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UNIQUE GIFT OF KRIYAYOGA ASHRAM AND RESEARCH INSTITUTE TO GIVE IMPETUS TO WORLD BUILDING AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT.

Briefs

MYSURU

Toll rises to 3 in helium cylinder blast

The death toll in the helium cylinder blast that occurred near the Mysuru Palace has risen to three, police said on Saturday. Lakshmi (29), a resident of Kamakshipalya in Bengaluru, succumbed to her injuries while undergoing treatment in KR Hospital, taking the toll to three, late on Friday, police officials said. She had suffered grievous injuries in the blast, including severe abdominal trauma, and despite intensive treatment, she could not be saved, a senior police officer said. Earlier, Saleem, the helium balloon seller, was killed on the spot on December 25. On Friday, another injured woman, identified as Manjula, also died while undergoing treatment at KR Hospital.

CHANDIGARH

'Hry BJP govt giving jobs to outsiders'

Haryana Congress president Rao Narendra Singh on Saturday launched a sharp attack on the ruling BJP government over its recruitment process asking whether "the youth of Haryana have become so incompetent that the government is compelled to give 70 to 80% of government jobs to candidates from other states." Stating that this is a direct assault on the rights of hardworking youth of Haryana, Singh said in a statement here that under a well-planned policy of the BJP government, large numbers of candidates from outside the state are being selected in recruitments for posts such as tutor, patwari, clerk, assistant engineer, civil judge, HCS, medical colleges, and the technical education department.

JAIPUR

Cops rescue 53 tribals held hostage

Rajasthan police rescued 53 tribal laborers, including 13 women, held hostage in Solapur, Maharashtra. Lured from Pratapgarh with promises of high wages in Indore, the victims were instead sold to landlords for sugarcane farming. Brokers allegedly took advances totaling Rs27.5 lakh for the "sale" of these workers. The laborers reported being starved, beaten, and denied wages for two months. The ordeal ended after several workers escaped and alerted authorities. Following a complaint at Ghantali station, a special police team traveled 950 kilometers to liberate the group. A case has been registered against the middlemen.

money special

Big-ticket investments likely to propel India's FDI in 2026

MUMBAI

Foreign direct investment into India is set to gather fresh momentum in 2026, underpinned by resilient macroeconomic fundamentals, large-scale corporate commitments, policy stability and a new generation of investment-linked trade agreements.

The government continues to review FDI policy on an ongoing basis, refining rules after consultations with industry. The DFIIT has held multiple stakeholder meetings this year, while Commerce and Industry

HINDUS TARGETED | Cong prez expressed grave concern over the targeted violence against Hindu minorities in Bangladesh

Kharge flags SIR, Church attacks in CWC meeting

NEW DELHI

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge on Saturday flagged the issue of "voter deletion" during the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in nine states and three UTs.

Kharge, backing Lok Sabha Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi's campaigns against alleged "vote theft," said that SIR is a "conspiracy to restrict" democratic rights.

"Today SIR is a matter of serious concern. It is a well-thought-out conspiracy to restrict democratic rights. Rahulji has repeatedly presented evidence of 'vote theft' before the country with facts and examples," Kharge said during his opening remark at the CWC meet.

"The collusion between the BJP and the Election Commission is well-known to all. Therefore, we must ensure that the names of our voters are not deleted," he added.

Kharge called party



Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge with party MP Sonia Gandhi and others arrives for the CWC meeting, in New Delhi, on Saturday

members to ensure that the votes of marginalised communities are not removed or transferred to other booths.

"We must ensure that the names of people from poor and vulnerable sections, especially Dalits, Adivasis, Extremely Backward Classes, and minorities, are not removed from the voter list. Nor should they be TRANSFERRED to other booths. For

this, our BLAs will have to go door-to-door with the voter list," he said.

Kharge further called party members to start working uniformly for the upcoming Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Puducherry Assembly elections in April-May 2026. Kharge also raised the issue of the BJP "misusing" government agencies against the Opposition.

"Over the past 11 years, the country has seen how agencies like ED, IT, and CBI are being misused. The BJP and Sangh Parivar are engaged in tarnishing the image of our leaders on the NATIONAL HERALD issue. We are fighting a legal battle. 'Satyameva Jayate'—this is what Rahulji always says, and we will emerge victorious," he said.

Kharge concluded his speech by highlighting violence against Hindu minorities in Bangladesh and recent acts of vandalism during Christmas across the country.

"The attacks on Hindu minorities in Bangladesh in recent months have worried the entire country. We strongly condemn this. One more thing is on my mind. Two days ago, on the occasion of Christmas, people from the BJP, RSS, and related organisations in many areas worked to disrupt brotherhood and harmony. This has tarnished our image in the eyes of the world," he said.

BJP uneasy as 15000 sadhus face SIR scrutiny in Ayodhya

AYODHYA



The Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls has thrown up an unexpected challenge in Ayodhya, where hundreds of sadhus and saints have filled voter forms in keeping with monastic traditions, raising fears of possible deletions from the voter list and causing unease within the BJP.

Ayodhya is home to more than 15,000 sadhus and saints residing largely in the Nirvana Ani, Digambar and Nirmodi akharas. During the SIR process, many of them entered the names of their gurus or Hindu deities in the column meant for the father's name. In the mother's name column, entries such as Kaushalya, Sita, Janaki, Durga and Saraswati were frequently written.

The practice of mentioning names linked to the Ramayana period is not new in Ayodhya. It was first adopted by former BJP MP and late Hindu Dharm Peethadheeshwar Dr Ram Vilas Das Vedanti, who had written Janaki Mata's name in the mother's column. Over time, saints from Digambar Akhara and Hanuman Garhi followed the same practice.

According to the Ayodhya Development Authority, the city has 60 wards and a population of around 24.7 lakh, comprising 12.6 lakh men and 12.1 lakh women. More than 15,000 residents are sadhus and saints living in temples, monasteries and akharas across the city.

A senior BJP leader from the Awadh region termed the situation a serious concern for the party. Speaking on condition of anonymity, he said many saints were unaware that incorrect entries could lead to rejection of their forms.

"If their forms are rejected,

sonally appealed to the saint community in Ayodhya to fill

in the names of their real parents. Some have done so, but their number is very small," he said.

Ayodhya mayor Girish Pati Tripathi said the matter has been taken up with the Uttar Pradesh Chief Electoral Officer. "We have spoken to the CEO, who has taken the issue seriously and issued specific instructions for Ayodhya. At present, there is no major problem," he said.

Deputy District Election Officer Aniruddh Pratap Singh said that while mentioning parents' names in the SIR form is mandatory, flexibility is being exercised in the case of sadhus residing in monasteries and temples. "The signature of the form applicant is being treated as sufficient proof. Saints who are unable to give their mother's name do not need to submit documentary proof related to the name entered in that column," he said.

He added that the filled SIR forms are sent to the sub divisional magistrate for scrutiny, where mapping with the 2003 voter list is carried out. "If discrepancies are found, notices are issued to the voters concerned for correction," Singh said.

Vigilance SSP suspended on graft charges

CHANDIGARH

The Punjab government on Saturday suspended the senior superintendent of police (SSP), vigilance, Amritsar, Lakhbir Singh on the charges of alleged irregularities in the tenders related to development works in the Ranjit Avenue area involving misappropriation of crores of rupees.

According to media reports, Singh was suspended and a social activist Mandeep Mann booked after an inquiry conducted by a senior officer detected irregularities in the use of development funds. The probe found that the funds released for infrastructure and development in the said area were allegedly misappropriated.

Reports said that a further probe is also underway so as to ascertain the extent of financial irregularities and find out other people's involvement in the case. However, according to unconfirmed reports, there were irregularities to the tune of about Rs 55 crore in the said case.

It may be recalled that Singh was appointed SSP, Vigilance in March this year and he had led the team that arrested senior Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader Bikram Singh Majithia in June this year in a drug-related money laundering case.

Resolution of RIL's \$247 mn dispute with GoI likely in 2026

Mumbai

Reliance Industries, the operator of KG-D6 oil block since 2002, is contesting the government of India's \$247 million claim for additional profit petroleum from KG-D6 in an international arbitration. As this process enters its last leg, a resolution can be expected in 2026, Money Control has reported.

The dispute arose over GoI's post-facto stand to disallow a part of money already invested by the consortium of Reliance Industries, bp and Nippon in the KG-D6 block for creating drilling and evacuation infrastructure, in spite of the NELP agreement allowing for full cost recovery to an operator.

Exploration for petroleum reserves is a high-risk busi-

Medical services hit in HP as docs go on strike

SHIMLA

Medical services, barring emergency services, were affected across several hospitals in Himachal Pradesh as resident doctors went on an indefinite strike on Saturday against the termination of services of a doctor who entered into a brawl with a patient.

The doctors maintained that the termination of the medic within 48 hours was unjustified and that there was resentment brewing among the medical fraternity.

Meanwhile, patients and attendants, especially those coming from remote locations, faced difficulties due to the unavailability of doctors.

The peak winter cold and unavailability of accommodation due to heavy tourist rush around the New Year was adding to their trouble, Thakur said, urging the government and the doctors to resolve the matter at the earliest in the interest of patients.

Reports of health services being affected due to the strike have poured in from Shimla, Dharamshala, Nahan, Hamirpur, Una and several other districts.

Resident doctors of Indira



Doctors raise slogans during their indefinite strike, in Shimla on Saturday

PTI

Doctors' strike won't last long: HP Health Minister

Shimla: Amid disruptions faced by patients in Himachal Pradesh's hospitals, including the main referral hospital, Indira Gandhi Medical College (IGMC), following the doctors' strike, state Health Minister Col. (Retd) Dhaniram Shandil on Saturday assured that medical services remain intact and the strike is unlikely to continue for long. Speaking to ANI, the Health Minister acknowledged that doctors have gone on strike but said the government had already taken steps to ensure uninterrupted emergency and indoor services across all health institutions.

Gandhi Medical College (IGMC) and several other government hospitals across the state had gone on casual leave en masse on Friday.

Announcing an indefinite strike from Saturday, the RDA

Mamata flays lynching

Kolkata: Two days after a migrant worker had died in Odisha for being lynched in Bengal, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Saturday condemned the incident. "We strongly condemn the brutal oppression and persecution that has descended upon Bengali-speaking people in every BJP-ruled state. We stand by those oppressed, terrified, and tortured migrant Bengali-speaking families, and we will provide all kinds of support to those families," said Mamata.

Officers write to Nitish after Dy CM takes them to task

PATNA

Bihar Revenue Service Association (BiRSA) has lodged a formal complaint with the chief minister, accusing Sinha of humiliating revenue officials during public grievance redressal sessions. The offices alleged that Sinha was using language that undermined constitutional norms and administrative decorum.

In a letter sent to Nitish, the Association alleged that officers were being publicly humiliated and threatened in the name of swift justice.

Officers threatened if such "humiliation" were not stopped immediately, its officers would be forced to boycott public grievance redressal sessions in future if corrective measures were not taken immediately.

Sinha, who is also holding the portfolio of revenue and land reforms department, earned revenue officers' wrath after he issued a stern warning to them against collusion with land mafia in the state. He said that "erring" officials would be identified and brought to book. He has also started holding the "Bhumi Sudhar Jankalyan Samvad" (public grievance redressal

sessions) for addressing and related matters in districts.

Meanwhile, Bihar Revenue Service Association (BiRSA) has accused deputy chief minister Vijay Kumar Sinha of "humiliating" its members as revenue officers have written to chief minister Nitish Kumar, threatening to boycott public grievance redressal sessions in future if corrective measures were not taken immediately.

Officers objected to the deputy chief minister's remarks allegedly made during public hearings such as "We will suspend you on the spot," "Answer here in front of the public," and "Immediate decisions will be taken."

The deputy CM, who claimed he was not aware of such a letter, asserted that "he would not succumb to any pressure and that action would be taken against those who were found indulging in wrongdoing."

Regarding officers' allegations of insulting and abusing members, deputy chief minister said that in public interactions, no one was abused or insulted.

Failure as engine!



India must shed its discomfort with insolvency and bankruptcy if it is to foster a confident, risk-taking economy, according to Sanjeev Sanyal, a member of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister.

Speaking to ANI, Sanyal said a healthy economic system requires "continuous churn", in which inefficient firms exit and new enterprises emerge. Such renewal, he argued, is vital for sustaining long-term growth and competitiveness.

He said the failure of even large companies should not be viewed as a systemic weakness. Recalling the stress faced by Indian banks in 2017, Sanyal said the decision to allow several major corporates to go bankrupt ultimately strengthened the economy. The clean-up, he

noted, left the corporate sector more resilient and disciplined. Using aviation as an example, he said the collapse of Jet Airways created room for other carriers to expand. Companies that fail to comply with rules or maintain standards, he added, should be allowed to close.

Sanyal also urged society not to begrudge success, while underlining the need for regulators to step in when dominant firms misuse their power or distort competition.

Rupee may remain weak in 2026?

NEW DELHI

The Indian rupee is expected to show more weakness going ahead into 2026, according to a report by MUFG, a global financial group. It expects the Indian rupee to appreciate modestly above the 90 level in 2026, targeting 90.80 by the September 2026 quarter. "We have already been expecting INR to weaken and underperform, although we note FX outflow pressures have been more acute than we have anticipated thus far.

"Our forecasts also imply continued INR weakness against key FX crosses such as EUR (Euro), JPY (Japanese yen) and CNY (Chinese Yuan)," the report read.

46th Free Eye Surgery Camp Begins at Shriram Van Kutir

Barabanki

The 46th free eye (cataract) surgery camp formally began today at Shriram Van Kutir Ashram, Hadhiakol, a symbol of communal harmony. OPD services have started for patients from various districts, while hundreds are being prepared for surgery. The official inauguration will be held on 28th December at 8 AM by Bhagwandas Maharaj, President of the Shriram Van Kutir Trust Committee, with a ceremonial worship of the camp guardian deity Hanuman Maharaj. Manish Mehrotra, Ashram Sevadar, stated that Asia renowned eye surgeon Dr. Jacob Prabhakar (Jalandhar, Punjab) and his expert team are examining and admitting hundreds of patients for surgery at the state-of-the-art Swami Ramdas Ji Maharaj Memorial Hospital.

(Coordinated Effort for Effective Service)



Ankit Gupta team from Gorakhpur, preparing for months, has completed all arrangements. The Ashram's subsidized canteen for patient families has started under Nikhil Khurana (Delhi). To combat severe cold, under directives from Swami Mukti Nath Anand Maharaj, Secretary of Ramakrishna Mission Seva Ashram, Lucknow, Swami Vishwadevanand and Swami

Ramadhanand Maharaj distributed hundreds of blankets at the free OPD center in front of Swami Vivekananda statue, supervised by Swami Ramgandas Maharaj. Following District Magistrate Shashank Tripathi instructions, the Banki Nagar Panchayat ensured

deployment of sanitation staff and bonfires for the needy. For public safety, Police Superintendent Arpit Vijayvargiya instructed In-Charge Inspector Durga Shukla to inspect the camp's security arrangements.

(Health Department Team Inspection)

Under directives of Chief Medical Officer Dr. Avadhesh Yadav, District Program Officer (Eye) Dr. D.K. Srivastava and Senior Eye Testing Officer T.N. Verma inspected the operation theater and wards, expressing satisfaction.

This camp is not only an eye care initiative but also a living example of humanity, service, and positive thinking, bringing new light into hundreds of lives.

Barabanki: Under the aegis of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's Collegiate Students' Activity Wing, a seminar was organized on Saturday on the occasion of Veer Bal Diwas at the premises of Saraswati Vidya Mandir Inter College, Lakhpur. The audience was deeply moved after listening to the tales of bravery and supreme sacrifice of the Veer Sahibzadas.

Addressing the gathering as the chief guest, Sardar Harpal Singh Jagga, President of the Lucknow Sadar Gurdwara Committee, said that the sacrifice of the Veer Sahibzadas was not for an individual or a family, but for the protection of the nation and religion. He stated that inspired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi the entire country is now observing the martyrdom days of Baba Zorawar Singh and Baba Fateh Singh as Veer Bal Diwas..RSS



Provincial Special Contact Head Prashant Bhatia, while paying homage to Guru Gobind Singh, said that he dedicated all his four sons for the protection of the nation and Dharma, conveying the immortal message, "If four are gone, thousands are alive." Provincial Head of Collegiate Students' Activity, Pankaj Patwa, said that although Guru Gobind Singh Ji's four Sahibzadas attained martyrdom, his fifth son lives on in the form of the Khalsa, ever ready to safeguard the nation and Dharma. The program was presided over by Sardar Bhupendra

Singh, President of the Barabanki Gurdwara Committee. District Karyavah Sudhir expressed gratitude, while the proceedings were conducted by Ashish Singh. The seminar began with floral tributes and the lighting of lamps before the portraits of the Veer Sahibzadas. Those present on the occasion included District Pracharak Ravi Prakash, Co-District Karyavah Shri Om, Paritosh, Shardul Vikram Singh, Kartavya, Sardar Harpal Singh, Prabhakar, Aman, Avadhesh Srivastava, Upendra Singh Rawat and Shravan Singh.

Barabanki Emerges as a New Hub of Investment under Yogi Government

Barabanki

Barabanki, adjoining Lucknow, is beginning to carve a new identity in industrial development. Investor-friendly policies, strong law and order and transparent administrative mechanisms under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath have made the district an attractive destination for investments. Investment agreements in recent years clearly indicate that Barabanki is emerging as a strong pillar of Uttar Pradesh's industrial progress. (Growing Investor Confidence)

Government data shows that investment agreements worth thousands of crores are tak-



ing concrete shape in the district. Capital inflows across various sectors have not only accelerated construction activities but also energized the economic cycle through the operation of production units. This confidence of investors highlights that Barabanki has become a safe,

stable, and profitable industrial environment. (Employment and Local Development)

The operation of new industrial units is creating large-scale employment opportunities for the district's youth.

Activities in dairy, food processing, energy, electronics,

and other modern sectors have strengthened the local economy. Employment opportunities close to home have reduced migration and ensured sustainable income growth for families.

(From Groundbreaking to Future Prospects)

The process of translating proposed investments into reality through groundbreaking ceremonies is progressing steadily. A large number of investment proposals have already been approved, indicating strong potential for further industrial expansion. This initiative reflects the state government's vision of making Uttar Pradesh a leading investment destination.

Wild Animal Preys on Calf Near Chaneni Village, Locals Alarmed

Bahraich

On Saturday, residents of Chaneni village in the Nawabganj police station area discovered the remains of a calf in an orchard near the primary school located to the east of the village. Upon inspection the forest department team confirmed that the calf had fallen victim to a wild animal. The sight of the remains has caused considerable fear among the villagers. When contacted, Abdulganj Range Officer Pankaj Kumar Sahu stated that there are four to five leopards in the Abdulganj forest, and it is possible that



they were responsible for the attack. He also noted that the remains were found very close to the spot where a tiger was sighted on Thursday, which had already injured two people, heightening the villagers' concern. The forest department team conducted an inspection in the evening, collected information from locals and is working to raise awareness among villagers about precautions to avoid encounters with wild animals.

Ashish Dwivedi from Meduva Village Becomes 'Dr', Creates New Chapter in Education

Barabanki

Ashish Dwivedi, a resident of Meduva village in Barabanki district, has earned a PhD in Education, bringing pride to the region. He achieved this milestone from Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia University, Ayodhya. His accomplishment is not only a personal success but also a strong source of inspiration for the youth in rural areas. Dr. Ashish Dwivedi shared that his childhood dream was to bring positive change in the field of education. With this goal, he dedicated his entire academic journey to research aimed at improving the education system. He



believes that a strong society can only be built on the foundation of quality education.

Acknowledging his achievement, he first expressed gratitude to his mother, whom he considers his first teacher. He also thanked all his mentors for their guidance, blessings and inspiration, which helped him realize this dream.

Passenger Bag Stolen at Aliganj Bus Stand, 21,000 Cash Missing

Etah

A theft at the Aliganj Bus Stand created a stir when a passenger bag was reportedly stolen from a bus. Police rushed to the spot immediately after receiving information and began an investigation. According to reports, Naveen Kumar, a resident of Mendapur village in Kayamganj Police Station area, was returning home from Agra. While the bus stopped at Aliganj Bus Stand, he briefly got off to assist his young daughter.

During this short period, an unknown individual took advantage of the situation, lifted the bag left on the bus and fled the scene. Upon receiving the complaint, the Aliganj Police reached the bus stand, conducted inquiries, and began checking CCTV footage from



the bus stand and surrounding areas. Some time later, after Naveen Kumar had reached home, he received a call from an unknown number. The caller informed him that his bag had been found and could be collected from a nearby colony. Naveen Kumar went to the designated location and, after verification, recovered his bag. However, 21,000 in cash was missing from the bag. Other

valuables, including a purse containing a mangalsutra and a mobile phone, were found intact. Naveen Kumar expressed distress over the missing cash. Circle Officer Rajkumar Singh and Town In-Charge Vipin Kumar also visited the scene following the incident. Police confirmed that a thorough investigation is underway and assured that the unidentified thief would be identified and necessary action taken soon.

Married Woman Murdered by Husband, Father-in-law, and Mother-in-law, All Arrested

Akhand Bharat Sandesh

Kaushambi: In Kherwa Majra Baraula village under Manjhanpur police station, a married woman was poisoned to death by her in-laws on Thursday night. The woman died a painful death after suffering intensely. The husband, mother-in-law, and father-in-law were constantly demanding dowry. When the dowry demands were not met, the greedy husband, father-in-law, and mother-in-law repeatedly beat and tortured the woman. The atrocities of the in-laws reached their limit on the night of December 25th when the husband, mother-in-law, and father-in-law poisoned and murdered the woman. The woman's mother, Sunita Devi, a resident of Chandupur Amravati, Sarai Akil police station, informed the Manjhanpur police and demanded that a case be registered for the murder of her daughter and that the accused be arrested. The Manjhanpur police registered case number 449/25 under sections 80(2)/85 of the BNS and 3/4 of the DP Act. The police arrested the husband, Rajesh Gupta, son of Arjun Prasad Gupta; the father-in-law, Arjun Prasad Gupta, son of Chhotal Gupta; and the mother-in-law, Rajkumari, wife of Arjun Prasad Gupta, all residents of Kherwa Majra Baraula village, Manjhanpur police station. After legal proceedings, the police sent the accused to court.

Youth beaten in dispute over removing parked motorcycles outside a shop

Akhand Bharat Sandesh

Kaushambi: On Friday evening, in Garhi Bazar Raksoli under the Paschim Sharira police station area, some people had parked their motorcycles outside a tea and snack shop and were having refreshments inside. Meanwhile, Brijesh Kumar from the village arrived and asked them to move their bikes, but the people refused. In response, Brijesh Kumar parked his own motorcycle in front of theirs. This led to an argument between Brijesh Kumar and the other group of young men. The dispute didn't end there. After the argument with Brijesh, the other group informed their associates, and soon several people arrived at the scene and brutally beat Brijesh. It is reported that there was a pre-existing land dispute between the two parties, and this old land dispute was the underlying cause of Friday's conflict. It is alleged that Nirjan Singh, Guddu Singh, and Gyanu Singh assaulted and injured Brijesh Singh. The issue of moving the motorcycles was merely a pretext. The goons also damaged the motorcycles parked outside the shop with sticks and rods. When Brijesh protested, he was verbally abused and threatened with death. The victim has filed a complaint at the Paschim Sharira police station, requesting that an FIR be registered and action be taken.

Awareness Program on "Child Marriage Free India Campaign" Held in Etah

Etah: Under the directives of Senior Superintendent of Police Etah Shyam Narayan Singh and following the orders of the Women and Child Protection Organization, Uttar Pradesh Lucknow, an awareness program has been conducted in the district as part of the "Child Marriage Free India Campaign." A joint team of AHT/SJPU carried out the campaign in the Kotwali Dehat police station area, educating the public about the harmful effects of child marriage and the legal provisions against it. On Saturday, December 27, 2025 under the supervision of Additional Superintendent of Police (Crime) and Nodal Officer AHT, Yogendra Singh and the leadership of Sadar Sector Officer, Sankalpdeep Singh, the program was organized at the Gram Panchayat House, Kasaiti, targeting men, women, and children. During the event, participants were informed that child marriage is not only a social evil but also punishable offense under the law. The police team highlighted that the legal age for marriage in India is 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys and conducting a marriage below this age is a criminal offense. As part of the campaign, all attendees took a pledge against child marriage. Information about emergency support and helpline numbers issued by the government and administration, including 1098 (Child Helpline), 108, 112, 1076, and 181, was also shared to ensure immediate assistance in any suspicious situations. The police administration appealed to the public to actively participate in eradicating the social evil of child marriage and to report any such incidents immediately through the relevant authorities or helpline numbers, ensuring a safe and bright future for children.

Police teams investigate robbery of cloth merchant

Armed masked robbers looted one lakh rupees from a wholesale cloth merchant in Lal Gopalganj, Seven teams engaged in investigating the robbery case on Saturday, the day after the incident Lal Gopalganj

Akhand Bharat Sandesh

On Friday evening, masked robbers looted cash at gunpoint from a wholesale cloth merchant's shop located on the Lucknow-Pratapgarh National Highway. The incident has spread panic among the traders in the area. Nawabganj police, who arrived on the scene, were busy identifying the culprits based on CCTV footage late into the night. Dinesh Kesarwani runs a wholesale cloth shop called 'Virat Traders' near the Lal Gopalganj intersection on the Lucknow highway. On Friday, at around 6:15 pm, three robbers



arrived on a motorcycle, parked their vehicle some distance from the shop, and entered on foot. All three had their faces covered with cloth and were carrying pistols. As soon as they

entered the shop, one of the robbers pointed a pistol at Dinesh Kesarwani's younger brother, Dilip Kesarwani, who was at the counter. The robber went straight to the cash

register and took all the cash. After committing the crime in just a few moments, the three robbers went outside and fled towards Kunda on a black motorcycle. The sudden incident terrified

the shopkeeper and the people present in the shop. As soon as the news of the robbery spread, nearby traders gathered at the spot. Upon receiving the information, Nawabganj Station House Officer Raghavendra Singh and Lal Gopalganj in-charge Saurabh Pandey reached the spot with police force. The police examined the CCTV camera footage installed in the shop to identify the culprits and determine their escape route. ACP Suv Shyam Ji Pramila Singh said that the robbers escaped with approximately one lakh rupees. The investigation is underway. On Saturday, the day after

the incident, Police Commissioner Joginder Kumar, DCP Ganganagar Kuldeep Singh Gunawat, Crime Branch and SOG, along with police from Soraon and Nawabganj police stations, reached the spot. DCP Ganganagar Kuldeep Singh Gunawat said that the incident occurred when the businessman's agent returned to the shop after collecting money from the Pratapgarh area.

Seven teams have been formed to investigate the case. CCTV footage is being examined. The culprits will be arrested and appropriate action will be taken soon.

Magh Mela 2026: Land Allocation Completed, Instructions Issued for Swift Completion of Settlement Work

Akhand Bharat Sandesh

Prayagraj: The land allocation process for all organizations participating in the Magh Mela 2026 has been completed today to ensure its smooth and successful organization. Organizations that have been allocated land have been instructed by Mela Officer Mr. Rishi Raj to coordinate with their respective sector in-charges and complete the settlement work promptly, so that all necessary arrangements can be completed in a timely manner before the first holy bath. All devotees are requested to contact their respective sector offices and



their in-charges for any problems or information related to the settlement. The mobile numbers of all sector in-charges have been displayed on the notice

board outside the Mela office. For resolving issues, the Mela helpline number 1920 can also be contacted. From December 28th onwards, all officers

will expedite the work related to settlement in the Mela area, construction of ghats, other basic facilities, and crowd management, ensuring that all tasks

are completed within the stipulated time so that the saints, pilgrims, and devotees visiting the Mela do not face any inconvenience.

Accused wanted in Gahmar murder case injured in police encounter, country-made pistol and cartridges recovered

Akhand Bharat Sandesh

Ghazipur: An accused wanted in a murder case was injured and arrested in a police encounter by Gahmar police in Ghazipur district. A country-made .315 bore pistol and a spent .315 bore cartridge were recovered from his possession. On Saturday, as part of an ongoing campaign against crime and criminals, the Station House Officer of Gahmar Police Station and the in-charge of Sevarai Chowki were on night patrol in the area when they received information from an informant that an accused wanted in the Gahmar murder case was present in the police station area and was planning to escape. The informant suggested that he



could be apprehended if quick action was taken. Acting on this information, the Station House Officer and his team reached near Mathia Ghat where they saw a person approaching. Upon seeing the police team, the person opened fire with the intention of killing them. The police team fired in self-defense, and the person sustained a gunshot wound to his left leg. He was immediately sent to the District Community Health Center, Bhadaura, Ghazipur for treat-

ment. A case has been registered regarding the police encounter and the recovery of the weapon, and legal action is being taken. The arrested accused has been identified as Om Singh, son of Sunil Singh, resident of Gahmar Patti Kheluray, Gahmar Police Station, Ghazipur district, aged approximately 19 years. The encounter team/arresting team included Station House Officer Pramod Kumar Singh and his team, and the in-charge of Sevarai Chowki and his team.



also avoids unnecessary disputes. Along with the camp, an inspection campaign was also conducted in the concerned wards to prevent electricity theft. During this time, suspicious connections were thoroughly investigated, and consumers found violating the rules were given a stern warning. Officials clarified that electricity theft is a legal offense, which causes financial losses to the department and also causes inconvenience to ordinary consumers. On this occasion, Feeder Manager Avnish Kumar Awasthi, Sunil

Special Camp Under Electricity Bill Relief Scheme, Inspection Campaign Launched to Prevent Theft

Akhand Bharat Sandesh

Ghazipur: A special camp was organized in the Mohammadabad Municipal Council area of the district under the Electricity Bill Relief Scheme to provide relief to electricity consumers from outstanding bills. This camp was set up for consumers in Ward No. 7, Ward No. 18, and the Noniyapura area, where a large number of citizens arrived to resolve their electricity-related problems. At the camp, consumers were given information about paying outstanding electricity bills, installment payment facilities, discounts on outstanding amounts, and detailed information about departmental schemes. Electricity department officials appealed to consumers to pay their bills on time, stating that this not only ensures the smooth functioning of departmental work but

Kushwaha, Linemen Sarfaraz Khan and Sanjeev Kumar, Meter Reader Shivamurli Yadav, along with departmental officers Afsar Kumar and Dilip Kumar were present. Officials said that such camps will continue to be organized in the future for the convenience of consumers, so that the electricity system can be made more robust and transparent. The organization of the camp created an atmosphere of satisfaction among the consumers of the area, and people appreciated this initiative of the electricity department.

Citizens struggling to obtain birth and death certificates; disarray at the Tehsil office exacerbates the problem

Akhand Bharat Sandesh

Ghazipur: Citizens in the Mohammadabad Tehsil area of the district are facing immense difficulties in obtaining birth and death certificates. Despite months passing, birth certificates for newborns and death certificates for deceased family members are not being issued, leading to widespread anger among the people. Citizens allege that even when the Municipal Council sends the files to the Tehsil office, the arbitrary and negligent behavior of the officer in charge of issuing birth and death certificates, Vijay Srivastava, is causing the problem to worsen. Hundreds of applications are pending, but they are neither being processed on time nor are applicants being given accurate information. The situation is particularly frustrating when people visit the Tehsil office to inquire about the status of their applications. It is reported that the officer in charge is often unavailable at the office, and even when he is present, he fails to provide satisfactory answers. This is causing difficulties for parents of newborns in accessing government schemes, school admissions, and other essential services, while the lack of death certificates is causing significant problems for families in matters related to pensions, insurance, banking, and other necessary tasks. Local citizens say that this serious problem is either not reaching the attention of higher authorities, or it is being deliberately ignored. If this disarray is not addressed promptly, the situation could become even more critical. The people have appealed to the District Magistrate and other concerned higher authorities to immediately review the process of issuing birth and death certificates, take action against negligent employees, and ensure a transparent and time-bound system so that the general public can get relief.

Phulpur Critical Corridor Team Closes Open Dividers to Prevent Accidents



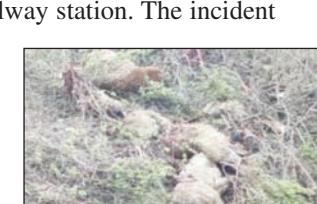
Utraon: Following orders from ADCP Pushkar Verma, Nodal Officer of the Critical Corridor Team, Prayagraj, the Critical Corridor Team of Phulpur, Prayagraj Commissionerate, on Friday closed illegal openings in the road dividers at eight locations on National Highway 319, from Babuganj Market to

minimize fatalities. The team involved in this operation included CC Team In-charge Phulpur Arvind Yadav, Head Constable Om Prakash Yadav, Constable Amit Chauhan, Constable Niles Kumar, and others. Local residents have praised the Phulpur Critical Corridor Team for this initiative.

22 Sheep Killed by Train in Handia Due to Fog; Accident Occurs After Sheep Wander onto Tracks

Akhand Bharat Sandesh

Prayagraj: Twenty-two sheep were killed in a train accident near Handia railway station. The incident occurred due to dense fog. The sheep belonged to farmer Badri Prasad Pal, a resident of Tara village, Khushalpur. According to reports, farmer Badri Prasad Pal was grazing his sheep near the railway station. Due to the thick fog, the sheep strayed onto the railway tracks. At that moment, the Vibhuti Express train, traveling from Howrah to Prayagraj, passed by and struck the sheep. The accident occurred at 2:40 PM. All 22 sheep died on the spot, resulting in a significant financial loss for farmer Badri Prasad Pal. Handia Sub-Divisional Magistrate Ravendra Singh stated that he is aware of the incident and that the government will provide all possible assistance to the affected farmer. Sheep owner Badri Prasad said that due to the dense fog, he was unaware of the accident. He said that these sheep were the sole source of livelihood for his family, and this loss will severely impact their lives.



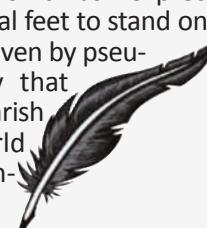
Notice

This is to inform the general public that my name is Mohammad Safi, son of Ansar Ahmad, as recorded on my Aadhaar card, PAN card, and mark sheets. My passport shows my name as Mohammad Safi, son of Ansar Ahmad. Both names belong to the same person and are correct and valid.

Editorial

Halal certification is turning into a scam. It's creating a Muslim-only economy

Halal is the latest Islamic fad. The internet is buzzing with content on Halal living, Halal dating, and even Halal sex. Halal certification is a booming global industry created by New Islam. A religion that has so far been proudly political is becoming brazenly commercial too. And why not, when catchphrases like "Islam is the complete way of life"—making detailed prescriptions for politics, economy, and every imaginable aspect of life—go unchallenged? In an ongoing Supreme Court case, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta submitted that while nobody had any objection to Halal certification for meat, nowadays even cement, iron rods, and bottled water were being certified as Halal. Since such certification comes at a cost—charged by private agencies in the Halal certification business—even customers who have no interest in such labels are being made to pay higher prices for the commodities thus certified. Halal certification preys on the naïveté of the newly prosperous Muslim masses. The Indian economy has been steadily growing, and Muslims have shared in this prosperity as much as anyone else. But this upward mobility has to be matched by enhanced self-esteem and social respectability, which, for a Muslim, still comes through overt piety and demonstrative religiosity. The Halal industry sows such fervour and reaps a good harvest from it. In the process, not entirely unwittingly, it also fosters a narrow and rigid religious attitude among Muslims—one that leads, inevitably, to radicalisation. The growth of the Indian economy has placed unprecedented purchasing power in Muslim hands too. And though the Halal certification business is aimed at tapping into the vast and growing Muslim market, it is bound to have some insidious and unforeseen consequences. For one, it will result in economic separatism, creating a Muslim-only parallel economy. In effect, it will lead to the systemic economic boycott of other communities. Stray calls to boycott Muslim street vendors, which keep circulating on social media, are a red herring compared to the harm the Halal market is insinuating into the political economy. Its normalisation and mainstreaming will have far-reaching consequences for inter-community relations—even greater than what Muslim Personal Law or vote bank politics have had so far. If a non-Muslim were to buy and sell in the Halal market, he would have to comply with the terms prescribed by Sharia, as interpreted by the agents of Halal certification. In such a market, they would be second-class citizens. Dhimmis. We would have the economic version of an Islamic state. Having suffered from the Two-Nation Theory, are we now sleepwalking into a Two-Economy reality? The path is nearly charted as a parallel economy develops around Islamic banking, Halal stocks, Halal mutual funds, Halal investments, and Halal travels. This trend will eventually lead to demands for the Halal certification of India itself as a country fit for Muslims. Then for the Constitution as a document that doesn't conflict with Sharia. And, as has already been happening informally, Halal certification for political parties—determining whether it is right for a Muslim to vote for some of them. One wonders, why should the religious lens be used to look at everything from iron rods and cement to electric wires and batteries? How will someone who looks at iron and cement through an Islamic filter see people of other religions? An outlook like this, even if genuinely Islamic, would have no place in the modern world. But as I will show in the latter part of this article, this isn't even Islamic. It has no precedence in history or theological feet to stand on. It's pop Islam—faux piety, driven by pseudo-Islamic power theology that seeks to paint the world in garish green. It divides the world between Islamic and non-Islamic and posits.



Why Syrians Are Between A Rock And A Hard Place

The replacement of the much-reviled Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria by a so-called "rebel force" that is actually just an Islamist offshoot of al-Qaeda and ISIS—which, remember, was headquartered in the Syrian city of Raqqa from 2014 to 2017—once again underlines how the turbulent history of that region is painted in countless shades of grey. As if the ongoing war between Israel and the equally Islamist Hamas left you in any doubt about that, of course. The Assads had ruled Syria with a mix of fear and murderous brutality for over 50 years. But that family, their Ba'th Party and that general cohort were not religious fanatics. In fact,

they professed the sort of secular socialism which evolved into the crony socialism-cum-authoritarianism seen in many countries ruled by similarly inclined people and parties. Even India and the Congress Party of the mid-1970s were not unlike Syria during that same period. The difference, of course, is that the Emergency in India marked the apogee and also the end of authoritarianism. India never degenerated into a single-party rule—which appears to be the main cause of the rise of the Islamist factions all over West Asia today. Ironically, authoritarian secularism (and in Syria's case, also minority rule by the Shia Alawite tribe of the Assads) has

led to the ascent of doctrinaire Sunni Islam and power being captured by its adherents. As the news channels broke the news of the fall of Assad's government in Syria, I saw London's Oxford Street become an impromptu victory procession of cars with young men honking, shouting and hanging out of windows brandishing their homeland's distinctive opposition flag. It continued for well over an hour without any of London's uniformed finest visible. Maybe the Metropolitan Police were just relieved it was not yet another fraught pro-Gaza demonstration. But having lived in Syria during the regime of this just-ousted socialist dic-

tator's father, I had mixed feelings. How would those fashionably puffer-jacket-clad Syrians cheering in London fare under the country's new rulers whose roots are in the Salafi-jihadist school although they profess to have "moved" to a more accommodating position? Do Syrians not know what's happening in Afghanistan, whose Taliban rulers mouthed similar lines and then recanted? When my father was India's ambassador to Syria, the then President Hafez al-Assad ordered the Hama massacre in 1982, triggered by a long-brewing uprising in that city 200km north of Damascus by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Deep State is the convenient bogeyman of modern politics. It's entered India too

Circa 1900: Rudyard Kipling wrote *Kim*, placing the eponymous hero at the centre of the Great Game of espionage between the British Empire and Russia in the 19th century. The book is set after the Second Anglo-Afghan War, which ended in 1881, but before the Third, likely in the period 1893–98. *Kim*, short for Kimball O'Hara, is an impoverished Irish orphan who lives on the streets of Lahore and works for Mahbub Ali, a Pashtun horse trader. He later befriends an aged Tibetan lama, accompanies him on his journey along the Grand Trunk Road, learns about the Great Game, and is eventually recruited by Mahbub Ali, who works for the British Secret Service in their quest to extend influence in both Afghanistan and Tibet. Whether or not the Great Game—the expression used by British imperialists to describe the perceived expansion of Russian influence in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Tibet—actually existed, the fact remains that surveys were undertaken, expeditions mounted, spymasters recruited, and novels written, even as soldiers lost their lives. Taking a cue from Viceroy George Curzon, all pro-establishment papers—from the Civil and Military Gazette of Lahore to *The Pioneer* of Lucknow, *The Statesman* of Calcutta (now Kolkata), and *The Times* of India of Bombay (now Mumbai)—concurred that Tsarist Russia posed a real threat to the jewel in Britain's crown. A hundred and twenty years later, histo-



rians remain sceptical of Curzon's assertions. Is the hue and cry about the Deep State similar to the Great Game? Whether or not it exists, whether it operates in all countries, and whether the 'deep state' of one country is connected with others through the dark web or entrenched corporate interests remains unclear, as the discourse is more ideological than empirical. Sometimes, those who claim to be part of the deep state ascribe to themselves a larger-than-life role in state affairs—for example, AS Dulat and Asad Durrani in their 2018 book *The Spy Chronicles: RAW, ISI and the Illusion of Peace*. Their claim to be arbiters of one of the most tense and difficult relationships in the region has been widely critiqued by reviewers. The term first gained wide currency in the context of Türkiye as *derin devlet*, which literally translates to "deep state" in English. In Türkiye, it refers to a non-elected military elite dominating elected governments, especially when they attempt to dismantle the secular foundations of the Republic, established by Mustafa Kemal Pasha after

the abolition of the caliphate in 1923. In Pakistan, "deep state" refers to a government controlled by powerful military leaders, as documented by Stephen Cohen in *The Idea of Pakistan* and Ishaq Ahmed in *Pakistan: The Garrison State*. Elected governments in Pakistan have rarely exercised real control over defense and foreign policy. In the US, Democrats and Republicans accuse each other of controlling the 'deep state.' Democrats claim the pro-Republican arms lobby and military-industrial complex constitute the deep state, while Republicans argue that Ivy League universities promote 'wokeism' and diversity, equity, and inclusion narratives that, according to Donald Trump, undermine America's greatness. Trump has accused the deep state within the Democratic regime of election interference, citing the Freedom Medal awarded to George Soros as evidence. However, skeptics argue that if the deep state were so powerful, how could Daksh Patel dismantle it simply by firing 'interns and associates' whose tenure is co-terminus

with that of President Biden? Ultimately, the deep state serves as a convenient scapegoat for anything that goes wrong or for political parties losing popular support. If Republicans and Democrats are battling it out in Washington, India faces a similar scenario, with Left liberals and Right nationalists accusing each other of leveraging the 'deep state' to gain or retain power. Publications like *The Caravan* and *Organiser Weekly* lead these respective narratives. Left liberals claim the RSS is India's deep state, while Right nationalists accuse the Ford Foundation and George Soros' Open Society Foundations of attempting to discredit the democratically elected Modi government. Left liberals find support in the speeches of Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi, while Right nationalists, led by Vice President Dhankhar, minister Kiren Rijiju, and BJP spokespersons like Sambit Patra, vehemently counter these claims. In a pre-budget article for *The Indian Express*, economist Surjit Bhalla, a former member of the PM's Economic Advisory Council, alleged that India's deep state comprises "major industrialists, senior IAS babus, and their friendly influencers in the media", slowing down economic growth. This claim was firmly repudiated, point by point, by Vivek Kaul in *Newslaundry*, who questioned the logic behind such allegations. Kaul argued that neither the IAS, corporates, nor the media benefit from econom-

India's GST system is now a mess. Those who designed it also are confused

While this may seem like a trivialisation of GST, it actually lays bare how the system has now rebounded on its initial promise of bringing ease of doing business in the country. The Finance Minister's four-minute explanation on the taxation of popcorn highlighted how complex the system has become. It shouldn't take anybody that much time to explain the applicable tax rates on a single product. Since then, GST has been ridiculed, derided, lamented about, and generally panned by laypeople and even former government officials who worked on its implementation. So, what is the issue behind GST on popcorn? You see, as per the taxman, depending on your taste preferences, popcorn can either be a namkeen (salty) or a mithai (sweet)—forget that those two terms have never been used by anyone to refer to popcorn. Ready-to-eat popcorn,

salted and spiced for taste, and sold loosely attracts a GST rate of 5 per cent. That same popcorn, if packaged and labelled, attracts a rate of 12 per cent. One wonders what happens if the vendor tears open the packet and sells loose popcorn to the customer. Perhaps the universe will explode, who knows? Things get even trickier when you talk about caramel popcorn. Those who prefer this flavour will have to shell out 18 per cent GST, regardless of whether it is packaged or sold loose. Then some head to the movie hall and ask for salted and caramel popcorn mixed together. What happens to them? Over the week, one particular meme stood out among the lot. It was a picture of salted caramel popcorn packets with questions along the lines of, "What now, taxman?" What now, indeed. Most of the memes were at Sitharaman's expense.

Tax cuts won't fix low growth. Govt must look beyond fiscal policy

The Modi government's main move in the Union Budget 2025 has been to cut personal income tax. As finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in her speech, it is meant to boost demand in the economy. However, the government doesn't expect a higher-than-usual increase in other non-debt receipts and has budgeted a decline in the deficit. The budgeted capital expenditure is the same as the revised estimates for 2024-25. The tax cut should be seen in the context of other fiscal policy moves the Modi government has made in the last decade to boost growth. Since 2016, the Indian economy has struggled to sustain rapid growth. From 2016 to 2019, it was in a relentless slowdown, with GDP growth falling to 3.9 per cent in 2019-20. The GDP then fell sharply in 2020-21 due to the pandemic. After this sharp decline, high GDP growth numbers created a false sense of complacency, but the compound annual growth rate between 2019-20 and 2024-25 is only 4.8 per cent. The latest GDP estimates suggest that the economy is slowing down again—with growth clocking at 5.4 per cent in the July-September quarter of 2024. Even if we set aside the critiques of GDP estimation in India, growth remains a topic of concern in policy conversations. The government's response to an economic challenge depends on what it considers to be the root cause. The Modi government's actions over the past decade suggest that it seeks to address India's economic growth pangs through fiscal policy. Consequently, fiscal policy has done much of the heavy lifting in the government's growth strategy over the past decade. In the economic slowdown from 2016-17 to 2019-20, the government sought to maintain its expenditure. To do so without increasing the reported fiscal deficit, from 2017-18 to 2019-20, it

transformed a significant part of its on-budget expenditure into off-budget expenditure done by public enterprises. It also sharply raised cesses and surcharges on petroleum products, which are not shared with the states. These unusual tactics allowed the government to spend more, and expenditure continued to outpace GDP growth. These tactics also allowed the government to introduce new cash transfer schemes such as PM KISAN and increase allocations to existing schemes. In 2019, in an effort to stimulate investment, the government announced major tax breaks for corporates, especially in manufacturing. At the time, corporate tax collection had been growing rapidly while other taxes were struggling to deliver the budgeted increase. The tax cut led to a sharp reduction in the corporate tax to GDP ratio in the subsequent years. As the pandemic hit, fiscal policy became even more central.

The pandemic allowed the government to suspend its concern for deficits and bring the off-budget expenditure to the Budget in 2020-21. For a few years, revenue expenditure as a percentage of GDP was higher than its pre-pandemic levels.

Among other things, this allowed the government to increase subsidies and cash transfers, and introduce production-linked incentives for manufacturing in India. Total subsidies as a percentage of GDP have now gone back to their pre-pandemic levels. The most important change in expenditure since the pandemic has been in its composition. Of the Union government's total expenditure, the share of capital expenditure has increased. Its share rose from 12.5 per cent of total expenditure in 2019-20 to 22.2 per cent in 2023-24. In 2019-20, capital expenditure was 1.67 per cent of GDP. It rose to 3.21 per cent.

National Patrika Security Council Holds Monthly Meeting. Focus on Journalists' Safety, Rights and Professional Dignity



Mathura: The monthly meeting of the National Patrika Security Council was held on Friday in Mathura under the chairmanship of Agra Divisional President Dinesh Sharma. The meeting was attended by Mathura District President Chandra Mohan Dixit, along with office-bearers and members from Mathura district and across the Agra division. The meeting witnessed detailed discussions on issues related to journalists' safety, constitutional rights, workplace harassment, false legal cases and the practical challenges faced during news gathering. The speakers emphasized that journalists are the fourth pillar of democ-

racy and play a crucial role in maintaining transparency and accountability in society. Ensuring their freedom and security, they said, is a collective responsibility of both the government and the public. Addressing the gathering, Agra Divisional President Dinesh Sharma said, "The primary objective of the National Patrika Security Council is to raise the voice of journalists and ensure a safe, independent, and dignified working environment. The organization stands firmly with journalists in every situation and will never compromise on their rights. "He added that the Council is consistently

taking up journalists' concerns with the administration to ensure prompt action against incidents of injustice and harassment faced by media professionals. The meeting also focused on strengthening the organization at the grassroots level, expanding membership and organizing awareness programs for journalists. Discussions were also held on future strategies, including collective efforts to advocate for a dedicated Journalist Protection Law.

The meeting concluded with all office-bearers unanimously reaffirming their commitment to continue working for the protection, dignity and rights of journalists

Jarwal Glows with Devotion as Homes Light Up with Sacred Tulsi Worship



Bahraich

On the auspicious occasion of Tulsi Pujan Diwas, the town of Jarwal was immersed in spiritual fervour as households across the area lit up with devotion to Tulsi Mata. Hundreds of families observed the sacred ritual in the early morning after ceremonial bathing, wearing yellow attire and offering prayers for prosperity, marital harmony and divine

blessings of Lord Vishnu.

Courtyards resonated with hymns as Tulsi plants were bathed with holy Ganga water, adorned with flowers and incense and illuminated with earthen lamps. Women led devotional bhajans, men performed ritual circumambulation while children actively participated in the distribution of prasad. A collective recitation of Vishnu

Sahasranama filled the atmosphere with spiritual energy. According to religious scriptures, Tulsi is revered as the beloved of Lord Vishnu and the rare Thursday coincidence on December 25 enhanced the spiritual significance of the observance.

The event concluded with a joint aarti, conveying a message of unity, faith and cultural harmony among the residents.

Lost Child Reunited with Family Through Initiative of Mission Shakti In-charge Alka Rani



Firozabad: A lost child was safely reunited with her family in the Rasoolpur police station area due to the supervision of Mission Shakti In-charge Alka Rani and the prompt action of the police team, including Head Constable Netrapal Singh. The child, a resident of Nagala Bhari locality under the Kashmire Gate outpost was safely escorted to her home and handed over to her family. According to officials, upon receiving information about the missing child, the Rasoolpur Police and the Mission Shakti team immediately sprang into action. Under the guidance of Mission Shakti In-charge Alka Rani and with the active role played by Head Constable Netrapal Singh, the child's identity was established, necessary verification was completed and contact was made with the family. After completing all formalities, the child was handed over to her family in a safe and secure manner. The child mother, Tarrannumz, wife of Mohammad Ovaid, a resident of Nagala Bhari, Kashmire Gate, Rasoolpur police station area in Firozabad district, expressed her gratitude to Mission Shakti In-charge Alka Rani, Head Constable Netrapal Singh, Rasoolpur Police, and Jai Hind Sir for their timely and sensitive efforts. She said the child's safe return was possible due to the compassion and alertness of the police and the Mission Shakti team. Local residents also appreciated the humane efforts of the Mission Shakti team and the Rasoolpur Police, stating that such initiatives strengthen public confidence in law enforcement and reinforce trust in the safety mechanisms for women and children. Police officials stated that ensuring the safety of women and children under the Mission Shakti campaign remains a top priority and swift action is taken in all such cases.

Botswana Minister of Transport and Infrastructure Noah Salake, impressed by Bareka technical excellence

Varanasi

Noah Salake, Minister of Transport and Infrastructure, Government of Botswana, paid a courtesy visit to Banaras Locomotive Works (BARECA), Varanasi today, December 27, 2025. On this occasion, he thoroughly inspected various modern locomotives manufactured at BARECA, their manufacturing process and advanced technological features. First Principal Chief Electrical Engineer Sushil Kumar Srivastava, warmly welcomed Noah Salake by presenting him with a bouquet of flowers. Following this, during a work-



shop tour led by Chief Mechanical Engineer (Production and Marketing) Sunil Kumar at 10:00 a.m. Salake inspected the New Block Shop, A thorough

inspection was conducted of Turbo Shop, Light Machine Shop, Sub Assembly Shop, ES & ET Shop, Loco Assembly Shop and Loco Test Shop. During the inspection,

Chief Mechanical Engineer (Production & Marketing) Sunil Kumar gave him detailed information about various types of railway engines manufactured at BHEL, their manufacturing technology, quality standards and innovations. Thereafter Noah Salake also visited the Design Department, where he saw the designs of various locomotives and understood the design based manufacturing process. After this, in the meeting held in the General Manager meeting room located in the Administration Building, through a power point presentation Sunil Kumar provided detailed

information about BHEL major achievements, production capacity, export activities and locomotive manufacturing process based on indigenous technology. On this occasion, Principal Chief Electrical Engineer Sushil Kumar Srivastava also discussed the technical features. At the conclusion of the program, Principal Chief Electrical Engineer Sushil Kumar Srivastava, honored Noah Salake with a memento. Salake expressed his appreciation for BHEL cutting-edge technology, innovation and superior quality locomotives. On this occasion,

Principal Chief Mechanical Engineer, Vivek Sheel, Chief Design Engineer Diesel, Praveen Kumar and other officers and officials of RITES were also present. It is noteworthy that this visit by the Minister of Transport and Infrastructure of the Government of Botswana was of great significance, given BREC's ever-growing reputation in the field of locomotive manufacturing internationally. The primary purpose of this visit was to gain firsthand and detailed information about BREC manufactured locomotives and their advanced manufacturing process.

Blankets Distributed to Poor and Needy by Kaiserganj Tehsil Administration



Bahraich: With the aim of protecting against the cold wave, the Kaiserganj Tehsil administration distributed blankets to poor, destitute, and helpless individuals in Karim Behad, under Barkhudwarapur Gram Panchayat. The blankets, provided by the Disaster and Revenue Department, were distributed late in

the evening by regional Lekhpal Pawan Chauhan, who went door-to-door to a total of 11 eligible beneficiaries. The beneficiaries included Nakchhed son of Babadeen, Mahmood son of Peeru, Amritlal son of Ramsevak, Sohanlal son of Munna, Sabarunnisha wife of Hanif, Ramadevi wife of Bhagwadeen, Bittan wife of

Sampat, Shakuntala wife of Rampal, Shivkumari wife of Nanhe, Naresh son of Babadeen and Ramchandra son of Sundar. Gram Pradhan Mohd. Niyaz and Prashant Verma were present during the blanket distribution. This initiative by the administration was appreciated by the local people.

"Malviya & Atal Bihari Jayanti Celebrated with Devotion at Paramhans Baba Kuti, Babaganj"



Pramukh Nawabganj Jai Prakash Singh said that Malviya and Atal were not ordinary humans but great visionaries whose thoughts and deeds united Sanatan society and strengthened the nation. Their ideals, he said, remain guiding principles for society. Sanjeev Srivastava, Advocate, President of Mahamana Malaviya Mission, Awadh Region called both leaders the builders of modern India and urged people to walk on their path to ensure national unity and strength. He also appealed for active participation in social awareness campaigns

to maintain unity, integrity, and social harmony. Educationist Pandit Maniram Sharma highlighted the role of Paramhans Baba as a pioneer in the border region and appealed for maintaining unity and social harmony in Sanatan society. Shiv Pujan Singh Convener of Kisan Parishad emphasized the need for collective efforts to strengthen social harmony and unity in the border areas and encouraged participation in the organization's social awareness initiatives. Social worker Er. R.K. Singh appealed to society to abandon hatred, animosity, and

internal discord and work collectively to strengthen Sanatan society. The program was conducted by Durgesh Verma, Block President of Kisan Parishad, while the vote of thanks was presented by Pandit Vijay Sharma, a Sanatan society leader. Presiding over the event, Suresh Chandra Gupta, Advocate, In-charge of the Mela Committee, stated that Paramhans Baba Kuti continuously inspires unity and strength in Sanatan society. He noted that the Sita-Ram Vivah Fair organized here attracts devotees not only from the region but also from neighboring Nepal, spreading the message of social and religious harmony. Mahant Ramdas blessed the gathering and urged everyone to work towards maintaining unity and integrity of Sanatan society. On the concluding occa-

Bhaijaan celebrates his 60th



Salman Khan cutting a cake in front of the media

Superstar Salman Khan celebrated his 60th birthday at his Panvel farmhouse, cutting cake with media before private celebrations

Superstar Salman Khan marked his 60th birthday in grand style on Friday, celebrating the milestone with close friends and family members at his Panvel farmhouse. Ahead of the private celebrations, the actor stepped out to greet the media gathered outside his farmhouse and to cut his birthday cake with them. Salman greeted the media warmly, exchanged smiles, and had a brief interaction. The stunning star is seen cutting a red-and-white cake as the paparazzi sang the birthday song. Dressed casually in a T-shirt and blue denims, Salman seemed to be ageing in reverse as he sported a clean-shaven look. The actor is seen offering pieces of cake to the photographers and posing for pictures. In a heartwarming moment, Salman also greeted a woman with a side hug, drawing cheers from those present.



Katrina wishes love & light to 'Super Human'

Actress Katrina Kaif wished love and light to 'Super Human' Salman Khan as he celebrates his 60th birthday on Saturday. Sharing a black and white photo of Salman on the Stories section of her Instagram handle, Katrina wrote, "Tiger Tiger... Happiest 60th Birthday To the Super Human that you are...May everyday be full of Love and Light (sic)."



Tiger Tiger Tiger...
Happiest 60th Birthday
To the Super Human that you are...May everyday be full of
Love and Light



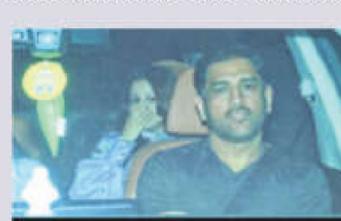
Battle of Galwan teaser out

Battle of Galwan, headlined by Bollywood superstar Salman Khan, is set to release in theatres on April 17, 2026, the makers said on Saturday on the occasion of the actor's 60th birthday. The film is based on the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict between India and China and helmed by Apoorva Lakhia of "Shootout at Lokhandwala" fame. The makers shared the news by unveiling the teaser of the film, which features the actor embracing the role of an Indian Army officer with restrained ferocity and quiet authority.



Bandra-Worli Sea Link illuminated

Salman Khan's birthday was marked with a special illumination of the Bandra-Worli Sea Link in his honour. The city came together to honour one of its most cherished celebrities with a special tribute. A striking birthday message illuminated the night sky, drawing the attention of commuters and passersby. The spectacle quickly caught public attention, with fans capturing photos and videos that soon flooded social media platforms.



Mahendra Singh Dhoni



Huma Qureshi



Maniesh Paul



Mahesh Manjrekar

Jashan ki raat at Panvel farmhouse

Several celebrities were seen Friday night at Salman Khan's Panvel farmhouse, celebrating his 60th birthday with a star-studded party attended by friends from the film industry and others.



Aayush Sharma

Bhagyashree, Suniel Shetty & Shilpa Shetty show their love



Bollywood hunk Salman Khan turned 60 years old on Saturday, and marking the special day, wishes have been pouring in for him from all sides. Many B-town celebs used social media to pen lovely wishes for Salman as he turned a year older.

Suniel Shetty shared a photo posing with the birthday star on his X handle and

wrote, "To the man whose heart is bigger than his stardom... happy birthday bhaai! May your kindness keep shining brighter than every spotlight. Always love, always respect (sic)."

Shilpa Shetty also uploaded a string of photos with Salman over the year and shared, "Then to NOW. Another year older, but still the same crazy!"

Happyyyy Birthday @beingsalmankhan...Stay happy, healthy and amazing... our forever Tiger."

Bhagyashree, who made her debut opposite Salman in *Maine Pyar Kiya* went on to pen, "Then and now! Friendship always... dosti ke asoal humesha...Happy birthday @beingsalmankhan...Wish you health, happiness and peace."

Daler Mehndi on Shaheedi Diwas

Char Sahibzaade Shaheedi Diwas refers to the ultimate sacrifices of the four *Sahibzaade* (Guru Gobind Singh's sons) — Baba Ajit Singh, Baba Jujhar Singh, Baba Zorawar Singh and Baba Fateh Singh

Char *Sahibzaade Shaheedi Diwas* is observed from December 20–28 every year, commemorating one of the most heartrending and heroic chapters in Sikh history. It refers to the ultimate sacrifices of the four *Sahibzaade* (Guru Gobind Singh's sons) — Baba Ajit Singh, Baba Jujhar Singh, Baba Zorawar Singh and Baba Fateh Singh. While the two older brothers were martyred in the Battle of Chamkaur, the younger ones were bricked alive at Sirhind for refusing to convert to Islam.

The Free Press Journal reached out to singer Daler Mehndi, so that he could share his thoughts about *Shaheedi Diwas* with us.

Views

"The *Sahibzaade* gave us their young lives to live for the truth. It is during this week that we refresh our memories of the sacrifices they made. We need to keep fighting for the truth and pray for everyone's happiness. This is my message to the whole world. When this week would come, our father would do *kirtan*, singing praises and songs of martyrdom and sacrifice. We were very young, but even at that age we used to cry a lot when hearing the hymns. Now we may have grown old, but we still have the same feelings," he told us.

"That day signifies a lot of pain, when they put their lives on the line for the sake of teaching Sikh values. They were so young, but still stayed steadfast in their faith. The whole universe recognises their strength, and there is a lot of affection for them. I also want to congratulate all the Sikhs, that because of the ultimate sacrifices that the *Sahibzaade* made, we are still here today. May Guru ji grant us ever-rising spirits so that we should live our life with dignity," Daler said.

Poster of the animated drama *Chaar Sahibzaade* (2014)

Brown Munde rocks Mumbai

Mumbai witnessed an electrifying night as global Punjabi pop sensation brought his record-breaking 'One Of One' India Tour 2025 to the city, drawing massive crowds and reaffirming Mumbai's position as a top live entertainment hub. The show stood out for its unique fan-first approach, where audience members were invited on stage, creating an intimate yet spectacular experience.

Returning to Mumbai after a highly celebrated previous performance, the singer delivered a show bigger and bolder this year, with expansive stage design, cinematic visuals, and world-class lighting and sound. Backed by longtime collaborator, he performed chart-topping hits such as *Excuses*, *Insane*, *Summer High*, *With You*, and newer fan favourites including *Hitmen*, *Afsos*, *STFU*, *Without Me* and *Thodi Si Daaru*. Thousands of fans sang along, turning the venue into a pul-

Sanjay Dutt and Tara Sutaria joined the stage during the Mumbai leg of the 'One of One' tour



Tara Sutaria joins singer onstage

Bollywood actress Tara Sutaria brought glamour to the Mumbai live show, joining the singer on stage and turning the performance into a high-energy moment. Fans cheered loudly as the duo performed the chart-topping hit, *Thodi Si Daaru*, in an electrifying live set. Tara looked chic in a sleek black gown with a



Sanjay Dutt lights up Mumbai stage

Veteran actor Sanjay Dutt made a special appearance during the Mumbai leg of the tour, joining the singer on stage for fan-favourite tracks. His presence brought nostalgia and excitement, adding a touch of Bollywood charm to the night. Fans cheered as he interacted with the audience and shared the spotlight with the singer, creating one of the most talked-about moments of the evening.

Italy nabs 9 for Hamas funding

ROME

Italian authorities arrested nine people linked to three charitable organisations on suspicion of raising millions of euros in funds for the Palestinian militant group Hamas, anti-terrorism prosecutors said in a statement on Saturday.

The suspects are accused of sending €7 million euros (\$8.2 million) to "associations based in Gaza, the Palestinian territories, or Israel, owned, controlled, or linked to Hamas," the statement said.

Among those arrested was Mohammad Hannoun, president of the Palestinian Association in Italy, prosecutors said, describing him as the "head of the Italian cell of the Hamas organisation."

The EU has Hamas listed on its terror list.

Heatwaves, wildfires, droughts, storms cost world over \$120b: Report

Heatwaves, wildfires, droughts and storms cost the global economy more than US \$120 billion in 2025, underscoring the rising financial and human toll of climate change, a new report by UK-based non-governmental organisation Christian Aid said.

According to the analysis, extreme weather events intensified across continents this year, with the most expensive disasters concentrated in richer countries where insured losses are higher, even as poorer nations suffered widespread devastation with limited financial protection.

"These disasters are not natural. They are the predictable result of continued fossil fuel expansion and political delay," said Joanna Haigh, Emeritus Professor at Imperial College London.

COSTLIEST CLIMATE EVENTS

The 10 most financially damaging climate events of



People flee floodwaters in Hat Yai, Southern Thailand

2025 each caused losses running into billions of dollars, with combined damages exceeding US \$122 billion, the report said.

Most of the figures reflect insured losses alone, suggesting the true economic impact is likely to be significantly higher, while human suffering often remains uncounted.

The US bore the largest financial burden, with wildfires in California topping the list as the single costliest

event, causing an estimated \$60 billion in damage and over 400 deaths.

Cyclones and floods across Southeast Asia ranked second, inflicting \$25 billion in losses and killing over 1,750 people across Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Malaysia.

Devastating floods in China followed, displacing thousands, killing at least 30 people and causing \$17 billion in damage.

MOST COSTLY DISASTERS IN 2025

- Palisades and Eaton fires in the US: \$60b
- South & Southeast Asia cyclones in Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Malaysia: \$25b
- Typhoons in Philippines: \$5b
- Drought, Brazil: \$4.75b
- Ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred in Australia: \$1.2b
- Hurricane Melissa in Jamaica, Cuba and Bahamas: \$8b
- Cyclone Garance in Réunion: \$1.05b
- Texas floods, US: \$1b

"No continent was spared from crippling climate disasters in 2025," the report said, noting at least one major event struck each of the world's six populated regions.

ASIA AMONG WORST HIT

Asia accounted for four of the six costliest disasters. Flooding in India and Pakistan killed over 1,860 people, cost up to \$6 billion and affected over 7 million people in Pakistan alone.

events occurred in poorer countries where insurance coverage is low and data is scarce.

Western Australia posing major threats to biodiversity.

CALL FOR URGENT ACTION

Christian Aid said the events of 2025 underline the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels and increase funding for climate adaptation in vulnerable regions. "This year has again shown the stark reality of climate breakdown," said Patrick Watt, CEO of Christian Aid. "Violent storms, devastating floods and prolonged droughts are turning lives and livelihoods upside down. The poorest communities are first and worst affected."

The climate disasters are a warning of what lies ahead if we do not accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels. They underline the urgent need for adaptation, particularly in the global South, where resources are stretched and people are vulnerable to climate shocks," he said.

PEACE TALKS

Zelenskyy heads to Florida to meet Trump Prez: Kyiv strikes show Putin's true attitude

KYIV

Russia attacked Ukraine's capital with missiles and drones early on Saturday morning, killing one person and wounding 27, a day before talks between Ukraine and the US authorities said.

Explosions boomed across Kyiv for hours as ballistic missiles and drones hit the city. The attack began in the early morning hours on Saturday and was continuing as the day broke. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is prepared to meet US President Donald Trump in Florida on Sunday for further talks on ending the nearly 4-year-old war. Zelenskyy told reporters he was on a plane en route to



Florida on Saturday afternoon, and would stop in Canada on the way to meet Prime Minister Mark Carney. Russian Defence Ministry said it carried out a "massive strike" overnight, using "long-range precision-guided weapons from land, air and sea, including Kinzhal hypersonic aeroballistic missiles" and drones. It said it targeted

energy infrastructure facilities used by Ukraine's forces and military-industrial enterprises. The ministry said the strike came in response to Ukraine's attacks on "civilian objects" in Russia.

Poland scrambled fighter jets and closed airports in Lublin and Rzeszow near the border with Ukraine for several hours during the Russian

attacks, the country's armed forces command said on X. There was no violation of Polish airspace. Civil aviation authority Pansa said the two airports had since resumed operations. It was unclear what caused the alert in Poland.

Zelenskyy said the main target was energy and civilian infrastructure in Kyiv. In some districts, there is no electricity or heating. "Today, Russia demonstrated how it responds to peace talks between Ukraine and the US on ending Russia's war against Ukraine. They carried out massive attacks on Ukraine precisely as we move toward peace negotiations," said Zelenskyy, speaking to reporters via audio note while travelling. "That is Russia's response."



FULL-SCALE ATTACK Switzerland cannot defend self: Army chief

Zurich: Switzerland cannot defend itself against a full-scale attack and must boost military spending given rising risks from Russia, the head of its armed forces said.

The country is prepared for attacks by "non-state actors" on critical infrastructure and for cyber attacks, but its military still faces major equipment gaps, Thomas Suessli told NZZ newspaper.

"What we cannot do is defend against threats from a distance or even a full-scale attack on our country," said Suessli, who is stepping down at the end of the year.

US air travel hit, 1600 flights cancelled and 7400 delayed

Thousands of flights across the US have been cancelled or delayed as the north-east braces for a severe winter storm during the peak holiday travel season.

As of Friday night, 1,600 flights had been cancelled and 7,400 delayed, as per flight tracking website FlightAware.

The most affected airports are John F Kennedy International, Newark Liberty, and LaGuardia, which all serve the New York area. Boston, Chicago, and Toronto, Canada, are also impacted. The National Weather Service issued a winter storm warning from 16:00 local time on Friday until 13:00 on Saturday, with as much as 23cm of snow expected in New York and southern Connecticut.



WINTER STORM

were warning travellers to check with their airline to determine the status of their flights.

The heaviest snow was expected between 18:00 local time and midnight. Drivers were warned of hazardous conditions and advised to bring an emergency supply kit. BBC reported on Saturday.

Massive crash on Japan's highway kills 2, as holiday season starts

Tokyo: A massive crash involving 67 vehicles in snowy weather has killed two people and injured 26 on an expressway in Japan as the country kicked off its end-of-year holiday season.

The Gunma prefectural highway police said on Saturday the pileup on the Kan-etsu Expressway late on Friday started with a collision between two trucks in Minakami, about 160 km



Burnt vehicles are seen after a massive crash on an expressway in Minakami, northwest of Tokyo, on Saturday.

AP

Maduro seeks talks with US

Caracas: Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro has expressed willingness to hold talks with the US based on mutual respect, provided the US gives up interference in Venezuela.

In a televised speech on Friday (local time), Maduro said if the US side is willing to engage in dialogue with Venezuela on the basis of mutual respect and abandon its failed attempts to interfere in Venezuela over the past 25 years, he will welcome it and seek a path toward peace, cooperation and prosperity.

Taiwan hit by strong quake

A magnitude 6.6 earthquake struck off eastern Taiwan at 11:05 pm on Saturday, sending strong tremors through Taipei, New Taipei, and Yilan County. Data from the USGS showed the quake occurred at a depth of 67.28 kms, producing significant shaking across northern and eastern regions. Early reports showed no casualties.

Rahman registers as B'deshi voter

Dhaka: BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman on Saturday completed the formalities to enlist himself on Bangladesh's voter list and obtain a national identity (NID) card, two days after his return from over 17 years of self-exile in London.

The 60-year-old leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party visited the Election Commission office in Dhaka under tight security, where he provided fingerprints and iris scans for biometric enrollment, news portal tbsnews.net reported.

Meanwhile, Awami League, banned by the interim government from contesting the elections, in an article, claimed Rahman is "receiving one privilege after another,

with repeated violations of the law". "After the announcement of the election schedule, becoming a new voter is legally prohibited; yet questions have arisen about Tarique Rahman becoming a voter while that schedule was still in effect. Moreover, the day was a Saturday, a weekly govt holiday. So how was the law followed, and under whose instructions?" it asked.

The concert in Faridpur was cancelled amid a recent spate of attacks on cultural institutions. James' concert was to mark the closing of Faridpur Zilla Schools' 185th anniversary celebrations.

A group of outsiders tried to force entry after being turned away, throwing bricks and stones and attempting to seize the stage.

Students of the school resisted the attackers, and at least 20 were injured by flying debris, according to the organisers.

African regional bodies reject Israel's recognition of Somaliland

Nairobi: Africa's regional governance bodies on Saturday rejected the recognition of Somalia's breakaway region of Somaliland as an independent nation by Israel a day ago, the first by any country in more than 30 years.

Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991 amid a descent into conflict and, despite having its own government and currency, had never been recognised by any nation in the world until Friday.

African Union chairperson Mahmoud Ali Youssouf said any attempt to undermine Somalia's sovereignty risks peace and stability on the continent. The commission "firmly rejects any initiative or action aimed at recognising Somaliland as an independent entity, recalling Somaliland remains an integral part of the Federal Republic of Somalia."

Kash plan to shut FBI bldg final

FBI Director Kash Patel said FBI's J Edgar Hoover building in Washington DC will be "shut down permanently" after previously discarding plans to move the bureau's headquarters to Maryland, The Hill's reported.

Instead, employees will report to the Ronald Reagan Building to occupy the former location of the US Agency for International Development, which was dismantled by the Trump administration earlier this year.

"After over 20 years of failed attempts, we finalised a plan to permanently close the FBI's Hoover headquarters and move the workforce into a safe, modern facility. Working directly with

President Trump and Congress, we accomplished what no one else could," Patel said.

"This decision puts resources where they belong: defending the homeland, crushing violent crime, and protecting national security. It delivers better tools for today's FBI workforce at a fraction of the cost."

Xmas eve miracle

\$2 lottery ticket wins \$1.8b jackpot



newest Powerball jackpot winner! This is truly an extraordinary, life-changing prize," said Matt Strawn, Powerball Product Group Chair and Iowa Lottery CEO.

"We also want to thank all the players who joined in this jackpot streak — every ticket purchased helps support public programs and services across the country."

The winner's identity has not yet been disclosed. Karen Reynolds, a spokesperson for the Arkansas Lottery, said the claims centre is closed for the

holidays and the winner is unlikely to come forward before Monday.

The jackpot followed 46 consecutive drawings without a top prize winner. The previous Powerball jackpot was won on September 6, when players in Missouri and Texas shared \$1.787 billion.

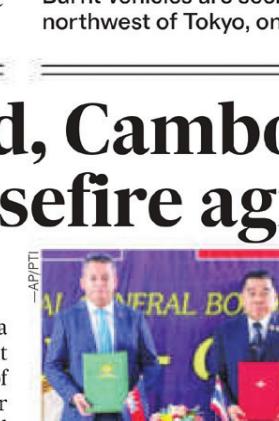
Officials said this is only the second time a Powerball jackpot has been won with a ticket sold in Arkansas, the first being in 2010. Powerball noted the last Christmas Eve jackpot win occurred in 2011. —AP

BANGKOK

Thailand and Cambodia signed a ceasefire agreement on Saturday to end weeks of fighting along their border over competing territorial claims. The agreement took effect at noon and calls for a halt in military movements and airspace violations for military purposes.

Only Thailand has carried out airstrikes, hitting sites in Cambodia as recently as Saturday morning, according to the Cambodian Defence Ministry.

The deal also calls for Thailand, after the ceasefire has held for 72 hours, to repatriate 18 Cambodian soldiers it



Cambodian Defence Minister Tea Seiha (L) with his Thai counterpart Nattaphon Narkphanit.

had been laid by Cambodian forces. The agreement was signed by the countries' defence ministers, Cambodia's Tea Seiha and Thailand's Nattaphon Narkphanit, at a border checkpoint. It followed 3-day lower-level talks by military officials.

It declares the sides are committed to an earlier ceasefire that ended 5 days of fighting in July and follow-up pacts. The original July ceasefire was brokered by Malaysia and pushed through by pressure from US President Trump, who threatened to withhold trade privileges unless Thailand and Cambodia agreed. It was formalised in more detail in Oct at a regional meet in Malaysia that Trump attended.

1-stop help desk for distressed Indian women in Canada

Toronto: The Consulate General of India in Toronto has established a 'One Stop Centre for Women', a dedicated support centre exclusively to assist women Indian nationals in distress.

The consulate has set up a 24x7 helpline and said the new centre aims to provide critical and timely support to Indian passport holder women facing domestic violence, abuse, family conflict, abandonment, exploitation and legal challenges, among others.

One-Stop Centre for Women will provide coordinated, beneficiary-centred assistance by connecting aggrieved women to timely and right pathways of support. —PTI

MELBOURNE
That Indian side wasn't great: Cook



Batting great Alastair Cook said England's 2-2 home series draw against Shubman Gill-led India was against "not a great Indian side", flagging concerns over the team's preparation for the Ashes, in which they are currently trailing 1-3. The five-match series against India ended in a 2-2 draw. Cook said England's recent results had masked deeper issues. "They started off with a bang, Key, McCullum and Stokes. I think McCullum won his first eight out of 10 games or something the first year. Since then it's gone downhill," Cook said.

"This year I think their percentage of win is like just above 30 percent so it's a bit of a downward trend." They were talking about India, they lost, they drew India and India just got thumped by South Africa. So that Indian side wasn't a great Indian side either."

CAPE TOWN
Rickelton ton in vain as MI lose in SA20



Ryan Rickelton's maiden SA20 century was not enough to save MI Cape Town from a 15-run defeat against Durban Super Giants in a cracking Season 4 opener here. On a run-filled opening day, when a cumulative total of 449 runs were struck, which included 25 sixes and 40 boundaries, Rickelton's 113 off 65 balls took MI Cape Town to the brink. But ultimately, Durban's Super Giants' record 232/5 was too much for the MI Cape Town. DSG's all-New Zealand opening pair of Devon Conway and Kane Williamson laid the platform as they dominated the Powerplay, racing to 96 in just 8.3 overs. The MI Cape Town run-chase revolved around Rickelton.

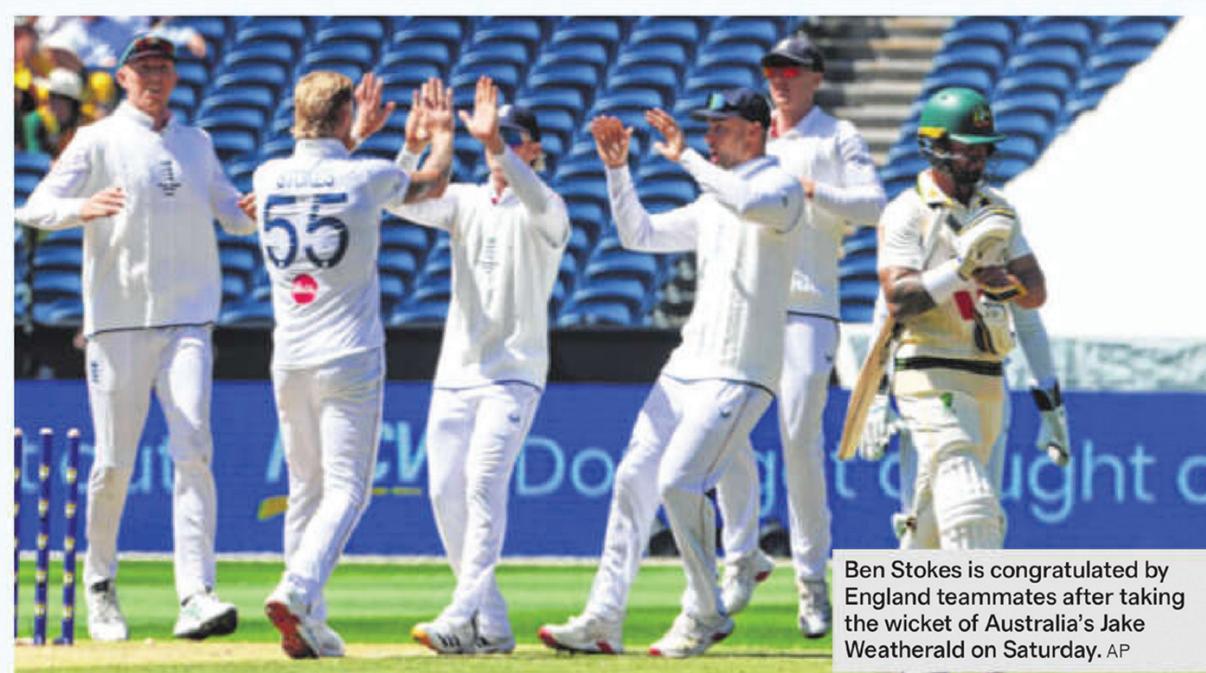
NEW DELHI
Vandana open to reverse retirement



Former India women's hockey striker Vandana Kataria on Friday said she decided to quit the game earlier this year after feeling neglected, but she is ready to reverse her decision if the

ASHES | Visitors register four-wicket victory over Australia in the 4th Test after two days of play at Melbourne Cricket Ground

England ends 18-match winless streak in Aus



Ben Stokes is congratulated by England teammates after taking the wicket of Australia's Jake Weatherald on Saturday. AP

MELBOURNE

other two of their 18 tests Down Under over a period of nearly 15 years.

Needing 175 second-innings runs to win and 98 after the tea break, England reached its target at 178-6 to clinch the match and send thousands of its long-suffering but faithful "Barmy Army" fans into frenzied celebration.

"It's obviously been a tough tour up until now," England captain Ben Stokes said. "The way that we did it was fantastic. It showed bravery, we were courageous in the way we operated."

England raced to 70-2 off the first

10 overs in its second innings, losing the wickets of Ben Duckett (34)

and Brydon Carse (6). Scott Boland removed Zak Crawley (37) and Jacob Bell (40), who both made valuable contributions.

Joe Root (15) and Stokes (2) fell cheaply before Jamie Smith and Harry Brook guided the visiting side to a morale-boosting win ahead of the fifth and final test beginning Jan. 4 in Sydney.

Earlier Saturday, England bowled out Australia out for 132 in its second innings after lunch on Day 2. On an MCG pitch offering substantial sideways movement for pace bowlers, England successfully chased down a target of 175 to win after 30

wickets had fallen in 4 1/2 sessions. The dismissal of opener Travis Head (46) was quickly followed by the departures of Usman Khawaja (0) and Alex Carey (4) in the next two overs as Australia slumped from 82-3 to 88-6 in the morning session.

Stokes (3-24) claimed the important wicket of Cameron Green (19) after lunch, caught at second slip, and Brydon Carse sliced through the tail to finish with 4-34.

"They got off to a flyer." Australia skipper Steve Smith said of England's second-innings runs chase. "If we got 50 or 60 more across both innings, we might have been there in the end."

Australia held an overall lead of 46 Friday after scoring 152, running through England for 110 in a dramatic first day.

Josh Tongue was named player of the match.

MCG TEST
2 Days played
852 Total Balls
572 Runs scored
36 Wickets

Mhatre named India captain for Under-19 WC next month



Squads:

For South Africa tour: Vaibhav Sooryavanshi (C), Aaron George (VC), Vedant Trivedi, Abhigyan Kundu (wk), Harvansh Singh (wk), RS Ambrish, Kanishk Chouhan, Khilan A Patel, Mohamed Enaan, Henil Patel, D Deepesh, Kishan Kumar Singh, Udhav Mohan, Urvraj Gohil, Rahul Kumar.

For U-19 World Cup:

Ayush Mhatre (c), Vihaan Malhotra (vc), Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, Aaron George, Vedant Trivedi, Abhigyan Kundu (wk), Harvansh Singh (wk), RS Ambrish, Kanishk Chouhan, Khilan A Patel, Mohamed Enaan, Henil Patel, D Deepesh, Kishan Kumar Singh, Udhav Mohan.

Five-time champions India (2000, 2008, 2012, 2018 and 2022) have been placed in Group B alongside New Zealand, USA and Bangladesh.

India will begin their cam-

paign against the USA on January 15 at the Queens Sports Club, Baluwary, followed by matches against Bangladesh on January 17 at the same venue and New Zealand on January 24.

Did BCCI informally look at Gambhir's replacement

JAIPUR

Gautam Gambhir's record as India's white ball coach has been pretty impressive with an ICC and ACC trophy in each of the two formats but with 10 Test defeats against SENA countries, the same cannot be said when it comes to Test cricket.

It is understood that right after India's abject surrender against South Africa in the two-Test series at home last month, someone who

matters in the cricket board had once again informally approached VVS Laxman to check if he would be interested in coaching the red ball team. However, it is learnt that the legendary batter of yesteryears is happy being the 'Head of Cricket' at the Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru.

While Gambhir's contract with BCCI runs until the end of the 2027 ODI World Cup, there is every possibility that it could be revisited, depending upon India's perform-

ance in the T20 World Cup which begins in five weeks' time.

It is understood that in the BCCI corridors, the jury is still out on whether Gambhir is the right person to remain at helm of the red ball team for remaining nine Tests of the World Test Championship 2025-27 cycle.

Having drawn 2-2 in a five-Test away series in England, India have a couple of overseas assignments comprising two Tests each against Sri Lanka in August 2026, and a

tour of New Zealand in October, before hosting Australia for a five-Test affair in January-February 2027.

"Gambhir does have (a) strong backing within the power corridors of Indian cricket and obviously, if India retain the T20 World Cup or at least reach the final, he would be seamlessly continuing with his assignment. However, it would be interesting if Gambhir continues in Tests too," a BCCI source told PTI on conditions of anonymity.

MCG pitch fiasco: It would be 'hell' somewhere else: Stokes

Kevin Pietersen, Dinesh Karthik see selective criticism

MELBOURNE

England captain Ben Stokes on Saturday came down heavily on the overwhelmingly bowler-friendly Melbourne pitch on which 20 wickets fell on Day 1 of the just-concluded Boxing Day Test, saying such a track elsewhere in the world would have invoked a barrage of criticism.

Stokes' one-time teammate Kevin Pietersen and former India cricketer Dinesh Karthik too joined him in slamming the MCG pitch, and highlighted the selective criticism of Indian decks when spinners get wickets in a heap there. Stokes said it was not a pitch that suited the Boxing Day Test, even though his side won the match by four wickets.

"Being brutally honest, that's not really what you want. Boxing Day Test match. You don't want a game finishing in less than two days. Not ideal. But you can't change it once you start the game and you've just got to play what's in front of you," Stokes told the media after the match.

Further, Stokes indicated that if such a rain of wickets had happened elsewhere in the world then the critics would have sharpened their knives in a haste.

"But I'm pretty sure if that was somewhere else in the world, there'd be hell on. Not the best thing for games that should be played over five days. But we played a type of cricket that ended up getting the job done," he added.

Asked specifically if he was talking about spin-friendly pitches in Asia, Stokes replied rather tongue-in-cheek, "Your words, not mine."

The Australian and England bowlers combined to take 20 wickets here on Friday, while the hosts were



Australia's Steve Smith (L) watches a delivery from England's Brydon Carse (R) on Day 2 of their Ashes Test match in Melbourne on Saturday. AP

Steve Smith said the pitch offered a "little too much".

"(It was a) tricky one. 36 wickets, over two days, probably offered just a little bit too much," he said.

"It's tough as a groundsman, he's always looking for the right sort of balance, I suppose. Last year's wicket was an outstanding one. It went to day five (and the) last session."

"In an ideal world, every wicket does that and it's exciting for everyone, but maybe if you took it (down) from 10(mm) to 8(mm), it would have been a nice challenging wicket, but maybe a little bit more even, I suppose."

"(The) groundsmen are always learning and you will probably take something from that, no doubt."

The entire Ashes series so far has seen action only on 13 days out of the total 20 match days. Earlier, the first Test at Perth too ended inside two days with the Aussies clinching it by eight wickets.

"MCG have produced an ordinary pitch here. Can't believe 2 out of the 4 ashes tests could end in 2 days. For all the hype, 4 ashes tests have happened in just 13 days," voiced Karthik.

bundled out for 132 in their second innings in 34.3 overs in a little over one session on Saturday. The irony was not lost on Pietersen either.

"India ALWAYS gets hammered when wickets fall like crazy on day 1 of a Test and so I hope that Australia gets the same scrutiny! Fair is fair!" wrote former England skipper Pietersen on X.

The decision to leave 10mm grass on the MCG deck generated massive sideways movement, making batting here a lottery.

In all, 36 wickets tumbled in six sessions at Melbourne as the fourth Test ended inside two days with England winning by four wickets.

Australia stand-in captain

India eye fourth successive win over SL in T20I series

Harmanpreet overtakes Lanning's record of most T20I wins by a skipper

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Formidable India will be eager to register a dominance-extending fourth victory on the bounce in the fourth Women's T20I against Sri Lanka here on Sunday.

The Harmanpreet Kaur-led team has not even given a chance to its Lankan counterparts to compete in this five-match series, which currently stands 3-0 in favour of the hosts. It is evident in the fact that India, who chased in all three preceding matches, have not batted more than 14.4 overs, have not lost more than three wickets.

The primary credit-holders for that overwhelming success are Indian bowlers. Seasoned spinner Deepti Sharma took four wickets across two matches, and Renuka Singh equalled that feat in a single match at the Greenfield Stadium here on Friday.

The toss also might have played a small part as



India's captain Harmanpreet Kaur (L) with teammate Shafali Verma after the third T20I against Sri Lanka in Thiruvananthapuram on Friday. PTI

Harmanpreet called it right on all three occasions and elected to field, giving her bowlers a chance to operate in conditions with lesser dew.

But the bowlers have maximised that opportunity spectacularly, not allowing any of the Sri Lankan batters to cross an individual 40 so far. In this series, India also have tried various combinations as well.

Arundhati Reddy played the first two

matches while Renuka came in for her pace colleague in the next contest.

The Indian batters too have backed the bowlers with a crushing show with Shafali Verma and Jemimah Rodrigues leading the parade with a fifty each.

Most T20I wins

Harmanpreet Kaur overtook

Australian legend Meg Lanning to become the captain with the most wins in women's T20Is. She now has

Squads:

India: Harmanpreet Kaur (C), Smriti Mandhana (VC), Deepthi Sharma, Sneh Rana, Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Harleen Deol, Arundhati Reddy, Kranti Gaud, Renuka Singh Thakur, Richa Ghosh (WK), G Kamalini (WK), Sree Charani, Vaishnavi Sharma.

Sri Lanka:

Chamari Athapaththu (c), Hasini Perera, Vishmi Gunaratne, Harshitha Samarakkrama, Nilakshi De Silva, Kavisha Dilhari, Imesha Dulani, Kaushini Nuthyanga, Malsha Shehani, Inoka Ranaweera, Shashini Gimhani, Nimesha Madushani, Kavya Kavindi, Rashmi Sewwandi, Malki Madara.

77 wins in 130 matches in T20Is as a captain (48 losses and five no results).

Test cricket



Indian head coach Gautam Gambhir (R) in a file pic. PTI