













EDITORIAL

Manufactured Traditions

In the landscape of modern Indian socio-politics, if there is such a word, December 25 has become a date of peculiar botanical urgency. Suddenly, the air is thick with the smell of incense and the aggressive rustle of holy basil. We are told, via high-resolution WhatsApp forwards and saffron-tinted infographics, that it is "Tulsi Pujan Diwas". To the uninitiated, it looks like a quaint revival of Vedic piety. To anyone with a history book and a functioning memory, however, it is a masterclass in the "invention of tradition" - a duplicitous branding exercise designed to turn a plant of peace into a picket line of cultural intolerance. Let us be clear: the Tulsi plant is, and has always been, a cornerstone of the Hindu household. For centuries, it has sat in the Vrindavan of the courtyard, a biological deity representing Lakshmi's grace and the medicinal wisdom of Ayurveda. We have Tulsi Vivah, an ancient, structurally complex festival tied to the lunar cycle of the Hindu calendar. But "Tulsi Pujan Diwas", fixed stubbornly to the Gregorian calendar date of December 25 (a most unVedic practice), is not an ancient ritual. It is a 2014 startup. It has the same historical depth as a seasonal discount sale.

Colonising The Calendar

The manufacture of this "Diwas" is a classic example of what historian Eric Hobsbawm called "Invented Tradition". These are practices that appear old but are actually quite new, designed to instil certain values through repetition and a false sense of continuity with a "glorious past". By pinning Tulsi worship to Christmas Day, the architects of this movement aren't trying to honour the plant or our culture; they are trying to colonise the calendar. The logic is transparently reactive. It stems from a profound cultural insecurity that views the celebration of Christmas - or even the mere acknowledgment of it - as a zero-sum game. If a neighbour puts up a star, one must counter with a shrub. If they sing a carol, we must chant a shloka, not out of devotion, but out of a desperate need to "reclaim" a space that was never actually lost. It is "spirituality" as a contact sport, kabaddi with chanting rather than panting. The duplicity lies in the justification. Proponents argue that they are protecting "Indian values" from the "onslaught of Westernisation". This creates a false binary: you are either a "Sattvic" Tulsi-worshipper or a "corrupted" consumer of cake and tinsel. By framing a modern creation as an ancient necessity, they provide a theological shield for contemporary xenophobia. It allows the practitioner to say, "I am not being intolerant of your holiday; I am simply being observant of my own (one-decade-old) tradition."

A Trojan Horse For Intolerance

This is how "manufactured tradition" serves as a Trojan Horse for intolerance. It rewrites history to suggest that Indian culture is a fragile thing that can only survive if it is constantly positioned against an imagined enemy. It replaces the expansive, pluralistic heart of Hinduism - which historically had no trouble assimilating various influences - with a brittle, reactionary mimicry. Furthermore, there is a profound irony in using the Tulsi plant for this purpose. In the Puranas, Tulsi is a symbol of bhakti (devotion), a quality that is internal, quiet, and deeply personal. To turn her into a tool for a "Cultural Cold War" is a form of spiritual malpractice. When worship is motivated by the desire to "cancel out" another person's joy, it ceases to be prayer and becomes a political weapon of intolerance. We see this pattern everywhere: the sudden "discovery" of ancient reasons to do modern, exclusionary things. Whether it is the rebranding of Valentine's Day as "Parents' Worship Day" (why not Kamadeva Diwas, I ask you?) or the fixating of festivals onto specific Western holidays, the goal is the same: to create a psychological ghetto where the "Other" is always an intruder.

Let Tulsi Be Sacred

By pretending that "Tulsi Pujan Diwas" has always existed in this specific, reactionary form, its promoters are gaslighting the public. They are erasing the genuine, organic history of Indian festivals, which are diverse, regional, and tied to the earth's own rhythms, and replacing them with a standardised, "Vedic-flavoured" version of modern "cultural nationalism".

Edit

HONOURING THE PUNJAB BOY, SHARVAN SINGH, IS HONOURING THE MANKIND, VELOUR AND PATRIOTISM

Jag Mohan Thaken

History repeats itself; but a few are fortunate to get the recognition. The spiritual world, especially the Sikh world, is proud of the act of kindness, humility and service to mankind exemplified by Bhai Kanhaiya Ji, who is widely known for his water seva during Sri Guru Gobind Singh Maharaj Ji's time in the battlefield. Once again in the History, a 10-year-old Sikh boy, Sharvan Singh, resident of a village hardly 2 kilometres from India-Pakistan border in Punjab's Ferozepur District, has earned national recognition for his act of compassion, exceptional courage and sense of patriotism by serving 'Milk-Lassi and Water' to the Military Persons deployed near his village during operation Sindoor. Akal Takht's former Jathedar, Giani Harpreet Singh, in a tweet on 26th December, 2025, said, "Even on the battlefield, the spirit of selfless service and fearless courage, as exemplified by Bhai Kanhaiya Ji and Sikh history, has always continued to inspire our younger generations. During the war-like situation with Pakistan, 10-year-old Sharvan Singh from Firozpur, Punjab, displayed remarkable selfless service by providing tea, water, and ice to our soldiers. In recognition of this noble act, he has been honoured with the 'National Child Award' by the Honourable President of India, Mrs. Droupadi Murmu. I commend Sharvan Singh and, while appreciating his spirit of service, courage, and humanity, appeal to the people of Punjab to connect their children with the teachings of Sikh history—values of service, compassion, and bravery". While presenting the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar to Sharvan Singh and other children for their exceptional achievements in the fields of Bravery, Social Service, Environment, Sports, Art & Culture and Science & Technology at a ceremony held in New Delhi on December 26, 2025, on the occasion of 'Veer Baal Diwas', the President of India, Smt Droupadi Murmu, said that about 320 years ago, Guru Gobind Singh Ji—the tenth Guru of the Sikh faith and



revered by all Indians—and his four sons made supreme sacrifices while fighting in support of truth and justice. She said that the bravery of the two youngest Sahibzadas, is honoured and respected both in India and abroad. She remembered with reverence the great child heroes who laid down their lives with pride for truth and justice. Terror of Mughal Rulers was on such a dreadful, scary, spooky and fearsome pitch that after the martyrdom of the younger Sahibzadas and Mata Ji, when no one dared to perform their last rites due to fear of the tyrannical government, Diwan Todar Mal Ji bought the holy bodies of the Sahibzadas and Mata Ji. In this way, Diwan Todar Mal Ji became the hero of Saka Sirhind, due to this unique act, his name was recorded among the respected personalities of the Sikh Panth. Still the people bow to the good-hearted personality of Diwan Todar Mal Ji, who had immense devotion towards the Guru Ghar. It is pertinent to mention here that Sikhism is the religion which always keeps humanity as its serving motto. It had not only given the religious Gurus, who preached equality without any discrimination of caste and creed, service to humanity, compassion and a deep sense of

spirituality, but also gave the brave heroes, who martyred their lives for protection of religious freedom and the rights of the oppressed. History can never forget the unparalleled, supreme and extraordinary sacrifice of Guru Arjan Dev Ji, Guru Teg Bahadur Ji, Mata Gujri Ji and the younger Sahibzadas -- Baba Zorawar Singh Ji and Baba Fateh Singh Ji. The brave heroes like Sardar Bhagat Singh, Sardar Uddham Singh and others, who fought against the tyranny of the English rulers for the sake of the country, are and will also remain the lighthouse for the present and coming generations. Bravery, humanity, kindness and fearless actions are the main elements in Sikhism. Presently also these elements can be noticed even in the children of the sect. The story of Ten-year-old Shraavan Singh, amidst the risks associated with war during Operation Sindoor, who regularly delivered water, milk, and lassi to the Indian soldiers stationed at the border near his home, reflects the 'Bravery, Humanity, Kindness and Fearless actions'. President Murmu said that the greatness of a country is certain when its children are filled with patriotism and high ideals. Ten-year-old Shraavan Singh, amidst the risks associated with war during Operation

Sindoor, regularly delivered water, milk, and lassi to the Indian soldiers stationed at the border near his home. Smt. Murmu was happy to note that the children have showcased their exceptional talent in various fields such as bravery, art and culture, environment, innovation, science and technology, social service, and sports. She said that it is because of talented children such as the seven-year-old Vaka Lakshmi Pragnika that India is considered a chess powerhouse on the world stage. Ajay Raj and Mohammed Sidan P, who saved the lives of others with their bravery and intelligence, deserve all the praise they receive. Nine-year-old daughter Vyoma Priya and eleven-year-old brave son Kamlesh Kumar lost their lives while saving the lives of others with their courage. Whereas, the differently-abled daughter Shivani Hosuru Uppara has achieved extraordinary accomplishments in the world of sports, overcoming economic and physical limitations. Vaibhav Suryavanshi has made a name for himself in the highly competitive and talent-filled world of cricket and has set many records. She expressed confidence that brave and talented children like them will continue to do good work and make India's future bright.

Congress Meltdown: In Digvijaya Singh's 'RSS' Post, A Reckoning For Rahul

"Multiple Chanakyas are advising the prince. The trouble is, there is only one prince. A problem that Machiavelli and Kautilya never faced. Plus, their respective Princes were able," says a senior Congress leader about the meltdown set off by Digvijaya Singh, 78, the former Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh. Singh, a master politician, recently threw a gauntlet at Rahul Gandhi through a social media post, in which he praised the organisational strength of the RSS and even tagged everyone from Rahul, Priyanka Gandhi, Mallikarjun Kharge and Jairam Ramesh to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Singh then attended the last Congress Working Committee meeting and made the same point in person. There, he was heard in utter silence, with his intervention espousing no comments from the audience. I spoke to a cross-section of Congress leaders before writing this column - both the rebels who want change in the party and the coterie to Rahul Gandhi who want status quo. The biggest takeaway is that Rahul cannot avoid a change if he continues to be unavailable and elusive. The last five days of the



winter session, Rahul, despite being the leader of opposition, chose to be in Germany to address the diaspora instead of taking up pressing issues such as the air pollution in Delhi, a state the Congress once ruled and where it has now been reduced to zero. The decentralisation and the lack of organisation that Singh underlined in his CWC address is unexceptionable. It is a point that any objective observer would agree with. A Warning For Venugopal? This also points to KC Venugopal, the General Secretary in charge of organisation, who has reduced the Congress party organisation to a hollow shell with state units almost out of business. Many say that is because Venugopal doesn't allow state

leaders to make decisions while endlessly dithering on decisions himself. In fact, the chorus for his ouster is only growing. Venugopal survives on Gandhi's patronage as his chief palace courtier. But he's no Ahmed Patel, who performed a similar role for Sonia Gandhi and was indispensable for the party. The question now is what lies in store for Venugopal. Will he get his dream job as the Congress face in the upcoming Kerala elections, or will he be kicked upstairs to some meaningless office? It may not be a stretch to say that Singh, in fact, was basically targeting Venugopal through his social media post, and by tagging Priyanka Gandhi Vadra publicly, he was seeking her intervention in the party's sorry state of affairs.

Sources close to Singh say that speculation, especially from within the Congress, that Singh is leaning towards the BJP-RSS is laughable. Sure he has been provocative, but his praise, they say, was nuanced and limited to the organisational discipline of the RSS. "They have created the largest political party in the world. The most formidable election winning machine and the biggest war chest. Only a blind person would not seek to emulate it in politics," said a source. This is a valid point. In contrast to such a robust organisation, Gandhi comes across as a leader who has romanticised electoral defeat with his constant pitch of "vote chori". Sources close to Singh also scoff at suggestions that the provocation for the tweet was the fact that he wants a new term in the Rajya Sabha. "Singh was a mass leader. He literally poisoned his own roots to come to Delhi and became Gandhi's counsellor. Yet, Gandhi, for reasons unknown, discarded him and fell for the comfort of his palace courtiers. Singh proved with his Narmada Yatra that he still has it in him to do mass politics, touching every district in Madhya Pradesh. He wants a say in the state and a bright future for his son Jaivardhan

Singh. Is that a crime? It can only happen when the Congress does well." Take Responsibility From the row between Siddaramaiah and DK Shivakumar in Karnataka, to the sidelining of leaders like Shashi Tharoor and Manish Tewari, to replacing the leadership in Rajasthan, Gandhi can no longer continue evading responsibility. Against this background, the public praise for Priyanka Gandhi Vadra can be seen as a cry for help from the party. Party leaders want Rahul to go back to bread and butter issues to take on the BJP. Instead, the issues he has taken up so far, such as "vote chori", "surrender Modi", have failed to get any traction. "The Trinamool Congress protested the removal of MGNREGA, the Congress' flagship scheme, much more than the Congress in Parliament. They held an all-night dharna. What did we do?" a Congress leader said. For now, all eyes are on the Rajya Sabha picks to see whether Rahul Gandhi has paid any heed to the discontent brewing within his party. If the usual palace guard makes the cut and there is no organisational overhaul, expect a mega meltdown. Evasion of responsibility isn't an option for the Congress top brass anymore.

Faith vs. Breath: Pigeons, Laws, and Our Collective Irresponsibility

— Dr. Satyawan Saurabh

In India, faith often trumps reason. That's why the sound of temple bells sometimes feels more suffocating than the sound of a suffocating sound, but we don't want to listen. A recent Mumbai court ruling—imposing a fine of ₹5,000 for feeding pigeons in a public place—is a clear and bold example of this confrontation. This decision is not against pigeons, but against the mindset that tramples on science, law, and public health in the name of sentimentality. In our society, feeding pigeons is considered a "virtuous act." Early in the morning, we find a sense of satisfaction in throwing a handful of grains onto our balcony, terrace, or park—as if we've served humanity in a significant way. But the question is: can an act performed without considering the consequences truly be considered compassion? Medical science has consistently warned that dried pigeon droppings can spread into the air and spread deadly diseases like cryptococcosis, histoplasmosis, hypersensitivity pneumonitis, and salmonella. These diseases are not imaginary fears, but true

stories from real patients admitted to hospitals. Asthmatics, lung patients, the elderly, and children—their lives are at risk first. The Mumbai court did not limit this case to a mere violation of a municipal corporation order, but considered it a direct threat to public health. The punishment under sections of the IPC indicates that the state now seeks not only to treat diseases but also to prevent social habits that cause disease. This is the first time in the country that a socially acceptable act like feeding pigeons has been criminalized. This decision demonstrates that the law will now be guided by its impact, not by emotions. The most uncomfortable question in this entire controversy concerns religion and tradition. Some are calling it an attack on faith, but does religion ever condone the spread of disease? Does any religious text ever prescribe risking the lives of others to earn merit? The government and health agencies themselves have clearly stated that feeding pigeons is not a religious obligation, yet protests continue. In reality, this protest is not about faith, but stubbornness—a stubborn refusal to change one's

habits. Cities are no longer villages. With dense populations, tall buildings, limited air, and shared spaces, even small negligence can turn into a major crisis. Grain left on a balcony not only attracts pigeons, but also brings with it a whole chain of disease, filth, and infection. Ironically, the same people who question masks, vaccines, and scientific warnings are, in the name of virtue, turning cities into a cesspool of biological waste. In this debate, it's important to clarify that the pigeons aren't at fault. They're simply living their lives according to their natural instincts. We are to blame—our unscientific sentimentality, our belief in convenience, and our collective irresponsibility. If you truly want to show compassion, do so in controlled, safe, and scientific ways—through animal welfare organizations, not in open public spaces. This decision by the Mumbai court sends a clear message that faith may be private, but its impact cannot harm public life. Compassion does not necessarily mean harm, and the law is now recognizing this distinction.





# ROLLS ROYCE PLANS MAJOR EXPANSION IN INDIA

New Delhi: British aero-engine maker Rolls-Royce on Sunday said it is looking at making India its third “home market” outside of the UK in line with a plan to unlock the full potential of opportunities across an array of domains including jet engine, naval propulsion, land systems and advanced engineering. In an interview to PTI, Sashi Mukundan, the executive vice president of Rolls-Royce India, elaborating on the move, said the company is planning for a “big investment” in the country and listed developing a next-generation aero engine in India as a priority to power the combat jets that New Delhi will produce under the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) programme. Besides the UK, Rolls Royce considers the US and Germany as its “home markets” as the company has considerable presence including manufacturing facilities in these two countries. Mukundan also highlighted how Rolls Royce can contribute significantly to address India’s requirement for



electric propulsion capability for boosting the Indian Navy’s combat prowess. He suggested that the development of the jet engine for the AMCA involving Rolls Royce could also help India manufacture engines for naval propulsion as the company is among very few engine makers globally to have the capability to “marinize the aero engine”. Mukundan, without divulging specific details, said Rolls Royce was eye-

ing to make significant investment to expand its footprint in India, noting that the country has “scale, policy clarity, and a strong push” towards a defence and industrial ecosystem that is expanding rapidly and becoming more sophisticated. “If everything goes well, it would be a significant investment. It’ll be big enough that people will notice it, but I don’t want to put a number to it. What matters is the impact of this investment, which

would be the development of the entire value chain and ecosystem here across sectors that we operate in,” he said. The top Rolls Royce executive said the company will firm up two MoUs with (Memorandum of Understanding) with two defence public sector undertakings in India. While one pact is for manufacturing the engines for the Arjun tanks, the other is for engines for the future ready combat vehicles. In October, CEO Tufan

Erginbilgic, during a business roundtable had conveyed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi that India is going to be very critical for Rolls-Royce going forward. “We have developed two other home markets outside the UK — the US and Germany. We want to make India our next one. What do we mean by that? We want to do everything across the field, and it’s not just defence,” Mukundan said. “That ambition cuts across defence, naval propulsion, land systems, manufacturing, advanced engineering skills, and technology development, all of which align closely with India’s own priorities,” he said. On the engines for AMCA, Mukundan said extensive discussions and background work are underway on how to move forward. “If India is thinking about next-generation engines, Rolls-Royce is probably the best partner. We have the capability, we have the experience both in India and globally, and we have repeatedly demonstrated that we can do it,” he said.

## BP sells stake in motor oil arm Castrol for \$6bn

BP has struck a \$6bn (£4.4bn) deal to sell a majority stake in its motor oil division Castrol to a US investment firm. The oil giant sold a 65% stake in Castrol, which makes lubricants for cars, motorcycles and industrial vehicles, to New York-based Stonepeak. The deal valued Castrol at \$10.1bn (£7.5bn), with BP receiving \$6bn in cash, which it will use to pay down debts and allow it to focus on its core business. BP will hold onto a 35% stake in Castrol, which it first took control of in 2000. The London-based oil major said the sale is a “milestone” in its plans to overhaul its business and strip out costs. BP in February announced plans to sell off \$20bn (£15bn) worth of assets in a bid to focus on its core crude oil and gas business and strengthen its balance sheet. Following today’s deal and previous announcements, the company says its over half way to meeting that target. It is also shifting its strategy away from investment in green energy and renewing its focus on oil and gas following pressure from some investors who were frustrated that its profits and share price had



lagged behind rivals. Rivals Shell and Norwegian company Equinor have also scaled back plans to invest in green energy and US President Donald Trump’s call to “drill baby drill” has encouraged firms to invest in fossil fuels. The Castrol sale comes a week after BP unveiled its first female chief executive, Meg O’Neill, who will take the helm in April 2026. Her surprise appointment came only three months after BP appointed a new chairman, Albert Manifold. And she was handed the top job less than two years after Murray Auchincloss took

over from Bernard Looney as chief executive. Wednesday’s deal is the latest in a series of sales by the firm, which included offloading its US onshore wind energy business and its Dutch mobility and convenience arm. Interim chief executive Carol Howle said the sale is a “very good outcome for all stakeholders”. “We are reducing complexity, focusing the downstream on our leading integrated businesses, and accelerating delivery of our plan,” she added. Russ Mould, investment director at AJ Bell, said the deal was “an early Christmas present” for BP shareholders.

## Amazon blocks 1,800 job applications from suspected North Korean agents

A top Amazon executive has said the US technology giant has blocked more than 1,800 job applications from suspected North Korean agents. North Koreans tried to apply for remote working IT jobs using stolen or fake identities, Amazon’s chief security officer Stephen Schmidt said in a LinkedIn post. “Their objective is typically straightforward: get hired, get paid, and funnel wages back to fund the regime’s weapons programs,” he said, adding that this trend is likely to be happening at scale across the industry, especially in the US. Authorities in the US and South Korea have warned about Pyongyang’s operatives carrying out online scams. Amazon has seen a nearly one-third increase in job applications from North Koreans in the past year, said Mr Schmidt in his post. He said the operatives typically work with people managing “laptop farms” - referring to computers based in the US that are run remotely from outside



of the country. The firm used a combination of artificial intelligence (AI) tools and verification by its staff to screen job applications, he said. The strategies used by such fraudsters have become more sophisticated, Mr Schmidt said. Bad actors are hijacking dormant LinkedIn accounts using leaked credentials to gain verification. They target genuine software engineers to appear credible, he said, urging firms to report suspicious job applications to the

authorities. Mr Schmidt warned employers to look out for indicators of fraudulent North Korean job applications, including incorrectly formatted phone numbers and mismatched education histories. In June, the US government said it had uncovered 29 “laptop farms” that were being operated illegally across the country by North Korean IT workers. They used stolen or forged identities of Americans to help North Korean nationals get jobs in

the US, said the Department of Justice (DOJ). It also indicted US brokers who had helped secure jobs for the North Korean operatives. In July, a woman from Arizona was sentenced to more than eight years in jail for running a laptop farm to help North Korean IT workers secure remote jobs at more than 300 US companies. The DOJ said the scheme generated more than \$17m (£12.6m) in illicit gains for her and Pyongyang.

## TREASURY TO COVER BAYEUX TAPESTRY FOR ESTIMATED £800M

The Treasury is set to insure the Bayeux Tapestry against damage for an estimated £800m while it is on loan to the British Museum next year. The 70m-long embroidery depicting the Battle of Hastings in 1066 will travel from France to London as part of a deal between the two nations’ governments. The artefact’s transit and its time in storage and on display will be covered under the Government Indemnity Scheme (GIS). Indemnity insurance covers situations like loss or damage. A Treasury spokesperson said that, without the long-standing scheme, “public museums and galleries would face a substantial commercial insurance premium, which would be significantly less cost effective”. There are concerns about the move, as some French art experts have suggested the nearly 1,000-year-old work was in far too a delicate state to be transported - something French officials have denied. It is understood the Treasury has received an initial valuation for cover-



ing the Bayeux Tapestry that has been provisionally approved. The loan will not be formally confirmed until it receives the final valuation. That final valuation is estimated to be around £800m, according to the Financial Times, citing unnamed officials. The Treasury did not dispute this figure when approached by the BBC. The Bayeux Tapestry will be displayed in the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery of the British Museum from next September until July 2027 while its current home, the

Bayeux Museum, undergoes renovations. Comprising 58 scenes, 626 characters and 202 horses, the huge masterpiece charts a contested time in Anglo-French relations when William The Conqueror took the English throne from Harold Godwinson, becoming the first Norman king of England. The government’s indemnity scheme allows art and cultural objects to be shown publicly in the UK which “might not have been otherwise because the cost of insurance would have been too high”. The scheme -

first set up in 1980 - has facilitated numerous high-value loans, including Vincent van Gogh’s 1888 work The Bedroom to the National Gallery. The scheme is estimated to save museums and galleries around £81m a year when compared to the cost of taking out commercial insurance. In exchange for the Bayeux Tapestry, the British Museum will loan items to France, including the 7th Century Anglo-Saxon artefacts discovered at the Sutton Hoo burial site in Suffolk and the 12th Century Lewis chess pieces.

## Ola Electric fast-tracks rollout of 4680 Bharat Cell powered vehicles

New Delhi: Ola Electric on Sunday said it has scaled up deliveries of its 4680 Bharat Cell powered S1 Pro+ (5.2 kWh) across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana, and Karnataka. The company has commenced deliveries across Coimbatore, Kochi, and Hyderabad, along with continued ramp-up in Bengaluru, Ola Electric said in a statement. The S1 Pro+ (5.2 kWh) is the first product powered by the company’s indigenously manufactured 4680 Bharat Cell battery pack, delivering more range, higher performance and enhanced safety, it added. “Customers are now taking deliveries of the scooters powered by our own 4680 Bharat Cell, and the rollout is picking up strong momentum. With deliveries scaling across multiple states, we are now gearing up to take the 4680 Bharat Cell powered vehicles nationwide, reaching every corner of the country,” an Ola



Electric spokesperson said. With its own 4680 Bharat Cell battery packs in the vehicles, Ola Electric is now India’s first company to fully own the cell and battery pack manufacturing process in-

house, marking a major milestone in building a fully integrated EV ecosystem in India. Ola Electric currently offers an expansive portfolio of S1 scooters and Roadster X motorcycles.

## Adani plans Rs 1.8 lakh cr defence spend to boost indigenous military capabilities

New Delhi: Adani Group plans to invest Rs 1.8 lakh crore next year in defence manufacturing, with a focus on strengthening capabilities in unmanned and autonomous systems as well as advanced guided weapons as it looks to play a stealth anchor role in India’s future warfare capabilities, sources said. Adani Defence & Aerospace in 2025 transitioned from extended planning cycles to rapid deployment with some of its military hardware being used in Operation Sindoor. Next year, it will invest in unmanned and autonomous systems, advanced guided weapons, sensors and electronics, AI-enabled multi-domain operations, and scaled-up maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) and training infrastructure, company sources said. Autonomous systems across air, sea and land domains are unmanned platforms that use sensors, software and secure networks to operate with minimal human intervention, expanding military reach while reducing risk to personnel. In the air, they include UAVs that conduct intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, communications relay and precision-support



missions with long endurance. At sea, unmanned surface and underwater vehicles perform tasks such as maritime surveillance, anti-submarine warfare and mine countermeasures over wide areas. On land, unmanned ground vehicles support logistics, reconnaissance, explosive ordnance disposal and perimeter security. Adani Defence & Aerospace has emerged as India’s largest integrated private-sector defence player, with capabilities spanning unmanned aerial and

underwater systems, counter-UAS solutions, guided weapons and loitering munitions, small arms and ammunition, aircraft MRO, simulator-driven training and airborne warning and control systems (AWACS). Sources said in 2025, the company’s Drishti 10 UAVs were inducted into the Indian Navy and Army for long-endurance ISR mission (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance). Also, its counter-drone systems cleared trials conducted by the Army, Navy and

Air Force, Agnikaa loitering munitions demonstrated endurance and resistance to electronic warfare and ARKA MANPADS - a shoulder-fired missile system - achieved tri-service deployment readiness within compressed timelines. Sources said the company’s entry into AWACS platforms helped position it as a sole private-sector player in this segment. Integration of Air Works and Indamer created a major defence-civil MRO platform while the acquisition of FSTC strengthened pilot and engineering training capabilities, they said. Adani Defence & Aerospace has embedded sustainability through digital twins, predictive maintenance and modular design, while higher indigenous sourcing has strengthened supply-chain resilience. Looking ahead to 2026, the company plans to scale autonomous systems across air, sea and land domains, expand precision-strike capabilities, deepen its MRO and training footprint, and advance AI-enabled, multi-domain operational systems in line with India’s planned defence investment trajectory, sources added.



# Zelensky says Russia 'doesn't want peace' ahead of meeting Trump in Florida

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky will meet his US counterpart Donald Trump in Florida on Sunday, for the latest round of talks aimed at ending nearly four years of war with Russia. The pair will discuss an updated version of a US-brokered peace plan, which Moscow has yet to support, as well as separate proposals for US security guarantees. Their meeting at the US president's Mar-a-Lago home follows intense Russian bombardment of Kyiv over the weekend, which Zelensky said was evidence that Moscow "doesn't want peace". On Friday night, a 10-hour missile and drone barrage targeting Ukraine's capital killed two people and left 32 others injured, local authorities said. There were further Russian strikes on Saturday night. At the meeting in Florida, Zelensky is expected to raise security guarantees for Ukraine and



territorial concessions, both issues that Russia has previously been unwilling to compromise on. They will also discuss the new 20-point peace plan, a revised version of an earlier 28-point plan drafted by US special envoy Steve Witkoff that was widely seen as being too favourable to Russia. Control of Ukraine's eastern Donbas region has

been a major sticking point so far, but Zelensky has now said a "free economic zone" could be an option. Moscow currently controls about 75% of the Donetsk region, and around 99% of the neighbouring Luhansk. The regions are collectively known as the Donbas. The Kremlin has not commented on Zelensky's offer to withdraw troops from the

Donbas if Russia pulls back too. But on Saturday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Ukraine was "in no hurry to resolve this conflict peacefully", according to state-owned news agency Tass. Putin added that if Kyiv did not want to resolve the conflict peacefully, Russia would accomplish its objectives militarily. The Ukrainian president has

voiced optimism about the new peace plan draft, describing it as "a foundational document on ending the war". On Friday, he told reporters that it was 90% complete: "Our task is to make sure everything is 100% ready." But Trump warned in an interview with Politico that Zelensky "doesn't have anything until I approve it". Trump added that he was expecting to see the new draft on Sunday. "I think it's going to go good with him. I think it's going to go good with Putin," he said in the interview, adding that he expects to speak to Russia's president "soon". Following meetings with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, Zelensky said Moscow's latest attack on Kyiv was "Russia's answer [to] our peace efforts and this really shows that Putin doesn't want peace". Zelensky also took a call with European leaders to

discuss diplomatic "priorities" ahead of his meeting with Trump, adding that "strong positions are needed" to move forward with the plan. Kyiv has the "full support" of European and Nato leaders, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said. Russia launched attacks on Ukraine over the weekend - the most destructive of which happened Friday night into Saturday morning. Ukrainian officials said Russia's attacks on Kyiv caused significant damage to energy infrastructure, with 40% of residential buildings in Kyiv and nearby districts left without heating. Russia's defence ministry said long-range precision weapons were used to target energy facilities, which it claimed were being used "in the interests of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and enterprises of the Ukrainian military-industrial complex".

## THREE KILLED IN SWEDEN AS MAJOR STORM SWEEPS ACROSS NORDIC COUNTRIES



A third person has died in Sweden after a powerful winter storm swept across Nordic countries, causing travel disruption and power outages. Sweden's meteorological agency issued alerts for strong winds for large parts of the northern half of the country as Storm Johannes hit. One man in his 50s died after being struck by a tree at the Kungsberget ski resort in the country's south, local media and police reported. Further north, regional utility company Hemab said one of its employees died in an accident while out working. Police also said a man in his 60s was

taken to hospital after being hit by a tree while working in a forest in Hofors, east-central Sweden, and later died of his injuries. Tens of thousands of homes in Sweden, Norway and Finland have been left without power as a result of the storm. In Sweden, more than 40,000 homes were affected by power outages and numerous rail services were cancelled, Swedish news agency TT reported. Several flights, rail and ferry services across parts of the Nordic nations have been cancelled. Roads and rail services have also been disrupted due to the storm conditions.

## Cruise ship hits reef on first trip since leaving passenger on island



A cruise ship has run aground in Papua New Guinea (PNG) on its first trip since the death of an elderly passenger in late October. The Coral Adventurer is currently under investigation over the death of Suzanne Rees, 80, who died on a remote Australian island after being left behind by the ship. On Saturday, the vessel suffered a "grounding incident" off the eastern coast of PNG, around 30km (18 miles) from the city of Lae, a spokesperson for the ship said. All passengers and crew aboard the cruise ship have been reported safe, and initial inspections have not revealed any damage to the hull. Further inspections will take place on Sunday. A spokesperson for the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (Amsa) told the BBC in a statement that it had not received a distress call from the Coral Adventurer. It added it was monitoring the situation and would support PNG authorities if necessary. No decisions have

been made about the current 12-day voyage, which was due to finish on 30 December. There were 80 passengers and 43 crew members aboard the ship at the time of the incident. The Coral Adventurer is currently the subject of a joint investigation by Amsa and Queensland Police, Ms Rees was found dead on Lizard Island on 26 October. She had been hiking on the island with fellow passengers, but broke off from the group for a rest. The ship left without her and returned several hours later after the crew realised the woman was missing. A major search operation found her body the following day. The ship was just two days into a 60-day voyage at the time of Ms Rees's death. The remainder of the cruise was cancelled with full refunds offered to all passengers. The CEO of Coral Expeditions, Mark Fifield, said that the company was "deeply sorry that this has occurred" and had offered its full support to the Rees family.

## Fearing deportation, Hondurans in the US send more cash home than ever before



For over a year, Elias Padilla had been saving up to make the journey from Honduras to the United States as an undocumented immigrant. As an Uber driver in the snarled streets of the capital, Tegucigalpa, it hasn't been easy for him to put money aside. On bad days he makes as little as \$12 (£9) in 12 hours. Now, though, his plans are on

hold. The images of undocumented immigrants in major US cities being dragged away by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, their wrists in zip-ties, have deterred at least one would-be immigrant in Central America from travelling north. "I want to improve my life conditions because we earn very little here," Elias explains as we drive around the city. "Take this line of work, for example: an Uber driver in the US makes in an hour what I'd make in a day." Like most Honduran immigrants, Elias says the main aim of reaching the US would be to send remittances home. "But I see what Trump is doing, and it's made me think twice," he admits.

## FRENCH CINEMA ACTRESS BRIGITTE BARDOT DIES AGED 91

French actress Brigitte Bardot, who revolutionised 1950s French cinema and became a symbol of sexual liberation, has died age 91. The cinema icon - BB as she was known in her home country - acted in almost 50 films, including And God Created Woman, but retired in 1973 to devote her life to animal welfare. French President Emmanuel Macron said the nation was mourning "a legend of the century", while the Brigitte Bardot Foundation remembered her as a "world-renowned actress". Later in life, Bardot's reputation was damaged after she made homophobic slurs and was fined multiple times for inciting racial hatred. The animal welfare foundation she established said in a



statement that it was announcing her death with "immense sadness". The Brigitte Bardot Foundation said she was "a world-renowned actress and singer, who chose to abandon her prestigious career to dedicate her life and energy to animal welfare and her foundation." It did not specify where or when Bardot died. Paying tribute, Macron

wrote: "Her films, her voice, her dazzling glory, her initials, her sorrows, her generous passion for animals, her face that became Marianne, Brigitte Bardot embodied a life of freedom. "French existence, universal brilliance. She touched us. We mourn a legend of the century." Meanwhile, French far-right politician Marine Le Pen said France had lost "an

exceptional woman, through her talent, her courage, her frankness, her beauty". Bardot's husband, whom she married in 1992, was Bernard d'Ormale, a former adviser to the late far-right politician Jean-Marie Le Pen - the father of Marine. Brigitte Anne-Marie Bardot was born in Paris in 1934 to a wealthy family, who wanted her to become a ballerina. She was discovered in her teens after posing on the cover of Elle magazine, swiftly becoming a sensation in her home country, and was persuaded to enter the cinema world. She played iconic roles, the most notable in the 1956 film And God Created Woman, directed by her then-husband Roger Vadim, in which she played a sexually liberated woman.

## POLLS CLOSE ON FIRST DAY OF MYANMAR'S WIDELY CRITICISED 'SHAM' ELECTION

The first of three phases of voting has finished in Myanmar in an election widely dismissed as a "sham", with major political parties dissolved, leaders jailed and as much as half the country not expected to vote due to an ongoing civil war. The military government is holding a phased ballot nearly five years after it seized power in a coup, prompting widespread opposition and spiralling into civil war. Observers say the junta, with China's support, is seeking to legitimise its power as it seeks a way out of the devastating stalemate. More than 200 people have been charged for dis-



rupting or opposing the polls under a new law which carries severe punishments, including the death penalty. There were reports of explosions and airstrikes across multiple regions as the first round of voting took place on Sunday. A rocket attack on

an uninhabited house in the Mandalay region in the early hours of the morning injured three people, the region's chief minister told the BBC. Separately, a series of explosions damaged more than ten houses in the Myawaddy township, near the border with

Thailand, late on Saturday. A resident told the BBC that a child was killed and three others were taken to hospital. Voters have told the BBC that the election feels more "disciplined and systematic" than previous polls. "The experience of voting has changed a lot," said Ma Su ZarChi, who lives in the Mandalay region. "Before I voted, I was afraid. Now that I have voted, I feel relieved. I cast my ballot as someone who has tried their best for the country." First-time voter Ei Pyay Phyto Maung, 22, said she was voting because she believed it is "the responsibility of every citizen".

## Nine arrested in Italy for allegedly raising millions for Hamas

Italian police have arrested nine people accused of raising around 7m (£6m) for Hamas over more than two years. The money was ostensibly collected as humanitarian aid for Palestinian civilians, a police statement said, but was instead sent to the militant group via a "complex fundraising system". Alongside the arrests, police say they have seized more than 8m (£7m) in assets as part of the investigation. Police say the suspects are "specifically accused of carrying out financing operations believed to have contributed to terrorist activities". The arrests were made as part of a joint initiative between Italy's counter-terror police and financial police. The investigation



began after the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack in southern Israel. Police say they analysed "a series of reports of suspicious financial transactions" involving some of the suspects in the lead up to the attack. Investigators uncovered a "complex" system of fundraising, which was headquartered in Genoa with branches in Milan, the

statement adds. "The suspects collected donations intended for the civilian population of Gaza, however, it emerged that over 71% of these funds were diverted to Hamas's coffers to finance its military wing and support the families of suicide bombers or those detained for terrorism," the police statement says.

## IRANIAN CINEMA GIANT, BAHRAM BEYZAI, DIES AGED 87

Widespread tributes have been shared for Bahram Beyzai, a giant of Iranian cinema and theatre, who has died aged 87 in the US. The front pages of Iranian newspapers mourn his loss, with opposition voices and those who look back fondly on the Shah era also paying homage to Beyzai. Prince Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of the last Shah of Iran, described his passing as "a great loss for the art and culture of our country". Although Beyzai's later films were banned in the 1980s by the Islamic regime that toppled the Shah, a number of senior figures in the current government have also paid tribute to his contribution to Iranian culture. Several of the current crop of



Iranian filmmakers have acknowledged their debt to him, with Jaafar Panahi - whose latest film won the top prize at this year's Cannes Film Festival - saying that he taught them "how to stand up to oblivion". Beyzai avoided direct political references in his work, both as a playwright and a film director, and always said he tried not to

trade in overt messages. But his work over many decades sets historical, even mythic figures in conflict with oppressive religious and political systems. From a family of celebrated poets, Beyzai was imbued in the deepest traditions of Persian culture from birth. He first found fame as a playwright, drawing on Persian legend and ritual.

## Executions in Iran estimated to have doubled in 2025, report says



The number of executions in Iran in 2025 is estimated to have more than doubled compared to the number that took place across the country in 2024. Norwegian-based Iran Human Rights (IHR) group told the BBC it had verified at least 1,500 executions up until the start of December, adding that many more have taken place since. Last year, IHR was able to verify 975 executions - although the exact number is never completely clear as Iranian authorities do not give official figures. However, the analysis shows another significant annual rise, and the figures chime with those provided by other monitoring groups. Iran's government has previously defended its use of the death penalty, saying it is limited to only "the most severe crimes". Execution figures were already on the rise before mass demonstrations broke out across the country in 2022 following the death in custody of Mahsa Amini. The 22-year-old Kurdish woman was

detained by morality police in Tehran for allegedly wearing her hijab "improperly". That protest movement represented the biggest challenge to the legitimacy of Iran's theocratic leadership for many years. In response, authorities intensified the rate of executions from around 520 in 2022 to 832 the following year - according to the figures verified by IHR. There have been some executions for protesters or alleged spies - but 99% of those executed have been for murder or drug offences - a ratio which has remained constant. Activists have said that the rate of executions in Iran increases when the regime feels under threat and that the aim is to forestall internal opposition by instilling fear in the population. It seems to be borne out by the fact that since the 12-day war with Israel in June, as well as major setbacks for Iran's proxy forces across the region, there's been another big surge.



# POUND-FOR-POUND STAR INOUE CRUISES PAST PICASSO

Japanese superstar Naoya Inoue outpointed Alan David Picasso Romero with a classy display to retain his undisputed super-bantamweight title in Saudi Arabia. Widely regarded as one of boxing's leading pound-for-pound fighters, Inoue, 32, showcased his ring intelligence, fast hands and sharp combinations over 12 dominant rounds. Picasso, 25, was unable to live with Inoue's speed and body shots in Riyadh as the judges scored the contest 119-109, 120-108 and 117-111 in favour of the champion. Despite the one-sided nature of the victory, Inoue - a four-division world champion and undisputed in two weight classes - said he was disappointed with his display. "My performance tonight is not good enough - I should have done better," he said. The win extended Inoue's perfect record to 32 victories, including 27 by knockout, and sets up a potential showdown in 2026



with compatriot Juntō Nakatani. Nakatani outpointed Mexico's Sebastian Hernandez Reyes on the undercard in a close contest marred by a controversial scorecard. In a fight where a case could be made for either boxer, two judges scored it 115-113, with the third returning an inexplicable 118-110 card. Following Terence Crawford's retirement, Inoue can be considered among boxing's leading fighters, alongside heavy-weight champion Oleksandr

Usyk, who was ringside. After assessing Picasso in the opening rounds, Inoue moved smoothly through the gears. The taller, rangier Picasso enjoyed some single-punch success in the first half, but Inoue appeared largely untroubled by his opponent's power. Former middleweight world champion Gennady Golovkin, now president of World Boxing, watched from close quarters as Inoue upped the

tempo, throwing fluent combinations and pressing forward with confidence. Heavy right hands in the fifth and sixth rounds, coupled with repeated hooks to the body, slowed Picasso, whose movement began to fade as the outcome became increasingly clear. A thudding left hook in the 12th represented a valiant, last-ditch attempt at an unlikely upset, but the bout had long since become a masterclass. Making a fourth defence of his undisputed crown in 2025, Inoue continues to set the standard for activity at the elite level and places himself firmly in the conversation for fighter of the year. Inoue said in the build-up that his time in the sport is "running out" - but he has options. There has been speculation about a move up to feather-

weight to face Liverpool's WBA world champion Nick Ball, while he has also welcomed the challenge of hard-hitting unified super-flyweight champion Jesse 'Bam' Rodriguez. The bout many fans - and influential Saudi Arabian boxing figure Turki Alalshikh - are most keen to see, however, is against Nakatani. Nakatani, who vacated his WBC and IBF bantamweight titles to move up in weight, was a heavy favourite against Hernandez and controlled the early rounds with sharp uppercuts and effective body work. Hernandez refused to fade, coming on strongly in the second half as he pressed forward relentlessly and landed telling shots. The controversial 118-110 scorecard underlined familiar judging concerns within the sport. Despite the controversy, the unbeaten Nakatani - a three-weight world champion - extended his record to 32 wins, 24 of them by stoppage.

## Smriti Mandhana Breaks Mithali Raj's World Record During 4th T20I vs Sri Lanka

India batter Smriti Mandhana on Sunday achieved a massive world record during the 4th T20I against Sri Lanka in Thiruvananthapuram. The 29-year-old registered 10,000 runs in international women's cricket, becoming the fastest woman to achieve the milestone. She went past former India captain Mithali Raj on the elite list, reaching the milestone in just 280 innings. Mithali, on the other hand, took 291 innings to do so. Prior to this contest, Mandhana had scored 9,973 runs in international cricket. Fastest to 10,000 Women International runs (By Innings) 281 - Smriti Mandhana\* 291 - Mithali Raj 308 - Charlotte Edwards 314 - Suzie Bates On Sunday, Mandhana slammed a half-century after India were put into bat by Sri Lanka. During the 1st T20I, Mandhana scripted history as she became the first Indian to hit 4000 runs in Women's T20I cricket. Mandhana, who scored 25 runs during



the opening T20I of the five-match series, also became the second woman to reach the landmark of 4000 runs in T20Is after New Zealand's Suzie Bates (4716 runs). Additionally, Mandhana was also the

quickest to do so in terms of balls taken (3227) than Bates, who took 3675 balls to reach the 4000 runs milestone. India came into the contest with an unassailable 3-0 lead in the five-match series.

## Shubman Gill's T20 World Cup 2026 Snub Causing Disarray In Team India? Report's Big Claim

The decision by the BCCI selectors to drop star batter Shubman Gill from the squad for the 2026 T20 World Cup has left many fans and experts stunned. Gill, currently India's Test and ODI captain, was also the T20I vice-captain. However, with his recent struggles in the shortest format, he has been left out of the World Cup squad. According to a PTI report, the move has sparked uncertainty among players regarding their place in the side under Gautam Gambhir's coaching. The report claimed that the decision to drop Gill from the squad "had Gambhir's

footprints written all over it." It further stated that the decision has created unease among several players, who now believe that "if Indian cricket's next poster boy could be dumped by the wayside, the next omission could have anyone's name written on it." Gautam Gambhir's record as India's white-ball coach has been impressive, with an ICC and ACC trophy in each of the two formats. However, with 10 Test defeats against SENA countries, the same cannot be said for his performance in Test cricket. According to PTI, right after India's abject surren-

der against South Africa in the two-Test series at home last month, someone influential in the cricket board informally approached VVS Laxman to check if he would be interested in coaching the red-ball team.



## Rohit Sharma Reunites With Ex-Mumbai Indians Teammate During Vijay Hazare Trophy

The Vijay Hazare Trophy 2025-26 turned out to be a grand spectacle for fans as India stalwarts Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli featured in two matches. While Rohit represented Mumbai, Kohli strengthened Delhi's playing XI with his presence. Interestingly, both batters scored centuries in their respective opening games (Rohit against Sikkim and



Kohli against Andhra Pradesh). Apart from the fans, it was also a special moment for former India pacer Dhawal Kulkarni, who reunited with his old Mumbai teammate Rohit. In a video going viral on social media, Rohit was seen meeting Kulkarni in the dressing room, where

the latter requested an autograph on his glove. Rohit obliged and signed the glove, leaving fans touched and emotional. Notably, both Rohit and Kulkarni played several domestic games for Mumbai together. Later, they were also teammates for Mumbai Indians in the

IPL. Talking about the first game, Rohit made a mockery of an inexperienced Sikkim bowling attack with a 94-ball 155 on his return to List A cricket, as Mumbai cruised to an eight-wicket victory in their opening Group C match of the Vijay Hazare Trophy in Jaipur. A near-capacity crowd of around 20,000 fans celebrated Christmas Eve witnessing the 'Hitman' carnage, which included 18 fours and nine sixes, as Mumbai chased down a target of 237 in just 30.3 overs. However, the former India skipper failed to replicate his heroics in the next game against Uttarakhand, as he was dismissed for a golden duck.

## FREEMAN STARS AS NORTHAMPTON BEAT BATH TO GO TOP



Tommy Freeman scored a hat-trick of tries as Northampton leapfrogged Bath to go top of the Premiership with a stellar 41-21 victory in an enthralling clash at the Recreation Ground. Freeman's England teammate Henry Pollock scored two more of Saints' tries, with Archie MacParland getting another, as the visitors ended a run of 11 consecutive wins at home for the reigning Premiership champions. Saints, who saw two more potential tries chalked off by the television match official as they dominated in almost every area on the field, scored 27 unopposed points during the second-half. Bath, whose tries came via props Thomas du Toit (two) and Tom Dunn, drop to second in the table with their second loss this season. Both sides made 10 changes to their starting line-ups but Bath were at full strength while Saints had players such as Fin Smith, George Furbank and Alex Mitchell among those missing. Bath have not lost at the Rec in the Premiership since 5 October 2024 but were on the back foot imme-

diately as Freeman cut a fine diagonal line to open the scoring in the third minute. Edoardo Todaro thought he had Northampton's second shortly after, only for it to be pulled back before he touched the ball down for an earlier knock-on. Du Toit rolled over the line for Bath's first score and when Northampton saw Ed Prowse sent to the sin bin for head contact in a tackle, Dunn made it 14-7 to the hosts as Bath's maul powered him forward. McParland drew Saints level, slipping through a gap in the line to run over, before Todaro was denied again try by an excellent covering Sam Underhill tackle, as he cantered clear when Pollock intercepted. Callum Chick then had a try chalked off as Bath prop Beno Obano was judged to have been held in an earlier ruck during a TMO check, allowing the gap to open which led to the initial Saints line break, while a long ball out the back from Pollock went wide late in the first-half as another Saints opportunity went begging.

## Magnus Carlsen Pushes Cameraman After Losing FIDE World Rapid Championship Match

World No. 1 and five-time World Rapid Champion Magnus Carlsen made headlines after suffering a shocking defeat against Russian Grandmaster Vladimir Artemiev in the FIDE World Rapid Championship on Saturday. In Round 7, Artemiev outplayed Carlsen in a game where the world's top-rated player committed a grave mistake on move 15, which proved costly. This victory propelled Artemiev to 6.5 points, a full point ahead of the field. Following the loss, Carlsen was visibly upset and stormed out of the playing hall. A video going viral on social media shows Carlsen being chased by a cameraman as he exited the venue. In a fit of rage, the Norwegian pushed the cameraperson away, expressing his frustration. After a strong start with 4.5/5 on Day 1, Carlsen's performance dipped on Day 2. In Round 6, he



played the Sicilian against Maxime Vachier-Lagrave but soon found himself saddled with tripled pawns on the e-file, spending considerable time searching for the right moves. After testing Carlsen for a few moves, Vachier-Lagrave agreed to split the

point. Carlsen bounced back in Round 8 with a win against Armenian GM Shant Sargsyan, and in the final round of the day, he held an advantage on time against US GM Ray Robson. With two straight victories, Carlsen joined a group of four players on seven points. < Meanwhile, reigning champion Koneru Humpy displayed her trademark composure and tenacity to remain in joint lead in the women's section, while Indian stars D. Gukesh and Arjun Erigaisi stayed in contention in the Open category on Day 2. With three more rounds to go in the women's section on Sunday, Humpy shared the lead with China's Zhu Jiner on 6.5 points out of a possible eight. The duo was closely followed by as many as 10 players on six points, including India's Dronavalli Harika.

## MCG Pitch Curator Breaks Silence After 4th Ashes Test Ends Within 2 Days

The Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) chief curator Matt Page was left in a "state of shock" after the fourth Ashes Test between Australia and England ended within two days. Twenty wickets fell on Day 1, and a total of 36 wickets fell in the match, which lasted just two days. Following England's win, several former cricketers expressed their displeasure with the pace-friendly wicket that produced no fifties from the batters. "I was in a state of shock after the first day to see everything that happened," Page told SEN Cricket. "Twenty wickets in a day-I have never been involved in a Test match like it, and hopefully never will be again," he added. "It was a roller-coaster ride for two days



to see everything unfold. But we will learn from it, we will grow from it, we will get better at it, just like we have over the past years. I have no doubt we will come back bigger, better, and stronger than we have done," he further said. While Page was dis-

appointed that the Test ended within just two days, he explained the reason behind producing a bowler-friendly pitch. "This year, we have produced a pitch that has favoured the bowlers more than the batters. We had a lot of hot weather leading

into last year, which makes it easier for us to control our moisture leading in. We left more moisture in the top of the pitch last year to provide that contest early in the game," he said. "We felt that we had the balance really good leading into that game. This year we went in with 10 millimetres as we knew we were going to get a lot of hot weather at the back end of the game," he added. England ended an almost 15-year wait with a spirited victory on Australian soil in the fourth Ashes Test, defeating the hosts by four wickets in a frenetic Boxing Day contest. While the Ashes remain out of reach, Ben Stokes' side produced a statement performance, sealing the match in just 32.2 overs on Day 2.

## SMALL HALLS IN CRISIS - BOXING'S LIFEblood IS STRUGGLING TO BREATHE



"I think it is an illness." Steve Wood, one of the country's most prominent small-hall promoters, has pondered why he stays involved in the sport when it is struggling to stay alive at the level he operates in. "You get involved and you can't get out," he added. Small-hall boxing is not in rude health. Ticket sales are down, the number of events is dropping, money is being lost and some fighters who fill these cards with dreams of bigger stages are retiring because of the lack of opportunities to earn enough. Many of the promoters who run what is considered the sport's grassroots are wondering why they continue to do it. What many consider the lifeblood of the sport is struggling to keep breathing. Small-hall boxing shows are the events without TV backing and big-name promoters which take place around the country in lesser-sized venues. They offer entertainment for punters but, more important-

ly for boxing, a pathway to the top for those boxers who may not be poached by the big-name promoters straight from the amateur scene or, in this modern world, the social media space. Think of Josh Warrington, the once dental technician from Leeds, who started on the small-hall circuit with Wood in the north of England and went on to become a world champion by winning the IBF featherweight title at Elland Road against Lee Selby. Without the scene, Warrington may never have had a career in the fight game at all, let alone reach the top. Wood has worked in the north of England for decades running boxing shows and managing fighters. It's a hobby, but an expensive one for the successful businessman. "It's not a struggle, it's impossible," said the VIP Promotions boss. "It's always been a struggle but it is more difficult now. I done it to start kids off on their careers and get them on to the TV shows.



