

THE PERFECT VOICE



CM pushes Munde's ball in Ajit's court ... pg 2



Challenges galore as Team Sitharaman frames Budget ... pg 6



Thakur shines again ... pg 10

64 feared dead as passenger jet collides with Army helicopter

Arlington: There are likely no survivors from a crash involving a passenger jet and a US Army helicopter in Washington, officials said Thursday, as recovery teams pulled 28 bodies from the river where both aircraft went down.

The American Airlines regional passenger jet with 64 people aboard collided with a US Army Black Hawk helicopter and crashed into the Potomac River near Reagan Washington National Airport earlier on Thursday. Moments after the mid-air collision Wednesday night, President Donald Trump said that he had been briefed on the "terrible accident" and was monitoring the situation.

The plane was carrying 60 passengers and four crew members when it collided with the Black Hawk helicopter which had three soldiers aboard. All take-offs and landings have been halted at the airport as the rescue operation got underway.



Search and rescue efforts are seen around a wreckage site in the Potomac River from Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in Arlington. Pic: AP/PTI

Dozens of firefighters are "engaged in dive operations" on the Potomac River. US Senator Ted Cruz said "We know there are fatalities" from the plane and helicopter collision, although he did not give out any further details about it.

There was no immediate word on the cause of the collision, but all takeoffs and landings from the airport were halted as dive teams scoured the site and helicopters from law enforcement agencies across

the region flew over the scene in a methodical search for bodies.

Images from the river showed boats around the partly submerged wing and what appeared to be the mangled wreckage of the plane's fuselage.

"We are going to recover our fellow citizens," District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser said at a sombre news conference at the airport in which she declined to say how many bodies had been

recovered.

The person who told The Associated Press that there had been multiple deaths was not authorised to publicly discuss details of the investigation and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Sen. Roger Marshall of Kansas said, "When one person dies it's a tragedy, but when many, many, many people die it's an unbearable sorrow."

President Donald Trump said he had been "fully briefed on this terrible ac-

cident" and, referring to the passengers, added, "May God Bless their souls."

Passengers on the flight included a group of figure skaters, their coaches and family members who were returning from a development camp that followed the US Figure Skating Championships in Wichita.

"We are devastated by this unspeakable tragedy and hold the victims' families closely in our hearts," US Figure Skating said in a statement.

Two of those coaches were identified by the Kremlin as Russian figure skaters Evgenia Shishkova and Vadim Naumov, who won the pairs title at the 1994 world championships and competed twice in the Olympics. The Skating Club of Boston lists them as coaches and their son, Maxim Naumov, is a competitive figure skater for the US.

Pilots of jet had agreed to land on another strip ... Page 4



Israeli soldier Arbel Yehoud, 29, who has been held hostage by Hamas in Gaza since October 7, 2023, is escorted by Hamas and Islamic Jihad fighters as she is handed over to the Red Cross in southern Gaza Strip on Thursday. Pic: AP/PTI

Suspected MPSC paper leak

Pune/Thane: The Pune police are investigating a viral phone call recording in which an aspirant is purportedly asked to pay Rs 40 lakh in exchange for an MPSC exam question paper, an official said on Thursday.

The Maharashtra Public Service Commission (MPSC) has clarified that all the question paper sets are safe in their custody.

The Group B (non-gazetted) joint examination 2024, conducted by the MPSC, is scheduled for Sunday.

In the purported phone recording, a person offers to provide the question paper to a candidate a day before the exam in return for

Rs 35-40 lakh.

In a notification issued on Thursday, MPSC said it approached the police for an investigation after learning about the viral audio clip.

"MPSC has approached us and we are probing the purported phone call recording," said Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime) Nikhil Pingle.

Addressing a press conference in Navi Mumbai, MPSC secretary Dr Suvra Kharat said all preparations are in place to conduct the Maharashtra Group-B (Non-Gazetted) Services Combined Preliminary Examination 2024 in fair, transparent manner.

"There should be no doubts regarding the integrity of the examination process. Aspirants must not believe in rumours of leaks etc. All question papers are securely stored under stringent security protocols. It has come to our notice that some individuals are attempting to deceive candidates by falsely claiming to have access to the exam papers and demanding money in return."

The Maharashtra Group-B (Non-Gazetted) Services Combined Preliminary Examination 2024 is a highly competitive exam, with 2,86,000 candidates expected to appear across the state.

Apple tops Indian smartphone market

New Delhi: iPhone maker Apple led the India smartphone market in supply value terms with 23 per cent share while Chinese smartphone brand Vivo led the market in volumes in 2024, a report by Counterpoint Research said on Thursday.

Apple volume share during the December quarter increased to 11 per cent on a year-on-year basis to occupy the fifth spot from 9 per cent a year ago.

The iPhone maker, however, did not figure among the top five smartphone brands in annual data sets as per the Counterpoint Research estimates.

The report estimated that smartphone shipments grew 1 per cent year-on-year in 2024, reaching 153 million units.

Counterpoint Research Senior Research Analyst Shilpi Jain said India's smartphone market is showing signs of maturity, with stable volumes affected by low entry of new users into the ecosystem.

According to Counter-

point's Monthly India Smartphone Tracker, Vivo led the country's smartphone market in volumes in the December quarter as well with its share increasing to 20 per cent from 17 per cent in December 2023 quarter.

During the reported quarter, Xiaomi followed Vivo with 16 per cent volume share, Samsung with 15 per cent and Oppo with 14 per cent.

Research Analyst at Counterpoint Research Shubham Singh said Vivo emerged as the market leader for the first time with year-on-year growth of 16 per cent, supported by a robust offline network and its sub-brand iQOO.

"Samsung slipped to third, as its value-driven strategies led to a reduced position in lower price bands, impacting overall shipments. However, Samsung's premium devices continued to perform well, particularly its S series, which helped the brand gain share in the premium segment," Singh said.

MUDA scam ED points to money laundering

Bengaluru: The thirteen sites (plots) allotted to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's wife Parvathi B M in Mysuru upmarket were 'illegally allotted' and there was a money laundering attempt, alleges the ED investigation into the MUDA land allotment case.

The Provisional Attachment Order (PAO) issued by the Enforcement Directorate gave a detailed picture of the alleged modus operandi to use these 14 sites allegedly for the money laundering purposes.

Repeated efforts to elicit a reaction from Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and his family over the ED's allegation remain futile. There was no reaction from them immediately.

Activist Snehamayi Krishna, a petitioner in the Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA) case shared the copy of PAO with PTI. As per the 104-page order, that the "illegal allotment was done under the influence".



LoP in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi during a visit at the Yamuna river amid a controversy surrounding contamination of the river water in New Delhi. Pic: PTI

Congress overlooked interests of Dalits, backwards in 90s: Rahul

New Delhi: The Congress did not protect the interests of the Dalits and backwards the way it should have in the 1990s, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi said on Thursday.

Addressing a programme organised by Dalit influencers here, Gandhi said merely getting political representation for Dalits and backwards would not help solve their problems unless they got "bhaa-

gidaari" in institutions and wealth.

He also said that once the "original base" of the Congress party is back, the BJP and the RSS would have to run away. It will happen soon, he added.

Gandhi said during Indira Gandhi's tenure, the Congress had full confidence of Dalits, minorities, backwards, but later in the 1990s "there were shortcomings," and the fact is not lost on the party.

"We would not talk just about representation. You talk about political representation and Kanshi Ram fought for political representation. But they have made political representation irrelevant. Lok Sabha BJP MPs say they have made them a statue as they can't even speak. The institutions, be it education or corporate India, judiciary, we have to get the share of power," he said at the function.

ECI tries to raid Mann's residence

New Delhi: A high drama unfolded outside Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's residence in Delhi on Thursday as EC officials tried to conduct a search of the premises following allegation that money was being distributed from the property ahead of the February 5 assembly polls.

Mann, who has been campaigning for AAP in Delhi, hit back at the Election Commission (EC) and the Delhi Police, accusing them of trying to "defame Punjabis" at the behest of the BJP.

AAP leaders, including party supremo Arvind Kejriwal and Delhi Chief Minister Atishi, doubled down to defend Mann and accused the poll authority of turning a blind eye to the BJP "openly" distributing money.

After more than two hours, the EC team, accompanied by Delhi Police, returned empty-handed.

An EC official said a complaint was received regarding the distribution of

cash and it had to be disposed of within 100 minutes but permission was not granted to conduct a search.

The complaint was received through an official app, he said. "This is to clarify the actions taken in response to cVIGIL Complaint ID 1282744 regarding the alleged distribution of cash at Kapurthala House, New Delhi, which falls under jurisdiction of AC-40, New Delhi," the New Delhi District EC Office said.

According to protocol, the flying squad team of the New Delhi Assembly constituency, stationed nearby, was assigned the task by the control room to investigate the complaint and close it by taking appropriate action within the stipulated 100-minute timeframe, it said.

The development comes a day after a private vehicle bearing a "Punjab government" sticker and registration number of the state was seized by the Delhi Police. -PTI

'Stampede: No fault of Arrangements'

By Ruddhi Phadke

Mumbai: While the Uttar Pradesh government is facing flak over the deaths of 30 devotees in Maha Kumbh, a devotee told *'The Perfect Voice'* that the arrangements were very well organised, and the stampede occurred mainly due to indiscipline of the devotees.

Mumbai-based businessman Pramod Khadse who managed to reach the most sought after destination Sangam nose on the afternoon of Thursday, January 31 recalled his experience. "The arrangements are excellent. Crores of people have visited this spot. The

security is perfect. It is very very sad that so many people died."

Khadse said, "The pilgrims had arrived the spot early morning, and all of them had fallen asleep in the restricted area near the barricades. Naturally, the security teams tried to vacate that area, and in the process the chaos happened because the pilgrims were sleeping and were very drowsy."

He pointed out that although the arrangements are excellent, the crowd is so huge that traffic jam has made the process misera-

ble. "It is difficult to blame anyone. The number of pilgrims is so much and I vouch for the fact that the arrangements are flawless but traffic jams are inevitable due to the large number of crowd. I found it nearly important to reach the Sangam nose."

"My vehicle was stopped 14 km from the actual site. Later, I had to walk for 22 km. Everyone is abandoning their vehicles after a point and walking to Sangam nose. I finally reached and took the holy dip twice."

The Sangam Nose at the



confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the Saraswati rivers, attracts millions of devotees during the Kumbh Mela. Close to 15 crore dev-

otees have visited the spot this year. The devotees believe that taking a dip in the Sangam washes away sins and frees people from the

cycle of birth and rebirth.

At least 30 pilgrims were killed, dozens injured and many separated from their families as a humungous group of devotees tried to break through barriers to reach the nose at the Triveni Sangam.

Travel becomes expensive

After the mishap on Wednesday a few pilgrims pointed out that the travel has become a big challenge because the prices have shot up exponentially. Devotees planning a trip to Prayagraj in February are

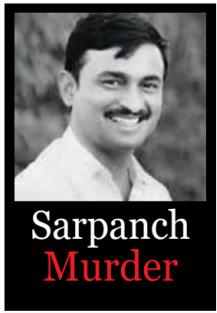
worried because airfare to Varanasi and Prayagraj has shot up as high as Rs 20-25,000, which otherwise usually is Rs 4-5,000.

Mumbai based Chartered accountant Manoj Tiwari who will have planned to travel to the Sangam Nose in February said, "I still want to go, especially with the historical significance and how rare this event is. It must feel like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The mishap is certainly concerning, but sometimes such incidents are unavoidable in big events. It's tough to say



who's at fault without more info, but safety measures might need to be heightened in situations like this."

He added, "Travel being expensive is an issue right now. It's understandable with train services being unpredictable and flights being nearly impossible to get, the options are limited. Private vehicles seem like the only feasible way to go, though that can come with its own set of problems—like high costs and long travel time."



CM pushes Munde's ball in Ajit's court

SAYS AJIT PAWAR'S STAND ON THE CONTROVERSIAL MINISTER WILL BE FINAL

Mumbai: Putting the ball in his deputy's court, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Thursday said Ajit Pawar's decision about the continuance of NCP leader Dhananjay Munde in the state cabinet will be final.

"Whatever stand Ajit Pawar takes will be final," Fadnavis told reporters in Delhi on the sidelines of a rally, as pressure mounted on the Mahayuti coalition government on the issue.

Munde has been facing the heat since the arrest of his close aide Walmik Karad in an extortion case related to the brutal murder of Massajog village sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh in Beed district in December. Munde is an MLA from the same district.

After activist Anjali Damania met deputy CM Pawar, who heads the Nationalist Congress Party, and handed some documents about alleged nexus between Munde and Karad, Pawar had said those found guilty after inquiry will certainly face action.

"Dhananjay Munde and I met during the cabinet meeting in the morning. He is a minister in our government, and there is nothing secret about our meeting. He can meet me anytime, and I can meet him anytime," Fadnavis told reporters while responding to a question about the meeting.

"Ajit Pawar has made a statement about (demand for) his resignation. Whatever stand Ajit Pawar takes, will be final," the CM added.

Ajit Pawar warns party workers against involvement in extortion rackets

Amid the political row over the murder of a sarpanch, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit



One accused still absconding, what is govt doing? Sule

NCP (SP) Lok Sabha member Supriya Sule on Thursday criticised the Maharashtra government over the probe into the murder of sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh, saying one of the alleged killers was at large even 50 days after the crime.



Referring to Deshmukh's murder and some other crimes, Sule said she will raise these issues in Parliament and will also seek appointment with Union Home Minister Amit Shah to apprise him of the situation in the state. She appreciated Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister and NCP head Ajit Pawar's "strong stand" while addressing his party workers in Beed on Thursday, and said had he taken such a stand earlier, the sarpanch would have been alive. "One of the killers of Deshmukh is still at large for the last 51 days. How can that person disappear? What are the police doing?" Sule asked while talking to reporters here.

Pawar on Thursday asked NCP workers in Beed district not to get involved in extortion attempts targeting development projects. Asking his party workers to

maintain a "clean character", the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) chief said political interference will not be tolerated in the administration.

His remarks come against the backdrop of the arrest of Walmik Karad, a close associate of state NCP minister Dhananjay Munde, in an extortion case linked to the

murder of sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh in Beed district.

The opposition has been demanding Munde's ouster in the wake of the arrest of his associate and to facilitate an impartial probe into the murder of Deshmukh.

Pawar arrived in Beed on Thursday morning, his first visit since becoming the district guardian minister.

Addressing a gathering of NCP workers, he said, "Maintain a clean character. Everybody should take care not to mingle with the wrong people. Our image among the people here (in Beed) should be good."

"No political interference will be tolerated in the administrative works and no one should ask for extortion money in development works," Pawar said.

The deputy CM said if he comes to know about such activities, he will not spare anyone and invoke the stringent Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA) against the guilty. "I can take any sort of action. I have already told (Chief Minister) Devendra Fadnavis that when I am taking this responsibility (as guardian minister of Beed), everyone should co-operate with me," he said.

Pawar also warned those brandishing guns in the public.

"I am also going to tell the (police) department that if someone is found showing a revolver or firing in the air, their licenses should be cancelled. I will not tolerate reels (short videos on social media) with weapons. Law will be equal for all, because a change should happen and people should feel the change," he said.

Dhas raises allegations against Munde in meeting with Ajit Pawar

BJP MLA Suresh Dhas on Thursday said Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar has asked him to submit a written complaint over the withdrawal of funds through "bogus bills" when Dhananjay Munde was the Beed guardian minister.



Dhas told reporters in Beed that he raised the matter with Pawar, the current guardian minister, at a district planning and development council meeting.

"Pawar told me to submit a written complaint. I have already provided documents in connection with the withdrawal of funds to his personal assistant on Wednesday. Now, I will submit the written complaint as instructed by Pawar," said Dhas.

The BJP leader, who represents the Ashti constituency in Beed district, had alleged on Wednesday that Rs 73.36 crore was fraudulently withdrawn under the watch of Munde when he was the district guardian minister.

Munde, a cabinet minister who belongs to the NCP headed by Pawar, represents the Parli assembly constituency in Beed.

"At least 500 people in Beed have slipped into coma after I raised the issue of bogus bills," claimed Dhas. The MLA has alleged that Rs 73.36 crore was withdrawn through bogus bills, while Rs 37.70 crore was withdrawn without doing any work.

"The issue of Santosh Deshmukh's murder and engineer Sanjay Munde won't be ignored. I will continue to follow on those in the coming days," he said. Dhas has alleged that public works in Parli and Ambajogai tehsils were not done but bills were raised under the district annual plan for 2021-2022, and claimed that he has evidence of the "corruption" in three files. According to the BJP MLA, funds were withdrawn through bogus bills between December 30, 2021, and March 31, 2022, at regular intervals by executive engineers of Zilla Parishad and the Public Works Department.

He claimed that one Sanjay Munde was shown as an executive engineer even though he was a deputy engineer.

"It is said that Sanjay Munde was given the charge as an executive engineer on June 25, 2022. A modus operandi was implemented wherein funds were moved from the district collector to the Zilla Parishad, and then to the Public Works Department.

"What was the need to withdraw all the money on March 31? Rs 37.70 crore was withdrawn without doing any work," the BJP MLA had alleged on Wednesday.

Sharp rise in road accidents in 2024 compared to 2023

Mumbai: Maharashtra's provisional accident data has shown that the number of road accidents increased sharply in 2024 when compared to 2023, while fatalities witnessed a minor dip.

The rise in accidents on Mumbai-Pune Expressway was a sizable 19 per cent, though the Mumbai-Nagpur Samruddhi Expressway saw a drop of 4 per cent, provisional data compiled by the highway police showed.

Maharashtra, the country's most industrialised state, has more than 3.8 crore vehicles.

The state witnessed 841 more accidents and 31 fewer fatalities in 2024 as compared to 2023, it showed.

"In 2024, the state recorded 36,084 accidents, while the figure was 35,243 accidents in 2023. The number of fatalities dropped to 15,335 in 2024 from 15,366 in 2023. The dip in the number of fatalities is 0.20 per cent, while the rise in the number of accidents is 2.38 per cent," as per the highway police data.

"Nine districts and cities have reported more than 10

per cent surge in fatalities. The highest 25 percent surge in fatalities was observed in Dhule district, followed by 23.4 per cent in Sindhudurg. A total of 24 districts and cities, including Mumbai, witnessed drop in fatalities. But only four cities and districts recorded a drop in fatalities of more than 10 per cent."

Wardha district has recorded the highest drop in fatalities at 29.2 per cent, followed by 15.9 per cent in Nashik city, while Washim was the only district where fatalities in the two years remained static.

"Mumbai-Pune Expressway witnessed 184 total accidents in 2024 as against 154 in 2023. However, there was a sharp 26 per cent rise in fatalities and 23 per cent increase in the number of fatal accidents. The Mumbai-Pune Expressway witnessed 70 fatal accidents and 82 fatalities in 2024 as against 57 fatal accidents and 65 fatalities in 2023."

The number of serious accidents has gone up by 41 per cent and minor accidents by 39 per cent on Mumbai-Pune Expressway.



An Artist giving final touch to Idol Ganesh Ganesh Workshop for the upcoming Maghi Ganesh Jayanti festival. Pic: Bhushan Koyande

'Pollution to be blamed for GBS'

Pune: NCP (SP) Lok Sabha member Supriya Sule on Thursday slammed the Pune civic administration as she blamed the "urban planning failure" and rising pollution for the outbreak of Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS), a rare nerve disorder, in the city.

There is a need to find the scientific cause behind the prevalence of GBS cases, the parliamentarian representing Baramati in Maharashtra's Pune district told reporters.

Sule demanded that the government bear all medi-

cal expenses of the GBS patients, claiming the disease was prevalent due to the "flawed management".

She visited a well, located in Nanded village off Sinhgad Road area here, from where contaminated water is suspected to have been supplied to adjoining localities, leading to the rise in GBS cases.

A 56-year-old woman from Pune is suspected to have died of GBS on Wednesday, while a 40-year-old man from Solapur died on Sunday.

Till Wednesday, 127 sus-

pected patients of GBS were found in Pune and elsewhere in the state, as per officials.

"I visited the well and the (nearby) area to understand the current GBS situation. People in the area are living in tremendous fear. I am going to put forth this issue in today's district planning and development committee meeting," Sule said.

Termining the current GBS situation as an "outbreak" (of the disease), Sule said all round efforts are needed to contain it.

SC to hear Gadling's bail plea next week

New Delhi: The Supreme Court on Thursday adjourned to next week the hearing on the bail plea of advocate Surendra Gadling in connection with the 2016 Surjagarh iron ore mine arson case.

A bench of Justices MM Sundresh and Rajesh Bindal deferred the matter as additional solicitor general Raja Thakare, representing Maharashtra government, was unavailable. Senior advocate Anand Grover, appearing for Gadling, requested the bench to keep the matter on top of the board.

The top court on October 10, 2023, issued notice to the state government and sought its response on the petition within four weeks.

On January 31, 2023 the Nagpur bench of the Bombay High Court refused to grant bail to Gadling and said the accusations against him were prima facie true.

On December 25, 2016, Maoist rebels allegedly set ablaze 76 vehicles being used for transporting iron ore from Surjagarh mines in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli. Gadling was accused of



providing aid to the Maoists and allegedly conspiring with various co-accused, including the ones absconding in the case.

He was booked under the various provisions of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, and the IPC and the prosecution claimed Gadling provided secret information about government activities and maps of certain areas to underground Maoist rebels.

He reportedly asked Maoists to oppose the operation of Surjagarh mines, and instigated several locals to join the movement.

Gadling also faced the Elgar Parishad-Maoist links case relating to the alleged provocative speeches delivered at the Elgar Parishad wocnclave held in Pune on December 31, 2017. The police claimed the speeches triggered violence the next day near the Koregaon-Bhima war memorial in Pune district.

PUBLIC NOTICE

A public notice is hereby given, that my client MR. SATISH TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA is one of legal heir of Late. MRS. SHUBHAN DEVI TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA. The said Late. MRS. SHUBHAN DEVI TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA died on 08/03/2024, at A/07, Chandrakanta Apartment, Varad Vinayak Lane, Near Ganpati Mandir, Virar East, Vasai, Palghar, left behind her 1) MR. TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Husband) 2) MR. SANTOSH TUFANI GUPTA, (Son), 3) MRS. KIRAN DIPAK GUPTA, (Daughter) 4) MRS. SEEMA ANIL GUPTA, (Daughter) 5) MANJU TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Daughter) 6) MEERA TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Daughter) 7) SATISH TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Son). The said Late. MRS. SHUBHAN DEVI TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA was Sole owner Flat No. 205 On Second Floor, D wing, In measuring 33.92 Sq. mtr (BUILT UP AREA) in Building Known as "BANGALU DEVI COMPLEX" Situated Known as "BANGADEVI CO-OPERATIVE HOUSING SOCIETY LTD", constructed on land being Survey no.197 (Old Survey No.65), Hissa No. 14+15+16, lying, being and situate at Village-NARINGI, Tal- Vasai, Dist- Palghar, within the area of sub-registrar at Vasai. And within the limits of Vasai Virar City Municipal Council.

After death of MRS. SHUBHAN DEVI TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA her shares devolved on the said legal heirs namely 1) MR. TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Husband) 2) MR. SANTOSH TUFANI GUPTA, (Son), 3) MRS. KIRAN DIPAK GUPTA, (Daughter) 4) MRS. SEEMA ANIL GUPTA, (Daughter) 5) MANJU TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Daughter) 6) MEERA TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Daughter) 7) SATISH TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Son). In equal proportion and accordingly the said of legal heirs and transfer the said shares and interest of deceased in the said Flat to the name of my client 1) MR. TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Husband) 2) MR. SANTOSH TUFANI GUPTA, (Son), 3) MRS. KIRAN DIPAK GUPTA, (Daughter) 4) MRS. SEEMA ANIL GUPTA, (Daughter) 5) MANJU TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Daughter) 6) MEERA TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Daughter) 7) SATISH TUFANI PRASAD GUPTA, (Son). It is entitled to succeed the shares and estate of deceased.

Whoever has any kind of right, title, interest and share in the aforesaid Property; shall come forward with their genuine objection along with certify copy of the documents to support their claim within 14 days from the issue of this Notice, and contact to me at the below mention address. Otherwise it shall be deemed and presumed that my clients are entitled to inherit the aforesaid property, and all future correspondence shall come in effect in my client's favour. And no claim shall be entertained after the expiry of Notice period

Date: 30/01/2025
ADV.RANJAN HASHA PATIL
OFFICE NO.102, KUNTI SADAN, VEER SAVARKAR MARG, VIRAR EAST, VASAI, PALGHAR-401305.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Uddhav Thackeray's Sena has consistently followed a policy of appeasement. The Waqf Board Bill is not against any community, certainly not against the Muslim community. It has been introduced to end the mismanagement of Waqf affairs."



Devendra Fadnavis, Chief Minister

Village keeps tradition of 'Gandhi-baba Jatra'

Latur: Republic Day conjures up images of a grand parade and procession of tableaux in the nation's capital, but for a village in Latur district, it is also about a "jatra" or fair centering around the Father of the Nation.

While most villages have fairs dedicated to local deities, residents of Ujed in Shirur Anantpal tehsil kept up its seven-decade-old tradition by organising the 'Gandhi-baba Jatra' from January 25 to 27.

Unbridled energy filled the village for three days, with streets adorned with vibrant flags and colourful 'rangolis' drawn in front of every house.

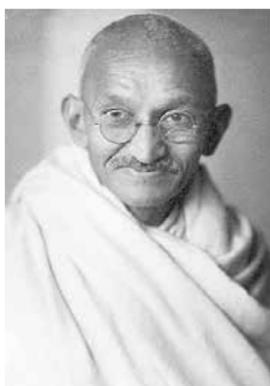
Nandini Jadhav, the sarpanch,

led a procession to bring Gandhi's bust, which stands in the gram panchayat office on other days, to the village square.

The fair featured agricultural exhibitions, competitions for children, wrestling matches and cultural programmes.

Talking about the origins of this unique event, fair committee president Anant Jadhav said earlier the village organised fairs dedicated to Lord Shiva, and Moiddinsab Khadri, a spiritual figure. However, the fairs were discontinued after Independence.

In 1955, village elders decided to organise a fair which would not be on religious lines, and came up



with the idea of celebrating the legacy of Gandhiji on Republic Day to promote the values of unity, peace and harmony that he stood for.

The fair became an annual feature, barring the two years of COVID-19 pandemic, Jadhav said.

"Gandhibaba Jatra is probably the first fair in the country dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi, and aligning the event with the Republic Day has added to its significance," he added.

The wrestling competition at the end of the three-day fair was a highlight that attracted several people from surrounding villages.

-PTI

Anna unveils public award in own name

By Quaid Najmi

Mumbai: Winner of many honours, veteran social worker Kisan Baburao 'Anna' Hazare has immortalised himself – by instituting an annual public award in his name for people excelling in community activities, an official said.

Titled 'Anna Hazare Social Service Gaurav Award', four notables have been selected for the inaugural distinction and shall be conferred it at a function scheduled on his upcoming birthday, June 15, and thereafter every year.

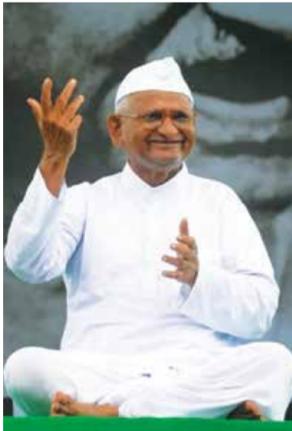
They are: Dr. Rajendra Dhamane and Dr. Suchita Dhamane of Mauli Seva Pratishthan, Sachin Khedkar of Uphal Foundation in Shegaon (both Ahmednagar); Santosh Garje of Aai Foundation in Gevrai (Beed); and Kishore Deshpande of Sawali Care Centre (Kolhapur).

The award ceremony on behalf of Hazare's native village, Ralegan-Siddhi, to the silent but dedicated individuals, shall be conducted and honours disbursed under the auspices of Swami Vivekananda Kritagya Nidhi Sansthan.

The prizes shall be worth Rs. 2 Lakhs, Rs 1.50 Lakhs, and two third prizes of Rs 1 Lakh each, besides certificate of merit and mementos.

Explaining the legendary Hazare's inspiration and magnanimity behind the award, his aide Anshu Shaikh said that during his lifetime, the anti-corruption Gandhian crusader was conferred with many accolades.

"These award monies, totaling to around Rs 1.67 crore, are in fixed deposits through a trust. He specifically directed that since the amount has come from society it should go back to the people in society. Hence,



the interest on the FDs shall be utilized for the cash rewards of the new honour in Hazare's name," Shaikh told 'The Perfect Voice'.

On his part, Hazare, 87 – born to labourers Baburao and Laxmibai – reminisced his tough and deprived childhood, the strong values imbibed from his unlettered mother, and the family's sheer struggles for survival.

"Guided by my mother's values and the school teachers, influences of Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhiji, I decided at the age of 16 to remain unmarried and dedicate myself independently to society," Hazare said today.

Unshackling himself from traditional aspirations, and hoping to improve his family's financial condition, the young Hazare joined the Indian Army as a driver, and had a close shave with death on occasions.

Now in the late-evening of his life,

the octogenarian travelled and worked in many places around the country but termed his over seven years in the snowy Himalayas as a 'milestone' in his life.

Hazare served the nation plus helped his family back home by sending part of his salary and after a 15-year long stint, took voluntary retirement from the army to immerse himself in a second glorious social career punctuated with many crusades.

"I am nearly 90. I have only a cot to sleep in and a plate to eat my food. But my social service and public activities keep on expanding. I am getting a pension from the army, so there is no need to spend anything from the prize monies. It will now be rolled back for public causes," Hazare said matter-of-factly on the award in his name.

"I have fulfilled the vows of public service during my entire life... and will continue to do so. However, I want this work to continue even after me. So we have decided to help those whose thoughts and acts are pure, persons with impeccable character, their lives full of sacrifices and treading the path of truth," he added.

Shaikh said that Hazare's life-savings from various awards are with the Swami Vivekananda Gratitude Trust which will continue giving the awards uninterrupted, with a celebration in Ralegan-Siddhi, besides supporting the poor and needy wherever required.

"There should be a feeling of 'surrender' by which joy flows in life and sorrow is erased. When 'I' and 'Mine' dissolve, then there is only joy and more joy left, and it always remains. I am immersed in that bliss," Hazare observed.



MNS chief Raj Thackeray addressing party state leaders meeting at NSI Worli on Thursday.

Pic: Bhushan Koyande

Now, Raj doubts poll results

Mumbai: Maharashtra Navnirman Sena chief Raj Thackeray on Thursday attacked the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, stating the party once said the leaders involved in a multi-crore scam would be put behind bars, but they were instead inducted into the state cabinet.

Speaking at an MNS gathering here, he also expressed doubt over the outcome of the last year's Maharashtra assembly elections, and asked how Ajit Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) won 42 seats just months after it bagged only one seat in the Lok Sabha polls.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said that those involved in a Rs 70,000 crore scam would be put behind bars. But where did they put them? In the cabinet," Thackeray said. He was referring to PM

Modi's speech made in 2023 in Madhya Pradesh, where he raised the issue of alleged irrigation scam in Maharashtra. The BJP targeted Ajit Pawar, who was then the leader of opposition, for his alleged involvement in the scam. However, Pawar later joined the Eknath Shinde-led government in the state and was made deputy chief minister in July 2023.

Thackeray said the BJP once accused many leaders of indulging in corruption, but later joined hands with them and made them chief ministers and ministers.

"BJP leader Kirit Somaiya had made allegations against several leaders, but now these very people are in the cabinet," he said.

On the criticism over his frequent meetings with BJP leaders, Thackeray said, "Many say I should not meet BJP leaders...I

meet people, but I do not sell myself. My Marathi identity remains intact."

Talking about the outcome of the Maharashtra assembly elections, where the Mahayuti alliance secured a thumping victory while the MNS and opposition parties suffered setbacks, he said he remained silent for some time as he was analysing the results.

"On the day of the results, there was an unusual silence across Maharashtra. The kind of celebrations that should have happened did not take place. Even some people from the RSS I spoke to were surprised. One of them jokingly asked me - 'Why is there so much silence? Someone must have won, right?' So, what did that silence indicate?" he said.

He asked how Ajit Pawar-led Nationalist Con-

gress Party (NCP) won 42 seats in the assembly polls, while Sharad Pawar's NCP (SP) won only 10.

"Congress secured the most Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra and Sharad Pawar-led NCP (SP) won 8 seats in the parliamentary polls, but managed to win only 10 assembly seats. On the other hand, the Ajit Pawar-led NCP had won only one Lok Sabha seat, but bagged 42 assembly seats. How is that possible?" he wondered.

Thackeray also cast doubt over certain election results. "MNS had fielded sitting MLA Raju Patil from Kalyan Rural constituency in Thane district. There are around 1,400 voters in Patil's village, he has always received votes from there. But this time, he did not get even a single vote. How is that possible?" he sought to know.

2023 Sea Link accident: Driver gets bail

Mumbai: The Bombay High Court granted bail to a man accused of ramming his car into several other vehicles on Bandra Worli Sea Link in 2023 resulting in four deaths after observing there was no malafide intention on his part.

A single bench of Justice Milind Jadhav on January 28 also noted that driver Mohammed Sarfraz Mohammed Yusuf Shaikh (42) himself suffered serious injuries in the accident and is presently suffering from mental illness.

"Prima facie, even according to the prosecution, there is no malafide intention or any pre-meditated act on the part of the applicant (Shaikh) which can be gathered from the record," HC said while granting him bail on a bond of Rs 20,000. It also directed him to surrender his driving licence for five years.

In his plea, Shaikh said he has been a driver for 15 years and had not met with any accident in the past. Shaikh claimed he lost control of the car due to sudden loss of concentration as he felt giddy at the spur of the moment.

On November 9, 2023, Shaikh rammed the Innova car he was driving into sev-

eral other cars at the Bandra Worli sea link toll. Four persons in the Innova car lost their lives, while six others were injured.

Shaikh was arrested on charges of culpable homicide not amounting to murder, rash and negligent driving and other sections.

"There is no doubt the accident in question is a serious accident wherein four precious lives have been lost and some other persons have also been injured," HC said.

However, the accused driver was not under influence of alcohol at the time and has himself sustained serious injuries in the accident, the HC noted.

Since his incarceration, Shaikh was referred to the hospital on several occasions for psychiatric evaluation and treatment due to severe visual hallucination, the HC said.

"He is suffering from aggressive behaviour, sleep disturbances, seeing faces which are not visible to others, irritable and aggressive behaviour and severe visual hallucinations. He has been advised for senior opinion and psychological assessment," the court said.



Board in Siddhivinayak temple states that no improper dress is allowed in the temple premises.

Pic: Bhushan Koyande

Bailable warrant against Pragya Thakur cancelled

Mumbai: The bailable warrant issued against former BJP MP Pragya Singh Thakur, an accused in the 2008 Malegaon bomb blast case, was cancelled after she appeared before a special court here on Thursday afternoon.

The special court assigned to hear cases pertaining to the National Investigation Agency had in November 2024 issued the warrant against Thakur after she failed to appear before it on various occasions.

The court is presently in the final stages of the trial

and had ordered all the accused to attend the hearing daily.

On Thursday, Thakur appeared before the court and filed an application through her advocate seeking cancellation of the bailable warrant.

In her application, Thakur said she was unable to appear before the court as she was unwell and hospitalised.

The court allowed the application and cancelled the bailable warrant. It directed Thakur to remain present in court on Friday.

Six persons were killed

and more than 100 were injured on September 29, 2008 after a motorcycle rigged with explosives detonated near a mosque in Malegaon, approximately 200 kilometres from Mumbai.

Besides Thakur, other accused in the case include Lieutenant Colonel Prasad Purohit and Major Ramesh Upadhyay (retired). All of them have been charged under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and the Indian Penal Code.

The case, which was initially investigated by ATS, was transferred to the NIA in 2011.

HC calls for compliance of PoP idol rules

Mumbai: The Bombay High Court on Thursday called for strict compliance of Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) guidelines that impose a ban on use of idols made from Plaster of Paris (PoP) and their immersion in water bodies.

A division bench of Chief Justice Alok Aradhe and Justice Bharati Dangre, while hearing a PIL, directed the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) and all other civic bodies in Maharashtra to ensure the guidelines are followed ahead of the 'Maghi Ganesh' festival to be celebrated on February 1 and 2.

The festival dedicated to Lord Ganesh is celebrated in the month of Magha in the Hindu lunar calendar (January/February of the Gregorian calendar). This festival is distinct from the widely celebrated Ganesh Chaturthi, which falls in August/September.

The HC also questioned idol manufacturers on why they have continued using PoP to make idols of deities despite repeated court orders against its use.

The CPCB had issued revised guidelines on May 12, 2020, banning the manufac-



ture, sale, and immersion of idols made of PoP, a white powder that hardens when mixed with water. The board encouraged the use of natural, biodegradable, and eco-friendly raw materials for making idols.

The HC was hearing a PIL filed by Thane resident Rohit Joshi and others, including nine clay-based and small-scale idol craftsmen, seeking strict implementation of the 2020 CPCB guidelines.

In August 2024, the high court had directed the authorities to intimate all Sarvajanik Ganesh Mandals that they must mandatorily follow the CPCB guidelines and, accordingly, not install Ganesh idols made of PoP, a material considered insoluble in water.

On Thursday, Joshi's advocate, Ronita Bhattacharya, submitted that despite this order, PoP idols were still available and being used.

She pointed out to the

court that the Maghi Ganesh festival would be celebrated in the state on February 1 and 2.

She argued that the authorities must ensure that PoP idols are neither manufactured nor sold or immersed in water bodies.

BMC counsel Milind Sathe said the civic body has been taking steps to implement the CPCB's revised guidelines.

Advocate S M Gorwadkar, appearing for the association of idol makers, said if any adverse order was passed then its members would be deprived of their livelihood.

The bench, however, noted that as per the existing guidelines, authorities must ensure that PoP idols are neither sold nor immersed.

"It is directed that respondent corporations shall ensure that the revised CPCB guidelines, which ban the making of PoP idols, shall be adhered to strictly in letter and spirit henceforth."

According to green activists, PoP idols cause water pollution and damage to marine ecology. The HC scheduled the next hearing for March 20. -PTI

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Illegal Bangladeshis and Rohingyas staying here is a major security concern. It is an attempt to Islamise our society. It is an attempt to take control of the city or the state."



Nitesh Rane, Minister, Fisheries

Shinde's birthday 'Common Man Day'

Mumbai: The Yuva Sena, the youth wing of the Shiv Sena, will celebrate Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde's birthday on February 9 as 'Common Man Day', a functionary of the organisation said on Thursday.

Yuva Sena working president Purvesh Sarnaik said they will celebrate the 'Common Man Day' across Maharashtra on Sunday, February 9, 2025, to mark the 61st birthday of Shinde, who

also heads the Shiv Sena. The initiative will also recognise and honour 61 "unsung" heroes from each of Maharashtra's 36 districts for their contributions to society, he said.

"Whether as 'CM Eknath Shinde' (the Common Man leader) or now as 'DCM Eknath Shinde' (Dedicated to the Common Man), his relentless efforts towards the welfare of farmers, labourers, women, youth, and students have

earned widespread public admiration," he said.

In keeping with this vision, he said, the 'Common Man Day' will celebrate the contributions of individuals from diverse backgrounds, including farmers, labourers, 'warkaris' (worshippers of Lord Vitthal), women entrepreneurs and social workers, healthcare workers, sanitation staff, workers from the unorganised sector and students.

Yuva Sena chief secre-

tary Rahul Londhe said 'Common Man Day' will now be an annual tradition and ensure that every February 9 is dedicated to "recognising and uplifting everyday heroes across Maharashtra".

While Shinde, who represents the Kopri-Pachpakhadi constituency in Thane city and was once an auto driver, was the CM from July 2022 to November 2024, he often described himself as a "Common Man".



Pilgrims continue to flock, no VIP movements on three special dates



65 lakhs devotees arrive in Ayodhya within 96 hours

Ayodhya (UP): After taking a holy dip on Mauni Amavasya at Maha Kumbh, the influx of devotees has begun to swell in Ayodhya as 65 lakh devotees arrived in the city in the last 96 hours till Thursday afternoon.

By night, Ayodhya's streets were packed with devotees. In view of the growing crowd, senior officials have started conducting inspections. After taking holy dip on Mauni Amavasya in the Kumbh, devotees are heading to Ayodhya for Ram Lalla's darshan. It is estimated that three lakh devotees visit the Ram temple and Hanuman Garhi daily. As a result, the temple's visiting hours have been extended to about 18 hours.

Mahakumbh Nagar: Millions of devotees flocked to the Triveni Sangam and other ghats at the Maha Kumbh to take a dip on Thursday with the Uttar Pradesh government ramping up efforts to ensure crowd management and safety of people a day after the stampede tragedy.

More than 2.06 crore devotees took the holy bath till 8 pm, according to the state government.

The crowd pressure was relatively lower Thursday and all bridges were reopened, allowing smoother movement within the mela area, officials said.

With the focus on crowd management after the stampede left at least 30 people dead and 60 injured, the state government said no VIP protocols will be enforced by the administration on the special bathing days of February 3, 12 and 26.

More than 29.64 crore devotees have taken the snan till Thursday.

As devotees braved the pre-dawn chill and reduced visibility to proceed towards the ghats for the ritual bath, many others spent sleepless nights waiting for news of their missing loved ones.

According to a circular, the government said it had announced the decision on VIP movement before the

start of the Kumbh Mela, and now strict implementation of this directive has been initiated.

"This initiative aims to ensure a smooth and memorable experience for general pilgrims, allowing them to participate in the sacred baths without disruptions caused by VIP movements, route diversions, or security restrictions," it said.

Additionally, the government has mandated that VIP and VVIP movements must be notified at least one week in advance.

The government also appealed to the public to exercise patience during the expected large gatherings on Basant Panchami, Magh Purnima, and Mahashivratri and urged them to take necessary precautions while participating in these bathing festivals.

DIG Maha Kumbh Vaibhav Krishna said the police are actively working on security arrangements for the upcoming Amrit Snan on Basant Panchami Snan (February 3), ensuring tight measures in the mela area.

He said all bridges have been reopened, allowing smoother movement within the mela area.

However, before Basant Panchami, new restrictions will be imposed at key locations for better crowd management and more police personnel

and security forces will be deployed, Krishna added.

Following Wednesday's tragic incident, the 30 pontoon bridges in the mela area were operating under a one-way traffic system. This meant that each bridge allowed movement in only one direction, with a parallel pontoon bridge designated for return routes.

Superintendent of Police (Traffic) Anshuman Mishra told PTI that the area would remain a no-vehicle zone until the crowd disperses completely.

No outside vehicles would be allowed to enter the city until the crowd exits the mela area, he said, adding essential services such as police administration vehicles, ambulances and suction machines would, however, be allowed entry.

Meanwhile, the three-member judicial commission set up by the Uttar Pradesh government to probe the stampede will visit the site on Friday.

Panel head Harsh Kumar, a retired judge of the Allahabad High Court, said the commission has a month to wrap up its investigation but will try to expedite it.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Secretary Manoj Kumar Singh and Director

General of Police Prashant Kumar are also here for a detailed probe into the stampede and also a thorough review of the arrangements in the mela area on the directions of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath.

They visited the injured at Swaroop Rani Nehru Hospital in Prayagraj and assured them that "the chief minister has issued clear instructions that no effort should be spared in their treatment".

He also alleged that the Kumbh administration was negligent and did not take expert advice despite repeated warnings.

As Parliament's Budget session is all set to begin Friday, the opposition parties have demanded a discussion on the alleged mismanagement of the Maha Kumbh festival.

At the Maha Kumbh, the devotees were undeterred by the pre-dawn chill and reduced visibility due to the dense fog in their bid to take a dip seeking 'moksha' or salvation.

The weather gradually cleared and bright sunshine spread across the Kumbh Mela area. However, the influx of pilgrims towards Sangam and other ghats remained constant throughout the day.

Many devotees kept moving towards Sangam from the Prayagraj

city side via the Kachchap Dwar, while several others who had arrived for Mauni Amavasya and the subsequent rituals were seen heading back towards the city.

So far, more than 27.58 crore devotees have taken the dip at Maha Kumbh, the government said.

DIG Krishna clarified that according to the official guidelines, there was no VIP movement in the mela area on Mauni Amavasya, and the same protocol will be followed for Basant Panchami.

Triveni Sangam, considered the most sacred bathing site, is located on one side of the mela area, while several other ghats, situated along the Ganges and closer to the akharas, are on the opposite side, connected by these pontoon bridges.

Geeta Agarwal, who travelled from Guwahati in Assam with her family, told PTI, I had come with my children and grandchildren to take a holy dip on Mauni Amavasya, but due to the overwhelming crowd, we couldn't reach Triveni Sangam. Today, we are trying again, but if we can't make it, we will take a dip at another ghat to seek blessings.

She further mentioned facing difficulties navigating the mela area, as directions were unclear at multiple

spots. On Wednesday, she had to rely on others' guidance several times, which sometimes led her in the wrong direction.

Pramod Panwar, who hails from Gurugram in Haryana, said he reached here on Wednesday with his family and was returning now.

"We took a dip early today. We came here yesterday but it was very crowded. Today the situation is better. We thank Modi and Yogi for the arrangements," he told PTI Videos.

Delhi resident Asha Patel was also among those who took a dip.

"We keep hearing something good or bad about what's happening but we don't focus on that. I had been wanting to come to the Maha Kumbh for a long time and finally it happened. Thanks to Modi, Yogi, our Gods and ancestors," she said.

In a bid to further strengthen the arrangements, the Uttar Pradesh government said it will also be deploying two former senior officers on Mela duty -- Ashish Goyal, who served as divisional commissioner of Prayagraj for the 2019 Kumbh, and Bhanu Goswami, former vice chairman of the Agra Development Authority.

Additionally, five special secretary-level officers are being assigned to oversee operations.

IIT-K analyst accuses colleague of rape

Kanpur (UP): A tribal woman from Arunachal Pradesh working as an analyst at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur has accused her colleague of raping her on the pretext of marriage, police said on Thursday.

An FIR has been lodged at Kalyanpur Police Station on the complaint of the 24-year-old woman. The IIT-Kanpur administration has also formed a six-member team to probe the matter.

The woman belongs to the Scheduled Tribe community. She had been working at IIT-Kanpur on a cyber security project as an analyst for about a year, Kalyanpur Assistant Commissioner of Police Abhishek Pandey said.

She has alleged that her 25-year-old colleague, also an engineer, developed a relationship with her and raped her on several occasions on the pretext of marriage, he added.

The victim's medical examination was done on Wednesday and her statement was recorded before a woman magistrate on Thursday, Deputy CP (west) Rajesh Kumar Singh said.

An FIR has been lodged

against the accused, a native of MP's Indore. He has not been arrested yet, the police said.

IIT-Kanpur administration has also formed a six-member team to investigate the charges against the engineer, Director Manindra Agarwal told PTI.

The team has been instructed to submit the facts finding report with the director and an action would be taken accordingly, he said.

Agarwal said, "We take allegations of this nature with the utmost seriousness and ensure that they are addressed with due diligence and fairness."

In a statement, the varsity said, "IIT-Kanpur is committed to maintaining a safe, inclusive, and respectful environment for all members of its community."

Both individuals involved are employees of C3i Hub, a Section 8 company set up at IIT-Kanpur, and the matter has been duly referred to its Internal Complaints Committee, which is conducting a comprehensive review in accordance with established protocols, the statement said.

-PTI



Lt Commander Diina K and Lt Commander Roopa A aboard INS Tarini as it crosses Point Nemo - the Oceanic Pole of Inaccessibility.

Pic: PTI

Mavali Mandal Kho-Kho tournament

By Correspondent

Thane: Shri Mavali Mandal in Thane has organised a Kho-Kho tournament between January 31 to February 1 in the zonal men's and women's groups on the occasion of its centenary year. The matches in the tournament will be played in two sessions from 8 AM to 11 AM and 4 PM to 9 PM.

In this tournament, a total of 28 teams will participate, 16 in the men's category and 12 in the women's category.

From the Thane district,

teams like Shri Mavali Mandal, Shri Anand Bharati Samaj, Griffin Gymkhana, Vihang Krida Kendra, Raj Krida Mandal, the United Sports Club, Dnyanvikas Foundation, Vayudoot Krida Kendra, Shivbhakta Krida Kendra, Yuva Krida Kendra and New Bombay High School will be participating in this competition.

From Mumbai district, teams like Saraswati Sports, Amarinid Mandal, Vidyarthi Krida Kendra, Shri Samartha Vyayam Mandir and Om Saishwar Seva

Mandal are participating in the tournament.

From the Mumbai Suburban district, renowned teams like Shri Sahyadri Sangh, Mahatma Gandhi Sports Academy and Yuva Sports Club are also participating in the tournament.

Prizes worth Rs one lakh will be distributed in the tournament.

The tournament will be inaugurated on January 31st at 8 am by Sudhakar More, the President of the Mavali Mandal. The award ceremony will be held on February 1.

4,006 new Aadhaar kits to be distributed

Mumbai: Minister of Information Technology said on Thursday that 4,066 new Aadhaar kits would be distributed in the state for enrolment and record updates concerning the 12-digit unique identification number.

The kits, including fingerprint and iris scanners, will be handed over to the district collector offices across the state from February 10, he said.

Centres providing services like new Aadhaar enrolment, renewal and address updates are operational across the state. In 2014, he said, 3,873 Aadhaar kits were supplied to the district collector offices for these services.

Of the kits provided earlier, nearly 2,500 are currently in use, while complaints have been received concerning about 13,00 faulty kits, said the minister.

Considering the demand from rural areas, Shelar said he met with IT Secretary Parag Jain Nainutia at the state secretariat Mantralaya on Thursday.

The new kits will be distributed from February 10.

Congress 'betrayed' us: AAP after defeat

Chandigarh: The Aam Aadmi Party on Thursday blamed the Congress for the shock defeat of its candidate for the post of mayor in the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation election that took place here.

It alleged that some of the Congress councillors indulged in cross-voting, resulting in BJP's Harpreet Kaur Babla being elected as the new mayor in the high-stakes election.

BJP's Babla secured 19 votes while AAP's Prem Lata got 17 votes.

The defeat of the AAP-Congress alliance came despite both parties having 20 votes in the 35-member House. A total of 19 votes are required to win the poll.

The AAP was fighting for the post of mayor while the Congress was contesting for the posts of senior deputy mayor and deputy mayor. The AAP-backed Congress candidates won both the posts.

Reacting to the poll outcome, AAP senior leader and spokesperson Neel Garg accused Congress councillors of cross-voting. The Congress councillors betrayed us, he said.

He added that the Congress and the BJP acted in

collusion. "This incident has made it completely clear. Both are two sides of the same coin," he said.

"The AAP councillors supported the Congress nominees. Their deputy mayor and senior deputy mayor were elected with our votes," he said.

Garg appealed to the people of Delhi not to vote for the Congress in the February 5 Assembly polls. "We want to tell voters of Delhi that they should not waste their votes by voting for Congress."

Punjab Finance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema said the Congress and the BJP formed an "unethical alliance" for mayoral elections. "Instead of honouring their alliance with AAP, @INCIndia stabbed us in the back and formed an 'unethical' alliance with @BJP4India for these posts," he said.

"The real reason behind this alliance is the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections, where AAP's victory is certain due to massive public support and the politics of work. Out of fear, these two parties -- limited to divisive politics -- are resorting to such tricks, but they will never succeed," he said.

Aaditya skips crucial meeting chaired by Shinde

Mumbai: The ruling Shiv Sena on Thursday claimed rival camp leader Aaditya Thackeray did not have the courage to face Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde after he skipped a key meeting of development panel on Mumbai City district presided over by the latter.

Eknath Shinde, who is the guardian minister of Mumbai City and also heads the Shiv Sena, presided over the meeting of the District Planning and Development Council (DPDC). During the meeting, a Rs 690-crore development plan for 2024-25 was approved for Mumbai City. Usually, MLAs, MLCs and MPs

from a district are invited for DPDC gatherings. So lawmakers from Mumbai City attended the meeting on Thursday.

However, Shiv Sena (UBT) MLA Thackeray, who represents Mumbai's Worli seat, skipped the DPDC meeting, prompting the Eknath Shinde-led party to hit out at the former state minister.

"He (Thackeray) is not bothered about his constituency. Being absent from an important meeting shows his love for Mumbai and his constituency (Worli). He did not have courage to face Shinde as the guardian minister," claimed Shiv Sena MLC Manisha Kayande.



Four Shiv Sena lawmakers attended the meeting.

Shiv Sena (UBT) MLC Sachin Ahir said although Thackeray did not attend the meeting, he had

shared the points to be raised during the DPDC gathering. Shiv Sena (UBT) lawmakers present at the meet raised those issues, he said.

Shiv Sena (UBT) MLC Sunil Shinde said he raised issues related to redevelopment of old chawls (row tenements), traffic congestion and bad quality water in the city. Both Ahir and Sunil Shinde hail from Worli in central Mumbai.

Another lawmaker pointed out that Thackeray also did not attend the DPDC meeting when Deepak Kesarkar was the guardian minister of Mumbai City during the first Mahayuti

government.

Kesarkar was one of the 39 MLAs of the undivided Shiv Sena who rebelled against party president and then-Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray in June 2022.

Since the Eknath Shinde-led revolt against the Thackerays, which led to a split in the party, relations between the two sides have been acrimonious.

Talking to reporters, deputy CM Eknath Shinde said several issues related to Mumbai City were discussed at the meeting.

The deputy CM said he has directed officials to send written compliances of the issues raised by the lawmakers.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"India is all set to launch its own safe and secure indigenous AI model. Compared to global models costing 2.5 to 3 US dollars per hour usage, India's AI Model will cost less than Rs 100 per hour."



Ashwini Vaishnav,
Union Minister, IT

Some missing reunited with kin, many still unaccounted for



Maha Kumbh Stampede



Mahakumbh Nagar: More than 36 hours have passed since the stampede at Maha Kumbh, but Jitendra Sahu has not caught a wink and has been frantically searching for his 70-year-old aunt Shakuntala Devi, who has been missing since.

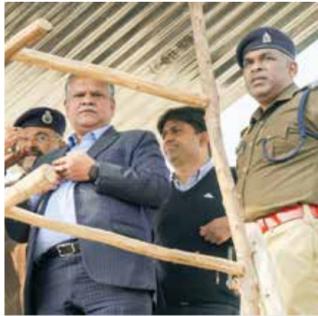
Shakuntala Devi had arrived at the Maha Kumbh from Gwalior with a group of 15 devotees.

"We have had no contact with my aunt since the incident. She has an identity card around her neck. Her phone is unreachable and she has not contacted anyone. We don't know what to do," he told PTI in a choked voice.

The tragedy struck between 1 am and 2 am on Wednesday, when a huge crowd broke through barriers and trampled over devotees who had been waiting overnight at the ghats to take a holy dip on the occasion of Mauni Amavasya, one of the most auspicious days of the Hindu calendar.

Nearly 18 hours after the incident, the Mela administration, in a brief press conference, confirmed that 30 people had died and 60 were injured in the stampede. A judicial inquiry has been ordered.

However, several families like Jitendra's continue their desperate search for their loved ones. While some of the missing persons have reunited with their families, many remain unaccounted for. The majority of those still missing are women.



Uttar Pradesh Chief Secretary Manoj Kumar Singh with state DGP Prashant Kumar (second from left) and others during inspection of the site following a stampede in Prayagraj. PICS: PTI

Phooli Nishad from Dheha Dera village in Hamirpur, has been missing since Mauni Amavasya.

Her son Rajesh Nishad, who works in Ahmedabad, said, "My mother, father, uncle, and aunt had travelled to the Kumbh Mela for a holy dip at the Sangam. After taking a dip on Mauni Amavasya evening, my mother got separated from the family and we have had no contact with her since."

Same is the case with Maya Singh. The Deoria resident had come to the Maha Kumbh with six to seven of her

Mortal remains of four devotees to be flown to Belgaum

Bengaluru: The mortal remains of four devotees who were killed in the stampede at the Maha Kumbh Mela in Uttar Pradesh's Prayagraj will be flown from Delhi to Belgaum, officials said. The deceased are Jyoti Deepak Hattarwath (44), her daughter Megha Deepak Hattarwath (24), Arun Khoparde (61), and Mahadevi Hemant Bhavanur (48), they said. In a statement, Karnataka Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda said that IPS officer Hariram Shankar is coordinating the movement of four dead bodies from Kumbh Mela. The mortal remains of those devotees are moving in two ambulances towards Delhi. Special Deputy Commissioner from Belagavi is also reaching Delhi.

Two elderly women from Bengal among those dead

Kolkata: Two elderly women from West Bengal were among those who died in the stampede at the Maha Kumbh. Basanti Poddar of Golf Green in Kolkata succumbed to injuries suffered during the rush for taking a holy dip at the mega religious gathering on the occasion of 'Mauni Amavasya' on Wednesday, her son said. Poddar's son said he was in Prayagraj and arrangements were being made to bring her mother's body to her native place in Bengal. Urmila Bhuniya of Salboni in Paschim Medinipur district also died in the stampede at the Maha Kumbh on Wednesday, a family member said.

relatives to take a dip at the confluence of three rivers on the occasion of Mauni Amavasya.

"Our group had travelled from Banaras to Sahso Chauraha, where we parked our vehicle before entering the Mela area. After the bath, we gathered at Sahso Chauraha to return home but Maya got separated due to jostling by the huge crowd and has been missing since. We have not been able to find her despite extensive searches and inquiries," her husband Janardhan Singh shared.

While for many families their anxious wait continues, some have been fortunate to reunite with their loved ones. Among them is Renu Lata Nandi from Odisha's Kendrapara who had been missing since Tuesday night after taking a dip in the Ganga.

"My mother got separated from our group after the bath. We were extremely worried, especially after hearing about the stampede. But today, a fellow villager from our group of 26 people found her in Sector 20. We are all relieved," her son Amar Kumar Nandi, said.

Aligarh resident Snehlata (68) had travelled to the Maha Kumbh alone. She long her belonging and went missing on Tuesday. However, she managed to find her way back home by Wednesday night.

Her son Gyanendra Kumar Sharma said, "My mother always travels alone for pilgrimages because my father has difficulty walking. Somehow, she managed to return home by train last night. Her purse and other belongings were also recovered and are now kept at the Maha Kumbh fair ground's Sector 4 lost-and-found centre."

Some of those who lost touch with the group they had travelled to Prayagraj were making efforts to return home alone. Among the many were an elderly couple from Uttar Pradesh's Kushinagar -- Ram Sanehi and Bitta Devi.

"Now, we are just trying to find a way to reach the railway station and board a train to Gorakhpur. But we have no idea how to get there," said Sanehi, wearing a hearing aid in one ear and thick eyeglasses.

Umesh Chandra Tiwari, who runs the lost-and-found camp of the Bharat Seva Dal in Sector 4, highlighted that the new digital lost-and-found centre is proving effective in reconnecting people. "Most of the missing person reports are now being registered there, and they are coordinating with us to help track people," he said.

However, the sheer scale of the situation remains overwhelming.

Judicial commission to finish probe in a month

Lucknow: The three-member judicial commission set up by the Uttar Pradesh government to find the reasons behind the Maha Kumbh stampede has a month to wrap up its probe but will try to expedite it, panel head Harsh Kumar said. Kumar, a retired judge, also told PTI that the commission members would soon visit Prayagraj. Kumar and panel members ex-Director General of Police (DGP) V K Gupta and retired IAS officer D K Singh reached the office assigned to them here and began their work on Thursday, an official statement said. "We have taken charge within hours of the announcement as the probe has to be taken up on priority," Kumar told PTI.

He said, "We have a one-month timeline but all the same, we will try to expedite it." He said the commission members will soon visit Prayagraj. However, he did not say when they would visit. Asked if the three members will be probing separate aspects, Kumar said.

CRPF jawan shoots wife dead, kills self

Bhopal: A CRPF constable allegedly shot his wife dead before killing himself at their house in Bhopal in the wee hours of Thursday, police said.

Ravikant Verma (35), who was stationed at the Central Reserve Police Force Bangrasia Camp near here, killed his wife Renu (32) around 1.30 am, and then called the CRPF control room, local police and his landlord before shooting himself dead with the same service rifle, station house officer of Misrod police station, M R Bhadouria, told PTI.

After receiving the distress call, a police team rushed to the spot in Capital Green Colony, and sent the bodies for postmortem, he said.

Initial investigation indicated that the shooting was a fallout of the family discord, Bhadouria said, adding that no suicide note was recovered from the spot.

Ravikant hailed from Bhand district in MP and lived with his wife and their two children - a two-year-old girl and boy aged six years - near the CRPF's camp in Bangrasia Misrod here, the police official said. "Ravikant was on Quar-

ter Guard duty on Wednesday night and returned home around 10 pm with a rifle. Three hours later, the constable shot dead his wife while their children were asleep in the other room," he said, adding that investigation into the incident was underway.

Six 'cyber criminals' arrested

Jamtara (Jharkhand): Six persons have been arrested for allegedly duping people on the internet using artificial intelligence in Jharkhand's Jamtara district, police said.

The arrested "cyber criminals" are experts in software development and used artificial intelligence to develop malware, they said.

The accused, who were sent to jail on January 26, operated under the pseudonym "DK Boss".

Several mobile phones, SIM cards, ATM cards, a drone and high-resolution cameras were among the items recovered from their possession, a police officer said.

The data of around 2,700 people was found on the website created by the accused, he said.



President Droupadi Murmu, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Defence Minister Rajnath during a ceremony to pay homage to Mahatma Gandhi on his death anniversary in New Delhi. PICS: PTI

Hindu Mahasabha celebrates Gandhi's assassination

Meerut: The Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha on Thursday honoured Nathuram Godse, the man who killed Mahatma Gandhi on this day in 1948.

Godse, allegedly linked with the Hindu Mahasabha, had shot Gandhi dead at a prayer meeting at Birla House in Delhi. He was hanged in an Ambala jail in 1949.

Hindu Mahasabha members gathered at the 'Amar Martyr Nathuram Godse Nana Apte Dham,' a location tied to the right wing outfit, where they hailed Godse for the assassination.

Prez, PM lead nation in paying tributes to Gandhi

President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi led the nation in paying homage to Mahatma Gandhi on his 77th death anniversary on Thursday.

Pandit Ashok Sharma, a leader of the Mahasabha and founder of the Nana Apte Dham, led the event, which saw a havan puja and a recital of Hanuman

Chalisa.

The ceremony was purportedly aimed at "removing the soul of Karamchand Gandhi," and eliminating "Gandhism" from India.

Sharma demanded that the Indian government revoke Mahatma Gandhi's title as the "Father of the Nation."

The Mahasabha also announced plans to honour the families of Nathuram Godse and Narayan Nana Apte, also associated with Gandhi's assassination.

The programme concluded with the distribution of sweets among supporters.

Online drug network busted

Shimla: The arrest of two individuals -- one from Kolkata and one from Delhi -- has revealed the operation of an extensive drug trafficking network throughout north India, with a particular focus on Himachal Pradesh's capital, Shimla.

According to Shimla Superintendent of Police Sanjeev Kumar Gandhi, the syndicate was an organised supply chain facilitated by online bookings through various social media platforms. Innocent people's accounts were being misused and drugs were delivered through couriers.

The modus operandi was exposed following the arrest of interstate drug kingpin Sandeep Shah from Kolkata earlier this month. Shah was supplying chitta through an interstate drug nexus. His close associate, Neeraj Kashyap from Mehrauli, South Delhi, was also arrested.

Shah, based in Kolkata, procured drug demand through local contacts using virtual numbers and social networking sites. Communication was conducted via WhatsApp, and payments were deposited into associates' accounts in Delhi.

'WhatsApp governance' programme in AP

Amaravati: Andhra Pradesh IT Minister Nara Lokesh on Thursday launched WhatsApp governance service Mana Mitra here, offering 161 citizen-centric services.

Government hopes it will save people from the need to visit government offices multiple times for procuring documents.

The IT Minister launched the services at the Chief Minister's residence in Undavalli in Guntur district.

Services pertaining to the Endowments, Energy, APSRTC, Revenue, Anna Canteens, CM Relief Fund (CMRF) and Municipal Departments would be provided in the first phase and the second phase is expected to promise more services.

"We believe it is a historic moment. To get basic documents why should they (people) come to government offices or meet an MLA," Lokesh said during the launch.

The IT Minister said he had the idea of offering a service like this from his padayatra days. Earlier, officials gave Chief Minister



Chandrababu Naidu a presentation about the initiative at a review meeting held in secretariat on Wednesday.

Officials explained to the CM on how people availing these services will choose their options.

While the first phase of the WhatsApp governance programme provides 161 services, in the second phase, 360 services will be made available, Lokesh said. In total, he said, around 520 services will be offered through this programme, in the future.

Further, the CM directed officials to ensure that people's data doesn't fall into the hands of cyber criminals and called for the strengthening of forensic and cybersecurity.

On October 22, 2024, the state inked a deal with Meta to extend services through whatsapp. -PTI

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Modi government assured that it would protect the biodiversity and heritage in the area. And following a detailed discussion, the Central government announced the decision to annul the auction of the Nayakkarpatti Tungsten mineral block."



G Kishan Reddy, Union Minister, Coal and Mines

Shanta Gokhale to receive award at JLF

New Delhi: Noted writer and translator Shanta Gokhale will be honoured with the 9th Vani Foundation Distinguished Translator Award for her contribution towards creating an unprecedented bridge between Marathi and English languages.

The award will be presented to Gokhale on February 3, the concluding day of the ongoing Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF). It comprises a cash prize of one lakh rupees, along with a trophy and a testimonial letter.

"We are honoured and delighted to confer the 9th Vani Foundation Distinguished Translator Award to the outstanding writer,

translator, journalist and theatre critic Shanta Gokhale, whose work has spanned many decades of dedication and brilliance," said writer and JLF co-founder Namita Gokhale, who has been the jury member of the award since its inception.

Born on 14 August 1939 in Dahanu, Maharashtra, Gokhale has made an indelible mark on both Marathi and English literary landscapes. Her multifaceted contributions span novels, memoirs, critical essays, and editorial work, making her a towering figure in the world of Indian arts and culture. She has translated "Smritich-



te: The Memoirs of a Spirited Wife" by Lakshmbai Tilak and the novel "Kautik on Embers" (Dhag) by Uddhav J Shelke. Apart from these she has also translated plays by Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Satish Alekar, G P Deshpande, Premanand Gajvi and Makarand Sathre.

The 85-year-old also translated from English into Marathi the play "Mister Behram" by Gieve Patel and the novel "Em and the Big Hoom" by Jerry Pinto.

Acclaimed writer and translator Arunava Sinha, a member of the jury and recipient of the 6th Vani Foundation Distinguished Translator Award, described

Gokhale as a "true guiding light" for translations and translators in India.

"She is someone who has shown the way with authority and grace to taking literatures from one language into others," he added.

Gokhale is also renowned for her novels "Rita Welinkar" (1995) and "Tya Varshi" (2004), which are celebrated for their nuanced portrayal of human emotions and relationships, and are regarded as classics in Marathi literature.

Her third novel, "Nirmala Patil Yanche Atmakathan", was published two years ago. -PTI

Challenges galore as Team Sitharaman frames Budget

New Delhi: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, set to make history with her eighth consecutive Union Budget, has worked tirelessly with key officials, including Finance Secretary TuhinKanta Pandey, to prepare a budget of over Rs 50 lakh crore for FY26.

The Budget will have to address several challenges, including decelerating economic growth, falling value of Rupee against the US dollar and moderation in consumption demand.

The economic growth is estimated to slow to a 4-year low of 6.4 per cent in FY25. This is the lowest growth since the outbreak of the COVID pandemic which hit the world in 2019.

On account of various factors, the rupee has plunged to an all-time low of over 86.7 per cent earlier this month.

The uphill task before the Finance Minister and her team would be to bolster growth without sacrificing fiscal prudence.

The government is also expected to stick to the fiscal glide path of reducing the fiscal deficit to below 4.5 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in FY26 amidst various headwinds.

Finance Secretary and Revenue Secretary TuhinKanta Pandey: The oldest hand at the finance ministry who has been involved with the Budget making process since October 2019 when he joined DIPAM as Secretary.

In September last year, Pandey, a 1987-batch IAS officer from Odisha cadre,



was appointed the Finance Secretary.

The Finance Ministry has six departments -- Revenue, Economic Affairs, Expenditure, Financial Services, DIPAM and DPE -- and the senior most bureaucrat in the ministry is designated as the Finance Secretary.

He has been credited with divestment of Air India and PSU dividend policy among others during his tenure as DIPAM Secretary.

Before serving as Secretary in the DIPAM, Pandey held many significant positions in the Union government and the Odisha government, in addition to serving a stint in the Regional Office of the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO).

Economic Affairs Secretary, Ajay Seth: The second oldest hand at the finance ministry who has in past handled four Budgets since 2021. The Budget division under his departments anchors the entire Budget making process.

The balance sheet match-

ing between revenue and expenditure and borrowings are all matched by the Budget division under him.

Seth is credited with heading initiatives such as India's first sovereign green bond issuance, and the creation of the Infrastructure Finance Secretariat.

Ensuring that the economy stays on the fiscal glide path while charting out the new strategy of targeting the debt-to-GDP ratio will be some of the items that will be on top of Seth's agenda in the upcoming Budget.

Expenditure Secretary Manoj Govil: A 1991-batch IAS officer of Madhya Pradesh cadre, Govil took charge of the Expenditure department in August 2024.

This will be Govil's first stint in Union Budget making and he will have a tough task in giving projections for subsidy in the Budget at a time when rupee is weakening.

DIPAM and Department of Public Enterprises Secretary Arunish Chawla, a 1992-batch Bihar cadre IAS officer, took charge in DIPAM and DPE

in December 2024.

Chawla would have his task cut out to drive privatisation of IDBI Bank, move forward with asset monetisation and streamline the functioning of public sector enterprise.

Chawla, a Masters and Doctorate in Economics from the London School of Economics, had served as Joint Secretary in the Department of Expenditure, Ministry of Finance earlier in 2014.

Financial Services Secretary M Nagaraju: Nagaraju will have to draw up the roadmap for reforms like FDI cap hike in the insurance sector, deal with rising cyber frauds and further improve the health of the banking sector.

This would be the first brush with Union Budget making as Nagaraju joined as the Financial Services Secretary only in August.

CEA V Anantha Nageswaran: He would be presenting his third Economic Survey a day in advance to Budget 2025-26.

Nageswaran was appointed CEA in January 2022 by the government. Nageswaran, an academic and former executive with Credit Suisse Group AG and Julius Baer Group, succeeded K V Subramanian.

The Economic Survey prepared by CEA is scheduled to be tabled in Parliament on January 31. The survey will give detailed analysis of the state of economy and some of his suggestions to make India Viksit Bharat by 2047.

-PTI

KEY NUMBERS TO BE WATCHED

Sitharaman had in her first Budget in 2019 replaced the leather briefcase - which had been in use for decades for carrying Budget documents - with a traditional 'bahi-khata' wrapped in red cloth. This year's Budget would be in paperless form, as done in the last three years. Here are the key numbers to watch out for in the Union Budget for 2025-26:

Fiscal Deficit: The budgeted fiscal deficit, which is the difference between the government expenditure and income, for the current fiscal (April 2024 to March 2025 or FY'25) is estimated at 4.9 per cent of GDP. As per the fiscal consolidation roadmap, the deficit is to be brought down to 4.5 per cent of GDP in FY26. Markets will keenly watch for the deficit number in FY '26 Budget.

Capital Expenditure: The government's planned capital expenditure for this fiscal year is budgeted at Rs 11.1 lakh crore. However, slower government spending in the first four months due to Lok Sabha elections delayed the capex cycle and the final numbers for current fiscal are expected to be lower than Budgeted. The capex momentum is expected to continue in FY '26 Budget as well.

Debt Roadmap: The finance minister, in her 2024-25 budget speech, had stated that from 2026-27 onwards the endeavor of fiscal policy would be to maintain the fiscal deficit in a way that the central government debt is on a declining path as a percentage of GDP. Markets would closely look for the debt

consolidation roadmap from FY '27 onwards to see when the finance minister sees general government debt-to-GDP fall to the 60 per cent target. The general government debt-to-GDP ratio was 85 per cent in 2024, which included central government debt of 57 per cent.

Borrowing: The government's gross borrowing Budget was Rs 14.01 lakh crore in FY'25. The government borrows from the market to fund its fiscal deficit. The borrowing number will be watched by the market, especially on the back of lower dividend from the RBI in FY'26 compared to Rs 2.11 lakh crore in FY'25.

Tax Revenue: The 2024-25 Budget had pegged gross tax revenue at Rs 38.40 lakh crore, an 11.72 per cent growth over FY'24. This includes Rs 22.07 lakh crore estimated to come from direct taxes (personal income tax + corporate tax), and Rs 16.33 lakh crore from indirect taxes (customs + excise duty + GST).

GST: Goods and Services Tax (GST) collection in 2024-25 is estimated to rise 11 per cent to Rs 10.62 lakh crore. FY '26 GST revenue projections will be watched as the revenue growth has slowed over the last three month in the current fiscal.

Nominal GDP: India's nominal GDP growth (real GDP plus inflation) in FY'25 is estimated to be 10.5 per cent, while the Real GDP



growth estimated by NSO is 6.4 per cent. FY'26 nominal GDP growth projections in the Budget will give an idea about the inflation trajectory in the next fiscal.

Dividend: The Government estimated Rs 2.33 lakh crore from RBI and financial institutions and Rs 56,260 crore from CPSEs as dividend in FY '25. These two key non-tax revenue numbers will be looked for in FY'26 Budget projections.

Disinvestment & Asset Monetisation: 'Miscellaneous Capital Receipts' -- which include proceeds from disinvestment and asset monetisation, -- was pegged at Rs 50,000 crore in FY '25 Budget. The FY'26 Budget will give a number for next year and a broader asset monetisation roadmap.

Moscow in talks for group visa-free travel

Mumbai: The Moscow City Tourism Committee is in discussions with the Indian government for a 'group-free visa regime,' allowing a specified number of tourists travelling together in a group to enter Russia without a visa.

"When there is a group of tourists travelling together to Russia, the particular number should be mentioned in the document for the visit to become visa free. For example, in the Chinese document, the group should be 10-20 people. The Russian government is in talks with the Indian External Affairs Ministry for a final agreement on the number of people comprising a group from India to avail this facility," Moscow City Tourism Committee Chairman Evgeny Kozlov told PTI.

Kozlov further said India is an important country and ranks second in terms of source market among far abroad countries after China.

"India is a priority market for us. For us among the far abroad countries, China ranks at the number one position, followed by India. Indians are also good



spenders while travelling, spending around USD 2,000 per person per trip," he said on the sidelines of an event on Wednesday evening.

In the first nine months of 2024, January-September, Moscow received 19.7 million guests including 61,000 Indians, he said.

By 2030 the number of foreign tourists in Moscow is expected to reach 6 million people, mainly due to travellers from the CIS countries (Commonwealth of Independent States), the Asia-Pacific region, India, the Middle East and other parts of the world, he stated.

"In the last two years we made the tourism image of Moscow our priority. There are three reasons for the increase in international visitors. First, we've been improving tourism infra-

structure, second, actively promoting Moscow in our key countries like India. At the same time introducing e-visa regime," he added.

Among segments, Kozlov said, Moscow City is focusing on Business, Wedding, Family and Film tourism.

Meanwhile, he said, a delegation of the Moscow City Tourism Committee is in talks with production houses to invite them to shoot in Moscow City.

"We want to attract Indian visitors to Moscow through cinema, therefore, our delegates are meeting with production houses and film directors to invite them to showcase Moscow City in their films. We are planning to provide them with incentives, which is still under discussion," Kozlov added.

-PTI

L&T to handle freight in Middle East

New Delhi: Infrastructure major Larsen & Toubro (L&T) on Thursday said one of its verticals has secured a 'significant order' to set up freight handling facilities in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region.

L&T, in a filing to the BSE, stated its minerals and metals vertical has secured a repeat order from a leading railway company in the GCC, which has ambitious multi-phase capacity expansion plans.

The company classifies a 'significant order' as orders valued between Rs 1,000-2,500 crore.

The scope of work involves the Engineering, Procurement, Construction, and Commissioning (EPC) of freight handling facilities with advanced automation and control systems at two locations, including an add-on package.

The vertical offers end-to-end solutions in the Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) domain across sectors such as mining, minerals processing, industrial products and material handling.



Actor Elli AvrRam poses for pictures during the premiere of the upcoming Marathi film Ilu Ilu 1998 in Mumbai on Wednesday.

Pic: PTI

Made in India debut in Japan

New Delhi: Maruti Suzuki India on Thursday said the locally manufactured Jimny five-door model has made its debut in the Japanese market.

The SUV, which is exclusively manufactured at Maruti Suzuki's Gurugram-based plant, was unveiled in Japan on Thursday.

The Jimny five-door model has become the second SUV after Fronx to be supplied to the home market of Suzuki Motor Corporation in FY 2024-25.

"The introduction of the Made in India Jimny 5-door in Japan is a testament to the global level of excellence in our manufacturing capability," Maruti Suzuki India MD and CEO Hisashi Takeuchi said in a statement. It is the company's second model to be exported to Japan this fiscal, after Fronx in August 2024, he added. Jimny is the second most exported Maruti Suzuki car in FY 2024-25, Takeuchi stated.

"After its resounding success in markets like Mexico, Australia, and South Africa, we are confident that it will delight customers in Japan. The ex-

port of Jimny reaffirms our commitment towards 'Make-in-India for the world,' he added.

Maruti Suzuki exports the four-wheel-drive (4WD) model to almost 100 countries. Suzuki Motor Corporation said it will launch the model, christened as JimnyNomade in Japan, on April 3.

The Jimny has over half a century of heritage and has sold more than 3.5 million units worldwide, in 199 countries and regions.

The three-door version of Jimny is already on sale in the Japanese market and the five-door version will further add to the popularity of the model, Maruti Suzuki said.

With India as a production base for Jimny 5-door, Suzuki aims to leverage Maruti Suzuki's global production stature to meet the growing demand for the iconic off-roader brand.

Maruti Suzuki is India's leading passenger vehicle exporter shipped over 3.23 lakh vehicles to around 100 countries in CY 2024. The company held a 43.5 per cent share of the country's total passenger vehicle exports in CY 2024. -PTI

AI chatbot 'Ryan' becomes an attraction

By Kunal Dutt

Riyadh: 'Ryan', a star attraction at a mega-conference in Riyadh, introduces himself as a global labour market advisor, talks about highly sought-after jobs in Saudi Arabia and says politics is not his area of expertise -- except he is not human but a highly intelligent AI-based chatbot.

'Ryan', as his makers have named him, has been showcased in a booth set up in a pavilion room of the second edition of the

Global Labour Market Conference (GLMC) being hosted at the sprawling King Abdulaziz International Conference Centre (KAICC).

Visitors at the GLMC Pavilion can interact with this chatbot -- billed as the first artificial intelligence-based 'global labour market advisor', either directly in the booth or by scanning a QR code that opens into a chat engine.

Built by Takamol, a Riyadh-based company, the AI chatbot has two ver-



sions -- on-site version in which it only responds to queries in English and

the online version in which it replies in text chat in multiple languages includ-

ing French, Arabic and Spanish.

PTI visited the booth set up by Takamol and even interacted with 'Ryan', who responded to a question related to the second presidency of Donald Trump in the US.

'Ryan', however, prefaced its response with a disclaimer that his expertise lies in global labour market-related subjects and not politics.

"I clarify that my expertise lies in global labour market topics. I can pro-

vide general information on US market trends and policies during his time in office if that will be helpful," the AI chatbot said when asked about Trump's second presidency.

The glitzy booth on the side showcases the chatbot represented by a 3D space with a digital image of 'Ryan' projected on two walls meeting at a corner. The bot even 'turns its head' when the visitors standing in front of the booth move.

-PTI

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"The Indian sugar industry has the potential to contribute three per cent in the country's GDP. Indian policy makers have urban centric mindset. They are only concerned about inflation in four products -sugar, oil, wheat and rice."



Nitin Gadkari, Union Minister, Roadways

Daughter killed over TikTok video

Karachi: The man, accused of killing his 15-year-old daughter who was born and raised in the US, on Thursday claimed before a lower court that he killed her as despite his warnings, she had posted videos on TikTok.

The girl, who was a US national, had come on January 15 to her hometown Quetta in the Balochistan province with her family and was allegedly shot dead by her father and uncle on Tuesday. The judge granted the police 10 days remand of the two accused.

Senior police official Abad Baloch said the girl's younger brother was also being questioned to find out what had happened as initially the father and uncle had claimed the girl was shot outside their home in an aerial firing incident.

"We are investigating the matter to find out if the girl was brought to Pakistan by her father for the sole purpose of killing her because of the tougher laws in the United States," Baloch said. The family had moved to the US 28 years ago.

This is not the first incident of a Pakistani girl born and raised abroad falling victim to an "honour killing" by her close relatives while visiting the country or even abroad.

Honour killings especially of women are frequent in many parts of Pakistan even in a cosmopolitan city like Karachi where last October a man killed his mother, sister, sister-in-law and niece because they refused to stop making TikTok videos. He slit their throats in their Lea Market apartment and was later arrested by the police after initially he claimed he was not in the house when the killings took place. -PTI

Pilots of jet had agreed to land on another strip

Arlington: The Federal Aviation Administration said the midair crash occurred before 9 p.m. EST when a regional jet that had departed from Wichita, Kansas, collided with a military helicopter on a training flight while on approach to an airport runway. It occurred in some of the most tightly controlled and monitored airspace in the world, just over three miles south of the White House and the Capitol.

Investigators will try to piece together the aircraft's final moments before their collision, including contact with air traffic controllers as well as a loss of altitude by the passenger jet.

American Airlines Flight 5342 was inbound to Reagan National at an altitude of about 400 feet and a speed of about 140 miles per hour when it suffered a rapid loss of altitude over the Potomac River, according to data from its radio transponder. The Canadian-made Bombardier CRJ-701 twin-engine jet, manufactured in 2004, can be configured to carry up to 70 passengers.

A few minutes before landing, air traffic controllers asked the arriving commercial jet if it could land on the shorter Runway 33 at Reagan National and the pilots said they were able. Controllers then cleared the plane to land on Runway 33. Flight tracking sites showed the plane adjusted its approach to the new runway.

Less than 30 seconds before the crash, an air traffic controller asked the helicopter if it had the arriving



Boats work the scene in the Potomac River near Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in Arlington on Thursday.

Pic: AP/PTI

plane in sight. The controller made another radio call to the helicopter moments later: "PAT 25 pass behind the CRJ." Seconds after that, the two aircraft collided.

The plane's radio transponder stopped transmitting about 2,400 feet short of the runway, roughly over the middle of the river.

Video from an observation camera at the nearby Kennedy Centre showed two sets of lights consistent with aircraft appearing to join in a fireball.

"I know that flight. I've flown it several times myself," said Sen. Jerry Moran of Kansas. He said he expected that many people in Wichita would know people who were on the flight.

"This is a very personal circumstance," he said.

The collision occurred on a warm winter evening in Washington, with temperatures registering as

high as 60 degrees Fahrenheit, following a stretch days earlier of intense cold and ice. On Wednesday, the Potomac River was 36 degrees Fahrenheit, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The National Weather Service reported that wind gusts of up to 25 mph were possible in the area throughout the evening.

American Airlines CEO Robert Isom expressed "deep sorrow" for the crash and said the company was focused on the needs of passengers, crew, first responders and families and loved ones of those involved.

Some 300 first responders were on scene. Inflatable rescue boats were launched into the Potomac River from a point along the George Washington Parkway, just north of the airport, and first responders set up light towers from the

shore to illuminate the area near the collision site. At least a half-dozen boats were scanning the water using searchlights.

"It's a highly complex operation," said D.C. fire chief John Donnelly. "The conditions out there are extremely rough for the responders."

The US Army described the helicopter as a UH-60 Blackhawk based at Fort Belvoir in Virginia. The helicopter was on a training flight. Military aircraft frequently conduct training flights in and around the congested and heavily-restricted airspace around the nation's capital for familiarisation and continuity of government planning.

The crash is serving as a major test for two of the Trump administration's newest agency leaders. Pete Hegseth, sworn in days ago as defence secretary, posted on social media that an in-

vestigation has been "launched immediately" by the Army and the Defence Department.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, just sworn in earlier this week, said at a sombre news conference at the airport early Thursday that his agency would provide all possible resources to the investigation.

The last major fatal crash involving a US commercial airline occurred in 2009 near Buffalo, New York. Everyone aboard the Bombardier DHC-8 propeller plane was killed, including 45 passengers, 2 pilots and 2 flight attendants. Another person on the ground also died, bringing the total death toll to 50. An investigation determined that the captain accidentally caused the plane to stall as it approached the airport in Buffalo.

Reagan Airport will reopen at 11 a.m. Thursday, the

Federal Aviation Administration announced. The FAA has previously said it would be closed until 5 a.m. Friday.

Located along the Potomac River, just southwest of the city, Reagan National is a popular choice because it's much closer than the larger Dulles International Airport, which is deeper in Virginia.

Depending on the runway being used, flights into Reagan can offer passengers spectacular views of landmarks like the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the National Mall and the US Capitol. It's a postcard-worthy welcome for tourists visiting the city.

The collision recalled the crash of an Air Florida flight that plummeted into the Potomac on January 13, 1982, that killed 78 people. That crash was attributed to bad weather.

-AP

Rohingya refugees in Indonesia

Pereulak: A rickety wooden boat carrying more than 100 Rohingya Muslims landed Wednesday in Indonesia as the northernmost province of Aceh continued to receive the refugees fleeing persecution and political unrest in Myanmar.

Indonesia's government blames a surge in human trafficking for the increasing number of Rohingya Muslims who have arrived over the past few years.

Local police chief Nova Suryandaru said the boat's engine had broken down and the boat, carrying mostly women and children, ran aground near Pereulak village in East Aceh district. He said authorities were collecting information about their identities.

He said one refugee told authorities that the vessel set off from Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh with the hope of reaching Malaysia. But Suryandaru said many suspect the boat was deliberately damaged by illegal traffickers so the refugees would not be returned to sea. The government will take "firm action" against perpetrators of human trafficking, Suryandaru said.

Over 600 Rohingya refugees have landed in East Aceh in the past year, including more than 260 weak and hungry refugees, mostly women and children, who landed in Pereulak in two boats earlier this month. About 1 million Rohingya, who are predominantly Muslim, are in camps in Bangladesh after leaving Myanmar. They include about 740,000 who fled a brutal "clearance campaign" in 2017 by Myanmar's security forces, who were accused of mass rapes and killings. -AP

Antisemitic plot busted in Melbourne

Melbourne: Australian police suspect explosives stashed on Sydney's outskirts were evidence of a deadly escalation in a campaign of antisemitic arson and graffiti crimes that has been waged in major cities for months, officials said on Wednesday.

Police found a list of Jewish targets together with a cache of Powergel, an explosive used in the mining industry, in a trailer in the outer suburb of Dural on Jan. 19, New South Wales state Deputy Police Commissioner David Hudson said.

Hudson said there were enough explosives to make a bomb with a blast of 40 metres (130 feet).

"This is certainly an escalation," Hudson told reporters, referring to a recent series of antisemitic crimes in Sydney, where businesses and cars have been torched and buildings graffitied. "The use of explosives ... have the potential to cause a great deal of damage." Hudson declined to identify the potential Jewish targets. "I don't think it's appropriate to nominate the targets. I can indicate that the Jewish community will be made aware," Hudson said.

He said several suspects had been arrested who were not directly related to the explosives.

Since the Israel-Hamas war began in 2023, targeted arson and graffiti attacks have soared in Australia's largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne, which are home to 85 per cent of the country's Jewish population.

A worshipper who suffered burn injuries in a fire that was set at a Melbourne synagogue in December last year is the only human casualty. That arson attack is being investigated by a joint counterterrorism team involving federal and state law enforcement authorities.

New South Wales Premier Chris Minns said counterterrorism authorities were also investigating the explosives discovery. "This is the discovery of a potential mass casualty event. There's only one way of calling it out and that is terrorism. That's what we're very worried about," Minns said.

"This would strike terror into the community, particularly the Jewish community, and it must be met with the full resources of the government." -AP



Displaced Palestinians walk on a road in central Gaza to return to their homes in the northern Gaza Strip on Wednesday.

Pic: AP/PTI

7,000 Indians overstayed in 2023

Washington: Over 7,000 student and exchange visitors from India overstayed in the US in 2023, an expert told US lawmakers and suggested several reforms in the country's immigration policies, including those related to H-1B visas.

As many as 32 countries have student/exchange visitor overstay rates of higher than 20 per cent, Jessica M Vaughan from the Center for Immigration Studies told the US House Committee on the Judiciary during a hearing on "Restoring Immigration Enforcement in America."

The F and M visa categories have the highest over-

stay rates of any of the broad categories of temporary admission.

The F-1 Visa allows a person to enter the United States as a full-time student at an accredited college, university, seminary, conservatory, academic high school, elementary school, or other academic institution or in a language training programme.

The M-1 visa category includes students in vocational or other nonacademic programmes, other than language training.

"Four countries -- Brazil, China, Colombia and India -- each had more than 2,000 of their citizens overstaying

student/exchange visas in 2023, with India having the highest number (7,000)," Vaughan said on Wednesday.

Visa issuance policies need adjustments and interior enforcement should be strengthened. Furthermore, Congress should amend the law in several significant ways, she stated.

"First, the concept of dual intent should not apply to student visa applicants; instead, each applicant should be required to demonstrate an intent and likelihood to return to their home country after their studies," she added. -PTI

Birtheright Citizenship Bill tabled

Washington: A group of Republican Senators has introduced a bill in the US Senate to restrict birtheright citizenship to the children of illegal immigrants and non-immigrants on temporary visas.

According to Senators Lindsey Graham, Ted Cruz and Katie Britt, who introduced the bill, the exploitation of birtheright citizenship is a major pull factor for illegal immigration and a weakness for national security.

The US is one of only 33 countries in the world with no restrictions on birtheright citizenship, they said.

The legislative move comes after an executive order on the matter, signed by President Donald Trump on the first day of his presidency, has been blocked by a federal judge in Washington state.

The Center for Immigration Studies estimates that in 2023, there were 2,25,000 to 2,50,000 births to illegal immigrants, amounting to close to seven per cent of births in the US. It is long overdue for the United States to change its policy on birtheright citizenship because it is being abused in so many ways.

Bishop accused of misconduct retires

By Aditi Khanna

London: An Indian-origin bishop accused of misconduct by two women, allegations he denies, announced his retirement from the Church of England on Thursday.

Right Reverend Doctor John Perumbalath, the Bishop of Liverpool who is originally from Kerala and ordained into the Church of North India in 1994, said he had sought the requisite permission from King Charles III - the Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

He maintained his innocence and blamed a "trial by media" which had made his position at the Diocese of Liverpool "untenable".

"Having sought the permission of His Majesty the King, I have today decided to retire from active ministry in the Church of England," reads a statement by Rt Rev. Dr John Perumbalath.

"Earlier this week, I was approached by 'Channel 4 news' who informed me they would be broadcasting a story containing allegations of inappropriate behaviour by me against two different women. Since

those allegations were made I have consistently maintained that I have not done anything wrong and continue to do so," said the 58-year-old clergyman.

"This rush to judgment and my trial by media (be that social or broadcast) has made my position untenable due to the impact it will have on the Diocese of Liverpool and the wider church whilst we await further reviews and next steps," he added.

The bishop stressed that his move was not a "resignation occasioned by fault or by any admission of liability" but because he did not wish the story broadcast on Tuesday night to become a distraction for his diocese.

"Having received the news of the retirement of the Bishop of Liverpool, we acknowledge his decision to take this step for the good of the Diocese of Liverpool. This is a deeply painful situation, and we hold all concerned in our prayers," the Diocese of Liverpool said in its statement.

Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell, who heads the Church of England, said he respected Perumbalath's decision. -PTI

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"Discussions will be held over all sorts of border-related agreements with India. The Bangladeshi side would seek to cancel 'some uneven agreements' related to border management alongside and discuss other related issues."

Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury,
Home Adviser, Bangladesh



More hostages and prisoners set to be released

Jerusalem: Hamas is set to free three more Israeli hostages as well as five Thai captives on Thursday, and Israel is to release another 110 Palestinian prisoners, in the third such exchange since a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip took hold earlier this month.

The tenuous ceasefire between Israel and Hamas is aimed at ending the war in Gaza and securing the release of dozens of hostages held by the militant group, as well as hundreds of Palestinians imprisoned or detained by Israel.

Under the ceasefire, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have jubilantly returned to northern Gaza over the past three days. However, their homecoming has been bittersweet as nearly everyone has friends or relatives who died, and many northern neighborhoods have been transformed into an apocalyptic landscape of devastation by more than 15 months of war.

The Israelis set to be released are Agam Berger, 20, a female soldier; Arbel Yehoud, a 29-year-old civil-



ian woman; and Gadi Moses, an 80-year-old man. The identities of the Thai nationals who will be released were not immediately known.

Yehoud was at the center of the dispute about the se-

quence of releases that briefly rocked the ceasefire over the weekend. Israel says she was supposed to have been freed Saturday and delayed the opening of crossings to northern Gaza when she was not. Berger was abducted alongside four other female soldiers, who were freed on Saturday.

A number of foreign workers were taken captive along with dozens of Israeli civilians and soldiers during Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack that set off the war. Twenty-three Thais were

among more than 100 hostages released during a weeklong ceasefire in November 2023.

Of the 110 people set to be released from prisons in Israel, 30 are serving life sentences after being convicted of deadly attacks against Israelis. Zakaria Zubeidi, a prominent former militant leader and theater director who took part in a dramatic jailbreak in 2021 before being rearrested days later, is also among those set to be released.

Today's exchange is part

of a deal that paused fighting in Gaza on Jan. 19. Israeli forces have pulled back from most of Gaza, allowing hundreds of thousands of people to return to what remains of their homes and humanitarian groups to surge assistance.

It calls for Hamas to release a total of 33 hostages, including women, children, older adults and sick or wounded men, in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners. Hamas has confirmed that eight of the hostages to be released in this phase are dead. -AP

EDITORIAL

Fatal Devotion

The stampede at the Mahakumbh Mela in Prayagraj, which claimed at least 30 lives and injured scores more, was an avoidable tragedy. The Uttar Pradesh government, fully aware that tens of millions would gather for the Amrit Snan, had months to prepare. Instead, it failed to control the surging crowds, exposing glaring weaknesses in its ability to manage large-scale events. The disaster not only highlights India's chronic crowd indiscipline but also raises questions about whether the state's intelligence agencies ignored potential risks or worse, whether they were blindsided by a deeper conspiracy.

This is not the first time such a catastrophe has occurred at an Indian religious congregation, nor is it likely to be the last. The combination of official complacency, a lack of discipline among Indian crowds, and, potentially, an intelligence lapse, paints a damning picture of administrative incompetence. In 1954, over 800 people died in a similar stampede while in 2013, another 42 perished during the event.

What makes this failure more egregious is that officials knew what was coming. The Maha Kumbh this year was set to be the largest ever, drawing an estimated 400 million devotees due to a rare planetary alignment that made this edition particularly auspicious. The government has poured thousands of crores into the event, yet its crowd management measures proved woefully inadequate.

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's post-facto orders - relocating street vendors and preventing overcrowding - were steps that should have been implemented pre-emptively before Mauni Amavasya, one of the busiest days of the festival. The lack of proper holding areas, inadequate barricading and insufficient emergency exits turned the Sangam area into a death trap.

Blaming the administration alone, however, would be simplistic. Indian crowds are notoriously undisciplined, often disregarding security instructions in their rush to gain an advantage. The instinct to push forward, disregard barricades and flout regulations is deeply ingrained. Unlike in countries where large gatherings follow strict queuing and movement protocols, crowds in India show no civic sense. Witnesses at the Sangam reported that barricades were broken as devotees surged forward, trampling those in their path. This kind of reckless behaviour is not unique to the Kumbh. Political rallies and festivals across India routinely devolve into chaos because attendees refuse to adhere to basic order.

That said, the government's responsibility is to anticipate and plan for such behaviour. Beyond administrative incompetence, there is another, more sinister possibility. The timing and nature of the stampede have led some to speculate whether it was more than just an accident. If there was any foul play - whether in the form of a political or extremist attempt, or simply a dangerous prank - will be determined only after the probe. But if true, then this points to an intelligence failure on the part of the Uttar Pradesh government. All said, one thing is clear as the investigation unfolds that the Prayagraj stampede was a failure of governance at multiple levels.

NATIONAL SECURITY

Spies, Lies and Five Eyes: How the West Plays Its Hand Against India



By
Commodore S.L. Deshmukh

During the Second World War, the United States and the United Kingdom built an extensive intelligence-sharing network to counter the Axis powers. This network, formalized post-war under the UKUSA Agreement, gradually expanded to include Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, forming what is now known—sometimes with admiration, sometimes with apprehension—as the Five Eyes Alliance. What was once a pragmatic wartime necessity has since become an opaque, self-serving consortium, an instrument of geopolitical manipulation whose unchecked power has drawn rebuke, lawsuits, and diplomatic tensions.

India, despite its complex and evolving strategic relationships with three of the Five Eyes members - the U.S., U.K., and Australia - has frequently found itself at the receiving end of the alliance's covert machinations. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the recent row between India and Canada over the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Khalistani separatist. Canada's insistence, backed by Five Eyes intelligence, that India was behind Nijjar's killing has

The covert alliance that shaped the modern intelligence world now finds itself at odds with an India unwilling to play by old rules.

frayed diplomatic ties, especially given its failure to produce concrete evidence. For New Delhi, this was less an isolated incident and more an ominous echo of a broader pattern of Western intelligence interference aimed at undermining India's geopolitical standing.

At the heart of this friction is the United States, the dominant partner in Five Eyes and a country that has seldom missed an opportunity to lecture India on democracy and human rights. Washington routinely chastises New Delhi over its handling of minority rights, media freedoms, and civil society restrictions—all while cozying up to regimes with far worse records. This moral posturing, however, often masks a deeper unease with India's independent foreign policy. America's irritation stems from India's close ties with Russia, its insistence on a multipolar world order, and its unwillingness to be strong-armed into a junior partnership. Unable to dictate terms, Washington has turned to alternative means: misinformation, covert influence operations, and the intelligence apparatus of Five Eyes.

Take, for instance, the recent accusations against India's national security establishment. Western media outlets, often fed by selective intelligence leaks, have named National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and former RAW chief Samant Goel in connection with an alleged assassination plot against Sikh separatist leader Gurbhagat Singh Pannun. Such allegations, vehemently denied by India, are not just politically motivated but also reek of double standards. Western intelligence circles, quick to indict Indian agencies, remain conspicuously silent about the CIA's own clandestine operations within India, be it Cold War-era meddling or more recent surveillance efforts.

But Five Eyes' ambitions go beyond discrediting India's security apparatus. The alliance, in concert with the Western media ecosystem, has been accused of meddling in India's domestic affairs, particularly through strategic leaks to left-



leaning media outlets, funding of civil society groups, and amplifying narratives that sow political and financial instability. The 2024 Indian general election, where Five Eyes allegedly sought to undermine Prime Minister Narendra Modi's prospects, were a case in point. Despite efforts to stir discontent, Indian voters reaffirmed Modi's leadership, dealing a blow to Western hopes of a regime change.

That loss, however, did not mean the end of hostilities. Soon after, Hindenburg Research, a U.S.-based firm, launched an explosive report against the Adani Group, triggering a financial upheaval in India's markets. Indian officials have since pointed to intelligence linkages, suspecting that the report was weaponized to create economic instability. The message was clear: if direct political intervention fails, economic subterfuge is the next best option.

Five Eyes' designs also extend to supporting separatist movements within India. Whether it's the Khalistani radicals in Canada and the U.K., Kashmiri activists in the U.S., or politically motivated protests like the Punjab farmers' movement, New Delhi sees a common thread—the tacit backing of Western intelligence. More concerning is the role of certain Indian elites: bureaucrats, academics, and activists, cultivated over decades by Western agencies, who act as enablers of these narratives.

And yet, despite the relentless subver-

sion, India has held its ground. The Modi government, aware of these manoeuvres, has tightened its counter-intelligence protocols and reduced its dependency on Five Eyes intelligence-sharing mechanisms. The larger question, however, remains: can the West afford to continue antagonizing India? The answer, in the long run, is no.

But what next? If the Five Eyes alliance continues its strategy of containment and destabilization, it risks alienating a country that could be a valuable partner in countering China's aggression in the Indo-Pacific. A more pragmatic approach - one informed by Kautilya's doctrine of Samashraya (seeking alliances with those who share common interests) - would dictate that the West nurture, rather than antagonize, its relationship with India. This means moving beyond intelligence warfare and into genuine strategic cooperation, whether through the Quad or other regional partnerships.

If the West truly believes in the democratic values it never tires of harping upon, it would do well to practice them in its dealings with India. The question, then, is whether Five Eyes is willing to evolve or whether it chooses to remain shackled to an old playbook - one that no longer works in a world where India refuses to be a pawn.

(The author is a retired naval aviation officer and geo-political analyst. Views personal.)

GLOBAL WATCH

Breaking the Bloc

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), founded in 1975 to foster economic and political integration across West Africa, is witnessing a major crack after three of its most embattled members - Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger - officially withdrew from the regional bloc, marking the culmination of over a year of escalating tensions and diplomatic impasses. This split, following a series of military coups in these countries, signifies a new chapter in the political dynamics of West Africa that could reverberate across the region and beyond.

In 2020, Mali was the first to fall under junta rule, followed by Burkina Faso in 2022 and Niger in 2023. Each of these countries experienced a military coup that ousted democratically elected leaders, prompting a swift and forceful response from ECOWAS, which has long advocated for democratic governance in the region. In reaction, the bloc imposed sanctions, including border closures, a no-fly zone, and the freezing of central bank assets, measures that hit the fragile economies of these countries hard.

However, the ECOWAS' measures only seemed to strengthen the resolve of the juntas. The military leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger condemned what they saw as ECOWAS' close ties to Western powers, which they accused of pursuing foreign interests in the region. In response, the three countries formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a new bloc designed to assert their sovereignty, reject external interference, and promote a more independ-

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso marks a turning point for both the future of ECOWAS and the region's security landscape.



ent regional agenda.

In December last year, ECOWAS offered a six-month grace period for the countries to reconsider their departure, but the junta governments were resolute. The creation of the AES was a pivotal shift in West African geopolitics. The new bloc, spearheaded by Mali's military ruler Assimi Goita, aims to foster stronger regional cooperation, not only in political and economic spheres but also in security. To counter the growing jihadist threat, which has devastated much of the Sahel, AES countries have vowed to establish a 5,000-strong military force. This move reflects a desire for greater autonomy in managing security challenges, with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger already receiving increasing support from Russia, including weapons and mercenaries, despite the ongoing instability.

While the AES offers these countries an alternative to ECOWAS, the long-term viability of this new alliance remains uncertain. All three countries are impoverished, landlocked, and highly dependent on their neighbours for trade and economic ties. In the short term, the withdrawal from ECOWAS might grant the juntas greater autonomy, but the three nations may soon face increased isolation and a deepening economic crisis. The impact of severing ties with a regional economic

bloc that facilitates the free movement of people and goods cannot be understated, particularly for countries whose economic survival is heavily reliant on cross-border trade.

For ECOWAS, the departure of three member states is a profound blow. The bloc, which at its peak represented over 400 million people, now loses 76 million citizens and a vast expanse of territory. The loss of these countries, all of which are among the poorest in the region, challenges ECOWAS's credibility and ability to enforce its will. The bloc's repeated failures to prevent the coups and uphold democratic governance have exacerbated a legitimacy crisis that was already simmering beneath the surface.

Moreover, ECOWAS's capacity to address regional security challenges is now under greater scrutiny. The Sahel, an arid region south of the Sahara, has become a global hotspot for jihadist violence. The insurgencies in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have inflicted devastating casualties, and the withdrawal of these countries from ECOWAS could exacerbate an already fragile security situation. The threat of jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS has only intensified in recent years, and the departure of these countries from a cooperative security framework could hinder efforts to combat extremism effectively.

STATES WATCH

Unlikely Convergence

In an unprecedented move, two influential political leaders from opposite ends of the ideological spectrum in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) - Hurriyat Conference chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and National Conference (NC) Member of Parliament Aga Syed Ruhullah - recently met in New Delhi to ostensibly discuss the pressing issues facing the people of J&K and Muslims across India.

The hour-long meeting is believed to signify the complex and evolving dynamics in J&K's post-Article 370 era. The discussions centered on three key concerns: the abrogation of Article 370, the proposed Uniform Civil Code (UCC), and the Waqf (Amendment) Bill.

Historically, the Hurriyat Conference and the NC have been bitter rivals, representing divergent political ideologies. The Hurriyat Conference, born out of a coalition of separatist groups in the early 1990s, had long advocated for J&K's independence from India or its merger with Pakistan, depending on the faction. On the other hand, the NC has traditionally supported the region's autonomy within the Indian Union. To see these two leaders meet - one representing the mainstream political establishment, the other the face of separatism - is a

The meeting between Hurriyat's Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and National Conference's Aga Syed Ruhullah signals a shift in the political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir, but it raises more questions than answers.

striking reminder of the deepening political fissures within the state, but also an indication of shifting priorities.

Farooq, who heads the Muttahida Majlis-e-Ulema (MMU), an umbrella body of over 40 Muslim organizations in J&K, has been at the forefront of the region's struggle for autonomy. In contrast, Ruhullah, a Shia cleric and an MP of the NC, has been more attuned to the intricacies of national politics, especially with the rise of concerns about Muslim rights



JAMMU AND KASHMIR

across India. The meeting itself underscores the growing realization among political leaders in J&K that the region's future cannot be understood in isolation from the broader issues facing Muslims in India, particularly in the aftermath of contentious legislative moves like the UCC and the Waqf Bill.

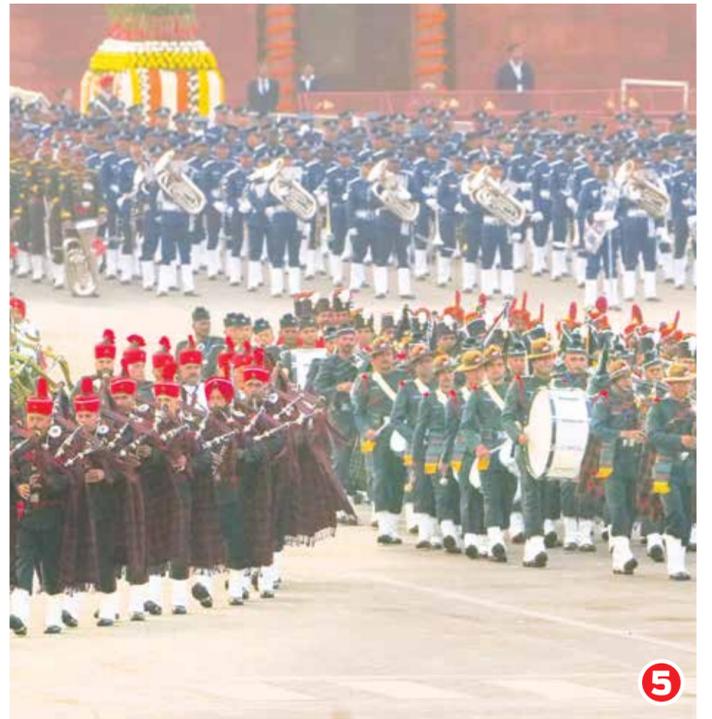
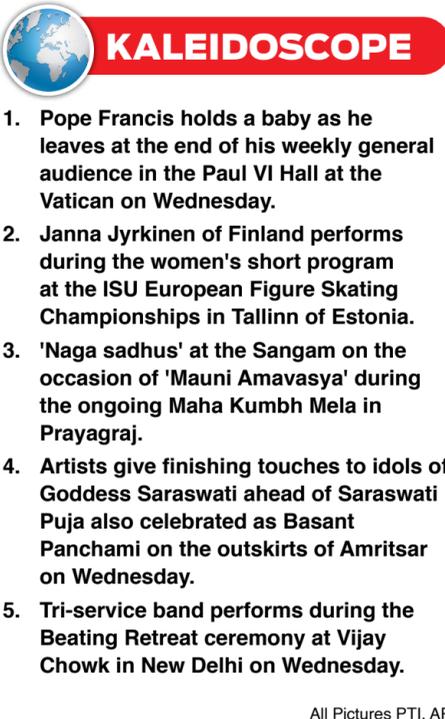
The Waqf (Amendment) Bill, which is currently under review by Parliament, has sparked significant controversy among Muslim leaders. The Bill proposes a central government-controlled Waqf board to manage properties belonging to the Muslim community, raising fears that it could infringe upon the community's autonomy and rights. Mirwaiz Farooq, who had previously submit-

ted a memorandum to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the matter, has voiced strong opposition to the Bill, warning that it could turn Muslims into second-class citizens. His meeting with Ruhullah was a chance to align their positions and explore ways to build opposition across party lines, with plans to approach leaders like Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar - BJP's coalition partners - for support.

For Farooq and Ruhullah, the UCC apparently represents an existential threat to the pluralistic fabric of India, particularly for Muslims. The two leaders have expressed concerns that the UCC could marginalize Muslim personal laws, further eroding the community's rights and freedoms. This issue, much like the Waqf Bill, has led to growing tensions within the Muslim community, which is already feeling besieged by the government's sweeping reforms.

While the meeting between these two leaders signifies a convergence of concerns, it is unclear whether this moment of unity will lead to a broader political shift in J&K. Farooq, who was once the face of J&K's separatist movement, has sought to adjust his stance to address the changing realities post-2019. Yet his alliance with Ruhullah, who represents a party deeply entrenched in India's political fabric, may face scepticism from his own supporters, many of whom view the NC as complicit in the dilution of J&K's autonomy.

There is a significant political risk involved for the NC as its support for such an alliance could also alienate its base, which harbours reservations about such a cooperation with the Hurriyat. The political landscape in J&K is evolving, but whether this new-found alliance between Farooq and Ruhullah will result in meaningful political change remains uncertain.



KALEIDOSCOPE

1. Pope Francis holds a baby as he leaves at the end of his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican on Wednesday.
2. Janna Jyrkinen of Finland performs during the women's short program at the ISU European Figure Skating Championships in Tallinn of Estonia.
3. 'Naga sadhus' at the Sangam on the occasion of 'Mauni Amavasya' during the ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj.
4. Artists give finishing touches to idols of Goddess Saraswati ahead of Saraswati Puja also celebrated as Basant Panchami on the outskirts of Amritsar on Wednesday.
5. Tri-service band performs during the Beating Retreat ceremony at Vijay Chowk in New Delhi on Wednesday.

All Pictures PTI, AP

BUDGET BREAKDOWN

Reading the Economic Tea Leaves



By
Amey Chitale

As Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman prepares to unveil the Union Budget on February 1, 2025, policymakers are poring over a complex set of economic signals. Gross Domestic Product figures, while crucial, arrive with a time lag, making High-Frequency Indicators (HFIs) the go-to barometers for assessing India's economic pulse in real time. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the maestro of macroeconomics, pieces together these fragmented signals from agriculture, industry, and services, painting a portrait of where the country stands.

On the surface, the agricultural sector is basking in a monsoonal afterglow. Water reservoir levels surged to 139.4 billion cubic meters by mid-December, a striking 24 percent increase over last year, setting the stage for a robust second half of FY25. Kharif food grain production hit 164.7 million tonnes—an 11 percent jump—while Rabi sowing inched up by 1.6 percent. Tractor sales, a reliable barometer of rural confidence, climbed to 690,000 units between April and November, signalling resilience. The government's decision to hike the Minimum Support Price (MSP) by 5 to 12.7 percent across crops has bolstered rural purchasing

Part 3: A mixed bag of high-frequency indicators suggests India's economic recovery is uneven, but not without promise.

power, hinting at a GDP boost ahead. Inflationary fears linger, but for now, agriculture appears to be on steady ground.

Passenger vehicle sales, a key indicator of urban demand, experienced a dip in the second quarter but saw a strong recovery during the Diwali season in the third quarter. Domestic air traffic, while still positive, grew by a modest 6.8 percent from April to October, a marked slowdown from the 19.3 percent growth in the same period the previous year. Fuel consumption rose by 3.3 percent from April to November, compared to a 5 percent increase in the prior year. Similarly, power consumption saw a more subdued growth of 3.9 percent, reaching 1,149.5 billion units, down from 9.7 percent the year before. Meanwhile, the agriculture sector's buoyant performance has buoyed rural demand, cushioning the effects of a tepid urban market.



Unemployment remains a political flashpoint, often wielded by opposition parties to take aim at the government. The latest Periodic Labour Force Survey pegs urban unemployment at 6.4 percent—an improvement, but one that masks a stark gender disparity. While male unemployment stands at 5.7 percent, female unemployment hovers at 8.3 percent. Encouragingly, new Employees' Provident Fund enrolments crossed 10.5 million between April and October, up from 8.2 million the previous year, and demand for work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act fell by 13.3 percent, suggesting that more rural jobs are emerging outside the safety net.

Then, there's inflation, a spectre that looms over every economic conversation. The Consumer Price Index

(CPI) softened to 4.9 percent between April and November, compared to 5.2 percent the previous year. Core inflation, stripped of volatile food and fuel prices, has cooled to 3.2 percent. But food inflation, the metric that weighs most heavily on household budgets, has risen to 7.9 percent, up from 6.6 percent last year. The Wholesale Price Index (WPI) has rebounded from a 1.3 percent contraction to a 2 percent increase, reflecting an economy where supply-chain pressures are shifting.

Global forces complicate the RBI's calculus. With the rupee showing signs of depreciation and the Federal Reserve's rate trajectory uncertain, India's central bank has opted for patience, keeping policy rates untouched. A Trumpian return to protectionism in the U.S. could disrupt trade flows, while the fragile Israel-Hamas ceasefire may determine the next moves in global energy markets.

One missing piece in this puzzle is private investment, which remains sluggish despite government spending driving infrastructure expansion. India's industrialists, historically cautious in uncertain times, have held back on large-scale capital expenditures, wary of volatile global conditions and policy risks. While the production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes have seen some success, they have not yet triggered a full-scale private investment boom. The government will be under pressure to balance fiscal prudence with populist spending.

In the months ahead, India's economic story will be a balancing act between rural optimism and urban sluggishness, between inflationary caution and growth imperatives, between domestic policy and global volatility. The tea leaves are there for the reading; the real question is who gets to write the script.

(The author is a Chartered Accountant and works at Automotive Division of Mahindra and Mahindra Limited. Views personal.)

FARMERS' PLIGHT

Ploughing for a Better Future



By
Ramesh Patil

Every year, as the Union Budget looms, we farmers hold our breath. Agriculture in India is not just a profession but the pulse of the nation, sustaining over half the population and shaping the country's economic narrative. And yet, the sector often finds itself in a perpetual cycle of neglect, caught between political posturing and bureaucratic inertia. The 2025 Budget offers another opportunity to break this pattern, to bring meaningful change to the farmers who form the foundation of India's economy. But will the government seize it?

First and foremost, farmers need more than token allocations - they need substantial, sustained investment. Irrigation projects, cold storage facilities and rural markets require dedicated funds, not sporadic handouts. Without such infrastructure, farmers remain vulnerable to erratic monsoons, supply chain breakdowns, and post-harvest losses.

The Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) was launched with the promise of shielding farmers from unpredictable crop losses. But the scheme has often fallen short - be it in Maharashtra or elsewhere, being mired in delayed payouts, insurance company bottlenecks and red tape that leaves farmers stranded. If the government is serious about protecting rural livelihoods, PMFBY must be revamped with stricter accountability measures and faster claim settlements.

The romance of the plough is outdated. Indian agriculture needs to fully embrace the 21st century. Precision farming, drone-based monitoring, and AI-driven soil analysis are no longer luxuries but necessities. While some initiatives have nudged farmers toward modern technology, adoption remains low



due to high costs. Subsidizing smart farming equipment would not only improve productivity but also make Indian agriculture globally competitive.

Minimum Support Price (MSP) remains the cornerstone of farmers' demands, a lifeline that ensures they are not crushed by volatile market forces. While the government announces MSP hikes, the reality on the ground is different as procurement remains skewed in favour of certain crops and middlemen often manipulate the system. Expanding MSP coverage and enforcing transparent procurement mechanisms would go a long way in restoring farmers' faith in the system.

For small and marginal farmers, loans are a double-edged sword. While access to credit is essential, the spectre of debt-induced distress looms large. Loan waivers, though politically popular, are short-term fixes at best. Instead, the government must introduce structured, long-term financial reforms—low-interest credit lines, easier repayment options, and financial literacy programs to prevent farmers from falling into debt traps.

Indian agriculture is at the mercy of the monsoon, a dependency that spells disaster in years of deficient rainfall. Irrigation projects need to be fast-tracked, and water conservation efforts must move beyond rhetoric. Efficient water management through drip irrigation, rainwater harvesting and watershed development can make farming less of a gamble.

While policymakers love to extol the virtues of organic farming, the ground reality tells a different story. The transition to organic methods is expensive, time-consuming, and rid-

dled with marketing challenges. For it to be viable, farmers need access to subsidies, dedicated supply chains, and global export avenues that ensure organic produce fetches competitive prices.

Indian farmers often produce in abundance, only to watch their harvests rot due to inadequate processing facilities. Encouraging agro-processing industries through tax breaks, local-level food processing centers and farm-to-market linkages can help farmers reap greater profits and reduce wastage.

Erratic rainfall, rising temperatures, and unpredictable weather patterns are no longer abstract concerns. Climate change is already impacting crop yields, and if India fails to act now, the repercussions will be dire. The budget must prioritize climate-resilient agriculture, investing in research, developing drought-resistant crops and creating financial safety nets for climate-affected farmers, especially in regions like Marathwada and Vidarbha.

Beyond the fields, Indian farmers need social security. Aging farmers need pensions, rural healthcare systems must be strengthened, and accident insurance should be a given. If policymakers truly believe in "Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan," then social protection for farmers must be more than a slogan.

The Union Budget 2025 can either continue with piecemeal solutions, offering band-aids to deep wounds, or it can herald a new era for Indian agriculture. Farmers are not looking for charity but systemic changes that empower them. The question is, will the government listen this time?

(The author is a farmer and resident of Latur district.)

Thakur shines again

THE BOWLER'S HAT-TRICK, FIFTIES FROM RAHANE, LAD POWER MUMBAI'S DOMINATION OVER MEGHALAYA

Mumbai: Shardul Thakur remained at the forefront of the Mumbai attack as his hat-trick and unbeaten half-centuries from skipper Ajinkya Rahane (83) and Siddhesh Lad (89) helped the hosts build a 127-run lead against Meghalaya on the opening day of their Ranji Trophy Elite Group A clash here on Thursday.

Thakur found adequate help from another opening-day bowling-friendly surface as well as from fellow bowlers Mohit Avasthi (3/27), Sylvester D'Souza (2/14) and Shams Mulani (1/1) as Mumbai shot out Meghalaya for a mere 86.

In reply, a sturdy unbeaten 170-run stand for the third wicket between Rahane and Lad powered Mumbai to 213 for two at stumps in their must-win last group stage clash here at the BKC Ground.

Mumbai captain Rahane made the right call of bowling first and Thakur was all over Meghalaya right from the word go.

Pitching the ball up to exploit the early moisture on the wicket and the new ball, the India all-rounder found the perfect line and lengths to record only the fifth hat-trick for Mumbai in Ranji Trophy history.

Thakur provided Mumbai with an early breakthrough getting Meghalaya opener Nishanta Chakraborty (0) caught by Shams Mulani at the slip cordon on the fourth ball of the innings.

But it was in his second over and third of the innings when the carnage unfolded for Meghalaya, who slipped for 2/5 by the end of it.

Anirudh B (0) was cleaned up with Thakur's delivery nipping back in and hitting the off-stump on the fourth ball.

Sumit Kumar (0) gave a simple grab to Mulani on the third slip on the penultimate delivery of the over and Thakur again got the ball to move back into another left-hander, Jaskirat Sachdeva (0), to hit the off-stump again.

Meghalaya soon slipped to 2/6 on the first ball of the fourth over as Mohit Avasthi cleaned up opener Arpit Subhas (2), in danger to possibly record the lowest Ranji Trophy total ever.

But Pringsang Sangma (19), skipper Akash Kumar (16), Anish Charak (17) and Himan Phukan (28) did extremely well to negotiate the rampaging Mumbai bowlers and drag Meghalaya as far as 86 all-out in the first essay.

Mumbai lost Ayush Mhatre (5) early but a cautious approach thereon helped the hosts crawl past Meghalaya's paltry score, but in doing so the hosts' batters Lad (89 off 155 balls, 11x4s, 1x6s) and Rahane (83 off 150, 9x4s, 1x6s) took away the fight from the less fancied visitors.

If Lad was resolute in defence and attack alike, Rahane raised his first half-century of the season while peppering the on-side with attractive stroke play which was the highlight of his knock.

Meanwhile, as Mumbai tightened screws on Meghalaya, their star player and India captain Rohit Sharma hit the nets adjacent to the BKC Ground on Thursday morning for a half-an-hour session against fast bowlers and throw down specialists.

As if it was a conscious approach, Rohit curbed his attacking instincts throughout the stint to focus on defence against the white-ball as he prepares for ODI assignments against England and Champions Trophy.

At Vadodara, fresh off a five-wicket humbling of the defending champions Mumbai, Jammu and Kashmir seemed to have squandered a solid platform as they slipped from 106 for three to 246 all-out with only Kanhaiya Wadhawan (71) putting up resistance.

But in reply, Baroda were rocked twice as they reached 29 for two, trailing by another 217 runs in the first innings as the race to quarterfinals intensifying with three teams in fray for

top-two finish.

J&K lead the Group A points table followed by Baroda and Mumbai at second and third respectively.

At Cuttack, Rajesh Mohanty's 61-ball 60 with eight fours and four boundaries was the only bright spot for hosts Odisha who were shot out for a mere 180 in the first essay by Services.

At the close of play, Services, who were rocked twice in quick succession, reached 85 for two, trailing by another 95 runs in the first innings.

Elsewhere in Solapur, visitors Tripura crawled to 230 / 5 against Maharashtra.

Brief scores:
At Mumbai: Meghalaya 86 in 24.3 overs (Himan Phukan 28; Shardul Thakur 4/43, Mohit Avasthi 3/27, Sylvester D'Souza 2/14, Shams Mulani 1/1) trail Mumbai 213/2 in 59 overs (Siddhesh Lad 89*, Ajinkya Rahane 83*, Anish Charak 1/50) by 127 runs.

At Vadodara: Jammu and Kashmir 246 in 71.3 overs (Vivrant Sharma 43, Paras Dogra 43, Kanhaiya Wadhawan 71; Mahesh Pithiya 3/62, Ninad Rathva 5/43) lead Baroda 29/2 in 15.3 overs (Shivalik Sharma 16*; Sahil Lotra 1/5, Shubham Khajuria 0/1) by 217 runs.

At Cuttack: Odisha 180 in 62.2 overs (Rajesh Mohanty 60; Jayant Goyat 3/33, PS Poonia 4/33) lead Services 85/2 in 23 overs (Ravi Chauhan 40*; Sunil Kumar Roul 1/20) by 95 runs.

At Solapur: Tripura 230/5 in 89 overs (S Sharath 66*; Hitesh Walunj 3/59) vs Maharashtra. -PTI

Champions Trophy Opening ceremony on Feb 16

Karachi: The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) in conjunction with the ICC will hold the opening ceremony of the upcoming Champions Trophy on February 16 in Lahore.

A source in the PCB told PTI that chairman Mohsin Naqvi had approved a scheduled list of events prior to the first match of the tournament on February 19 at the National Stadium in Karachi between Pakistan and New Zealand.

The PCB will officially open the renovated Gaddafi stadium on February 7 for which Prime Minister Shabbaz Sharif has been invited as the chief guest.

On February 11, the PCB will launch the renovated National Stadium in Karachi with a ceremony in which President Asif Ali Zardari has been invited as the chief guest.

The source said the PCB and ICC were also working out the schedule of the captains press conference and photoshoots. They are likely to be held in Lahore on February 16.

The opening ceremony is scheduled at Huzoori Bagh at the historic Lahore fort in which officials of different boards, celebrities, legends of the game, and government officials will be invited. The ICC and PCB are yet to confirm if Indian captain, Rohit Sharma, would be travelling to Lahore for the events.

India will be playing their Champions Trophy matches in Dubai as part of a hybrid model deal between the ICC, PCB and BCCI and if they qualify for the final, then the title clash would also be held in the UAE city on March 9.



Participants during a wrestling competition held on the death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi in Kolkata on Thursday.

Pic: PTI

L&T Mumbai Open from tomorrow

By Correspondent

Mumbai: The fourth edition of the L&T Mumbai Open tennis tournament, organised by the Maharashtra State Lawn Tennis Association (MSLTA), will be held at the hard courts of the Cricket Club of India (CCI).

The WTA 125 tournament will commence on February 1st with the qualifying round, while the Main Draw of the event will begin on February 3rd with the finals scheduled on February 9th.

Some of the talented players from across the globe will battle it out for top honours, whilst the Indian contingent have been given Wild Cards for the L&T Mumbai Open.

The main draw is headlined by Tatjana Maria, who is ranked 73 in the world, and will be looking

to clinch her fourth singles title in her career. The right-handed Tatjana, who has achieved a career-high ranking of 42, reaching a Wimbledon semi-final as the sixth female player in the Open Era over the age of 34 in 2022. She has also won the 2023 and 2024 Copa Colsonatis WTA 250 Event in Colombia on clay.

Also present will be the defending champion Latvian Darja Semenistaja, and one of the brightest young players in the game, Alexandra Eala of the Philippines, who has been selected by Rafael Nadal to train at his academy.

Past singles champions including world No 2 Aryna Sabalenka (2017) and Thailand's Luksika Kumkhum (2018), have been part of the prestigious L&T Mumbai Open.

OP Gupta, (IAS) Chairman of the Organizing

Committee, said, "We are delighted to be back for yet another edition of the L&T Mumbai Open, and the Government of Maharashtra is keen to use this opportunity to support more grass root programs in tennis. High prize money events such as the L&T Mumbai Open are crucial to the development of Indian tennis, and we hope this year is bigger and better than ever before."

Mumbai Open Tennis Championships is heading into its fourth year, and returned to Mumbai after a gap of six years in 2024. Previously, the 2024 Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka had won the 2017 edition of the Mumbai Open as a teenager, while Thailand's Luksika Kumkhum won the title in 2018. Latvia's Darja Semenistaja claimed the crown in 2024.



Gukesh beats Warmerdam to lead

Wijk Aan Zee (Netherlands): World champion D Gukesh defeated Dutch Grandmaster Max Warmerdam to stay in sole lead on 7.5 points at the end of the 10th round of Tata Steel Chess tournament here.

It was another eventful day for Gukesh who is now closing in on the 2800-rating barrier. The victory with black came easily when Warmerdam missed the line after being level for quite some time.

It was a closed Sicilian where Gukesh knocked down a couple of pawns to force resignation in 34 moves.

The youngest world champion is a half point ahead of nearest rival

Nodirbek Abdusattorov of Uzbekistan. Holding the sole third spot is R Praggnanandhaa on 6.5 points after a finely crafted victory over Vladimir Fedoseev of Slovenia.

Arjun Erigaisi's hunt for an elusive victory continued for the 10th day running as he drew with Vincent Keymer of Germany.

P Harikrishna defended a slightly worse rook endgame to hold his fort against top seed Fabiano Caruana of the United States, while Leon Luke Mendonca played out a draw with Anish Giri.

Praggnanandhaa came up with a dominating performance against Fedoseev who chose the Tarrasch

defense as black. The opening saw Praggnanandhaa getting a structural advantage and he nurtured it quite well in the middle game.

The game was devoid of drama towards the end as Praggnanandhaa sacrificed all his pawns to make a new queen on board. The calculation was perfect and it was all over in 48 moves.

Keymer showcased his opening preparation to hold Erigaisi easily. The closed Ruy Lopez did not put up enough challenge and Keymer sacrificed a pawn early to maintain parity. Erigaisi had to give the pawn back in the middle game and the position just petered out to be level.

K Srikanth enters quarters

Bangkok (Thailand): Former world No 1 Kidambi Srikanth and S Subramanian won their respective matches to reach men's singles' quarterfinals of the Thailand Masters BWF Super 300 tournament here on Thursday.

Srikanth needed only 42 minutes to get the better of the 20-year-old Jason Gunawan from Hong Kong 21-19, 21-15 in his round of 16 contest.



He had previously beaten Gunawan in the Badminton Asia Team Championships last year.

Subramanian had to work hard for his victory over Chico Aura Dwi Wardoyo from Indonesia.

Subramanian lost the opening set before sealing the issue 9-21, 21-10, 21-17.

In mixed doubles, however, the Indian pair of Rohan Kapoor and Ruthvika Gadde were beaten 19-21, 21-11 by Thailand's Ratchapol Makkasasithorn and Nattaman Laisuan.

Narmada clinches air rifle gold



Dehradun: Former World Cup winner Narmada Nithin Raju overcame a strong field, which included Asian Games medallist Ramita Jindal and Olympian Elavelin Valarivan, to not just create a national record but miss equalling the world mark by a fraction of a point on her way to clinching gold in the women's 10m air rifle event at the 38th National Games here on Thursday.

Among other results, Haryana's 2022 World Championships silver medallist Anish Bhanwala bagged gold in the men's 25m rapid fire pistol event.

Narmada, representing Tamil Nadu, clinched the top podium finish with a score of 254.4, beating back the challenge from Maharashtra's Arya Borse (252.5) and Ramita (230.4) in the

eight-shooter final.

In the process, she broke the national mark of 252.9 set by Olympian Apurvi Chandela at the 2019 World Cup in New Delhi. The world record in the event is 254.5 points, set by Huang Yuting of China at last year's ISSF World Cup Final in New Delhi.

"I can't express how happy I am. Representing my state is always a point of pride. Handling pressure on the range is part of the game, but today, it all came together," Narmada said.

Reflecting on her journey, Narmada had some words for young athletes.

"Instead of looking for role models, be your own. Push yourself every day, and you'll find success."

This was 23-year-old Narmada's third-biggest career achievement in the event after she had won the 10m air rifle mixed team gold partnering Rudranksh Patil at the 2023 Cairo World Cup and bagging a bronze at the World Cup in Bhopal the same year.

Self-assured and in total control of her nerves, Narmada, who was third at the end of the qualification round on Wednesday, shot a string of superb scores to stamp her authority over her more illustrious rivals



in the final.

She consistently shot high scores with three of her shots achieving maximum impact of 10.9, while another two shots in the 24-shot final fetched her 10.8. She didn't go below 10 in any of her 24 shots in the final.

Maharashtra's Arya Borse, 22, too enjoyed a great outing and, on any other day would have clinched a top-podium finish with a score 252.5 but the 2022 junior world cup gold medallist in team event wouldn't have known before the final that Narmada would come up with a record-breaking performance.

Haryana's Asian Games bronze medallist shooter Ramita, 21, who had shot a superb qualification-round score of 634.9 to top the qualification, had to settle for a bronze medal despite com-

ing up with another loaded performance, which saw her shoot consistently 10-plus scores.

Meanwhile, Bhanwala finished with 31 hits, three ahead of the silver medallist Gurpreet Singh of Services (28 hits) in the men's 25m rapid fire pistol final. Vijayveer Sidhu (Punjab) secured the bronze with 26 hits.

Bhanwala, who returned to competition after a lengthy break, was all smiles following the victory.

"This is my first medal after the Paralympics, and it feels great to be back. This is my second gold at the National Games my first was in Ahmedabad. The long break has been tough, but it's all part of the journey," he said.

Shooting is one discipline where many of the top players are taking part in the National Games.

All the shooters, who competed in the Paris Olympics last year, with the exception of double-medallist Manu Bhaker and Esha Singh, will be seen in action in the National Games.

In total, 364 shooters are representing 29 teams at the National Games, making shooting the star attraction of the Games.

-PTI

Homecoming of a King

EXUBERANT FANS TURN DELHI RANJI GAME INTO SPECTACLE FOR A GLIMPSE OF KOHLI

By Bharat Sharma

New Delhi: Delirious fans screamed in excitement at the mere mention of his name as Virat Kohli's unmatched aura dominated the Ranji Trophy fixture between Delhi and Railways here on Thursday, triggering an unprecedented rush for seats in the stands that forced administrators to make additional last-minute arrangements.

The DDCA (Delhi and Districts Cricket Associa-

tion) had projected a crowd of around 10,000 for Kohli's homecoming, which is unheard of for a Ranji Trophy game. But such was his magnetic pull that even those lofty calculations went for a toss.

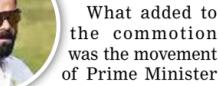
Long before the start of play at 9.30am local time, the 36-year-old Kohli's loyal band of supporters were jostling to enter the stadium where entry is free for domestic matches.

At first, the DDCA opened the roughly

6,000-capacity 'Gautam Gambhir Stand' for spectators but sensing that the crowd situation could go out of hand, the officials were forced to open the 'Bishan Singh Bedi Stand' which can accommodate around 11,000 people.

"I have never seen something like this in Ranji Trophy. Even in my playing days, there was hardly anyone who made the effort to watch domestic cricket. It

is just because of one man," a former India player present at the ground told PTI.



What added to the commotion was the movement of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cavalcade past the ground at the same time.

"I have been involved in Delhi cricket for more than 30 years but I have not witnessed such scenes for a Ranji Trophy game. It just shows the Kohli's popular-



ity is unmatched," an overwhelmed DDCA secretary Ashok Sharma told PTI.

"What made it more challenging was that fans entering the stadium coincided with the VIP movement of PM Modi on the outside roads and as part of his strict security protocol and

"Additional gates were soon opened, easing the situation. No injuries were reported, and the situation is now under control," it said in a statement.

The 'Gautam Gambhir Stand' was already packed to the rafters and it hardly took time to fill the lower tier of the 'Bishan Bedi Stand', taking the crowd count well past 12,000 at toss.

The deafening roars of "Kohli, Kohli" could be heard from a distance as the former India captain took the field with the rest of the Delhi teammates who too were experiencing something special. Their hopes of watching

him bat did not come true immediately as Delhi opted to bowl after winning the toss. But Kohli's mere presence on the field was enough to keep the fans hooked to the proceedings.

Manning the second slip, his every move attracted a cheer from the crowd and in the 12th over, an over-zealous fan breached the security to run towards the 'King'.

He just about managed to touch Kohli's feet before being whisked away by the security. Well aware of his popularity, Kohli did not forget to acknowledge the crowd every now and then with a wave of the hand.

-PTI