

# INDIAN CHRONICLE

17 December, 2024 | Tuesday | Volume No:12 | Issue No:264

Pages: 8+8

www.indianchronicle.com

Published from : Ranga Reddy (Telangana State)

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## Telangana wakes up to biting cold, mercury drops to 7.1 degrees Celsius in Hyd

Hyderabad: Hyderabad and other parts of Telangana State are under the grip of intense cold wave with Bela in Adilabad recording the season's lowest of 6.3 degree Celsius in the early hours of Monday. In Hyderabad, the minimum temperature recorded was 7.1 degrees Celsius at University of Hyderabad (UoH) campus, Serilingampally mandal, while at Moula Ali (Uppal mandal) the minimum temperature recorded was 7.2 degrees Celsius. The entire Hyderabad and its neighbouring districts including, Sangareddy, Vikarabad, Medchal-Malkajgiri and Rangareddy districts are under the influence of an intense cold wave with temperatures at several core areas .

## KNRUHS announces mop-up web counselling for B.Sc allied health sciences 2024-2025

Hyderabad: Kaloji Narayana Rao University of Health Sciences (KNRUHS), Telangana on Monday notified to conduct mop-up phase of web-based counseling for Competent Authority Quota seats in B.Sc. Allied Health Sciences Courses (including BPT and B. Sc .MLT courses) for 2024-25 in affiliated Colleges. Candidates whose names are notified as eligible candidates in the provisional final merit list for the academic year 2024-25 on the KNRUHS website are eligible and can exercise their web options for admissions into B.Sc Allied Health Sciences (including BPT and BS(c)MLT courses) from 2 pm on December 16 to 2 pm on December 18 through the through web-site: <https://alliedhs.tsche.in>.

## President Droupadi Murmu to Visit Guntur District Tomorrow



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Amaravati: President Droupadi Murmu is set to visit Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh tomorrow. As part of her schedule, the President will participate in the first convocation ceremony of AIIMS Mangalagiri.

The event marks a significant milestone for the prestigious institute, with the President expected to address the graduating students and faculty. Security arrangements have been tightened across the district ahead of her visit. President Murmu's participation in the convocation highlights the importance of AIIMS Mangalagiri in contributing to the medical field and fostering excellence in healthcare education.

## BRS to hold State-wide protest against oppression of Lagacherla farmers



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Hyderabad: The BRS will hold Statewide protests at 11 am on Tuesday, against the Congress government's tyrannical, inhuman and oppressive treatment of Lagacherla farmers. The party charged the Congress government with filing illegal cases, applying third-degree methods, detaining farmers, and even handcuffing them when one of them suffered heart stroke. The party demanded immediate withdrawal of cases and release of the detained farmers. As part of the protest, petitions will be submitted at Dr BR Ambedkar statues in all constituencies, highlighting the alleged injustice and demanding for accountability from the Congress government.

## No Reorganisation of districts in Telangana, says Ponguleti

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Hyderabad: Revenue Minister Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy on Monday clarified that the government had no proposal for reorganisation of districts in the State. Replying to a query on the issue raised by BRS member T Ravinder Rao in the Legislative Council, Srinivas Reddy said there was no proposal to reduce the number of districts in the State. All reports about abolishing a few districts were false and misleading, he said. Ravinder Rao said reports of few districts being abolished were circulating in various social media platforms and people were expressing fear over it. "I want the government to come up with a statement about the issue so that the fear of the people could be addressed," he said. Finance Minister Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka informed that after the new government was formed in the State 55,172 posts selection process was completed and 54,573 posts appointment orders were issued. The State government had issued Telangana Job Calendar for 2024-25 to ensure prompt conduct of competitive examinations for filling up of various direct recruitment vacancies in government departments, grant-in-aid institutions and public sector units to enable the students to plan their schedules for exams.

The government was identifying the vacancies and notifications would be issued as per time schedule mentioned in the job calendar, he said. 13 weavers committed suicide in last one year: Agriculture Minister Agriculture Minister Tummala Nageshwar Rao informed that as many as 13 weavers committed suicide in the last one year in the State. So far three families of weavers who committed suicide have been given Rs. 5 lakh each and the remaining 10 cases are under process, he informed. The family members of weavers aged up 59-years committing suicide covered under Nethanna Bhima Scheme were being provided an ex-gratia of Rs. 5 lakh and above 59-years were being provided an ex-gratia of Rs. 5 lakh through Telangana State Handloom Weavers Cooperative Society Limited, he said, adding that those not registered with Nethanna Bhima scheme were being provided Rs. 1.5 lakh. Endowments Minister Konda Sureka admitted that the recommendation letters of Telangana peoples' representatives were not being honoured by the TTD authorities.

## Ustad Zakir Hussain tribute: Tabla loses its vibrant voice

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

The tabla fell silent as Ustad Zakir Hussain (1951-2024), one of the greatest global ambassadors of Indian classical music, passed away on Monday (December 16, 2024) after a brief illness in San Francisco, California. A maestro who transformed the modest instrument into a robust voice for universal peace and humanity, Hussain's incredible speed, dexterity, and creativity mesmerised audiences across cultures. Having grown up singing odes to Mother Saraswati, verses of the holy Quran, and hymns of the Bible as a daily ritual, India's syncretic soul echoed through Hussain's rhythmic art. With a flair for carving stories out of percussive sound, his conversational music buzzed with a spark of spontaneity. Natu-



ral flow defined his music and personality. The Padma Vibhushan would impress the purists, enthrall the seekers of fusion, and handhold the fans of Bollywood music into his creative space with equal felicity. At the peak of his creativity genius, he bagged three Grammys in one night this February. Like his carefully designed free-flowing style, the versatile artist would execute complex rhythms, intricate patterns, and nuanced dynamics and then move on to

role in popularising tabla and providing it a global platform remains unparalleled. Born to Ustad Alla Rakha, the eminent accompanist of Pandit Ravi Shankar, credited with taking tabla to foreign shores, tabla chose Hussain. He grew up in Mumbai in an environment where his father believed that every instrument has its spirit. Hussain befriended the tabla at the age of three and by the time he hit teenage, the instrument had become his muse for life and perhaps an extension of his personality. After watching him play, one couldn't see playing tabla as a chore in classical music. His other two brothers, Taufiq and Fazal, are also noted percussionists but Hussain took his father's legacy to the next level by adding a touch of showmanship and expanding the riches he inherited from the Punjab gharana.

items like the sound of traffic signal and deer's walk, without putting music into brackets. In tune with technology, over the years, he experimented with frequencies to highlight the subtle shades of the instrument to establish that tabla is not just a rhythmic instrument but also a melodic one. He emerged on the scene alongside eminent tabla artists like Anindo Chatterjee, Shafaat Ahmed Khan, Kumar Bose, and Swapan Chaudhuri, but Hussain's

## Sri Lankan president Dissanayake meets PM Modi: India-Sri Lanka decide to ramp up defence, energy, trade ties

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

India and Sri Lanka Monday (December 16, 2024) adopted a futuristic vision to expand their partnership, resolved to soon conclude a defence cooperation pact and decided to ramp up energy ties by establishing electricity grid connectivity and multi-product petroleum pipelines. The decisions were taken during wide-ranging talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake. Prime Minister Modi said both sides decided to emphasise investment-led growth and connectivity for the India-Sri Lanka economic partnership, and it was decided that physical, digital and energy connectivity will be key pillars of the cooperation.

Work will be done to establish electricity grid connectivity and multi-product petroleum pipelines, Mr. Modi said, adding India will supply liquefied natural gas to the island nation's power plants. The Prime Minister also announced that a ferry service will be started between Rameshwaram and Talaimannar to boost connectivity between the two nations. "We both agree that our security interests are interconnected. We have decided to soon finalise the defence cooperation agreement. There has also been an agreement for cooperation on hydrography," Mr. Modi said. The vexed



fishermen issue also figured in the talks. "We also discussed issues related to the livelihood of fishermen. We agree that we must proceed with a humanitarian approach to this matter," Mr. Modi said. Referring to the Tamil issue, Mr. Modi said India hopes that the Sri Lankan government will fulfil the aspirations of the community. The Prime Minister also noted that India has so far provided Lines of Credit and grant assistance worth \$5 billion to Sri Lanka. "We have cooperation in all 25 districts of Sri Lanka and selection of our projects is always based on priorities of our partner countries," PM Modi said.

## New ration cards to be issued after Sankranti festival, says Uttam



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Hyderabad: Civil Supplies Minister N Uttam Kumar Reddy on Monday announced that new white ration cards would be issued after the Sankranti festival. Replying to a question raised by MLC M Kodanda Ram Reddy during the Question Hour, Uttam Kumar Reddy said efforts were being made to issue white ration cards from January. The State government would provide white ration card to every Below Poverty Line (BPL) family in the State, he clarified. The Minister said the government had received 18 lakh new applications for white ration cards in the last one year and of them 10 lakh applicants would be issued ration cards after Sankranti. Giving information about the ration cards, he said in the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh 91.68 lakh cards were issued in Telangana region and about 3.38 crore people used to get benefits of it. Between 2016-2023, about 647479 new ration cards were issued, benefiting 19 lakh families, he said. He said currently about 31 lakh people have to be included in the food security scheme. Congress member T Jeevan Reddy and BRS member Satyavathi Rathod urged the government to set up ration shops in newly formed Gram Panchayats in the State. They said the tribals were forced to travel long distances to get ration as they do not have ration dealers nearby. Kodandaram urged the government

to immediately issue new ration cards so that the beneficiaries could get their share of ration.

## Carrying gold back from the Gulf a 'typical problem' of Kerala: Supreme Court

GNS News Agen

The Supreme Court on Monday (December 16, 2024) termed the bringing of gold from Gulf countries to Kerala a "typical problem", probably unique, to the State.

A Bench of Justices Surya Kant and Ujjal Bhuyan was hearing a petition filed by the Union government against a Kerala High Court decision of April 2024 which upset a detention order under the Conservation of Foreign Exchange and Prevention of Smuggling Activities Act, 1974 (COFEPOSA) passed on a man caught travelling back to Kerala with a few lakhs worth of dirhams.

The court's oral observations were triggered after Additional Solicitor General Aishwarya Bhati, appearing for the government, said there was a previous case of gold smuggling against the man, Siraj. The High Court had given the man relief in April on the basis of a petition filed by his wife, Shafina Siraj. "This is a typical problem relating to Kerala... There are numerous cases of bringing gold... People go, earn in Dirhams, buy gold and come back," Justice Kant remarked orally.

The Bench said it seemed to be a common feature in Kerala to carry back gold from the UAE. Justice Kant said it may be a "unique" feature of culture in Kerala that almost everyone wore gold. The judge said gold was also considered something of an investment in the State. The Bench refused to intervene against the High Court decision. Dismissing the Centre's appeal in the COFEPOSA issue, the apex court recorded Ms. Bhati's submission that that there was separate legal action against Siraj under the Customs Act.

## PM Modi to inaugurate projects worth Rs 46,300cr in Rajasthan tomorrow



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Jaipur: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Rajasthan on December 17 and inaugurate projects worth Rs 46,300 crore in Jaipur. PM Modi will participate in 'Ek Varsh-Parinaam Utkarsh' (completion of one year of Rajasthan government programme during which he will inaugurate and lay the foundation stone for 24 projects related to energy, road, railways and water worth over Rs 46,300 crores.

He will also inaugurate nine projects worth over Rs 11,000 crore which include seven Central government projects and two state government projects and will lay the foundation stone for 15 projects worth over Rs 35,300 crore which include nine Central government projects and six state government projects. The projects being inaugurated during the event include Navnera Barrage, Smart Electricity Transmission Network and Asset Management System projects, Railway electrification of Bhildi-Samdari-Luni-Jodhpur-Merta Road-Degana - Ratangarh section and Package 12 of Delhi-Vadodara Green Field Alignment (NH-148N) (Major bridge over Mej River upto junction with SH-37A) project among other projects.

These projects will help to provide an easy commute to people and fulfil the energy needs of the state in line with the PM's vision of green energy. Prime Minister will also lay the foundation stone for construction work of Ramgarh Barrage & Mahalpur Barrage and system for transfer of water from Navnera Barrage to Bisalpur Dam and Isarda Dam through aqueduct on Chambal River at a cost of over Rs 9,400 crore. Prime Minister will also lay the foundation stone for installation of rooftop solar plants on government office buildings, development of one 2000 MW solar park and two phases of 1000 MW solar parks in Poogal (Bikaner) and drinking water transmission line from Saipau (Dholpur) to Bharatpur-Deeg-Kumher-Nagar-Kaman & Pahari and Chambal-Dholpur-Bharatpur retrofitting work. The foundation stone will be laid for works related to the Luni-Samdari-Bhildi Double Line, Ajmer-Chanderiya Double Line and Jaipur-Sawai Madhopur Double Line railway project as well as other energy transmission related projects.

## Mallikarjun Kharge accuses PM Modi of neglecting crisis in Manipur



The Prime Minister travels everywhere within the country and outside but he has no time to visit Manipur, even when violence continues there, said the Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge on Monday (December 16, 2024) raised the issue of continued violence in Manipur and asked why Prime Minister Narendra Modi had not had the time to visit the State. Participating in a discussion on the "Glorious Journey of 75 Years of the Constitution of India", the Congress chief said the Prime Minister had not had the time to assess the situation in Manipur for the past year and a half, since violence started in the eastern border State. "Violence and unrest is continuing in Manipur but Modi ji did not get the time for one-and-a-half years to assess the situation there," he said. "The Prime Minister travels everywhere within the country and outside but he has no time to visit Manipur, even when violence continues there," Mr. Kharge said, questioning PM Modi's silence on the issue. Ethnic violence broke out in Manipur on May 3 last year after a tribal solidarity march was taken out in the hill districts to protest against the majority Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Since then, more than 220 people, including members of both the Kuki and the Meitei communities and security personnel, have been killed in the continuing violence.

# Indian Chronicle

English Daily

## 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.

## Both NCP factions should come together, says Sunanda Pawar; Ajit Pawar's party says why not



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

A day after NCP chief Ajit Pawar met his estranged uncle Sharad Pawar to wish him on his 84th birthday, Sunanda Pawar, the mother of NCP (SP) MLA Rohit Pawar, said Friday that the two factions should come together. In response, the NCP said the Sharad Pawar group is welcome to join hands with them provided they are ready to accept the leadership of Ajit Pawar. While speaking to reporters in Pune, Sunanda Pawar said, "Every year, we all meet Sharad Pawar... As a family, we should all come together". "I can't say whether Ajit Pawar and Sharad Pawar will come together. Every family has differences. In future, they can come together. I think they should come together. If we are united, it increases our strength, if we are divided, the strength is diminished. The two should decide who should go with whom," she said.

When asked whether the Senior Pawar should also join hands with the ruling parties, Sunanda Pawar said, "Sharad Pawar has been in politics for 60 years. What he should do and what he shouldn't is his call. I am nobody to advise him". Sunanda Pawar is married to Rajendra Pawar, the son of Dinkarrao Pawar — Sharad Pawar's older brother. NCP spokesperson Amol Mitkari said they "welcome" Sunanda Pawar's statement. "Even Ajit Pawar had made the same appeal during a rally he addressed at Shanmukhanand Hall in Mumbai... Today, under the leadership of Ajit Pawar, the NCP is growing rapidly. We have 41 MLAs, one Lok Sabha MP and two Rajya Sabha. If the Sharad Pawar group wants to join hands with us, we will welcome them. But they will have to honestly accept the leadership of Ajit Pawar... Party workers also feel that the two NCP should come together," said Mitkari. However, after Ajit Pawar visited Sharad Pawar at his Delhi residence Thursday, their first meeting in more than a year, leaders of the NCP (SP) dismissed any speculation of a possible reunion. Ajit Pawar and Sharad Pawar fell out after he broke away from the main Nationalist Congress Party to form the government with the Bharatiya Janata Party in Maharashtra in July 2023. After that, family members have contested against each other in the Lok Sabha elections 2024 and the recently concluded Maharashtra Assembly polls.

## Yasangi at stake for second consecutive year in 4 lakh acres under SRSP stage-II

Hyderabad: The prolonged closure of the Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Scheme (KLIS) barrages has begun to take its toll on the SRSP Stage II ayacut. The lack of water supplementation from KLIS is expected to have a devastating effect in over four lakh acres of Yasangi (Rabi) ayacut in the erstwhile Nalgonda, Khammam, and Warangal districts.

Nearly two lakh acres of it, falling mainly in Tungathurthy, Suryapet, Kodad and Huzurnagar assembly constituencies in Nalgonda and Suryapet districts, will be bearing the brunt. It forms the tail-end of the SRSP Stage-II canal system. The system was receiving irrigation support for rabi only since 2018. The farmers in these parts of the SRSP command are now a worried lot.

## Bangladesh delegation to join Vijay Diwas celebrations in Kolkata



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

A small delegation of 10-12 people from Bangladesh is set to grace the upcoming Vijay Diwas (Victory Day) celebrations in Kolkata on Monday, amidst tensions between India and Bangladesh. The delegation is expected to include both freedom fighters who played a crucial role in the 1971 Liberation War and serving officers of the Bangladesh Armed Forces. As per sources, Mukti Yoddhas are likely to arrive in Kolkata one day before the Vijay Diwas. For the past five decades, India has invited Mukti Yoddhas — members of the Mukti Bahini, the Bangladeshi guerrilla resistance force that fought alongside Indian forces in the 1971 war — to participate in the celebrations. This year, despite initial un-

certainty, the Eastern Command has confirmed the delegation's participation. The Indian Army's Eastern Command, headquartered in Fort William, Kolkata, has planned a series of events to commemorate the historic victory. Key highlights include a wreath-laying ceremony at Vijay Smarak and a grand military tattoo at the Military Training Centre.

Vijay Diwas commemorates the historic surrender of 93,000 Pakistani soldiers to the joint forces of the Indian Army and the Mukti Bahini on December 16, 1971. This decisive victory led to the birth of Bangladesh. The day holds immense significance for both countries, and the Eastern Command's Vijay Diwas celebration is one of the largest military events in South Asia. Army officials say that it is a time to remember the historical significance of the war as India played a pivotal role in supporting the liberation of Bangladesh and the restoration of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman alias Bangabandhu to power. Lately, India has expressed deep concern over the recent alleged surge in "violence against Hindus" in Bangladesh. The interim government led by Muhammad Yunus has been urged to "fulfill its responsibility" of protecting minority groups. Since former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled to India in August after mass protests, relations between the two countries have become increasingly tense, heightening with the recent arrest of ISKCON monk Chinmoy Krishna Das.

## As Sukhbir Singh Badal completes 'sentence', all eyes on SAD working committee



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

More than three months after he was declared 'tankhaiya' or guilty of violating the Sikh religious code of conduct, former Punjab deputy chief minister Sukhbir Singh Badal completed his 'atonement' and paid obeisance at the Sri Akal Takht Sahib in Amritsar on Friday. Badal and other Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leaders had been ordered to perform guard duty, clean toilets, serve in the community kitchen, perform Nitnem or daily Sikh prayers, and recite the Sukhmani Sahib as part of their punishment for the "mistakes" made by their government from 2007 to 2017. After being declared guilty, Badal had stayed away from the public eye and resigned as SAD president. The SAD had also refrained from contesting the Assembly bypolls in Punjab last month. All eyes are now on whether the SAD working committee, which is known to be loyal to him, will accept his resignation. On Friday, other SAD leaders also reached the Sri Akal Takht Sahib after completing their 10-day religious sentence. "We have completed our service in compliance with the directives given by Sri Akal Takht Sahib. I express my gratitude to all the leadership for contributing enthusiastically to the service," SAD leader Daljit Singh Cheema said. Badal did not make any statement. Earlier, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee president Harjinder Singh Dhami, who was in charge of the committee formed for the reorganisation of the SAD, had himself raised questions over the instructions from the Sri Akal Takht Sahib. "There are some technical issues... I have discussed it with other members also. There is a system. There are Election Commission of India (ECI) guidelines for a recognised party. We have already brought it to the knowledge of Sri Akal Takht Sahib Jathedar that they should also examine the legal aspects," Dhami had said.

## Karnataka govt to raise Rs 3,000 crore from World Bank for stormwater drain, underground drainage works in Bengaluru

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Karnataka Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda informed the Legislative Assembly Friday that the state government will raise Rs 3,000 crore as loans from the World Bank for various projects to prevent flooding in Bengaluru. Of the Rs 3,000 crore, Rs 2,000 crore will be utilised for stormwater drain (SWD) works by the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP). The remaining Rs 1,000 crore will be allocated to the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) for underground drainage works in areas where sewage water enters SWDs. The funds will be utilised to connect the underground drainage network with sewage treatment plants in the city.

In his reply to the Assembly regarding damages caused due to heavy rainfall, Gowda said that authorities have identified 856 km of primary and secondary SWDs and 200 km of tertiary SWDs for development. "Permanent development works along... remodelling will be taken up to increase the capacity of flowing water in the SWDs," he added. The works of all drains identified for development will be completed within a year. Under the Disaster Mitigation Fund, too, Rs 240 crore will be allotted for these works in the city. Tenders for these projects will be invited within a month, the minister said.

He further said the Geological Survey of India has identified 863 gram panchayats susceptible to landslides in six districts of the state — Dakshina Kannada, Uttara Kannada, Kodagu, Shivamogga, Chikkamagaluru, and Udupi. Based on the report submitted by the deputy commissioners of these districts, Rs 425 crore will be required for various projects to prevent landslides, Gowda said, adding that Rs 115.85 crore will be spent for 152 works in the first phase.

## Roadside fast-food operator dies by suicide in Jind, live streams act on Facebook

A roadside fast-food cart operator died by suicide on Facebook Live in Haryana's Jind district in the intervening night. The deceased has been identified as Sanjeev Thakur, 26, a migrant from Bihar. People saw his live post and a few of his neighbours reached his home, and took him to the civil hospital where he was declared dead on arrival. Thakur's wife Kiran Devi told the police that she and her husband hail from the Katihar district in Bihar. The couple had taken a loan of Rs 2.5 lakh from a few people in their village but could not repay it. To avoid money lenders, they migrated to Jind a few months ago. Thakur started selling fast food on a cart in the Vishwakarma colony of Jind but could not repay his loan. In his last FB post, Thakur mentioned he was having a 102-degree fever and believed that he wouldn't survive. He added that people should forgive him for his mistakes and that he was ending his life. Inspector Manish Kumar, City Police Station, Jind told The Indian Express that the deceased was mentally disturbed for the last few days due to his inability to repay the debt that he and his wife had taken. "His wife has stated that she does not suspect any foul play. We have initiated the inquest proceedings and shall hand over the deceased's body to his family members after the post-mortem examination," he added.



## AI cameras on Bengaluru-Mysuru highway detect 13 lakh violations, slap Rs 90 crore in fines in 3 years

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Intelligent Traffic Management System (ITMS) cameras installed along the 119 km 10-lane Bengaluru-Mysuru highway have booked 13 lakh traffic violation cases during 2022-2024, according to data released by the Karnataka home department during the Belagavi session of the state legislature on Thursday. Fines totalling Rs 90 crore have also been imposed during these three years of which only Rs 4 crore has been collected.

Driving without a seatbelt tops the list of violations with 7 lakh cases, followed by speeding (2 lakh cases), lane discipline violation (1 lakh) and using mobile phones while driving (23,000). However, out of the total 13 lakh cases booked, only 74,000 have been cleared in the three years. In 2024, a total of 4.1 lakh cases were booked and a fine amount of Rs 24 crore was imposed. Of these cases, only 15,000 have been cleared with a pending fine amount of Rs 23 crore. ITMS cameras installed by the Karnataka traffic and road safety department monitor and detect traffic violations using artificial intelligence technology. According to the department, a total of 12 such cameras are installed along the highway. Five cameras each have been installed in Mandya and Ramanagara regions while two have been installed in the Mysuru region. The cameras usually capture images of the vehicles involved in the violations and use the vehicle's registration number to promptly send an SMS to the owner, notifying them of the traffic violation and the corresponding fine. However, the department is also thoroughly reviewing complaints from drivers who claim they were fined despite adhering to traffic rules, such as wearing seat belts or not using mobile phones while driving.

A key issue raised by complainants is the inaccurate booking of cases for not wearing a seat belt. They argue that the AI-based cameras often fail to detect seat belts



when the shirt color is dark, making seat belts appear invisible. Additionally, the Bengaluru-Mysuru access-controlled highway has recorded a significant drop in road fatalities, from 188 in 2023 to just 50 in 2024, after the installation of the Advanced Traffic Management System (ATMS) in July 2024, according to the data from the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. The ATMS improves traffic safety through real-time monitoring and quicker incident response, with zero fatalities reported from September to December 2024, according to data presented in the Lok Sabha by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways recently. The reasons for the decline in fatalities also include the installation of sectional speed control cameras this year. The AI-powered cameras are equipped with sophisticated algorithms capable of monitoring the speed of vehicles in real time. When a vehicle exceeds the speed limit—typically set between 80-100 km/h—the cameras automatically capture the vehicle's number plate. The data is then transmitted to a Traffic Management Centre (TMC), where cases are registered under the Motor Vehicles Act, and e-challans (electronic fines) are generated and sent to the violators.

## Noida building projects without clearances not to proceed with construction: NGT

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

The National Green Tribunal has directed that building projects in Greater Noida and Noida, not having the requisite clearances, will not be allowed to proceed with the construction activities. The green body was hearing a plea regarding the alleged unauthorised and illegal construction of houses, shops and other commercial and residential complexes in Greater Noida and Noida, which violated environmental norms. The plea also alleged that some realtors were illegally extracting the topsoil, besides operating unauthorised borewells.

In an order dated December 9, a bench of NGT Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava said, "Authorities concerned have filed their replies which reveal that some of the project proponents (realtors) are continuing with the construction without obtaining Consent to Establish (CTE), Consent to Operate (CTO) and Environmental Clearance (EC).""Since it has been submitted that large-scale illegal construction without following environmental norms is in progress, therefore, we direct that till the next date of hearing, concerned authorities of the state and pollution control board will ensure that a project requiring EC/CTE/CTO but not having these clearances are not permitted to proceed with the construction illegally till it complies with all the requisite environmental norms and clearances," said the bench also comprising judicial member Justice Sudhir Agarwal and expert member A Senthil Vel.

The tribunal also directed the Uttar Pradesh Pollution



Control Board to prevent illegal plotting in the area falling in the floodplain zones. During the proceedings, the petitioner's counsel, Akash Vashishtha argued that a large part of Greater Noida had illegal townships, villas and apartments. "We have placed extensive material on record to demonstrate how huge constructions are coming up every day. Photographs show how electricity poles are being erected in illegal colonies and borewells are being dug without the mandatory no objection certificates (NOCs)," he said. The petition filed by BJP leader and former Municipal Corporator Rajendra Tyagi lists 56 villages of Greater Noida and 18 villages in Noida having unauthorised colonies and townships. It alleges that over 20,000 hectares of fertile arable farmlands in Greater Noida have been usurped while more than 20,000 hectares of land in Noida is being used for illegal plotting.

## RG Kar rape and murder: Sealdah court grants bail to Sandip Ghosh, Abhijit Mondol as CBI fails to submit chargesheet

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

A local court in Sealdah Friday granted bail to Sandip Ghosh, the former principal of state-run R G Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata, and Abhijit Mondol, the former officer in charge of the Tala police station, in the rape and murder case of a junior doctor at the campus. The Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate (ACJM) granted bail to Sandip Ghosh and Abhijit Mondol after the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) did not submit a chargesheet within the mandatory 90-day period. The court granted them bail on a surety bond of Rs 2,000 each and said the accused would have to appear before the CBI when they are called by the central agency. However, Ghosh will remain in jail in another case of alleged financial irregularities at R G Kar Medical College and Hospital.

In the court, the CBI's investigating officer said that the probe against the accused in the R G Kar rape and murder case is still ongoing. Massive protests erupted

across the country after the crime took place on August 9 this year. The Kolkata police arrested Sanjay Roy, a civic volunteer, a day after the rape and murder of the junior doctor. Later, the CBI arrested Sandip Ghosh for allegedly destroying evidence in the case. Mondal has been accused of alleged delay in filing of FIR in the rape and murder of R G Kar Hospital doctor. The victim's mother reacted to the decision of bail, saying, "We are very disheartened. This has happened only because the CBI did not file a chargesheet." Utpal Bandhopadhyay, one of the agitating doctors, said he is shocked at the news. "We can imagine what the family is going through now and we are with the family as we are Abhaya's family. We will once again begin our protests. We want to know the secret behind why the CBI did not submit any chargesheet." Previously, the CBI had submitted before the Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate of Sealdah court that they had "tephonic evidence" against the two accused. "

## 18th edition of Pune's Bhimthadi Jatra to be held from December 20-25



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

The 18th edition of the much-awaited Bhimthadi Jatra showcasing Maharashtra's rural arts, culture, and sustainable innovation will be held at the Agriculture Ground, Sinchan Nagar, Pune from December 20 to 25. This year's Jatra holds a special significance as it marks the 25th death anniversary of Padma Shri (Late) Appasaheb Pawar, a pioneering agriculturalist renowned for his revolutionary contributions, including drip irrigation.

Talking about the event, Saeer Pawar, curator, Bhimthadi Jatra, said: "This year, there will be about 325

stalls... agriculture section will have 25 farmers and the company which they started... and GI tag farming products and all these products will be 'residue-free'... Products such as fresh farm products, including honey and other agriculture innovations. This year, the theme is #ShareYourPrivilege campaign, as we want to bridge a gap between urban and rural people." "We had a record-breaking 1 lakh visitors last time... we are looking at the same number (this year). Bhimthadi Jatra is known for its parking area, it has 5 acres of parking area though it gets congested sometimes, but we have a great team. We manage to keep our area clean," she added. 4 stalls from Telangana Sunanda Pawar, founder, Bhimthadi Jatra, said: "We are cooperating with Telangana this time, we have four stalls offering Telangana's traditional handlooms and authentic cuisine such as pickles and spices... this will enrich our Jatra's cultural tapestry. Another key highlight is the Bara Balutedar section, which will pay tribute to Maharashtra's traditional occupational communities. Also, visitors will witness live demonstrations of rural craftsmanship by artisans..." There will be 85 food stalls offering authentic Maharashtra delicacies such as Malvani seafood thalis, Kolhapuri thalis, and sweet dishes.

## Parliamentary panel raises concern over low MGNREGS wages



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Flagging low wages under MGNREGS, a Parliamentary panel has questioned why the remuneration under the flagship scheme was not linked to an inflation index. It has also urged the Union rural development ministry for devising a mechanism for raising wages under the scheme. Headed by Congress MP Saptagiri Sankar Ulaka, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, in a report tabled in the Lok Sabha on Thursday, rapped the ministry and said there had been no noticeable change in its stance. It has been sending "stereotype responses" regarding revision of wages, the report said.

"Rising inflation and cost of living, be it urban or rural setting, has risen manifold and is evident to all. Even at this moment, going by the notified wage rates of MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), per day wage rate of around Rs 200 in many states defies any logic when the same state has much higher labour rates," the panel said in its report. "It becomes inexplicable as to why wages under MGNREGA still can't be linked to a suitable index commensurate with the existing inflation. Aware of the demand of increase in wages under MGNREGA from various quarters, the committee urges

the DoRD (Department of Rural Development) unequivocally to revisit its stand and devise a mechanism for raising the wages under MGNREGA," the panel said. It asserted the disparity in wages in different states was another matter of concern. Clause (d) of Article 39 of the Constitution that directs certain principles of policy to be followed by the state provides that there is a provision of equal pay for equal work for both men and women, it added.

"Hence, under the directive, there cannot be different wages for different states under MGNREGA. In view of Article 39 of the Constitution and to have parity in wages, the committee strongly recommends that MGNREGA beneficiaries must be paid wages without any disparity in order to bring equality in wages under MGNREGA across all states/Union territories urgently," the report said. The committee also recommended that the department spruce up its financial management of the scheme and tighten its grip on the fallacies that might have crept up in the implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) at the ground level for the earliest eradication of pendencies in wages and material components. The committee also recommended an increase in the number of days of work sought under MGNREGS from 100 to 150 days. The scheme — often called MGNREGA or NREGA — aims to enhance livelihood security of rural households by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. Wages under MGNREGS were last revised in April, with hikes ranging between four and 10 per cent for different states. Haryana has the highest wage for unskilled workers under the scheme at Rs 374 a day while Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland have the lowest at Rs 234, according to a government notification. An expert committee under the chairmanship of Anoop Satpathy, in a report released in 2019, had recommended that wages under MGNREGS should be Rs 375 a day.

## Ajit trying to poach 5-6 MPs from Sharad Pawar's party on BJP directive: Sanjay Raut



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Ajit Pawar is making an attempt to poach MPs of the NCP(SP) led by Sharad Pawar, Shiv Sena (UBT) spokesperson Sanjay Raut alleged on Friday. His statement comes a day after Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) president Ajit met the senior Pawar in New Delhi. According to Raut, the BJP has directed Ajit to break NCP(SP). "Ajit Pawar has been told to rope in at least five to six MPs of the NCP led by Sharad Pawar. Ajit has been told that if he wants any of his leaders to be

accommodated in the central ministry, he will have to break Sharad Pawar," Raut alleged.

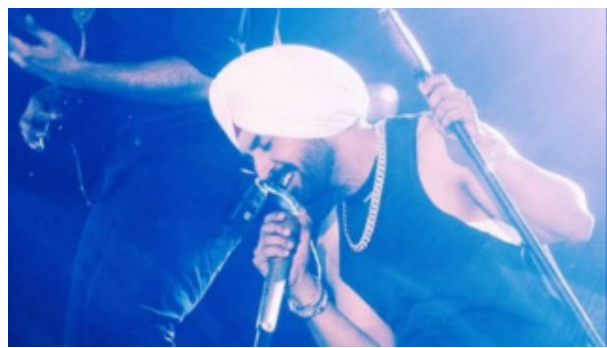
The Sena (UBT) leader's statement comes two days after BJP spokesperson Pravin Darekar hinted that a few MPs of Sharad Pawar's party are in touch with the BJP and are likely to switch over to the Mahayuti. Darekar claimed the MPs were worried as Mahayuti candidates won most of the Assembly seats in their Parliamentary constituencies. Raut said no matter what the BJP was up to, Sharad Pawar will never join hands with the saffron party. "Sharad Pawar is a secular leader. He will never join hands with a party that seeks to divide the people of this country in the name of religion," he said. In the recent Assembly elections, NCP(SP) managed to win only 10 seats in sharp contrast to its performance in the Lok Sabha polls where it had emerged as the top party in the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) alliance. When Ajit met Sharad Pawar, he told reporters that they discussed various issues including the vandalism in Parbhani, Cabinet expansion, and the functioning of the Parliament. NCP state president Sunil Tatkare, meanwhile, said there was no discussion regarding a reunion. "Don't go on that subject... We met Sharad Pawar to wholeheartedly wish him on his birthday," he said.

## HC allows Diljit Dosanjh show in Chandigarh with noise cap of 75 decibels

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

The Punjab and Haryana High Court on Friday permitted Diljit Dosanjh's show in Chandigarh but directed that the event's sound levels must not exceed 75 decibels at its periphery. A detailed order is awaited in the case. The division bench of Chief Justice Sheel Nagu and Justice Anil Kshetarpal clarified that the event could proceed as per permissions granted by the Chandigarh Administration, provided noise pollution norms are strictly followed. The bench observed that any breach of the 75-decibel limit would attract penal action by the authorities. Senior Advocate Akshay Bhan, representing the organisers, informed the court that the event would be held from 7 PM to 10 PM and assured that liquor would not be served to anyone under 25.

UT Senior Standing Counsel Amit Jhanji apprised the court of extensive security arrangements, including the deployment of around 2,000 police personnel, traffic marshals, and five fire tenders, to ensure the smooth conduct of the event. The court also directed the Chandigarh Administration to submit a status report on the event by December 18, the next hearing date. The petition, filed by Chandigarh resident Ranjeet Singh through counsel Davinder Singh, cited



disruptions caused by a December 7 concert at the same venue featuring artist Karan Aujla. The petitioner expressed concerns over recurring events at the Sector 34 exhibition ground, which lies near Sector 32, a hub for medical and emergency services. The bench was also informed about an upcoming concert by AP Dhillon, scheduled for December 21 at the same venue, and stated that it would address the matter during the December 18 hearing.

## Renukaswamy murder case: Karnataka HC grants bail to actor Darshan, Pavitra Gowda and 5 others



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Kannada film actor Darshan Thoogudeepa (right) was arrested on June 11 for allegedly killing Renukaswamy (left), a fan, for sending obscene messages to Pavithra Gowda. Kannada film actor Darshan Thoogudeepa (right) was arrested on June 11 for allegedly killing Renukaswamy (left), a fan, for sending obscene messages to Pavithra Gowda. The Karnataka High Court Friday granted bail to Kannada film star Darshan Thoogudeepa, his close friend Pavitra Gowda, and five associates nearly six months after their arrest in connection with the murder of his fan Renukaswamy. A single judge bench of Justice Vishwajith Shetty granted bail to Darshan Thoogudeepa, Pavitra Gowda, Pradoosh Rao, Jagadish alias Jaggu, Anu Kumar, Lakshman M, and Nagaraju K. The court had earlier reserved its judgment in the matter on December 9. On October 30, Justice Shetty granted interim conditional bail for six weeks to Thoogudeepa for treatment of a back ailment. The interim bail was extended on December 9 to facilitate surgery. In the course of the bail arguments, the state special prosecutor pointed to the severity and number of wounds inflicted on Renukaswamy to stress that it was a case of violent murder. The counsel for the actor, however, argued that the evidence in the case was "concocted". The popular actor was arrested on June 11 for his alleged role in the June 9 murder of Renukaswamy, who allegedly stalked and abused Pavitra Gowda on social media, in Bengaluru. The members of his gang, including Pavitra Gowda, were ar-

rested after investigations revealed that the actor paid a few men for the murder. In September, the Bengaluru police filed a 3,991-page chargesheet, naming Pavitra Gowda as accused number one and Darshan as accused number two. Besides Darshan and Gowda, the others named in the chargesheet are Pawan K, 29; Raghavendra, 43; Nandish, 28; Jagadish, 36; Anukumar, 25; Ravi Shankar, 32; Dhanraj D, 27; Vinay V, 38; Nagaraju, 41; Laxman, 54; Deepak, 39; Pradosh, 40; Karthik, 27; Keshavamurthy, 27; and Nikhil Nayak, 21. The police said they based their charges against Darshan Thoogudeepa on the call detail records and DNA reports that established his presence at the crime scene.

## Telangana Govt urges flu patients to avoid public places as temperatures plunge

Hyderabad: With the weather department in Hyderabad forecasting a drop in temperatures in the next five days, the State health department on Friday in an advisory has urged people with flu/influenza like infection to stay away from public places. The Director of Public Health (DPH), Telangana Dr B Ravinder Nayak in the advisory also urged people to avoid crowded places, stay away from arm's length from persons with flu and stay home and limit contact with others if the individual is sick. Individuals with chronic medical conditions (such as chronic cardiac, pulmonary, renal, metabolic, neurodevelopmental, liver or hematologic diseases) and individuals with immunosuppressive conditions/treatments (such as HIV, receiving chemotherapy or steroids, or malignancy) have to consult a doctor, he said. The advisory has urged people to look out for warning signs that include high fever, difficulty in breathing, blue colour of skin or lips, blood in sputum or altered behavior should consult doctor immediately at nearest government health facility without any delay.

## As convict flees Pune's Yerawada open prison, a look at these minimal security jails and how their inmates are picked

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

A murder convict serving a life sentence escaped from the Yerawada open prison in Pune on Wednesday, the second such incident at the facility this year. So what are open prisons? How are inmates selected to serve their sentence in an open prison? And how does this translate into reduced sentences? The open prison concept

The idea of having minimal-security open prisons was deliberated extensively in the mid-1950s on various international forums. In the late 1950s, a committee set up by the Indian government to revise prison rules set guidelines for establishing open prisons in the country. In Maharashtra, the first open prison for convicts was started as an annexe of the Yerawada Central Prison in 1956. The second such facility was set up at Paithan in Aurangabad (now Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar) in 1968. The Paithan facility was the first separately located open prison in Maharashtra and is considered an important landmark in the history of the state's prison administration. Maharashtra now has 19 open prisons, the second highest in India, after Rajasthan which has 31. Maharashtra's 19 open prisons include two for women, one at Yerawada in Pune and the other at Akola. The 19 open prisons have a total capacity of housing over 3,300 inmates and currently house over 3,100 prisoners. While the Yerawada open prison for men has a capacity of around 400 and houses somewhere around 250 currently, the one for women has a capacity of 100 and currently houses around 60 inmates. "We need to understand that the central idea behind open prison is the trust that the system puts in these inmates. The inmate will trust the sys-



tem only when the system trusts the inmate. These inmates are very carefully chosen by a committee for admission here from those serving long sentences at central prisons. That is why there is very little security, supervision and nominal perimeter wall or fencing. Various correctional and vocational activities here prepare the inmates for better life after their sentence," a prison officer said. How inmates are selected? States that have open prisons have formulated their own set of rules to govern their functioning. The Maharashtra Open Prisons Rules were formulated in 1971 and came into force in July of the same year. The superintendent of open prison prepares a list of eligible inmates along with their case histories. This list is placed before a selection committee that comprises the inspector general of prisons as chairman, the deputy inspector general of prisons of the region from which the prisoners are to be selected, the superintendent of the prison from which the inmates are to be selected and the superintendent of open prison.



## Take these precautions to avoid 'Digital Arrest': NPCI

Hyderabad: Digital payments are now accessible nationwide, driving India towards a digital-first economy. They offer both security and convenience. However, it's crucial to use digital payments safely and avoid online scams. Early identification of potential scams helps protect you and your loved ones, fostering a safer, less-cash economy, for everyone. What is digital arrest?

Online scams are becoming more sophisticated, with 'Digital Arrest' scams being a prime example. In these scams, fraudsters pretend to be law enforcement officials, tricking victims into sending money or sharing personal information by making up fake legal cases involving victim or their family member. They initiate contact through phone calls and then switch to video calls using platforms like WhatsApp or Skype. Victims are threatened with a digital arrest warrant for alleged financial misconduct or other legal violations. Under fear, victims often give in, resulting in financial loss and the risk of identity theft. How to identify Potential 'digital arrest' scam: Unexpected Contact from 'Officials': Be cautious if someone claims to be from gov-

ernment agencies like the police, CBI, income tax officers, or customs agents, contacts you. Be cautious especially if they claim urgent legal action is being initiated or warranted. They might allege that you or one of your family members is involved in a serious crime like money laundering, tax evasion, or drug trafficking. Fear-Based Language and Urgency: Scammers may request video calls, disguising themselves in police uniforms, using government logos, or creating official-sounding background noise to appear legitimate. They often threaten arrest or immediate legal action, demanding a quick response and using legal terms to sound convincing. In some cases, they create a police station-like setup to further convince victims of their credibility. Request for Sensitive Information or Payment: Scammers may ask for personal information or demand large sums of money, promising that this will clear up your involvement in the alleged crime. They may also coerce you to transfer money to their account until the investigation is complete. Terms like "clearing your name", "assisting with the investigation",..

## Protect Hindus in Bangladesh, don't ignore their pleas: Uddhav Thackeray to PM Modi



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Shiv Sena (UBT) president Uddhav Thackeray Friday questioned the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Centre and Prime Minister Narendra Modi over their silence on the attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh and asked about the action they would take to safeguard the interests of minorities in the neighbouring country. Thackeray said PM Modi should discuss the issue in the ongoing Winter Session of Parliament.

While addressing reporters at his residence, Matoshree, the former Maharashtra chief minister said, "Just like the Manipur violence, which is in our own country and is the responsibility of the Government of India, the Prime Minister and the Government seem to be ignoring the pleas of Hindus in Bangladesh. While the BJP's social media ecosystem drives narratives on social media with videos (some real and some not), and its karyakartas indulge in protests against Bangladesh, why doesn't the Union Government speak firmly for Hindus in Bangladesh?" Uddhav said if PM Modi can stop the Russia-Ukraine conflict to repatriate Indian students, he should also stop atrocities on Hindus in Bangladesh. "If Shaikh Hasina is safe in India, why are Hindus being attacked in Bangladesh and why are temples being vandalised there?" He asked. "They were used by the BJP in its political narrative. When it comes to helping them, the government doesn't speak. Likewise, in Mumbai, an 80-year-old Hanuman Temple has been issued a demolition notice by the Railways Ministry. It seems Hindus are used by the BJP only for elections," Uddhav said. He said neither are Hindus in Bangladesh safe nor are temples in Maharashtra because of the BJP government which sends the demolition notices.

## IISER Pune scientist Dr Krishanpal Karmodiya selected as EMBO Global Investigator

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Dr Krishanpal Karmodiya from the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Pune, is among the 11 scientists selected to be part of the prestigious Global Investigator Network of the European Molecular Biology Association (EMBO). "I am grateful for this recognition as it highlights our contributions to understanding drug resistance in *Plasmodium falciparum*, the parasite responsible for malaria," Dr Karmodiya told The Indian Express.

Karmodiya is among the five life scientists from India who got the opportunity to be included as the newest members of the EMBO Global Investigator. Prem Kaushal and Rajender Motiani from Regional Centre for Biotechnology, Faridabad, Bhavana Muralidharan from Institute for Stem Cell Science and Regenerative Medicine, Bengaluru, and Jogender Singh from IISER, Mohali, are the four others from India. EMBO is an organisation of more than 2,000 leading researchers that promotes excellence in life sciences. Over the last 60 years it has grown from the early pioneering days of molecular biology and made several contributions to promote the development of life sciences.

Dr Karmodiya, a faculty member in the Department of Biology at IISER Pune, said that their research group has contributed to the understanding of genetic markers associated with artemisinin resistance by analysing over 2,000 genomes. His group's research has focused on the cellular and genetic determinants of resistance to artemisinin, a critical drug in malaria treatment. The research on key chromatin regulators implicated in drug resistance is well cited



and has been received with great interest by the scientific community. A recent study by Dr Karmodiya's group was also able to identify novel mutations linked to resistance mechanisms. At a time when the World Malaria Report has noted a decrease in India's malaria caseload and the country exiting the High-Burden-High-Impact group of countries, this selection to the EMBO network is crucial to the work undertaken by Dr Karmodiya. "We will be able to exchange expertise with other EMBO members, particularly in chromatin biology and advanced genomic tools which are crucial for our work. Participation in conferences will also help build meaningful conversations," he said. The EMBO Global Investigator Network supports young group leaders in Chile, India, Singapore and Taiwan, and, in a pilot project, in Africa. Membership in the EMBO Global Investigator Network offers support to early- and mid-career scientists for a period of four years.

## Himachal minister Vikramaditya Singh meets Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, seeks support for construction of roads and bridges

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Himachal Pradesh PWD Minister Vikramaditya Singh and Nitin Gadkari meeting, himachal bridges and roads construction support news, Indian Express. Union Minister Nitin Gadkari assured Himachal Pradesh PWD Minister Vikramaditya Singh of all possible support to Himachal. Himachal Pradesh PWD Minister Vikramaditya Singh Friday met Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari in Delhi and took up various development issues pertaining to the state. Vikramaditya Singh urged Nitin Gadkari for the construction of an alternate road from Ghatasni, Shilha-Badhani-Bhubujot-Kullu with a tunnel at Bhubujot, which would reduce a distance of 40 km on National Highway 144. Singh said this is very important from the tourism point of view besides its strategic importance, and would facilitate tourists visiting the hill state's Kullu district.

He also urged Gadkari to provide approval for the construction of a Rs 125.57 crore double-lane bridge over the River Beas between Basantipattan and Kheri connecting Kangra and Hamirpur districts on priority under the Bharat Setu Yojna. Singh said Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu also raised this issue with the Union Minister during his previous meeting. He also requested the construction of a Rs 19.09 crore 110-metre span single-lane steel truss



motorable bridge over the Beas Pandoh on the Pandoh-Shiva Road in the Mandi district. On his part, Union Minister Nitin Gadkari assured Singh of all possible support to the state. Singh thanked Gadkari for sanctioning Rs 350 crore under the Central Road and Infrastructure Fund (CRIF), which he said will go a long way in improving road connectivity and enhancing the state's growth. He also thanked for the support extended by the Union minister for providing exemption to ropeway projects from forest clearances by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEFCC).

## 3 reasons why Pune is seeing fluctuating temperatures this winter

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Winter began on a strange note in Pune this year, with temperatures just dipping below the 10-degree Celsius mark, that too only for a few days in November. At present, the temperature is around 12-13 degrees Celsius but the India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Thursday predicted a rise in mercury levels over the next few days. The fluctuating weather can be linked to three things – Cyclone Fengal which struck the south peninsular coast in November, the consistently clear skies, and the presence of Northern Disturbances or moisture-laden cold winds which cause snowing and rainfall in North India, according to weather officials.

When Cyclone Fengal was in its formative state, it saw the withdrawal of inland moisture and coupled with the clear skies, it resulted in dipping temperatures. IMD officials said the dip in the last week of November was a result of this depletion of moisture, and the incursion of cold winds from the north. Pune's minimum dipped to below 10 degree Celsius at the time. Given the lack of moisture, the chill factor was more for the region. However, since the first week of December, the minimum temperature saw a slight rise – touching 16-17 degrees Celsius – due to the incursion of moisture into the city's air. This condition prevailed over the last few days, after which Pune's temperature showed a slight dip again, mainly due to the incursion of cold winds from up north. A low-pressure area along the coast of South India also led to moisture depletion in Pune. At present, the Indian subcontinent is in a peculiar situation with cold waves



The fluctuating weather can be linked to three things – Cyclone Fengal which struck the south peninsular coast in November, the consistently clear skies, and the presence of Northern Disturbances or moisture-laden cold winds which cause snowing and rainfall in North India, according to weather officials.

in the north and rainfall in the south. Maharashtra might not experience any rainfall but the showers in South India will affect Pune's minimum temperature. The temperatures are expected to rise by 1-2 degrees Celsius, mainly due to the incursion of moisture into the air. The cold winds from the North have also seen a slight dip in temperature. Given the cold waves and rainfall, the see-saw in Pune's temperature is not totally unrealistic. "For the next few days, we will see such dips and rises in the region's minimum temperature," said an IMD official.

## EVM verification plea should go before bench that gave verdict in April: SC



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

The Supreme Court on Friday said the plea seeking a policy for verification of electronic voting machines (EVMs) should go before the same bench that delivered a verdict in April rejecting the demand for bringing back the old paper ballots. When the plea on EVMs came up for hearing, a bench of Justices Vikram Nath and P B Varale told petitioner's counsel senior advocate Gopal Sankaranarayanan, "Why don't this matter go before the same bench?" Sankaranarayanan informed the court about its April judgment on a batch of pleas over EVMs. "That is what I am saying. It (plea) should go before the same bench," Justice Nath reiterated.

The bench further said, "To our understanding, the reliefs claimed by means of this petition under Article 32 of the Constitution of India would require interpretation/modification/implementation of the directions issued by this court vide judgement dated April 26, 2024 ..." In its verdict on April 26, the apex court termed the suspicion of manipulation of the EVMs "unfounded" and said the polling devices were "secured" and eliminated booth capturing and bogus voting. The top court, however, opened a window for the

aggrieved unsuccessful candidates securing second and third places in poll results while allowing them to seek verification of microcontroller chips embedded in five per cent EVMs per assembly constituency on a written request upon payment of a fee to the poll panel. It asked the apex court registry to place the papers of the case before Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna for passing appropriate orders on whether the petition would be listed before the same bench or another bench.

The petition was filed by former Haryana minister Karan Singh Dalal and five-time MLA Lakhman Kumar Singla. It sought compliance of the April 26 judgement of the top court delivered in the case of 'Association for Democratic Reforms versus Union of India'. Dalal and Singla secured the second-highest votes in their respective constituencies and sought a direction to the Election Commission (EC) to implement a protocol for examining the original "burnt memory" or microcontroller of the four components of the EVM — the control unit, ballot unit, VVPAT and symbol loading unit. The top court had mandated that five per cent of the EVMs every assembly constituency should undergo verification by the engineers from EVM manufacturers after the election results were announced. The petitioners said the poll panel has failed to issue any such policy, leaving the procedure for burnt memory verification unclear. According to the petition, the current standard operating procedure issued by the EC only involves basic diagnostic tests and mock polls without scrutinising the burnt memory for tampering. The petitioners said their plea did not challenge the election results but sought a robust mechanism for EVM verification. Separate election petitions challenging the results are pending before the Punjab and Haryana High Court. The petitioners have urged the Supreme Court to direct the EC to conduct the verification exercise within eight weeks.

## Cotton arrival in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan drop by 43%

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

The three cotton producing north Indian states — Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan — have witnessed a decline of 43% in arrival of kapas (unginned cotton) till November 30 this year compared to the same period last year. The sharp reduction is causing concern across the supply chain, with some farmers holding back their produce in hopes of higher prices, while ginners and spinners are facing raw material shortages, particularly in Punjab. Even though the arrival season is still continuing, experts attribute the low arrival till November to reduced acreage, lower yields, and farmers delaying sales, anticipating a price rise in the coming months. Currently, kapas is being sold at prices ranging from Rs 6,250 to Rs 8,340 per quintal, with most of the crop being sold close to the Minimum Support Price (MSP). Cotton arrival season begins from October 1 in the North Zone and continues till September 30 but major portion of crop arrives in mandis by this time of the year. The cotton picking begins in September in north and ends by November. The three cotton producing states of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan in the North Zone have this year witnessed a combined production of around 54 lakh quintal in kapas, which comes to around 9.75 lakh bales. One bale is equal to 170 kg of lint, which is ginned cotton or cotton separated from its seed. Till November 30, 2023, 86.15 lakh quintals or 17.23 lakh bales had arrived in mandis last year. Punjab has witnessed the lowest arrival of only 1.57 lakh quintals of kapas this year against 5.40 lakh quintals during the same period last year. Haryana and Rajasthan have received 13.75 lakh quintals and 32.50 lakh quintals, respectively till November end against 24.25 lakh quintals and 56.50 lakh quintals in the same period last year.

The three states have also witnessed a significant decline of around 5.58 lakh hectares in the area under cotton cultivation this year (2024-25), with Punjab leading the chart at 50% less area compared to last year. In Punjab, area under cotton reduced from 2.14 lakh hectares last year to just 1 lakh hectares this year. Rajasthan saw a decline of 34% with the area under cotton dropping from 10.04 lakh hectares last year to 6.62 lakh hectares this year. Haryana witnessed a 17% decline, with cotton area decreasing from 5.78 lakh hectares to 4.76 lakh hectares.

These states have also been grappling with repeated attacks of pink bollworm in recent years, which has eroded farmers' confidence in growing cotton. Experts have said that Punjab is the worst affected and several years ago, the area under the crop was around 8 lakh hectares. If the Punjab government is serious about diversification and saving the cottonbelt, it should invite scientists from across India to investigate the root cause of the pest attack and develop solutions, experts said. Similarly, cotton prices remained relatively strong and above MSP in the last three years but significantly dropped this year.

In 2021, the crop was sold at Rs 13,000 to Rs 14,000 per quintal, in 2022 for around Rs 10,000 per quintal, and in 2023 at Rs 8,000 to Rs 8,100 per quintal. For the current season, cotton price in Punjab is ranging between Rs 6000



per quintal and Rs 8300 per quintal but most of the crop was sold at Rs 7,400 to Rs 7,500 per quintal which is almost same as the MSP. The MSP for cotton is set at Rs 7,121 per quintal for medium staple cotton and Rs 7,521 per quintal for long staple cotton. Farmers in north India mostly grow medium staple cotton. Bhagwan Bansal, president of the Punjab Ginners' Association, said that the decline in cotton arrivals is creating severe challenges for Punjab's ginning and spinning industries. "In 2004, the state had 422 ginning units but now the number has gone down to only 22. Many ginners are now relying on raw material imports from Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Karnataka to sustain operations. The situation in dire in Punjab and most ginners and spinners are running their units at less capacity due to supply shortages. Importing cotton from other states is essential to keep the industry alive but comes at a high cost due to exorbitant transportation charges," Bansal said. Bansal emphasised the need for high-yielding varieties such as Bollgard-3 cotton and scientific collaborations with countries such as Brazil, where yields reach up to 18 quintals per acre compared to Punjab 7-8 quintals, which have now reduced further to 4-5 quintals owing to pest attack. "Without such advancements, Punjab's cotton industry will continue to struggle," he said.

Farmers and industry stakeholders have also urged the state government to adopt proactive measures, including collaborations with international agricultural experts and reforms to address recurring issues such as pest attacks, particularly pink bollworm infestations. "If the government is truly sympathetic towards farmers and the cotton industry, it must act now," said Bansal, adding, without intervention, Punjab's cotton sector may face further decline. Echoing similar sentiments, Sushil Mittal, president of the Haryana Ginners Association and owner of Aditya Agro in Sirsa, said that by the end of November this year, Haryana had received approximately 2.75 lakh bales, equivalent to 13.75 quintals of kapas in the mandis. "This figure is lower compared to the same period last year. The area under cotton cultivation has also significantly decreased from the previous season, and we are expecting a production decrease of around 20 to 25%. The arrival season is still ongoing and will continue until September 30, 2025, but the majority of the crop typically arrives in the mandis between October and mid-January each year.

## Farmers' protest: Senior farm leaders of SKM meet Dallewal on Punjab-Haryana border

Senior leaders of Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), that spearheaded the Delhi farmers' protest in 2020-21, met the agitating farmers of 'Delhi Chalo' march, including Jagjit Singh Dallewal of SKM non-political, who has been on a fast-unto-death agitation since November 26, at Khanauri and Shambhu on Punjab-Haryana borders on Friday. The SKM is not part of the 'Delhi Chalo' protest that has recently crossed its 300th day. The agitation is led by Kisan Mazdoor Morcha and SKM (non-political). Around ten SKM leaders reached Khanauri border at 1.30 pm to meet Dallewal on his 18th day of hunger strike pressing for several demands, including Minimum Support Price (MSP) guarantees. Dallewal was brought to the protest stage from his temporary hut after many days together. The team comprising Rakesh Tikait, president of Bharatiya Kisan Union (Tikait), Harinder Singh Lakhowal, BKU (Lakhowal) general secretary, Manjit Singh Dhaneer, BKU Dakaunda president, and several others, spent time at the venue for around two hours. Gurdit Singh Sekhon, AAP MLA from Faridkot constituency from where the farm leader hails, also came to meet Dallewal. "We saluted his determination. He wasn't in a position to talk today as it was day 18 of his hunger strike. It is high time the government responded to the demands of farmers and saved the life of Dallewal. Our paths to

struggle may be different, but our demands are the same," Dhaneer told. Lakhowal has said that a six-member national coordination committee of SKM has called for an emergency online meeting on Friday evening to discuss Dallewal's health and future course of action of SKM. "We know Jagjit Singh Dallewal, he will not end his fast till demands are met. Sikh religion is known for sacrifices. The government should wake up," Rakesh Tikait, president of BKU (Tikait), said. The leaders have, meanwhile, clarified they met Dallewal, the president of BKU (Sidhupur), on behalf of their unions and not on behalf of SKM, which consists of several farm bodies across India, including 37 unions from Punjab alone. Dallewal has also demanded the implementation of Swaminathan commission's report, debt waivers, and pension, among others. Earlier, the Punjab Police had whisked away the protesters from the Khanauri border, hours before Dallewal was to start his hunger strike and he was forcibly admitted in Ludhiana's Dayanand Medical College and Hospital (DMCH). But he had started his hunger strike at the hospital itself. On November 29, he was discharged by doctors following widespread protests by farmers against the Punjab Government. Blood test reports of Dallewal suggest that the fast has started affecting his kidneys, liver and heart and he has lost over 12 kg of weight so far.

## Jeff Bezos, Lauren Sanchez savour Indian flavours at chef Vikas Khanna's Bungalow: 'Like a pilgrimage'



Amazon founder and executive chairman Jeff Bezos and his partner Lauren Sanchez recently visited renowned chef Vikas Khanna's New York restaurant, Bungalow. The couple, along with other guests, posed happily for a group photograph shared by Khanna on his X (formerly Twitter) account.

In the post, Khanna expressed his joy and pride in hosting Bezos and Sanchez, captioning the picture: "When @JeffBezos said the visit to Bungalow was like a pilgrimage. It filled my heart with pure joy & pride." He accompanied the post with the hashtags #PowerOfAuthenticity and #SoftPowerOfIndia, reflecting the cultural significance of the visit.

In a separate tweet, Khanna shared the dishes that

Bezos and Sanchez were treated to during their visit. The spread included a diverse range of Indian delicacies, such as Bengali Kasundi Tandoori Avocado, Bihari Sattu Roti, and Udipi's Annanas Menaskai, as well as regional specialties like Gujarati Tindora Pickle and Nagaland's Black Rice Pudding. The menu also featured Indore-inspired Dahi Kebab and the Jewish-Indian Chicken Chitrane. Khanna's post concluded with a sweet note, highlighting the final treat: Gulab Jamun Ice-Cream with Millet-Chocolate Cake. Khanna's Bungalow, which opened in March 2024, has quickly become a celebrated destination for those seeking authentic Indian cuisine in New York. Recently, the restaurant received the prestigious Michelin 2024 Bib Gourmand Award. Khanna shared his excitement and gratitude on Instagram, writing, "260 days of Bungalow and today we received the Michelin 2024 Bib Gourmand Award." Though Khanna has previously been awarded the Michelin Star eight times, he remarked that this recognition felt different, describing it as a tribute to his heritage and his sister.

Bezos and Sanchez prepare for winter wonderland weddingAs for Bezos and Sanchez, the couple is gearing up for a winter wedding in Aspen this Christmas. According to a source close to the pair, the wedding will feature festive décor, twinkling lights, and a star-studded guest list, with high-profile Hollywood personalities expected to attend. Aspen was chosen as the perfect location to celebrate their union, blending winter charm with the festive holiday spirit.

## 'The Bibi Files,' with leaked Benjamin Netanyahu's footage, can't be seen in Israel. Israelis are finding ways



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Veteran documentarian Alex Gibney, known for his decades-long career addressing complex issues, hadn't planned to make a film about Israel—until a remarkable leak landed in his hands last year. Suddenly, Mr. Gibney, through a source who contacted him on the Signal messaging app, was being offered access to copious video recordings of police interviews with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, his wife Sara, his son Yair, and a host of associates and benefactors, all conducted as part of the sprawling corruption case against Mr. Netanyahu. It amounted to an astonishing 1,000-plus hours of tapes.

The Oscar-winning filmmaker didn't speak Hebrew but sensed this was something big. He turned to longtime Israeli investigative reporter Raviv Drucker, who did a deep dive into the material, Mr. Gibney says, and showed him that "we had something very explosive." Then Mr. Gibney enlisted colleague Alexis Bloom, who had worked in Israel, to direct. The result: "The Bibi Files," a hard-hitting documentary that certainly has timing on its side, was released on streaming this week as Mr. Netanyahu took the stand in the long-running case. If the timing is fortuitous, the film faces other obstacles. For one thing, Mr. Gibney and Ms. Bloom had to raise funds without disclosing to potential backers what they had, given the secrecy involved. Many potential backers and distributors were also nervous about getting involved, especially once war broke out after the Hamas-led attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. Then there was the biggest obstacle of all: The film cannot legally be shown in Israel, due to privacy laws regulating such proceedings. That doesn't mean Israelis aren't seeing it, though. Many have managed to watch the film either by using a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to bypass streaming restrictions or by watching leaked versions that made their way to social media. "The film is being pirated like wildfire in Israel," says Ms. Bloom. And it has made a predictable splash, just as Mr. Netanyahu becomes the first sitting Israeli leader to take the stand as a criminal defendant. On Tuesday (Dec. 10), he promised defiantly to knock down the "absurd" corruption allegations against him.

The longest-serving Prime Minister in Israel's history is charged with fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in three separate cases. He is accused of accepting tens of thousands of dollars worth of cigars and champagne from a billionaire Hollywood producer in exchange for assistance with personal and business interests, and of promoting advantageous regulations for media moguls in exchange for favorable coverage. In the leaked police videos, the 75-year-old leader sits at his desk in a surprisingly cramped office, a map of the region behind him. He expresses outrage at the proceedings, calls witnesses liars, and notes he has much weightier matters to attend to. At one point, asked about numbers of champagne bottles, he says he spends his time counting missiles threatening Israel, not bottles. Frequently, his answer is he doesn't remember.

"We have a number of people on the record telling us what a great memory he has," says Mr. Gibney. "And almost every question that could be possibly incriminating, he says 'I can't recall.'" Reviews in Israeli media for "The Bibi Files" have been mostly positive, though they highlight the harsh portrayal of Mr. Netanyahu. Unsurprisingly, public reaction mirrors the deep divisions surrounding the po-

larizing leader. Mr. Netanyahu and his supporters claim he is the target of a witch hunt led by a hostile media and a biased justice system determined to undermine his rule. "Netanyahu's opponents will swear by the film and will only become more convinced that he is corrupt, dizzy with power and leading us to destruction," Nir Wolf, TV critic for the Netanyahu-friendly Israel Hayom paper, wrote. "His supporters will want to embrace him more." Mr. Netanyahu has also noticed the film. In September, his lawyer asked the country's Attorney General to investigate Mr. Drucker, who is a co-producer with Mr. Gibney, accusing him of trying to influence the legal proceedings. No investigation has been launched. (In the film, Mr. Drucker notes that Mr. Netanyahu has previously sued him three times.) The film, which intersperses police footage with commentary from former officials, Mr. Netanyahu's associates, journalists, and other analysts — including, frequently, Mr. Drucker — begins with the Prime Minister sitting for his first interview. "With Netanyahu, nothing concentrates his mind more than the sound of the prison gate slammed behind his back," comments Nimrod Novik, a former adviser to late Prime Minister Shimon Peres. One of Mr. Gibney's and Ms. Bloom's key arguments will be that Mr. Netanyahu's fear of potential prison time has influenced his policy decisions — from judicial reform to war. Mr. Netanyahu appears indignant throughout. "You're asking me delusional questions," he tells his questioners. "This is preposterous and insane."

In other footage, Arnon Milchan, the billionaire Hollywood mogul, Mr. Netanyahu's friend and, more recently, prosecution witness, describes delivering fancy pink champagne on demand for Sara Netanyahu, sometimes toting a cooler himself, as part of an alleged gifts-for-favors scheme. Elsewhere, Sara Netanyahu sits for questioning herself. "How are you not ashamed of yourselves?" she sharply admonishes the interviewers. She tells them that outside Israel, her husband is justly received as a king. Footage also includes interviews with Israeli-American billionaires Sheldon and Miriam Adelson. Sheldon Adelson expresses discomfort with the friendship — "I don't think I'll continue the relationship with them" — and dismay over the cost of Mr. Netanyahu's preferred Cuban cigars: \$1,100 for a box of 10. And a combative Yair Netanyahu, the couple's 33-year-old son, tells his questioners: "You're investigating me because the Israeli police has become the Stasi secret police, wanting to overthrow the Government." Director Bloom insists the film is not intended to preach to the choir — that it is made not for leftist opponents of Mr. Netanyahu, but for centrists.

"You know, a hardcore Bibi-ist is probably going to remain a hardcore Bibi-est," the director says. "But there are a lot of centrists. ... And it's very much a portrait of one family. I don't think it's anti-Israeli, in the slightest." The filmmakers say they paused after the Oct. 7 attack, trying to figure out how to approach it. As part of the historical context in the film, they include chilling scenes of the raid on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza. "What was this going to mean?" Mr. Gibney says they wondered. "With a bit of time, it became clear that this tale that we started before Oct. 7 remained a story of corruption — the size of the corruption kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger." The film, which began streaming on Wednesday (Dec. 11) on the new service Jolt, draws a direct connection between Mr. Netanyahu's legal troubles and the war. Through various commentators, it argues that the criminal cases prompted the Prime Minister to launch a campaign to weaken the country's judiciary. This, in turn, sparked mass protests and divisions, projecting an image of national vulnerability that emboldened Hamas to attack. (Mr. Netanyahu denies all such accusations.) Ms. Bloom says she hopes people will, having watched "The Bibi Files," consider the idea that "term limits are a good idea." (Mr. Netanyahu has served a total of 17 years as Prime Minister.) And she also hopes they will take away a simple concept. "It's OK to criticize the Prime Minister of Israel, and it's not antisemitic and it's not anti-Israel," the director says. "He's a political leader, like any other."

## Biden watching situation in Bangladesh very closely: White House



President Joe Biden is closely monitoring the situation in Bangladesh and the U.S. will hold the country's interim government accountable for ensuring the protection of religious and ethnic minorities, the White House has said. The security situation in Bangladesh has been difficult following the ouster of the former prime minister Sheikh Hasina, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said. "And we have been working closely with the interim government to enhance the capability of their law enforcement and security services to deal with the challenge," Mr. Kirby said at a news conference on Thursday. Ms. Hasina was ousted as prime minister in the face of a massive anti-government protest in August.

There have been a spate of incidents of violence against Hindus and other minorities, as well as attacks on temples in the last few weeks in Bangladesh. "We've been very clear in our engagement with all Bangladeshi leaders that protection of religious and ethnic minorities is absolutely critical, and the leaders of the interim government have repeatedly committed to providing security to all Bangladeshis, regardless of religion or ethnicity," he said.

"We want to hold them to that," Kirby said in response to a question. Over the past few weeks, Indian Americans have held peaceful protests and marches in several cities, including in front of the White House, in Chicago, New York, SFO, Detroit, Houston and Atlanta, urging Mr. Biden to help stop alleged brutalities against the minority Hindu community in Bangladesh. Earlier in the day, Indian-American Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi urged members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to address the issue of violence against minorities, primarily Hindus, in Bangladesh during the confirmation hearing of Senator Marco Rubio for the position of secretary of state.

President-elect Donald Trump has nominated Senator Rubio for the top diplomatic position. The date of his confirmation hearing has not been announced yet. "As targeted violence against Hindus and other minorities continues amid the disorder in Bangladesh, I urge the members of the Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations to address this crisis directly during the upcoming hearings to confirm Senator Rubio as the next US secretary of state," Mr. Krishnamoorthi said. March from White House Over the weekend, a large number of Indian-Americans held a march from the White House to the U.S. Capitol over alleged attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh. Raising slogans like "We want Justice" and "Protect Hindus", the demonstrators urged the Biden administration and the incoming Trump administration to ask the new government in Bangladesh to take steps to protect Hindus and also initiate action against those responsible for this. "The Bangladeshi Hindu community and the larger Hindu diaspora from the Indian subcontinent have come in support of the Bangladesh Hindu community because there is continuing violence going on in Bangladesh, specifically in Chittagong and Rangpur area, as well as in some other parts of the country," said Utsav Chakrabarti of HinduAction.

## Meta donates \$1 million to Trump's inauguration fund

New York: Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, said it has donated USD 1 million to President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration fund. The donation comes just weeks after Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg met with Trump privately at Mar-a-Lago. A Meta spokesperson confirmed the offering Thursday. The news was first reported by The Wall Street Journal. Stephen Miller, who has been appointed deputy chief of staff for Trump's second term, has said that Zuckerberg, like other business leaders, wants to support Trump's economic plans. The tech CEO has been seeking to change his company's perception on the right following a rocky relationship with Trump. Trump was kicked off Facebook following the Jan 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol. The company restored his account in early 2023. During the 2024 campaign, Zuckerberg did not endorse a candidate for president but has voiced a more positive stance toward Trump.

## Republican-led U.S. Congressional report findings on COVID's origins explained

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

The story so far: A U.S. Congressional committee led by Republican Brad Wenstrup has concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic was the result of the spread of a virus that likely leaked from a research facility in Wuhan, China. The final report of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, established in February 2023, was published on December 2, 2024. The report runs over 500 pages and, according to committee members, will serve as a roadmap for government action during future pandemics. "A future pandemic requires a whole-of-America response managed by those without personal benefit or bias," Mr. Wenstrup wrote. "We can always do better, and for the sake of future generations of Americans, we must." The lab-leak theory

The report's highlight is that SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly emerged from a laboratory leak. The report finds this conclusion on inferred or circumstantial claims made early during the pandemic. For example, it quotes an unclassified factsheet from January 2021 published by the U.S. State Department that said: "The U.S. government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV [Wuhan Institute of Virology] became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illness." The report itself does not directly prove the lab-leak theory, however.

The report also quotes previous statements by Alina Chan, a molecular biologist at the Broad Institute of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, in June 2024 in support of the lab-leak theory. In one of these statements, Dr. Chan says the virus emerged in Wuhan, which is also home to China's "foremost research lab for SARS-like viruses", and that Shi Zhengli, a senior virologist at WIV, "has been researching SARS-like viruses for over a decade and even initially wondered if the outbreak came from the WIV". But at a conference called "Preparing for the Next Pandemic: Evolution, Pathogenesis and Virology of Coronaviruses" in Japan on December 4, Dr. Shi reportedly refuted the claim that the viruses she was studying were ancestors of the SARS-CoV-2 pathogen. She had earlier promised to sequence the genomes of 56 betacoronaviruses she and her team had collected between 2004 and 2021 and were studying. She presented the sequencing data and its analyses at the conference. (The latter have yet to be peer-reviewed.) The Select Subcommittee report also noted an observation by Nicholas Wade, former science editor at The New York Times, in January 2024, that SARS-CoV-2 "possesses a furin cleavage site, found in none of the other 871 known members of its viral family, so it cannot have gained such a site through the ordinary evolutionary swaps of genetic material within a family."

A furin cleavage is the process by which the furin enzyme breaks up specific proteins to activate them. The furin cleavage site in SARS-CoV-2 controls how it interacts with human cells to cause the disease. A letter published in The Lancet in August 2023 by researchers from Cornell University refuted Mr. Wade's idea and said the site could have evolved naturally, as opposed to being genetically engineered.

## Ukraine facing 'massive' Russian attack on energy sector

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Ukraine said Friday (December 13, 2024) that it was fending off a new missile attack on its energy system, the latest in Russia's campaign targeting the war-torn country's power grid during the winter season. Russia has escalated its strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, plunging hundreds of thousands into temporary blackouts as temperatures hit -5 degrees Celsius (23 Fahrenheit).

To fend off the strikes, Ukraine has been pleading for more air defence from its Western allies, amid fears support will soon be reduced when U.S. President-elect Donald Trump takes office. "The enemy continues its terror. Once again, the energy sector across Ukraine is under massive attack," Energy Minister German Galushchenko said. "Engineers are taking all the necessary measures to minimise the consequences," he said after explosions were reported in a few regions. The air raid alert was announced at 7.00 a.m. (0500 GMT), with social media channels that monitor threats reporting cruise and hypersonic Kinzhal missiles over several regions of Ukraine. Ukraine's neighbour Poland said it placed its army on "high readiness" due to the threat of an attack. Russia has conducted at least 11 large-scale strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure since the beginning of the year, Kyiv says.

To manage the power deficit, Ukraine's energy operator has been implementing hours-long outages, and it announced increased restrictions on Friday. Moscow has previously acknowledged striking Ukraine's energy sites but says they are legitimate targets as they "support the Ukrainian defence industry enterprises". The latest strike comes

a day after the Kremlin said it would "definitely" respond to a Ukrainian attack on a southern airfield using U.S.-supplied ATACMS missiles. President-elect Donald Trump said in an interview published Thursday that he disagreed "very vehemently" with Ukraine firing American-supplied missiles deep into Russia.

But Mr. Trump insisted he would not abandon Ukraine as U.S. support for Kyiv would be key leverage in efforts to bring the war to a close. Mr. Trump has boasted he would end the war swiftly, raising fears he might force Ukraine into a deal on Russia's terms. Deprive us of energy Ukrainian officials urged allies to send more air defence to fend off the strikes on energy infrastructure. Kyiv has repeatedly denounced the attacks on its energy system as attempts to break the population's morale. "Russia aims to deprive us of energy. Instead, we must deprive it of the means of terror," Foreign Minister Andriy Sybida said on social media. He said Ukraine needed 20 NASAMS, HAWK or IRIS-T air defence systems. French President Emmanuel Macron called Thursday (December 12, 2024) for a path to end the war that takes into account the interests of both Kyiv and the European Union, saying the former's sovereignty and the latter's security were at stake. During a meeting in Poland with Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the two leaders also discussed the possibility of stationing foreign troops in Ukraine in case of a ceasefire, Tusk said. Macron did not publicly mention the possibility of foreign peacekeepers, but in February he floated the idea of Western troops in Ukraine. Asked about the proposal on Monday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said: "

## No material impact of TotalEnergies' decision as no funding talks were on: Adani



Embattled billionaire Gautam Adani's group on Tuesday said French energy giant TotalEnergies' decision to pause new investments in the group will not have any material impact on operations and growth plans as no new funding was under discussion. TotalEnergies SE had on Monday stated that it was not aware of the corruption investigation its partner Adani group's founder chairman was facing in the US and that it is pausing fresh investments in the conglomerate pending the outcome of the charges. "We wish to clarify that there is no new financial commitment under discussion with TotalEnergies," Adani Green Energy Ltd (AGEL) said in a stock exchange filing. It was clarifying on TotalEnergies' statement of November 25. "Hence, the press release (through which the French firm announced its decision) will not have any material impact on the company's operations or its growth plan," AGEL added.

TotalEnergies is one of the biggest foreign investors in Adani's business empire and had previously taken stakes in the group's renewable energy venture AGEL and city gas unit Adani Total Gas Ltd (ATGL). In a statement on Monday, the French firm had said it learnt of US authorities indicting Gautam Adani and two other executives for allegedly paying USD 265 million bribes to Indian officials to secure solar power supply contracts for AGEL. "This indictment does not target AGEL itself, nor any AGEL-related companies," TotalEnergies had said. "Until such time when the accusations against the Adani group individuals and their

consequences have been clarified, TotalEnergies will not make any new financial contribution as part of its investments in the Adani group of companies." Adani group has dismissed the allegations brought in the US court as baseless and has said it would seek all possible legal recourse. TotalEnergies holds 19.75 per cent stake in AGEL — the renewable energy arm of the Indian group. It also has a 50 per cent stake in three joint venture companies that produce electricity from sunlight and wind with AGEL.

The French firm also holds a 37.4 per cent stake in Adani Total Gas Ltd, which retails CNG to automobiles and pipes natural gas to households for cooking. TotalEnergies, France's largest oil and gas company, first joined hands with Adani in 2018 for a liquefied natural gas (LNG) venture before buying a 19.75 per cent stake in AGEL and a stake in three solar assets for USD 2.5 billion in 2020-21. The French energy giant had in February last year put on hold a planned investment in Adani Group's USD 50 billion hydrogen project pending results of an audit launched following allegations by a US short-seller. While the partnership, where the French oil giant was to take a 25 per cent stake in the hydrogen venture of the Adani Group, was announced in June 2022, TotalEnergies had not yet signed a contract. As per the June 2022 announcement, TotalEnergies was to take 25 per cent equity in Adani New Industries Ltd (ANIL) — the Adani Group firm that is investing USD 50 billion over 10 years in a green hydrogen ecosystem, including an initial production capacity of 1 million tonne before 2030. The announcement by Total adds to the woes of Adani. The crisis around the group, which began when Hindenburg released a damning report in January 2023, has also been used by the opposition parties to attack the government, alleging that the tycoon's rise was primarily because of his association with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The government has rejected the allegation. Hindenburg's allegations of accounting and financial fraud unleashed an over USD 150 billion rout in market value across Adani's companies. Adani Group has vehemently denied the allegations, calling them malicious and an "attack on India".

## 'Cautiously optimistic' economic outlook for coming months: Finance Ministry October review

While maintaining a "cautiously optimistic" economic outlook for the coming months for the Indian economy, the Finance Ministry in its monthly economic review for October released Monday stated that agriculture is likely to benefit from favourable monsoon conditions, increased minimum support prices and adequate supply of inputs. The Ministry also underlined that most countries are loosening monetary policy, with a broad consensus that after a successful disinflationary phase, monetary policy will have to be eased to avoid recession. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has also said that the RBI shouldn't factor in food inflation while taking a decision on lowering its policy interest rates, which have been unchanged since February 2023, adding that it is his personal view and not that of the government. The RBI, on the other hand, has termed the 6.2 per cent October inflation number as a "sticker shock", stating that if the current inflation is allowed to run unchecked, it "can undermine the prospects of the real economy".

The Ministry also pointed out the emergence of a few downside risks to global growth that may impact developing economies. "Financial assets such as bond prices may be repriced if inflation proves stubborn, driven by global tensions and commodity prices. That can lead to tighter conditions and potential market instability. This may affect developing economies that are vulnerable to higher borrowing costs," it said. Talking about global disinflation, the Ministry pointed out price pressures across economies have abated substantially after peaking towards the end of 2022 on account of central bank policy rate hikes and improved supply chain resilience.

"As inflation approaches the central bank target levels, disinflation seems to have slowed on account of sticky core inflation. This is due to persistence in services price inflation driven by higher nominal wage growth. There are early signs of wage growth moderating, which will aid disinflation... however, IMF (International Monetary Fund) notes that fiscal consolidation across economies between 2022 and 2024 has not played out as planned, thereby contributing to inflationary pressures. Adverse weather events and their effects on food prices may also affect disinflation, particularly in EMEs (emerging market economies)," it said. Retail inflation in India rose to a 14-month high of 6.2



per cent October driven by elevated food inflation, especially vegetables. The Ministry said tomatoes, onions, and potatoes faced pressure due to supply disruptions due to heavy rains in major producing states and tighter market stock amid lower output last year. Imported inflation drove the increase in oil and fat inflation from elevated international prices of edible oils, it said. However, a continuous easing trend is visible in pulses, spices and sugar, the Ministry said. Going ahead, a bumper kharif harvest is expected to lower food inflation in the coming months. "Favourable monsoon, adequate reservoir levels and higher minimum support prices are likely to boost rabi sowing and production," it said, adding that bright agricultural production prospects make the inflation outlook benign, despite existing price pressures in select food items. However, the Ministry said geopolitical factors may continue to impact domestic inflation and supply chains even as early November trends show moderation in key food prices. On the employment front, it said, the formal workforce is expanding, with a notable increase in manufacturing jobs and a strong inflow of youth into organised sectors. On the external front, the Ministry said India's export recovery may encounter challenges due to softening demand in developed markets even though trade in the services sector is sustaining momentum. Apart from the emerging indications of domestic growth and stability, the dynamics of global interest rates, earning growth and valuation, geopolitical developments and policy decisions of the next administration in the United States will determine the course of trade and capital flows, the Ministry said.

## Cabinet clears PAN 2.0, card to feature QR code



Cabinet clears PAN 2.0, card to feature QR code The PAN 2.0 is a e-governance project for re-engineering the business processes of taxpayer registration services through transformation of PAN/TAN services, the statement said. An upgrade of existing Permanent Account Number (PAN) with an additional feature of QR code on the cards along with a proposal to make PAN "the common identifier for businesses" was approved by the Union Cabinet on Monday. The Cabinet approved the PAN 2.0 Project of the Income Tax Department, with a cost of Rs 1,435 crore, under which the existing system will be upgraded completely, the digital backbone will be revamped and PAN will be made as a common business identifier for all digital systems of specified government agencies, Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnav said during the Cabinet briefing. The upgrade for existing PAN holders will be free of cost. The PAN 2.0 project will enable technology-driven transformation of taxpayer registration services with an aim to improve ease of access and service delivery, an official statement said. The PAN 2.0 project proposes to make PAN as the "single source of truth and data consistency" and with security and optimisation of infrastructure for greater agility, a statement said. "The new PAN cards will be QR code enabled. The existing ones can regenerate

the old PAN card to the QR code-enabled ones," a senior Finance Ministry official told. Around 78 crore PAN cards have been issued so far, out of which 98 per cent belong to individuals. Vaishnav said there have been demands by businesses to not have different identification numbers and thus, the new PAN will work as a common business identifier. There will be a unified portal as the existing software is nearly 15-20 years old, he said. "It'll be completely paperless, online and a lot of focus will be on the grievance redressal system," he said. The PAN 2.0 is a e-governance project for re-engineering the business processes of taxpayer registration services through transformation of PAN/TAN services, the statement said.

## Ola Electric set to lay off 500 employees amid poor results

New Delhi: Ola Electric, mired in controversies amid a government probe and mounting losses, is set to lay off at least 500 employees as part of a restructuring exercise. The Bhavish Aggarwal-led electric vehicle (EV) company is trying to boost its operational efficiency by reducing redundancies and "drive profitability", according to multiple reports. The restructuring exercise will impact employees from several departments, the reports added. According to an Inc42 report, citing sources, "the aim is to cut expenses to drive profitability and improve margins. There's no set time period for the completion of the exercise". Ola Electric did not immediately comment on layoffs. The company reported a 43 per cent increase in net loss at Rs 495 crore in the July-September period (Q2 FY25), from Rs 347 crore in the previous quarter (Q1 FY25). The electric two-wheeler company also saw its revenue slump 26.1 per cent to Rs 1,214 crore (on-quarter) from Rs 1,644 crore in the first quarter

## Diabetics, find out if having curry plant seeds will help you manage blood sugar levels

Curry leaves or kadipatta — which are native to India — are valued for their therapeutic as well as culinary qualities and are frequently used in many households. But these green leaves, and particularly their seeds, have also come under the spotlight as a natural remedy to manage diabetes. But do doctors recommend them? Dr Haricharan G, senior consultant physician, HoD, internal medicine, Gleneagles Hospitals, Lakdi Ka Pul, Hyderabad started by explaining that curry plant seeds are indeed known for their medicinal properties, particularly in managing diabetes. "The seeds, much like the leaves, contain several bioactive compounds that may help control blood sugar levels. Research suggests that these seeds can improve insulin sensitivity and reduce blood glucose levels, making them beneficial for diabetics," said Dr Haricharan.

The potential benefits

Mahanimbine, one of the chemicals found in curry plant seeds, may have hypoglycemic effects, said Simrat Kathuria, CEO and head dietitian, The Diet Xperts. "By increasing insulin production, decreasing intestinal glucose absorption, and improving insulin activity, these substances aid in blood sugar regulation. In addition, the seeds' high fibre content slows down digestion, which causes blood sugar levels to gradually rise. They, therefore, represent a promising complement to a diet suitable for diabetics," said Kathuria.

How to consume curry plant seeds?

They are dried, powdered, and taken with water or mixed into food, said Dr Haricharan. "It is generally recommended to take 1-2 teaspoons of this powder daily, preferably on an empty stomach in the morning. This practice can be continued for a few months, but it's essential to monitor blood sugar levels regularly and consult with a healthcare provider to avoid any potential complications or



interactions with other medications," said Dr Haricharan. According to Kathuria, curry leaf seeds are best consumed in the morning, right before breakfast. "While the length of consumption can be adjusted, starting with a three-month trial period is a typical strategy. To determine efficacy during this period, blood sugar levels must be monitored. Positive outcomes may allow for an extension of the period under medical observation," said Kathuria.

Things to note

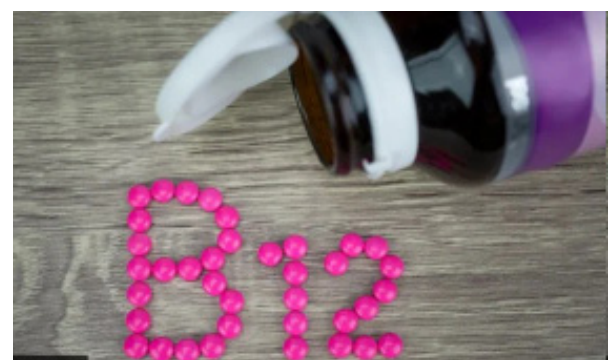
Curry leaf seeds may be beneficial, but they shouldn't take the place of prescription diabetes drugs, urged Kathuria. "Alternatively, they could be applied as an additional precaution. Their efficaciousness stems from their inherent capacity to naturally regulate the metabolism of glucose. Moderation is crucial because excessive consumption may have negative consequences including gastrointestinal distress or interact with diabetes medications," said Kathuria. Dr Haricharan also affirmed that curry leaf seeds can be beneficial for diabetics when used correctly, but they should be part of a broader diabetes management plan, and it's important to consult with a doctor before starting any new treatment.

## Why you must never take vitamin B12 supplement at night

Often, we fail to follow the dos and don'ts when it comes to foods and medicines — simply because there is so much to remember. But that's just us. You must always stick to having vitamin D capsules after breakfast or lunch because it is fat soluble, and vitamin B12 supplements during the day and not at night. Why, you ask? According to nutritionist Amita Gadre, taking vitamin B12 supplements at night can mess with your sleep cycle. "Since B12 boosts energy, it's best to take it earlier in the day. Timing is everything when it comes to supplements," said Gadre.

Vitamin B12 deficiency, following which the supplements are advised, usually presents symptoms like anaemia, feeling tired or weak, trouble while walking, weight loss, irritability, poor appetite, and diarrhea. According to the Cleveland Clinic, it is usually seen in people who do not get enough vitamin B12 from their diet or when their digestive tract does not absorb enough. Vitamin B12 plays a vital role in maintaining the health of the nervous system and red blood cells, said Dr Aniket Mule, consultant internal medicine, Wockhardt Hospitals, Mira Road. "Vitamin B12 is best taken in the morning due to its role in energy production. It helps form red blood cells, supports nerve function, and contributes to DNA synthesis. As a result, it boosts energy levels and can increase alertness," said Dr Ramesh A, consultant, internal medicine, Gleneagles Aware Hospital, L.B. Nagar, Hyderabad.

Agreed Dr Aniket Mule, consultant internal medicine, Wockhardt Hospitals, Mira Road, Mumbai, and said that vitamin B12 supplement plays a crucial role in energy metabolism and nervous system function and, hence, should be taken during the day. "This is so because the B12 can



increase alertness and reduce feelings of fatigue, which could lead to difficulty falling asleep," said Dr Mule. Dr Mule added that one may also feel energetic and fail to sleep well at night. "It is also believed that B12 at night may not only impact the body's absorption process but also interfere with other nighttime bodily functions that take place to repair and recover processes essential for overall wellness," he told indianexpress.com. Dr Ramesh recommended taking Vitamin B12 supplements earlier for optimal absorption and to avoid sleep disturbances.

This supplement is most often recommended to patients during the day. However, if your doctor has particularly advised you to take vitamin B12 at night, it is best to follow their instructions," said Dr Mule. If you have specific medical conditions or dietary restrictions, consult your healthcare provider for personalised advice on timing and dosage.

## This is what happens to the body if you replace wheat with millet for 30 days

According to the health awareness portal SHARAN India, founded by homeopath Dr Nandita Shah, one can expect changes like less bloating, feeling full faster, reduced cravings, weight loss, improved mental clarity, regular bowels, clearer skin, and feeling lighter and more energised.

Are these true?

Millet is quite popular these days due to its range of health benefits. Adding millets to your diet can be rewarding as they are rich in fibre and jam-packed with nutrients like magnesium, iron, and B vitamins. Swapping wheat with millet can be a great choice, stressed Jinal Patel, dietitian at Zynova Shalby Hospital Mumbai. "Wheat has gluten, which makes it more harmful to your body. Gluten can lead to bloating, increased weight gain, fatigue, constipation, diarrhea, and migraine," said Patel. When eaten regularly, millet can improve digestion while helping manage your weight. "It can also keep you full longer and provide long-lasting energy. If you are someone who is sensitive towards



gluten or has celiac disease, then you should strictly avoid things that contain gluten, including wheat," said Patel. You can make various dishes with millet without compromising on your taste buds. "However, ensure that you consult a doctor before making any significant changes in your diet for the betterment of your health," said Patel.

## Human exclamations of pain are similar across the world, new study reveals

But what kinds of "pain words" (or "interjections") do speakers of other languages use to express pain? And do these interjections feature similar sounds across languages, as we might expect if they are reflexive responses? A new article published in the Journal of the Acoustical Society of America examines this question for the first time. Our study measured vowels ("a", "i", "o", etc.) in interjections expressing pain, disgust and joy in over 130 languages across the globe. We then compared these with the vowels in nonlinguistic vocalisations (like moans, screams etc.) to test whether interjections and vocalisations share similar sounds. Our results suggest pain interjections can indeed be traced back to nonlinguistic vocalisations, but the story is less clear for joy and disgust. What are interjections?

Interjections are standalone words that can be used on their own (like "ouch!" or "wow!"). They don't combine grammatically with other words. Because linguists mostly study grammatical combinations, for a long time they didn't pay much attention to interjections. This is why some very basic questions about them have yet to be answered — despite interjections being very frequent in speech and fundamental to communication. The main goal of our research was to find out whether interjections share similar vowels across languages based on the emotion or affect they're meant to express.

If so, we wanted to know whether these commonali-

ties can be explained by the acoustic forms of nonlinguistic vocalisations like cries and moans. To test this, we collected pain, disgust and joy interjections from dictionaries spanning many languages in Africa, Asia, Australia and Europe (more than 500 interjections in 131 languages). To compare our interjections with noninterjection words, we used large databases with comprehensive lists of words for languages in our sample. This allowed us to run statistical tests to compare the distribution of vowels in interjections to those found in other words. These tests showed that on average, the pain interjections we collected have more "a" vowels, and more successions of vowels, like "ai" (as in "ai!") in Spanish) or "au" (as in "ouch!" in English). This applies across all the regions of the world we investigated. To be clear, this result doesn't mean all pain interjections will contain an "a", "ai" or "au" sound. But if you pick a random pain interjection, it has more chances to have these sounds than if you pick a random disgust or joy interjection, or any other word. Of the three types of affective experiences we looked at, pain was the only one with such properties. Vowels in disgust and joy interjections, by contrast, did not differ markedly from other words. This shows the vowels in pain interjections are not random. So, where do they come from? Pain interjections resemble pain vocalisations. To explore this question, we looked at the nonlinguistic sounds people make to express pain, as well as disgust and joy.

# Heretic movie review: Hugh Grant elevates A24 horror film



Heretic movie review: The charm of God or the charm of Grant? This is the choice before two young missionaries of The Church of Mormon who have a long list of visits to make and elders to impress, on a very cold, rainy day that is quickly turning into evening. So it is that Sister Paxton (Chloe East) and Sister Barnes (Sophie Thatcher) are enticed into the dimly lit, quaintly furnished parlour of Mr Reed (Hugh Grant). The first thing Reed tells them is that his house has "metal" in its walls and roof. That should give the girls pause, but as Reed offers that with Grant's familiar twinkly mannerisms and winsome smile, it is easy to dismiss the same as one of the quirks of an old man. However, very, very quickly, it is clear that a lot may be wrong about Reed, starting with the so-called Mrs Reed – "baking blueberry pies" – who never makes an appearance. But this film by frequent collaborators and writer-directors Scott Beck and Bryan Woods is not as straightforward as that. Unfortunately, as it were, it is not as complex as it promises to be

either.

For, what follows is Reed, who says he has studied theology, dissecting religion, the many iterations of it, and why and how we believe what we do, and can our belief pass the test of disbelief. The two missionaries, in their late teens or early 20s, are conscious of being outliers in a culture where "religion is no longer a part", conscious that their particular faith may seem even more at odds with much of "modern beliefs", and conscious of being out-talked – if not outsmarted – by Reed who clearly knows much more than they do and plays on their insecurities. Reed draws on stuff from board games such as Monopoly and its many versions to popular hits and their many "inspirations", and debates polygamy, to put Paxton and Barnes at more and more unease. When they decide finally that they are done playing Reed's games, including an inner room that is fashioned like a church, and has liturgical literature and items lining his bookshelves, he throws them a question that is the highest point of this film. "Do you believe after all that you have seen that you will find my wife behind this door?" he asks – his point being that the entire story of God rests on a premise as "weak".

However, after this, as Reed leads his two trapped ingenues deeper and deeper into his lair, the film's wrestling with faith becomes more and more a forced plot device, in the service of predictable horrors. Because Grant is so very believable as a man who may actually be no more harmful than a conceited know-it-all, and one who is probably after little more than a fawning audience, you are willing to go along. Because East is so very good as a docile listener who has never really questioned authority, and who finds the ground beneath her feet slipping when asked to do so now, you are willing to humour the story. Because Thatcher's striking beauty is so distracting that it is hard not to think of dangers posed by old men to young girls, you have to tell yourself constantly to refocus. But because Heretic itself ultimately doesn't have enough faith to follow through on its initial promise, it all comes down to that question again: the charm of God, or the charm of Grant?

# Nayanthara feels guilty for 'dragging' Vignesh Shivan into relationship: 'I feel it would've been better if we weren't together'

Actor Nayanthara wondered what life would be like if she hadn't met her husband, director Vignesh Shivan. She said that he is trolled for being married to her, and opened up about why the difference in their levels of professional achievement shouldn't matter to anybody. Nayanthara and Vignesh's relationship was commemorated in the recent Netflix documentary Nayanthara: Beyond the Fairytale. The couple also attracted controversy when they spoke out against actor-filmmaker Dhanush, accusing him of denying them an NOC for the documentary.

In an interview with The Hollywood Reporter India, Nayanthara opened up about their marriage, and said, "Sometimes, I feel that it would've been better if we were not together. I always feel guilty. Even today I feel guilty. I dragged him into this relationship; not dragged him, but I took the first step. If not for me, he would've had a voice of his own, and people would have just let him be. They would've given him credit for the director he is, for the writer he is, for the lyricist he is, the person he is. He's such a kind soul. I'm a good person, I know that, but I don't know if I can be as good as him."

Nayanthara said that the love and respect that they have for each other is 'offset' sometimes by the hatred that they face. She continued, "We all think that if somebody is successful, they have to get married to somebody who is equally successful. But it's love that you're choosing. You're not choosing success. You're not choosing money and luxury. That's not how it's calculated at all. You fall in love, you fall in love." She said that their relationship is based on 'unconditional love', where there are 'no sacrifices and com-



promises'. She continued, "Obviously, he started out much later than me, and I'm a senior... The hatred is coming from the fact that maybe he hasn't given back-to-back blockbusters, or maybe because there's a huge gap between the films that he has done. Maybe because I'm already successful, maybe because I'm already an established name, and he's still (finding his place). I feel it's so unfair to compare me and him." Nayanthara and Vignesh Shivan tied the knot in 2022, after dating for over seven years. In 2022, they welcomed twin sons Uyir and Ulag via surrogacy.

# Diljit Dosanjh drops new song 'Don', track features Shah Rukh Khan's powerful voiceover.



Diljit Dosanjh, who has had a whirlwind 2024 with concerts worldwide, dropped his new song "Don" on Friday. The track is extra special as Diljit has collaborated with none other than Shah Rukh Khan for "Don".

The music of Diljit's "Don" begins with the powerful voice of Shah Rukh, followed by the singer's stylish entry. SRK narrates, "Puraani kahawat hain, ke sab se upar jaana hain to bohut sari mehnat chahiye. Lekin agar sabse upar tikna hain, to maa ki dua chahiye. Tumhara mujh tak pohochna mushkil hi nahin, namunkin hain. Kyunki dhool kitni bhi oonchi chali jaye, kabhi aasman ko ganda nahin kar sakti. (There is an old saying that to overcome everything requires a lot of hard work. But if we have to survive, we need mother's blessings. It is not difficult for you to reach me like that, but it is not possible. Because dust, no matter how high it rises, can never spoil the sky.)" The video further showcases Diljit's remarkable journey in 2024. From becoming a Billboard chart-topping artist, to appearing on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, and moments from his ongoing Dil-luminati tour, the clip features it all.

# 'Sridevi had a bag full of money, and she started handing out cash to the unit': ChhaalBaaz director recalls euphoric scenes on set after pack-up

Filmmaker Pankaj Parashar recalled the strenuous circumstances in which Sridevi filmed the song "Na Jaane Kahan Se" for the film ChhaalBaaz. He said that Sridevi had a high fever at the time, and that her mother would've had the shoot cancelled if she found out. But Sridevi soldiered on, despite the brief disappearance of her co-star Sunny Deol, and her illness. She was so pleased with how the song turned out, she distributed cash to the crew after pack-up. In an interview with Siddharth Kannan, Pankaj said that the song was filmed in three days, and that Sridevi was highly demanding ahead of the shoot. She challenged him to design an innovative sequence, one that would stand

apart from all the other song numbers that she had done in the past. He said, "I told her to send her mother to the makeup room, because if she finds out that Sridevi has a fever, she would insist on the shoot being stopped. But Sridevi insisted on finishing." He continued, "She finished the song at 2 in the night, and it won the Filmfare for best choreography. She knew it was a classic. At 2, I told her to go home because she was ill, but she said, 'No, I'm not going. Give me 10 minutes, I'm coming back'. She took a shower and returned. She had a bag of money in her hand. She called the whole unit, and distributed money among everyone. She was so pleased. She was literally handing out cash."

# Soodhu Kavvum 2 movie review: Even Shiva and Karunakaran can't salvage this disappointing disservice to the original



Soodhu Kavvum 2 movie review: 2024 has been the year of sequels and franchises. If it isn't a sequel, it is a film that ends with the promise of one. But this trend begs a bigger question. Why do most sequels seem like a cash-grab opportunity that rides on the goodwill of the original only to tarnish it beyond recognition? Of course, there are the stray good ones that manage to uphold the 'iconic' status of the first part, and build on it to earn plaudits for delivering on the expectations. Director SJ Arjun's Soodhu Kavvum 2, unfortunately, belongs to the former category.

The thing with making a sequel is that comparisons with the first part is par for the course. However, in Soodhu Kavvum 2, it gets even more obvious because there are scenes from the first part finding its way in the sequel to establish a connection. Honestly, these scenes were the best and the worst thing to happen to Soodhu Kavvum 2. While the scenes from Soodhu Kavvum 1 that were shown in this instalment were insanely entertaining, it also triggered a sense of nostalgia about how things were better last time around. Soodhu Kavvum 2 serves as a prequel, a standalone film, and a sequel at the same time, and the end result is as confusing as attempting this cocktail.

Soodhu Kavvum 2 is essentially a political satire, and it starts off with the story of how Radha Ravi becomes the Tamil Nadu CM. Soon enough, we shift timelines to pre-Soodhu Kavvum days to show that the OG 'kednapping' specialist was Guru (Shiva), who disbands his motley group of criminals and surrenders to the cops. What connects Guru and Das from the first film? It is Arul Doss' Rowdy Doctor who moonlights as a filmmaker. What connects both the films? It is the kidnapping of Arumai Pragasam (Karunakaran). But both these connections are so all over the place, and familiar but unconvincing that the film falters even before it could start.

What makes the sequel a rather unflattering addition is how Soodhu Kavvum 2 has the same beats as the original. As in, it isn't just in the treatment, but even the scene structure and order. Why call it a sequel, when it is essen-

tially a remake, albeit a disappointing one. Guru has the same issues as Das. Guru is saddled with two henchmen who create more problems than they solve. Guru has an imaginary girlfriend, and there is an elaborate life-and-death sequence featuring this fantasy character. Arumai Pragasam uses his mother as a shield when it comes to saving his skin from his father's righteous wrath. He continues to find a way to stage his own kidnapping. There is a trigger-happy cop who wants to bring this kidnapping gang to justice. One different thing is the inclusion of one more trigger-happy cop who wants to bring the other kidnapping gang to justice, which only results in long-drawn sequences that are neither dark nor funny, and ends up becoming a grating mess. Here's the trailer:

It isn't to say that Soodhu Kavvum 2 didn't have redemptive qualities. There were a few laughs here and there, but the film definitely needed more. Even though inspired, the scenes involving Shiva and his shenanigans in the kidnapping sequences are fun. But why pull back punches in comic set pieces when the aim is to bowl us over by the sheer incredulity of things. The film needed more scenes like the one where a random doctor is forced to do a surgical procedure on Guru's imaginary girlfriend. Also, why go for similar scenes to the original in the name of callback when the entire film feels like one? There is an interesting angle to be explored in Guru's need to consume alcohol on a timely basis because in the absence of the intoxicant, he starts 'seeing' snakes everywhere. However, it isn't explored enough, and it goes on a tangent that grounds the idea to a great extent. Oh, the film needed more quirks across departments. The biggest drawback of Soodhu Kavvum 2 is the rudderless actions of the protagonists. There is nothing organic or seamless about the way these characters find their way out of trouble. It feels like random scenes stitched together in the hope that something would come off it. Even the background score and songs are very similar to the first film, and it is an unnecessary burden on composer Edwin Louis Viswanath because Soodhu Kavvum featured one of Santhosh Narayanan's best-ever soundtracks. It makes one question the need for being so faithful to the original that the film in hand becomes invisible. With the strong ensemble, played by earnest actors, not having anything original to play around with, even actors with proven comic talent like Shiva and Karunakaran feel underserved by the writing. There is only so much they can do when the film is happier seeing them exist rather than thrive. Oh! The film is a political satire that still grinds the same old axe of 'freebies are keeping people disillusioned.' Of course, they extend the scope of the freebies to include a lot more whimsical things, but it doesn't come across as well-intentioned. Why blame people for the incompetence of the system? Anyway, back in 2013, Soodhu Kavvum came out of nowhere and took Tamil cinema by storm, and the reception to the film propelled the cast and crew to the top. It was one of those runaway hits that defined the careers of many. As the credits rolled, Soodhu Kavvum 2 served as a reminder as to why the re-release trend seems to be catching up across the world. Sometimes, it does make sense.

# From stampede at Pushpa 2 premiere to Rs 25 lakh 'goodwill gesture'; a complete timeline of events

Allu Arjun arrest, Sandhya theatre stampede case: Actor Allu Arjun, star of the blockbuster hit Pushpa 2: The Rule, was arrested on Friday in connection with the death of a woman during a special screening of the film some days ago. A stampede-like situation broke out during the Sandhya Theatre in Hyderabad, while the actor was present. The chaos resulted in the death of a 39-year-old woman and caused injuries to a child. Allu Arjun vowed support for the woman's family, and expressed his grief in a video message. Here's a timeline of events. On December 4, Allu Arjun attended a special screening of Pushpa 2 at the Sandhya Theatre in Hyderabad. The victim was identified as M Revathi, who had attended the premiere with her husband, M Bhaskar, their son, and their seven-year-old daughter. According to the police, the stampede occurred when the theatre gates, unable to withstand the pressure of the surging crowd, collapsed.

Bhaskar described the events in an interaction with the media. "When Allu Arjun arrived, the crowd suddenly swelled, and I got separated from my wife and son. My daughter and I were outside, while Revathi and our son were inside. Initially, when I called, she said they were inside, but later her phone was switched off. As my daughter cried, I dropped her off at a relative's place and went back to find my wife and son. By then, they were gone. Some people showed me a video, and I recognized them. I was told they were taken to Durga Bai Deshmukh Hospital. Around 2 PM, I was informed that her body had been moved to Gandhi Hospital as she had passed away," he said.

Following the tragedy, the film's producers, Mythri Movie Makers, issued a statement on social media. They posted on December 5, "We are extremely heartbroken by the tragic incident during last night's screening. Our thoughts and prayers are with the family and the young child undergoing medical treatment. We are committed to standing by them and extending all possible support during this difficult time. With deep sorrow." The Charges

A case was filed against the Sandhya Theatre management, Allu Arjun, and his security team following the incident. Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) of Central Zone, Hyderabad Police, Akshansh Yadav told The Indian Express, "A case has been filed under BNS section 105 (punishment for culpable homicide not amounting to murder) and 118(1) r/w 3(5) (voluntarily causing hurt or grievous hurt) at Chikkadpally police station based on the complaint of the family members of the deceased person. It is being investigated. Stringent action as per law will be taken against all the persons responsible for the chaotic situation inside the theatre leading to the death of a person and injury to others." Allu Arjun's Statement Allu Arjun broke his silence on the matter the following day. In a video posted on social media on December 6, he wrote, "Deeply heartbroken by the tragic incident at Sandhya Theatre. My heartfelt condolences go out to the grieving family during this unimaginably difficult time. I want to assure them they are not alone in this pain and will meet the family personally. While respecting their need for space to grieve, I stand committed to extend every possible assistance to help them navigate through this challenging journey." The actor also shared that he is donating Rs 25 lakh as a 'goodwill gesture' to the family and will bear their medical expenses. At the film's success meet on December 7, Allu Arjun once again spoke about the tragedy, and said that it took him hours to pro-



cess it. "A very unfortunate incident took place at Sandhya Cinema. We are extremely sorry for that. I had no idea about it until the next morning. When I heard about it on December 5, I was in shock. It took me hours to process it and respond to the incident. I couldn't process it psychologically. It took me around 10 hours. We all blanked out when we heard the news. Sukumar got extremely emotional," he said at the event. The Arrest On December 13, Allu Arjun was taken into custody by a team from Chikkadpally police station, where the case was registered. Meanwhile, Pushpa 2 is breaking records at the box office, emerging as the biggest hit of Arjun's career, and one of the biggest Indian blockbusters of all time.

# Anushka Sharma, Virat Kohli spend 'best day ever' in Brisbane, celebrate their seventh wedding anniversary.

Bollywood actress Anushka Sharma and cricketer Virat Kohli, who are currently in Australia, made the most of their day off in Brisbane. The couple, who recently celebrated their seventh wedding anniversary, were spotted spending quality time together, indulging in scrumptious burgers and fries at a local eatery followed by a shopping spree.

For their casual day out, Anushka wore a stylish white outfit, paired with an ear-shaped headband, while Virat opted for a blue T-shirt and denims. The couple was seen walking hand-in-hand, enjoying each other's company as they strolled through the streets of Brisbane. Anushka took to social media to share a glimpse from their special celebration, giving fans a sneak peek into their romantic day out. Anushka took to Instagram story to share a few glimpses from her burger and fries date with husband Virat. Sharing a happy picture of them two days later, Anushka wrote, "Bandit and Chilli ????", she also shared a picture of the burger they enjoyed and captioned it, "Best day ever ??."

## How mindset change helped Rahane trigger T20 transformation



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Ajinkya Rahane has attributed mindset change as the key reason behind his continued evolution as a T20 batsman, after his blazing 98 off 56 deliveries against Baroda put Mumbai into the final of the Syed Mushtaq Ali T20s. Coming into their semifinal clash at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium, Rahane had scores of 54-ball 95 & 45-ball 84 against Andhra and Vidarbha in successive 200-plus targets and on Friday, needing 159 for a win, he batted Baroda into submission.

Similar to his last two innings, this wasn't an innings where he destroyed the opposition attack with brute power. It was a knock that was very much built on his batting ethos, where timing and sticking to classic textbook shots, continue to make the batsman he is. The striking difference though is in his intent which has drastically changed since the time he joined Chennai Super Kings during the 2023 IPL, and one Rahane continues to build on. Despite having Prithvi Shaw at the other end, Rahane turned aggressor. He started his innings with 4, 6, 4 off left-arm seamer Lukman Meriwala. Once he got the head start, Baroda could hardly bring him back into control. "It's just a mindset change. The way this format is going on throughout the world, we see the first six overs are really important. You have to capitalise on those first six overs. If the opener or top three bats well in the first six overs and gets a big score, it becomes really easy after the first six overs. It's all about that. This format is all about expressing ourselves, playing with intent and I'm happy that it's coming off really well," Rahane said. When Kolkata Knight Riders released him into the auction pool — whom he has rejoined again ahead of this season — ahead of the 2023 season, his career was in cross roads. When CSK picked him, it was evident he had to bat in the middle-order, a role he wasn't accustomed to, but

that season he ended up scoring at a strike-rate of 172.49 — his highest ever. Last season it dropped down to 123.47. But in the SMAT he has been striking at 169.41. CSK's batting coach Mike Hussey attributed Rahane's turnaround in T20s to keeping it simple and the 36-year-old revealed how he unlocked the new version of his. Rahane, left, being greeted by teammates at the dugout as he walks off the field after his dismissal during the first semi-final. "My game is always about the time. I'm not too strong. It's not about power hitting. For me, it's always about timing the ball but at the same time having that intent from ball number one. All my shots are just extension of my defence. So I'm just focusing on that and not trying to play too hard or try to play a big shot. It's always about timing the ball and maintaining my shape all the time," Rahane said.

He also credits how his role changed at CSK, where from playing anchor, he was told to play his natural game, which he believes helped him maximise his T20 batting. "The last two years have been really good for me. When I played for CSK, they gave me the platform and the freedom to express myself. The message was clear from them, just go out there and play my game. That's my natural game. I always played with the intent that I'm an aggressive batsman. Whenever I played for other franchises, my role was different, I had to play anchor role," he said.

Since Rahane has unlocked this side of his batting, as an aspect that has stood out is how he hasn't got carried away and become a batsman he isn't. Of course, the occasional reverse sweeps and paddle scoops have been there to see, but he has largely struck to what works for him. "Even though I'm playing at a strike rate of 190-200, it's still classical batting. It's not power hitting. It's always about trying to play over mid-off, over mid-on, over extra covers for left-arm spinners. When you're doing well, your mind tells you to do something else, something extra. And that's where you actually make a mistake. When it's going good, for me, it's always about going back to my basics," Rahane said. Right through his knock against Baroda, Rahane didn't drift from this plan. Not once when hit 11 boundaries and 5 sixes did he try to play differently. It meant, chasing a modest target after their batting unit, especially Krunal Pandya and Hardik Pandya failed to step up, Baroda were never in the game. With Rahane going strong, skipper Shreyas Iyer scored a typical 46 as Mumbai walked into the final in search of their second SMAT title. Brief scores: Baroda 158/7 in 20 overs (Shivalik Sharma 36 n.o.; Suryansh Shedge 2/11) lost to Mumbai 164/4 (Ajinkya Rahane 98, Shreyas Iyer 46).

## 'Every sportsman makes mistakes': FIDE president Arkady Dvorkovich on criticism of Gukesh vs Ding Liren championship match

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

With the recently concluded World Chess Championship between D Gukesh and Ding Liren coming under fire for its perceived lack of quality, International Chess Federation (FIDE) President Arkady Dvorkovich on Friday came to its defence, saying mistakes make sports interesting. On Thursday, Gukesh became the youngest world champion after capitalizing on a blunder from Ding Liren in Game 14 which ultimately decided the fate of the championship. After the results were announced, former world champion Vladimir Kramnik was less than impressed, even going on to call Ding's blunder as a 'childish' one.

Reacting to the criticisms, Dvorkovich said at the closing ceremony, "Sports is about mistakes, without mistakes, there would be no goals in football. Every sportsman makes mistakes but that's what we are excited about, whether the opponent can find the way to use a mistake." "No comment. Sad. End of chess as we know it," Kramnik had written in one of his posts on X. He had followed that up with another post saying, "Never yet WC title was decided by childish one move blunder." A couple of weeks ago, Kramnik had also ranted about Game 6 of the World Championship, saying "Frankly, I am very disappointed by today's game (Game 6). Even Game 5 was not extremely high level, but today it



was really — for a professional — it was really weak play from both players. It's a very disappointing level." Even five-time champion Magnus Carlsen had lashed out at the quality on display at the World Chess Championship saying it doesn't look like a game between two World Championship contenders. "This does not look like a game between two World Championship contenders. It just looks like maybe the second round or third round of an open tournament. It's like it's the stage where you play somebody who is like decent with openings but then you just win with class," Carlsen said during a podcast by the Take Take Take app after Game 12.

Gukesh. According to Dutch GM Benjamin Bok, Ding who ceded his crown to the Indian was spotted soon after the title-fight ended, on chess.com, playing the team variant of chess. Bughouse chess is considered to cater to both chess hangers and heartbreaks, where four players form teams of two and play on two boards. Most of chess rules apply, but captured pieces in bughouse are passed to the teammate on the other board, who can avail of them on their own board. Results are clinched by checkmate or timed out.

By 2315 IST, a twitter watcher, noted that Ding had finished 22 games of bughouse, where the capture rules lend it names like Siamese Chess, Swap Chess, and Exchange Chess. It is discussional chess where partners can tag team to capture enemy pieces and checkmate opponents. In one of the snap 3 minute games, Ding and Indian CuisineMaster, a registered British player took on Chinese YouShallRose and Momoko105.

While it was speculated that Ding was glad to be relieved of the burden of world champ — hugely believable — others opined that seeking recourse in the flippy bughouse chess, could be anything from being angry, hurting to completely relaxed. Most however wanted the 'Ding Chilling' entrenched trope to continue, and guessed that Chefhouse was simply relaxing after a torturous three weeks that ended in a more than an "Oopside Daisies" blunder. Speculation is rife over whether Ding would continue in classical and just how treacherous his path is to securing qualification for the next cycle of Candidates. Meanwhile news is awaited on whether D Gukesh will actually bungee jump as earlier mentioned post his historic title, after it was reported he is actually scared of heights. Having pocketed a cool USD 1.3 million (approx ₹11.03 crore), after the title, Gukesh can float a few feet above ground, and that much thrill is enough for a year, some would say.

## Gukesh tells Ding Liren at closing ceremony: 'I really admire you... thank you for this amazing fight'



GNS News Agency, Dec 16

D Gukesh, the youngest ever chess world champion who created history after defeating defending champion Ding Liren, was ever his graceful self when he was presented with the trophy in the closing ceremony on Friday. "I mean this moment, it feels like I have lived it a million times. Every morning when I woke up, this moment was the reason I woke up. To hold this trophy and this reality means more than anything else in my life," the teenager said in his acceptance speech after being pre-

sented with his gold medal and the trophy that came with a USD 1.3 million reward. He also showered praises on opponent Ding, calling him a 'true champion' and said that he admired him.

This journey has been beautiful because of the people around me. I would also love to thank my opponent, Ding Liren. He is in my eyes a true champion and we saw that despite a lot of pressure on him, he was able to put on a huge fight and this match has been just the show it is because of his fighting spirit. I really admire you," Gukesh said. The last 24 hours have been like a blur for the champion who experienced a range of emotions after beating Liren in Game 14.

Along with the trophy, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin also announced a reward of Rs 5 crore for Gukesh, who became only the second Indian to clinch the World Chess championship crown after the iconic Viswanathan Anand. "To honour the monumental achievement of @DGukesh, the youngest-ever World Chess Champion, I am delighted to announce a cash prize of ₹5 crore! His historic victory has brought immense pride and joy to the nation. May he continue to shine and achieve greater heights in the future," Stalin said in a tweet.

## Rahul Dravid's son, Anvay, scores hundred for Karnataka in Vijay Merchant Trophy

GNS News Agency, Dec 16

Former India captain and head coach Rahul Dravid's younger son, Anvay, scored his maiden hundred for Karnataka in the Vijay Merchant Trophy on Friday. Batting at the DVR Ground in Mulapadu, Dravid junior's hundred was instrumental in Karnataka taking the first-innings lead over Jharkhand Under-16 and earning three points in a drawn contest. Playing as the wicket-keeper, Anvay walked in at No. 4 and remained unbeaten on 100 off 153 deliveries on the back of 10 fours and two sixes. Karnataka were bolstered by a fine start in reply to Jharkhand's 387, with openers Arya Gowda and skipper Dhruv Krishnan securing hundreds during a 229-run stand. The match marked Anvay's third innings in the Vijay Merchant Trophy that began last week, following 75 runs from the previous two innings, including a half-century. Last year, Anvay was named the captain of Karnataka in Under-14 age-group tournaments. In 2020, Anvay made headlines after scoring a brilliant fifty in the semi-final of the BTR Shield Under-14 Group I. He fell short of his hundred by just 10 runs. Anvay's elder brother, Samit, also represented Karnataka successfully in age-group tournaments for Karnataka over the years. In September, Samit was named in the India Under-19 team for a



series against Australia U19 at home. Samit, however, could not feature throughout the series after suffering a knee injury. Samit will miss out on the 2026 Under-19 World Cup after having turned 19 recently. Samit though has been among the runs and wickets. In the Cooch Behar Trophy earlier this year, he made 362 runs and took 16 wickets in eight matches during Karnataka's title-winning campaign. Samit also featured for Mysuru Warriors in the Maharaja Trophy in August.

## What to expect in Gabba: Heat, bounce, pace and intensity

GNS News Agency, Dec 16 "They are playing at pitch no.4. That's the bounciest of the lot. The pitch where Mitchell Johnson terrorised England in 2013 with a nine-wicket haul. I expect it will seam a bit on the first day and quicken up with more pace and bounce on the second day." That's Kevin Mitchell Jr, an ex-curator of the Gabba for 33 years. "The job for your Indian batsmen is cut out. For that matter, the Aussies too. Both teams' batsmen aren't in flush form, are they? Travis Head saved the day at Adelaide, else it could have got tricky for Australia too."

Not long ago, a Test against South Africa got done in two days here, but that track had a lot of grass. This one, though, has already seen a change in colour. The overly grassy-green of Wednesday evening is gone after a few cuts, and it looks firm. "I think it will be quick and bouncy. It will be an interesting toss, especially if it is cloudy and humid," Mitchell Junior says. Batsmen from both teams have certainly been working hard at nets for the past few days to try to get into some rhythm. Some have even been tweaking their technique. If it was Virat Kohli on Thursday, trying to get his moving-back-first-before-pressing-forward routine clicking, Steve Smith came out on the optional nets day on Friday to make a tweak. As he did on the previous day, he would incorporate a small move of opening-up as his initial movement before release. Not by much, but enough to get him almost front-on facing the bowler. It should in theory help with his leg side whips, but how that clicks in against the balls in the outside-off corridor remains to be seen. But two stars in search of crucial runs in the big game have been sweating it out, not afraid to tweak their games a bit.

On Friday, many Indians set to play in the game didn't turn up. Usually, the day before the game, that's the norm. Rishabh Pant, Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill did have a stint at the nets. In the absence of Rohit Sharma, Gill turned up for the pre-game, raising eyebrows in the Australian media, who are used to seeing captains address the media a day before a Test. "Optional training day; I am here, so I am addressing!" Gill would say with a smile. Sword on Rohit/Rohit certainly has to turn up at the Gabba with a knock of substance. He isn't necessarily a captain who needs personal batting form to lead creatively, but it won't hurt. Not just external noise, but considering India won the first game in his absence, he won't mind some runs either. With the kind of lead-up he had before the tour, he didn't stand much chance against the pink ball, with its little devilry. Another failure, and even his move to demote himself to no. 6 that looked a selfless positive move will be painted as a submissive move of uncertainty. That's how quickly perceptions can change at this level. Even his captaincy tactical decisions would begin to be questioned.

Gill would talk about an interesting facet that's been tested in Australia. "The intensity is the key, mental intensity in these conditions." He would cue up his first-innings dismissal at Adelaide. "I got affected by what was happening at the other end." Some wickets. "And I didn't get much of a strike for a while, for four overs or so. And I missed a full ball (from Scott Boland)." He had faced just three balls in five overs prior to that, which had seen two Indian wickets of KL Rahul and Virat Kohli. That's the kind of mental intensity he is referring to. But he certainly is taking heart not just from his batting in the series so far, but also from his past heroics at the Gabba. "I definitely felt nostalgic when I walked into the stadium." Rohit can also indulge in the past; he hit a 44 in the 2021 Test, but did make a hundred — a 124 against Australia in an ODI in 2016. His lack of runs can't quite be



put down to a lack of intensity or his approach in the middle. Unlike in the recent past, he didn't take a cavalier approach; he just couldn't crack the pink-ball movement. The Gabba with its bounce will give us, and him too perhaps, a clear picture of where he stands as a batsman. At the nets, he was seen doing little things: like running from the other end before he would take strike to get the energy up and running, just like Sunil Gavaskar had suggested he should. He was seen stretching and warming-up before his stint. He also faced a few short balls, trying to get his swivel-motion of the hips quicker. And sweated a lot on that forward stride. "Batsmen who don't naturally have a big stride tend to get it even shorter at the Gabba," Mitchell Jr, observed. It wasn't a reference to Rohit, but he was talking about the effect of the bounce on the pitch on a few batsmen. "The nature of the soil and weather here helps in that consistency: Usually hot weather and sun-baked soil. Everything packs in really well. And the ball shoots up!" says Mitchell. It's difficult to make fair estimates from the proceedings in the nets, but it does seem that India will make a couple of changes: Washington Sundar probably in for R Ashwin, and Akash Deep for Harshit Rana. Whoever is picked, one thing is clear, as Gill had said. "High intensity needs to be maintained". No one can roam around the garden at the Gabbatoir, no space for 'garden mey ghoomney waale log'.

## Telangana's Sneha Singh shines in Lalla Aicha Q-School, secures spot in final stage

GNS News Agency, Dec 16 Marrakech: Telangana golfer Sneha Singh is among the six Indian women golfers who will play in the Final Stage of Lalla Aicha Q-School after the 54-hole Pre-qualifiers. A total of 101 golfers qualified for the Final Stage. The Final qualifiers will begin next week with the five rounds to be played over two courses, Royal Golf Marrakech and Al Maaden Golf Marrakech. The competition will be held from December 16 to 20. Sneha Singh (69-73-75) had the best result among Indian golfers finishing tied fourth. Amandeep Drall (71-73-70) and Avani Prashanth after rounds of 73-72-72 were tied for fifth and ninth respectively. Vidhatri Urs, who was tied first after the first day at Samanah Club by Nicklaus, was tied 14th with rounds of 68-77-75 at 4-over. American Annika Borrelli won by five shots at Noria Golf Club with New Zealand's Amelia Garvey and French amateur Vanessa Bouvet topping the leaderboard at Golf Club Rotana. Ireland's Anna Foster, American Zoe Slaughter and Welsh amateur Darcey Harry shared first place at Palm Golf Ourika, meanwhile, Australia's Justice Bosio, Nigeria's Georgia Iziemgbe Oboh and Iceland's Ragga Kristinsdottir ended the week in T1 at Samanah.