



**VARANASI, India:** Milkmen pass a poster featuring Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (right) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday. — AFP

## FRIENDS ABE, MODI SEEK BUSINESS DEALS

**NEW DELHI:** Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will look to seal a deal on building India's first bullet train after he arrived in New Delhi Friday for talks with counterpart and conservative soulmate Narendra Modi. New Delhi and Tokyo are seeking to take advantage of a warm relationship between the two premiers that has only deepened, partly to counter China's growing rise, since Modi came to power last year. Before setting off yesterday, Abe told reporters that relations between Japan, Asia's second largest economy, and India, its third, harbor great potential.

"I want to achieve results that will give a boost to the development of future Japan-India relations in the areas of high speed railways, security cooperation and an agreement on the peaceful use of nuclear power," Abe said. The premier was later greeted at Delhi airport by junior finance minister Jayant Sinha bearing a bouquet of roses. Abe will meet Indian business leaders in the capital before taking a tour with Modi today of India's holiest city of Varanasi and the prime minister's parliamentary constituency.

Several lucrative business deals are slated for discussion during the three-day trip, according to officials, including a \$15 billion agreement for Japan to provide a "Shinkansen" bullet train connecting the cities of Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Modi has pledged to overhaul India's ramshackle railways and other infrastructure as part of ambitious reforms to revive the economy. The pair are also expected to discuss a long-mooted civil nuclear deal that would allow Japan to export its nuclear plant technologies to the subcontinent. — AFP

# WOMEN BATTLE AGAINST MUMBAI MOSQUE BAN

MANY INDIAN WORSHIP PLACES HAVE GENDER RESTRICTIONS

**MUMBAI:** A landmark mosque in Mumbai is facing pressure to overturn a ban on women entering its inner sanctum, a move that could set a precedent on gender restrictions to places of worship in the deeply religious country. A Muslim women's rights group is locked in a bitter legal battle with trustees of Mumbai's Haji Ali Dargah, built in the 15th century and popular not only with Muslims but Hindu devotees and sight-seeing tourists.

Women have been prevented entry to the mosque's mausoleum since 2011, with its trust saying close female proximity to the tomb of a revered saint is "a grievous sin" in Islam. Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) has petitioned the Bombay High Court seeking a ruling that the ban is unconstitutional, hoping such a decision would mark a major step forward for women's rights in India. "A positive ruling would set a precedent and would have a wider and long-term effect," BMMA co-founder Noorjehan Niaz told AFP. "It would send a message and encourage women of all religions who are barred from entering places of worship to approach courts with similar demands," she added.

The mosque is located on an islet accessible via a causeway at low tide. It was built in the 1430s in memory of a wealthy Muslim who gave up his worldly possessions and went on a pilgrimage to Makkah. Legend has it that Pir Haji Ali Shah Bukhari, who became a Sufi saint, died during his spiritual journey and his body washed up on rocks in the Arabian Sea off south Mumbai. The mosque was constructed on the spot where his body was found, and his tomb, or "dargah", lies in the



**MUMBAI:** In this photograph taken on Dec 9, 2015, Indian Muslims and visitors are seen inside the Haji Ali Dargah. — AFP

inner sanctum - the mosque's most sacred place. It is one of a string of temples and mosques across India that restricts access to women. Last month local media reported that a Hindu temple in western Maharashtra state, of which Mumbai is the capital, suspended seven security guards after a female devotee stepped on a platform to worship an idol. Women are barred from the stand and temple authorities later performed a "purification" ceremony on the idol, according to the reports.

### 'Women are Impure'

Haji Ali Dargah is one of Mumbai's most recognizable landmarks and receives tens of thousands of visitors every week. But Niaz said the trust started banning women from the mausoleum four years ago, although they are still allowed into the mosque's other areas, where they can pray. She said trustees cited menstruation as the reason for barring women entry to sacred spots, an argument often given by conservative elements. — AFP

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