to check such illegal hoardings and banners," it

The bench said it had cautioned political parties in a previous order and reminded them of the undertakings furnished on their behalf in the court.

However, it appears that political parties and other such organisations also do not have any respect for the orders of the court, the bench said.

The court mentioned that it had already expressed concern in earlier orders about potential environmental hazards due to such banners and

### Court grants bail to IRS officers on ground of illegal arrest

Mumbai: A special CBI court here on Wednesday rejected the agency's plea for the remand of two IRS officers and four others held in a corruption case and released them on bail after accepting the defence's contention of illegal arrest

The CBI's remand application stated that one of the officers, Chandrapal Singh Chauhan, posted as joint development commissioner, was getting an extension by paying hefty bribes to higher-ups.

The probe agency claimed to have recovered luxury cars and expensive watches from Chauhan's residence and property documents.

The court directed the accused to cooperate with the CBI investigation.

The anti-corruption bureau unit of the Central Bureau of Investigation had arrested IRS officers-Chandrapal Singh Chauhan and Varawantkar Hanumantrao, posted at SEEPZ-SEZ, Mumbai, for their alleged involvement in "collusive corruption" with other officers and private persons. The accused were col-

lecting undue advantage from the parties functioning from SEEPZ and other related parties in space allotment, disposal of imported goods not utilised in manufacturing, sale of duty-free imported goods without paying duty, engaging security persons and daily wagers and favouring civil contractors in lieu of monetary consideration, the CBI said.

After the registration of an FIR, police searched the SEEPZ-SEZ office in Andheri, leading to the arrest

of the IRS officers and other accused between Tuesday and Wednesday.

The accused were produced before special CBI judge S M Menjoge on Wednesday afternoon.

The Central probe agency sought the remand of the accused to unearth the crime, which was opposed by defence lawyers.

Defence lawyers, including Rahul Agarwal, opposed the remand plea contending that the arrest was

They argued the accused were not provided grounds for the arrest despite being asked, either in writing or orally.

The accused persons were produced before the court 24 hours after their arrest which amounted to the contravention of their fundamental rights, the defence argued.

The court accepted the submissions of the defence and rejected the police' application for remand, releasing the accused on bail.

The CBI's remand application stated that Chauhan was getting an extension by paying hefty bribes to higher-ups. It claimed that documents of 27 immovable properties worth crores were found at his residence, while luxury cars and expensive watches were recovered.

The CBI nabbed one Manoj Joglekar from Andheri office who admitted to collecting bribes at the direction of the officers.

The CBI recovered three bags from Joglekar containing 22 envelopes stashed with bribe money belonging to the SEEPZ-SEZ officers.

Rs 60,000 was with Joglekar when he was arrested.

# Driver not drunk, didn't have mental illness, say police

Mumbai: Medical tests of Kurla BEST bus accident, which claimed eight lives, have indicated he did not have any mental disorder and was not drunk at the time of the incident, police said on Wednesday.

The electric bus, hired on a wetlease basis by the civic-run Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) un-

dertaking and driven by Saniay More, ploughed into a crowd in Mumbai's Kurla area on December 9.

The accident claimed eight lives and left more than 40 persons injured. Several vehicles were also damaged in the incident.

More (54) is in police custody for alleged reckless driving and booked on charges of culpable homicide not amounting to murder.

Before the commencement of the case trial, the driver's psychological test was recently conducted at a civic hospital in Sion to confirm if he had any mental illness.

The test report confirmed his mental condition was normal and he had no mental disorder and he was not suffering from any brain-related disease, the official said

More's blood test report revealed he was not driving

under the influence of alcohol at the time of the accident, he said.

Earlier, More claimed the bus brake failure led to the accident, but police

have received a report from the regional transport office (RTO), stating the vehicle was working fine and there was no brake or any other technical failure, the official said.

BEST administration has claimed More received three days' training before he was allowed to drive the electric bus

RTO officials suspect human error and lack of proper training for driving automatic transmission buses could be the reason behind the accident, among the most horrific involving BEST buses in recent

#### Bomb threat to Kalyan station

Thane: A bomb threat targeting Kalyan railway station in Thane district turned out to be a hoax after an intensive search of the premises by security agencies that lasted for nearly three hours on early Wednesday, police said.

The bomb threat call, originating from New Delhi, was received at the Central Police Station in Ulhasnagar around 1 am, but nothing suspicious was found during the search, an

The caller claimed a person has informed him that Kalyan station on the Central Railway (CR) route on Mumbai's outskirts is going to be "blown up", and then disconnected, he said.

The Central Police Station immediately alerted the station manager at Kalyan, Railway Protection Force (RPF), Government Railway Police (GRP), and canine detection squads to assess the threat.

Within minutes, multiple police teams arrived at Kalyan station and conducted a thorough inspection. Over the next two to three hours, security personnel meticulously combed through the premises.

Mumbai: Ensconced in her one-room home and surrounded by children and grandkids, Hamida Bano had a piece of advice for those seeking jobs abroad: "Always use the proper channel if you want to avoid what I went through."

Hamida was speaking to PTI at her place in Kurla in central Mumbai hours after she reached the city on Wednesday. The 73-year-old woman spent about 22 years in Pakistan after an agent lured her with a "good" job in the Gulf and instead dumped her in the neighbouring country.

"Mumbai looks so different now," exclaimed a beaming Hamida.

A bit of luck and a lot of hard work on the part of two activists, one in Pakistan and another in Mumbai, helped Hamida reunite with her family.

"I was overjoyed to see the Indian tricolour when I reached the Wagah border in Punjab from Lahore. After over two decades, I was ecstatic that I would finally enter my country and head to my city Mumbai," said Hamida.

A resident of Kasaiwada in Kurla (East), Hamida came in touch with a Vikhroli-based agent in 2002 who offered her the job of a

# 'Overjoyed to see tricolour at Wagah'

**MUMBAI WOMAN TRICKED BY AGENT RETURNS FROM PAK AFTER 22 YEARS** 

Hamida Banu, a 75-year-old resident of Kurla, Mumbai was reunited with her family after 23 years. In 2002, Banu left India after a recruitment agent promised her a cooking job in Dubai. Instead, she was trafficked to Pakistan. Pic: Bhushan Koyande

house help in Dubai. The agent took Hamida and four other women to Pakistan and handed them over to two men.

After being kept at an undisclosed location for some time. Hamida was left to fend for herself in Hyderabad, a major city in the Sindh province. But she had no documents to prove her Indian identity as the Pakistani agents took away all her documents, recalled

Speaking to PTI at her 10ft X 10ft home, Hamida said, "I would like to caution people looking for jobs abroad and earn money that they should allow use the proper channel. Many women like me from India and Bangladesh who were deceived by agents are

Hamida, who has two sons, two daughters and many grandchildren, said a fruit vendor took care of her all these years. "He was

stuck in Pakistan.'

very nice. I would get angry when someone spoke against India," she said.

A chance encounter with an activist. Waliullah Maroof, in 2022 raised her hopes. After learning that she was from India, Maroof searched for activists in Mumbai and got in touch with Khaflan Shaikh through social media in

Shaikh then shared a video of Hamida among his acquaintances and one of

daughter Vaseem lives in Kurla'a Kasaiwada. He got in touch with Yaseem and connected her with Hamida through a video call. PTI had reported Hamida's discovery then.

them told him that her

Yaseem said the PTI report brightened the prospects of her mother's return as her story reached a much wider audience and facilitated her documentation through official

"We are thankful to PTI. We were informed by someone from Pakistan that my mother would reach the Wagah border on December 16 and were asked to reach there," she said.

Yaseem said the Indian embassy in Pakistan made her mother's passport, and thanked the Pakistani authorities for extending cooperation at every stage.

"My father Haneef died in 2002. We are happy that our mother is alive and back home. Earlier, she had visited countries like Qatar to work as a house help."

Shaikh said, "Though she was traced in 2022, it took efforts over the next two years to ensure that she was back in Kurla."

#### **QUOTE OF THE DAY**

"Ustad Zakir **Hussain was from** India but he was for the world. He was such a humble and disciplined person. He did not have habits like smoking and drinking, yet he had to leave this world early."



Anup Jalota Singer

#### By Suyash Padate

Mumbai: Two days since the expansion of the Mahayuti Cabinet, controversies regarding ministerial berths refuse to die. Ongoing row is regarding Deputy Chief Minister and NCP chief Ajit Pawar's decision to exclude OBC leader and former minister Chhagan Bhujbal from the new Cabinet. As various theories about his exclusion are floating around Manoj Jarange Patil factor seems to be the cause. Ajit Pawar and Devendra Fadnavis have joined hands and bolted the door on Bhujbal.

The OBC leader took a strong

Pawar. Bhujbal openly took on Maratha activist Manoj Jarange Patil even when no leader within the Mahayuti Cabinet spoke against him. So much so that the NCP leadership feared this would affect the party's performance. Bhujbal continued his tirade against Jarange. He was in no mood to listen to Pawar. However, the NCP couldn't afford to remove Bhuibal before the election. With the stunning performance in the Assembly elections, Pawar now gained the confidence to keep Chhagan Bhujbal away from the

stance on the Maratha reserva-

tion movement, which annoved



Since September 2023, Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange-Patil had been targeting then deputy CM and Home Minister Devendra Fadnavis. He blamed Fadnavis for the police lathicharge on the crowd that had gathered during his hunger strike in Antarwali-Saraati village of Jalna district. At his press conferences and rallies, he attacked

Fadnavis. Fadnavis did not respond for the fear of antagonising the strong Maratha community, which forms 32 per cent of the Maharashtra population.

After the Mahayuti won an absolute majority, Fadnavis has changed his strategy. Now that the Mahayuti and the BJP have secured an overwhelming majority, Fadnavis does not want to give Jarange any handle in the form of Bhujbal. Fadnavis first approached Ajit Pawar and asked him to keep Bhujbal out. Ajit Pawar was annoyed with him and gave him the nod to keep Bhujbal

Both Pawar and Fadnavis man-

for the time being. Now all eyes are on the senior leader who is getting feelers from the Maha Vikas Aghadi camp, with both Shiv Sena and NCP expressing interest in welcoming him back. However, Bhuibal has not revealed his mind, other than to attack the NCP for denying him a cabinet berth.

aged to get rid of Bhujbal at least

Meanwhile, there are speculations that both Ajit Pawar and NCP state chief Sunil Tatkare will visit Bhujbal soon. Tatkare told reporters that he is in touch with Bhujbal's son Pankaj and nephew Sameer over the issue and is hopeful of resolving it soon.

# **Families of** deceased took loans, in debts

Chandigarh: Many among the 11 Indian nationals who were found dead at a restaurant in Georgia's mountain resort of Gudauri last week, had taken loans or debts to move abroad.

The victims were employees of an Indian restaurant named Haveli in Gudauri. The majority of the Indians, who died in the incident, hailed from Punjab.

Georgia's Ministry of Internal Affairs had said the initial inspection found no signs of injury or violence. All victims died from carbon monoxide poisoning, local media reported, citing police.

Thirty-five-year old Sandeep Singh, who also lost his life in this incident, was the sole breadwinner of the family. Hailing from Tarn Taran, he had moved to Georgia a year ago to earn the livelihood of his

His father Balwant Singh said he had taken a loan of Rs 6 lakh to send his son. Sandeep's wife Baljit Kaur said she spoke to her husband a week back. Sandeep is survived by his father, wife and eight-year-old daughter. Twenty-four-old Gagandeep Singh, who hailed from Ghal Kalan village in Moga, had gone to Georgia four months ago. His father Gurmukh Singh, a labourer, had taken a debt to send him to Georgia.

Ravinder Kumar (45) last called up his family in Kot Ramdass in Jalandhar for the last time on December 13. His wife Kanchan, who is yet to come to terms, said,



Varinder Singh (33), who

hailed from Patiala, was

also among 11 Indians who

died in Georgia. One of his

family members said Singh

had gone to Georgia one-

Singh's brother-in-law

Amrinder Pal Singh said

Varinder was working as a

manager in an Indian res-

taurant in Georgia. He said

they came to know about

his death through a phone

call. He is survived by his

wife and a five-year-old

hailed from Mehman vil-

lage in Patiala, was also one

of the victims. According

to her family members,

Kaur (32) had moved to

Georgia in 2015 in pursuit

of green pastures. She had

called her family members

on December 12 and told

them that there was a snow-

storm in the area, which led

to a power outage. Ravin-

der Singh and his wife Gur-

vinder Kaur, hailing from

Sunam in Sangrur, were

Khanna's Sameer Kumar

who had moved to Georgia

around six months.

Among the deceased was

also among the deceased.

Amrinder Kaur, who

daughter.

and-a-half-years ago.

"On Friday, he called up and spoke to the children. He told them there was a big storm and poles were uprooted. He promised to call again in the morning. But that call never came.'

The family came to know about his death on Sunday. "My son turned seven years on December 1. His father never saw him in person. He went abroad about eight years ago," said Kanchan.

Kumar's eldest daughter Harshita was in tears and said her father had spoken about the snowstorm during the last conversation. Kumar is survived by his mother, wife, two daughters and a son. He had moved abroad around eight years ago for greener pastures. The grief-stricken families of the deceased have appealed to the Centre and the Punjab government to take necessary steps in getting back the bodies for the last rites.

The Indian mission in Tbilisi had said that it was saddened to learn of the unfortunate passing of the 11 Indian nationals and extended its deepest condolences to their families

## Six teams pick 48 players for WPL

Mumbai: A total of 48 players were picked by six franchises in the player draft for the inaugural edition of the World Pickleball League which will be held here next

While the players draft consisted of 75 players from 20 countries, the tournament will feature men and women players from 14 countries including India, Japan, Spain, South Korea, Australia and the United

The WBPL, which works closely with All Indian Pickleball Association (AIPA), is co-founded by former Indian tennis players Gaurav Natekar and Arati Ponnappa Natekar and will be held from January 24 to February 2.

The six franchises in the tournament will represent Chennai, Mumbai, Pune, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, and Delhi. The owners were guided by the league during the player draft here on Wednesday.

"To ensure that the draft process was smooth, fair and transparent, we curated a special in-house software that consisted of all the necessary information about the players," Natekar said.

"We wanted to pick some of the best players across the globe and have a combination of players who are experienced as well as new, young talent. We also wanted to give our Indian players a chance to shine so we had mandated each team that one player should be from India in each team," Na-

A total of eight players will be in each team including four men and as many women including a mandatory Indian player.



# ISRO begins assembly of Gaganyaan's first uncrewed flight

Bengaluru: ISRO on Wednesday announced that it has commenced the assembly of the Human-Rated Launch Vehicle Mark-3 (HLVM3) for Gaganyaan's first uncrewed flight at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC) in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh.

The Bengaluru-based space agency called it a major step towards India's maiden human spaceflight and future space ambitions.

The event coincides with the 10th anniversary of the Launch Vehicle Mark-3 (LVM3-X/CARE (Crew module Atmospheric Reentry Experiment)) mission, conducted on December 18,

According to a statement by ISRO, the human-rating of LVM3 has been completed and all systems have been tested for enhanced reliability. Ground tests and flight tests in off-nominal condi-



tions have ensured the performance of these systems in line with human safety requirements

The addition of the highly reliable Crew Escape System (CES) has further increased confidence for the manned missions planned by ISRO. Escape provision exists for the crew during all phases of ascent till injection of the module into

HLVM3 is a three stage vehicle with a payload capacity of about 10 tonnes to Low Earth Orbit (LEO), which is 53 meters tall and weighs 640 tonnes.

"The Crew Module de-

14-year-old

girl dies after

being 'raped'

Chaibasa: A 14-year-old girl, who was found lying

unconscious near an An-

ganwadi centre after alleg-

edly being raped by a man

in Jharkhand's West Sing-

hbhum district, died on

Wednesday at a hospital in

Family members of the

girl lodged a complaint

with the Jagannathpur Po-

lice Station, alleging that

the minor was raped, a sen-

ior officer said. "According

to villagers, the minor with

torn clothes was found ly-

ing unconscious near an

Anganwadi centre on Tues-

day evening. She was taken

to a community health cen-

tre and later admitted to a

sub-divisional hospital in

bordering Odisha where

she breathed her last while

undergoing treatment,'

Odisha, police said.

place, thus commencing the official launch campaign of the HLVM3-G1/OM-1 mission," it stated. signed with enhanced safety The space agency said the margins and multiple re-

dundancies, will fly aboard

the Human-rated LVM3, en-

suring the safety of the Ga-

ganyatris. The data gained

through the un-crewed

flights will be instrumental

for the success of manned

The experience from Ga-

ganyaan programme will

play a vital role in the con-

struction and operationali-

sation of the Bharatiya

Antariksh Station (BAS).

This ambitious endeavour

reflects ISRO's long-term vi-

sion and foresight to lever-

age established heritage for

advancing India's space sec-

missions," it stated.

preparation of both the S200 motors will now take place with the assembly of segments, control systems and avionics. L110 and C32 stages for the HLVM3 are ready at the launch complex. The crew escape systems elements are also received at

'At 8.45 am on December

18, 2024 at SDSC, the stack-

ing of the nozzle end seg-

ment with full flex seal noz-

zle of the \$200 motor took

"The integration of crew module is happening at Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) and the integration of Service Module at URSC. The Orbital Module (OM) level integration and tests will take place subsequently at URSC, Bangalore," it stated.

### BJP leader argues for reclaiming mosque land

Ayodhya (UP): A BJP lead-tury, a Supreme Court Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, asking him to reclaim the land allotted for the construction of a mosque here and claiming that no substantial endeavour has been undertaken to build it.

"The Muslim community's intention was never to construct the mosque but to perpetuate discord under the pretext of a mosque," Rajneesh Singh, the BJP's media in-charge for Ayodhya and local spokesperson, said in the December 10 letter.

Asserting that "a mosque is not necessary for offering prayers anyway," Singh appealed to the chief minister to "issue strict instructions to the officials of the Ayodhva mosque trust to use the land in compliance with the Supreme Court orders".

In case they are unable to do so, directives should be issued to return the land to the government to prevent its misuse, the BJP leader

On November 9, 2019, settling a fractious issue that went back more than a cenbench headed by the then CJI Ranjan Gogoi paved the way for the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, at the site where the 16th century Babri Masjid once stood.

It also ruled that an alternative five-acre plot would be found for a mosque in the holy town.

The Sunni Central Waqf Board later formed the Indo-Islamic Cultural Foundation to build a new mosque on the land allotted by the state government in the Dhannipur area of the

In his letter, Singh wrote, "In compliance with the Supreme Court's order, the land allocated to the Sunni Central Waqf Board in Ayodhya is being used by the people concerned for other purposes.

He added that since the apex court's verdict, "no substantial endeavour has been undertaken by the Muslim community to construct the mosque".

"The Muslim community merely wishes to preserve Babar's legacy through this



# Shutdown to protest ropeway

Katra/Jammu: Jammu and Kashmir's Katra, the base camp for the Vaishno Devi pilgrimage, observed a shutdown on Wednesday in protest against the proposed Rs 250-crore ropeway project connecting Tarakote Marg to Sanji Chhat, which leads to the cave shrine in Reasi district.

Alleging that the ropeway would destroy the livelihoods of local business owners, the Mata Vaishno Devi Sangharsh Samiti, which claims to represent shopkeepers, pony operators and palanquin owners, led a protest march in the town and demanded that the project be scrapped.

Last month, the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board decided to install the ropeway to facilitate access to the temple for senior citizens, children and others who find it difficult to climb the 13-km-long track to the cave shrine.

Wednesday's shutdown disrupted normal life in the town, resulting in reduced vehicular traffic on the

A large rally, backed by various organisations, was held by the Samiti from the Shalimar Park to oppose the ropeway project. Carrying placards and wearing black armbands, protestors raised slogans against the shrine

board and the project.

"The Sangharsh Samiti is fighting for our rights as the board is out to snatch the bread and butter of over 60,000 families. Everyone hoteliers, shopkeepers, pony operators, labourers and transporters — has come out to the streets against the ropeway project. We want the project to be shelved," Bhupinder Singh Jamwal, president of the Vaishno Devi Trek Mazdoor Union, told reporters.

He added that all political parties and social organisations in Jammu and Kashmir have extended their support to the protest.

Jagannathpur Police Station in-charge Shivnarayan Tiwari. A post-mortem examination of her body would be conducted during the day to ascertain the exact cause of death, he said. "The accused was ar-

rested and would be produced before a court here. An FIR was also registered," Tiwari said. -PTI

# Three streams of Ganga merged into one at Sangam

Three streams of the Gan- sure a grand Mahakumbh ga river were merged at the Sangam area here by the Irrigation Department of Uttar Pradesh to create better bathing facilities for millions of devotees expected to attend the Mahakumbh in 2025, officials said on Wednesday.

Approximately 22 hectares of additional space have been created which will allow a large number of devotees to bathe simultaneously at a central location, officials added.

Previously, the Ganga had changed its course, splitting into three streams between Shastri Bridge and Sangam Nose. This split impacted the river's purity and complicated the organisation of the Mahakumbh, officials said.

The division not only reduced the mela area but also disrupted arrangements for the pilgrims, they said. Now, with the efforts of the irrigation department, the river's original course has been restored and it is flowing cohesively as a single stream, they added.

The department devel-

Mahakumbh Nagar: oped a strategic plan to enexperience, centralizing bathing facilities for the anticipated 40 crore devotees at one location instead of spreading them across multiple spots.

The department drew a parallel to the mythological story of Bhagirath, who brought the sacred river to Earth through rigorous penance for the salvation of his ancestors.

"To turn the plan into reality, the expertise of IIT Guwahati's team was sought. Based on their survey report, three massive dredging machines were deployed to streamline and expand the flow of Ganga in the Sangam area," they said. Initially, the swift current and high water levels of the river posed significant challenges. Stabilizing the dredging machines in the strong flow and merging the two side streams with the central stream proved especially difficult, officials said.

To level the 22 hectares of space, five lakh metric tonnes of sand were arranged, ensuring a wellprepared fairground. - PTI

# Kerala police rescues doctor from online fraud

Kottayam: A Kottayambased doctor has been rescued in real time from a 'virtual arrest' by "fakesters" who were posing as Mumbai police officers to defraud him, Kerala

police said on Wednesday. The cyber cell of Kerala police and officials of State Bank of India (SBI) on Tuesday worked together to identify the fraud being committed on the doctor and managed to recover most of the Rs five lakh that was fraudulently taken from him by the culprits, Kottayam SP Shahul Hameed A said.

Giving details of the incident, a cyber cell officer told a TV channel that SBI has a financial tracking system for monitoring suspicious transactions and they flagged a Rs five lakh transaction made by the doctor on Tuesday to an ac-

count in north India. "They immediately informed the cyber cell, which forwarded the address of the doctor to the Changanassery police station and an officer was sent from there to his residence to find out what happened,"

the officer said.

Kottavam SP Hameedsaid that the officer who went to the doctor's home was not allowed inside by the doctor on the directions of the fraudster posing as a Mumbai police officer.

"The Inspector heard the person on the phone telling the doctor in Hindi not to go outside or allow anyone inside. So the Inspector entered the home by force and examined the phone.

"On examining the phone, it was found that the fakesters had put him under 'virtual arrest'. When

they saw the Kerala police officer, they cut the call."

The SP further said that due to the prompt steps taken by the police and the financial tracking system of SBI, around Rs 4.65 lakh of the doctor's money was recovered and only Rs 35,000 was lost.

Giving details of the modus operandi of the fraudsters, the SP said that they sent fake letters with the letter head and emblem of the Reserve Bank of India and the Supreme Court of India to the doctor stating that he was under investigation for money laundering.

When the doctor contacted them, one of them posed as a Mumbai police officer and said that he was under virtual arrest. They then asked him to send them Rs 5 lakh," police said.

The officials of the Changanassery branch of SBI, from where the doctor sent the amount to the fraudsters, said that they were suspicious of the transaction, but when they asked the doctor, he told them he was sending the money to a friend.

"Initially, he was not ready to believe that all of it was a fraud and it took some effort to convince him and lodge a complaint," the cyber cell officer said.

SP Hameed said that the central government, RBI and the police have been issuing advertisements cautioning people to be alert against such frauds.

"People should go through these advertisements and be vigilant and if anything happens, they should immediately call 1930 to block any suspicious online transaction."

#### **QUOTE OF THE DAY**

"I am happy to share the news of the first-ever tagging of Ganges **River Dolphin in** Assam a historic milestone for the species and



India! This project will deepen our understanding of conserving our **National Aquatic Animal.**"

Bhupender Yadav, Union Minister,

Environment

# Opposition stalls RS proceedings over Shah's remarks on Ambedkar

on Wednesday rocked by protests from Opposition members who demanded an apology from Union Home Minister Amit Shah, claiming his remarks in the House a day earlier were an "insult" to the architect of India's Constitution B R Ambedkar.

Union Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Kiren Rijiju accused the Congress of misleading the country by using only a part of Shah's remarks made in the Rajya Sabha and asserted that the Home Minister had in very clear words mentioned how the Congress party had insulted Ambedkar

"You (Congress) cannot use an 11-12 second clip out of Shah's entire speech and mislead the nation." Rijiju said and asserted that for the BJP, Ambedkar is equivalent to

However, the opposition was unrelenting. Amid sloganeering, the House was adjourned for the day soon after it met post-lunch.

In the morning, after the listed papers and reports were tabled and the House went ahead with the scheduled Zero Hour, Congress MP Jairam Ramesh rose and alleged that Shah insulted Ambedkar with his remarks during the debate on the Constitution.

Several other Congress members were on their feet and started raising slogans like "Ambedkar ka apamaan nai sahega Hindustan' (India will not tolerate Ambedkar's insult)". Countering them, Rijiju said it was the Congress that insulted Ambedkar and did not honour him with a Bharat Ratna.

Congress President and Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge raised a poster of Ambedkar. Amid an uproar, Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar adjourned the proceedings within a few minutes till 2 pm.



#### O'Brien files privilege notice against Amit Shah

Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha leader Derek O'Brien on Wednesday submitted a privilege notice against Home Minister Amit Shah over his remarks on B R Ambedkar, a source said.

According to the source, the notice has been filed under Rule 187 of Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business of the Rajya Sabha.

The notice also quoted the statement the home minister made in the Upper House on Tuesday during his reply to a debate on the 75 years of the

Both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha witnessed protests from the Congress and some other opposition parties over Shah's alleged insult of Ambedkar, resulting in both the Houses being adjourned.

When the Upper House re-assembled post lunch at 2 pm. Rijiju said two Bills were listed for the day -- the Appropriation Bill and the Banking Regulation Bill. He requested the Opposition parties to allow the House to function and start the discussion on the Banking Regulation Bill.

However, as sloganeering by members of the opposition parties continued, Chairman Dhankhar said Babasaheb Ambedkar is a father figure for all, being the architect of the Indian Constitution.

Congress leader Pramod Tiwari sought to raise a point of order, claiming that Shah "insulted"

Ambedkar a day earlier.

Rejecting Tiwari's claim, Rijiju accused the Congress of misleading the country by using only a part of Shah's remarks made in the Rajya Sabha

He said the HM in his speech mentioned how the Congress party had insulted Ambedkar.

The Parliamentary Affairs minister said the Opposition was trying to mislead the nation by using only an "11-12 second" clip from Shah's entire speech.

Rijiju explained that the Home Minister had on Tuesday said that the Congress hatched a conspiracy to defeat Ambedkar when he conlater from Vidarbha.

The minister demanded that the Congress must apologise to the nation, alleging that Ambedkar wanted to get re-elected to the Lok Sabha but was not allowed to do so by the Congress, which forced him to leave electoral politics.

Rijiju also said that until 1990, the Congress-led government refused to give a Bharat Ratna to Ambedkar.

He accused the Congress of attempting to malign and remove Ambedkar's name from India's history while trying to garner votes by using his name.

"You (Congress) cannot use an 11-12 second clip out of Shah's entire speech and mislead the nation. It is not correct", he said, adding for the BJP, Ambedkar is equivalent to

At this, Kharge repeated Shah's remark and said it only showed the minister's disrespect towards the architect of the Constitution.

Kharge claimed that Shah had "made fun of" Ambedkar by saying that "if they (Congress) had taken God's name as many times, it would have attained a place in heaven in all of its seven births"

The Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha argued that this was an insult to Ambedkar, to which Rijiju said that he was again trying to mislead the House.

Leader of the House J P Nadda stood up in Shah's defence, saying that Kharge was trying to "mislead" the nation through Parliament and accused the Congress of treating Ambedkar with disdain and disrespect.

Nadda rejected Kharge's claim and alleged that it was the Congress that had disrespected Ambedkar during his lifetime due to which he had resigned from the Union



the outskirts of Amritsar on Wednesday.

# Train services affected due to farmers' protest

Chandigarh: Train services in Punjab were affected as farmers squatted on rail tracks on Wednesday as part of their threehour 'Rail Roko' protest to press the Centre into accepting their various demands, including a legally binding minimum support price for crops

The call for the 'rail roko' was given by the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha.

Kisan Mazdoor Morcha leader Sarwan Singh Pandher said farmers have been squatted on rail tracks at many places from 12 noon to 3 pm.

Protesting farmers blocked train routes at many places, including Moga, Faridkot, Kadian and Batala in Gurdaspur; Phillaur in Jalandhar; Tanda, Dasuya, Mahilpur in Hoshiarpur; Makhu, Talwandi Bhai in Ferozepur; Sahnewal in Ludhiana; Shambhu in Patiala; Mohali; Sunam and Lehra in Sangrur, Rampura Phul in Bathinda and Devidaspura in Amritsar

The Humsafar Express from Jammu to Sealdah, Dadar Express from Amritsar to Mumbai and Shan-e-Punjab Express from New Delhi to Amritsar were halted at different platforms of the Ludhiana railway station.

The Shatabdi Express coming from New Delhi for Amritsar was halted at Khanna railway station.

A protesting farmer said, 'We are demanding a legal guarantee for MSP from the government.'

Farmers under the banner of Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha have been camping at Shambhu and Khanauri border points between Punjab and Haryana since February 13 after their march to Delhi was stopped by security forces.

For the past three weeks, Punjab farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal has been on a fast-unto-death at the Khanauri border point between Puniab and Harvana to press the Centre to accept the agitating farmers' demands, including a legal guarantee of MSP on crops.

A "jatha" (group) of 101 farmers made three attempts to enter Delhi on foot on December 6, December 8 and again on December 14. Haryana security personnel did not allow them to proceed.

Besides a legal guarantee on MSP for crops, the farmers are demanding a debt waiver, pension for farmers and farm labourers, no hike in the electricity tariff, withdrawal of police cases and "justice" for the victims of the 2021 Lakhimpur Kheri

Reinstatement of the Land Acquisition Act, 2013, and compensation to the families of the farmers who died during a previous agitation in 2020-21 are also part of their demands.

## Shivling recovered from abandoned temple debris

Aligarh (UP): A Shivling met with the Additional bris of an abandoned roadside temple in the Muslimdominated locality of Sarai Rehman in Bannadevi area here on Wednesday, prompting intervention by the local police and the administration.

The recovery led to demands for the temple's restoration from local rightwing organisations, including Bajrang Dal and Karni Sena.

Bajrang Dal member Mavank Kumar, who rushed to the site upon hearing the news, said that the temple had been abandoned for nearly five decades and was being misused as a dumping ground.

"During cleaning operations, a Shivling was found buried in the debris of broken bricks adjoining the temple," he said.

The incident led to a significant congregation of locals and activists, prompting police to rush to the spot to maintain peace in the area.

According to Karni Sena functionary Gyanendra Pratap Singh, a delegation

memorandum. The memorandum demanded a full inquiry into how the temple was abandoned and alleged illegal use of its premises. It further sought penalties for those found responsible and called for the temple's

and Superintendent of Po-

lice (City) to submit a

"This is a matter of heritage and faith. Those who allowed the misuse of this temple need to be held accountable," Singh told

Superintendent of Police (City) Mrigank Shekhar Pathak said that investigations were underway.

"The incident is being looked into, and action will be taken if it is found that the premises were being misused by unauthorized individuals," Pathak said.

Precautionary measures have been implemented by local authorities to ensure the situation does not escalate, and further developments are awaited pending the completion of the investigation, police said.

#### Rahul attend panel to select NHRC chairperson

New Delhi: A committee endra Modi met here on Wednesday to select the next chairperson of National Human Rights Commission, sources said.

They also said Congress president Mallikariun Kharge and party leader Rahul Gandhi attended the meeting as leaders of the opposition in Rajya Sabha Lok Sabha respectively.

The post of NHRC chairperson has been vacant since Justice (retd) Arun Kumar Mishra completed his tenure on June 1.

A former judge of the Supreme Court, Justice Mishra served as the eighth chairperson of the rights panel and was appointed to its top post in June 2021.

According to the law governing NHRC, while the committee which selects the NHRC chief is headed by the prime minister, it has the Lok Sabha Speaker, home minister, leader of opposition in Lok Sabha, leader of opposition in Raiya Sabha and deputy chairperson of Rajya Sabha as its members



Bhavan in Srinagar on Wednesday.

## Priyanka among JPC members

New Delhi: Former Union ministers Anurag Thakur and P P Chaudhary from the BJP, and Privanka Gandhi Vadra of the Congress are set to be among the 21 Lok Sabha members, who will be part of the joint committee of Parliament that will scrutinise two bills on simultaneous elections.

The Lok Sabha's list of business for Thursday included the names of 21 MPs to be part of the committee. a motion on whose constitution will be moved by Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal.

Former Union minister

Parshottambhai Rupala, Bhartruhari Mahtab, Anil Baluni, C M Ramesh, Bansuri Swaraj, Vishnu Dayal Ram and Sambit Patra are among the BJP's Lok Sabha members to be part of the panel.

Chaudhary, a former minister of state for law, is seen as the likely chairperson of the committee, sources said, adding that Thakur is also a

Speaker Om Birla will take the final call according to the rules.

Manish Tewari and Sukhdeo Bhagat of the Congress, Shrikant Shinde of the Shiv Sena, Dharmendra Yadav of the Samajwadi Party, Kalyan Banerjee of the TMC, TM Selvaganapathi of the DMK, GM Harish Balayogi of the TDP, Supriya Sule of the NCP (Sharad Pawar), Chandan Chauhan of the RLD and Balashowry Vallabhaneni of the Jana Sena Party are other Lok Sabha members.

Rajya Sabha will name its 10 members for the committee in a separate communication.

Among the Lok Sabha members proposed to be on the committee, 14 are from the BJP-led NDA.

# Rajasthan to replace Urdu in policing with Hindi

(allegation), Ittila (information), Chashmdeed (eyewitness) and many such terms may not be a part policing vocabulary in Rajasthan for long, with the BJP government in the state issuing direction to replace them with appropriate Hindi words.

The state police headquarters started the exercise following a letter by Minister of State (Home) Jawahar Singh Bedham, seeking information about such words and their Hindi alternatives

Following the letter, state police chief U R Sahoo wrote to Additional Director General of Police (Training) last month to collect details of Urdu words and find out their appropriate replacements.

He also instructed the officer to omit Urdu terms from training material, apprise all trainees of the new Hindi words, and disseminate information about same.

The DGP's communication, dated November 11, also gives a reference of the

Jaipur: Mukadma (case), letter from MoS Bedham.

while, also wrote to all police range inspector generals on December 10 in reference to the DGP's letter. "In the follow-up of the

(Police headquarters), the SPs have been asked to collect information about the Urdu words and their Hindi replacements.' The Congress party criti-

instructions from the PHQ

cised the government over the move, calling it uncalled for

"Rather than replacing words which have been there in practice for long, the government should take effective action to control crime and restore law and order," he said.

There are several terms which are commonly used in police, like Mukadma (case), Mulzim (accused), Mustagis (complainant), Ilzam (allegation), Ittila (information), Chashmadeed (eye-witness), Jeb Tarashi (pick pocketing), Ferd Baramadgi (recovery memo) among others. Many Urdu terms may not be a part of the vocabulary for long.

#### **QUOTE OF THE DAY**

"Let me congratulate you for finally speaking the truth by openly revealing the BJP's real



statement in Parliament didn't

surprise us; we already knew your

party's true mindset." Siddaramaiah, CM, Karnataka

#### Bangladeshi baby's rare disease treated in Kolkata **By Sudipto Chowdhury**

Kolkata: A Bangladeshi couple, whose nine-month-old son got a fresh lease of life after a Kolkata hospital treated him for a rare disease, is now anxious about getting a visa to come to the city for the child's post-surgery checkup. The infant, Ridwan Habib Ilham, a resident of Jessore district of Bangladesh, was diagnosed with 'Craniosynostosis' in which the skull bones fuse prematurely hindering brain growth and eventually leading to an abnormal shape of the head.

"We took our child to a private hospital in Kolkata and, following a successful reconstructive surgery, we brought him back to Bangladesh," the baby's father Ahsan Habib Rubel told PTI from Benapole in the neighbouring

country. But that was in June, a few weeks before Bangladesh was gripped by a crisis that forced Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to auit and come to India in August. Following this, the Indian government has restricted issuing visas to the people of the neighbouring

A senior doctor in the hospital, where the child was treated, said that a period of six months postsurgery is crucial for such a



patient.

"We could not go (to Kolkata) now as getting visas even on medical grounds is a bit difficult. So. we are consulting them virtually. But a physical consultation would have been far better. But the doctors are very cooperative," the

Doctors in the neighbouring nation diagnosed the child with 'Craniosynostosis' six months ago.

"We were quite tense seeing an unusual enlargement of his skull. Doctors found that he was suffering from Craniosynostosis. They recommended immediate surgery," Rubel said.

The diagnosis was confirmed through X-rays and a CT scan and a corrective surgery was recommended, said Dr G R Vijay Kumar, Director of Neurosurgery department in Kolkata's Fortis Hospital.

"A newborn's skull consists of small, soft segments connected by membranous sutures, which alcommodate brain growth during the first two years of life. In Craniosynostosis, one or more segments fuse prematurely, restricting normal skull and brain development and resulting in an abnormal head shape. If left untreated, it can lead to complications beyond cosmetic concerns, Kumar said. A team of doctors, led by Ku-

low the skull to expand and ac-

mar, performed a nearly 4.5-hourlong surgery to reconstruct the infant's skull and was discharged within six days after the surgery.

The parents could visit the hospital only once for a checkup following the surgery.

#### PE/VCs invest USD 4 bn in November

Mumbai: Private equity and venture capital (PE/ VC) funds invested USD 4 billion in November, which was 156 per cent higher than the year-ago period but lower about 15 per cent compared with the preceding month, a report said on Wednesday.

The month saw 87 deals -- 47 per cent higher than the 59 transactions in November 2023, as per the report by industry lobby grouping IVCA and consultancy firm EY.

"While 2024 had started off on a strong note, geopolitical tensions, uncertainty over US elections outcome, and inflation weighed on the markets, as did the bid-ask spread between seller expectations and buyer valuations," the consultancy firm's partner Vivek Soni said.

Soni said pure-play PE/ VC investments in November totalled USD 3.5 billion in November, a 297 per cent increase compared to the USD 873 million in November 2023 and 27 per cent higher than the USD 2.7 billion in October 2024.

Buyout investments emerged as the leading deal type in November at USD 1.6 billion, followed by start-up investments at USD 1.1 billion.

Industrial products led with USD 1 billion in PE/ VC investments followed by financial services and ecommerce at USD 723 million and USD 550 million, respectively.

Total fundraises in November 2024 reached USD 1.1 billion across eight funds, compared to USD 401 million raised across six funds in November 2023.

Total fundraises increased to USD 1.1 billion across eight funds, compared to USD 401 million.

# Indian economy to grow 6.6 pc in FY26

New Delhi: India Ratings and Research (Ind-Ra) on Wednesday projected the Indian economy to grow at 6.6 per cent in 2025-26, up from 6.4 per cent in the current fiscal year.

Ind-Ra believes investments will be a key growth driver for the Indian economy in FY26, like in FY22 and

The Indian economy has experienced a cyclical growth slowdown in the past three quarters, which it expects to reverse from the December quarter.

The GDP growth till FY24 was impacted by the aftereffects of Covid-19, even the base effect impacted the quarterly GDP growth.

While the June quarter GDP growth of FY25 was impacted by the combination of a strong base effect and the general elections in May 2024, the growth in the July-September period witnessed the extended impact of weak private sector capex.

Ind-Ra believes that the Indian economy is facing monetary, fiscal, and external tightening. While it expects monetary conditions to ease now, the fiscal and external tightening is expected to continue in FY26.

"Nonetheless, the FY26 GDP growth is expected to be same as India's best decadal growth (FY11-FY20)," says Devendra Kumar Pant, Chief Economist and Head Public Finance,

Ind-Ra's said growth and inflation forecast could, however, be affected by any tariff war, and any capital outflow, if the dollar continues to strengthen. Ind-Ra expects the retail inflation in FY26 to average at 4.4 per cent, lower than FY25 forecast of 4.9 per cent. "The timing of rate cut would depend on how the forthcoming data -- arithmetic of the FY26 Union Budget, inflation trajectory and evolving domestic and global landscape -- gels with the RBI's flexible inflation targeting approach.'

Merchandise trade account is expected to remain in deficit of USD 308 billion in FY26 (FY25: USD277.4 billion, FY24: USD 244.9 billion), Ind-Ra



#### Congress blames govt for myopic policy-making

The Congress on Wednesday blamed the Central government for corporate India's "failure" to generate employment and investment, claiming its refusal to invest or increase wages is a direct consequence of the Centre's "myopic" policy making. Citing a report, Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh claimed that corporate India is choking the middle class and hurting the India

growth story by failing to increase wages despite higher profits and

paying lower taxes after GST and tax sops in 2019.

"Here is the government's track record -- indiscriminate corporate tax cuts without linking them to employment creation or investment. Introducing a punitive GST regime, with input tax credits only for corporates. Overseeing and enabling the growing oligopolisation of the market. Introducing a CBI/ ED/IT Raid Raj to extort donations from the corporate sector to the BJP," the Congress leader alleged.

Ramesh also claimed government's failure to stimulate consumption demand by hiking MSP and MGNREGA wages, refusal to provide income support despite mounting evidence of wage stagnation and growing indebtedness among the poor and middle classes, and unwillingness to accept the seriousness of the mass unemployment crisis. "India Inc's refusal to invest or increase wages is a direct consequence of the Union government's myopic policy making," the Congress leader claimed.

#### HPCL expands heart-care initiative

Ahmedabad: Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL) has taken a significant step to bring life-saving heart care closer to those in need. The company has signed an MoU with Prashanti Medical Services & Foundation to support Sri Sathya Sai Hospitals, strengthening its flagship "Dil Without Bill" initiative. This program provides free heart surgeries, angioplasty, and heart devices to underprivileged patients, ensuring that no one is denied critical cardiac care due to financial constraints.

Since its launch in 2011-12, the initiative has transformed the lives of over 5,575 people, focusing especially on women and children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In the current fiscal year, 500 more patients are set to benefit from this life-saving support.

As part of this collaboration, senior HPCL officials, including the Executive Director of CSR & PRCC and the Company Secretary, visited Sri Sathya Sai Hosnitals in Ahmedahad During their visit, they met patients, families, and hospital staff, witnessing the program's profound impact

"We believe that everyone deserves a chance at a healthier life, regardless of their financial circumstances," said Shri Rajeev Goel, ED-CSR & PRCC. "The Dil Without Bill initiative embodies our commitment to ensuring that lifesaving cardiac care reaches those who need it the most."

This partnership reflects HPCL's unwavering focus on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and its mission to drive meaningful change in society

#### **PROFILE**

### The Warren Buffett of India

By Mangesh Kulkarni

aamdeo Agrawal, an Indian entrepreneur, stock market investor, and Chairman of Motilal Oswal Group, has demonstrated that accumulating significant wealth is achievable through longterm investing. His journev serves as a real-life illustration for aspiring investors who seek to generate wealth via the stock markets. Remarkably, he has earned every single rupee solely through long-term investing, having amassed crores without engaging in Futures and Options trading. Raamdeo Agrawal was

born into a middle-class Marwari family. He is a chartered accountant from the Institute of **Chartered Accountants** of India He was raised in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, before relocating to Mumbai to pursue his CA studies. Although he faced multiple failures in his CA examinations, his determination ultimately bore fruit. He co-established Motilal Oswal Financial Services, and his family currently holds approximately 36 per cent of the company. The current value of his investments in Motilal Oswal Group exceeds 20,000 crores.

His annual wealth creation studies and QGLP framework for stock selection are widely embraced by the investment community. Through his 29 wealth creation stud-



ies, which commenced in 1996, Raamdeo Agrawal has assisted countless investors in profiting by teaching them how to evaluate and choose stocks for the long term. "Invest in quality companies that possess growth potential, longevity, and are reasonably priced,' encapsulates Raamdeo Agrawal's formula for success. Utilizing this framework, he has identified and invested in several multibagger stocks, including Hero Honda, Infosys, Bharti Airtel, Eicher Motors, and

Zomato. Raamdeo Agrawal has not only drawn inspiration from his mentor Warren Buffett but has also adhered to his guiding principles, proving that wealth accumulation through long-term investing is indeed possible. Despite possessing over 40 years of experience, he refrains from attempting to time the market. He proudly asserts that he is consistently fully invested in the equities market. "Being invested in the market is more crucial than trying to time it," is the mantra Raamdeo Agrawal imparts to the young inves-

#### Retailer's body seeks lower interest rate

New Delhi: Retailers Association of India on Wednesday asked the government to provide lower interest rates to retailers for easier financing while calling to expedite national retail policy to enable ease of doing business, ahead of the upcoming Budget.

In its pre-budget memorandum, RAI said the Union Budget for FY25-26 should focus on generating demand and spurring consumption by offering benefits or concessions in the form of lower taxes as it will boost the overall consumer sentiment and benefit the retail sector.

Asking for low-cost finance to retailers, RAI said, "There is a need to provide lower interest rates to the retailers through the special announcement in the budget to assure easier financing for the retail

The government should allocate a special fund and formulate a special trader finance scheme with SIDBI to help millions of independent retailers across the nation by declaring lowcost loans and relaxing some industry guidelines, it added.

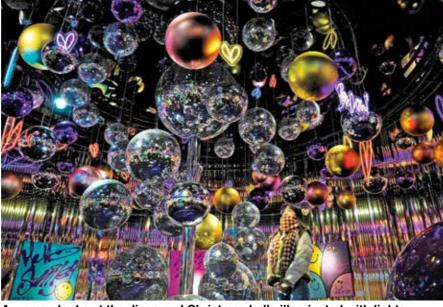
Demanding the retail sector to be considered as

an essential service, RAI said, "F&B retail sector needs to be considered as a priority and an essential service. Subsidies and benefits should be given on land rates and other neces sities such as electricity."

Stressing the need to expedite the National Retail Policy to enable ease of doing business, the association said, also demanded that all the MSME benefits must be extended to retail traders saying that while the government has included retail and wholesale trades as MSMEs and are allowed to be registered on Udyam Registration Portal, the benefits to retail and wholesale trade MSMEs are restricted to priority sector lending only.

The retailers' body also drew the attention of the government to the risks of the proposed GST hike on products based on price range saving an increase in rate on apparel, footwear, handbags, cosmetics, watches, and other premium products could have significant repercussions on the formal retail sector and consumer sentiment.

"This may jeopardise the formalisation of trade, encouraging a shift toward unorganised markets."



A woman looks at the disco and Christmas balls illuminated with lights hanging on a decoration display for the upcoming Christmas Festival at a popular outdoor shopping mall in Beijing on Wednesday.

#### Sugar mills pay Rs 8,126 cr to farmers



New Delhi: Sugar mills have paid Rs 8,126 crore to sugarcane farmers in the first 70 days of the ongoing 2024-25 sugar season, Food Minister Pralhad Joshi told Parliament on Wednesday.

As of December 13, the total cane price payable stood at Rs 11,141 crore, Joshi said in a written reply to the Lok Sabha. Pending payments of Rs 3,015 crore remain, with Karnataka accounting for the maximum outstanding du es of Rs 1,405 crore, followed by Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra.

The sugar season in India runs from October to September.

Joshi attributed the reduction in sugarcane arrears to ongoing policy interventions In the previous 2023-24 season, out of to-

tal cane dues of Rs 1,11,674 crore, approximately Rs 1,10,399 crore has been paid, leaving only Rs 1,275 crore outstanding as of December 13 - effectively clearing 99 per

### Airoli among best biz districts in MMR

New Delhi: Airoli in Navi Mumbai has the potential to emerge as one of the best business districts in Mumbai Metropolitan Region on the back of physical infrastructure, strong pipeline of fresh housing supply and growing business ecosystem, according to a report.

Real estate research firm Liases Foras on Wednesday released the report 'Airoli - Epicenter of a Prospering Enclave, an emerging Bet-

ter Business District'.



Pankaj Kapoor, Managing Director, Liases Foras said, "The area in and around Airoli presents as a goldmine for home seekers, investors and businesses as the housing stock is expected to nearly double to 1.85 lakh units by 2030.' He said, the seamless

connectivity with 30-40 per cent less travel time to

coming Navi Mumbai International Airport, position Airoli as a prime destination and solidifies it as a growth driver of Navi Mumbai. Airoli has the potential

business hubs and the up-

to emerge as one of the best business districts in Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR).

The presence of commercial spaces in Airoli and its proximity to key business hubs and a vi-

brant IT industry has created an appealing business ecosystem for both employers and employees. "The 25-minute access to

over 325 educational centres, 140 healthcare hubs, and 120 shopping hotspots further enhance Airoli's investment potential and liveability quotient," the report

#### Casinos to be relocated by March 2027

tors of India.

Panaji: The Goa government on Wednesday said that the off-shore casinos currently anchored at Mandovi river would have to be relocated before March 2027.

Briefing press persons after chairing the cabinet meeting, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant said this is the last extension for such floating places offering social amusements in the

The state government has been renewing the extensions granted to the offshore casinos, which are a big tourist attraction, after every six months. The CM said there would be no more such extension to the casinos, allowing them to be in Mandovi, after March

The successive governments in Goa have been under pressure to relocate the casinos off the Goa coast, which is mandatory as per the licences granted to them. An off-shore casino must operate beyond a certain distance, about five nautical miles, from the seafront. Goa has five offshore casinos in Mandovi river and almost a dozen in different five-star hotels

# Dairy sector emissions can be reduced: Report

New Delhi: Balanced diet, effective breed and manure management and precision dairy farming technologies could improve dairy productivity in India and reduce planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions from the sector, accord-

ing to a new report. The report, titled "India's Dairy Future: Aligning Livelihoods, Growth, and Climate Solutions", says the doubling of the female bovine population in India -- from 122.7 million in 1972 to 246.7 million in 2019 -- has led to a corresponding doubling of greenhouse gas emissions from dairy

animals. India's livestock sector is projected to account for 15.7 per cent of global enteric methane emissions by 2050, it said.

According to the data published by the International Energy Agency earlier this year, India is the third largest emitter of methane. Studies suggest livestock are responsible for about 48 per cent of all methane emissions in the country, with cattle accounting for the majority of it.

Despite the significant rise in female bovine population and emissions from enteric fermentation, the country's average milk yield per cow remains low, accounting for only two-thirds of the global average, and is far



lower than in developed countries

On the other hand, climate change is adversely affecting dairy productivity and livestock health, the report by the Confederation of Indian Industry's Food and Agriculture Centre of Excellence and Environmental Defense Fund said.

For example, heat stress is re-

ducing milk yields, impairing reproduction, and increasing the risk of disease. Water scarcity, exacerbated by erratic weather patterns, is further challenging farmers who rely on irrigation for feed crops, while the rising costs of feed and water place additional financial pressure on smallholder farmers, the report said.

It said that dairy farmers need support to adopt more climateresilient dairy practices that improve both productivity and resilience.

Such practices include balanced diets, supported by initiatives like the National Dairy Development Board's Ration

Balancing Programme, to enhance livestock productivity and reduce emissions.

Practices such as silage feeding, especially in water-scarce regions, and the use of crops like maize and sorghum are particularly beneficial for smallholders.

Innovative solutions, such as hydroponics and climate-resilient forage crops including Bajra, Napier, and millets, address fodder shortages in drought-prone areas. However, wider adoption of these practices requires accessible extension services, robust feed quality standards, and improved supply chain infrastructure, it added.

#### **QUOTE OF THE DAY**

"Gold continues to trade within a range as market participants await the Fed's policy announcement tonight, with increased focus on



the 2025 outlook and concerns surrounding the job market."

> Jateen Trivedi, VP, LKP Securities

# **Israel: Will** occupy buffer zone inside Syria



Israeli soldiers in armoured vehicles before crossing security fence at Golan Heights.

Jerusalem: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday that Israeli forces will stay in a buffer zone on the Syrian border, seized after the ouster of Syria's President Bashar Assad, until another arrangement is in place "that ensures Israel's security." Netanyahu made the

comments from the summit of Mount Hermon — the highest peak in the area inside Syria, about 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the border with the Israel-held Golan Heights.

It appeared to be the first time a sitting Israeli leader had set foot that far into Syria. Netanyahu said he had been on the same mountaintop 53 years ago as a soldier, but the summit's importance to Israel's security has only increased given recent events.

Israel seized a swath of southern Syria along the border with the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights days after Assad was ousted by rebels last week.

Israel's capture of the buffer zone, a roughly 400-square-kilometer (155-square-mile) demilitarised area in Syrian territory, has sparked condemnation, with critics accusing Israel of violating a 1974 ceasefire and possibly exploiting the chaos in Syria in the wake of Assad's ouster to make a land

"We will stay ... until another arrangement is found that ensures Israel's security," said Netanyahu who had traveled to the buffer zone on Tuesday with Defense Minister Israel Katz.

Katz said he instructed the Israeli military to quickly establish a presence, including fortifications, in anticipation of what could be an extended stay in the area. "The summit of the Hermon is the eyes of the state of Israel to identify our enemies who are nearby and far away," he said.

An Israeli military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with military regulations, said there is no plan to

The buffer zone between Syria and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights was created by the U.N. after the 1973 Mideast war. A U.N. force of about 1,100 troops had patrolled the area since

evacuate the Syrians living

in villages within the buffer

A U.N. spokesman said Tuesday that the advance of Israeli troops, however long it lasts, violates the 1974 deal that set up the

That agreement "needs to be respected, and occupation is occupation, whether it lasts a week, a month or a year, it remains occupation," spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

There was no immediate comment from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the insurgent group that led the ouster of Assad, or from Arab states.

Israel still controls the Golan Heights, which it

captured from Syria during the 1967 Mideast war and later annexed — a move not recognized by most of the international community. Mount Hermon's summit is divided between the Israeliannexed Golan Heights, Lebanon, and Syria. Only the United States recognizes Israel's control of the Golan Heights.

With Assad gone, a top U.N. official said Tuesday that militant leaders who have taken over Syria have committed to "an ambitious scaling-up of vital humanitarian support" for millions in desperate need of food and other aid.

The leader of the insurgent HTS - Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Mohammed al-Golani and the country's caretaker prime minister, Mohammed al-Bashir, pledged to support the movement of aid from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and other neighboring countries "for as long as humanitarian operations are required," said Tom Fletcher.

Fletcher, who heads the the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, known as OCHA, spoke to the U.N. Security Council members from Damascus via a video link.

Germany said Tuesday that its diplomats had also met with insurgent leaders to discuss Syria's political transition and "our expectations regarding the protection of minorities and women's rights.'



#### Pak issues 84 visas to Indians

New Delhi: The Pakistan high commission on Wednesday said it issued 84 visas to Indian pilgrims to visit the Shree Katas Raj temples in Punjab province's Chakwal district. The group has been given visas to visit the Katas Raj temples from December 19 to 25.

The temples are also known as Qila Katas. It is a complex of several Hindu temples connected to one another by walkways. Under the provision of a bilateral protocol on visits to religious shrines, Sikh and Hindu pilgrims from India visit Pakistan every year. Pakistani pilgrims also visit India every year under the protocol.

Pakistan's Charge d'Affaires Saad Ahmad Warraich wished the pilgrims a "spiritually rewarding" and a "fulfilling" journey. "Under the Pakistan-India protocol on visits to religious shrines of 1974, each year thousands of Sikh and Hindu pilgrims visit to attend various religious festivals.

# Trump: Will impose reciprocal tax on India

told reporters on Monday.

Washington: US President-elect Donald Trump has reiterated his intention to impose reciprocal tariffs in retaliation for the "high tariff" imposed by New Delhi on import of certain American products

"Reciprocal. If they tax us, we tax them the same

We have to wait and watch: India

New Delhi: Imposing reciprocal duties violates global trade

rules but one has to follow a "wait and watch" approach to

US President-elect Donald Trump has said that India charges

a lot of tariffs, reiterating his intention to impose reciprocal

tariffs in retaliation for what New Delhi will impose on the

Trump made these remarks on Tuesday and also said that

"It will be very difficult to decipher from one or two sentences

which Mr Trump makes but if I understood from what he was

saying. One will have to wait and watch and see," Director

General of Foreign Trade (DGF) Santosh Kumar Sarangi said

India and Brazil were among countries that impose high

US President-elect Donald Trump's remarks on imposing

reciprocal tariffs, a senior official said on Wednesday.

import of certain American products.

at CII's export competitiveness event.

tariffs on certain US products.

amount. They tax us. We tax them. And they tax us. Almost in all cases, they're taxing us, and we haven't been taxing them," Trump

He made the remarks while responding to a question on a potential trade agreement with China. Trump said India and Brazil were among countries that impose high tariffs on certain US products. "The word reciprocal is

important because if somebody charges us - India, we don't have to talk about our own — if India charges us 100 per cent, do we charge them nothing for the same? You know, they send in a bicycle and we send them a bicycle. They charge us 100 and 200. India charges a lot. Brazil charges a lot. If they want to charge us, that's fine, but we're going to charge them the same

Mar-a-Lago. Responding to a question, his Commerce Secretary pick Howard Lutnick said "reciprocity" is something that is going to be a key topic for the Trump administration. "How you treat us is how you should expect to be treated," he

thing," Trump said at a

news conference at

### N Korean troops killed in Russia-Ukraine battle

**Washington:** A couple hundred North Korean troops fighting alongside Russian forces against Ukraine have been killed or wounded during battle in the Kursk border region, a senior military official said

Tuesday. The official didn't provide details on exactly how many have been killed, but said the North Korean forces don't appear to be battle-hardened, which contributes to the number of casualties they've had. The official was providing the first significant estimate of North Korean casualties, which comes several weeks after Ukraine announced that North Korea had sent 10,000 to 12,000 troops to Russia to help it in the almost three-vear war.

The White House and Pentagon on Monday confirmed that the North Korean forces have been battling on the front lines in largely infantry positions. They have been fighting with Russian units and, in some cases, independently around Kursk.

The casualty disclosure comes as the Biden administration is pressing to send as much military aid as

possible to Ukraine before President-elect Donald Trump takes over. But a senior defense official told reporters Tuesday that the Defense Department may not be able to send all of the remaining USD 5.6 billion in Pentagon weapons and equipment stocks intended for Ukraine before Jan. 20, when Trump is sworn in.

Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity to provide a U.S. assessment of the war.

According to the Pentagon, there is about USD 1.2 billion remaining in longerterm funding through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which is used to pay for weapons contracts that would not be delivered for a year or more. The official said the administration anticipates releasing all that money by the end of this year.

The USD 5.6 billion is in presidential drawdown authority (PDA), which allows the Pentagon to take weapons off the shelves and send them quickly to Ukraine. That is a substantial amount of money, the defense official said, and while the U.S. will continue to provide weapons to Ukraine until Jan. 20, there

may well be funds remaining that will be available for the incoming Trump administration to spend.

Trump has talked about getting some type of negotiated settlement between Ukraine and Russia, creating some unease about whether he will provide Ukraine all the weapons funding approved by Congress. Ukrainian and Russian

forces have been in a fierce battle around Kursk, and the official said Russia has been able to take back about 20 per cent of the territory gained there by Kyiv. They said it will be possible for Ukraine to hold ground there for some time, but it will depend on how the rest of the fight is going, including the long-range strikes that Kyiv has been launching.

The officials said it's not clear if Moscow has asked Pyongyang for additional forces, but acknowledged that Russia continues to lose as many as 1,200 troops a day in casualties - including both dead and wounded. But so far, Russia has been able to generate enough forces to replace



launched from Space Port Kii in Kushimoto town.

#### Doval holds talks with Chinese FM

Beijing: India, China Special Representatives for the border mechanism, National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met here on Wednesday to discuss a range of issues, including management of peace and tranquillity along LAC and restoration of bilateral ties frozen for over four years due to the military standoff in eastern Ladakh.

Doval, who is heading the Indian delegation, arrived here on Tuesday to take part in the 23rd round of the Special Representatives' talks being held after a gap of five years. The last meeting was held in 2019 in Delhi.

The talks began at 10 am China time.

The two officials were expected to discuss a range of issues to rebuild the bilateral ties following the October 21 agreement of disengagement and patrolling in eastern Ladakh between the two countries.

On Tuesday, China expressed optimism about the talks saying that it is ready to work with India to implement the commitments based on the common understandings reached between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping during their meeting at Kazan in Russia on the sidelines of the BRICS summit on October 24.

China is prepared to settle differences with sincerity, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian told a media briefing here when asked about the Special Representatives (SR)

# Indian-American crowned Miss India USA 2024

Washington: Chennaiborn Indian American teenager Caitlin Sandra Neil has been crowned Miss India USA 2024 at the annual pageant held in New Jersey.

Caitlin, 19, is a secondyear student at University of California, Davis. "I want to leave a positive lasting impact on my community and focus on women's empowerment and literacy," Caitlin was quoted as saying in a media release.

Born in Chennai, India, Caitlin has been living in the USA for the last 14 years. She wants to be a web designer and also pursue a modelling and acting career.

Sanskriti Sharma from Illinois was crowned Mrs. India USA and Arshita Kathpalia from Washington won the Miss Teen India USA in the pageant organised by the India Festival Committee (IFC).

Rijul Maini, Miss India USA 2023 and Sneha Nambiar, Mrs India USA 2023 crowned Caitlin Sandra Neil and Sanskriti Sharma, respectively.



Nirali Desia of Illinois and Manini Patel of New Jersey were declared first runner-up and second runner-up in the Miss India **IISA** competition

Sapna Mishra of Virginia and Chinmayee Ayachit from Connecticut were named first and second runner-up in the Mrs India USA competition. Dhriti Patel of Rhode Island and Sonali Sharma were declared as first runner-up and second runner-up in the teen category, the press release said.

Forty-seven contestants from 25 states participated in the three categories of the pageant.

#### **QUOTE OF THE DAY**

"We are confident that we'll be handing the bilateral relationship off to the incoming Trump team at its strongest possible apex. It was inspirational to see the manifestations



of engagement between US and India in endeavours associated with space."

> Kurt Campbell, Deputy Secretary of State, US

#### Good news for US H-1B visa aspirants special positions and nonto change their status to going Biden administration employers with greater

Washington: A month ahead of transferring power, the outgoing Biden administration announced a new set of rules on Tuesday for H-1B visas that makes it easier for American companies to hire foreign workers with special skill sets and facilitate a smoother transition from F-1 student visas to H-1B visas.

The rule, announced by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), aims to provide greater flexibility to employers and workers by modernising the definition and criteria for profit and governmental research organisations that are exempt from the annual statutory limit on H-1B

The changes will help U.S. employers hire as per their business needs and remain competitive in the global marketplace, an official release said.

Donald Trump will be the next president of the US after a swearing-in ceremony on January 20.

The rule also extends certain flexibilities for students on an F-1 visa seeking H-1B to avoid disruptions in lawful status and employment authorisation for students holding F-1 visas.

It also will allow US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to process applications more quickly for most individuals who had previously been approved for an H1-B visa.

It will also allow H1-B visa holders with a controlling interest in the petitioning organisation to be eligible for H-1B status subject to reasonable conditions. The latest move by the outbuilds on its previous efforts to ensure that the labour needs of American businesses are met to reduce undue burden on employers while adhering to all U.S. worker protections

under the law. "American businesses rely on the H-1B visa programme for the recruitment of highly-skilled talent, benefiting communities across the country," said Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas.

"These improvements to the programme provide flexibility to hire global talent, boost our economic competitiveness, and allow highly skilled workers to continue to advance American innovation," he said.

The changes made in the final rule will ensure that U.S. employers can hire highly skilled workers they need to grow and innovate while enhancing the integrity of the programme, he said.

The DHS said the rule also strengthens the programme's integrity by codifying USCIS' authority to conduct inspections and impose penalties for failure to comply; requiring that the employer must establish that it has a bona fide position in a speciality occupation available for the worker as of the requested start date.

It clarifies that the Labor Condition Application must support and properly correspond with the H-1B petition; and requires that the petitioner have a legal presence and be subject to legal processes in the courts of the United States.

#### **EDITORIAL**

# **OBC Oversight**

he expansion of the new Mahayuti cabinet led by CM Devendra Fadnavis has set tongues wagging. The conspicuous exclusion of OBC leaders like Chhagan Bhujbal, Sudhir Mungantiwar and Sanjay Kunte has sparked speculation of the move being an emerging risk for the Mahayuti coalition, especially BJP.

To offset this, the ruling coalition has done a 'strategic recalibration' by inducting the BJP's Pankaja Munde and her cousin, the NCP's Dhananjay Munde in the cabinet. However, this prompts the question whether the Munde cousins can fill the leadership vacuum among Maharashtra's OBCs. The BJP's dominance in Maharashtra's OBCs. The BJP's dominance in Maharashtra has always been a delicate juggling act — satisfying the aspirations of its urban, upper-caste core while appeasing its growing OBC voter base. It was Pankaja's father, the late Gopinath Munde, whose deft welding of the diffuse OBC communities made it a potent vote-bank.

The last 18 months have seen Chhagan Bhujbal, a stalwart member of the ruling Ajit Pawar's NCP, emerge as the most vocal voice of the OBCs by taking a firm stance against Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange-Patil. Bhujbal, projecting himself as an 'elder' leader concerned with safeguarding the OBC community's reservation pie against Maratha encroachment, had managed to gather the fragmented OBC castes and sub-castes during his rallies to counter Jarange-Patil's insistent demand of securing a Maratha quota under the OBC category. Bhujbal's stance had resulted in strains within the erstwhile cabinet under CM Eknath Shinde.

Now, Bhujbal has cried foul over his exclusion in 'Mahayuti 2.0,' hinting that his advocacy for OBCs may have cost him a cabinet berth. While Bhujbal's outspokenness may have made him a liability in Ajit Pawar's calculations, sidelining him underscores the Mahayuti's tenuous position in balancing the demands of its OBC base and the politically assertive Marathas.

In this context, the induction of the Munde siblings, Pankaja and Dhananjay, appears a calculated move. The BJP and the Mahayuti seek to tap into Munde's enduring appeal among OBC voters. Yet, the choice is fraught with challenges. Pankaja Munde, estranged from the BJP's leadership for years, has been a vocal critic of Devendra Fadnavis, even blaming him for her 2019 electoral defeat. Though all that is water under the bridge, the Munde family's chequered political record and internal dynamics could undermine the Mahayuti's efforts to project them as the new torchbearers of OBC politics.

Complicating matters further is the simmering tension between Maharashtra's OBCs and Marathas. Jarange-Patil, who remained quiescent during the Assembly polls, has again threatened to go on a collective strike from January 25 next year, intensifying his demand for Marathas to be included under the OBC category.

In Maharashtra's fractious politics, where caste and coalitions shape outcomes, the BJP's gamble hinges on the Munde cousins rising as credible OBC leaders. Whether this youthful shift strengthens the BJP or backfires remains uncertain.

#### **PUBLIC INTEREST**

# Development Insured: Women Take the Lead with Modi's Bima Sakhi Yojana



Abhijit Mulye

India's economy cannot thrive while half its population remains sidelined. At just 20 percent, the female labourforce participation rate in India ranks among the lowest in the world, far below the global average and China's formidable 40 percent. Women contribute a meagre 17 percent to India's GDP—less than half the global norm. Estimates suggest that getting more women into the workforce could boost India's annual GDP growth rate by 1.5 percentage points, pushing it to a robust 9 percent.

Enter the *Bima Sakhi Yojana* (BSY), launched last week by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Panipat which aims to empower women economically by training them as LIC insurance agents. Targeting those aged 18 to 70 who have completed their Secondary School Certification (SSC), the scheme offers training, a stipend for the first three years, and commissions based on performance. Participants, addressed as *Bima Sakhis*, are expected to not only earn sustainable incomes but also expand insurance penetration in India's underserved regions.

The model cleverly merges social uplift with business objectives. LIC, India's state-owned insurance giant, benefits by tapping into unbanked rural markets, while *Bima Sakhis* are equipped to become self-sufficient earners and entrepreneurs. Modi's government has set an ambitious goal: enrolling 100,000 *Bima Sakhis* within a year. If successful, the program could quietly reshape India's rural economy while nudging more wom-

en into the workforce.

The *Bima Sakhi Yojana* builds on a growing ecosystem of women-focused schemes rolled out by Modi's government over the past decade. Initiatives like *Bank Sakhi* (banking facilitators), *Krishi Sakhi* (agriculture advisors), and *Pashu Sakhi* (livestock specialists) have sought to train women for roles traditionally dominated by men. Programs such as Lakhpati Didi aim to push rural women towards million-rupee incomes. The BSY fits neatly into this broader strategy of promoting financial inclusion through grassroots entrepreneurship.

At its heart, the scheme leverages microfinance principles—tools that have long been touted as game-changers for economic inclusion. Microfinance provides credit, insurance, and savings opportunities to the unbanked, often through self-help groups (SHGs). LIC, which already runs micro-insurance products like Jeevan Mangal and Jeevan Deep, has seen evidence that such models can drive socio-economic empowerment. A study on LIC-linked SHGs found improvements in the financial standing and decision-making abilities of women beneficiaries.

The BSY, however, ups the ante. Beyond offering women a safety net, it positions them as active participants in financial markets. *Bima Sakhis* will earn commissions on policies sold —Rs.48,000 annually, by government estimates — alongside a monthly stipend of Rs. 7,000 in year one, tapering to Rs. 5,000 by year three. For most rural households, these earnings are transformative. LIC agents typically bring home Rs. 15,000 a month, or Rs. 1.75 lakh annually — a figure that could double household incomes in India's poorest regions.

Yet the program is not without its challenges. Microfinance initiatives often struggle with patchy implementation, low financial literacy, and poor uptake in rural areas. Women — particularly in deeply patriarchal regions — may face resistance to stepping into public-facing, commission-based roles. A stipend of Rs.



7,000, whilst meaningful, may not be sufficient to attract candidates unless backed by robust awareness campaigns.

Then there is the matter of sustainability. The scheme relies heavily on entrepreneurial success as women must renew policies and attract clients to maintain their income. Without adequate support, training, and mentorship, some *Bima Sakhis* may falter, leaving them with little more than a short-term stipend. Financial inclusion schemes are only as effective as their execution, and India's track record on rural outreach remains uneven.

Nonetheless, BSY's design shows promise. By positioning women as insurance agents, the scheme shifts the narrative around empowerment: rural women are no longer just beneficiaries of government programs but active contributors to the economy. The initiative also has far-reaching implications for India's insurance sector, where penetration remains abysmally low, especially in rural areas

Prime Minister Modi has hailed BSY as a step towards gender parity. At the scheme's launch, he pointed to India's growing female workforce in other fields

— fighter pilots, police officers, and corporate leaders—as evidence of changing tides. "When women are empowered, new doors of opportunity open for the country," he declared. He highlighted the 1,200 women-led cooperatives already operating in agriculture and allied sectors, a quiet revolution that BSY seeks to amplify

The scheme's success will hinge on its ability to tackle entrenched gender biases and ensure steady, sustainable incomes for participants. If Modi's goal of recruiting 100,000 *Bima Sakhis* materializes, the program could inspire similar models of financial inclusion across sectors.

India has miles to go before its gender gap begins to narrow. But as *Bima Sakhis* begin knocking on doors across rural India, selling policies and promoting financial literacy, they may just nudge the country's economy and society towards a more balanced, inclusive future.

By turning rural women into breadwinners, the scheme certainly has the potential to transform households and communities. If executed well, India's Bima Sakhis could become not just agents of insurance but agents of change.

# The Long Road Ahead: Foreign Motivations in a Post-Assad Syria

#### AS THE HOUSE OF ASSAD COLLAPSES, SYRIA'S GREAT TRAGEDY COULD BE THAT IT IS NOT LEFT TO REBUILD IN PEACE



Shoumojit Banerjee

In the final chapter of the sixth and final volume (1788-89) of Edward Gibbon's monumental and endlessly quotable 'The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,' we come upon a famous fragment: "...as all that is human must retrograde if it does not advance." The inimitable Gibbon says this in regard to a wonderfully melancholic description of the decayed splendour of the western Roman Empire given by the 15th century Italian Renaissance scholar Poggius (Poggio Bracciolini), nine centuries after Rome's fall

Gibbon's famous remark could well apply to Syria - once a cradle of civilization and home to the great cities of Palmyra and Damascus which today stares at an anxious future following the collapse of Bashar al-As-

sad's brutal regime.

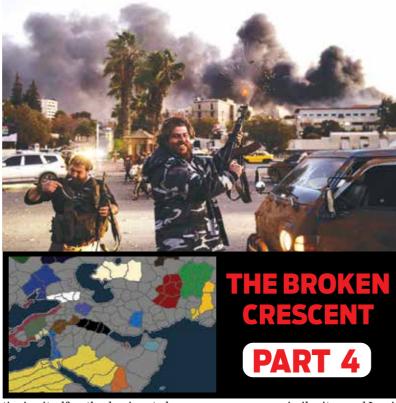
History offers little optimism. The fall of a dictatorship, especially in a country as fractious and fragile as Syria, often unleashes chaos instead of peace. For more than a decade, Syria was a battlefield, a proxy war where foreign powers advanced their own agendas on Syrian soil. Today, those foreign powers are still deeply embedded, their ambitions unchanged.

Amid the fog of war, Israel and Turkey stand out as the two most significant foreign powers poised to shape Syria's future. But their motivations in the post-Assad era are not just about land grabs but long-standing geopolitical calculations.

For Turkey, the demise of the Assad regime presents an opportunity to reshape the Middle East's map, with a particular focus on its Kurdish adversaries. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has long seen the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-a predominantly Kurdish militia—as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a decadeslong insurgency against Turkey. With Assad's fall, Turkey now seeks to capitalize on the vacuum by securing the Kurdish-majority areas of northern Syria. Already, Turkey has expanded its footprint in Syria through its proxy forces, the Syrian National Army (SNA), seizing Kurdish-held towns like Tel Rifaat and Manbij. Erdoğan's ultimate goal is to diminish Kurdish influence in the region, especially in areas like Kobane, which became a symbol of Kurdish resistance against the Islamic

But Turkey's ambitions extend beyond just eliminating Kurdish autonomy. Erdoğan also seeks to create a 'safe zone' along Turkey's southern border to house over three million Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey. The idea of sending refugees back to Syria, under Turkey's terms, serves a dual purpose: alleviating pressure on Turkey's overstretched resources while also stabilizing the region under Turkey's control. However, this strategy risks further alienating the Kurdish population, who are already facing a perilous future as they find themselves increasingly isolated. The potential for renewed conflict with Kurdish forces, backed by their former U.S. allies, looms

Turkey's involvement also has broader geopolitical ramifications. With its sights set on the Kurdish issue, Erdoğan's government is posi-



tioning itself as the dominant player in post-Assad Syria. But this ambition will almost certainly inflame tensions with Iran, which has deepened its presence in Syria through various militias supporting Assad's regime. As Ankara's military presence expands, the risk of a direct confrontation between Turkey and Iranian-backed forces becomes ever more real.

While Turkey's focus is on reshaping the northern part of Syria, Israel's priorities are centered on its own security, particularly the need to limit Iran's influence in the region. For years, Israel has waged a covert war against Iranian military infrastructure in Syria, targeting weap-

ons convoys, missile sites, and Iranian-backed militias. With Assad's regime on the brink of collapse, Israel sees an opportunity to further diminish Iran's foothold in Syria and prevent the country from becoming an Iranian launchpad for future

Israel's involvement is rooted in a deeply entrenched history of conflict with Syria, dating back to the founding of the Jewish state in 1948.

The two countries fought multiple wars—the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the 1967 Six-Day War, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War—each one focused on territorial disputes and geopolitical dominance. The most significant of these is the Golan Heights, the stra-

tegically vital plateau seized by Israel from Syria in the 1967 war. The Golan is a commanding position overlooking northern Israel and Syria's main water sources, making it a military and economic prize. Though Israel formally annexed the Golan Heights in 1981, the territory remains at the heart of Syria's ongoing territorial claims. Despite numerous peace talks, including the 1990s negotiations brokered by the United States, Syria has never relinquished its demand for the Golan's return.

Since the collapse of Assad's regime, Israel has seized the opportunity to further solidify its control over the Golan, taking advantage of Syria's weakened state. Israel's air force has waged a shadow war against Iran's military presence in Syria for years, targeting weapons convoys, missile sites, and Iranianbacked militias operating in the region. The fall of Assad presents Israel with a chance to eliminate what it perceives as an Iranian foothold in Syria, a move that could fundamentally alter the balance of power in the region. Israel's top priority in the coming days will be to ensure that Syria does not become a launchpad for future Iranian attacks.

Israel's approach is already playing out in the southern parts of Syria, where Israeli forces have conducted airstrikes to target Iranian positions. These strikes are part of a broader effort to limit the ability of Iranian-backed militias to establish a permanent presence in Syria. As the situation in Syria becomes more volatile, Israel's security calculations are likely to drive it toward even deeper involvement, further complicating any prospects for peace or stability in the region.

Syria, with its rich strategic value, has long been a prize for foreign powers eager to exert influence over the region. While Turkey and Israel are

the most prominent players today, they are hardly alone in their ambitions. Iran, Russia and the United States all continue to stake claims in Syria, each with their own objectives.

Russia, despite its challenges in Ukraine, remains deeply committed to its military presence in Syria, particularly along the Mediterranean coast. The Russian military bases in Syria serve as a foothold for Russian influence in the region and provide Moscow with a critical outlet to project power in the Middle East. Even as Russia's global influence wanes, its presence in Syria remains a key pillar of its foreign policy, and it will not easily relinquish control of its

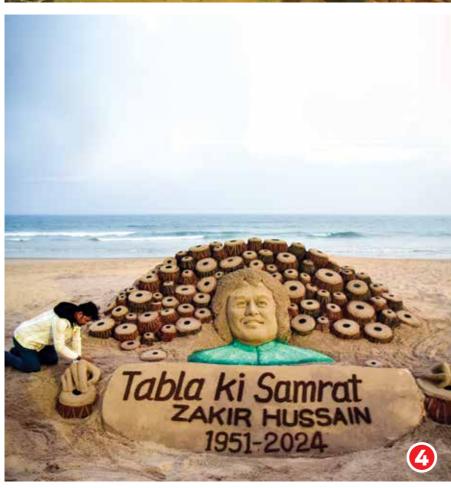
For the United States, its involvement in Syria is shaped by a mix of counterterrorism objectives and a desire to limit Iran's expansion. Washington's commitment to supporting Kurdish forces in the fight against IS has come into direct conflict with Turkey's interests, resulting in an uneasy and often contradictory relationship. As U.S. troops remain stationed in northeastern Syria, their presence serves as a check on both Turkish ambitions and Iranian influence. However, with the potential shift in leadership in the U.S. after the 2024 elections, the future of America's role in Syria remains uncertain. If the U.S. withdraws, the balance of power in Syria will likely tip in favour of Turkey and Iran, with significant consequences for the region.

As Assad disappears from the stage, Libya's descent into warlordism after Gaddafi, or Iraq's sectarian implosion after Saddam Hussein, is deeply etched into the Arab world's collective memory. With Syria's own mosaic of tribes, religions, and foreign interests, the same forces threaten to pull it apart once again.











- 1. Street vendors sit around a bonfire to warm themselves during a cold winter evening in Amritsar on Tuesday.
- 2. Bollywood actor Divya Dutta poses for pictures during the screening of the Indo-French joint-production 'Girls Will Be Girls'.
- 3. A person dressed as Santa Claus rows a boat as seagulls fly past, near Causeway of Tapi River in Surat of Gujarat.
- 4. Sand artist Sudarsan Pattnaik creates a sand sculpture to pay tribute to tabla maestro Ustad Zakir Hussain at Puri beach in Odisha.
- 5. Visitors at Serendipity Art Festival's 'Multiply' curated by Thukral and Tagra in Panaji, Goa.



#### **EXPLAINERS**

# Why Is Israel Interested In the Golan Heights?



Ruddhi Phadke

't's been not just two weeks since the Syrian rebels sprung into a spree of excitement and joy of freedom with celebratory tunes being heard across the streets of Damascus, after former President Bashar-Al-Assad fled the country over night. Unfortunately, the celebration was indeed short lived as the territory became exposed to the world. Especially Israel, a country that has been struggling to have a clear territorial outline since decades and has been mired by conflicts, tussle and bloody battles with all the neighouring Arab

settlements. The conflict that Israel has been constantly putting up a strong face to dates back to 1917 when the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, which expressed support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In 1920, the British Mandate for Palestine was established, which allowed for Jewish immigration and the development of Jewish settlements. Between 1920 and 1947, hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants arrived in Palestine, leading to tensions with the Arab population. Needless to say, the tensions are still simmering even today.

The moment Assad fled from Syria, there were two major concerns that haunted Israel. One being the biggest opportunity to strengthen presence in a land that has got freed up for all and second, to protect the Israeli population that has now turned vulnerable to the Syrian rebels. Over night Netanyahu approved of a plan to launch attacks in Syria, especially the Golan Heights

region that acts as a buffer zone be-

#### Israel vs Syria over Golan Heights

tween Israel and Syria.

The Golan Heights has been a focal point of contention between Israel and Syria since the mid-20th century. Israeli occupation in Golan heights dates back to 1967 when Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria during the Six-Day War. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Syria attempted to take back the Golan Heights but failed to do so. In 1974 the UN jumped into picture and deployed peacekeeping forces Golan Heights after Israel and Syria signed an armistice. The Security Council established the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in 1974 as an attempt to maintain a ceasefire and creating a ceasefire buffer zone in the area. As of April, 1,274 UN personnel are deployed in the Golan Heights. Later In 1981, came Israel's move to take over the Golan Heights inviting worldwide condemnation. Golan Heights region continues to remain under Israeli occupation, with approximately 20,000 Israeli settlers living in the region. However, this move has not been internationally recognized, except by the United States under the Trump administration in 2019. The region is considered to be a disputed territory by the international community, with the United Nations recognizing it as part of Syria. The dispute over the Golan Heights remains a major point of contention between Israel and Syria, with periodic clashes and tensions reported in the region.

#### Strategic relevance

The Golan Heights region is of immense strategic interest to Israel making the reasons behind Netanvahu's move to approve of the action by Israeli Defence Forces to occupy the territory even more obvious. Netanyahu himself entered Syrian territory on Tuesday claiming it to be a security tour of the buffer zone seized by Israel. The strategically located region provides Israel with a military vantage point and control over the surrounding region. It is a plateau overlooking northern Israel, providing a significant military advantage. It is a critical source of water for Israel as it contains the headwaters of the Jordan River and feeds into the Sea of Galilee, an essential water reservoir. Control of the Golan Heights helps Israel secure its water supply. Needless to say, it facilitates Israel to detect and prevent potential attacks or infiltration in the backdrop of ongoing conflicts and the presence of groups like Hezbollah and Iranian-backed militias. Besides, the region has fertile land suitable for agriculture and is home to vineyards, orchards, and cattle ranches, and has strong potential for tourism. Lastly, potential oil and natural gas reserves in the region add more strategic value to Golan Heights. Above all, religious and ethnic sentiments cannot be overlooked when it comes to human beings. Golan Heights has ancient Jewish connections, with archaeological sites and evidence of Jewish settlement during biblical times.

#### **Security threat**

supplied by Russia.

While Israel's motive behind entering Golan heights is clear in the region's strategic importance, another factor being current chaotic situation in Syria. An entire Syria has fallen into the hands of rebel forces primarily comprised of Kurdish forces supported by Turkey. Left over Assad's Syrian army is fast changing its loyalty to the stronger rebel group. This chaotic condition resulting out of political vacuum has created a possibility of revival of ISIS or Islamic hardliners in Syria. This has alarmed Israel and hence it has taken the preemptive action to destroy Syria's arms depots & bases completely. It was an easy cakewalk for Israel as there was no opposing or defending force, with dismantling of Syrian army & rebel forces still lingering in rejoicing phase of Assad's ouster. This eliminated possibility of rebels attacking Israel using modern arms

# Where Turkey Stands As Svrian Government Falls?

yrian refugees across Turkey jubilantly welcomed the downfall of Bashar Assad's government Sunday, with many embracing the chance to return to their homeland.

Large crowds waving Syrian and Turkish flags gathered in the main square of Kilis, a border city in southern Turkey.

In Hatay province, which also lies on the Syrian frontier, many said it was time to go home after years of living in Turkey, which hosts some 3 million Syrians.

"We are free now, everyone should return to their homeland," Mahmud Esma told the DHA news agency at the Cilvegozu border gate.

Turkey, which shares a 911-kilometre-long frontier with Syria, has been a main backer of opposition groups aiming to topple Assad since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011.

While Turkish officials have strongly rejected claims of any involvement, observers believe that the offensive, which appears to be aligned with Turkey's long-time goals, could not have gone ahead without Ankara's consent.

It has allowed Turkey, through its Syrian proxy the Syrian National Army, to push back against Kurdish forces in Syria allied to its sworn enemy, the Kurdistan Workers' Party,

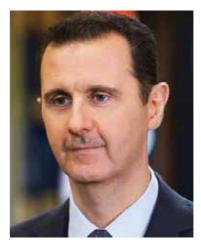
The jihadi group that spearheaded the 10-day march on Damascus, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, is listed as a terrorist organisation by Ankara. However, Turkey has operated alongside it for years in northern Svria and is believed to exert significant influence over the group.

Here's a look at Turkey's position, how Assad's removal could serve the country's objectives and possible risks ahead:

Ties with Syria

Turkey has stated its support for Syria's territorial integrity: the last thing it wants is a Kurdish-controlled autonomous region on its border or a fresh exodus of refugees created by instability.

Ankara has conducted several incursions into Syria since 2016 with



the aim of pushing back the Islamic State group or Kurdish militants and creating a buffer zone along its border, and now controls a stretch of territory in northern Syria.

Turkey was previously involved in diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict between the regime and insurgents, including holding talks with Assad's main supporters, Russia and Iran.

Recently Ankara sought a reconciliation with Assad in order to mitigate the threat to Turkey from Kurdish militias and ensure the safe return of refugees. Assad rebuffed Turkey's overtures.

Where Turkey stands

Turkish officials have strongly rejected claims of involvement in the anti-government offensive, stating opposition to developments that increase instability in the region.

"All statements that claim Turkey provoked or that Turkey supported this are untrue. They are all lies," Omer Celik, spokesman for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling party, said this week.

Analysts say, however, that the rebel offensive would have been impossible without a green light from

Turkish officials say Ankara stalled the offensive for months. Opposition forces finally went ahead with the assault after the Syrian government attacked opposition-held areas, violating agreements between Russia, Iran and Turkey to de-esca-

The offensive was initially meant to be limited, the officials said, but expanded after Syrian government forces began retreating from their

Speaking in Qatar on Sunday, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said Turkey "attaches great importance for the national unity, stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and the well-being of the Syrian people.

"Thereby millions of Syrians who were forced to leave their homes can return to their land."

Risks ahead

The Syrian government's fall could pose several risks to Turkey, including sending a new wave of refugees toward the Turkish border if chaos ensues.

Sinan Ulgen, director of the Istanbul-based Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, said that first and foremost Turkey wants a stable

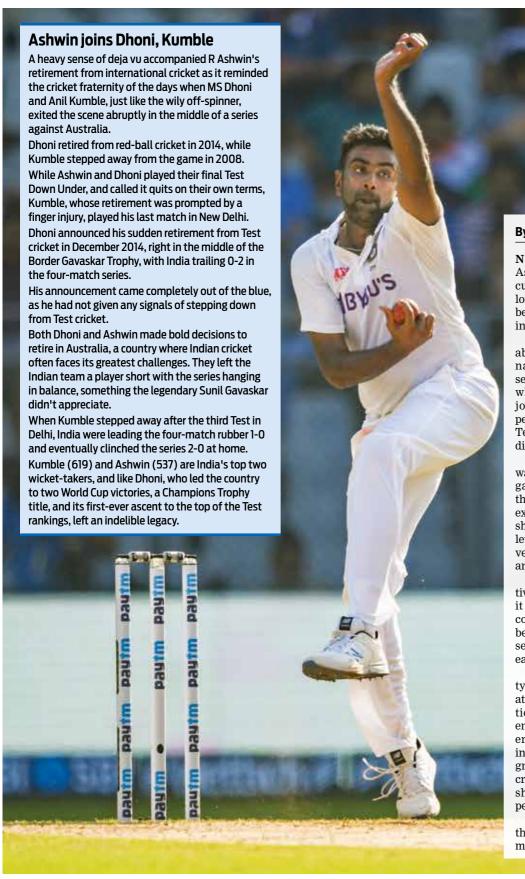
"The first risk that Turkey would want to avoid that all cost is the territorial disintegration of Syria, with different power structures vying to obtain autonomy on their territory,' he said, highlighting the PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units, the YPG, in northeast Syria.

A stable period of transition would allow Turkey to channel economic aid to Syria to create the conditions for the return of refugees, Ulgen added.

Some analysts have suggested that the rebel offensive could stoke tensions with Syria's backers, Iran and Russia. Turkey, a NATO member, has sought to balance close relations with both Ukraine and Russia in the face of Moscow's full-scale

invasion of its neighbour. Ulgen noted that Russia has not accused Turkey of stoking the insurgents' advance. He said this was due in part to not wanting Turkey to 'switch to become more anti-Russia" in its stance on the war in Ukraine.

"I don't think that this creates a breaking point in Turkey-Russian



# 

#### By Kushan Sarkar

New Delhi: Ravichandran Ashwin sparred with his insecurities as a child for far too long and perhaps didn't want to be dragged into a rigmarole of insecurities once again.

It is for this reason that an abrupt retirement from international cricket would not seem out of the blue for anyone who has followed the man's journey. It could have happened in Sydney after the fifth Test against Australia but he didn't want to hang around.

No one had to tell him that it was time to walk away from the game that consumed nearly three decades of his 38-year-old existence. Ashwin, the straightshooter, did a cameo presser to let the world know in John Denver style "My bags are packed and I am ready go".

He wore many hats as an active international cricketer and it would take just a five-minute conversation with him would be enough to know that he can see through word salad quite

It is very difficult to stereotype Ashwin even after 14 years at the top level. The 765 international wickets are not a good enough data to decode the veteran, who admitted to being insecure as a kid in his book. He gradually won that battle with cricket playing a major role in shaping him into an assured person.

"I would rather fail in life than be absolutely safe. That's my character. I don't have the common insecurities that people have," Ashwin had recently told PTI when the first part of his autobiography "I Have The Streets" released a few months

"If you go to the Casino, thinking of how much money you will make, you will pretty much end up without a rupee. But when you go with the intention of having fun and wanting to lose the money that you have, you always go back a much richer person. It was actually a big learning experience," he had said.

So when he told his teammates about his decision, he didn't care whether his 106 Test matches could become 107 or for that matter 108. It didn't matter anymore.

If one has to analyse Ashwin the cricketer, it is very difficult to ignore Ashwin, the person, who had a very independent mind and a brain that probably ticked 24x7. He believed in deconstruction of his art and became craftier one ball at a time.

He never believed that an offspinner can only bowl doosra (the wrong 'un) with a legal action. But he developed his own wrong 'un, patented it as "carrom ball", which could be bowled with a flick of middle finger and thumb and beats the outside edge of a right hander.

The ball became Ashwin's calling card throughout his career but he had the guts to tell the world that he had learnt it by first watching Sri Lankan Ajantha Mendis during a junior camp in Chennai.

From 2011 till the series against England, he was lethal

Critics can talk endlessly about the nature of Indian strips during the past 13 years but no one can deny Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja were a force of nature in those conditions.

One can be provided with advantageous conditions but the player also needs to know how to capitalise. The 383 wickets on Indian soil and 433 out of his 537 Test scalps in Asia is a testimony to his mastery of these conditions.

He has had some great spells in England and Australia but at times statistics conceal more than they reveal. No one can gauge how much pain he endured due to a lower abdominal injury during the 2018 Southampton Test against England which India lost.

Ashwin's biggest overseas Test achievement would certainly be batting for more than 40 overs with an equally hamstrung Hanuma Vihari as the two saved a Test match in Sydney in 2021. If 'Gabba' was India's Sholay, Sydney certainly was 'Ankur'.

That day, Ashwin played through the pain to save a game that felt like a victory.

He is a man of strong values. In his junior cricket days, it was his father Ravichandran, who, from the sidelines, asked him to run the non-striker out when he saw him gaining unfair ground. That started his tryst with with run outs at the nonstrikers' end. He believed in rules and played by them.

'Spirit of Cricket' in garb of cheating was unacceptable to

He could stand for a colleague, like he did for Mohammed Siraj, who was hurled with choicest abuses in Australia.

But he always knew that cricket is a part of life not heart

The engineer from Chennai's Ramkrishnapuram First Street never hesitated in leaving a COVID bio-bubble when family members fell sick quit a Test match when his mother Chithra survived a heart scare

One former agent who worked with Ashwin during his earlier days had once said: "There are people who pitch ideas and deals. And there are people who close the deal. Ashwin is the second one."

He always had a plan B, be it buying a cricket team in the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association league or a squad in the Global Chess League.

His Tamil YouTube channel with 'Kutty Stories' and interviews has a huge Pan India following. His refreshing takes on cricket's myriad issues, players and laws are a huge hit with the fans. "I had realised that I don't need an intermediary (media) to connect with people who might have a created perception about me," he had said.

Ravichandran Ashwin, the cricketer will always be one of a kind. A sequel to 'I Have The Streets' would be as fascinating.

# India to face Pakistan in opening Kho-Kho match



New Delhi: Hosts India will face arch rivals Pakistan in the opening match of the inaugural Kho Kho World Cup on January 13, the organisers announced on Wednesday.

As many as 24 countries have already confirmed their participation in the week-long event (January 13-19), which will be organised at the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium in the national capital and at the Noida Indoor Stadium.

"The league matches will start on January 13. There will be an opening ceremony on that day and after that the most exciting match of the season, the match between India and Pakistan men's teams will be played on January 13," Kho Kho World Cup CEO Vikram Dev Dogra said in the press

conference on Wednesday. "Thereafter, on 14th, 15th

and 16th January, the remaining league matches will carry on, following which the quarterfinals will be held on January 17 and semifinals on January 18 and final on January 19 " He said the national

camp of 60 men and 60 women is currently undergoing at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, and the Indian teams -- men and women -- for the World will be selected from among these

Kho Kho Federation of India (KKFI) president and chairman of the tournament's organising committee, Sudhanshu Mittal announced that Bollywood megastar Salman Khan will be the brand ambassador of the World Cup.

"I am announcing with pride that the brand ambassador of the event will be

> Salman Khan." Mittal said. USA, England, Germany, Australia New Zealand and Brazil are among the teams that have confirmed their participation in the tournament.

in a league-cum-knockout format, for both men and women. Among Asian countries.

The event will take place

Indonesia will send only their women's team while all other nations will send both their men and women's squads.

Mittal said that 615 players and 125 support staff will take part in the event. Each team will comprise 15 players, one coach, one manager and international technical officials. -PTI

#### India wait for Harman's fitness

Navi Mumbai: Harmanpreet Kaur's participation in India Women's T20I series decider here on Thursday is under doubt after the regular captain was sidelined from the second match having suffered a niggle in her knee during the first game.

Smriti Mandhana, who stood in for Kaur as the West Indies levelled the series 1-1 on Tuesday, said the team is awaiting update on Kaur's availability for the third match.

"Harman's fitness, (the) BCCI medical team is observing on day-to-day basis. They'll be at a better place to answer that question. I think we'll have to wait for the update from their side." Mandhana told media after India's crushing nine-wicket loss here on Tuesday.

Kaur, who turned up for practice here last Saturday with her knee strapped, scored 13 not out in India's big total of 195/4 but she did not take the field in the series-opener here.

"Harmanpreet Kaur sustained a niggle in her knee while batting during the first T20I against West

# Will go to Melbourne with confidence: Rohit

Brisbane: Indian skipper Rohit Sharma hailed the resilience of the lower-order batters after his team managed to salvage a crucial draw in the rain-hit third Test against Australia here on Wednesday, saying it has given the side renewed confidence for the remaining series.

With the five-match Border-Gavaskar Trophy now tied 1-1. Rohit believes the team's morale will be high during the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne.

"I mean, we will take that. Obviously to have interruntions like that wasn't great, but going to Melbourne at 1-1 pretty much gives us that confidence to go out there and pull things towards us," Rohit said at post-match t h e presentation.

"The situation we were in iust after lunch (on Day 4), needed someone to stand up and take us through, we knew with the weather, we knew it wasn't going to be a full game.'

Opener KL Rahul once again shone, top-scoring with 84 before Ravindra Jadeja (77) put up a lower-



order resistance.

Akash Deep (31) and Jasprit Bumrah (10 not out) put on a gritty 47-run partnership to help India avoid follow-on before they were all out for 260 in reply to Australia's big first innings score of 445.

"Credit to (Ravindra) Jadeja, the way he played and (KL) Rahul, the way he played was magnificent at the top of the order, the fight that Akash Deep and Bumrah (gave) was great to watch, we have seen them work so hard at the nets (on their batting)."

#### **Cummins denies momentum** in India's favour

Australia captain Pat Cummins is not bothered if India walked away with momentum from the drawn third Test but is pleased that they did not let the visitors exploit better batting conditions in the first innings. Australia, who largely controlled the third Test, declared their second innings at 89/7 to set India a 275-run target but rian prevented an exciting climax. "(I) can't say I've ever been scared of momentum — don't really care about that. I think we can take a lot from this week," he told media after the end of the contest. "A couple of great partnerships, to be sent in on a (fresh) wicket and score 450 (445) and then managing to bowl India out for 250 (260) when the wicket, the conditions were probably a little bit better. We can take a lot from that," he said.

# Dinesh Rathod 'Navodit Mumbai Shri'

By Correspondent

Mumbai: Dinesh Rathod of the Parab Fitness gymnasium won the 'Navodit Mumbai Shri' bodybuilding tournament, which was witnessed by an unprecedented crowd and a record participation of athletes at Kamgar Maidan, Parel. Hiten Tamore of Strength Gym finished as the runner-up.

A record number of 280 bodybuilders showed up to flex their muscles in seven groups, where the competition in each group was challenging. In the extremely competitive 55 kg weight category, Syed Shahvez of Anant Gymnasium emerged victorious, while Durgesh Meher of Bodywork Shop emerged victorious in the 60 kg weight category. In the 65 kg weight category, Rohit Yadav of Muscle Empire came first, while Hiten Tamore of Strength Gym won the 70 kg weight category. In the next three groups, there was a close fight for the group title, in which Wali Ansari, Dinesh Rathod and Ganesh Mhabdi came first.

The finals saw a fierce competition among Dinesh Rathod, Ganesh Mhabdi, Hiten Tamore and Rohit Yadav. Finally, Dinesh defeated Hiten to win the title. The winner of the competition was awarded the title of 'Navodit Mumbai Shri' along with a cash prize of Rs. 21,000.

The tournament was organised by international bodybuilder Vikrant Desai jointly with the Brihanmumbai Bodybuilding Association and the Mumbai Suburban Bodybuilding



and Fitness Association. The prize distribution ceremony was held in the presence of Mumbai Bodybuilding Association President Ajay Khanwilkar, General Secretary Rajesh

Sawant, Mumbai Suburban Bodybuilding Association President Amol Kirtikar, Sudhir Salvi, former corporator Nana Ambole. Vishal Parab, Kitty Fansek and Sunil Shegde.

'Navodit Mumbai Shri' results:

**55 kg:** 1. Syed Shahvez (Anant Vy.), 2. Vinay Ghadigaonkar (Raj Gym), 3. Darshan Sawant (Cloud Nine), 4. Pranay Murkar (Power Fitness), Siddhant

Lad (Parab Fitness). 60 kg: 1. Durgesh Meher (Bodywork Shop), 2. Naeem Syed (Parab Fitness), 3. Shubham Adangle (Maansaheb), 4. Kadir Sheikh (A.K. Fitness), 5. Arpan Sakpal (Parab Fitness).

**65 kg:** 1. Rohit Yadav (Muscle Empire), 2. Santosh Ghatal (Bodywork

Shop), 3. Adnan Tiwari (Bal Mitra Gym), 4. Yagnik Mandadkar (Apoorva Gym), 5. Shivam Jadhav (Parab Fitness).

70 kg: 1. Hiten Tamore (Strength Gym), 2. Laxman Patil (SP Fitness), 3. Darshan Sanas (Jai Bhavani Gym), 4. Mangesh Bhosle (Bodywork Shop), 5. Kiran Patil (Chhatrapati Shivajar University).

75 kg: 1. Wali Ansari (Parab Fitness), 2. Manish Vaghela (Iron Paradise), 3. Roshan Panda (Parab Fitness), 4. Vipul Kamble (Parab Fitness), 5. Yogesh

Marde (Parab Fitness). 80 kg: 1. Dipesh Rathore

(Parab Fitness), 2. Dipesh Kalmkar (Mansaheb), 3. Omkar Kalke (Fitness Point), 4. Raj Ghole (Jai Bhawani), 5. Shubham Chaudhary (Madness). Above 80 kg: 1. Ganesh

Mhabdi (Infinite Gym), 2. Nilesh Remie (Parab Fitness), Irfan Remje (Bal Mitra Gym), 4. Ayush Tandel (Parab Fitness), Rian Koli (Gurudutt Gym).

Title Winner - Dinesh Rathod (Parab Fitness), Runner-up - Hiten Tamore (Strength Gym).