

NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

President Murmu confers Bal Puraskar excellence awards to 17 children

NEW DELHI, DEC 26: Three-year-old chess prodigy Anish Sarkar, who made history by becoming the youngest-rated chess player ever, was among the 17 children who were presented the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar by President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday.

The president mentioned the preschool child prodigy in her address and lauded his achievements. Sarkar, from Kolkata, is also the youngest recipient of the prestigious national award.

"In today's event, the youngest award winner, who lives in Kolkata, is Master Anish, who received the recognition at such a young age when children are in play school and nursery," she said at the award function held at Rashtrapati Bhavan Cultural Centre.

"He is the youngest chess winner in the world. I am sure that in the future, he will also make a name for himself internationally," she said as she presented the seven boys and 10 girls from 14 states and union territories with a medal, certificate, and a citation booklet. Sarkar is the youngest FIDE-ranked player in the world, with an impressive rating of 1,555.

The awards recognised outstanding contributions across seven categories: art and culture, bravery, innovation, science and technology,



social service, and the environment.

Among the winners was 14-year-old Janane Narayanan from Tamil Nadu. The Harikatha artist and a dedicated Carnatic music student, she has delivered over 100 Tamil, English, and Sanskrit performances showcasing her storytelling and musical talents. The young artistic girl has been recognised with prestigious honours.

The president also appreciated the efforts of 15-year-old Hembati Nag, who faced many challenges after her parents passed away. Nag hails from the Naxal-affected area of Chhattisgarh. "Amidst all the challenges, on the strength of her perseverance, courage and skill, Hembati has made her mark at the national level in Judo,"

she said.

The other awardees include nine-year-old Saurav Kumar from Bihar, who was awarded for his remarkable display of courage when he rescued three young girls from drowning in a pond; 17-year-old Vyas Om Jignesh with cerebral palsy, who has memorised over 5,000 Sanskrit shlokas; 12-year-old Ayaan Sajad, a Sufi singer from Kashmir and Arav Bhardwaj, a 12-year-old cyclist from New Delhi, who demonstrated remarkable courage through his extraordinary cycling yatra.

The president congratulated all the winners and praised their remarkable accomplishments, noting their limitless potential and exceptional qualities.

She emphasised that these young achievers serve as role

models for children nationwide.

She said they have accomplished extraordinary work, achieved outstanding accomplishments, limitless capabilities, and possess incomparable qualities. "You have set an example for the country's children," she said.

Highlighting India's tradition of nurturing and recognising talent, she called for continued efforts to support young minds.

Looking ahead to India's centenary of independence in 2047, the president envisioned the awardees as key contributors to a developed nation. "Their patriotism and achievements reinforce our faith in the bright future of India," she said, urging the children to channel their dedication toward the nation's progress.

Congress announces campaign on 'attack on Constitution', price rise; vows major organisational overhaul

BELAGAVI, DEC 26: The Congress on Thursday announced a 13-month-long political campaign, including padyatras, to raise issues such as the alleged attack on the Constitution as well as people's concerns over price rise and corruption.

The party also called for a major organisational overhaul based on accountability and capability starting immediately and running through the next year.

These decisions were taken at the extended Congress Working Committee meeting -- 'Nav Satyagraha Baithak' -- to mark 100 years of Mahatma Gandhi assuming the presidency of the party at the Belgaum session.

Two resolutions were passed by the CWC -- one on Mahatma Gandhi and the other was a political one.

Top Congress leaders, including party chief Mallikarjun Kharge, former party chief Rahul Gandhi, general secretaries Jairam Ramesh and K C Venugopal, among others, were in Belagavi to attend the "historic" meeting.

He said accountability and



Addressing reporters along with Congress general secretary-in-charge (communications) Jairam Ramesh and AICC media and publicity department head Pawan Khara, Congress general secretary in-charge (organisation) K C Venugopal said 2025 is going to be a year of an organisation revamping programme at every level, from booth to the top.

He said accountability and

a thorough inquiry about the capability of the leadership will form the basis of a "massive revamp" of the organisation. Venugopal also said there will be a 'Jai Babu, Jai Bhim, and Jai Samvidhan abhiyan' from December 27, 2024 to January 26, 2026 which will be a continuous campaign featuring a continuous series of padyatras and village, block, district, and state-level rallies.

This will be led by national, state and local level leadership, he said.

"In that campaign, we will raise the issue of attack on Constitution, degradation of values of Constitution, people's issues such as price rise and corruption," he said.

In April, the Congress will hold an AICC session in Gujarat where Mahatma Gandhi was born, he informed.

400 million pilgrims expected to take a dip in Sangam during this edition of Kumbh Mela

ALLAHABAD, DEC 26: Beside India's holy rivers, a makeshift city is being built for a Hindu religious festival expected to be so vast it will be seen from space, the largest gathering in history.

Line after line of pontoon bridges span the rivers at Prayagraj, as Indian authorities prepare for 400 million pilgrims -- more than the combined population of the United States and Canada -- during the six-week-long Kumbh Mela.

The millennia-old sacred show of religious piety and ritual bathing is held once every 12 years at the site where the holy Ganges, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati rivers meet.

But this edition from January 13 to February 26 is expected to be a mega draw, as it is set to coincide with a special alignment of the planets.

Beads of sweat glisten on labourer Babu Chand's forehead as he digs a trench for seemingly endless electrical cables, one of an army of workers toiling day and night at a venue sprawling over 4,000 hectares (15 square miles).

"So many devotees are going to come," 48-year-old Chand told AFP, who says he is working for a noble cause for the mela, or fair.

"I feel I am contributing my bit -- what I am doing

seems like a pious act."

- Pure faith -
A humongous tent city, two-thirds the area of Manhattan, is being built on the floodplains of Prayagraj, formerly called Allahabad, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

"Some 350 to 400 million devotees are going to visit the mela, so you can imagine the scale of preparations," said Vivek Chaturvedi, the spokesman for the festival.

Preparing for the Kumbh is like setting up a new country, requiring roads, lighting, housing and sewerage.

"What makes this event unique is its magnitude and the fact that no invitations are sent to anybody... Everyone comes on their own, driven by pure faith," Chaturvedi told AFP.

"Nowhere in the world will you see a gathering of this size, not even one-tenth of it."

Around 1.8 million Muslims take part in the annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

The Kumbh numbers, according to Chaturvedi, are mind-boggling.

Some 150,000 toilets have been built, 68,000 LED lighting poles have been erected, and community kitchens can feed up to 50,000 people at the same time.

Alongside religious preparations, Prayagraj has undergone a major infrastructure overhaul, and huge posters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and state Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath dot the city.

Both are from the ruling Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with politics and religion deeply intertwined.

- Nectar of Immortality -
The Kumbh Mela is an ancient celebration, with its origins rooted in Hindu mythology.

Hindus believe that taking a dip in Sangam, the confluence of the rivers, will cleanse them of their sins and help them attain "moksha", setting them free from the cycle of birth and death.

According to legends, deities and demons fought over a pitcher -- or "kumbh" -- containing the nectar of immortality.

During the battle, four drops fell to Earth.

One drop landed in Prayagraj.

The others fell at Haridwar, Nashik and Ujjain -- the three other cities where the rotating Kumbh Mela is held on other years.

But the one in Prayagraj -- held every 12 years -- is the largest.

Organising authorities are calling it the great, or "Maha" Kumbh Mela.

The last Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj in 2019 saw 240 million devotees, according to authorities -- but that was the smaller "Ardh" or half festival, spaced in between the main event.

"When you talk about the Kumbh, you have to talk about astronomy," said historian Heramb Chaturvedi, 69.

"Jupiter transits one zodiac sign in a single year," he added. "Therefore, when it completes 12 zodiac signs, then it is Kumbh."

Core to celebrations is giving alms to the "wise and learned, the poor and the needy", he said.

- Naked monks -
Some pilgrims have already arrived, including naked naga sadhus -- wandering monks who have walked for weeks from the remote mountains and forests where they are usually devoted to meditation.

They will lead the dawn charge into the chilly river waters on the six most auspicious bathing dates, starting with the first on January 13.

"I have come here to give my blessings to the public," 90-year-old naga sadhu Digambar Ramesh Giri, naked with dread-locked hair in a bun, told AFP.

"Whatever you long for in your heart you get at Kumbh."

2025 will be year for strengthening Cong to fight those spreading lies: Kharge at CWC meet



NEW DELHI, DEC 26: Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge on Thursday said 2025 will be a year for strengthening the organisation to fight those spreading lies as he called for nurturing new and regional leadership in the party to help make it poll-ready.

With a resolve to come up with new ideas and strategy, he told party leaders that this is not the time for despair but for carrying forward the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and the heritage of great leaders.

He also attacked Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the government are not accepting the "mistake" of Home Minister Amit Shah with his "extremely insulting" remarks about B R Ambedkar and asserted that the party will fight for the respect of the architect of the Constitution.

The Congress chief asserted that 2025 will be the year of the party's organisational empowerment.

"We will fill all the vacant posts in the organisation. We will fully implement the Udaipur Declaration. We will equip our organisation with the skills required to win elections from AICC to Mandal and booth," he said.

"We will have to find such people who are ideologically committed. Who are ready to fight to protect the Constitution. Those who believe in

the Congress party's idea of India will have to be connected to the party. They will have to be brought into the mainstream. They will have to be involved in the organisational work," Kharge said.

"Only hard work is not enough, timely concrete strategy and direction are necessary. There is a need to give a chance to new strength, there is also a need to nurture local and new leadership," he said.

In his opening remarks here at the Congress Working Committee meeting 'Nav Satyagraha Baithak' to mark the 100 years of Mahatma Gandhi assuming the presidency of the party at the Belgaum session, Kharge alleged that constitutional institutions are being controlled and cited the example of the Election Commission.

"The matter of concern is that people's faith in the electoral process is gradually decreasing because questions are being raised on the impartiality of the Commission. A few days ago, they changed the election rules so that the information that the court had ordered to be shared could be stopped. What is it that they are trying to hide," he asked.

It is a matter of concern that people's faith in the election process is gradually decreasing because questions are being raised on the impartiality of the commission,

he said.

Noting that sometimes names of voters are deleted from the list, or people are prevented from casting their vote, while sometimes there is a sudden increase in the number of voters in the list, or vote percentage increases unexpectedly towards the end, Kharge said, "These are some questions that keep arising for which no satisfactory answer is found."

Raising the issue of Shah's remarks on Ambedkar in Rajya Sabha earlier this month, he said the statement was "extremely insulting" to the maker of the Constitution.

"We raised objections, protested and demonstrated. Now protests are taking place all over the country. But the Prime Minister and the government are not ready to accept their mistake. Far from seeking an apology and resignation from Amit Shah, they supported the objectionable statement," he said.

The Prime Minister issued a statement in defence of the Home Minister and a false case was filed against Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, he said.

"This is the attitude of today's rulers towards the Constitution and its architect. But we are not going to be afraid of anyone nor are we going to bow down. We will fight till the last breath for the

ideology of Nehru-Gandhi and the respect of Babasaheb," Kharge said.

He also took a swipe at the prime minister, saying when he bowed his head on the steps of old Parliament after winning his first election, the new Parliament was built. "We are afraid that this time before taking oath in the new Parliament House, he bowed his head before the Constitution," he said.

Recalling Mahatma Gandhi's words that "Truth survives even when it does not have public support", Kharge said we have the truth and crores of people behind us.

"That is why this is not the time to despair. We have to destroy the lies of our opponents with unity. We have to move ahead with confidence and face the challenges boldly. And we will definitely succeed," he said before ending his speech.

He said the Congress has the power of ideology, the legacy of Gandhi-Nehru and the heritage of great heroes.

"We will return from Belagavi with a new message and new resolution. That is why we named this meeting is named 'Nav Satyagraha' because today even those who hold a constitutional post, are questioning Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha," he said.

"Those who have taken oath on the Constitution are the ones spreading lies. Those in power take the help of falsehood and accuse us. We have to expose and defeat such people," he said.

The Congress chief also recalled how Mahatma Gandhi became the Congress president only for a year but he set such high standards that it is difficult for any political leader to match that.

"Gandhiji gave the Congress Constitution a new form and established a place for the Congress in the hearts of the villages, poor, farmers and labourers and connected the Congress organisation with constructive works. He also included untouchability and discrimination with the main Congress agenda.

India mourns loss of one of its most distinguished leaders: Modi on Manmohan Singh's demise

NEW DELHI, DEC 26: Paying tributes to his predecessor Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said India mourns the loss of one of its most distinguished leaders whose wisdom and humility were always visible.

Singh, the architect of India's economic reforms, died here on Thursday night. He was 92.

Rising from humble origins, he rose to become a respected economist, Modi said, noting that Singh served in various government positions as well, including as finance minister, leaving a strong imprint on our economic policy over the years.

In a post on X, Modi said, "His interventions in Parliament were also insightful. As our Prime Minister,



he made extensive efforts to improve people's lives."

Recalling their interactions when he was the Gujarat chief minister and Singh the country's prime

minister, Modi said they would have extensive deliberations on various subjects relating to governance.

"His wisdom and humility were always visible,"

Modi said, adding, "In this hour of grief, my thoughts are with the family of Dr Manmohan Singh Ji, his friends and countless admirers. Om Shanti."