13 dead, two injured as ferry capsizes near Gateway of India, ex-gratia announced

Mumbai

A ferry carrying passengers capsized near the Gateway of India in Mumbai leaving thirteen dead and two in critical condition on Wednesday. As per the information, the deceased included ten passengers and three Navy personnel. The incident occurred when the ferry was travelling from the Gateway of India to Elephanta Island. Meanwhile, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis announced an ex-gratia of Rs 5 lakh each to the families of each deceased.

As many as 110 people were on the ferry including crew members. Rescue operations are currently underway, with the assistance of the Navy, JNPT, Coast Guard, local police and local fishing boats. As many as 77 people have been rescued so far. The incident

occurred around 4 pm on Wednesday and there have been no reports of any casualties so far.

The Navy and Coast Guard have launched a massive rescue operation, with 11 Navy boats and three boats of Marine Police and a boat of Coast Guard being deployed in the area, a defence official said. Four helicopters are also involved in the search and rescue operation, the official said. Personnel from police, Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority and fishermen in the area are also involved in the rescue work, the official said.

PM Modi announces ex-gratia

Prime Minister Narendra Modi condoled the deaths of people in the accident and termed the incident saddening. He also announced

an ex-gratia of Rs 2 lakh from PMNRF for the next of kin of each deceased and Rs 50,000 to the injured.

CM Devendra Fadnavis reacts

Meanwhile, Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis reacted to the incident, saying orders have been given to the district administration to deploy all the necessary machinery for the rescue operation. "We have received reports of an accident involving the boat Nilkamal, which was heading towards Elephanta. Boats from the Navy, Coast Guard, Port and Police teams have been immediately dispatched for assistance.

We are in constant touch with the district and police administration and fortunately, most of the citizens have been rescued. However, rescue operations are still underway," he posted on X.

President Murmu expresses grief

President Droupadi Murmu also expressed grief over the incident and wished for a quick recovery of the survivors. "I am shocked and saddened to learn of the accident involving a passenger ferryboat and an Indian Navy craft boat near Mumbai Harbour. My condolences to the families of those who have lost their lives. I pray for the swift success of the rescue and relief operations and a quick recovery of the survivors," she posted on X.

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Mumbai ferry tragedy: Never witnessed such horrific incident, drivers recount horrific scene

Mumbai

The drivers of some boats who rushed to help the ferry tragedy victims off the Mumbai coast were aghast to see chaos at the site with people screaming for help and said they never witnessed such a horrific incident in their lives.

Thirteen persons died and 99 were rescued after a Navy craft undergoing engine trials lost control and collided with the passenger ferry Neel Kamal off Karanja near Mumbai at around 4 pm on Wednesday, the Navy said.

The ferry was carrying passengers from the Gateway of India to Elephanta Island, a popular tourist destination.

Arif Bamane, a driver of the Mumbai Port Trust (MBPT) pilot boat Poorva, said, "When we reached there, the situation was tragic and completely chaotic. People were screaming for help, and

some were crying."

He recalled a small girl lying motionless as water had entered her lungs.

The driver and other rescuers performed chest compressions on her and helped her breathe again. Slowly, her breathing became normal, he said.

Bamande said they

prioritised rescuing women and children.

A fishing trawler and another tourist boat already arrived at the scene before them, the driver said.

Bamane said he and his team were heading to Mumbai from Jawahar Deep on Wednesday evening when the control

room gave the information about the accident. They were instructed to reach the spot near JD5 as quickly as possible.

He said their boat had only four people aboard, but they did their best to rescue the stranded individuals before other boats arrived. Among

those crying for help, there were three to four foreigners, he said.

"We tried to save as many people as possible," Bamane said, adding they rescued about 20-25 persons, who were later transferred to naval boats that arrived at the scene.

With 18 years of boat driving experience, Bamane said he had witnessed small rescue operations before but Wednesday's incident was the most horrific and tragic.

"This is the biggest rescue operation that I have seen so far," he said.

Iqbal Gothekar, the driver of a small tourist boat, told PTI that 25 to 30 minutes after his boat departed from the Elephanta Island at 3.35 pm, he learned about the incident and was one of the first to reach the accident site.

The people on the

capsized boat were frantically waving their hands for help, said Gothekar, a Raigad district native who has been a boat driver since 2004.

He said by the time they reached the spot, a fishing trawler also arrived.

Gothekar said his boat rescued 16 persons, bringing them safely to the Gateway of India. The rescued individuals were taken to a police post.

In my career, I have never witnessed such an incident," Gothekar said while recounting the tragedy.

The capsized ferry had a capacity of 80 persons and departed from the Gateway of India for the Elephanta Island about 45 minutes before the incident, which occurred near Butcher Island, according to sources.

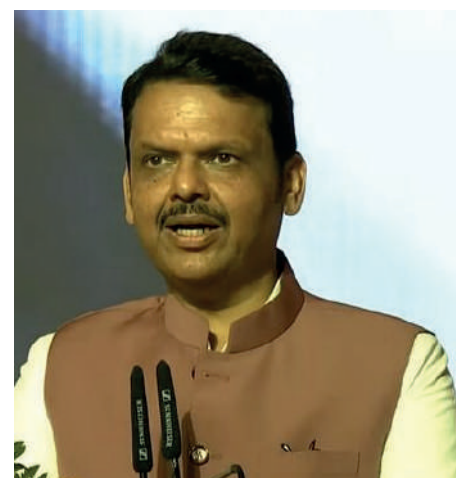# Bill to curb 'urban Naxalism' re-introduced in Maharashtra Assembly

Mumbai

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

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

With the new government led by Fadnavis at the helm after the November 20 Assembly elections, he re-introduced the bill in the House.

Fadnavis said the Bill would be referred to the joint select committee of the state legislature so that all doubts related

to it can be cleared.

Views of the stakeholders will be considered and the bill will be cleared in the monsoon session of the state legislature to be held in July next year in Mumbai, he said.

No Trade License Or Loans For Illegal Buildings; Officers Liable For Wrong Completion Certificates: Supreme Court Issues Directions

New Delhi

The Supreme Court has issued a set of guidelines to curb unauthorised constructions. The Court said that these directions are in addition to the directions issued in an earlier case regarding the demolition of structures.

The bench comprising Justices JB Pardiwala and R. Mahadevan directed that it would be mandatory for the builder to display the approved plan during the period of construction, and no building completion certificate be issued unless the officer inspecting the building is satisfied that the building is constructed as per the building planning permission. Moreover, the Court directs departmental actions against the erring officials who grants wrongful building permission in violation of the law.

The directives issued re-affirms the principle that unauthorized construction cannot be allowed to flourish and send a warning to the erring officials who permitted unauthorized construction in violation of the law.

In the public interest, the Court issued the following directions: -

"(i) While issuing the building planning permission, an undertaking be obtained from the builder/applicant, as the case may be, to the effect that possession of the building will be entrusted and/or handed over to the owners/beneficiaries only after obtaining completion/occupation certificate from the authorities concerned.

ii) The builder/developer/owner shall cause to be displayed at the construction site, a copy of the approved plan during the entire period of construction and the authorities concerned shall inspect the premises periodically and maintain a record of such inspection in their official records.

(iii) Upon conducting personal inspection and being satisfied that the building is constructed in accordance with the building planning permission given and there is no deviation in such construction in any manner, the completion/occupation certificate in respect of residential / commercial building, be issued by the authority concerned to the parties concerned, without causing undue delay. If any deviation is noticed, action must be taken in accordance with the Act and the process of issuance of completion/ occupation certificate should be deferred, unless and until the deviations pointed out are completely rectified.

iv) All the necessary service connections, such as, Electricity, water supply, sewerage connection, etc., shall be given by the service provider / Board to the buildings only after the production of the completion/occupation certificate.

(v) Even after issuance of completion certificate, deviation / violation if any contrary to the planning permission brought to the notice of the authority immediate steps be taken by the said authority concerned, in accordance with law, against the builder / owner / occupant; and the official, who is responsible for issuance of wrongful completion / occupation certificate shall be proceeded departmentally forthwith.

(vi) No permission /licence to conduct any business/trade must be given by any authorities including local bodies of States/ Union Territories in any unauthorized building irrespective of it being residential or commercial building.

(vii) The development must be in conformity with the zonal plan and usage. Any modification to such zonal plan and usage must be taken by strictly following the rules in place and in consideration of the larger public interest and the impact on the environment.

(viii) Whenever any request is made by the respective authority under the planning department/local body for co-operation from another department to take action against any unauthorized construction, the latter shall render immediate assistance and co-operation and any delay or dereliction would be viewed seriously. The States/UT must also take disciplinary action against the erring officials once it is brought to their knowledge.

(ix) In the event of any application / appeal / revision being filed by the owner or builder against the non-issuance of completion certificate or for regularisation of unauthorised construction or rectification of deviation etc., the same shall be disposed of by the authority concerned, including the pending appeals / revisions, as expeditiously as possible, in any event not later than 90 days as statutorily provided.

(x) If the authorities strictly adhere to the earlier directions issued by this court and those being passed today, they would have deterrent effect and the quantum of litigation before the Tribunal / Courts relating to house / building constructions would come down drastically. Hence, necessary instructions should be issued by all the State/UT Governments in the form of Circular to all concerned with a warning that all directions must be scrupulously followed and failure to do so will be viewed seriously, with departmental action being initiated against the erring officials as per law.

(xi) Banks / financial institutions shall sanction loan against any building as a security only after verifying the completion/occupation certificate issued to a building on production of the same by the parties concerned.

(xii) The violation of any of the directions would lead to initiation of contempt proceedings in addition to the prosecution under the respective laws."

Background

The Court was hearing an appeal challenging the Allahabad High Court's decision to demolish a building purchased by the appellants. The shops and commercial spaces had been illegally constructed by Respondent No. 5 and 6 on land allotted by Respondent No. 1, the U.P. Housing and Development Board, without obtaining the required approvals.

The appellant challenged the demolition order on grounds of long-standing occupancy and alleged lapses by the authorities in not sending prior notices to the appellant.

Respondent No.1 argued that the construction was in blatant violation of residential zoning and lacked statutory approvals. It informed that several notices were issued to the original allottee (Respondent No.5 and 6) and the Appellant, but no corrective action was taken. According to them, delay and inaction do not validate illegal constructions.
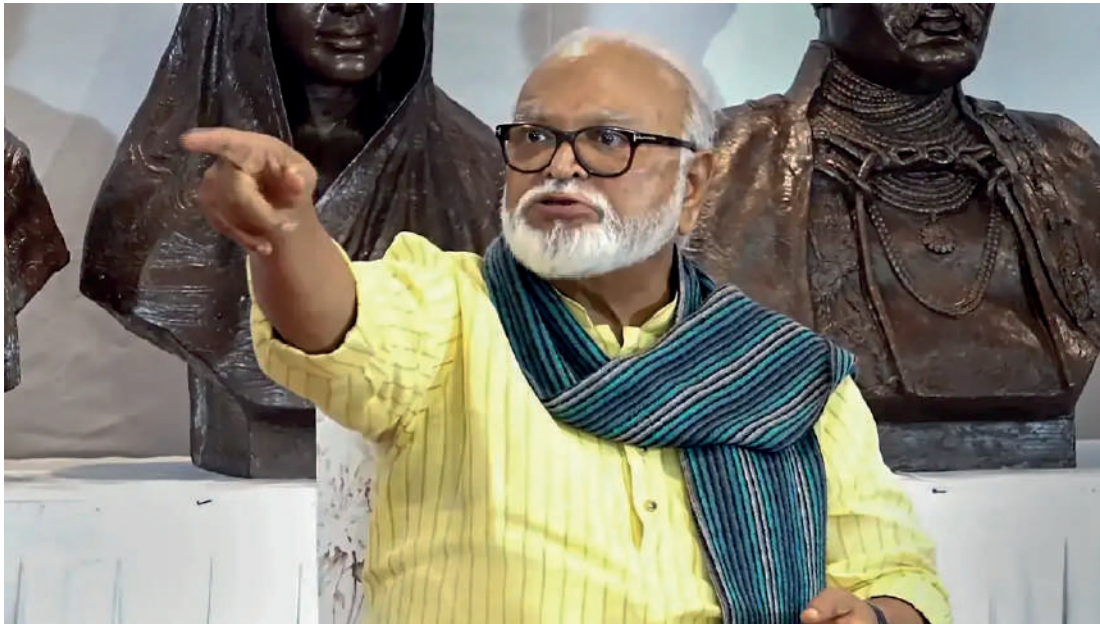
Affirming the High Court's decision, the judgment authored by Justice Mahadevan emphasized that illegal constructions cannot be permitted to thrive in blatant violation of mandatory legal provisions. The Court further noted that prolonged occupancy, financial investment, and authority's inaction do not legitimize unauthorized structures.

Chhagan Bhujbal hits out at Ajit Pawar amid resentment in party: 'Am not toy in anyone's hand'

Nashik

Senior Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Chhagan Bhujbal has expressed frustration with the conduct of the party leadership that precipitated his exclusion from the Maharashtra Cabinet and delay in political decisions. Bhujbal, who is a veteran in the politics of Maharashtra for more than 40 years, is miffed over the sidelining of him despite entries from Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis to accommodate him in the Cabinet.

Speaking to reporters on Monday as he left Nagpur for his hometown Nashik, Bhujbal said he had been overlooked for the ministerial position due to his support for the OBC community and his opposition to Maratha social activist Manoj Jarange-Patil. While acknowledging that Fadnavis had been keen on his inclusion, Bhujbal implied that his exclusion was a decision made at the top levels of NCP leadership, hinting at party chief Ajit Pawar's role in the matter.

Bhujbal, who recently won the Yeola Assembly seat, was also critical of the delay in declaring his candidacy for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. "I've been preparing for the elections for a month, but my name was not announced. I opted out because of this lack of clarity," he said.

He further emphasised that his issue was not with the ministerial position itself but with the way he had been treated and disregarded by the party.

The NCP leader also discussed his attempts to secure a Rajya Sabha seat, which were similarly met with delays and rejection. "I was told to contest the Assembly elections instead of going to Rajya Sabha. Now, they offer me the Rajya Sabha seat again, but I can't accept it after being elected as an MLA. It would betray my voters," Bhujbal explained.

His frustration was evident when he asked rhetorically, "Am I a toy in your hands? You want me to go to Rajya Sabha when you decide, contest elections when you decide, and sit or stand when you choose. "That Chhagan Bhujbal is not that kind of person." He is also intending to meet with his supporters in Nashik on Wednesday, to talk about the future course of action.

As a senior leader, Praful Patel from the NCP tried to touch on the subject, stating that the party could send Bhujbal to Rajya Sabha, to which he replied, underscoring how disillusioned he felt because he reiterated that his political future is not so certain, and the party should understand more respectfully about his contributions.

There is, however, escalating frustration among old-timers within the NCP, which hints at making cracks in the internal cohesion of the party.

Ambedkar row: Uddhav seeks action against Shah, asks 'will Ajit Pawar, Shinde, Athawale break silence'

Mumbai

Shiv Sena (Thackeray) chief Uddhav Thackeray on Wednesday sought action against Home Minister Amit Shah for his statement on Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in the Rajya Sabha. While addressing a press conference in Mumbai, the former Maharashtra chief minister said Shah would not have dared to make remarks about Ambedkar without BJP and RSS backing.

" The manner in which BJP is insulting someone who gave us the Constitution is not acceptable to us. Will BJP and RSS take action against Amit Shah? Or did they tell Amit to say this?...Is this acceptable to other parties that have extended support to Amit Shah, be it Chandrababu Naidu or Nitish Kumar or Ajit Pawar? Will Ramdas Athawale continue to be in their cabinet even after this?," he said during the press conference.

Yesterday, the way the country's Home Minister took the name of Maharashtra's son Ambedkar and said that taking Ambedkar's name is a fashion, the hypocrisy of BJP has come to the fore, he added

After continuous attacks on Jawaharlal Nehru, now they dared to turn to Ambedkar, Thackeray said.

Will Union Minister Ramdas Athawale now resign, he asked. Thackeray also attacked Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, asking will he break the alliance over the issue.

PM Modi should take action against Shah or resign, he demanded.

Shah should apologise: Rahul

Meanwhile, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday said the country will not tolerate Ambedkar's insult and demanded that Shah should apologise for his remarks in the Rajya Sabha. Several MPs of the INDIA bloc, including Congress leaders Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi, staged a protest in Parliament premises demanding Shah's apology for his remarks which they claimed were an insult to B R Ambedkar.

Sharing pictures from the protest, Gandhi said in a Facebook post in Hindi, "Baba Saheb is the architect of the Constitution, a great man who gave direction to the country. The country will not tolerate his insult or the insult to the Constitution framed by him. Home Minister should apologize!"

Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra also shared pictures from the protest on X.

"One gets rights by taking the name of Ambedkar ji. Taking the name of Ambedkar ji is a symbol of human dignity. Ambedkar ji's name is a symbol of self-respect of crores of Dalits and deprived people," Priyanka Gandhi said in a post in Hindi on X.

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

PM Modi hits back at Congress

On the other side, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stoutly defended Shah from the Opposition's charge that he insulted BR Ambedkar in his speech in the Rajya Sabha, asserting that the Home Minister in fact exposed the party's "dark history of insulting" the architect of the Constitution, leaving the main opposition "stung and stunned".

"They are clearly stung and stunned by the facts he presented, which is why they are now indulging in theatrics. Sadly, for them, people know the truth," PM Modi said in a series of posts on X.

When it comes to Ambedkar, his government's respect and reverence are absolute, the prime minister asserted.

Congress twisted facts, distorted my statement on Ambedkar: Amit Shah

New Delhi

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

Addressing a press conference here, Shah alleged that the Congress in the past has also misrepresented his and even PM Narendra Modi's comments to spread confusion and mislead people.

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

The senior BJP leader said the Congress also insulted VD Savarkar and blew to smithereens the values enshrined in the Constitution by imposing Emergency.

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

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

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

Kharge, he added, has acted under Rahul Gandhi's pressure to be part of this "malicious" campaign against him by distorting his views on Ambedkar.

Sharad Pawar meets PM Modi with a group of farmers

New Delhi

The last time Nationalist Congress Party (SP) chief Sharad Pawar met Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the meeting had generated a lot of political buzz.

Today, after a few years, Sharad Pawar, a leading light of the Opposition alliance, again called on Prime Minister Modi at his Parliament House office.

He was accompanied by some farmers from the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, with the Prime Minister's office putting out images of the meeting that looked warm and congenial on the face.

This is the first meeting between Sharad Pawar and Modi since the complete rout of the opposition Mahha Vikas Aghadi in Maharashtra Assembly polls.

Sharad Pawar's NCP(SP) is a major constituent of the Aghadi which lost comprehensively at the hands of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance coalition in the state.

Pawar and other constituents of the Aghadi have been alleging Tampering of the electronic voting machines as a possible reason behind the Opposition debacle in the state.

The Agadi partners have even approached the election commission in this matter.

The Pawar and Modi meeting at the height of this distrust is important.

'Matter of shame': Priyanka slams Yogi for sending youths to Israel

New Delhi

In a swipe at Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Tuesday said throwing youths into the war zone in Israel for "employment" is not an achievement but a matter of shame.

Her remarks came after Adityanath took a veiled jibe at Priyanka for carrying a handbag to Parliament that had 'Palestine' emblazoned on it.

"Yesterday, a Congress leader was seen walking around Parliament carrying a Palestine bag, while we are sending our youth to Israel for opportunities. So far, more than 5,600 youth from Uttar Pradesh have gone to Israel for construction work. Every youth gets free food and accommodation besides a monthly salary of Rs 1.5 lakh there. There is also full guarantee of safety," Adityanath said on the second day of the winter session of the Uttar Pradesh Assembly.

Hitting back at Adityanath, Priyanka said those who sent Uttar Pradesh's youths to war-torn Israel instead of providing them employment are calling it their achievement.

They are neither aware of the unemployment situation in the state nor do they understand the pain of those youths and their families," she said.

According to reports, the youths who have gone to work in Israel are saving their lives by hiding in bunkers and the companies are exploiting them, she said in a post.

5 terrorists killed in encounter with security forces

Kulgam

At least five terrorists have been reportedly killed after an encounter broke out in Jammu and Kashmir's Kulgam district on Thursday, officials said. Security forces had launched a cordon-and-search operation at Kadder in the Behibagh area of the district on Wednesday night following information about the presence of suspected terrorists there, the officials said.

They said the search operation turned into an encounter as the terrorists opened fire on the security forces, who retaliated.

The neutralised terrorists were identified as Yasir Javaid, Adil Hajam, Mushtaq Itoo, Irfan Lone, Asif Sheikh.

In November, a Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO), laid down his life in a gunfight with the terrorists in Kishtwar district. Three other soldiers were also injured in the encounter in Keshwan forests when the joint search parties of the army and police intercepted a group of terrorists responsible for the recent killing of two village defence guards. Two terrorists were also killed in November in an overnight encounter with security forces in Baramulla district. Their identification and affiliation are being ascertained, the Kashmir Zone police posted on X. Incriminating materials, arms and ammunition were recovered from the slain terrorists following the encounter which started on Thursday night after the security forces launched an intelligence-based operation.

Electricity department inspects SP MP Zia Ur Rehman's residence, FIR lodged for power theft

Sambhal

The Uttar Pradesh electricity department on Thursday filed an FIR for irregularities in electricity usage at the premises of Samajwadi Party MP from Sambhal Zia Ur Rehman. The electricity department is also preparing to file an FIR in a case of threatening the electricity department officials who went to check the electricity meter at the MP's house.

The electricity department team reached Zia ur Rehman Bark's house to check the load of the new meters at the MP's residence.

Earlier, the electricity department flagged irregularities in electricity usage at the premises of Rehman's home.

What was the issue?

Superintendent Engineer Vinod Kumar of the electricity department told reporters that there are two electricity connections at the MP's premises.

"One is a two-kilowatt connection registered under MP

Zia Ur Rehman's name, located in the front of the property. The second one is another two-kilowatt connection under the name of his grandfather, Shafiqur Rahman Barq," Kumar said.

"The name on the second meter was not updated after his grandfather's death. We are now sealing that meter and issuing a notice for a laboratory examination of its status. The examination will be conducted in the presence of parties concerned, and the process will be video-recorded for transparency," he

added.

The official also claimed that there were billing discrepancies in the MP's electricity usage. "Over the last six months, the bill for the MP's meter has consistently shown zero usage. The only exception was in June when a usage of 13 units was recorded. From July to November, the meter showed zero unit consumption," Kumar told reporters.

When asked about security measures, Kumar added, "Security personnel were present in the area during inspections. However, residents in the lanes often oppose such checks, leading to protests."

This scrutiny comes amid ongoing police investigations against Zia Ur Rehman and others in connection with violent clashes that took place on November 24 in Sambhal over a court-ordered survey of the Mughal-era Shahi Jama Masjid in the Kot Garvi area of the city.

Schools in Gurugram, and Faridabad shift to hybrid mode due to air pollution, Haryana department issues order

Gurugram

Amid the worsening of air quality in the Delhi-NCR region, the Haryana government has taken a significant step toward improving school students' well-being. The Haryana school education government has asked all government and private schools located in Gurugram and Faridabad to switch to hybrid teaching mode for all classes except for classes 10 and 12, with immediate effect, until further orders.

The decision follows the implementation of stage four measures under the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) to address the hazardous pollution levels in the NCR.

The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) has also released instructions for all government and private schools in Faridabad and Gurugram to shift classes to hybrid mode wherever feasible.

What was said in the official notice?

"All actions as envisaged under Stage-IV of the latest GRAP Schedule as issued by the Commission vide its order dated 13.12.2024 be implemented with immediate effect in right earnest by all agencies in entire NCR, in addition to the actions under Stage-I to Stage-III of the revised GRAP Schedule

(December 2024) already in force", the department said in the official notice.

Additionally, the heads of schools of government and private schools have been directed to conduct classes in schools for students up to classes 9 and 11 in a hybrid mode (Physical and online mode), with immediate effect.

Moreover, the school authorities have been asked to communicate this information to the parents and guardians of students immediately. This move is in addition to the actions already being implemented under Stage I to Stage 3 of the revised GRAP schedule, which were introduced in force in early December.

Due to deteriorating air quality and the implementation of Stage 3 limitations under the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), schools in Gurugram were previously forced to close for students up to Class 5. This action was taken to shield young children from the negative consequences of pollution. For students above Class 5, hybrid classes continued, providing schools and parents flexibility. The decision was made as part of broader efforts across Delhi-NCR to solve the serious air quality problem while minimising disruption to education.

Former PM Deve Gowda urges Parliament to consider reservation on economic grounds

New Delhi

Former Prime Minister and JD(S) leader H D Deve Gowda on Tuesday urged Parliament to reconsider whether reservation should continue based on caste or it should be changed to economic criteria.

Participating in a discussion on the "Glorious Journey of 75 Years of the Constitution of India" in Rajya Sabha, Deve Gowda said, "The House itself has to apply its mind on what all happened in the past and whether we should give reservation only on the basis of poverty in this country." People are suffering "even with the reservations that we have given in the past and it has not lifted the people who are still suffering for two-square meals a day", he said.

The former prime minister suggested that the House should consider whether reservation should continue as it has been, or if it should focus on those who are most impoverished and whose living conditions are the most dire. "If the House thinks over and the leaders think over, this can be thought over by the prime minister (Narendra Modi) before taking any decision on the reservation," Deve Gowda said.

He said the Constitution drafted by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar has withstood the test of time. Referring to Leader of the House J P Nadda's speech before him, Deve Gowda said it was a "thought-provoking speech" on reservation and the various challenges the country has faced over the past 75 years.

CAG flags deficiencies in training of IAF pilots

New Delhi

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India, in a report tabled in Parliament today, highlighted significant deficiencies in the training of Indian Air Force (IAF) pilots. The performance audit, covering 2016-2021, flagged outdated equipment and critical issues with the basic trainer aircraft, Pilatus PC-7 Mk-II, including engine oil leaks.

The report said the CAG team studied the operations of the Pilatus PC-7 Mk-II aircraft which is being used as a basic trainer aircraft to impart 'Stage-1' flying training to trainee pilots since May 2013.

According to the report, 16 of the 64 Pilatus PC-7 Mk-II aircraft (25 per cent) reported 38 engine oil leaks between 2013 and 2021. The IAF raised the issue with the manufacturer, and as of August 2023, the matter was stated to be under investigation.

Delays in the IAF's aircraft modernisation plans have affected 'Stage 2' and 'Stage 3' pilot training for transport and helicopter streams.

Helicopter pilots are trained on legacy platforms with outdated avionics, necessitating additional conversion training for operational units like Mi-17 V5 helicopters. Transport pilot training still relies on older Dornier-228 aircraft lacking modern cockpits.

The CAG also noted limitations in training simulators. While Virtual Reality (VR) Simulators and Flying Training Devices (FTDs) provide procedural training, they lack physical movement to simulate the real flight experience.

Pilot shortages were another concern. In February 2015, the IAF assessed a shortage of 486 pilots. Between 2016 and 2021, an annual intake of 222 trainee pilots was planned, but actual recruitment fell short, increasing the shortage to 596 pilots, according to the report.

Navy commissions next-gen survey ship

New Delhi

The Indian Navy today commissioned INS Nirdeshak, a next-generation survey ship designed for mapping underwater terrain. The data gathered will aid warships, submarines and autonomous underwater vessels.

The commissioning ceremony took place at the Naval Dockyard in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. INS Nirdeshak is the second vessel of the Survey Vessel (Large) project, which envisions a total of four ships. The first vessel, INS Sandhayak, has already been inducted into the Navy.

The Rs 2,435 crore contract to build these ships was awarded to Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers (GRSE), Kolkata, in 2018. Designed by the Indian Navy's Warship Design Bureau, the ships feature 80 per cent indigenous content, with contributions from the Steel Authority of India Limited, MSMEs and private industry partners.

INS Nirdeshak boasts advanced operational capabilities, an endurance of 25 days at sea, and a top speed exceeding 18 knots. The vessel's commissioning represents a significant step in modernising the Navy's hydrographic fleet and supports India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision.

The ship is part of the Indian Naval Hydrographic Department's seven-vessel fleet, tasked with producing official electronic navigational charts for Indian waters. It also supports capacity-building efforts in the Indian Ocean Region by training personnel from various countries. The department has also signed MoUs with various countries for surveying their waters as part of international cooperation.

111 trees for every girl child: SC lauds Rajasthan village's initiative

New Delhi

The Supreme Court (SC) today lauded the environmental initiative of Piplantri village in Rajasthan, where 111 trees are planted for every girl child born. In its order, the court urged the Centre to formulate a comprehensive policy for the governance and management of sacred groves, which are community-protected forests that hold cultural and ecological value.

The court said that the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) should develop a nationwide plan to survey sacred groves, identify their location, size and boundaries, to ensure strict protection against encroachment due to agricultural activities or human habitation. It emphasised that the boundaries should be flexible to accommodate natural growth, ensuring the preservation of these ecosystems.

The Bench, comprising Justice BR Gavai, Justice SVN Bhatti and Justice Sandeep Mehta, also highlighted the importance of protecting sacred groves under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, particularly through the provision of declaring "community reserves" under Section 36-C.

The court directed Rajasthan's Forest Department to conduct detailed mapping, both on-ground and using satellite technology, of each sacred grove, including Orans, Dev-vans, and Rundhs, as they are locally known. It called for the completion of this survey in all districts, and recommended that these groves be classified as forests, as per the Central Empowered Committee's 2005 report.

The ruling came in response to a petition concerning the state of sacred groves in Rajasthan. The Court noted the importance of sustainable conservation and the need to empower communities historically involved in the protection of these groves. It further directed the Rajasthan Government to recognize these communities by designating sacred groves as "community forest resources" under the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

In addition to the sacred groves initiative, the court praised the 'Piplantri model' of environmental conservation in Rajasthan's Rajsamand district. The movement began after the tragic death of a girl child and has since transformed the village's environment, which was once devastated by marble mining. According to sources, the practice of planting 111 trees for every girl born has significantly improved the area's water table, raised by 800–900 feet, and cooled the local climate by three to four degrees Celsius.

Farmers can directly come to us with demands: Supreme Court

New Delhi

As agitating farmers refused to interact with the court-appointed high-powered committee, the Supreme Court on Wednesday said its doors were always open to their suggestions and demands to reach an amicable solution to the problem. "We clarify that the court's doors are always open to any suggestion or demand by the farmers directly or through their authorised representative," a Bench led by Justice Surya Justice Kant said. The assurance came from the Bench after Punjab Advocate General Gurminder Singh told the Bench that the farmers had refused to interact with the SC-appointed committee, which had invited them for talks on December 17. Singh suggested that the farmers could be allowed to submit their demands directly to the court.

The Bench asked the Punjab Government to extend Dallewal immediate medical aid, saying it would have serious repercussions if something untoward happened to him. "He needs to be healthy to agitate… As an elected government and constitutional organ, you would not like to invite the blame that something happened to him… Even farmers should be concerned about saving his life. He's their leader. You tell us something tomorrow. Do something swiftly," the Bench told the Advocate General.

Opposition wants HM sacked over Ambedkar remark

New Delhi

The opposition and ruling blocs were ranged against each other today over Home Minister Amit Shah's Tuesday remarks about Dr BR Ambedkar, with the Congress demanding his ouster from the Cabinet and Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly backing him.

Hours after the Congress-led INDIA bloc leaders disrupted the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha demanding Shah's apology or resignation, the Prime Minister hit out at the Congress, saying its "rotten ecosystem" and "malicious lies" couldn't hide its misdeeds. "In Parliament, Amit Shah had exposed the Congress' dark history of insulting Dr Ambedkar and ignoring the SC/ST communities. They (Congress-led Opposition) are clearly stung and stunned by the facts he presented, which is why they are now indulging in theatrics," the PM said in one of his six tweets on the issue.

Parties like the Congress, Trinamool Congress, AAP, RJD, SP, Shiv Sena (UBT) and the Left protested against Shah inside Parliament and outside. Trinamool Congress MP Derek O'Brien submitted a notice to move a privilege motion against Shah in the Rajya Sabha, where the Home Minister made the remarks.

Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge also warned that there would be a countrywide agitation if Shah did not resign. After Modi waded into the issue, Kharge and Shah held back-to-back press conferences to stress their points. Kharge warned of street protests should Shah not resign before midnight and Shah hit back, threatening legal action and saying that the Congress selectively edited his remarks with a malicious intent to spread lies.

Kharge urged the PM to sack his Cabinet colleague instead of backing him. "We want Amit Shah to quit, I want to tell the Prime Minister he should dismiss Shah before midnight if he has respect for Babasaheb. If there is no resignation, there will be protests all over the country...."

The BJP, Shah said, would consider all legal options inside and outside Parliament and take appropriate action in the matter. Accusing the Congress of returning to its "old familiar habit of distorting statements of senior leaders to spawn confusion", Shah said statements of the PM had been twisted in the past and his own remarks altered using the AI.

What Shah had said

"It has become a fashion to say Ambedkar, Ambedkar... Had they (Oppn) taken God's name so many times, they would have been assured of a place in heaven. We are happy the Congress is taking Ambedkar's name, but the party should also speak about how it treated him."

Congress stung by Shah's exposé, says PM Modi

New Delhi

As the Congress mounted an offensive against the BJP over Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks about BR Ambedkar on Tuesday, PM Narendra Modi stepped in to hit back saying the opposition party had been stung by Shah's exposé on its "serial insults" of the father of the Constitution.

"If the Congress and its rotten ecosystem think their malicious lies can hide their misdeeds of several years, especially their insults towards Dr Ambedkar, they are gravely mistaken!" said Modi defending Shah over his remarks made in the Rajya Sabha.

"The list of the Congress' sins towards Dr Ambedkar includes: Getting him defeated in elections not once but twice; Pandit Nehru campaigning against him and making his loss a prestige issue; denying him a Bharat Ratna; and denying his portrait a place of pride in Parliament's Central Hall," said the PM.

"They are clearly stung by the facts he presented, which is why they are now indulging in theatrics," he said.

The Congress and some of its leaders have received notices from social media platform X for sharing certain video clips of Amit Shah on their handles.

India, China agree to 'inject vitality' to settle border dispute, maintain peace

New Delhi

The Special Representatives of India and China today reached a consensus on multiple points, including "injecting vitality" into the process of settling the long-pending boundary dispute between the two countries and maintaining peace and tranquillity in the border areas to promote bilateral relations.

The decisions were announced after the Special Representatives — National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi — met in Beijing. This was the 23rd round of Special Representative-level talks since 2003, the first since December 2019 and also the first since the friction along the Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh. A statement issued by the Ministry of External Affairs said the Special Representatives reiterated the importance of maintaining the bilateral relationship while seeking a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable framework for the settlement of the boundary question. The duo agreed on the need for having stable, predictable and amicable India-China relations. The two sides had agreed to resume the Special Representative-level talks when Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping met on the sidelines of the 16th BRICS summit at Kazan in Russia in October. The Special Representatives were tasked with "meeting at an early date to oversee the management of peace and tranquillity in the border areas and to explore a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution to the boundary question". At the talks today, Doval and Wang affirmed the implementation of the October disengagement agreement. The MEA said "they emphasised the need for ensuring peaceful conditions on the ground so that the issues on the border do not hold back the normal development of the bilateral relations". The two sides spoke about "drawing on the learnings from the events of 2020". The MEA said the discussion included "measures to maintain peace and tranquillity on the border and advance effective border management".

India conducts first satellite tagging of Ganges River Dolphin

New Delhi

In a first-ever move, the satellite tagging of Ganges River Dolphin was successfully accomplished on December 18.

This initiative was implemented by Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and conducted by the Union Environment Ministry in collaboration with the Assam Forest Department.

This is the first tagging, not only in India but also for the species.

In a statement, the Environment Ministry said that given the paucity of information on Ganges River Dolphin habitat needs, movement pattern or home-range information, it was decided to undertake satellite tagging of dolphins.

"The first of the tagging took place in Assam, where a healthy male river dolphin was tagged and released under utmost veterinary care. The tagging exercise will help in understanding their seasonal and migratory patterns, range, distribution, and habitat utilisation, particularly in fragmented or disturbed river systems," the ministry said.

Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav said, "Happy to share the news of the first-ever tagging of Ganges River Dolphin in Assam—a historic milestone for the species and India!"

The Ganges River Dolphin is distributed across the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna and Karnaphuli river systems. However, its distribution has drastically declined over the past century.

Despite its wide range, significant knowledge gaps remain regarding this species due to its elusive behaviour. It surfaces for only 5-30 seconds at a time, posing a significant challenge in understanding the ecological needs of the species and for any scientifically sound conservation interventions, the ministry said.

WII Director Virendra R. Tiwari said, "Tagging River Dolphins will contribute to evidence-based conservation strategies that are urgently needed for this species. I am delighted that this historic step has been undertaken".

US Sanctions On Pak's Aerospace, Defence Agency For Continuing Proliferation Of Long-Range Missiles

Washington

The United States on Wednesday slapped sanctions on four Pakistani entities, including the state-owned flagship aerospace and defence agency -- National Development Complex (NDC) -- on charges of contributing to Pakistan's ballistic missile programme.

In light of the continuing proliferation threat of Pakistan's long-range missile development, the United States is designating four entities for sanctions which target proliferators of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, the State Department said.

In addition to the NDC, the three other entities are Akhtar and Sons Private Limited, Affiliates International and Rockside Enterprise. All three are based in Karachi, while the NDC is in Islamabad.

The NDC has worked to acquire items in furtherance of Pakistan's long-range ballistic missile programme -- including special vehicle chassis intended to be used as launch support equipment for ballistic missiles and missile-testing equipment.

The United States assesses that the NDC is responsible for Pakistan's development of ballistic missiles, including the SHAHEEN-series ballistic missiles, the State Department said.

Akhtar and Sons Private Limited has worked for the NDC to supply a range of equipment to Pakistan's long-range ballistic missile programme. Affiliates International has facilitated the procurement of missile-applicable items for the NDC and others in support of Pakistan's ballistic missile programme.

Rockside Enterprise has worked for the NDC to supply a range of equipment to Pakistan's long-range ballistic missile programme, the State Department said.

All these entities "having engaged, or attempted to engage, in activities or transactions that have materially contributed to, or pose a risk of materially contributing to, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or their means of delivery (including missiles capable of delivering such weapons), including any efforts to manufacture, acquire, possess, develop, transport, transfer or use such items, by Pakistan," State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

The NDC -- which is responsible for Pakistan's ballistic missile programme and has worked to acquire items to advance Pakistan's long-range ballistic missile programme -- and Affiliates International, Akhtar and Sons Private Limited, and Rockside Enterprise worked to supply equipment and missile-applicable items to Pakistan's ballistic missile programme, including its long-range missile programme, Miller said.

US Lawmaker Seeks Targeted Sanctions Against Bangladesh

Washington

Expressing a sense of urgency on the escalating crisis of human rights violations in Bangladesh, an influential American Congressman called on the US Departments of Treasury and State on Wednesday to impose and enforce sanctions on those perpetrating these heinous acts against minorities in the South Asian country.

"I call on the Departments of Treasury and State to impose and enforce sanctions on those perpetrating these heinous acts against minorities in Bangladesh," Indian American Congressman Shri Thanedar said in front of the US Capitol on Wednesday afternoon in the presence of Hindu Americans who had come from various parts of the country.

Since July, he said, Bangladesh has experienced a spike in political violence, leading to the resignation and departure of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina. "Since then, we have seen Bangladesh plunge into political turmoil, with its Hindu, Buddhist and Christian minorities bearing the brunt of violent acts towards their people and places of worship by a majority Muslim population," Thanedar said.

"The creation of a new government with Prime Minister Muhammad Yunus is yet another attempt in their history to obtain lasting peace and stability for the country. While I have my concerns regarding this new government, I am hopeful that with our assistance, Bangladesh will finally find a peaceful resolution to these conflicts," he said.

The United States has a storied history of championing the oppressed and this issue should be no different, he noted. "When we receive a global call for help, we must respond appropriately as the world's bellwether of human rights. We must urge Prime Minister Muhammad Yunus to fulfil his promise of restoring peace and rebuilding the nation on the principles of equality and justice," Thanedar said.

"Hindu temples have been vandalised, burned and desecrated. Just this month, the Iskcon Namhatta centre was burnt to the ground in a coordinated attack upon the Hindu people in the Dhaka district of Bangladesh. Before that, over 70 temples throughout Bangladesh suffered similar attacks from mobs seeking to persecute Hindu minorities. Hindu religious leaders are regularly arrested on dubious charges and vulnerable communities have been forced to flee their homes in fear," he said.

US Govt Urges Supreme Court To Dismiss Rana's Petition For Writ Of Certiorari

Washington

The United States government has urged the Supreme Court to dismiss "the petition for a writ of certiorari" filed by Mumbai-attack convict Tahawwur Rana, a Canadian national of Pakistani origin, against his extradition to India.

India is seeking the extradition of Rana as he is wanted in the Mumbai terror attack case. Having lost the legal battle in lower courts and several federal courts, including the US Court of Appeals for the North Circuit in San Francisco, Rana on November 13 filed a "petition for a writ of certiorari" before the US Supreme Court.

In a long battle, this is Rana's last legal chance to not be extradited to India. "The petition for a writ of certiorari should be denied," US Solicitor General Elizabeth B Prelogar said in its filing before the Supreme Court on December 16. Rana is not entitled to relief from extradition to India in this case, she argued in a 20-page submission.

In his "petition for a writ of certiorari to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit", Rana has argued that he was tried and acquitted in the federal court in the Northern District of Illinois (Chicago) on charges relating to the 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai. "India now seeks to extradite him for trial on charges based on the identical conduct at issue in the Chicago case," the plea has said.

Prelogar disagreed. "The government does not concede that all of the conduct on which India seeks extradition was covered by the government's prosecution in this case. For example, India's forgery charges are based in part on conduct that was not charged in the United States: petitioner's use of false information in an application to formally open a branch office of the Immigration Law Centre submitted to the Reserve Bank of India," the US solicitor general said.

"It is not clear that the jury's verdict in this case -- which involves conspiracy charges and was somewhat difficult to parse -- means that he has been 'convicted or acquitted' on all of the specific conduct that India has charged," Prelogar said.

Several Children Killed In Stampede At A Holiday Fair Event In Nigeria

Abuja

Several children have died during a stampede on Wednesday at a holiday funfair in southwestern Nigeria, authorities said.

The incident happened at the Islamic High School in Basorun, Oyo State, near the economic hub of Lagos. Security forces attended the scene and arrested the event organizers, state governor Seyi Makinde said in a statement.

"Earlier today, an incident occurred in Islamic High School Basorun, the venue of an event organised for families. Sadly, a stampede at the venue has led to multiple loss of lives and injuries. This is a very sad day," Makinde said.

"We sympathise with the parents whose joy has suddenly been turned to mourning due to these deaths," he added.

Nigeria's national emergency services said it has deployed a team to help provide assistance to the victims. Children injured at the venue were taken to local hospitals where parents were asked to check for missing persons. Video footage that appeared to be from the scene showed a large crowd of mostly children looking on as some children were being carried away from an open field.

Fix health insurance

THE shocking murder of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson in the US, reportedly motivated by grievances over denied claims, has ignited a global debate about health insurance systems. While the US struggles with its own healthcare challenges, India faces a similarly disheartening reality. As per a recent survey, 43 per cent of policyholders in India reported difficulties in claim processing, ranging from rejections due to "pre-existing conditions" to opaque exclusions hidden in fine print. India's health insurance sector, touted as a safety net, often traps patients in a web of delays and financial burdens. Claims are sometimes processed so sluggishly that hospital discharges are delayed, forcing families to bear additional costs. Ambiguous contracts filled with technical jargon only worsen the plight of policyholders, many of whom are left financially and emotionally drained.

Adding to the problem, insurance premiums have seen staggering hikes — over 50 per cent for one in five policyholders last year — making coverage unaffordable for many middle-class families. This trend undermines public trust and risks turning health

insurance into an unsustainable financial burden rather than a source of relief. The lessons from the US are clear: distrust between stakeholders-insurers, healthcare providers and patients leads to systemic failures. India must urgently address this mistrust by strengthening transparency and accountability within the insurance sector. Models like managed care, which integrate healthcare delivery with insurance, can reduce costs and improve patient outcomes.

The Insurance Regulatory Development Authority of India must enforce stricter transparency norms, ensure grievance redress mechanisms and penalise unscrupulous practices. Strengthening public systems like Ayushman Bharat can complement these measures by reducing dependence on private insurers. The growing disenchantment with health insurance calls for meaningful reforms. India cannot afford a system that prioritises profit over patient welfare.

// satyasya paramaṁ nidhānam //

We would like to hear from you. Please share your comments on editor.acrossstate@gmail.com

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World chess champ

IT'S been Gukesh Dommaraju's year. In September, he led the Indian team to a historic gold medal at the biennial Chess Olympiad. Now, the 18-year-old prodigy from Chennai has fulfilled a childhood dream by becoming the youngest world champion in chess history. He is the first Indian to hold the title after Vishwanathan Anand. Twists and turns marked the 14 games in Singapore. Gukesh and China's Ding Liren, the reigning champ, were tied with two wins each before the final game. Just when a draw seemed imminent, setting the stage for high-speed games to break the tie, Ding committed a dramatic blunder. He was gracious in defeat, marking the end of the three-week match that kept fans riveted across the globe. Former world champions Magnus

Carlsen and Vladimir Kramnik may have criticised the quality of play, but in the larger scheme of things, it's the game of chess that won.

Gukesh's victory signals a generational shift in the chess world. Yet, the new champion does not harbour any illusions. He remains outside the world's top three by rating, and is not even the highest-rated Indian. That spot goes to 21-year-old Arjun Erigaisi. In his post-match press conference, Gukesh acknowledged that 'becoming the world champion doesn't mean that I'm the best player in the world, there's obviously Magnus.' The 34-year-old Norwegian, who is regarded as possibly the greatest chess player of all time, said Gukesh has shown the potential to establish himself as the 'number two player in the world, who knows, maybe the number one'.

The surging popularity of chess as a spectator sport could ignite a new wave of enthusiasm. Gukesh's achievement also cements India's growing influence in the chess world. What's needed is more government and private support to nurture a robust ecosystem.

Modi-AKD meeting

THE meeting between Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on Monday marks a critical juncture in Indo-Lanka relations. As Sri Lanka rebuilds after years of economic and political turmoil, Dissanayake's visit signifies Colombo's trust in India's partnership for its recovery. Notably, this is Dissanayake's first international visit since assuming office in September. It underscores his priority to deepen bilateral ties with India and reaffirm Sri Lanka's commitment to a collaborative regional vision. President Dissanayake's tribute to Mahatma Gandhi at Rajghat earlier in the day set the tone for the visit. Modi and AKD focused on deepening economic cooperation, exploring investment opportunities and bolstering regional security. It is a reflection of their shared aspirations for prosperity and stability in the Indian Ocean Region. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's earlier visit to Colombo underscored India's commitment to Sri Lanka's economic revival and laid the groundwork for this fruitful dialogue.

The island nation's significance as India's closest maritime neighbour ensures it occupies a central role in New Delhi's strategic outlook — from fostering trade to safeguarding regional security. Dissanayake is known for his pragmatic leadership. Anchored in leftist ideology and focus on anti-corruption reforms, AKD's regime marks a move away from the dynastic politics that has long dominated Sri Lankan governance. It aligns well with Modi's own grassroots approach, offering opportunities for renewed cooperation, particularly in addressing economic rebuilding and ensuring regional stability.

The meeting underscored Delhi's support for Sri Lanka's economic recovery, recalling India's $4-billion assistance during the 2022 crisis and its role in facilitating an IMF bailout. By advancing mutual interests and focusing on sustainable solutions, India and Sri Lanka are poised to forge new paths for cooperation in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

Running dry

HIMACHAL Pradesh, often dubbed the 'Power state of India' due to its hydel resources, is battling a severe electricity crisis, unravelling the fragility of its energy management. With hydropower generation plunging by 90% in some regions, the state's reliance on external power sources predicament — with a debt nearing Rs 90,000 crore — limits its ability to invest in modernising infrastructure. Despite being a power-surplus state in summer, the failure to ensure year-round energy stability highlights the lack of a coherent policy for resource management. The

underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms. The root of the problem lies in reduced water flows in rivers feeding the hydel projects. The situation is compounded by ageing infrastructure and a workforce shortage in the electricity board. Power plants like Baner and Gajj are now operating at a fraction of their capacity, creating a dire supply-demand mismatch, especially during the peak winter months. Even the much-touted Larji hydroelectric project struggles to recover from monsoon damages, deepening the crisis.

This predicament exposes deeper fiscal and administrative woes. Over 65% of the state electricity board's technical posts remain vacant, a testament to years of neglect. Furthermore, the state's financial

state government has secured a stopgap solution by procuring 500 million units of power at discounted rates from the Centre. However, this measure barely covers half the winter demand, leaving domestic consumers and industries grappling with disruptions.

A sustainable resolution requires investment in resilient infrastructure, recruitment drives for technical staff and a shift towards alternative energy sources like solar and wind. Himachal must also reassess its fiscal priorities, diverting resources from populist subsidies toward long-term energy security. This crisis serves as a wake-up call: without proactive reforms, the state risks progress on its development aspirations.

Perilous fast track

THE life of farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, who is on a fast-unto-death, is precious — as rightly observed by the Supreme Court. So too are the lives of all protesters who are staying put at Shambhu and Khanauri borders in the bitter cold. And Dallewal himself has said that the lives of farmers pushed to the brink by flawed government policies are more valuable than his own. If every kisan's life really matters, why have things come to such a pass? And why has the time-tested path of dialogue been abandoned?
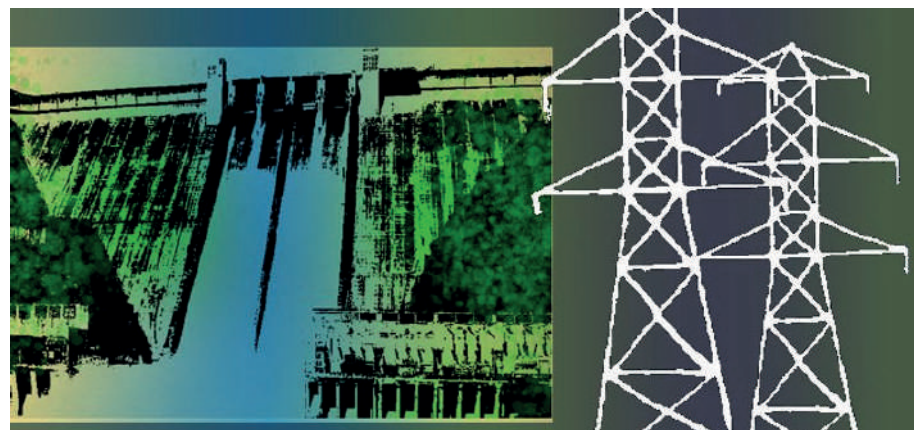
Unfortunately, it was only after the apex court's intervention that senior representatives of the Punjab and Central governments reached out to Dallewal. But it is unlikely that his extreme stand will force the Centre

to accept farmers' key demands, including a legal guarantee of MSP for various crops. After all, over 700 of them had died during a year-long agitation before the Modi government finally repealed the three farm laws. Ironically, Dallewal's hunger strike and the efforts to dissuade him are eclipsing the big picture — the widespread agrarian distress fuelled by factors such as the debt burden, rising costs of farming and inadequate support for crop diversification.

The SC has urged farmers to adopt the Gandhian way of staging protests. The Mahatma considered fasting as a potent weapon in the Satyagraha armoury, but he made it clear that a Satyagrahi should do it only as the last resort — "when all other avenues of redress have been explored and have failed". Leaders of farm unions still have the option of pressing the Centre to return to the negotiating table. The marathon talks between Union ministers and farmers' representatives in February might not have produced a breakthrough, but that is no reason to snap lines of communication. A mutual climbdown is a must to save farmers' lives as well as livelihood.

PF a swipe away

THE Labour Ministry's initiative to enable Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) subscribers to withdraw funds directly from ATMs by 2025 is a landmark step toward simplifying social security. This reform exemplifies the integration of advanced technology with public service to enhance efficiency and accessibility. Currently, EPFO withdrawals are marred by procedural delays, taking up to 10 days for funds to reflect in bank accounts. The proposed PF withdrawal cards aim to eliminate such red tape, providing real-time access to funds. However, prudence prevails with the capping of withdrawals at 50 per cent of the total balance, ensuring financial discipline and safeguarding long-term savings. The broader agenda

under EPFO 3.0, which includes increasing contribution limits and converting provident fund savings into pensions, indicates the government's commitment to modernising the country's social security systems. This aligns well with India's growing emphasis on digitisation and ease of living for its workforce, which has swelled by 70 million EPFO members since 2017.

In a related welcome step, the ministry is finalising a scheme for gig and platform workers, who often remain excluded from traditional employer-employee arrangements. The inclusion of this rapidly growing workforce in social security nets, with benefits like health coverage and financial aid, is a vital stride in formalising labour markets and addressing future workforce challenges.

These measures signal a shift toward a technology-driven welfare framework. By reducing human intervention and operational inefficiencies, the government underscores its commitment to improving citizen-centric services. While challenges like implementation hurdles and awareness gaps must be addressed, the potential benefits far outweigh them. Ultimately, this is not merely a technological upgrade but a profound leap toward equity and convenience in labour welfare, fostering trust in public institutions and bolstering the workforce's resilience.

New RBI Guv

REVENUE Secretary Sanjay Malhotra's surprise appointment as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor comes amid worries over a decline in economic growth, a weaker currency and an upturn in inflation. As he embarks on his three-year term, Malhotra has huge expectations to deliver, particularly concerning the monetary policy. Despite the several high points during his six

years in office, the second longest for any chief of the central bank, Shaktikanta Das ends his tenure on a sombre note. His parting message about restoring inflation-growth balance being the most important task ahead is acknowledgement of the unfinished agenda. Political overtones have been dominating the clamour for a cut in interest rates, with both the Finance Minister and Commerce Minister flagging high bank interest rates as a growth dampener.

Das leaves behind a legacy marked by steady policymaking and deft crisis management. He steered the economy through the Covid pandemic which prevented any economic activity for well over a year, and also oversaw its recovery, especially in the financial sector. Another achievement was to mend the difficult relationship between North Block and Mint Street that he had inherited from Urjit Patel. The generous out-of-record dividend to the Centre remains a contentious issue, raising concerns about weakening of the RBI's financial strength and independence.

While strengthening the banking system, Das prevented a build-up of risk, asking lenders to avoid all forms of exuberance. The Governor-headed Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) kept the repo rate unchanged at 6.5 per cent for the 11th consecutive time last week. It signalled the RBI's cautious approach amid inflation and slowing growth. A review of the rate cut is likely by the Malhotra-headed MPC in its February meeting. It will be a tough call.

Case for secularism

AT stake is India's secular character and vision as a special Bench of the Supreme Court begins hearing from December 12 a batch of petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991. The legislation preserves the identity of religious sites as they stood on August 15, 1947. It also bars suits that seek to alter the status. The hearing comes amid intense judicial activity, particularly in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, in response to multiple civil suits questioning the origins of mosques and dargahs. The petitions in the apex court claim that several mosques have been built on the ruins of temples demolished by invaders. The law, the contention is, denies Hindus and members of other communities the right to reclaim their places of worship. Muslim organisations argue that the law safeguards the basic structure of the Constitution.

The affirmation of the 1991 Act in the Ayodhya judgment provides hope that attempts to tinker with the principles of secularism and fraternity — that define the very idea of India — are defeated. A five-judge Supreme Court Bench has held that the Places of Worship Act is designed to protect the secular features of the polity. Historical wrongs, it noted, cannot be remedied by people taking the law in their own hands and Parliament has mandated that history and its wrongs shall not be used as instruments to oppress the present and future.

The outcome of the case could well determine the trajectory of communal relations in the country. For a former apex court judge, RF Nariman, the solution to address the disputes over religious sites, which he said were emerging like hydra heads, is strict implementation of the 1991 Act. The present and future cannot be held hostage to the past.

Maruti crosses 20 lakh annual production-marks in a year for first time in 2024

New Delhi

Maruti Suzuki India on Tuesday said it has crossed 20 lakh production-mark in a calendar year for the first time in 2024.

The company has also become the first among Suzuki Motor Corporation's global automobile manufacturing facilities to reach this landmark, the auto major said in a statement.

Ertiga was the 2 millionth vehicle to be rolled out from the production line at the company's Manesar-based manufacturing facility, it added.

Of the 20 lakh vehicles, almost 60 per cent were manufactured in Haryana and 40 per cent in Gujarat, Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) said.

Baleno, Fronx, Ertiga, WagonR, and Brezza were the top-five manufactured vehicles in 2024, it added.

"This achievement reflects our commitment, alongside our supplier and dealer partners, to driving economic growth, supporting nation building, and making India's automobile industry self-reliant and globally competitive," MSI Managing Director & CEO Hisashi Takeuchi said.

MSI operates three manufacturing facilities: two in Haryana (Gurgaon and Manesar) and one in Gujarat (Hansalpur). Together, these facilities have a combined annual production capability of 23.5 lakh units.

In anticipation of growing demand for automobiles in India and worldwide, the company plans to expand its annual production capacity to 40 lakh units. The auto major is establishing a new manufacturing facility in Kharkhoda, Haryana, with the first plant having an annual capacity of 2.5 lakh units expected to be operational next year.

Once fully operational, the facility will have a capacity of 10 lakh units per year. Additionally, the company is planning to set up another greenfield facility with an annual capacity of 10 lakh units and is in the process of identifying a suitable location for this new facility.

Gold jewellery consumption to grow 14-18 percent in FY25 in value terms: Icra Report

New Delhi

The domestic gold jewellery consumption, in value terms, is expected to continue its growth momentum in the current financial year and is likely to witness an on-year rise of 14-18 per cent, a report said on Tuesday.

Rating agency Icra in a report said in FY25, gold jewellery consumption growth is pegged at 14-18 per cent in value terms, led by favourable realisations.

In 2023-24, gold jewellery consumption growth had witnessed a growth of 18 per cent in 2023-24, primarily driven by realisations even as volume growth was subdued.

According to the report, while gold prices were volatile, improving consumer sentiments and festive-led demand aided consumption growth in the recent months.

Moreover, a sharp 900 basis point (bps) cut in import duty in the Union Budget in July 2024, and consequent correction in gold prices for a brief period led to some pre-buying of jewellery as well as bars and coins during the second quarter of FY25, which is generally a seasonally weak quarter, it said.

This, coupled with higher number of auspicious and wedding days, and favourable monsoons aiding better rural output, is likely to help jewellery demand growth in H2 (July to December) FY25, it added.

"The organised market is projected to record a healthy Year-on-Year (YoY) expansion of 18-20 per cent in FY25. Planned store additions with focus on tier II and III cities, rising gold prices, shift in preferences towards branded jewellery and some likely pre-buying in the fourth quarter of FY25 on account of higher number of auspicious days in the first quarter of FY26 shall drive growth.

"The customs duty cut is also expected to disincentive unofficial imports, thus supporting the growth in organised trade," Icra Vice President and Sector Head - Corporate Ratings, Sujoy Saha said.

Revenue growth for organised jewellery in FY24 had been supported by realisations with gold prices rising by 14 per cent YoY, the report said. He added that the same trend is expected to continue this fiscal as well.

So far in the current fiscal, the average gold price has risen by a sharp 25 per cent. There were occasional corrections in prices, once after the cut in customs duty in late July 2024 and then in November 2024, following the US elections and currency movements.

The continuing uptick in the gold prices for the last seven quarters has been stimulated by the evolving global economic and geopolitical scenario, and rising investment demand for gold, it said.

On the supply side, organised jewellers are expected to add 16-18 per cent to their existing retail network in FY25, said the report.

Most large jewellers are opting for the franchise model to expand into new markets given the twin benefits of low capital expenditure and knowledge of the local market with the franchisee-partner, it stated.

94 percent of Indian desk workers feel urgency to master AI: Report

New Delhi

Amid the rising influence of artificial intelligence (AI) in the workplace, 94 per cent of desk workers in India feel the urgency to master the advanced technology, according to a report on Tuesday.

Slack's new Workforce Index showed that AI adoption is on the rise in India with 61 per cent of Indian desk workers using AI in their jobs and 80 per cent excited about the prospect of AI replacing some tasks.

India's progress in AI adoption underscores the growing prioritisation of AI among its executives, reflecting a heightened sense of urgency among business leaders to unlock its transformative potential.

The report, based on a survey of 1,029 desk workers in India, showed that although 94 per cent workers are keen to skill up on AI, 40 per cent have spent less than five hours total learning how to use the technology. About 30 per cent of global workers said they've had no AI training at all, including no self-directed learning or experimentation.

"India's workforce is leading the way in AI

adoption, with 61 per cent of desk workers already integrating AI into their roles. This enthusiasm highlights the transformative potential of AI and its alignment with leadership priorities for innovation and upskilling," said Rahul Sharma, Vice President - Sales, Salesforce India.

"However, to fully harness AI's benefits, there remains uncertainty that agents can address. By introducing AI agents with clearly defined roles and guidelines, businesses can reduce worker anxiety and foster seamless integration into daily tasks," Sharma said.

While Indian workers are leading the way on AI adoption globally, the research points to some uncertainty and discomfort around AI usage. About 21 per cent of Indian workers, report feeling uncomfortable admitting AI use to their managers for fear they might be seen as incompetent, lazy, or cheating.

To realise the benefits of AI, employers need to encourage employees to use the technology and equip them with the training and guidance needed to work successfully in this new era, the report suggested.

India's import of Russian oil drops in November on shrinking discounts

India's import of Russian crude oil dropped in November to its lowest level since June 2022 but the Kremlin continues to be the biggest source of oil for India, according to a monthly tracker report of a European think tank.

India became the second biggest buyer of Russian crude oil since Moscow invaded Ukraine in February 2022, with purchases rising from less than one per cent of the total oil imported to almost 40 per cent of the country's total oil purchases.

The rise was primarily because the Russian crude oil was available at a discount to other internationally traded oil due to the price cap and the European nations shunning purchases from Moscow.

"India's imports of Russian crude oil dropped by a massive 55 per cent in November - the lowest figure since June 2022," the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) said its latest report.

Russia remained India's top oil supplier, followed by Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

"China has bought 47 per cent of Russia's crude exports, followed by India (37 per cent), the EU (6 per cent), and Turkey (6 per cent)," CREA said without giving absolute numbers.

In November, there was a 17 per cent month-on-month increase in the discount on Russia's Urals grade crude oil to an average of USD 6.01 per barrel compared to Brent crude oil. The discount on the ESPO

grade narrowed by a massive 15 per cent and was traded at an average discount of USD 3.88 per barrel while that on the Sokol blend narrowed by 2 per cent to USD 6.65 per barrel, it said.

Russia predominantly sells ESPO and Sokol grades of crude oil to India.

Besides crude oil, India bought smaller quantities of coal from Russia.

"From December 5, 2022 until the end of November 2024, China purchased 46 per cent of all Russia's coal exports - India (17 per cent), Turkey (11 per cent), South Korea (10 per cent), and Taiwan (5 per cent) round off the top five buyers list," according to CREA.

All fossil fuels taken together, "India dropped to third in the list of largest buyers of Russian fossil fuels in November, contributing 17 per cent (EUR 2.1 billion) to Russia's monthly export earnings from its top five importers. There was a significant 22 per cent drop in Russian revenues from crude oil exports to India in November," it said.

While there was an 11 per cent month-on-month decline in the total volume of India's imports of crude oil in November, Russian volumes suffered the most, dropping by a massive 55 per cent.

India imports more than 85 per cent of its crude oil, which is refined into fuels like petrol and diesel refineries.

In an attempt to restrict

funds for Russia's war machine, The Group of Seven (G7) rich nations, the European Union and Australia put an embargo on Russian crude and introduced a USD 60 per barrel price cap in December 2022. Over the next 12 months, the price cap and embargo had a significant impact on revenues, and forced Russia to find new markets and ways to transport its oil.

Russia did this by offering deep discounts on its Urals grade crude.

"It has been two years since the imposition of the price cap. CREA estimates that in this period, the sanctions have forced Russia to drop the price of Urals by an estimated 15 per cent. Since the sanctions, Russia has lost an estimated EUR 14.6 billion in revenues from Urals grade crude exports," the report said.

In the second year of the sanctions, CREA estimates that sanctions impacted Russian Urals crude revenues by 10 per cent resulting in losses of EUR 4 billion.

This impact was felt heavily for the first half of 2024 when Russian revenues were hit by EUR 2.5 billion.

"The price cap has had an impact but has failed to live up to its potential. A lack of enforcement and desire to lower the price cap has meant Russia has found a way to circumvent the cap and find new markets as time has gone by, especially in the second year of the sanctions," it said.

In the first year of the sanctions Russia was losing, on an average, 23 per cent of its Urals crude export revenues every month due to the price cap and embargo. This figure has fallen sharply to a mere monthly average of 9 per cent in the second year of the cap. The impact has reduced steadily through 2024 - the effect on revenues in October was 63 per cent lower than that in January.

"As Russia has built a network of 'shadow' tankers, it can trade its oil above the cap to new markets in non-sanctioning countries," CREA added.

Maggi prices likely to rise after January 1

New Delhi

Maggi, the beloved two-minute noodles enjoyed by millions of Indians, could soon cost more following Switzerland's decision to suspend the Most-Favored-Nation (MFN) clause under its 1994 Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) with India. This change would be effective from January 1, 2025, to raise operating costs for Swiss companies in India, including the maker of Maggi, Nestle.

The issue traces back to a 2023 ruling by Supreme Court, which stated that the MFN clause in the DTAA does not automatically apply. The court clarified that India must issue explicit notifications for the clause to take effect.

Switzerland contested this interpretation, citing that it deprived the country of benefits

that India extends to nations with more favourable tax treaties. Swiss officials highlighted discrepancies in divided taxation, noting that India's agreements with countries like Slovenia and Lithuania offer better terms. Citing unfair treatment and a lack of reciprocity, Switzerland chose to suspend the MFN clause.

Nestle and other Swiss enterprises stand to bear the brunt of this decision. With the MFN clause no longer in effect, these companies would face a higher dividend tax rate of up to 10 per cent, compared to the reduced 5 per cent rate they previously enjoyed. Nestle had appealed for the lower tax rate, but the Supreme Court dismissed the plea. The resulting increase in tax liabilities would squeeze Nestle's profits and push it to adjust its pricing strategies in India.

Trade deficit widens to all-time high of $37 bn in November

Led by a significant surge in imports and a fall in merchandise exports, India's merchandise trade deficit — the gap between imports and exports — widened to an all-time high of $37.84 billion in November. This is the highest monthly trade deficit in the current fiscal year. Compared to last year, imports grew by 27 per cent to $69.95 billion in November, while exports declined by 4.86 per cent to $32.11 billion during the month, according to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry's data. India's merchandise trade deficit was $27.14 billion in October, $20.78 billion in September and $29.7 billion in August. In July, the merchandise trade deficit was $23.5 billion. The deficit was $20.98 billion in June, $23.78 billion in May and $19.1 billion in April. On an annual basis, trade deficit widened in November 2024, com ared to November 2023. The merchandise trade deficit was $21.31 billion in the corresponding month last year, according to the data. According to experts, the fall in petroleum exports caused the fall in November goods exports due to the price effect. Despite global headwinds, some sectors have driven India's export growth.

WPI inflation declines to 3-month low of 1.89 per cent on cheaper food

New Delhi

The wholesale price-based inflation declined to a three-month low of 1.89 per cent in November on cheaper food items, and experts predicted a 0.25 per cent interest rate cut by the RBI in the policy review in February.

The Wholesale Price Index (WPI) based inflation was 2.36 per cent in October 2024. It was 0.39 per cent in November, last year. In August, 2024, it was 1.25 per cent.

As per the data, inflation in food items eased to 8.63 per cent in November, as against 13.54 per cent in October. The decline was led by a dip in vegetable inflation which stood at 28.57 per cent, as against 63.04 per cent in October.

Inflation in potato, however, continued to be high at 82.79 per cent, while in onion it fell sharply to 2.85 per cent in November.

The fuel and power category witnessed a deflation of 5.83 per cent in November, against a deflation of 5.79 per cent in October. In manufactured items, inflation was 2 per cent in November, against 1.50 per cent in October.

In a research note, Barclays said wholesale price inflation softened in November, on lower primary food inflation, which more than offset higher inflation seen in manufactured products.

"December to date, global prices are up 0.7 per cent and are likely to push December WPI inflation higher," Barclays said.

As per the consumer price index data released last week, retail inflation moderated to 5.5 per cent in November, compared with 6.2 per cent in October.

Barclays said this is within the monetary policy committee's (MPC) tolerance band of 2-6 per cent indicating that CPI inflation will be drifting closer to the 4 per cent target by March 2025.

"We expect the MPC to cut the policy repo rate by 25bps in its February meeting. We are mindful of the almost new-looking MPC that will be in charge of this decision," Barclays said.

The government appointed a new RBI Governor earlier this month. Former Revenue Secretary Sanjay Malhotra took over as the 26th RBI Governor on December 11 replacing Shaktikanta Das.

In October, the government had reconstituted the 6-member MPC.

ICRA Ltd Senior Economist Rahul Agrawal said the moderation in WPI inflation was primarily led by primary food articles, which eased to a three-month low of 8.6 per cent from 13.5 per cent in the previous month, exerting downward pressure on the headline print to the tune of 91 bps between these months.

ICRA expects the headline WPI inflation to rise to 2.5-3 per cent in December 2024 (+0.9% in December 2023) despite a favourable base.

A majority of food items, for which data is released by the Department of Consumer Affairs, have witnessed an uptick in their YoY inflation prints in December 2024 (up to Dec 15, 2024) vis-à-vis November 2024.

Additionally, the YoY deflation in global commodity and crude oil prices has also narrowed between these months, while the USD/INR pair has depreciated mildly, which would exert some upward pressure on the landed cost of imports.

Looking beyond the ongoing month, the arrival of kharif crops in the market, and the robust outlook for the rabi crop amid healthy sowing trends and elevated reservoir levels, augur well for the food inflation outlook, Agrawal said.

EPFO, ESIC subscribers may soon use claim amounts via e-wallets: Labour Secretary

New Delhi

Subscribers of retirement fund body EPFO and Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) may soon be able to use the claim settlement amounts through e-wallets, a top official said on Wednesday.

Replying to a question on EPF withdrawal from ATMs, Secretary in the Ministry of Labour and Employment Sumita Dawra said, "This is an area of great interest for the insured person, a contributor. How can I withdraw my money more easily?" "In cases of auto settlement... the money goes to the bank account and they in any case are able to withdraw it from the bank account, from any ATM presently," Dawra said.

"Now you are talking about how the claim can go directly to probably a wallet or, we'll have to work out some mechanism. So there we have started talks with bankers and also we are going to have a plan in place on how we can do this practically," she said, while speaking on the sidelines of a tourism summit here.

"We are reaching out to them (Reserve Bank of India). We'll have a plan in place very soon," she said.

Rs 22,280 crore of Vijay Mallya, Choksi restored to banks: Sitharaman

New Delhi

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has listed several major cases where the Directorate of Enforcement has from time to time attached properties of individuals and companies connected to economic offence cases.

Replying to the debate on Supplementary Demands for Grants - First Batch for 2024-2025, the finance minister apprised the Lok Sabha on Tuesday evening that the central enforcement agency has successfully restored properties worth around Rs 22,280 crores -- only the major cases included. Of those restored, the complete attached property worth Rs 14,131.6 crores of

fugitive businessman Vijay Mallya has been restored to the public sector banks, the minister said in Lok Sabha.

In the case of Nirav Modi, another fugitive, Rs 1,052.58 crores has been restored to the public and private sector banks.

In National Spot Exchange Ltd (NSEL) scam, Rs 17.47 crores have been obtained and given to the banks, SRS Group worth Rs 20.15 crores, Rose Valley Group worth Rs 19.40 crores, Surya Pharmaceuticals Ltd worth Rs 185.13 crores, Nowhera Sheikh and Others (Heera Group) worth Rs 226 crores, Naidu Amrutesh Reddy and Others worth Rs 12.73 crores.

Properties worth Rs 2,565.90 crores have been restored related to Mehul Choksi and others, she said.

Citing these numbers of attached properties and subsequently handing them over to the banks, the finance minister said that her government has not left anybody who committed economic offences.

"It is important to recognise that we have not left anybody in economic offences; we are after them. We will ensure that money that has to go to the banks goes back," she said in Lok Sabha during the one-hour-long reply.

Earlier in her address, the Union Minister expressed optimism about economic growth, saying that the sluggish figures of second-quarter GDP growth was a "temporary blip." She said the country's GDP growth averaged 8.3 per cent over the last three years which demonstrates resilience despite global uncertainties. She added that the second quarter was a challenging time not just for India but for the countries around the globe.

The Case for Tech-Based Wargaming in the Indian Armed Forces

The operational strategies of militaries and nations are aimed at achieving 'decision superiority' over adversaries. Reducing the probability of errors by both individuals and organisations requires sufficient preparation, which enhances awareness and understanding of threats and possible contingencies that could arise in real time. Additionally, it can help achieve an alignment between the thinking, logistics, plans, command and control, conduct, and limitations prior to their execution. In military parlance, a core component of such preparation is wargaming.

Wargames have three primary implications for military thinking: they enable wargamers to challenge assumptions and add new perspectives to their existing knowledge; they provide insights into and enhance professional training and practice, thus catering to military readiness and effectiveness; and the planning component of wargames helps prepare, analyse, and plan for any possible scenario. The wargaming approach consists of six phases: teach; apply; do; learn; repeat; and improve. The exercise helps situate a problem and provides a framework for decision-making by facilitating an assessment of emerging challenges, creating a feedback loop, and developing a better judgement of the strategic environment and crucial operational and tactical details.

Wargaming is a centuries-old exercise that has evolved through various phases to its current state. Wargaming has been conceptualised in various ways according to the utility, roles, functions, and objectives that it serves for a particular organisation. It is viewed as a method of active learning and an effective way to impart information, develop group cohesion, and create an understanding of strategic and tactical dynamics of real military operations. It also helps align the military and political dynamics of a nation-state.

The roots of wargaming can be traced to the ancient Chinese game Weiqi, also known as Go, which was based on the application of abstract strategy. First-generation wargames were primarily abstract strategy games that replicated warfare and helped players anticipate the move of the adversary. In 1811, wargames in Prussia began to involve the simulation of movement, attrition, and logistics, which gave rise to the development of models to achieve battlefield simulation.,v

During the 19th and 20th centuries, analog-based wargaming became the prominent mode of performing analysis and training-related tasks. After the First World War, Germany began to use wargames to develop plans and doctrines to invade France and Russia. The Japanese military also used wargames to validate their tactical and operational plans against the United States (US) during the World Wars.

The US also integrated wargaming in its planning process, with the RAND Corporation developing a range of scenarios and new wargames, including computer games and simulations. During the Cold War, wargaming gained new relevance, with participation not being limited to military professionals but expanding to civilian bureaucrats and political leadership. Methods such as Operations Research (OR) also became prevalent for modelling and wargaming during this period. As nuclear weapons turned international politics into a zero-sum game, RAND began applying mathematical equations and game theory models to address issues in international politics. Such problems were endorsed with data and simulated and validated through wargaming exercises. Pure military simulations in wargaming moved beyond political and economic theme-based simulations to cover strategic landscapes and develop policy options in response to those circumstances.

Wargaming has since evolved to include more sophisticated methods and procedures. There have been substantial changes and standardisations in wargaming processes, which is reflected in conceptual development by various actors.

From Wargaming to Tech-Based Wargaming

Militaries such as those of the US and the United Kingdom (UK) have integrated tech-based wargaming in their planning processes, with early results showing promise. Tech-based wargaming can become a test bed for planning to confront complex developments in the battlefield, enabling the integration and absorption of technology in the armed forces.

Technology-based wargaming is also a useful tool for training and educating warfighters to prepare for worst-case scenarios in the battlefield and in campaigns. In tech-based wargaming, the real-time battlefield environment can be simulated to measure and analyse effectiveness and efficiency and validate systems and components through simulations. Key parameters like the lethality, mobility, protection, and endurance of a system can be assessed, unlike in conventional wargaming. Therefore, tech-based wargaming provides a platform to validate technological parameters and their integration with organisational command and control. This process, in turn, helps wargamers assess the strengths and weaknesses in the existing set of plans and capabilities.

Technology-based wargaming processes differ from conventional wargaming on the basis of the purpose; tech-based wargaming helps make simulations more accurate while maintaining simplicity to aid comprehension and learning and ensuring flexibility to enable refinement and adjustments to the game and specific parameters, depending on environmental factors. Finally, technology-based wargaming enables generating a scenario with the integration of environmental parameters and capabilities.

Tech-based wargaming can advance and improvise the existing capabilities of wargames through the following: improvise and upgrade modelling and simulations to make them more realistic; improvise the formatting of the games; make red-team and adversary information and moves more realistic and familiar, and the abilities bias free by inculcating cultural and behavioural traits to ensure more real-time observations and behaviour. These three key factors, when properly incorporated into wargames, will create a paradigm shift from conventional-wargaming-based linear thinking towards enhanced thinking based on treating warfare as a complex adaptive system.

This holistic training and thinking capability to educate and upgrade military minds makes a case for establishing technology-based wargaming in the armed forces. Wargaming is generally viewed as an intellectual exercise to test military commanders' thinking abilities when confronted by uncertainties. Tech-based (especially AI-based) wargaming enables warfighters to expand beyond existing knowledge and explore and create one of their own.

AI can be utilised in the design, execution, analysis, and logistics of wargames. Through a convergence of strategy, operational planning, and tactics, wargaming aims to refine doctrines and strategy and prepare stakeholders for contingencies. A prominent AI-based wargaming technique is the use of metaverse technology, which enhances modelling and simulation in wargaming and facilitates agility in complex matters related to decision-making. Another important technology in wargaming is the use of Large Language Models (LLMs) that, when integrated with AI, can help shorten decision-making cycles and mitigate the limitations of broader AI-based systems. , LLMs can support decision-making processes by enhancing strategic insight and operational accuracy through better simulations. If integrated within the OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act) loop, LLMs can help understand and monitor changes, enhance predictive accuracy, and provide better context-driven recommendations to act in a given context.

AI integration in wargaming can have three key possibilities: wargaming and AI as distinct activities; the complete takeover of wargaming processes by AI; and a collaborative approach between AI and human actions. In the human-AI integration process, the complete set of wargaming processes could be more innovative through computer-based simulations for wargaming. AI can balance human understanding and biases with raw data to create more sound and intelligible findings.

Wargaming in the US and the UK

The post-Second World War US strategic community has historically relied on developing an offset strategy against adversaries to maintain an asymmetrical advantage or edge. Accordingly, the US has adopted three offset strategies since 1945.

The first offset strategy, in the early 1950s, was aimed at addressing the challenge of nuclear deterrence posed by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies and avoid enhancing conventional forces capabilities to deter the USSR and its allies. The second offset strategy was developed after the end of the Vietnam War and led to a decrease in defence expenditure in the US. Simultaneously, the USSR's conventional forces outnumbered NATO forces in the European region, with qualitative and quantitative developments in the Soviet nuclear forces closing the gap between NATO and USSR forces. The second offset strategy was also aimed at maintaining an advantage over the Soviet camp and leveraging the technological advantage to "build better weapon systems than those of the Soviet Union." The strategy also meant to increase the precision of defence strike systems and the automation of command-and-control systems. The third offset strategy was introduced in 2014 to foster innovative methods to ensure the US military's preparedness to tackle emerging threats from a strong adversary and thus foster innovations in warfighting capabilities. This set the stage for innovative methods of conducting wargames to achieve the best outcomes.

In the 2017 and 2018 National Security Strategy of the US, there was a clear recognition of a military competition with China, with amassing military power being a critical area for such competition. Consequently, disruptive technology in the military domain became an enabler to help achieve US objectives and interests and maintain its military and warfighting edge.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) released its Artificial Intelligence Strategy in 2018, which warns that "failure to adopt AI will result in legacy systems irrelevant to the defence of our people, eroding cohesion among allies and partners, and reduced access to markets that will contribute to a decline in our prosperity and standard of living." In the 2023 Data, Analytics and Artificial Intelligence Adoption Strategy of the US DoD, Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks emphasised: "As we focused on integrating AI into our operations responsibly and at speed, our main reason for doing so has been straight forward: because it improves our decision advantage." Therefore, there is a clear indication that not integrating AI in defence can have consequences for US military superiority in the international sphere.

The US has consistently developed innovative methods to bring more accuracy and clarity to its operational plans and create better strategies through technology-based wargaming. The US Research and Development funding agency Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) invested in AI-based wargaming through the Gamebreaker project, which is nearing execution at the time of writing. The game is meant to not be fair and aims to explore new capabilities, tactics, and rule modifications to "develop winning warfighting strategies when the adversary's objectives—i.e. the "rules of the game"—are not clearly known." The aim is to let AI play in the wargame; if it can play, it can win, and if it can win, then it works. The game can be a useful tool to enhance the learning of military commanders and warfighters.

The US Marine Corps University has also launched a cloud-based wargaming initiative, which aims to integrate wargames and augmented reality to develop a database to enhance decision-making. Holographic tabletop exercises can also create new possibilities for wargaming. The US Air Force is examining how wargaming can shape the role and integration of AI-based systems in the evolving battlefield and how AI can be leveraged to improve wargaming itself. Another project, the US Army Synthetic Training Environment (STE), combines live, virtual, and constructive simulations to enable terrain mapping, mission planning, and rehearsal.

Silver cities: Enabling walkability for the urban elderly

Walkability, accessibility, and safety determine pedestrian mobility in cities, including for those who walk, run, jog, hike, or use mobility aids like wheelchairs, scooters, or canes. Walking promotes well-being, reduces emissions, and supports critical first- and last-mile connectivity when integrated with urban public transit systems. Moreover, Sustainable Development Goal 11.7 emphasises universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible public spaces, while promoting walkability, particularly for women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. This aligns with the United Nations Decade of Action for Road Safety 2021–2030 for reducing road traffic deaths by half by 2030.

Rapid urbanisation prioritises motorised transport over pedestrian needs, particularly impacting the elderly.

With 31 pedestrians killed every hour, pedestrian deaths account for 21 percent of global road fatalities, predominantly in urban areas. Moreover, rapid urbanisation prioritises motorised transport over pedestrian needs, particularly impacting the elderly. By 2050, 22 percent of the global population will be 60 or older. In India, their proportion will grow to 20 percent during the same period. Furthermore, in 2022, 17.4 percent of pedestrian fatalities in India comprised senior citizens, underscoring the need for safer infrastructure and mixed-use neighbourhoods.

Pedestrian challenges for seniors

Walkable environments enable healthy, active ageing, improve access to social networks and resources, and reduce isolation, contributing to enhanced mental well-being. Walking is often the non-motorised means of transport for the elderly to access healthcare and leisure activities. However, reduced mobility, weakened vision and hearing, cognitive decline, and fears of falling or isolation increase vulnerabilities further for senior citizens. Moreover, 92 percent of pedestrian deaths are known to occur in low- and middle-income countries. Cities in the Global South face additional challenges of poor infrastructure and inadequate social services, emphasising the urgency of safer infrastructure and improved mobility for elderly pedestrians.

In Mumbai, dense populations and inadequate pedestrian infrastructure contribute to high accident rates and limited mobility.

Badly designed sidewalks, uneven ramps and pavements, street vendors, and unregulated traffic worsen their movement. For instance, the growing elderly population in Mexico City faces increased risks given the uneven terrain, heavy traffic and insufficient pedestrian infrastructure. In Mumbai, dense populations and inadequate pedestrian infrastructure contribute to high accident rates and limited mobility. In São Paulo, the lack of accessible walkways and poorly enforced traffic laws make everyday tasks like walking to a market or crossing a street daunting. These urban challenges are especially heightened for seniors. The urban sprawl and socio-economic disparities of Johannesburg, coupled with the limited pedestrian infrastructure in South Africa's peripheral areas, pose significant challenges for senior pedestrians.

Key learnings

Walking and cycling are essential, pollution-free forms of mobility. Technology can enhance safety perceptions by providing elderly pedestrians real-time updates on safe walking routes, weather alerts and traffic congestion. For example, in Singapore, where senior citizens are likely to make up 25 percent of its population by 2030. Its Smart Nation initiative offers smart traffic signals that adjust crossing times, Geographical Information System (GIS) mapping for real-time traffic monitoring, and wearable devices that provide updates on safe routes, weather, and congestion, enhancing safety and convenience. Silver Zones in elderly neighbourhoods have reduced speed limits, raised zebra crossings, and signage.

As cities age, such advancements are crucial in ensuring safer and more accessible urban environments for the elderly. For instance, Kochi, the first Indian city to join the World Health Organization's Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (GNAFCC), renovated its Marine Drive Walkway with CCTVs, open seating, LED lighting, drainage and a native tree cover to create safe, inclusive and green walking spaces.

In India's Chennai, the Non-Motorised Transport (NMT) Policy, which aimed to improve access for the elderly and disabled, suffered because of poor implementation and fragmented pedestrian networks.

The United States Vision Zero initiative offers insights into improving elderly pedestrian mobility. Despite the ageing infrastructure, funding issues, and local opposition that slowed progress, New York City reduced pedestrian fatalities by 29 percent from 2014 to 2023 through traffic-calming measures. Conversely, the car-centric Los Angeles saw a 32 percent rise in deaths during the same period. In India's Chennai, the Non-Motorised Transport (NMT) Policy, which aimed to improve access for the elderly and disabled, suffered because of poor implementation and fragmented pedestrian networks. On the other hand, Tokyo's barrier-free sidewalks, smart traffic signals, energy-generating walkways, and Barcelona's "superblocks" create pedestrian-friendly areas by regulating speed limits and restraining motor traffic.

Towards walkable streets

Best-practice sharing

An age-integrated society aligned with India's National Policy for Senior Citizens 2011 must encourage multi-stakeholder alliances by exchanging successful strategies and experiences. Such collaborations must prioritise the concerns of older individuals, especially women, to integrate mechanisms established by governments, civil society organisations, and senior citizen associations. Globally, networks such as the World Health Organization's Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities, the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing and C40 Cities facilitate city partnerships to improve walkability and safety. Pune's Complete Streets initiative, with wide and barrier-free footpaths, and Bhubaneswar's MaaS-integrated pedestrian-friendly projects like Smart Janpath are models worth emulating.

Caring to engage the elderly

Grassroots initiatives like community-led transport services can address the physiological and emotional concerns of the elderly. For example, Manila's Age-Friendly City Programme enhances pedestrian safety with overpasses, wider sidewalks, and accessible public transport and encourages walkable communities through parks and green spaces. Jakarta's Pedestrian Programme focuses on elevated walkways while providing public seating and low-entry buses. Copenhagen has designed shared streets, or "woonerfs" to slow traffic and create a safer environment for pedestrians. Such initiatives cultivate mutual trust between the elderly and urban planners, creating a more inclusive environment. Additionally, community programmes involving seniors in local decision-making processes and developing Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans can help prioritise their needs, fostering a greater sense of belonging.

Adopting standardised metrics for assessment

Cities should establish standardised metrics to assess elderly pedestrian safety and accessibility by adapting frameworks like the Pedestrian Level of Service (PLOS) to include longer crossing times, resting areas, auditory signals, tactile marking, and access to services. The Walkability Index must assess factors such as proximity to essential services and continuous and well-lit sidewalks. Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS) can offer user-friendly interfaces and real-time data on elevators and pedestrian facilities. Implementing performance recognition schemes can incentivise cities to enhance infrastructure, and leveraging IoT and connected devices can provide real-time updates and remote access to services, improving safety for seniors and people with disabilities. However, while NMT initiatives can enhance mobility for the elderly in India, they must be carefully planned. For example, despite its improvements, Ahmedabad's Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project has encountered accessibility issues, safety hazards, and a lack of awareness.

Implementing performance recognition schemes can incentivise cities to enhance infrastructure, and leveraging IoT and connected devices can provide real-time updates and remote access to services, improving safety for seniors and people with disabilities.

Leveraging assistive technologies

Integrating assistive technologies from the design phase, including features like tactile paving, audio signals at crossings, and smart traffic systems, can aid navigation for seniors and people with disabilities. Promoting smart walking canes, eye-tracking technologies, GPS-enabled wearables, and mobility apps can provide physical support, route guidance, and real-time updates. However, ensuring digital literacy and accessibility of city services will be crucial for broadening participation.

Singapore is integrating technologies and customisable digital interfaces into its public transport, cultural venues, and public spaces, ensuring accessibility for all. Helsinki's subway uses audio beacons to provide blind and visually-impaired individuals with audio cues, helping them navigate stations and public transport independently. In India, Bengaluru has introduced smart traffic signals that adjust timing based on pedestrian movement, benefiting seniors who walk slower.

Developing data platforms

Cities should prioritise age- and gender-disaggregated data collection to effectively map elderly pedestrian movement, infrastructure quality and accident hotspots. Barcelona monitors high-risk pedestrian zones through CCTV surveillance and speed cameras. Further, cities can implement geo-tagged reporting systems to identify infrastructure issues like uneven sidewalks and inadequate crossings, enabling prompt remedial action. Georgia Tech's Automated Sidewalk Quality Assessment System uses an Android app to evaluate sidewalk conditions by collecting GPS-tagged video and sensor data. The semi-automated system identifies issues like cracks, potholes, and obstructions, reducing labour while ensuring consistent reviews. Such frameworks can help local governments review, improve and continuously monitor their sidewalk infrastructure.

Prioritising funding and research

Given the capacity constraints and resource crunch, the Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) must urgently allocate resources and create capacity-building programmes to help the respective municipal departments change their approach to urban mobility through dedicated budgeting for installing ramps, wider sidewalks, and better signage. Central initiatives like India's Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) must also address elderly pedestrian mobility. Researching the unique needs of elderly pedestrians will be crucial for identifying gaps in infrastructure. Cities like Ahmedabad, which have implemented age-friendly features like improved crossings and seating areas, serve as models.

The semi-automated system identifies issues like cracks, potholes, and obstructions, reducing labour while ensuring consistent reviews.

Conclusion

Enhancing pedestrian mobility for the elderly is essential to building inclusive and sustainable cities. Comprehensive urban planning that underlines pedestrian infrastructure can enable senior citizens to live independently and stay engaged with their communities. By addressing specific challenges and implementing learnings from existing frameworks, cities can create safe and accessible environments that support their physical and emotional well-being. Through collaboration, innovation, and targeted investments, cities can improve the quality of life for their ageing populations, creating more equitable, inclusive, and resilient urban spaces.

Prioritising maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean

Established in 2018 and hosted by the Indian Navy, the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) has emerged as a critical facet of India's maritime safety and security efforts in the Indian Ocean. Given the growing priority accorded to maritime domain awareness (MDI) in maritime security preparedness, the IFC-IOR continues to facilitate information exchange and dissemination related to imminent challenges at sea. The establishment of the centre has marked an increment in India's maritime security preparedness and maritime cooperation.

India's maritime geography makes maritime security a key priority in its broader national security thinking. Given the complex challenges at sea, vigilance in the maritime domain is crucial to safeguard India's vital maritime interests. With the growing proliferation of non-traditional maritime security challenges in the Indian Ocean, such as maritime terrorism, piracy, trafficking, and IUU (Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated) fishing among others, maritime domain awareness has emerged as a critical cornerstone of maritime security preparedness. Coupled with the emergence of new technologies, real-time data has provided scope for cooperation between agencies and organisations for the monitoring of oceans to ensure safety and security. In tandem with India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision, information dissemination has also emerged as a crucial component in the enhancement of cooperation in maritime security.

Given the complex challenges at sea, vigilance in the maritime domain is crucial to safeguard India's vital maritime interests.

In this light, the IFC-IOR has emerged as an important facet of India's continued efforts to enhance maritime security preparedness. Importantly, given the vast geography of the Indian Ocean and the capacity differential among regional states, cooperation through information sharing has provided a vital ground of convergence for India and its partners. India announced the establishment of the IFC-IOR at the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) leaders' summit, Jakarta, in 2017 to coordinate and cooperate on maritime domain awareness. This prompts the question—why is maritime domain awareness important? Oceans are vast and complex spaces with dynamic challenges that hold the potential to profoundly impact a nation's national security. Thus, it is imperative to grasp the evolving dynamics of the oceans. This awareness is likely to shape responses to challenges emanating from the oceans.

For maritime nations, this is crucial since it poses an alarming threat to security—not only traditional maritime security but also environmental security, economic security, human security, and food security. In the Indian Ocean, maritime domain awareness has gained currency following the rise in its geopolitical importance. While the region was characterised by the onset of strategic inertia in the post-Cold War period, with the rise of new economic players and the growing importance of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the region, the security and stability in the Indian Ocean has increasingly emerged as a key priority for its stakeholders. In this context, information sharing through maritime domain awareness has emerged as a critical aspect of the regional maritime security agenda. This aligns well with India's outlook towards the region. MDA in the Indian Ocean is important for India not only to secure its own maritime interests but also to work towards its stated goal of facilitating regional security preparedness.

The imminent threats arising in the oceans have the potential to directly impinge on the national security of regional littoral states, as well as endanger the lives and livelihood of coastal populations in these countries.

The IFC-IOR has marked steady progress in facilitating cooperation in maritime domain awareness efforts. For example, when it was first established, IFC-IOR shared information with partners virtually. Now, there are International Liaison Officers from 12 partner countries through which dissemination of information is facilitated. Importantly, another major development towards bolstering cooperation in MDA is its incorporation into multilateral and minilateral groupings. Given that maritime domain awareness has risen as a critical agenda for maritime safety and security and given the capacity differential among the Indian Ocean littoral states, countries like India have sought to play an important role in enabling cooperation for sea vigilance and information sharing. The Indian Ocean Rim Association—the only pan-Indian Ocean regional forum—seeks to bolster efforts towards maritime security in the region. The imminent threats arising in the oceans have the potential to directly impinge on the national security of regional littoral states, as well as endanger the lives and livelihood of coastal populations in these countries. Therefore, for a regional organisation seeking to strengthen efforts for maritime security preparedness, MDA is naturally a key priority. This is in alignment with India's SAGAR vision and efforts to bolster cooperation on maritime domain awareness. Furthermore, maritime domain awareness has emerged as an important facet of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—a grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—cooperation to strengthen maritime security preparedness in the Indo-Pacific. The recent Quad leaders' summit at Wilmington in September 2024 announced the scaling up of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness to build synergies with IFC-IOR. In this regard, India's role in the Indian Ocean remains critical. Importantly, India's location in the region at the heart of the Indian Ocean makes it imperative for India to lead MDA efforts in the region. Cooperation among forums such as IFC-IOR and its counterparts in like-minded countries is crucial to effectively monitor the oceans and share information to strengthen maritime security.

Bolstering maritime domain awareness is critical to monitoring Chinese advances in the region and enhancing maritime security preparedness accordingly.

Going forward, the dynamic maritime challenges emerging are likely to galvanise the urgency for information sharing in maritime security. For India's own maritime security interests in the Indian Ocean, it is vital to monitor China's growing forays into the region. Unlike the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean has not witnessed Chinese naval aggression. Instead, China has adopted a strategy of sending research and survey vessels into the Indian Ocean, which have occasionally docked at critical nodes in the regional landscape, such as Sri Lanka and Maldives. This has prompted a security dilemma in India, given that New Delhi remains concerned about Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. Bolstering maritime domain awareness is critical to monitoring Chinese advances in the region and enhancing maritime security preparedness accordingly. At a collective level, the rising threats of piracy, maritime terrorism, and IUU fishing have exacerbated the urgent need for a collective approach to strengthen the maritime security environment of the Indian Ocean. In tandem with India's stated objective of leading efforts in maritime security preparedness in the Indian Ocean, MDA through IFC-IOR is likely to gain further momentum.

What does Donald Trump's win mean for peace in the Middle East?

In his public address to his supporters after winning, the newly elected 47th President of the United States (US), Donald Trump, said, "I'll stop wars", without explicitly mentioning the ongoing war in Gaza. He also asserted that during 2017-2020, his presidency saw no major civil wars involving the US, reiterating his intent to restore world peace. "This will truly be a golden age of America", he emphasised, while constantly pledging that the Republicans would make America great again through his "America First" policy. This article traces the currency of President Trump's claims to restore world peace, particularly its implications for peace in the Middle East, by analysing America's foreign policy in the region during his earlier presidency while simultaneously evaluating the possible impact of his presidential victory on the Middle East.
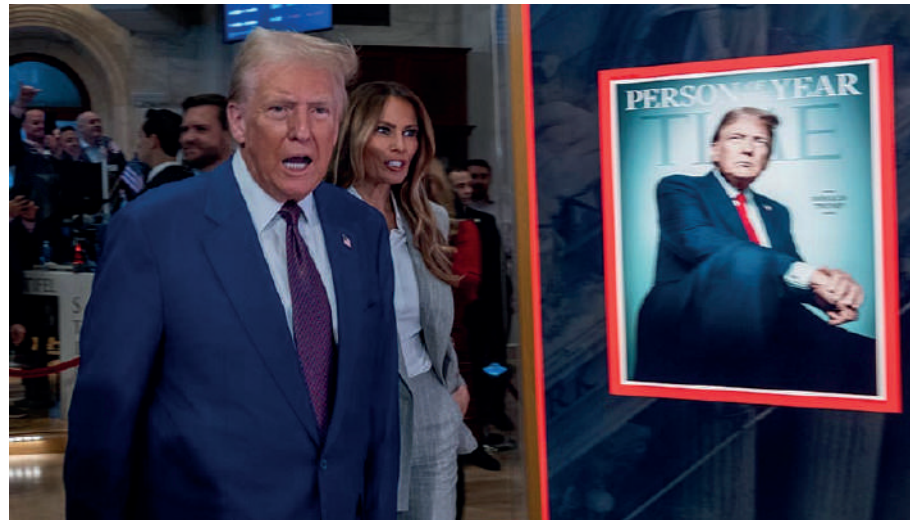
The Daesh crisis and the Obama vs Trump debate

Trump became the 45th President of the United States in January 2017, winning 306 votes as opposed to 232 won by the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. During his predecessor Barack Obama's tenure in 2014, Daesh (also known as ISIS/ISIL or the Islamic State), a former affiliate of al-Qaeda in Iraq, gained global attention when its militants occupied large swathes of land in both Iraq and Syria by taking advantage of sectarian strife in Iraq and the ongoing Syrian civil war. The same year, the Obama administration launched a targeted military operation called "Inherent Resolve", using US and allied troops to aid other non-specified coalition efforts to counter Daesh rather than engaging in significant ground operations.

By December 2017, Iraq declared its victory over Daesh and in February 2019, the SDF besieged Daesh in the village of Baghouz, its last territorial enclave, thus ending ISIS' physical caliphate in both Iraq and Syria.

The Trump administration continued implementing Obama's strategy, although employing the new "rules of engagement", which involved "greater risks in return for faster, more decisive operations". As a result, backed by the US-led coalition airpower, Mosul was recaptured by Iraqi forces in July 2017 and Raqqa by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2017 after months-long battles. By December 2017, Iraq declared its victory over Daesh and in February 2019, the SDF besieged Daesh in the village of Baghouz, its last territorial enclave, thus ending ISIS' physical caliphate in both Iraq and Syria. It is worth noting that within two and a half years of Obama's military campaign, Daesh lost its only international border with Türkiye, and approximately half of its territory had already been liberated by the time Trump joined the office. The remaining territory was recaptured within the next nine months, demonstrating the rigour of Trump's military operations.

During Trump's tenure, significant tactical changes were made to Obama's military strategy. For instance, Trump "delegated authority to the right level to aggressively and promptly move against enemy vulnerabilities." In other words, fewer sign-offs were required when those on the ground requested airstrikes due to a faster decentralised approval process. As proclaimed by Trump himself, "We have made, alongside our coalition partners, more progress… in the past several months than in the past several years." Rather than establishing peace in the Middle East, Trump's broader objective in defeating Daesh has been to prevent American casualties, illustrating his "America first" motto. That being said, Daesh was almost defeated within a year of Trump's presidency, which eventually paved the way for reconstruction and peacebuilding initiatives in the recaptured territories of both Iraq and Syria.

From 2017 to 2020: Trump's foreign policy in the Middle East

During Trump's time in office, although his constant "wading in and out of conflicts" risked further destabilisation in the region, he significantly reduced the US presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, fulfilling his promise to pull the US out of endless wars. In 2018, Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, which aimed to have P5+1 sanctions lifted on Iran in exchange for its agreement to serious restrictions on its nuclear development. The US withdrawal from the deal was seen as a new crisis in the making.

Around the same time, the Trump administration pursued a maximum pressure campaign against Iran, thereby increasing the risks of escalation and conflict with Iran. However, Trump did not respond to Iran's provocations in the Persian Gulf in the summer of 2019, thereby maintaining peace in the Middle East.

Around the same time, the Trump administration pursued a maximum pressure campaign against Iran, thereby increasing the risks of escalation and conflict with Iran.

About the Israel and Palestine issue, Trump defended Israel's right to security throughout his first term while simultaneously acknowledging the right of the Palestinians to freedom. This can be seen in his endorsement of the two-state solution in 2018, claiming that it would work best for the broader peace in the Middle East. He stated in a press conference, "My vision presents a "win-win" opportunity for both sides, a realistic two-state solution that resolves the risk of Palestinian statehood to Israel's security." Trump also mentioned unveiling a plan for a final peace deal within months, stating, "It is a dream of mine to be able to get that done prior to the end of my first term." However, Palestinians have been sceptical of the promises made by Trump, particularly citing his controversial decision to relocate the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem back in 2017.

Ongoing war in Gaza and Trump's renewed pledge for peace

Fast forward to 2024. Trump has won the 2024 presidential election in the US, defeating the Democratic candidate Kamala Harris. In her closing pitch for the presidential campaign, Harris promised to end the war in Gaza, a rather weak attempt to change the narrative regarding her party's unrelenting military support to Israel. Trump has also pledged to bring "peace" to the Middle East, suggesting that he would end the ongoing war in Gaza, which has killed around 45,000 individuals, devastated the region, and brought neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Iran to be engulfed in the war. Although indecisive in his statements regarding foreign policy, Trump has a reputation for keeping the promises he made during his campaign.

The Gaza war poses a serious threat to peace in the Middle East and beyond, therefore, it is inevitable that Trump would make some difficult decisions, balancing his support for Israel and his commitment to world peace. For months during his campaign, Trump has asserted to end the ongoing war in Gaza, even setting a timeline for Israel, asking it to end its campaign against Hamas by the time he officially enters office. If reports are to be believed, Trump has pressured Hamas to backpedal on key issues during recent ceasefire and hostage-release talks with Israel. For instance, Hamas has now conceded to temporary intervention through Israeli forces staying in the Gaza Strip after the fighting ends, as well as agreed to provide a complete list of hostages, including Americans, who will be released as part of the ceasefire agreement. Trump's warning that he wants to see a deal before he enters office has been perceived as "a big factor" in these recent concessions. Trump has been opposed to wars, and it is doubtful that his support for Israel would include an extension of the ongoing war in the region.

Aamir Khan on 'Laapataa Ladies' Oscar Exit: This is not the end but a step forward

The producers of "Laapataa Ladies," Aamir Khan Productions, Jio Studios, and Kindling Productions, have expressed their reactions following the film's exit from the Oscars 2025 race.

As India's official entry in the Best Foreign Feature Film category, Laapataa Ladies held high hopes but unfortunately did not make it to the top 15 shortlist. While the producers admitted to being disappointed by the outcome, they remain proud of the film's journey and the recognition it garnered along the way.

In a statement, Aamir Khan Productions said, "Laapataa Ladies (Lost Ladies) did not make it to the Academy Awards shortlist this year, and we are of course disappointed, but equally we are immensely grateful for the incredible support and belief we've received throughout this journey. We at Aamir Khan Productions, Jio Studios, and Kindling Productions extend our gratitude to the Academy members and the FFI jury for considering our film."

"To be included in this prestigious process alongside some of the finest films from across the world is an honor in itself. Our heartfelt thanks to all the audiences around the world who have expressed their love and support for our film. We congratulate the teams of all the top 15 shortlisted films and wish them the very best in the next stages of the awards. For us, this is not the end but a step forward. We remain committed to bringing more powerful stories to life and sharing them with the world. Thank you for being part of this journey," the statement further read.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has unveiled the shortlist of 15 films competing for the Best International Feature Film category at the 2025 Oscars. Unfortunately, India's official submission, Laapataa Ladies (Lost Ladies), did not make the cut.

Directed by Kiran Rao, the film had been unanimously chosen by the Film Federation of India (FFI) as the country's entry, but its selection stirred debate. Many critics argued that Payal Kapadia's "All We Imagine As Light" would have been a more competitive choice for the prestigious category.

Singer Byran Adams loves rajma chawal, vada pav and gol gappas

Global music icon Bryan Adams, who is currently in India for his So Happy It Hurts Tour 2024, has expressed his love for Indian delicacies such as rajma chawal, vada pavs, gol gappas and masala dosas. Adams, who will wrap up his seven-city India tour on Tuesday in Goa, said India had always been close to him. "I am excited to be back in India for my tour! India has always held a special place in my heart. I'm especially looking forward to rajma chawal, idli sambar, gol gappa, vada pav, momos and masala dosa," he said.

Shahid Kapoor all set to play an edgy '90s gangster

Shahid Kapoor says it is 'prep time' as he is all set to play an 'edgy and nasty' gangster from the 1990s. Shahid took to Instagram, where he shared a monochrome selfie post his workout. In the image, he is seen flaunting his pumped up biceps and sporting a rugged beard. For the caption, he wrote, "Prep time... Next character, next film what can I do that I haven't before...Lost in the woods…" Shahid is all set to play Hussain Ustara, a notorious gangster in the upcoming action thriller directed by Vishal Bhardwaj. The film also stars Triptii Dimri.

Under Akshay Kumar-funded initiative, over 1,250 monkeys fed in Ayodhya

Bollywood actor Akshay Kumar usually garners headlines for his philanthropic works. In his latest social media post, the actor announced that he fed over 1,250 monkeys in Ayodhya with the help of his team and Anjaneya Seva Trust. Taking to Instagram, Akshay highlighted the issue of the increasing population of monkeys in the holy city of Ayodhya. In the video shared by the actor, a bunch of monkeys were seen wandering around the temple premises and the surrounding areas. Under this initiative, Akshay claimed that the monkeys in Ayodhya were fed clean and nutritious food daily.

To keep waste management at a minimum, the team of Akshay Kumar collects the banana peels discarded by the monkeys. They are then fed to the cows, whose dung is then used as manure for the plantation of banana trees. Akshay called it a chhoti si koshish (a small effort) while sharing the video on Instagram. Earlier this year, the actor had donated Rs 1 crore to feed monkeys in Ayodhya.

During Chandigarh concert, Diljit says no more events in India

Punjabi singer and actor Diljit Dosanjh enthralled thousands of fans at his electrifying 'Dil-Luminati Concert' on Saturday in Chandigarh. The singer, who has been on a multi-country tour announced on stage that he would not host a concert in India until the government focuses on concert infrastructure across the country.

Diljit took his disappointment live to the stage about the state of concert infrastructure across India. He said while addressing the crowd, "I want to tell the designated authorities that India does not have the infrastructure for live shows. This is a big revenue generating space. It also gives livelihood to many. Please focus on this space as well."

"I will try to set up a stage in the middle, while the crowd is distributed around it (to improve concert experience). I will not perform shows here until things improve. Instead of troubling artists, improve the infrastructure," he added.

The much awaited concert of the Punjabi superstar faced quite a lot of hurdles ever since the tickets went on sale. A handful of tickets were being resold at higher prices. Many people blamed Diljit for this.

Legendary tabla player Zakir Hussain has passed on, but he leaves behind a legacy for generations to cherish

Zakir Hussain a true genius: PM Modi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday paid tributes to the iconic tabla player Zakir Hussain, saying he will be remembered as a true genius who revolutionised the world of Indian classical music.

Expressing grief at his death, Modi said he brought tabla to the global stage, captivating millions with his unparalleled rhythm. Through this, he seamlessly blended Indian classical traditions with global music, thus becoming an icon of cultural unity, Modi added.

He said on X, "His iconic performances and soulful compositions will contribute to inspire generations of musicians and music lovers alike. My heartfelt condolences to his family, friends and the global music community." Hussain died in a hospital in San Francisco, US, his family said on Monday. He was 73. Hussain died from complications arising out of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, the family said in a statement. He had been in the hospital for the past two weeks and was shifted to the intensive care unit (ICU) after his condition deteriorated.

Zakir Hussain, the tabla maestro who was initiated into music the moment he was brought home from the nursing home as 'Baby Qureshi', lived up to the legacy of his illustrious family well, only taking it to the new heights. One of the greatest tabla players of all time, Grammy winner, actor and composer, Zakir Hussain left music -overs in deep sorrow on Monday as he breathed his last at a hospital in San Francisco.

Born to legendary tabla virtuoso Ustad Alla Rakha, Zakir's music education begun at home. By 12, he was already part of international concerts while travelling the world. In the six decades of musical journey, he earned name and fame not just as one of the finest percussionist but also a leading figure of Hindustani classical music and jazz fusion.

Spending his initial years at Mumbai, where he did his schooling and college, Zakir went on to earn his PhD in music from the University of Washington. While he travelled the world, preforming at every eminent stage, including Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center, he settled in the US. He taught at prestigious universities in the US, including Stanford, Princeton and UC Berkeley. His yearly workshop in the San Francisco Bay Area has been a sought-after and revered destination for tabla performers for the last three decades.

Ground-breaking collaborations, awards and honours, including Padma Vibhushan and Kyoto Prize laureate in Arts and Philosophy, he was a man as feted as loved. If 'Wah Taj' has been forever been associated with the curly haired, energetic, jovial man, he was also the leading authority on contemporary world music, giving multiple historic collaborations.

The year 2024 was grand for Hussain as he won three Grammys at the 66th Annual Grammy Awards —for Best Global Music Album, Best Global Music Performance and Best Contemporary Instrumental Album.

I made tabla for him, he made my life: Zakir Hussain's tabla maker

For Haridas Vhatkar, tabla making won't be the same again, as he mourns the passing away of his most celebrated customer, Ustad Zakir Hussain.

"I first began making tablas for his father Alla Rakha, and made tablas for Zakir Hussain saab since 1998," an emotional Vhatkar, 59, said.

Speaking from his workshop at Kanjurmarg in Mumbai, Vhatkar said he last met the 73-year-old tabla maestro in August 2024 in Mumbai.

"It was Guru Poornima. We met at a hall where lot of his admirers were also there. The next day, I went to his house in Simla House Cooperative Society on Nepean Sea Road neighbourhood and were engrossed in conversation for a couple of hours," Vhatkar said.

"He was very particular about what sort of tabla he wanted and when. He paid a lot of attention to the 'tuning' aspect of the musical instrument," said Vhatkar, a third generation tabla maker, hailing from Miraj in western Maharashtra.

"Innumerable," was Vhatkar's reply when asked how many tablas did he make for Hussain over the last two decades.

Vhatkar said he also has many tablas which were left behind for him by the tabla maestro.

"Besides making new instruments, I was also his sort of repair department for maintaining the collection of the older ones," said Vhatkar. "I made tablas for him and he made my life," the tabla maker added.

Asked if he and Zakir Hussain were in regular contact, Vhatkar said, "Not really. He called whenever needed, to ask about a new tabla or regarding repair of some old instruments."

Our conversations were after a gap of months and not what you would categorise as regular calls," said Vhatkar, who entered tabla making following the footsteps of his grandfather Kerappa Ramchandra Vhatkar and father Ramchandra Kerappa Vhatkar.

His sons Kishore and Manoj have also carried forward the family tradition of tabla making.

Haridas learnt the art of tabla making at an early age and developed a keen sense of innovation and perfection. He came to Mumbai in 1994 and started working as a tabla maker for the famous Haribhau Vishwanath company in Mumbai.

Zakir Hussain, who is regarded as the greatest tabla player of his generation, died at a hospital in San Francisco, his family said on Monday. The Mumbai-born tabla maestro is survived by his wife Antonia Minnecola and daughters Anisa Qureshi and Isabella Qureshi.

India vs Australia: Rain gods play spoilsport again as 3rd Test ends in draw

India escaped with a crucial draw in the weather-hit third Test against Australia after intermittent rain wiped out majority of play on day five, leaving the five-match series tantalisingly locked at 1-1.

Resuming the day at 252 for nine, India batted for 24 balls and were all out for 260 in their first innings.

With limited time left in the day to force a result after majority of the morning session was rained out, the Australian batters came out all guns blazing and stuttered to 89 for seven in 18 overs before making a brave declaration, giving India at least 54 overs to chase down 275.

Bad light and rain forced an early tea break soon after with India at 8 for no loss in 2.1 overs. The rain got heavier as the time passed and no play was possible thereafter.

The absorbing series is nicely poised going into the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne.

India would have fancied chasing 275 on day five but weather helped them immensely in the game controlled by Australia.

Jasprit Bumrah (3/18) was brilliant as usual in the second innings with Mohammed Siraj (2/36) and Akash Deep (2/28) offering good support.

Australia's approach in the second essay was brave and questionable at the same time.

Nathan McSweeney (4) and Marnus Labuschagne (1) went after balls outside the off-stump and perished while Usman Khawaja (8) and Mitchell Marsh (2) fell to good deliveries.

Wickets falling in a heap did not impact Australia's approach as they kept going for the big hits. Skipper Cummins chipped in with two sixes and as many fours before the declaration.

In the morning session, lightening and subsequent rain allowed only 24 balls to be bowled.

The warning of severe weather was flashed on the digital scoreboard at the Gabba shortly after India were bowled out for 260 in their first innings, handing Australia a lead of 185 runs.

Akash Deep (31) was the last man out, stumped off a Travis Head delivery, bringing an end to a 47-run stand with Jasprit Bumrah (10 not out).

The duo had done well to avoid the follow-on on day four.

Players were asked to remain in the dressing room and fans were requested to take shelter away from the fence after the visitors were all out.

The forecast was largely clear for Brisbane from Thursday onwards but the entire game has been adversely impacted by bad weather with rain forcing multiple stoppages for four out of five days.

Only day two of the game was not impacted by weather as Australia coasted to 405 for seven on the back of memorable hundreds from Head and Steve Smith.

Going into the fourth Test beginning December 26, India have major concerns in both batting and bowling department which they must address.

Barring K L Rahul, who has been India's standout batter on the tour, the star-studded line up has not found a way to negotiate the threats posed by the Australian pace attack.

Skipper Rohit Sharma has been woefully short of runs and after the hundred in Perth, superstar Virat Kohli has struggled with ball outside the off-stump.

Majority of the batters have been guilty of playing away from their bodies in challenging conditions. They will need to curb their white-ball instincts to make an impact at MCG.

On the bowling front too, it has been effectively a one man show with Jasprit Bumrah doing the heavy lifting in all the games.

Mohammed Siraj bowled in the Brisbane Test with a niggle, leaving a question mark over his fitness ahead of the Melbourne game.

Akash Deep, who played ahead of Harshit Rana, bowled well in the game but did not have a lot of luck, especially against Smith. He is expected to retain his place the eleven.

India have picked three different spinners in the first three Test. It remains to be seen what strategy they adopt for the Boxing Day Test.

Ace spinner Ashwin announces retirement from international cricket

India's premier off-spinner R Ashwin on Wednesday surprised the cricketing world by announcing his retirement with immediate effect in the middle of the Test series against Australia here.

Ashwin retires from the game as the second highest wicket-taker for India in Tests with 537 scalps in 106 games, leaving him only behind Anil Kumble (619 wickets). He will continue to play club cricket.

"I won't take too much of your time. Today will be the last day for me as an India cricketer," Ashwin said at the end of the drawn third Test here in a joint press conference with captain Rohit

Sharma during which he declined to take any questions and left after making the announcement.

The 38-year-old played the day-night Test in Adelaide and picked up one wicket.

"He was very, very sure of his decision. We should stand by what he wants," said Rohit after Ashwin left the stage.

He was seen sharing an emotional moment with star batter Virat Kohli in the dressing room hours before the announcement.

"A name synonymous with mastery, wizardry, brilliance, and innovation," said the BCCI in its tribute post on X.

Ashwin leaves with promise of being 'just a call away'

The Indian dressing room was overwhelmed with emotions on Wednesday but R Aswhin maintained a stoic expression all along.

Soon after his last press conference as an international cricketer, where he broke the news of his retirement to those who chronicled his illustrious career, Ashwin was on his way to the Indian dressing room, when Matthew Hayden stepped out to greet him as match referee Ranjan Madugalle hugged the great off-spinner.

A few steps later, he exchanged pleasantries with Nathan Lyon and Pat Cummins on the corridor as they gifted the Indian ace a signed Australian team jersey, and finally, Aswhin made his way into the Indian dressing room.

With the music of a poignant Tamil song playing in the background, Ashwin then delivering a heartwarming speech, during which he promised his teammates that he would always be "just a call away" for them.

Ashwin's announcement to retire with immediate effect did come as a surprise as the Border-Gavaskar Trophy trickled into final two Tests of the series, leaving behind one of its great characters who will not be a part when action resumes on the Boxing Day in Melbourne.

He walked towards the press conference room with a smile on his face.

Later, the Indian support staff members had lined up to meet Ashwin before he re-entered the group of players, albeit for the final time. Among them were fielding coach T Dilip, left-arm throwdown specialist from Sri Lanka Nuwan Seneviratne, and many more.

Having entered the change room amid thunderous claps, Ashwin was greeted by those who are now entrusted to take Indian cricket forward — Yashasvi Jaiswal, Dhruv Jurel and Rishabh Pant among others.

Ashwin must have chosen his every word with a lot of thought before speaking to his teammates.

"I don't know how to go about this. Honestly, it is easier to speak in the team huddle. Even though I'm not exhibiting it, it is truly a very emotional moment for me," Ashwin said in a video shared by BCCI.

"Aisa feel ho raha hai ki… (it is feeling like) when in 2011-12 I toured here, my first Australian tour, I saw everybody transition. I saw Rahul (Dravid) bhai left, Sachin (Tendulkar) paaji left...

"But trust me guys, everybody's time comes, and today was to leave my time."

Ashwin said the last four-five years of international cricket was the time when he truly made some special relationships, having been a part of the Indian side since November 2011.

"I have enjoyed it, thoroughly enjoyed it, built some great relationships and friendships over the last four-five years notably, and I am leaving behind some of my teammates who have been playing (with me)," he said.

"Every passing year in the last 4-5 years, I have felt how much more I value their relationship and how much more I value them as a player."

Ashwin said he may have been gone but the "cricket nut" in him will always keep him involved. "I've had a great time. I will be taking a flight back home, but I will be tuned to watch how well you guys go in Melbourne," Ashwin said.

"The cricketer in me, the Indian cricketer, international cricketer might have come to an end, but the cricket nut in me will never come to an end, so I will be looking forward to each one of your performances and all the very best," he said.

He left his India teammates with the promise that he is "just a call away" for them.

"If at all you guys need anything, I'm just a call away. Thank you so much once again, thanks Rohit. Thanks, Virat, thanks, Gauti Bhai. I'm so happy today," Ashwin said.

An emotional Rohit Sharma offered him a piece after he cut his farewell cake, while Mohammed Siraj gave him three salutes, and KL Rahul hugged him. Ashwin got emotional as he embraced Shubman Gill.

Ravichandran Ashwin: The Man who never believed in playing it safe

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From 2011 till the series against England, he was lethal at home. Critics can talk endlessly about the nature of Indian strips during the past 13 years but no one can deny Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja were a force of nature in those conditions.

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

39 MLAs sworn in as ministers in Fadnavis-led govt

BJP MLAs sworn as Ministers	Shiv Sena MLAs sworn as Ministers
Chandrashekhar Bawankule	Gulabrao Patil
Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil	Dada Bhuse
Chandrakant Patil	Sanjay Rathod
Girish Mahajan	Uday Samat
Ganesh Naik	Shambhuraj Desai
Mangal Prabhat Lodha	Sanjay Shirsat
Jaykumar Rawal	Pratap Sarnaik
Pankaja Munde	Bharat Gogawale
Atul Save	Prakash Abitkar
Ashok Uike	Ashish Jaiswal (MoS)
Ashish Shelar	Yogesh Kadam (MoS)
Shivendra Raje Bhosale	**NCP MLAs sworn as Ministers**
Jaykumar Gore	Hasan Mushrif
Sanjay Savkare	Dhananjay Munde
Nitesh Rane	Dattatray Bharne
Akash Fundkar	Aditi Tatkare
Madhuri Misal (MoS)	Manikrao Kokate
Pankaj Bhoyar (MoS)	Narhari Zirwal
Meghana Bordikar (Mos)	Makarand Jadhav-Patil
	Babasaheb Patil
	Indranil Naik (MoS)

The much-awaited cabinet expansion of the BJP-led Maharashtra government took place on Sunday (December 15), with 39 ministers, taking its strength to 42. Notably, the council of ministers in Maharashtra can have a maximum of 43 members, including the chief minister.

While 33 legislators were sworn in as cabinet ministers, six took oath as ministers of state. In the expansion, BJP got 19 ministerial berths, followed by 11 for Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and 9 for Ajit Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party.

Maharashtra governor CP Radhakrishnan administered the oath to the new ministers at the Raj Bhavan. For the second time after 1991, the swearing-in ceremony of ministers was organized in Nagpur.

Ministers to serve for 2.5 years, performance to be reviewed thereafter: CM Fadnavis after Cabinet expansion

Nagpur

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Sunday (December 15) said that the ministers who were sworn in today will serve a tenure of two and a half years, after which their performance will be reviewed.

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CM Fadnavis on 2.5 years ministerial post

Addressing the media after the cabinet expansion, the CM said, "Our party has decided that our ministers will work for two and a half years for the ministerial post, then after two and a half years we will give opportunity to new people after seeing their performance. We will also have a performance audit of the work of every minister in our party and government, this will be for the ministers of all three parties," said the CM.

CM Fadnavis also informed that the portfolio allocation to Maharashtra ministers in the next two days. "Almost consensus has been reached on all the departments, so we will declare the portfolio in two days. We have not decided anything about the guardian minister yet, we will decide after the session. The Speaker of the Assembly will decide on the Leader of Opposition," he said.

"The Assembly session will begin tomorrow, during which we will pass 20 bills. We have already responded to the letter sent by the opposition and addressed the questions raised. We will provide a dynamic government in the state. The opposition is attempting to create a misleading narrative regarding EVMs, but we will address it. For us, EVM signifies every vote for Maharashtra," he added.

Fadnavis to distribute portfolios: Shinde

Deputy CM Eknath Shinde said that CM Devendra Fadnavis will allocate the portfolios. He congratulated Fadnavis on becoming Chief Minister for the third time, noting that Fadnavis had expressed his intention to return, which he has now done. Shinde emphasised the teamwork between them, saying, "We worked as a team."

During the oath-taking ceremony of the cabinet ministers, Shinde said, "For the last few days, we were seeing who is getting how many departments. This conference is being held in Nagpur, and I congratulate Devendra ji. The match is new, the opposition remains the same. We have worked as a team. Devendra ji and Ajit Dada are with me. I had said earlier that I would bring 200 MLAs, and Ajit Pawar's arrival is a bonus. We have a responsibility towards the public. Decisions will be taken in a dynamic manner."