





## SHORT TAKES

4 Noida schools get  
hoax bomb threats

**Noida:** Four schools in Noida received bomb threats on Wednesday, prompting authorities to rush in the police and a bomb disposal squad, officials said. The Noida police said the schools were thoroughly checked but nothing was found and classes were resumed. The police said the threats were received on emails and the cyber team is looking into the matter.

Parents rushed to the schools after hearing about the threats and tried to take their children back but the police assured them that the situation was normal. Noida additional deputy commissioner of police Sumit Kumar Shukla said four schools — Step By Step School, The Heritage School, Gyanashree School and Mayoor School — received bomb threats via email at 8.30 am on Wednesday. “No suspicious item was found in any school and all places were normal,” he added. — PTI

Lawyer attack: SC  
summons bar staff

**New Delhi:** The Supreme Court has directed the president and secretary of the Gautam Budh Nagar district court bar association to appear before it over the alleged manhandling of a senior advocate. A bench of Justices B.R. Gaval and K. Vinod Chandran on March 21 last year directed both the office bearers to appear before it but they failed to comply with the order. The bench warned non-adherence to its direction by the officials of Janpad Diwani Evam Faujdari Bar Association would be viewed seriously. “Issue fresh notice to the president and secretary of the Janpad Dewani Evam Faujdari Bar Association, Gautam Budh Nagar, returnable on February 17, 2025. The notice be served through the registrar of the Gautam Budh Nagar District Court,” it said.

Gold coins worth  
₹7.8cr seized at IGI

**New Delhi:** Gold coins worth ₹7.8 crore have been seized at the Indira Gandhi International (IGI) Airport from the possession of two men, the customs department said on Wednesday. The accused, who are from Jammu and Kashmir, were intercepted after their arrival from Milan on Wednesday. While baggage scans revealed nothing unusual, a personal search led to the discovery of two specially designed waist belts concealed gold coins wrapped in plastic envelopes, it said. The officials seized 10,092 kg of gold coins, valued at approximately ₹7.8 crore, the customs department said in a post on X. The passengers have been detained for further investigation, it added.

HC: DELHI GOVT  
FIXING COACHING  
CENTRES' ISSUES

**New Delhi:** The Delhi high court has observed the government's welfare department for SC, ST, OBC and minorities was taking steps to resolve the issue of payments to coaching institutes under the Jai Bhim Mukhyamantri Pratibha Vikas Yojna. Justice Sachin Datta said each of the petitioner coaching institutes should be given a hearing by the special secretary of the department and a decision should be taken on release of their monetary entitlement after a proper verification. “It is hoped and expected that the DSCST shall take expeditious steps to resolve the grievances of the petitioners and to ensure that the object of the scheme is not undermined or frustrated,” said the court. The court as a result disposed of a batch of petitions filed by the coaching institutes. The order was passed on January 28 and made available on February 3. The petitions were filed by various coaching institutes seeking directions to the Delhi government to implement September 2019 Jai Bhim Mukhyamantri Pratibha Vikas scheme. The scheme was introduced to provide quality coaching to economically disadvantaged candidates belonging to the above-mentioned categories.

## ■ Kejriwal, Atishi, Sisodia face challenge in Delhi elections

AAP's Big 3 on sticky wicket,  
spirited fight by Cong & BJP

SANJAY KAW  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal, chief minister Atishi, and former deputy CM Manish Sisodia seem to be on a slippery wicket in the face of a triangular fight put up against them by the BJP and the Congress in the high-octane Assembly elections held in the national capital on Wednesday.

If the number of party supporters near voting booths is any indication, the chances of the three top AAP leaders sailing through their New Delhi, Kalkaji, and Jangpura seats respectively is not going to be easy.

The dampened morale of the AAP supporters in the three constituencies was being cited by the BJP and the Congress as a reflection of the high anti-incumbency against the current government.

Party leaders said middle-class residents — upset with the AAP governance over a host of issues like poor civic infrastructure, sanitation, and air — came out to vote in large numbers for their respective candidates.

The AAP, however, said the high polling was owing to women who voted in large numbers given the party's promised scheme of ₹2,100 per month for them if it returns to power.

Party leaders said Assembly seats with slum clusters have reported high voting as well, citing how the residents there have voted for them in the last decade.

Gole Market resident Madhu, however, said, “Everyone is trying to buy votes. After one party announced a monthly allowance for women, all other parties did the same. Why didn't they do it earlier?”

Transgenders  
vote in hope of  
empowerment

**New Delhi, Feb. 5:** Madhubala, a 29-year-old third gender, cast her vote for the first time and expressed hope for a better future.

“We want policies that empower us, ensure our safety and give us equal opportunities,” she said. Delhi has a total of 1,261 third genders (transgenders) with their highest concentration (294) in southwest Delhi.

Some of the community members were enthused about being able to vote for the first time, seeing it as a valuable opportunity to contribute to the democratic process and shape a better future for all.

Madhubala, a dancer by profession who teaches Bollywood-style dance to children, said, “I voted for the first time with the belief that each vote is important.”

Another transgender Tina Kinnar said, “We have the right to vote and it strengthens democracy. To all my fellow women of the transgender community, voting is your right. You must vote.” — PTI

Pakistani Hindu refugees use  
right to franchise for 1st time

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

At a polling booth in Delhi's Majnu Ka Tilla, Reshma cast her vote on Wednesday with a sense of pride. The 50-year-old woman, who cast her vote for the first time, said it is not just to choose a candidate, but for her family's future. She is one of the 186 Pakistani Hindu refugees who, after years of uncertainty, exercised their voting right for the first time in the Delhi Assembly polls, marking a powerful moment in their journey from statelessness to citizenship. They all got Indian citizenship under the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Dharamveer Solanki, president of the Pakistani Hindu refugee communi-



Voters stand in a queue to cast their votes at a polling station of Jafrabad area in New Delhi. — G.N. JHA

Women voters want govt to  
give livelihood, not promises

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

Labelling the announcements for financial assistance by the political parties as “mere poll promises”, a section of women in Delhi said they voted for better education and safety.

The BJP, the AAP and the Congress have each promised financial assistance for women — a demographic that constitutes 46.2 per cent of Delhi's electorate. The national capital has 72.36 lakh women voters.

Tri Nagar Assembly vorter Nisha Sharma (59)

er?” “I voted for development and better opportunities for the future generation, not fake allowances,” she added.

In New Delhi, Mr Kejriwal, who had defeated three-time CM Sheila Dikshit in 2013, is facing a serious challenge from her son, Sandeep, a two-time Congress Lok Sabha MP, on the one side and BJP's Parvesh Verma, also

said announcing a financial aid was just a poll promise. “We don't need this ... We want those that would improve a common person's life. I want the government to provide livelihood to the people so that they can stand on their feet...I voted for development and better opportunities for the future generation, not fake allowances,” Ms Sharma added.

Okhla resident Ayesha Khan (27) called the election a chance to choose a government that would support women's rights, education, health care, and safety.

a former MP, and son of former chief minister Sahib Singh Verma, on the other.

Political pundits say if Mr Dikshit is able to retain a sizable vote share, it would automatically help Mr Verma.

“And if Mr Kejriwal is not able to retain his seat, it will also be the beginning of his downfall in Delhi politics,” a party

worker told this newspaper.

With Mr Dikshit in the fray, there are clear indications that the Congress vote share is bound to increase.

“The shift in the number of votes from AAP to Congress is bound to help the BJP,” said a close confidant of the AAP chief.

As voting commenced for the Assembly polls, Mr Kejriwal himself made a fervent appeal to the voters of Delhi to recognise the importance of their vote in shaping the future of the city.

As far as Kalkaji seat is concerned, BJP has fielded Gujar leader and former MP Ramesh Bhiduri against Ms Atishi. The Congress has also fielded its youth leader Alka Lamba, who had once won the Assembly elections on the AAP ticket.

With Ms Bhiduri and Ms Lamba in the fray, the two are expected to secure more votes, which may prevent the chief minister from securing her own seat. That's precisely why she could not campaign much for the party's other candidates and had to restrict herself to her constituency only.

After Mr Sisodia left his Patparganj seat to contest from Jangpura, Congress fielded former mayor Farhad Suri and the BJP gave ticket to former Congress MLA Tarwinder Singh Marwah from the high-profile constituency.

Poll pundits believe that Mr Marwah, who has earlier won Jangpura, may get more votes on the BJP ticket.

“If Mr Suri is able to retain some of the party's vote share which had shifted to the AAP, things may work against Mr Sisodia,” a senior BJP functionary said.

AAP & BJP engage in blame  
game; cry foul play in voting

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

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

The chief electoral officer (CEO) of Delhi told the media around noon that the polling process was going on “smoothly.”

A few EVMs were replaced during mock polls and actual voting also, the CEO said.

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

High drama unfolded in Seelampur when a BJP leader alleged that some people wearing burqas were attempting fraudulent voting. However, the police denied any fake voting in the area.

In Kasturba Nagar, police sources said two

men allegedly attempted to vote fraudulently. They have been apprehended and were being interrogated, they said.

Following allegations of fake voting by the BJP in Seelampur, AAP workers resorted to slogan shouting. The Delhi police, however, dismissed the charges, pointing to security deployed in the area.

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

Allegations of voter bribery in Sarai Kale Khan were promptly investigated, said DCP (southeast) Ankit Chauhan in a post on X.

The officer also said that the police, along with an executive magistrate and a flying squad team, thoroughly verified the complaint and no evidence was found to substantiate the charges.

AAP candidate from Greater Kailash Saurabh Bharadwaj claimed the police had barricaded the Chirag Dilli area, prevent-

ing people from voting. He shared a video on X showing a woman sitting alone in an autorickshaw near a barricade, alleging that the obstruction was deliberately placed to prevent access to the polling station.

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

The Delhi BJP in a post on X, alleged that AAP workers torched the shanty of a party worker at Kalandara Colony in Shahdara constituency. Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva claimed that the AAP has stooped to “fake voting” as it was rattled by its “imminent defeat.”

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

Voter turnout at 60.42%  
in Delhi, lower than 2020

Highest 69.09% turnout in Mustafabad, Mehrauli lowest

BHASKAR HARI SHARMA  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

The fate of 699 candidates was sealed on Wednesday as Delhi voted to elect a new 70-member house. The voter turnout touched 60.42 per cent till 11 pm, compared to 62.82 per cent in 2020 polls.

The polling in all the 70 constituencies began at 7 am and ended at 6 pm.

Among other constituencies, Mustafabad had the highest turnout at 69.09 per cent while Mehrauli recorded the lowest at 53.05 per cent.

The turnout recorded in the northeast district stood at 66.25 per cent, while the New Delhi district it was at 55.86 per cent.

There are around 1.56 crore eligible voters in Delhi.

The north district had a turnout of 59.50 percent while the northwest district 60.70 percent. The Shahdara district recorded a turnout of 63.94 per cent, southwest Delhi 60.93 per cent, central Delhi district 58.07 per cent, southeast Delhi 56.16 per cent, according to the EC data.

In south, east and west districts it was 58.16, 61.83 and 60.76 per cent respectively.

The voter turnout in key constituencies like New Delhi, where AAP chief



Congress leader Sonia Gandhi along with Priyanka Gandhi after casting their votes in New Delhi. — ASIAN AGE

Arvind Kejriwal is pitted against Congress's Sandeep Dikshit and BJP's Parvesh Verma had a turnout of 56.41 per cent, a slight increase compared to last time which was 52.45 per cent.

Another key constituency Kalkaji, from where chief minister Atishi is contesting against BJP's Ramesh Bidhuri and Congress's Alka Lamba saw voter turnout of 54.59 per cent compared to 57.51 in 2020.

While in Jangpura, from where former deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia is contesting against Congress's Farhad Suri and BJP's Tarwinder Singh Marwah, it was 57.42 per cent while it was 60.66 last time.

The key candidates in

the fray are AAP minister's Gopal Rai and Saurabh Bharadwaj from Babarpur and Greater Kailash, respectively.

Delhi Congress chief Devender Yadav, who is trying to regain the lost ground of the party, has been fielded from Badli Assembly while his predecessor Arvinder Singh Lovely, who switched over to BJP last year, is contesting from Gandhi Nagar Assembly.

Polling took place at 13,766 stations across Delhi's 70 constituencies to decide the electoral fate of 699 candidates.

In the 2020 polls, Delhi had recorded a turnout of 62.59 per cent while only 56 per cent participated in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

1st time voters  
want overall  
development,  
women safety

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

As polling for the Delhi Assembly elections ensued, the first-time voters made their presence felt across the city on Wednesday, underlining their hopes for better employment opportunities, improved facilities and a safer environment for women besides overall development of the national capital.

As soon as the voting commenced, the teens kept turning up at the booth in a steady flow during the day, an apparent enthusiasm to make the democratic choice and highlight that each vote counts.

“I am here to vote for a better environment for women and good opportunity. As I attend college everyday, the issue of women safety and security is paramount for me. Women should not constantly worry about their safety. As every vote counts, it will decide city's future,” said a third-year engineering student Sara.

Another voter Priya Srivastava from Bijwasan constituency said, “Women's security is one of the most important issues which should not be compromised. We all need a safe and comfortable environment for women and also the opportunity for growth.”

She also emphasised that environmental issues should be a priority.

## Voters demand action on inflation, jobs

Civic amenities, crime, broken roads, public restrooms other key issues

AGE CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

Delhiites on Wednesday exercised their right to vote while expressing concerns about key issues such as civic amenities, employment opportunities, and inflation — matters that directly impact their daily lives.

Basin (67), a resident of Kalkaji, said he was voting in the hope of improving the entire constituency.

“I am here to vote against corruption and poor sanitation. The issues don't need to be highlighted — just look at the roads. When you step out of the house, you can clearly see all the sanitation problems. The entire constituency needs cleanliness. The roads are there, but they're broken and congested. Similarly,



Voters wait in a queue to cast their votes at a polling station at Trilokpur area in New Delhi. — PTI

the drainage and sewage systems are open,” he stated.

Damodar Kumar (50), a motorcycle garage owner and resident of Okhla, said the maintenance of public washrooms is poor and open drains also trouble the residents.

“The management is poor. There are public restrooms on the roads, but their maintenance is terrible. They're open, so

they stink all the time. And these open drains create the same problem during rain — they're not even covered, and many are newly built. If someone isn't careful, they could fall right into them,” Mr Kumar stated.

In northeast Delhi, where communal riots occurred five years ago, residents are focusing on development as the central theme of their votes.

A voter said that they have “bad memories of the riots” but people are “voting in large numbers for the future.”

Mohammad Wahid (38), a resident of Jaffrabad, said that the unavailability of a sewer line in Seelampur is a major concern for the residents.

“We do not have a sewer in our area, which is a major issue for every street in the locality. Apart from this, the crime rate is also increasing, which is worrying people about their children's future,” he said.

Similarly, Rehman Ali (42) also expressed concern about crime in Seelampur and Jaffrabad.

Raisuddin (54), a resident of Babapur, said all the issues would be resolved with a stable government.



SHORT TAKES

Bombay HC quashes plea against Cong MP

**Mumbai:** The Bombay high court on Wednesday dismissed a petition challenging the election of Congress MP Varsha Gaikwad. Asif Siddiqui, one of the candidates contesting against Ms Gaikwad, had challenged the election, alleging electoral malpractices and procedural violations in the Congress candidate's poll campaign. Ms Gaikwad had contested the parliamentary election held last year from the Mumbai North-Central seat. She defeated BJP's Ujjwal Nikam, a well-known lawyer, by a margin of 16,514 votes. She is the only Congress MP from the entire Mumbai metropolitan region. Mr Siddiqui, who got only 683 votes, challenged the election. His main allegation against Ms Gaikwad was that the handbills circulated by the elected MP did not comply with the prescribed norms.

SP neta booked for his Yogi, Kumbh jibe

**Bareilly:** The police has booked Samajwadi Party leader and former Uttar Pradesh MLA Sultan Beg for allegedly making objectionable remarks about chief minister Yogi Adityanath and the Maha Kumbh, officials said on Wednesday. The FIR was registered at Shergarh police station here on a complaint lodged by BJP leader Virpal Singh on Tuesday. Circle officer Arun Kumar Singh said Mr Beg had been booked under sections 353 (statements conducing to public mischief) and 299 (deliberate or malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and Section 67 of the Information Technology Act. A video became viral on social media purportedly showing Mr Beg alleging that Adityanath government had turned the Maha Kumbh into a "cremation ground". — PTI

Surya Kiran to be part of Aero India

**Bengaluru:** The Surya Kiran Aerobatic Team will perform at the much-awaited Aero India show, scheduled to take place at the Yelahanka Air Force Station in Bengaluru from February 10-14, officials said on Wednesday. The team comprises nine Hawk Mk 132 aircraft flying in extremely close proximity, at a distance of less than five meters. The team includes 14 pilots, they added. The team leader is Group Captain Ajay Dasarathi, a Su-30 MKI pilot, while the deputy leader is Group Captain Sidhesh Kartik, officials added. "The SKAT, better known as the 'ambassadors of the IAF', is renowned for its precision, skill, and teamwork. This elite team, flying the striking red-and-white Hawk Mk 132 jets, will showcase a series of jaw-dropping manoeuvres," an official statement from the defence wing of the PIB said.

1ST LIVE-IN CASE RECORDED UNDER UCC IN U'KHAND

**Dehradun, Feb. 5:** Only one live-in relationship has been registered in Uttarakhand's Uniform Civil Code (UCC) portal in the first 10 days of its implementation. Officials claimed that five applications have been received from live-in couples for the mandatory registration. One has been granted registration while four others are being verified, they said. On January 27, the BJP-ruled Uttarakhand became the first state in Independent India to implement the UCC, which promotes equal laws for every citizen across all religions and standardises personal laws on marriage, divorce and property. On the occasion, chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami launched a portal designed for the mandatory online registration of marriages, divorce and live-in relationships. He was the first to register his marriage on the UCC portal. The UCC's provision for mandatory registration of live-in relationships has been much criticised for its potential to infringe upon people's right to privacy. However, the CM had justified it, saying mandatory registration of live-in couples would help prevent brutal incidents. — PTI



Pushkar Singh Dhami

Will double investment by '30 in Bengal, says Ambani

Didi thanks RIL chief ■ 'Requested Tata Sons head for Europe flight'

RAJIB CHOWDHURI KOLKATA, FEB. 5

Industrialist Mukesh Ambani on Wednesday pledged to double investments of his business conglomerate, Reliance Industries Limited (RIL), in West Bengal by 2030. He made the announcement at the inauguration of the eighth edition of Bengal Global Business Summit, organised by the Mamata Banerjee government. Mr Ambani said, "In 2016 when I first attended this summit, Reliance's investment stood below ₹2,000 crores. Today in less than a decade, our investment in Bengal have increased 20 times and we are invested over ₹50,000 crores. We shall double this investment by the end of this decade. More importantly, our investment created one lakh



West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee with industrialist Mukesh Ambani during the Bengal Global Business Summit in Kolkata on Wednesday. — PTI

direct jobs and sparred significant economic growth in Bengal." Showering lavish praise on the CM on the dais amid the Opposition's allegations of lack of industrial growth under the

Trinamul Congress-rule in the state, the RIL chairman and managing director further informed that an AI-ready data centre in Kolkata would be operational in nine months as part of his five commit-

ments for development of the state.

Highlighting the success story of Jio, Mr Ambani shared that the telecom giant has been building the state's first cable landing station which would be commissioned early next year at Digha in East Midnapore. Mr Ambani observed, "All of India needs this kind of inclusive and sustainable model of development so that no Indian is left behind and no region in India is left behind."

Expressing gratitude to Mr Ambani, the CM said, "I am very much satisfied with Mukeshji for sharing his plans." She also revealed that she requested Tata Sons chairman N. Chandrashekar to introduce a new Air India flight to Europe from Kolkata over a telephonic conversation on Tuesday evening.

Row erupts in Maha on actor's jibe over Shivaji

BHAGWAN PARAB MUMBAI, FEB. 5

Maharashtra on Wednesday witnessed widespread outrage and protests over actor Rahul Solapurkar's statement regarding Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's historic escape from Agra, after he claimed that contrary to popular belief, the legendary Maratha king did not escape by hiding in sweet boxes, but instead bribed several of Aurangzeb's officers to secure his return to Maharashtra.

During a recent YouTube interview, Mr Solapurkar said, "Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj did not escape from Agra by hiding in sweet boxes; instead, he bribed several leaders of Aurangzeb to return to Maharashtra."

According to him, he possesses evidence to support his claims that Maharaj had even bribed Aurangzeb's vizier and his wife. "For his escape, documentation exists showing how many bribes were paid, including taking both signature and seal," he stated.

The actor's claims of bribery during Shivaji Maharaj's dramatic Agra escape triggered huge backlash across the state, accusing the him of distorting historical facts and showing disrespect toward the legendary Maratha king.

NCP leader Chhagan Bhujbal condemned Mr Solapurkar's remarks, saying, "Has this man lost his mind? Who would bribe Aurangzeb?"

Modi should accept 'Make in India' is a failure: Rahul

**New Delhi, Feb. 5:** Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday said Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not mention "Make in India" in his speech in the House, and asserted that the PM must acknowledge the initiative a failure. The Congress leader said no government in recent times — the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) or the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) — had been able to meet at scale the national challenge of providing jobs. "Prime minister, in your speech, you didn't even mention 'Make in India'! The prime minister should acknowledge that 'Make in India', although a good initiative, is a failure. Manufacturing has fallen from 15.3 per cent of GDP in 2014 to 12.6 per cent — the lowest in the last 60 years," Mr Gandhi said in a post on X. "India's youth desperate-



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi addresses a gathering in Patna on Wednesday. — PTI

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

India must also have a specific focus on emergent technologies such as electric motors, batteries, optics, and artificial intelligence. "This is the only way to revive our manufacturing sector, develop cutting-edge manufacturing ability, and create the jobs we need. China is 10 years ahead of us and has a stronger industrial system," he said. — PTI

'No assent to bill for 2nd time is failure of democratic system' TN approaches SC against governor

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

The Tamil Nadu government has informed the Supreme Court that governor R.N. Ravi withholding its assent to bills passed by the Legislative Assembly for the second time would lead to failure of democratic system.

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

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

State government's counsel Mukul Rohatgi on Tuesday said under the law, if the state legislature passes the bill, the governor could ask for a reconsideration. "However, if the same bill is re-enacted and presented before the governor for the second time, the governor has no other option but to grant assent. This is the procedure laid down in our constitutional framework. If he still does not give his assent or failure to give his assent, then it is the

failure of our democratic system," Mr Rohatgi argued. Constitutional provisions were very clear to the effect that the governor was duty-bound to give his assent in the second round, he added.

Senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, also appearing for Tamil Nadu government, submitted the option to refer the bills to the President had to be done at the first instance and couldn't be done as an afterthought.

He submitted after the re-enactment of the bill and on being presented to the governor, he had no other option but to grant assent and could not reserve the bill in the second round for the President's consideration.

The SC posted the matter for further hearing on February 6, saying it would first hear counsel for Tamil Nadu government and then attorney-general R. Venkataramani representing the governor.

SC clears names of 5 TN, T'gana HC judges

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

The Supreme Court collegium approved the proposal for appointment of five additional judges of the high courts of Madras and Telangana as permanent judges Wednesday.

The collegium, headed by CJI Sanjiv Khanna, held its meeting on Wednesday and approved the proposals for appointment of two additional judges to the Madras high court and three judges to the Telangana HC.

"The Supreme Court collegium in its meeting held on February 5, 2025

has approved the proposal for appointment of the following additional judges as permanent judges in the Madras high court — Justice Venkatachari Lakshminarayanan and Justice Periyasamy Vadmalai," read the collegium statement.

Another statement said the collegium approved the proposal for appointment of additional judges — Justice Laxmi Narayana Alishetty, Justice Anil Kumar Jukanti and Justice Sujana Kalasikam — as permanent judges in the Telangana high court.



Activists take part in a rally during the "One Billion Rising" event in Kolkata on Wednesday. The global campaign calls for an end to violence against women and girls. — PRITAM BANDYOPADHYAY

Assam officials in fix after SC's terse note on detention

MANOJ ANAND GUWAHATI, FEB. 5

The observation of the Supreme Court on 63 individuals, deemed foreigners languishing in detention camps in Assam, has triggered angry reaction from the Opposition parties, while officials have expressed their helplessness in deporting them due to non-cooperation of these detainees.

Pointing out that these 63 individuals have not divulged their nationality or address, security sources said that it was posing a unique problem for authorities in deporting them. Security sources said that in case of their deportation, authorities have to submit the detailed address and evidence of their nationality to their counterparts on the international border with Bangladesh.

Informing that deportation of an individual from India is accepted only if their counterpart in Bangladesh successfully verify and ascertain the identify and addresses of those individuals being handed over for deportation, security sources said that these 63 of the 270 inmates of the Matia "transit camp" — the desig-

ned detention camp for "illegal foreigners" in Assam, have not revealed their addresses deliberately. Alleging that they are backed by some forces within the country, security sources said that in December, the court had granted the state government time to file an affidavit explaining the reasons for detaining the 270 individuals there and the steps taken for their deportation. As the matter was pending before the Supreme Court, authorities in Assam refused to say anything on record.

Meanwhile, leader of the Asom Jatiya Parishad Jagdish Bhuyan on Wednesday criticised the BJP government for its failure in deporting these declared foreigners. It is significant that the SC on Tuesday directed the Assam government to initiate the deportation process for 63 individuals currently held in detention centres within the next two weeks.

Majhi unveils ₹5K-cr plan to boost rural infra in Odisha

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO BHUBANESWAR, FEB. 5

In a significant push for rural development, Odisha chief minister Mohan Charan Majhi on Wednesday unveiled the transformative umbrella scheme "Bikashita Gaon Bikashita Odisha" at a special function held in Jankia, Khurda district.

Designed to accelerate growth in rural areas, the initiative comes with a substantial budget of ₹5,000 crore, spread over five years, and aims at directly addressing the needs of villagers by enhancing infrastructure, connectivity, and overall quality of life of the people.

Speaking at the launch, chief minister Majhi reiterated his government's commitment to holistic rural development.

"The government is dedicated to the progress of every village, ensuring that development reaches the last mile," he said.

Quoting Mahatma Gandhi's famous words, "India lives in its villages," Mr Majhi emphasised the enduring importance of rural upliftment for the state's progress.

Aga Khan, spiritual leader of Ismaili Muslims & philanthropist, dies at 88

**Paris, Feb. 5:** The Aga Khan, who became the spiritual leader of the world's millions of Ismaili Muslims at age 20 as a Harvard undergraduate and poured a material empire built on billions of dollars in tithes into building homes, hospitals and schools in developing countries, died Tuesday. He was 88.

His Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili religious community announced that Prince Karim Al-Hussaini, the Aga Khan IV and 49th hereditary imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims died in Portugal surrounded by his family. His successor was designated in his will, which will be read in the presence of his family and religious leaders in Lisbon before the name is made public.

A date has not been announced. The successor is chosen from among his male progeny or other relatives, according

Modi, Rahul condole his death, cherish service & contributions

**New Delhi, Feb. 5:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday condoled the death of Aga Khan IV, describing him as a visionary who dedicated his life to service and spirituality.

"Deeply saddened by the passing of His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan IV. He was a visionary, who dedicated his life to service and spirituality. His contributions in areas like health, education, rural development and women empowerment will continue to inspire several people,"



Prince Karim Aga Khan

Mr Modi said on X. Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday expressed sadness over the passing of the Aga Khan and said he was a visionary leader devoted to humanity, education, and progress. — PTI

to the Ismaili community's website. Considered by his followers to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, Prince Karim Aga Khan IV was a student when

his grandfather passed over his playboy father as his successor to lead the diaspora of Shia Ismaili Muslims, saying his followers should be led by a young man "who has been brought up in the

midst of the new age".

Over decades, Aga Khan evolved into a business magnate and a philanthropist, moving between the spiritual and the worldly with ease.

While his death was announced late in the day in Europe and the Middle East, ceremonies were already being held Tuesday in Ismaili communities in the US. Condolences poured in online from charity groups he supported, as well as the equestrian world, where he was a well-known figure.

"An extraordinarily compassionate global leader," Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Tuesday, calling him a very good friend. "He will be deeply missed by people around the world." Mr Trudeau said. Treated as a head of state, the Aga Khan was given the title of "His Highness" by Queen Elizabeth in July 1957. — AP

NORTHERN RAILWAY (E-Auction Notice)			
Sr. Divisional Commercial Manager/PS, Northern Railway, Delhi Division invites bids through e-Auction through IREPS ( <a href="https://ireps.gov.in/">https://ireps.gov.in/</a> ) for the allotment of under mention contracts at following Railway stations/locations:			
E-Catalogue Date & Time		Railway Stations/Locations/Sites	
No.	of bidding		
Parking-02-2025	17.02.2025 at 11:00 Hrs	Panipat (Car) = Total 01 Site	
Parking-03-2025	19.02.2025 at 11:00 Hrs	Rohtak (2 <sup>nd</sup> Entry) (TW), Delhi (PF-16) (B-T-T) = Total 02 Site	
Website particulars where complete details of E-Auction can be seen		<a href="https://ireps.gov.in/">https://ireps.gov.in/</a>	
All contractors who intend to participate in the e-auctions conducted through E-Auction Leasing module of IREPS should fulfil following mandatory requirements before they can submit their bids:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Registration on IREPS for E-Auction Leasing module -Active IREPS User Account for E-Auction Leasing Module.</li><li>- Payment of One Time Registration Fee</li><li>- Current Account in State Bank of India</li><li>- Integration of SBI Bank Account with IREPS Account</li><li>- Lien Marking of Funds</li><li>- Updation of Turnover Details</li><li>- Contractors who do not have IREPS account for any module of IREPS can submit their online request for registration by clicking on New Vendors / Contractors (E-Tender /E-Auction Leasing) link on IREPS Home page.</li></ul>			
Railway Authority to contact, in case of any query		Divisional Railway Manager's Office, Commercial Branch, State Entry Road, New Delhi 110055. Email: <a href="mailto:pkg.delhidivision@gmail.com">pkg.delhidivision@gmail.com</a> Tel: 011-23743084	
No. 23AC/393/E-Auction/Pkg/2025		Dated: 04.02.2025	
		388/2025	
SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE			



SHORT TAKES

Teens drown during idol immersion

**Bhubaneswar:** Two teenage students drowned in the Kuakhai river while taking a bath following the immersion of a Goddess Saraswati idol at Ranga Bazar under Baliaanta police station limits in Bhubaneswar Wednesday. The deceased, both aged 15, were identified as Sikun Senapati of Ganga Nagar and Dibyajyoti Mahalik of Unit-6 in Bhubaneswar. According to sources, a group of six students from a private tutorial, accompanied by their teacher and a staff member, had gone to the Kuakhai river bank for the immersion ceremony. After completing the ritual, they decided to take a dip in the river. However, strong currents and unstable sand beneath their feet led to a mishap, sweeping all six into deeper waters. Sources said that only two adults — the tuition teacher and a staff member — were present during the immersion.

Kangana's Manali cafe to open Feb. 14

**New Delhi:** Kangana Ranaut has shared that her cafe “The Mountain Story” in Manali will open its doors to customers on Valentine’s Day. The actor said opening a cafe was a long cherished dream and it is finally real. Fans were quick to find an old interview of the actor where she had expressed a desire to open a cafe in near future. In the 2013 interview, the actor was part of a round table that also had Deepika Padukone in attendance. On being asked where she would see herself in 10 years, Ranaut said she would like to open a restaurant. “I’ve eaten all over the world, and I’m carrying amazing recipes. I’d like to have a very very beautiful, little cafeteria somewhere. I’m very good with food,” she is heard saying in the old video. Padukone was quick to reply, “I’ll be your first client”. — PTI

Cops beat family in Kerala, sparks anger

**Thiruvananthapuram:** Three members of a family, including a woman, were brutally beaten up by police in Kerala’s Pathanamthitta district on Tuesday night. The incident occurred at Pathanamthitta at 11 pm. The natives of Erumely, who had returned from a wedding ceremony, stopped the vehicle on the roadside for rest. There was a 20-member team inside the vehicle. A police team led by a sub-inspector arrived at the spot and started beating the family members. Sithara, sustained a fracture to her shoulder bone, and injuries to her leg and her husband suffered injuries on his head, while other members of her family were also injured in the police assault. Meanwhile, the public outrage over the incident forced top cops to initiate disciplinary action against SI Jinu who was transferred to the district SP office.

Most exit polls predict BJP win

■ **Continued from Page 1**  
Congress with 5.1 per cent vote share. Another pollster, Mind Brink, too, has predicted a big win for the AAP, with the party getting anything between 44-49 seats in the 70-member Assembly and the BJP getting 21-25 seats. Matrizze has predicted a close contest between the AAP (32-37) and the BJP (35-40). Reacting to the predictions, Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva said, “We respect the exit polls...the decision will come on February 8. We believe that just as all the Bharatiya Janata Party workers have worked hard and everyone has worked together, the people of Delhi have given us their full blessings and the results will be seen on February 8.” Predictably the AAP rejects exit polls for underestimating the party’s performance in the Delhi polls. “I don’t think all the surveys are against us. If you look at it historically, the AAP doesn’t come to power in surveys but forms a government eventually... We are encouraged with the voting percentage, which is close to 2015’s 67 per cent,” AAP leader Anurag Dhanda said. AAP spokesperson Reena Gupta said that exit polls have historically underestimated the AAP but in actual results, the party gains several times more than these projections. “You look at any exit poll — whether in 2013, 2015 or 2020 — the AAP was always shown getting a smaller number of seats. But it got a greater number of seats in the actual results,” Ms Gupta said.

■ **65.35% turnout** ■ **Akhilesh alleges fake voting, cops deny claims**

Milkipur turns into prestige battle

**Ayodhya (UP), Feb. 5:** More than 65 per cent of the total 3.70 lakh voters exercised their franchise in the bypoll to the Milkipur Assembly constituency of Uttar Pradesh on Wednesday, surpassing the turnout recorded in the 2022 assembly polls. The voting began at 7 am and continued till 5 pm, officials said, adding those who queued up outside poll booths before that will be allowed to vote. Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav alleged “fake voting” and rigging by officials, but senior police officers rejected the charge and said voting is going on peacefully at all polling stations. According to the Election Commission (EC), 65.35 per cent votes were cast till the completion of voting. The final poll percentage can go up as the data is compiled from all the 414 polling stations. The turnout is more

6 Opp-ruled states seek roll back of draft UGC

**New Delhi, Feb. 5:** Hitting out at the Centre over the draft University Grants Commission (UGC) regulations, the Congress on Wednesday said the justification that the rules have been updated for compliance with the National Education Policy does not withstand scrutiny and must be rolled back. Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh said the state higher education ministers conclave was hosted in Bengaluru by Karnataka minister M.C. Sudhakar with six ministers or their representatives from Karnataka, Telangana, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh and Jharkhand (all Opposition ruled states) adopting a 15-point resolution on the UGC’s “draconian” draft Regulations, 2025. “The constitutional principle of federalism is sacrosanct and the quality of higher education should be one of the ultimate endeavours of the ministry of education. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 does not prevail over either and the justification that the rules have been updated for compliance with the NEP 2020 does not withstand scrutiny,” he said. These draft regulations must be rolled back immediately, Mr Ramesh asserted. — PTI

‘Intensify terror war’

■ **Continued from Page 1**  
in the Union territory. The Union home minister also lauded the efforts of the security agencies for significant improvement in all parameters of the security scenario in Jammu and Kashmir after reviewing the security situation in the Union territory with top officials of the Army, police, paramilitary forces and others in two back-to-back meetings held on Tuesday and Wednesday. The meeting was also

Erode bypoll ends peacefully

**Erode (Tamil Nadu), Feb. 5:** Voting for the bypoll for the Erode East Assembly constituency concluded on Wednesday peacefully and the voter turnout crossed 65 per cent. People turned up enthusiastically at the polling stations to cast their vote, and those who were in the queue at the closing time were issued tokens and allowed to vote. The polling was held from 7 am to 6 pm and during afternoon the voting was sluggish. and the Supreme Court to take cognisance of the “enemies of democracy.” Mr Yadav posted on social media platform X an audio clip from a purported sting and said, “This is a sting operation of the truth of presiding officers who are fulfilling the target of fake voting for the ruling party.” He alleged that police are checking identity cards of

Thief builds ₹3cr house for girlfriend, arrested

**Bengaluru, Feb. 5:** A 37-year-old burglar who allegedly built a ₹3 crore bungalow for his girlfriend using the robbed money was arrested in a case of theft of ornaments worth ₹14 lakh at a house here, the police said on Wednesday. Panchakshari Swamy, who hails from Solapur in Maharashtra, was married and has children but he was a womaniser and spent the robbed money lavishly on women, they said. He allegedly committed thefts in many parts of the country over the past two decades. Swamy has been arrested in a case of theft of gold and silver ornaments worth ₹14 lakh from a house at Maruti Nagar in Bengaluru that occurred on January 9. His involvement in the theft was revealed with the help of footage from

more than 200 CCTV cameras. With his arrest, the police has seized gold biscuits of 181g, silver ornaments of 33g, and a firearm from him. Swamy started burglaries in 2003 when he was a minor and by 2009 he had become professional at it gaining wealth through crores through thefts, burglaries and robberies and it was in 2014-15, he started dating an actress and spent lavishly on her by building a ₹3 crore house for her in Kolkata, a police officer said. He also allegedly gifted her an aquarium worth ₹22 lakh, he said. The police said that he mostly operated alone and kept a watch over empty houses so that he could target them easily and after committing the theft, he would change clothes to avoid suspicion. — PTI

‘PM on 2-day Assam visit from Feb. 24’

**Guwahati, Feb. 5:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to arrive here on a two-day visit to Assam from February 24, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Wednesday. The PM will arrive at 5 pm to witness the record creating Jhumur dance performance by 8,000 artists. He will also attend the inaugural session of the Advantage Assam Summit the next day, the CM said. The two-day Advantage Assam 2.0 — investment and infrastructure summit 2025 — will be held here from February 25 to forge and strengthen partnerships and collaborations, while gaining valuable insights into the myriad possibilities available in the state for pursuing new investments. — PTI

3 cheetah cubs released to test survival in Indian wilds

**RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY**  
BHOPAL, FEB. 5  
For the first time since African cheetahs were introduced to Madhya Pradesh’s Kuno National Park (KNP) two and a half years ago, three cubs were released into the wild on Wednesday. This marks a significant milestone in India’s cheetah reintroduction project as the young cheetahs begin their journey in the open wilderness. The cubs, aged around 1.3 years, along with their mother — Namibian cheetah Aasha — and female cheetah Dheera, were released into the wild in the NP by chief minister Mohan Yadav. “This was the first time three cheetah cubs were released into the wild in Kuno NP. It will be very interesting to see how they are coping with their maiden wildlife, which is very challenging,” a senior forest officer of the NP told this newspaper, unwilling to be quoted. Experts say this will be the first experiment on the Indian soil to see how the mother cheetah and her cubs cope with the wildlife



A female cheetah released by MP chief minister Mohan Yadav into the wild at Kuno National Park.

together and how the mother shares her hunting and survival tips with her cubs during the period in the face of threats from the predators such as wolves. “If they encounter an Indian wolf, sloth bear or leopard, this would be the first recorded incident since these cheetahs are introduced in Indian soil after 75 years”, the forest officer said. The mom will teach her cubs how to hide, scan the landscape for predators and how to hunt. They will explore together while she teaches them life skills. “Cheetah instinct would be to flee, run and hide, but not fight”, the forest officer said. With the release of five cheetahs including three cubs, a total of seven cheetahs are now in the free range in Kuno NP. In December last year, two male cheetahs, Agni and Vayu, were released into the wild in the NP. There was heavy barricading outside the airport and police personnel were deployed in large numbers. This is the first batch of illegal Indian immigrants to have been deported by the US government. According to the sources, the deportees are expected to be allowed to go home following verification and background checks. Police will focus on identifying any deportee with a criminal record, the sources said. Punjab director-general

5 women among 6 top Naxals lay down arms

IED explodes at mining site in C’garh, labourer injured

**N a r a y a n p u r (Chhattisgarh), Feb. 5:** A labourer was injured when a pressure IED planted by Naxalites went off at a mining site in Chhattisgarh’s Narayanpur district Wednesday, the police said. One of the six surrendered Maoists, Hunga, alias Harendra Kumar Madvi (30), was deputy commander in the formation, while the other five were members of the unit, the police said. The desertion of the Maoist unit by these hardcore Naxals has considerably weakened the formation, once considered the deadliest among the three area committees of the Darbha division of the outlawed CPI (Maoist). The Darbha division was involved in several major attacks on security forces in Bastar including the April 2010 massacre of 76 CRPF jawans in Tadmetla under the neigh-

Dongar police station limits, located nearly 350 km from the state capital Raipur. The injured labourer was shifted to a hospital in Chhote Donga. Jayaswal Neco Industries Limited (JNIL) has been allotted the iron ore mine in Aamdai Ghati, and Naxalites have been opposing the project for a long time. — PTI

bouring district of Sukma, and the 2013 ambush of the Congress convoy at Jeeram Ghati in Bastar district in which 32 people including 28 Congress leaders were killed. The other two area committees of Darbha division are Katekalyan and Kanger Ghati. “The Darbha division was once a strong formation of the Maoist. But it is now in the last stage of its existence,” Bastar

range inspector general of police P Sunderraj told this newspaper. The Melangir area committee, members of which were involved in the Tadmetla attack of 2010 and 2013 Jeeram Ghati ambush, was once considered a fierce military unit of the Maoist. The unit has depleted considerably following the surrender and killing of its members in the last several months, police said.

Saint Tukaram Maharaj’s 11th scion kills self in Mumbai flat

**AGE CORRESPONDENT**  
MUMBAI, FEB. 5

In a tragic incident, a 11th descendant of legendary saint-poet Sant Tukaram was found dead at his residence in the Dehu road area of Pune on Wednesday morning. The initial probe by the police indicated that 32-year-old Shirish More committed suicide due to financial issues. Known as Shirish Maharaj, the deceased was himself a well-known kirtankar. According to reports, he had recently built a new house, where his parents lived on the ground floor and his room was on the upper floor. He was set to marry on February 20. On Tuesday night, More went to his room but did not come downstairs the following morning. When he failed to respond to knocks on his door, family members broke it open and found him hanging from a ceiling fan hook with a stole. “Around 8.30 am on Wednesday, family members of Shirish More realised the door of his room was not open. They found that the door was locked from inside. When they broke open the door, they found him hanging. A doctor later pronounced him dead,” a police official said.

104 deported from US arrive in Amritsar

■ **Continued from Page 1**  
At Amritsar airport arrangements are reportedly being made by the government agencies to once again check the documentation of these individuals and also arrange for a medical examination to check their well-being before they are sent back to their respective states. Government agencies are also expected to question the individuals on the agents that lured or duped them into travelling to the United States illegally. The flight landed at 1.55

pm. There was heavy barricading outside the airport and police personnel were deployed in large numbers. This is the first batch of illegal Indian immigrants to have been deported by the US government. According to the sources, the deportees are expected to be allowed to go home following verification and background checks. Police will focus on identifying any deportee with a criminal record, the sources said. Punjab director-general

of police Gaurav Yadav said on Tuesday that the state government will receive the immigrants and set up counters at the airport. Punjab NRI affairs minister Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal on Tuesday expressed disappointment over the US government’s decision and said these individuals, who contributed to that country’s economy, should have been granted permanent residency instead of being deported. The Punjab minister said

many Indians entered the US on work permits, which later expired, making them illegal immigrants. The minister said he plans to meet external affairs minister S. Jaishankar next week to discuss the concerns and interests of Punjabis living in the US. Mr Dhaliwal had also appealed to Punjabis not to travel abroad through illegal means, emphasising the importance of acquiring skills and education to access opportunities worldwide. He encour-

aged people to research legal ways and acquire education and language skills before travelling abroad. After Donald Trump assumed office as the US President last month, the country’s law enforcement agencies launched a crackdown against illegal immigrants. Many people from Punjab, who entered the US through “donkey routes” or other illegal means by spending lakhs of rupees, are now facing deportation.

‘Blessed to be at Maha Kumbh’: Modi takes dip at Sangam

■ **Continued from Page 1**  
Sangam at Prayagraj Maha Kumbh. I got immense peace and satisfaction from the blessings of Ma Ganga. I prayed to her for the happiness, prosperity, health and well-being of all the countrymen. Har-Har Gange.” Mr Modi’s visit to the world’s largest religious and spiritual event came at a time when the Opposition has been accusing the BJP-led UP government for not revealing the exact number of deaths during the recent stampede. Some Opposition parties have also slammed the PM for visiting the Maha Kumbh

claiming that the VVIP visit will only disturb the pilgrims. Sharing pictures of his visit, the PM captioned the post: “The confluence of faith, devotion and spirituality in the divine and grand Maha Kumbh of Prayagraj is overwhelming everyone.” His trip lasted around 90 minutes during which there was minimal use of the road, barely 3 km in the car. He travelled from Prayagraj airport by helicopter to a helipad near the Sangam and later used a motorboat to and fro the confluence of the sacred rivers from Arail Ghat.

This trip was much shorter than Mr Modi’s February 2019 visit to Kumbh when he, in a unique gesture, washed the feet of several sanitation workers as a mark of appreciation for their work and spent around five hours in the Kumbh Mela. After landing in Prayagraj around 10.30 AM Wednesday, Mr Modi took a boat ride from Arail Ghat to the Triveni Sangam, the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati. He was accompanied by Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath. The UP

CM also shared pictures of Mr Modi’s visit on the social media, saying he offered prayers as per rituals for the “happiness, peace and prosperity” of all countrymen. On the way, he acknowledged the greetings of crowds that had lined up on both sides of the riverbanks to catch a glimpse of him. After the holy dip, the Prime Minister performed rituals, including an “aarti” as he got on board a floater, a specially built makeshift platform on the river. He was dressed in a black jacket, white pyjamas, a saffron stole and a

Himachali cap for the “aarti”, during which he offered milk and flowers to the holy rivers. He also offered a “chunari” at the confluence of the rivers. A priest guided the prime minister in the rituals. Security was stepped up for the Prime Minister’s visit, which comes on a day when Assembly polls are under way in Delhi and there are bypolls in Milkipur in Uttar Pradesh. The visit also falls five days after a stampede at the Sangam claimed the lives of at least 30 pilgrims and left another 60 injured. However, barring some portions mandatory for

security protocols, devotees continued to take a dip at other ghats during the VIP visit, officials said. By 2 pm, nearly 60 lakh devotees had taken a dip on Wednesday, they added. Being held after 12 years, the Maha Kumbh started on January 13 and will continue till February 26. It is considered among the holiest pilgrimages by Hindus. According to the Uttar Pradesh government, more than 38 crore pilgrims have visited the Maha Kumbh since January 13. An official statement said Mr Modi’s ritual bath at the Sangam coincided

with an auspicious alignment of celestial events -- Gupt Navratni and Bhishtmashtami. While Gupt Navratni is dedicated to worshipping the goddess, Bhishtmashtami is observed for ancestral “Tarpan” and “Shradha”. This convergence of faith and tradition further enriched the sanctity of the occasion, it added. In his previous visit to Prayagraj on December 13, Mr Modi had inaugurated 167 projects worth ₹5,500 crores, including that about major railway station upgrades, ROB flyovers, road widening, strengthening, and beautification.



THE ASIAN AGE

6 FEBRUARY 2025

Major issues raised in Parl, but little clarity

Parliamentary discussions contribute a healthy lot to the success of electoral democracy all over the world. Though only a minuscule share of the electorate closely follow what transpires in what we call the temple of democracy in real time, they expect that their interests and aspirations to be reflected in the discussions and debates there, and given the possibilities that technology has opened up for all, they can always go back in time and check what went on, and come to their conclusions. The elected representatives must be mindful of this possibility when they speak in Parliament.

It is because of this reason the speeches of the leaders of the two main sections of the Lok Sabha while participating in the discussion on the motion of thanks to the President's address were less than edifying. While Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi put some questions that are fundamental to the survival of our democracy, he ruined his advantage by mixing the real issues with some unverified claims. The Prime Minister was right when he expected the leader of the Opposition to be more mature but he refused to answer valid questions in an unequivocal way, allowing them to linger.

Cherry-picking from history and whataboutery are not appropriate behaviour in Parliament which is a forum for asking specific questions and giving plain, reasonable and direct answers

It has been a practice for some time now for the Opposition parties, especially the Congress, to raise a finger at the electronic voting machines if they lose an election. They did it after their loss in the Haryana and Maharashtra elections which they had expected to win but failed to make a foolproof case. However, the party has of late been making a strong claim that an unusual number of new voters were enrolled in the short span of six months between the last Lok Sabha elections and the Assembly elections in Maharashtra. While the party, as well as Mr Gandhi, claim that 70 lakh new voters were added to the list, the Election Commission data shows that the roll had an additional 41 lakh votes, which is approximately 4.4 per cent of the total number of electors in the state. There are also doubts about the disproportionately high percentage of votes being cast during the final hours and the Bombay high court has sought the response of the Election Commission on this question. The Election Commission will have to come up with a convincing answer.

Mr Gandhi's statements giving his own interpretation of what the Army chief said on the situation on the border with China and the travel external affairs minister had undertaken to the United States have been refuted by the ministers concerned. It will be wise for the Opposition leader to abstain from honouring conjectures by giving them space in the parliamentary debate.

The Prime Minister's approach has been to ridicule the Opposition and its leader instead of offering them, and the nation, direct answers to the questions raised on the floor of the House. There may be details that the government may not be able to divulge to the people, especially on border issues due to operational constraints, but it is the PM's duty to make a case for it. Cherry-picking from history and whataboutery are not appropriate behaviour in Parliament which is a forum for asking specific questions and giving plain, reasonable and direct answers.

Will T'gana survey set example?

The Congress government in Telangana has successfully conducted the caste survey as promised by its leader Rahul Gandhi before the 2023 Assembly elections in the state. This is the third such exercise conducted in India after Karnataka and Bihar. It is aimed at increasing reservation as per Rahul Gandhi's slogan "Jitni abadi, utna haq".

According to the caste survey, people from backward classes make up 46.25 per cent of the state population, followed by Scheduled Castes at 17.43 per cent, Scheduled Tribes 10.45 per cent and other castes 13.31 per cent. Muslims form 12.56 per cent of the state population of whom BC Muslims are 10.08 per cent and OC Muslims 2.48 per cent.

While the Karnataka government has been dithering on releasing the caste survey, chief minister A. Revanth Reddy helped Rahul Gandhi flaunt Telangana's caste survey as an example to set the narrative for the Congress across the country.

The resolution of the Telangana Assembly asking the Central government to take up caste survey across India, though not binding, could exert pressure on the Bharatiya Janata Party in Telangana, where it is aiming to expand its appeal.

At the outset, the caste survey is merely an enumeration of people along the caste lines after nearly 100 years. It will help the policymakers understand the granular reality of people and how much they have developed since the last caste survey in 1930.

Nevertheless, the survey results could subsequently lead to the demands for a higher percentage of reservation, though affirmative action was never envisaged to match the respective community's share in the population. However, any increase in reservation will go against the 50 per cent cap that the Supreme Court set for the maximum reservations that can be provided. That lobs the ball to the court of the Narendra Modi government.

THE ASIAN AGE

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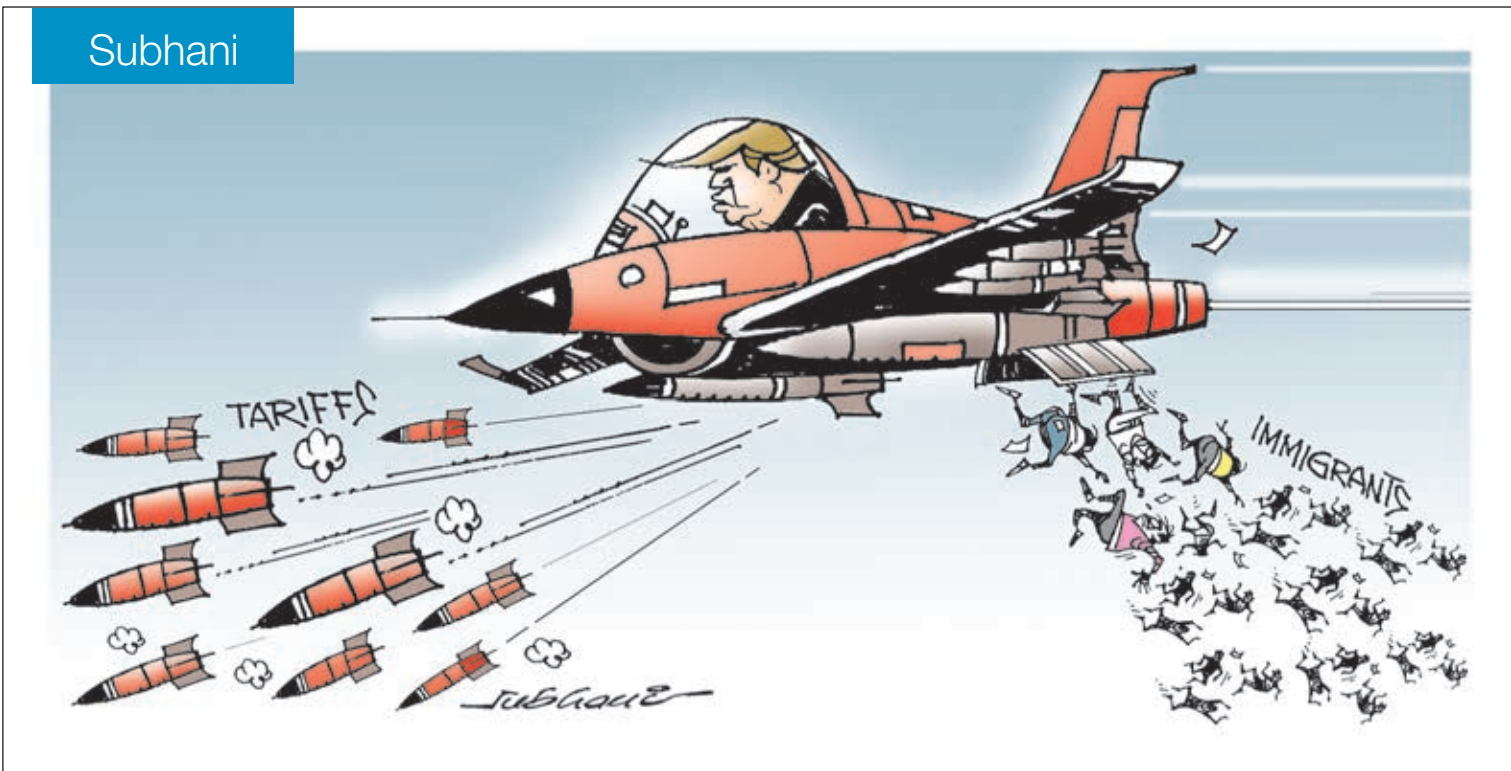
THE ASIAN AGE office is located at:  
New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: (011) 23211124.

Published and Printed on behalf of and for:

Deccan Chronicle Holdings Limited, Jawaharlal Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi 110 002 at BFL Infotech Ltd., C-9, Sector-III, Noida -201301.

London: Quickmarsh Ltd, 8th Floor, Block 2, Elizabeth House, 39 York Road, London, SE1 7NQ.  
RNI Registration number: 57290/94

Subhani



Middle class fix won't float India's economy



Shikha Mukerjee

The "never before" tagline of the Narendra Modi government, repeated ad nauseam in election season and out of it, as a measure of its successful handling of India's chronic economic, social and political problems has become threadbare through overuse. This peculiarly stuck-in-the-mud, frog-in-the-well perspective of comparing then with now has its uses during electioneering to distract a population that prefers to feign ignorance or unfamiliarity with the jargon in which India's economy is explained in Budget season.

The world, particularly the rich and the powerful, could not care less about India's election schedules. Nor are policies made elsewhere timed to roll out to fit the narrative of politicking in India. There may have been talk in certain quarters across the world that India needs to get over its policy paralysis, but no one is waiting for the arrival of that moment of illumination followed by appropriate action from the Modi government.

The Budget's grand unveiling, a tradition that has sustained public interest for decades, is not an unimportant or routine annual ritual by the Union finance minister on behalf of the government in power. It has consequences just as it raises expectations till the moment its details are disclosed.

Despite finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman's largesse of ₹1 lakh crores to the two per cent of the 1.4 billion Indians who actually pay taxes, the response of the "middle class" that never had it so good (before) is, to say the least, lukewarm. The shopping malls, automobile show-

rooms, the sort of buzz in the air that can be felt and which shows up in how the stock markets respond the day after is missing. The media is not saturated with stories of people going on shopping sprees with the extra money they will get from Budget 2025-2026.

The mood is not buoyant. The "animal spirits" are "dimmed and the spontaneous optimism falters, leaving us to depend on nothing but a mathematical expectation", as John Maynard Keynes spelt it out in his general theory of employment, interest and money. There is low expectation that the panel set up to boost manufacturing will do what it must to prevent enterprises from fading and dying, "though fears of loss may have a basis no more reasonable than hopes of profit had before". A cursory reading of the Budget shows how the economy is doing; the government is not spending more but its spending less money on boosting agriculture regardless of the spiel it trots out. It is not spending more money on improving the quality of education or healthcare, and now it is working on how to get the private sector to invest more on infrastructure projects within the next three years.

The country's economy is not yet broke, but it is faltering. This is at a time when it needs to be doing the opposite. It's pointless to declare that India under Modi will leverage the domestic market to sustain and speed up growth, when the reality is that it must leverage its potential to trade with the world, not by sending talented or even unskilled or under-skilled Indians overseas but by manufacturing things that the

There is much the Modi government deliberately chooses to ignore that needs to be fixed in the economy. But in order to even begin that exercise, the government has to face up to its policy paralysis.

world will desire.

If Ms Sitharaman had spared a little time in her bullet train speed delivery of her bullet-point budget for 2025-2026, on how India sees and prepares to tackle two things, first, the rate of growth roadblock the economy seems to have it because of the policy failures over the past 10 years and, the second, immediate impending crisis as India needs to prepare for the near certain confrontations over tariffs and its ripple effects vis-a-vis the United States, movers and shakers of the economy and the common man may have felt a bit reassured.

In one sense, the never-before scenario is correct; never before has India's economy faced a global economic environment as unpredictable, turbulent and difficult to navigate as the Modi 3.0 government must with Donald Trump as President of the United States. Trade and tariffs are a starting point on why the response of all sectors and segments of the economy lacks enthusiasm. If no sector or segment of India's working population, that includes everyone from billionaires, investors, corporate honchos down to the zero-hour contract employee within the expanding pool of unorganised gig workers, buys the story that they will be better off in 2025-2026 relative to the previous year, then Modi 3.0 needs to take a reality check.

The fundamental question is simple; when different segments of the Indian economy tot up their budgets, is the outcome happiness or mis-

ery? In sum, if income is higher than expenditure, then "result happiness"; if it's the other way around, then "result misery", as Charles Dickens wrote in *Copperfield*.

This, that is 2025-2026, is not the time for hypothetical scenarios of the "Viksit Bharat 2047" kind. The reality is that people have borrowed money against gold, as a last resort, and there is a 30 per cent increase in defaults on those loans. People have drifted back to their villages as opportunities for earnings in urbanising locations have shrunk. As President Droupadi Murmu put it, real wages have not risen to keep pace with inflation. The Economic Survey said India needs to create 78.5 lakh non-farm jobs annually. Dependence on the farm sector has gone up; instead of declining as it was till 2018, the share of agriculture in the workforce reversed and has now gone up to 46.1 per cent in 2024.

There is so much the Modi government deliberately chooses to ignore that needs to be fixed in the economy. In order to even begin that exercise, the government has to face up to its policy paralysis.

Hard as this may be, the easy way out that the government has taken is obviously not going to produce positive results.

If the Budget was not a list of pronouncements as it has become in recent years, solutions have to be found and spelt out in some detail for the sentiment to change from low to high. The challenge for the Modi 3.0 government is to get the Indian economy moving at a rate faster than it has been in the previous year certainly, but also over the last 10 years. The Budget and the Economic Survey (that most of the general population does not read) made it quite clear: India is not set to grow at a rate faster than it did in 2024-2025. The slower pace affects everyone.

Shikha Mukerjee is a senior journalist based in Kolkata

LETTERS

SHOCK WARNING!

Nassim Taleb, author of *The Black Swan*, has issued a stark warning about potential market shocks that could surpass Nvidia's recent 17 per cent stock plunge. Taleb emphasised the fragility of the current economic structure and the overreliance on technology stocks, highlighting Nvidia's crash, which wiped out \$589 billion in market capitalisation. He cautioned that this event could be a precursor to more significant market adjustments, especially with the rise of AI technologies like DeepSeek, raising concerns about the sustainability of current market valuations.

Amarjeet Kumar  
Hazaribagh

FORGETTING HISTORY

BANGLADESH has resumed direct flights by Karachi and Dhaka after a gap of seven years. This is a precursor to thawing of relations between the two nations after the bitter liberation war of 1971 and an on-off theme among the two. What is of wry note is about what a disjointed nation as Pakistan, that is in a turmoil, both political and economic, has to offer to a relatively better-off Bangladesh. In fact Pakistan was prima facie responsible to the deterioration of the erstwhile East Pakistan by exploiting its resources for its sole benefit. Strange that in this day and age, a hitherto progressive Bangladesh should choose to forget history.

R. Narayanan  
Navi Mumbai

LESSON FOR MIGRANTS

THE MIGRANTS who illegally landed in the US are being sent back by Donald Trump. As a matter of fact, they paid over ₹40 lakhs to reach the US. That amount, I am sure, was shared all the way to the top Democrats, just like cow smuggling feeds all the way to the top here in West Bengal and Assam some years earlier. Now, these guys not only have spent ₹40 lakhs, but will owe the government nearly ₹10 lakhs in deportation charges. They couldn't establish a future for themselves here for an outlay of half a crore. Meanwhile, that half crore is equally lost foreign exchange, which created no equity nor earnings for the country. And there are hundreds like these guys. Is that chilling and depressing in some ways?

C.K. Subramaniam  
Navi Mumbai

Mahir Ali



US tariffs against Mexico, Canada on hold; but who will bell the cat?

With malice towards none" and "justice for all" are justly among the best remembered phrases of the second inaugural address by America's first Republican president, just weeks before he was assassinated. Abraham Lincoln also wanted "to bind up the nation's wounds" and to "achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and between all nations."

The inclinations of the latest Republican President — I'm probably being too optimistic there, but one lives in hope — could broadly be summed up as the opposite. But even "malice towards all" is not a consistent objective. The vaunted 25pc tariffs against imports from Mexico and Canada were paused this week after minor concessions from their heads of government, while Xi Jinping was reportedly next on the calling list, and a tête-a-tête with proclaimed war criminal Benjamin Netanyahu was also happening.

The leading Israeli genocidal maniac was the first head of government to receive an invitation to the White House, which just might help to remind bodies such as Arabs for Trump of their idiocy. Their favoured candidate continues to insist on the ethnic cleansing of Gazans — possibly followed in his imagination by the

rebuilding of the occupied territory as a tourist zone by the Saudis and Emiratis, in collusion with presidential son-in-law Jared Kushner.

The first Trump term's ruling method was spelt out by Steve Bannon: "All we have to do is flood the zone. Every day we hit them we three things. They'll bite on one, and we'll get all our stuff done ... But we've got to start with muzzle velocity." The strategy hasn't changed much, but this time there is a co-president Bannon despises. Elon Musk's tentacles are all over government departments, and his initial target appears to be USAID — which may not be quite as benign as its liberal defenders pretend, but has occasionally pursued commendable goals. Perhaps because of that, Musk — reared in apartheid South Africa — sees it as "viper's nest of radical left Marxists who hate America", while his putative boss says "it's run by radical lunatics, and we're getting them out".

Radical lunatics have indeed been unleashed in the US, but don't count on the Democrats to get them out. The supposed opposition's tendency to kowtow to the slightly new order is not a surprise. Since at least the 1990s, Democrats have deemed it opportune to abide by the neoliberal Thatcher-Reagan consensus

of the preceding decade, with neither Bill Clinton nor Barack Obama striving for any policies that might convince the electorate that their lives would substantially improve under a Democratic administration. Their successor Joe Biden perished by failing to recognise that he was a creature of the past.

So is Trump in many ways, but it's harder for the average American to acknowledge the continuity, and appreciation of the assumed difference lapses into 'he does what he says'. He doesn't, but that's a fair enough criticism of his predecessors and adversaries, who either evade their stated agenda or ignore it once in power. Kamala Harris gave no indication that she would be any different, which helps to explain last year's outcome.

Some greeted Trump's triumph in the vain hope that his governing impulses would differ from his vile campaign rhetoric. It hasn't exactly turned out that way. Nor is there any solace to be found for those who assumed that the chaos of his first administration would not be replicated in 2025. The main difference is that this time there is hardly any visible congressional or extra-parliamentary Opposition.

Sure, a sensible judge has halted the President's unconstitutional attempt to rescind birthright citizenship, and the clamp-

down on federal funding has been lifted in some quarters. But will anyone notice, amid the deportations of immigrants and asylum-seekers and the rest of the unfolding neo-fascist agenda, some of it straight out of the wretched Heritage Foundation's Project 25, which Trump claimed to know nothing about?

More than 100 years ago, Rosa Luxemburg cited fellow German communist Friedrich Engels as pointing out that bourgeois society faced "either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism". The latter has been evident for a while. A decade or so later, the imprisoned Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci pronounced his verdict, declaring that "the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear". The Slovenian public intellectual has appropriately interpreted the latter segment as: "Now is the time of monsters."

Trump isn't the only one. They stretch across the globe, from Meloni to Orbán and Milei, among others. But perhaps we should focus our attention on those who facilitate them, which would leave out very few countries in the world.

— By arrangement with Dawn



## SHORT TAKES

## MAN STARTS FIRE AT ROME AIRPORT, NABBED

Rome, Feb. 5: Italian police on Wednesday arrested a Georgian man suspected of starting a fire at Rome's Ciampino international airport, causing flights to be suspended, an airport authority spokesman said.

The fire broke out at the base of the control tower at the airport southeast of the capital, which mostly serves low-cost airline Ryanair. It was quickly extinguished but take-offs and landings were "temporarily suspended", the air navigation service ENAV said. Arriving flights were diverted to nearby Fiumicino Airport.

## EU SEEKS ECOM PACKAGE NEW IMPORT FEE

Brussels, Feb. 5: The European Commission announced on Wednesday it would seek to impose new fees on e-commerce imports, as part of efforts to tackle a surge of "harmful" products into the bloc.

The EU action came after the US Postal Service said it was suspending inbound parcels from China and Hong Kong, a move that could hit low-cost platforms Temu and Shein.

EU tech chief Henna Virkkunen said the bloc had seen the number of imported e-commerce parcels double from 2023 to 2024, to reach 12 million a day.

## UNAWARE OF MOVE TO ARREST GOTABAYA: MIN.

Colombo, Feb. 5: A minister said on Wednesday that the Sri Lankan government is unaware of any move to arrest former Lankan president Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the Easter Sunday bombings case.

Nalin Jayathissa, the minister of health and mass media, said this in response to a statement by opposition politician Udaya Gammanpila who accused the government of plotting to arrest Rajapaksa to meet its motive to blame the state intelligence services for the 2019 Easter Sunday suicide bombings that killed 270 people, including Indians.

## MORE PATROLLING BY LANKA OVER ILLEGAL TRAWLING

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

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

"We have increased patrolling and arrests," government spokesperson and minister of information Nalinda Jayathissa said while addressing reporters here.

## FRENCH PM SET TO SURVIVE NO TRUST VOTE

Paris, Feb. 5: French Prime Minister Francois Bayrou is expected on Wednesday to survive a no-confidence vote in parliament, winning some breathing space after less than two months in office but still facing an uncertain future.

Bayrou, a veteran centrist named by President Emmanuel Macron in December to end months of political crisis, on Monday used a controversial constitutional article to ram his cost-cutting budget through Parliament without a vote.

But its use allows the opposition to put forward a no-confidence motion.

## THAILAND CUTS POWER TO FIVE MYANMAR AREAS

Bangkok, Feb. 5: Thailand cut cross-border electricity supplies to five locations in Myanmar on Wednesday, in an effort to stamp out online scam centres.

Scam compounds have mushroomed in Myanmar's lawless borderlands, run by criminal gangs and staffed by foreigners trafficked and forced to work swindling their compatriots in an industry analysts say is worth billions of dollars.

Beijing has grown increasingly concerned about the centres as many of those involved — both victims and perpetrators — are Chinese.

## US to own Gaza, develop it: Trump

Donald Trump withdraws US from UNHRC, stops future funding for UN body for Palestinian refugees

New York, Washington, Feb. 5: In a surprising announcement, President Donald Trump said the US will take over "the war-ravaged Gaza Strip, own it and undertake economic development there that will create unlimited numbers of jobs and housing, prompting international backlash.

Trump made these remarks on Tuesday during a joint press conference in the White House with visiting Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu standing beside him. Trump also suggested that the US develop the land but gave no details on who would be allowed to live there.

He also said that all Palestinians currently living in Gaza — around 2 million people — should leave and be placed in other countries in the Middle East.

Trump signed an executive order withdrawing the US from the UN Human Rights Council, prohibiting any future funding for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees. The President, had on Tuesday, also directed the US to review its participation in the UN's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, the body that uses culture and history as a bridge-building mechanism between nations.

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

"Create an economic development that will supply unlimited numbers of jobs and housing for the people of the area, do a real job, do something different," he said.

"The only reason the Palestinians want to go back to Gaza is they have no alternative. It's right now a demolition site," Trump said.

"This is just a demolition site. Virtually every building is down. They're living under fallen concrete that's very dangerous and very precarious. They instead can occupy all of a beautiful area with homes and safety, and they can live out their lives in peace and harmony, instead of having to go back and do it again," he said. — PTI



Imran Khan

## SECURITY FORCES: NO IMRAN LETTER TO ARMY CHIEF

Islamabad, Feb. 5: Contrary to the claims made by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), security sources have revealed that no letter from the country's former prime minister Imran Khan was received by Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Asim Munir.

The controversy began when PTI chairman Gohar Ali Khan and Khan's lawyer Faisal Chaudhry informed the media on Monday that the PTI founder had written a letter to the army chief, urging him to "reevaluate policy."

According to *The Express Tribune*, sources familiar with the matter stated that the news regarding Khan's letter reached the military leadership through the media, not a formal communication. Separately, the *Dawn* newspaper quoted security sources saying the military had not received the letter. They also dismissed reports about the existence of such a letter.

The security sources alleged that the PTI leadership had staged another "drama" and suggested that if the party was interested in holding talks, it should contact politicians instead of the military establishment. — PTI



A Palestinian man sells vegetables at Saftawi street in Jabalia, in the northern Gaza Strip, on Wednesday. — AFP

## GLOBAL REACTION

Our people in the Gaza Strip will not allow these plans to pass...What is required is to end the (Israeli) occupation and aggression against our people, not to expel them from their land.

— SAMI ABU ZUHRI, SENIOR HAMAS OFFICIAL

They (Palestinians) must be allowed home, they must be allowed to rebuild, and we should be with them in that rebuild on the way to a two-state solution.



— KEIR STARMER, BRITISH PRIME MINISTER

Encouraging Gazans to migrate from the enclave was the only correct strategy at the end of the war in Gaza.

— ITAMAR BEN GVR, EX-ISRAELI MINISTER FOR NATIONAL SECURITY

Gaza Strip belongs to Palestinians and their expulsion would be unacceptable and contrary to international law.

— ANNALENA BAERBOCK, GERMAN FOREIGN MINISTER



Russia believes a settlement in the Middle East is only possible on the basis of a two-state solution.

— DMITRY PESKOV, KREMLIN SPOKESMAN

The Palestinians will not relinquish their land, rights and sacred sites, and that the Gaza Strip is an integral part of the land of the State of Palestine, along with the West Bank and East Jerusalem.



— MAHMOUD ABBAS, PALESTINIAN PRESIDENT

## PROTESTS AGAINST TRUMP, PROJECT 2025 PLANNED

Washington, Feb. 5: A movement to oppose the early actions of President Donald Trump's administration is taking off online, with plans to protest across the US on Wednesday.

The movement has organised under the hashtags #buildtheresistance and #50501, which stands for 50 protests, 50 states, one day. Many of the protests are planned at state capitols, with some in other cities.

The movement has websites and accounts across

social media. Flyers circulating online decry Project 2025, a hard-right playbook for American government and society, and include messages such as reject fascism and defend our democracy.

In a coffee shop just a block from Michigan's Capitol, organisers of a planned action there on Wednesday pushed together tables, spreading out poster boards to write messages that read "No Deportations Ever!" and

"Workers Unite!"

Kelsey Brianne, a key organiser of Michigan's rally, called it a real grassroots effort. She learned about the movement and has been coordinating speakers and safety protocols.

"I got involved because I knew that there was a need, and I knew what I could do," Brianne said on Tuesday. "But also I want to look back at this time and say that I did something and I didn't just sit back." — AP

## House impeaches V-P of Philippines

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

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

With enough endorsements by House legislators, the impeachment complaint was ordered transmitted to the Senate, which will serve as an impeachment tribunal that would try the V-P, the daughter of former president



Sara Duterte

Rodrigo Duterte.

Sara, who didn't immediately react to the House move to impeach her, and her father have been politically at odds with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr and his camp, including a majority of House legislators. The V-P regarded as a possible presidential candidate after Marcos's term ends in 2028, has faced at least four impeachment complaints by several legislators. — AP

## SIMIAN | SCARE

## Angkor Wat, built from 9th to 15th centuries, was capital of Khmer Empire Fed by YouTubers, monkeys attack tourists

Phnom Penh, Feb. 5: Wild monkeys egged on by YouTubers have been rampaging at Cambodia's famed Angkor Wat complex, attacking tourists, wrecking temple stonework and damaging information boards, officials said.

The agency that runs the Unesco-listed site warned visitors to steer clear of the growing gangs of "aggressive" macaques that live around the sprawling complex of ruins and have been biting tourists.

The macaques are native to the lush forests that sur-

round Angkor Wat, but Apsara National Authority said human interaction — particularly by people filming content to post online — had changed their behaviour.

A small number of YouTubers regularly fed monkeys to create videos and this has "changed the monkeys' natural behaviour from being wild animals to domestic ones that are aggressive, steal foods, and cause injuries among people", it said in a statement. Some have reportedly even filmed themselves

abusing macaques.

Long Kosal, a spokesman for the Apsara National Authority, told *AFP* that as well as the danger posed to tourists, the agency was increasingly worried about the monkeys damaging the centuries-old stonework. "On top of biting visitors, they have been climbing up and pushing stones down, damaging temples," he said, adding that the macaques had also damaged information boards.

The agency has urged tourists to leave the monkeys alone while visiting the

ruins, and said it is looking for "an appropriate solution" to the problem.

Angkor Wat, built from the 9th to the 15th centuries, was the capital of the Khmer Empire and is Cambodia's top tourist attraction, bringing in valuable revenue to a poor country. More than a million foreign tourists visited the park last year. Since it became a world heritage site in 1992, Angkor Wat and the surrounding jungle have benefited from increased legal and physical protections. — AFP

## US Prez says he will not blow Iran to smithereens

Washington, Feb. 5: US President Donald Trump called on Wednesday for a "verified nuclear peace agreement" with Iran, after withdrawing from a similar deal in his first term and instituting a so-called "maximum pressure" policy. On Tuesday, ahead of a meeting with Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump signed an order reinstating the "maximum pressure" policy against Iran over allegations the country is seeking a nuclear weapons capability.

"I want Iran to be a great and successful Country, but one that cannot have a Nuclear Weapon," he said in a post on his *Truth Social* platform.

"I would much prefer a Verified Nuclear Peace Agreement, which will let Iran peacefully grow and prosper." It echoed a similar message in his press conference a day earlier with Netanyahu, who also said Tehran could never have a nuclear weapon.

Trump on Wednesday dismissed reports that the



Abbas Araghchi

United States was working with Israel "to blow Iran into smithereens" as "GREATLY EXAGGERATED." "We should start working on it (the agreement) immediately, and have a big Middle East Celebration when it is signed and completed," he said.

"God Bless the Middle East!" During his first term that ended in 2021, Trump withdrew the United States from a landmark nuclear deal between Iran and major powers, and re-imposed biting sanctions.

The deal — known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) —

● **TRUMP ON** Wednesday dismissed reports that the United States was working with Israel "to blow Iran into smithereens" as "GREATLY EXAGGERATED". 'We should start working on it (the agreement) immediately, and have a big Middle East Celebration when it is signed and completed,' he said.

imposed curbs on Iran's nuclear programme in return for sanctions relief.

Tehran adhered to the deal until a year after Washington pulled out, but then began rolling back its commitments. Efforts to revive the 2015 deal have since faltered. Iran denies seeking to build nuclear weapons, insisting its programme is solely for peaceful purposes.

Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi said he believed Trump's maximum pressure policy "is a failed experiment and trying it again will turn into another failure." — AFP

## Transgender female athletes can't contest

Washington, Feb. 5: President Donald Trump will sign an executive order on Wednesday designed to prevent people who were biologically assigned male at birth from participating in women's or girls' sporting events.

The order, which Trump is expected to sign at an afternoon ceremony, marks another aggressive shift by the President's second administration in the way the federal government deals with transgender people and their rights.

The President put out a sweeping order on his first day in office last month that called for the federal government to define sex as only male or female and for that to be reflected on official documents such as passports and in policies such as federal prison

assignments. Trump found during the campaign that his pledge to keep men out of women's sports resonated beyond the usual party lines. More than half the voters surveyed by AP VoteCast said support for transgender rights in government and society has gone too far.

He leaned into the rhetoric before the election, pledging to get rid of the transgender insanity, though his campaign offered little in the way of details.

Wednesday's order — which coincides with National Girls and Women in Sports Day — will involve how his administration will interpret Title IX, the law best known for its role in pursuing gender equity in athletics and preventing sexual harassment on campuses. — AP

## DIRECT HIRES OF USAID PUT ON LEAVE GLOBALLY

Washington, Feb. 5: The Trump administration is placing US Agency for International Development direct-hire staffers around the world on leave except those deemed essential, upending the aid agency's six-decade mission overseas.

A notice posted online on Tuesday gives the workers 30 days to return home. The move had been rumoured for several days and was the most extreme of several proposals considered for consolidating the agency into the State Department. Other options had included closures of smaller USAID missions and partial closures of larger ones. Thousands of USAID employees already had been laid off and programmes worldwide shut down. — AP

## Sweden mourns attack victims

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

The gunman's motive hadn't been determined by early Wednesday as the Scandinavian nation — where gun violence at schools is very rare — reeled from an attack with such bloodshed that police early on said it was difficult to count the number of

dead among the carnage.

Officials said on Wednesday that three women and two men, all with gunshot wounds, underwent surgery at Orebro University Hospital. All were in serious but stable condition after being admitted to the hospital with life-threatening injuries. Another woman was treated for minor injuries and was stable.

All of the victims are over age 18, officials said. However, no other patients related to the shooting were admitted to Orebro University Hospital overnight. — AP



Sweden's PM Ulf Kristersson and his wife Birgitta Ed place flowers at a memorial near a shooting scene on the outskirts of Orebro, Sweden, on Wednesday. — AP

## RUSSIA, UKRAINE EXCHANGE 300 POWS

Kyiv, Feb. 5: Russia and Ukraine each said on Wednesday that 150 of their captured soldiers had been returned in the latest prisoner-of-war exchange between the two warring countries.

The two sides regularly swap prisoners of war in

one of the only forms of cooperation between Kyiv and Moscow amid the nearly three-year war.

"Some of the guys had been in captivity for more than two years," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in a post on social media. — AFP

## SK TEMPORARILY BANS DEEPSEEK

Seoul, Sydney, Feb. 5: South Korea's industry ministry has temporarily banned employee access to Chinese artificial intelligence startup DeepSeek due to security concerns, a ministry official said on Wednesday, as the government urges caution on

generative AI services.

Australia has also banned DeepSeek from all government devices on the advice of security agencies, a top official said on Wednesday, citing privacy and malware risks posed by China's breakout AI programme. — Agencies



Macaque monkeys at Bayon Temple in Angkor Park in Siem Reap province of Cambodia. — AFP



quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	78,271.28	-0.40
Nifty 50	23,696.30	-0.18
S&P 500*	6,037.88	----
Dollar (₹)	87.47	0.44
Pound Sterling (₹)	109.48	1.19
Euro (₹)	91.00	1.08
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	84,658.861	1.03
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	75.33	-1.14
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.662	-0.01
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.476	-0.037

\* As of 8:30 PM IST

Ajax Engineering initial public offer to open on Feb.12

Bengaluru-based Ajax Engineering announced ₹1,269 crore initial public offering (IPO) in the price band of ₹599 to ₹629 per equity share of ₹1 face value. The IPO opens on February 10 and closes on February 12. Ajax Engineering IPO is entirely an offer for sale by promoters and investor selling shareholder Kedaara Capital. Ajax is self-loading concrete mixers manufacturer in India with 75 per cent market share.

Atlanta files prospectus with Sebi for IPO

Gujarat-based Atlanta Electrical, manufacturer of transformers, has filed draft red herring prospectus with Securities and Exchange Board of India for an initial public offering (IPO). The IPO comprises a fresh issue of ₹400 crore and an offer for sale of 38.1 lakh equity shares. Atlanta Electrical proposes to utilise the net proceeds towards repayment of borrowings, funding working capital requirements of company.



Zydus sees Q3 net profit rise 30% to ₹1,023 cr

Zydus Lifesciences on Wednesday said consolidated net profit increased by 30 per cent to ₹1,023 crore for the third quarter ended December 31, 2024, aided by robust sales across domestic and US markets. The drug firm reported a net profit of ₹790 crore in corresponding quarter of previous fiscal. Revenue from operations increased to ₹5,269 crore in the third quarter as against ₹4,505 crore in year-ago period, it said.

ITC opens global CoE for artificial intelligence

Diversified conglomerate ITC Limited on Wednesday announced the opening of its global centre of excellence for artificial intelligence (AI) in the metropolis. ITC chairman and managing director Sanjiv Puri highlighted Bengal's potential for investment, noting that the firm, headquartered in Kolkata, has made significant investments in sectors such as hospitality, manufacturing, IT, and agriculture.

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Hopes of rate cut increases amid slowdown in growth

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI, FEB. 5

With the government delivering a growth supportive budget with fiscal prudence, all eyes are now on the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) decision to be announced on Friday.

Most economists expect the MPC to cut the repo rate (the rate at which RBI lends to banks) by 25 basis points to 6.25 per cent in its upcoming credit policy meeting scheduled from February 5 to 7 to boost economic growth that has slowed down considerably. This is the first MPC meeting under the new RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra and also the first meeting after the Union Budget 2025.

While MPC is expected to take cognisance of the recent bouts of rupee depreciation and the resultant risk of imported inflation in the medium term, it would draw comfort from the near-term trajectory of inflation and the need to push growth supportive measures announced in the budget. Meanwhile, the rupee on



ROLLS-ROYCE BRINGS REVAMPED GHOST AT ₹8.95 CR

MICHAEL GONSALVES PUNE, FEB.5

Rolls-Royce, the legendary British super luxury car maker, on Wednesday launched the updated version of Ghost Series II in India with a starting price of ₹8.95 crore.

The company claims the Ghost Series II brings a refreshed exterior design, enhanced digital features, and improved driving dynamics while maintaining the signature luxury and bespoke craftsmanship associated with the marque.

Rolls-Royce has also introduced two additional variants - Ghost Extended Series II and Black Badge Ghost Series II, offering even greater personalisation and performance options.

The Ghost Series II, Ghost Extended Series II, and the Black Badge Ghost Series II are tagged at ₹8.95 crore, ₹10.19 crore, and ₹10.52 crore respectively.

"Ghost Series II remains faithful to its principles, yet it elevates every aspect of its presence. It is the most technologically advanced and driver-focused V12 Rolls-Royce ever created," said Irene Nikkein, regional director Asia-Pacific, Rolls-Royce Motor Cars.

The Rolls Royce Ghost Series II gets a 6.75-liter, twin-turbocharged V12 engine, connected to an eight-speed gearbox, which is capable of generating a peak power and torque output of 600 Hp and 900 Nm, respectively.

LIQUIDITY CONCERNS

- ▶ RBI's MPC decision on rate cut to announce on Friday.
- ▶ Central bank has maintained repo rate at 6.5% since April 2023.
- ▶ Rupee plunges 39 paise to close at new low of 87.46 against US dollar.

- ▶ This is first MPC meeting under new RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra.



Wednesday plunged 39 paise to close at new low of 87.46 against the US dollar. Ashutosh Khajuria, former executive director at Federal Bank said, "With the Budget being fiscally prudent and growth supportive, the RBI could cut the repo rate by 25 basis points and announce measures for injection of durable liquidity."

The RBI has maintained the policy repo rate at 6.5 per cent since April 2023 in a bid to bring inflation under its medium-term target of 4 per cent.

During December 2024

MPC meeting, the central bank left the repo rate unchanged for the 11th consecutive time but shifted its stance from withdrawal of accommodation to neutral indicating its openness to cut rates.

"Led by softer food prices, consumer prices inflation is expected to decline in January, inching closer to MPC's target of 4 per cent. The tighter fiscal stance and expectations of lower inflation should open the path for rate cuts," said Dipti Deshpande, principal economist at Crisil.

India gold demand rises 5% to 803 tn

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, FEB. 5

Gold demand in India grew 5 per cent to 802.8 tonnes in 2024, crossing 800 tonnes after a gap of nine years as the country spent ₹5.15 lakh crore on the yellow metal, while global demand hit a record high of 4,974 tonnes. Investment demand in India grew 29 per cent, while jewellery demand slid 2 per cent.



In 2024, gold demand grew 5 per cent from 761 tonnes in 2023 to 802.8 tonnes in 2024. India's gold demand crossed 800 tonnes in 2015 at 858.1 tonnes. However, in the December quarter, gold demand was similar to 2023 at 265.8 tonnes. Gold demand in value terms grew 31 per cent to ₹5,15,390 crore against ₹3,92,000 crore in 2023.

Jewellery demand dropped 2 per cent to 563.4 tonnes while investment demand was down by 29 per cent to 239.4 tonnes. In Q4, jewellery demand was down 5 per cent to 189.8 tonnes and investment demand was down 14 per cent to 76 tonnes.

Recycling decreased by 2

per cent in 2024 to 114.3 tonnes. Imports declined 4 per cent to 712.1 tonnes, compared to 744 tonnes in 2023. In Q4, imports were down by 1 per cent to 223.1 tonnes.

Globally, gold demand hit a new record high of 4,974 tonnes, driven by strong, sustained central bank buying and growth in investment demand. In value terms, demand too made a fresh high of \$382 billion as central banks bought 1045 tonnes, crossing 1000 tonnes for the third year in a row. Global investment demand increased 25 per cent to 1,180 tonnes, a four-year high.

WGC expects gold demand in 2025 to be between 700-800 tonnes. "It is expected that gold jewellery demand will recover due to wedding-related purchases, provided there is some level of price stability. Additionally, it is anticipated that the trend of robust gold investment demand will continue, with retail investors showing growing interest in gold ETFs, digital gold, and coins and bars," said Sachin Jain, Regional CEO, India, WGC.

India to ban DeepSeek, AI tools in govt offices

Move comes on security concerns over potential leakage of data

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

After countries like Taiwan, Australia and the US, now India has sought to ban use of DeepSeek R1 in all its government offices. To start with, the ministry of finance is learnt to have already banned the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek due to several concerns, including the country's security over the potential leakage of confidential documents and data, a top source privy to development said on Wednesday.

The move by the government comes at a time when there are rising concerns over the nation's security risks on use of AI app like DeepSeek, a Chinese AI start-up, which hit the headlines worldwide after it topped app download charts.

As per the source, the order of ban was issued with the approval of finance secretary Tuhin Kanta Pandey, on January 29 - just a couple of days before the Union Budget, saying that it applies to all AI tools and applications.

"A letter has been sent to all departments within the ministry, including the department of economic

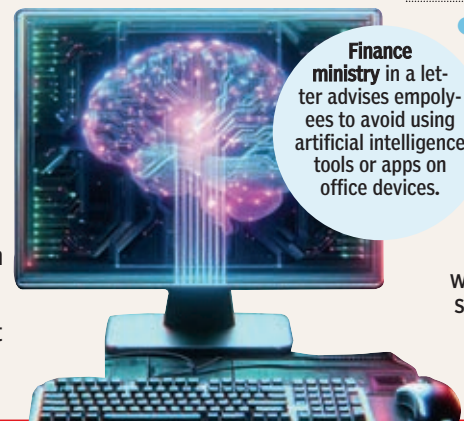
RISK PERCEPTION

- AI tools and apps (such as ChatGPT, DeepSeek R1, etc) in office computers and devices pose risks for confidentiality of government data.

- Some western countries are suspicious of Chinese technology, notably Huawei which is restricted on national security grounds.

- India also plans to ban AI tools, not only in the offices of the finance ministry but also all the government offices due to security purposes.

- Australia also bans DeepSeek from all govt devices and systems over what it says is the security risk the DeepSeek poses.



- Regulators in South Korea, Ireland and France have all begun investigations into how DeepSeek handles user data, which it stores in servers in China.

affairs, the department of expenditure, the department of public enterprises, DIPAM, and the department of financial services and the ban remains in effect beyond the Budget period," the source added. According to the letter, it is, therefore, advised that the use of AI tools or apps in office devices be strictly avoided and this may be brought to the notice of all employees. "It has been determined that AI tools and apps (such as ChatGPT,

DeepSeek R1, etc) in the office computers and devices pose risks for confidentiality of government data and documents," the letter said. It has been observed that western countries have a track record of being suspicious of Chinese tech - notably Huawei which is restricted on national security grounds. India also plans to ban AI tools, not only in the offices of the finance ministry but also all the government offices due to

security purposes. Australia has banned DeepSeek from all government devices and systems over what it says is the security risk the Chinese AI start-up poses. The Italian government previously temporarily blocked ChatGPT over privacy concerns in March 2023. Regulators in South Korea, Ireland and France have all begun investigations into how DeepSeek handles user data, which it stores in servers in China.

OpenAI to work with India on cost-effective AI solutions

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

Union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on Wednesday said that OpenAI was open to work with India in its efforts to build cost-effective artificial intelligence (AI) solutions. He also highlighted India's goal of creating an entire AI ecosystem.

The minister's statement came after meeting OpenAI chief executive officer Sam Altman to discuss India's strategy for developing a comprehensive AI ecosystem.

As per the sources, Altman, in a closed-door meeting with Indian tech developers, reaffirmed India's growing significance for OpenAI. Altman, during the discussion with the IT minister also said that OpenAI tripled its users here in the last year, giving a ringing endorsement to India's efforts in building

**BIG PLANS FOR TECHNOLOGY**

- ▶ IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw meets OpenAI CEO Sam Altman to discuss India's strategy for developing a comprehensive AI ecosystem.
- ▶ Minister urges start-ups to come up with unique AI solutions.
- ▶ OpenAI triples users in the country in last year, endorsing India's efforts in building on AI at all levels.

India is an incredibly important market for AI in general and for OpenAI in particular, it's our second biggest market. — Sam Altman, CEO, OpenAI

on AI at all levels of the stack, chips, models and the applications as well. "India is an incredibly important market for AI in general and for OpenAI in particular, it's our second biggest market. I think India should be one of the leaders of the AI revolution. India's rapid adoption of AI technologies is really quite amazing to see what the country has done, in embracing the technology and

building the entire stack of things on top of it," Altman said. Vaishnaw also posted on X, saying that he had a super cool discussion with Sam Altman on India's strategy of creating the entire AI stack - GPUs, model, and apps. The minister also emphasised India's ability to develop cost-effective AI models, drawing comparisons to the country's low-cost space missions.

Growth in services falls to 2-year low

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO NEW DELHI, FEB. 5

After ending 2024 on a strong note, activities in dominant services sectors in India slumped to more than two year low as the demand softened but it remained strong and led to a substantial rate of hiring. The loss of growth momentum in January could be attributed to the slow pace of growth in new business orders, a



private survey showed on Wednesday. As per the survey, though the the seasonally adjusted HSBC India services purchasing man-

agers' Index (PMI) was seen at 56.5 in January, down from 59.3 in December, the headline index still indicated a sharp rate of expansion in the sector. Pranjul Bhandari, chief India economist at HSBC said that India's services sector lost growth momentum in January and the business activity as well as the new business PMI indices eased to their lowest levels since November 2022 and November 2023 respectively.

"That said, new export business partly countered the downtrend and continued to rebound from a dip in late-2024, in line with official data which showed India's services exports shining in December and capturing a larger share of global trade," she added. In contrast to the trend for total new orders, it also noted that there was a quicker increase in international sales.

India to emerge as top destination with vast skilled workforce

GCCs to create 4.5 lakh jobs this year

Mumbai, Feb. 5: Global capability centres (GCCs) are expected to create 4.25-4.5 lakh new jobs this year and 10 lakh in the next six years, with 35 per cent of companies aiming for 50-100 per cent workforce expansion, a report said on Wednesday.

According to India GCC Growth Outlook 2024 report by global technology and digital talent solutions provider NLB Services, India has emerged as top GCC destination fuelled by its vast skilled workforce and supportive policies. Across the country, GCCs

- ▶ Introduction of national framework in FY26 Budget will propel GCC growth across tier-II and III cities.
- ▶ Over 61% of India Inc GCCs anticipate an over 50% rise in women hires by 2030.

are expected to employ 33 lakh professionals by 2030, said the report, which is based on insights from 207 GCC decision-makers spanning 10 diverse sectors. GCCs across Bengaluru,

Mumbai, Hyderabad, Pune and Chennai are poised to drive the demand for freshers. Signalling commitment to future-ready workforce and equipping youth for next-gen innova-

like tech, finance, manufacturing, and sustainability, the need for critical high-demand skills like financial services (79 per cent) will lead the way. "Additionally, Industry 4.0 transformation will continue to bolster the demand for engineering and manufacturing (69 per cent), while HR (68 per cent) will remain essential," NLB Services CEO Sachin Alug said. The introduction of national framework in FY26 Budget will further propel GCC growth across tier-II, III cities, he added. — PTTI

PM Gati Shakti to up India's logistics rank

New Delhi, Feb. 5: Strong infrastructure development through initiatives like PM Gati Shakti and National Logistics Policy will help India find a place among top 25 nations on the World Bank logistics performance index by 2030, a report said.

India ranks 38th in the World Bank logistics performance index (LPI) out of 139 countries and aims to be in top 25 by 2030. The study conducted by global exhibitor Messe Stuttgart India in partnership with EAC International Consulting was released on Tuesday. The Indian freight and logistics market is projected to grow at an annual rate of 8.8 per cent to reach \$484.43 billion by 2029, up from \$317.26 billion in 2024. India is fast emerging as a global logistics hub, marking a significant milestone in its journey toward becoming a developed economy, the report stated. At present, the logistics costs in the country account for 13-14 per cent

of its gross domestic product (GDP), the study said, noting that the government is determined to reduce this figure to single digits by 2030 by enhancing its infrastructure and streamlining supply chains. India is advancing multi-modal transformation through high-speed roads, hyperloops, and new airports, aiming to cut transport times by 66 per cent and boost logistics competitiveness. As world's fastest-growing major economy, India is projected to surpass Japan and secure the fourth spot by 2026. Under PM Gati Shakti, 434 projects worth ₹11.17 lakh crore have been identified to enhance logistics efficiency across key economic corridors and high traffic density sectors. The report also suggested the best way to address challenges such as infrastructure gaps and fragmentation is to move towards innovative solutions and advanced technologies which can also position India as a global logistics leader. — PTTI



## SHORT TAKES

## Smith is likely to lead Oz at CT

**Sydney:** Australia captain and pace spearhead Pat Cummins is “heavily unlikely” to be fit in time for this month’s Champions Trophy, head coach Andrew McDonald has revealed, opening up the possibility of either Steve Smith or Travis Head leading the side.

Cummins hasn’t been able to resume training after he missed the Test series in Sri Lanka due to the birth of his second child, while also nursing an ankle problem, which flared up during the gruelling five-Test Border-Gavaskar Trophy against India. “Pat Cummins hasn’t been able to resume any type of bowling so he’s heavily unlikely, so that would mean that we do need a captain,” ICC quoted McDonald as saying on SEN Radio. “Steve Smith and Travis Head are the two that we’ve been having conversations with while we’ve been building out that Champions Trophy team along with Pat (Cummins) back home. They’ll be the two that we look at for that leadership post,” added McDonald.

The Champions Trophy will be held in Pakistan and UAE beginning February 19 in Karachi. — *PTI*

## Mumbai QF tie shifted to Eden

**Mumbai:** Defending champions Mumbai’s Ranji Trophy quarter-final against Haryana has been shifted from Lahlil to Kolkata by the BCCI.

All the quarterfinals will be five-day affairs, from February 8 to 12.

Although no reason has been given for the change of venue, it is learnt that receding winter in the northern region could pose challenges like morning fog at Lahlil and affect the proceedings.

“Yes, we have received a communication from BCCI that our quarterfinal against Haryana will be played at the Eden Gardens,” Mumbai Cricket Association (MCA) president Ajinkya Naik told PTI on Wednesday.

The Mumbai team, which has 42 Ranji titles to its credit, will feature stars such as India’s T20 captain Suryakumar Yadav, all-rounder Shivam Dube, Shardul Thakur and skipper Ajinkya Rahane. The Haryana team will be headlined by seam-bowling sensation Anshul Kamboj. — *PTI*

## Suruchi shoots gold at Nat Games

**Dehradun:** Haryana’s Suruchi won the gold medal in the women’s 10m air pistol shooting competition with a remarkable score of 245.7 at the National Games here on Wednesday.

Palak, also from Haryana, secured the silver medal with 243.6, while Simranpreet Kaur Brar from Punjab took home the bronze with a score of 218.8 as the Trishool Shooting Range saw some intense competition on the day.

The men’s 50m rifle 3 positions event saw 33 participants from various states competing for a spot in the final round of eight shooters.

After a highly competitive qualification stage, Madhya Pradesh’s Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar (598), Services Sports Control Board’s (SSCB) Chain Singh (594), Niraj Kumar (591) and Nishan Bhudha (589), Maharashtra’s Swapnil Suresh Kusale (588), Uttar Pradesh’s Akhil Sheoran (587), Madhya Pradesh’s Goldi Gurjar (587), and SSCB’s Ganga Singh (587) qualified for the final.

The final round for the men’s 50m rifle 3 positions event is scheduled for Thursday. — *PTI*

## Alcaraz fights hard for a win

**The Hague, Netherlands:** Spanish tennis star Carlos Alcaraz battled through against local hero Botic van de Zandschulp at the Rotterdam Open on Tuesday, his first match since quarterfinal heartbreak at the Australian Open. The top seed had to dig deep to overcome the wildcard ranked 81 places below him, eventually coming through the first-round clash 7-6 (7-3), 3-6, 6-1 in nearly three hours.

“It was a really difficult match. I had to get through some really difficult moments,” Alcaraz said.

“I started the match a little bit nervous, making some mistakes. I let him dominate the match, play his style,” added the Spaniard.

Van de Zandschulp stunned Alcaraz with a straight-sets win at last year’s US Open and the higher-ranked man initially struggled to find his range on the slow Rotterdam indoor surface. — *AFF*

## OVER TO ODIS

## Champions Trophy in focus as 50-over series begins

**Nagpur, Feb. 5:** Form and fitness of seasoned stars is under the scanner as India enter the final phase of their Champions Trophy preparations with the three-match ODI series against England starting here on Thursday, aiming to find the right balance for some specific slots in the line-up.

The likes of skipper Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli have been under tremendous scrutiny after their dismal run in red-ball cricket.

The two stars, after making hyped but disappointing appearances in Ranji Trophy last month, will be eyeing strong performances in a format that they have dominated for several years.

They were the top two run-getters of the 2023 World Cup with Kohli scoring 765 and Rohit smashing 597.

Since that World Cup, which India let slip in the final after going unbeaten throughout, the two have only featured in a three-match ODI series loss to Sri Lanka where Rohit scored two fifties while Kohli didn’t have a great run.

The slump intensified in Tests and in the last three months, the two heroes of India’s most recent T20 World Cup triumph have faced numerous calls to decide on their future.

The ODI series against England is India’s only tune-up tournament for the Champions Trophy, to be held in Pakistan and Dubai from February 19. The eight-team competition could be a make-or-break event for the two stalwarts who have already retired from T20s.

However, their form is not the solitary concern for the outfit.

One of the grey areas is the wicket-keeper’s slot. Who among K. L. Rahul and Rishabh Pant should get the nod for the playing XI? With skipper Rohit and his deputy Shubman Gill likely to open, followed by Kohli, Shreyas Iyer and Hardik Pandya, the wicketkeeper-batter is likely to slot in at number five.

Rahul, who kept wickets in Pant’s absence during the 2023 World Cup, performed admirably, scoring 452 runs and proving to be one of India’s most consistent middle-order batters.



India’s Virat Kohli bats in the nets during a training session ahead of the first One-Day International match in Nagpur on Wednesday. — *AP*

His stability has been instrumental in creating a formidable ODI setup, but his strike rotation in the middle overs remains a concern. On the other hand, the left-handed Pant offers variety in India’s right-hand dominated top order. Additionally, his unpredictability, raw power, and ability to clear with breatching ease make him the X-factor.

The Indian think tank could always go with both but that would likely come at the expense of Iyer, who despite under-performing in the Sri Lanka series, has been a prolific contributor. His exploits in the

domestic season are hard to ignore.

The series will also test the preparedness of veteran pacer Mohammed Shami and wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav, both of whom had been laid low by injuries and could be key to India’s success in the Champions Trophy.

While Shami played two T20s against England in the recently-concluded series, Kuldeep hasn’t donned the India colours since the first Test against New Zealand in October.

Spearhead Jasprit Bumrah was never in contention for this series due to a back problem. — *PTI*

## WE CAN HAVE GOOD SERIES, SAYS BUTTLER

**Nagpur, Feb. 5:** It hasn’t quite gone the way England would have liked but skipper Jos Buttler on Wednesday said the ongoing tour of India is “as good a preparation as you can have” for this month’s Champions Trophy given the similarities in conditions with Pakistan where his team will be based for the event.

Buttler also believes that veteran batter Joe Root will play a pivotal role in both the ODI series against India, starting Thursday, and the upcoming Champions Trophy, given his experience.

England, coming off a disappointing 1-4 T20I series loss, have received a much-needed boost with Root’s return. The seasoned batter, who has 171 ODIs under his belt, recently enjoyed a successful stint in SA20 with Paarl Royals, further reinforcing his form.

“Root is one of the great players of the game, so in all the formats here he’s obviously been a vital part of ODI cricket for England for a long time,” Buttler told reporters on the eve of the first ODI here.

The ODI series serves as England’s final preparation before the Champions Trophy, where Buttler and his team will begin their campaign against Australia on February 22 in Lahore. — *PTI*



## ASHLEIGH TO LEAD GIANTS OF GUJARAT

**Ahmedabad, Feb. 5:** Australia allrounder Ashleigh Gardner was on Wednesday appointed as captain of Gujarat Giants for the Women’s Premier League, beginning later this month.

The 27-year-old replaced another Australian stalwart Beth Mooney, who will now focus only on her batting.

The third edition of the tournament begins on February 14 with Gujarat Giants taking on Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

Gujarat Giants have finished fifth and last in the two editions of the WPL, since its inception in 2023. A key figure in Australian team, Gardner made her debut in 2017 and has played 95 T20Is, scoring over 1400 runs and taking 78 wickets with her off-spin.

Winner of the Belinda Clark Award, a prestigious honour in Australian women’s cricket, played a key role in her country’s gold-winning performance at the 2022 Commonwealth Games, and was the ‘Player of the Tournament’ at the T20 World Cup in South Africa in 2023.

“It is an absolute honour for me to be named the captain of Gujarat Giants. I have loved being a part of this team and I am excited to lead this fantastic group in the upcoming season,” Gardner said in a release. — *PTI*



Atletico Madrid’s Antoine Griezmann (right) runs with the ball as Getafe defender Omar Alderete (left) tries to challenge during their Copa del Rey match. — *AFF*

## PSG, Dunkerque &amp; Brest move into quarterfinals

**Paris, Feb. 5:** Paris Saint-Germain eased into the French Cup quarterfinals on Tuesday with a 2-0 win over Le Mans as Dunkerque shocked Lille on penalties and Brest earned a last-gasp 2-1 win over Troyes.

Defending champions and solid Ligue 1 leaders, PSG lined out with an overhauled side ahead of a busy February in which they are also through to the Champions League knockout phase play-off.

Desire Doue opened the scoring after 25 minutes after poor Le Mans defending before Bradley Barcola slotted in the second after 71 minutes.

Defender Presnel Kimpembe made his return after a two-year injury absence coming onto the pitch after 81 minutes.

PSG coach Luis Enrique said: “Our team is mature and has resources. I’m lucky to have this team with me. Gonalo Ramos played a very good match,

Bradley Barcola showed his usual flow. We have to give confidence to all the players, the level is increasing and is high.

“We have to give minutes of play to the players to gain confidence but I am not here to give them as a gift, we want to win all competitions, I really like this team,” he added.

Ligue 1 side Lille lost a match that they dominated largely due to squandered chances against Dunkerque. — *AFF*

## MI Cape Town storm into final

**DEEPIKA DAS**  
GOEBERHA (SOUTH AFRICA), FEB. 5

MI Cape Town outplayed Paarl Royals in Qualifier-1 by 39 runs to book a berth in the final of the SA20 League at St George’s Park Stadium here on Tuesday. With this win Cape Town extended their winning run to five matches. Paarl will now have to lock horns with the winners of the Eliminator — between defending champions Sunrisers Eastern Cape and Joburg Super Kings — in Qualifier-2.

Chasing 200, the Royals never posed a threat as they were down and almost out at 33 for 3 in just 4.2 overs before being restricted to 160 in 19.4 overs.

Captain David Miller (45, 26b, 4x4, 6x3) was the top scorer but failed to get support from the other end. Cape Town bowlers made sure they took wickets at regular intervals as Trent Boul, Kagiso Rabada, Corbin Bosch and Rashid Khan took two apiece while George Linde scalped one before marching into the final. After this match Rashid became the highest wicket taker in T20 format with 632 wickets in his kitty.

Paarl won the toss and asked Cape Town to bat first. The decision backfired badly. Rayan Rickelton (44, 27b, 4x4, 6x2) and Rassie van der Dussen (40, 32b, 4x3, 6x2) exploited the flat pitch to give a strong start to table-toppers MICT. Rickelton survived a scare early on when Mujeeb-ur Rahman dropped a catch at slip in the seventh over to the delight of Cape Town fans. Van der Dussen and Rickelton stitched together

● Captain David Miller was the top scorer but failed to get support from the other end. Cape Town bowlers made sure they took wickets at regular intervals as Trent Boul, Kagiso Rabada, Corbin Bosch & Rashid Khan took two apiece to push their rivals into a corner.

er an opening wicket partnership of 91 runs to lay a solid foundation to the Cape Town innings.

Van der Dussen was dismissed when he offered an easy catch to David Miller at mid-off before Sediqullah Atal departed for a duck. Atal tried to go for a big hit but mistimed his shot and was caught by wicketkeeper Dinesh Karthik on c delivery but that was the only blip they had.

MI reached the 100-run mark in 12.4 overs as Linde (26 off 14 balls) smashed a huge six. He hit a flurry of maximums and steadied the boat before being cleaned by Bjorn Fortuin. But Dewald Brevis and Delano Potgieter made sure Cape Town posted a competitive total. Brevis struck an unbeaten 44 in 30 balls embedded with fours and Potgieter also returned unbeaten at 32 from 17 balls which had four fours and a maximum.

Wallage took two wickets for the Royals while Fortuin and Dayyaan Galien got one each.

**Brief scores:** MI Cape Town 199/4 in 20 overs (Rayan Rickelton 44, Dewald Brevis 44 n.o., Rassie van der Dussen 40, Dewald Brevis 2/23) bt Paarl Royals 160 in 19.4 overs (David Miller 45, Dinesh Karthik 31, Kagiso Rabda 2/18).

## DATTU NAMED CAPTAIN OF BADMINTON JR SIDE

**New Delhi, Feb. 5:** National Under 17 champion Gnana Dattu T will lead India’s 17-member squad at the Dutch Junior International and German Junior badminton tournaments to be played in February and March this year.

The squad also includes junior world number six Raunak Chouhan, Adarshini Shri and doubles specialists Bhavya Chhabra and Param Chaudhary, among others.

The Dutch Junior International will be played in Haarlem, Netherlands from February 26 to March 2, while the German Junior will be held in Mulheim an der Ruhr from March 5 to 9.

The Indian contingent consists of four boys and girls singles players each, two boys doubles and two girls doubles combinations, and two mixed doubles pairs. The squad was selected based on the BAI selection committee’s guidelines, granting direct entry to winners of the All India Junior Ranking Tournament (U-19) in Hyderabad, while the remaining spots were filled through selection trials held in New Delhi, featuring top-ranked players and semifinalists from the Hyderabad event.

Surya Charisma Tamiri had bagged the girls’ singles bronze medal in the 2024 German Junior. — *PTI*

## Golf body wants IOA to keep off

**New Delhi, Feb. 5:** The International Golf Federation (IGF) has strongly objected to Indian Olympic Association’s interference in the Indian Golf Union elections, and recognising the rival faction led by Harish Kumar Shetty, saying the IOA has “no jurisdiction” over the federation’s poll process.

The IOA had given recognition to the IGU led by Shetty while declaring the other body, headed by Brijinder Singh, void in a letter issued on December 30. In a strongly-worded letter to IOA president PT Usha, IGF executive director Antony Scanlon, said the world body fully supports the election won by the Singh faction held on December 15.

Shetty and Singh held

separate elections and AGMs under different Returning Officers (ROs).

The election of Shetty’s faction was conducted by retired Allahabad High Court judge OP Garg, while Singh was re-elected in polls conducted by retired Punjab and Haryana High Court judge, Rameshwar Malik. “We write to object in the strongest terms to your interference and that of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) in the recent Annual General Meeting and election of office bearers of our National Federation member, the Indian Golf Union (IGU),” Scanlon wrote in his letter.

The Sports Ministry has also pulled up the IOA for recognising IGU elections won by the Shetty-led faction. — *PTI*