# Hindus Allowed To Worship In Sealed Basement Of Varanasi's Gyanvapi Mosque

## *Muslim Side To Move High Court*

Varanasi

In a big win for the Hindu side, Varanasi district court on Wednesday allowed the Hindu side to offer prayers at 'Vyas Ka Tehkhana' inside the Gyanvapi Mosque complex. "The District Administration will have to make arrangements within 7 days. Puja will start within seven days. Everyone will have the right to perform Puja," Hindu side Advocate Vishnu Shankar Jain quoted as saying by news agency ANI. Meanwhile, the Muslim side has decided to challenge the district court verdict in high court.
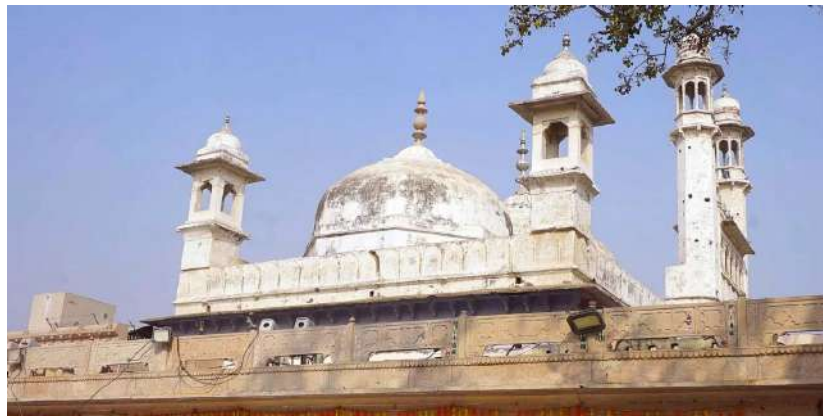
Earier on Monday, The Hindu side in the Gyanvapi mosque dispute had moved the Supreme Court to de-seal the 'wazukhana' area, where a 'Shivling' is believed to be located, after the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) found evidence of a pre-existing Hindu temple in the complex.

The 'wazukhana', the place where Muslims perform ablution before offering prayers, was sealed by the Supreme Court in 2022, pending the ASI's survey of the mosque premises. The Hindu side, represented by advocate Vishnu Shankar Jain, has filed an application to lift the stay order and allow the ASI to conduct another survey in the 'wazukhana' area, without damaging the 'Shivling'.

Jain said that the ASI should be given permission to study the 'wazukhana' area, as it would reveal whether it is a fountain or a 'Shivling'. "I have filed an application in the Supreme Court asking to vacate the stay order given on 19 May 2023. ASI should be allowed to conduct a study and feature study of the 'Wazukhana' area. Only, after the study it will be known if it is a fountain or a Shivling…" he said.

### ASI Survey Finds Evidence of Hindu Temple

The ASI survey of the Gyanvapi mosque complex began on August 4, 2023, after the Allahabad High Court dismissed the petition of the Muslim litigants, who sought a stay on the Varanasi court's order for a scientific survey by the ASI. The ASI team used ground-penetrating radar and other scientific instruments to examine what lay beneath the surface of the mosque



premises. The team also surveyed the inner and outer walls, the cellar and other parts of the complex, except the 'wazukhana'.

On January 27, 2024, Jain claimed that the ASI report, which is 800 pages long, confirmed that the Gyanvapi mosque was built after destroying a Hindu temple in the 17th century. He said that the report mentioned finding ancient scriptures in Kannada, Devanagari, and Telugu languages inside the mosque premises, which were related to Rudra, Janardan and Vishweshwar. He also said that the pillars of the demolished temple were used to construct the mosque.

### ASI Report Says Hindu Temple Existed

The ASI report, which was submitted to the Varanasi court, stated that a pre-existing structure was destroyed in the 17th century, during the reign of Aurangzeb, and "part of it was modified and reused" in the existing structure. The report also said that based on scientific studies, it can be said that there "existed a large Hindu temple prior to the construction of the existing structure."

The ASI report also said that the "western wall of the existing structure is the remaining part of a pre-existing Hindu temple". The report cited an Arabic-Persian inscription found inside a room, which said that the mosque was built in the 20th regnal year of Aurangzeb (1676-77 CE).

"Hence, the pre-existing structure appears to have been destroyed in the 17th century, during the reign of Aurangzeb, and part of it was modified and reused in the existing structure. Based on scientific studies/survey carried out, study of architectural remains, exposed features and artefacts, inscriptions, art and sculptures, it can be said that there existed a Hindu temple prior to the construction of the existing structure," the ASI report said.

## Inside...

# Mumbai Teacher Gets 5 Years In Jail For Sexually Assaulting Minor Girls

**Mumbai**

A special court in Mumbai has sentenced a 28-year-old school teacher here to five years' rigorous imprisonment for sexually assaulting minor girl students.

A teacher is expected to act as a protector and such heinous acts by the accused have left a lifelong "psychological and emotional impact" on the victims, special judge Seema Jadhav said in the



order on Tuesday.

The accused, who worked as a teacher at a school in suburban Govandi, was held guilty under relevant provisions of the Protection of Children From Sexual Offences (POSCO) Act by the court.

He was accused of sexually assaulting three students, aged below 12, in his class.

In the detailed order, available on Wednesday, the court said the accused is not a layman but a teacher, "the only career that influences other professions."

"Hence, the teacher is expected to act as a protector. Such heinous acts by the accused have cast a lifelong psychological and emotional impact on the victims," the judge said.

The court also noted the teacher has no criminal antecedents.

Considering the facts in the present case, the minimum punishment under relevant provisions of the POCSO Act "would meet the ends of justice", the court said, while sentencing him to five years in jail.

The mother of one of the victims complained to the police in September 2019, following which a case was registered against the teacher.

As per the complaint, the three victims were students of standard fifth and the accused was their class teacher.

The victims have accused him of "frequently touching them inappropriately".

The court held that there is no reason to disbelieve the testimony of the victims, which is corroborated by other witnesses as well.

The accused has not brought on record any probable evidence to corroborate his defense of false implication at the instance of another teacher, it said.

# Veteran actor Ashok Saraf to be given 2023 Maharashtra Bhushan Award

**Mumbai**

Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde on Tuesday announced veteran Marathi actor Ashok Saraf's selection for the Maharashtra Bhushan award, 2023. It is the highest award given by the state government.

In his congratulatory message, Shinde complimented his versatility and said that Saraf was not only amazing in his comedic roles but also gave stellar performances as a villain and in other serious roles.

The 76-year-old actor began his career



in Marathi theater. He acted in iconic Maratha dramas such as 'Hamidabaichi Kothi', 'Darling Darling' and many others.

Saraf is known for his iconic roles in hit Marathi films such as 'Ashi hi Banva-Banvi', 'Gammat Jammat', 'Navari Mile Navryala,' 'Vajeer', 'Chaukat Raja' and more. He achieved fame nationally with the hit Hindi comic series 'Hum Paanch'.

Saraf has also acted in Hindi movies such as 'Yes boss', 'Singham', 'Koyla', 'Gupt', 'Pyar Kiya to Darna Kya' and others.

# Extortion case against Mumbai's ex-top cop Param Bir Singh: CBI submits closure report in court

**Thane**

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has sought to close a case registered against former Mumbai Police Commissioner Param Bir Singh and others for alleged extortion, citing lack of substantial evidence.

The agency submitted a closure report before the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Thane, on January 18.

The court is likely to take up the report for consideration in February.

The CBI in its report said the facts and circumstances in the case do not substantiate the allegations or disclose any incriminating evidence for launching prosecution against any of the accused persons.

"The incident that occurred during 2016-2017 was reported in 2021. By this time the evidence which would have been instrumental in finding out the truth is not available," the closure report said.

The case was initially lodged at Kopri police station in Mumbai's neighbouring Thane city in July 2021 by local businessman Sharad Agarwal, who claimed that Singh and the other accused, who include a former deputy commissioner of police and some real estate developers, had allegedly threatened and extorted Rs 2 crore from him to acquire his land.

The case was later transferred to the CBI.

The agency in its closure report said it has verified the allegations made by the complainant and noted that it lacked corroborative evidence.

The report highlighted the absence of any independent evidence to support the complainant's claims.

The CBI said Agarwal had willingly



entered into a settlement to give his land without any pressure or fear.

"The allegations made by the complainant are not corroborated by any independent evidences. The complaint was lodged almost after a lapse of five years from the date of occurrence," the CBI said in its report.

The complainant could not provide any details to substantiate his claims, it added.

The extortion case is one of the many FIRs lodged against Singh in Maharashtra in 2021, when he accused the then state home minister Anil Deshmukh of corruption.

Singh made these allegations after he was shunted out as Mumbai police commissioner in March 2021 following the arrest of dismissed police officer Sachin Waze in the case of an explosives-laden vehicle found near the residence of industrialist Mukesh Ambani in south Mumbai.

# Bombay HC rejects contractors plea against BMC termination of contract



**Mumbai**

The Bombay High Court on Tuesday rejected a plea by M/s Roadway Solutions Infra Ltd (RSIL), which challenged the January 25 order by BMC which terminated the contract to improve and concretise various roads in the island city and imposed a Rs 64 crore penalty to be paid within a month. The HC asked the parties to resolve the issue through arbitration.

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) had also forfeited RSIL's contract deposit and earnest money deposit (EMD).

The BMC had passed the order after Justice Gautam S Patel-led bench had directed its Commissioner to nominate a high ranking officer to provide a hearing to RSIL, which was denied earlier while terminating the contract in November, last year.

The BMC officer was told to hear the firm's reply to its termination and show cause notice as to why a nearly Rs 52 crore penalty cannot be imposed on it for not complying with the contract terms. The HC said that not hearing the firm despite offering it the same was 'unnaceptable."

The HC had continued to stay the termination till the BMC decided the matter or January 31, whichever was later.

The BMC, in its January 25 order held that the contractor RSIL did not have ability or interest in actually carrying out works and therefore the contract awarded to it was terminated. Aggrieved by the BMC order, RSIL approached the HC urging to quash the civic body's order, The bench rejected its plea and said the parties can resolve the issue through arbitration.

Meanwhile, on January 17, the BMC told the HC that it has cancelled a fresh tender, worth over Rs 1,362.34 crore, issued on December 4 to concretise roads in Mumbai.

# Shinde-led Sena meets police commissioner, complain against Sena (UBT) for 'fraudulently filing' party's I-T returns

**Mumbai**

Chief Minister Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena on Tuesday met Mumbai police commissioner Vivek Phansalkar to lodge a police complaint for cheating and forgery against the Uddhav Thackeray-led Sena UBT functionaries claiming that they were misusing the party's PAN and TAN details and fraudulently filing the TDS and Income Tax returns of Shiv Sena.

Shiv Sena leader and secretary Kiran Pawaskar alleged that even though Shinde faction has the Shiv Sena party and the party symbol and is recognised as real Shiv Sena by Election Commission, Shiv Sena's PAN card and TAN card are being misused by the Sena (UBT).

Pawaskar alleged that the log-in and password related to income tax department are also being used by the Sena UBT and demanded to register a criminal case against the persons concerned from Sena UBT.

A Shiv Sena delegation headed by Kiran Pawaskar met the police commissioner and filed a written complaint.

"The Shiv Sena and party symbol has been given to us by the Election Commission. Also, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly has also given a decision in our favour as per the directions of the Supreme Court. But in spite of this, while working on the account of the party as well as according to the instructions of the Income Tax department, the password is required for the log-in. There is confusion about it. We allege that Shiv Sena party's name, original PAN card, TAN card and income tax-related matters are being misused by the Sena UBT and we demand that there should be a thorough investigation in this regard and serious criminal cases should be registered against the persons concerned at the earliest," Pawaskar said.

Pawaskar said the police commissioner has assured them of a probe.

# MMRDA calls tender of over Rs 2k crore for rolling stock, carshed works

**Mumbai**

The Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) has relocated tenders for the metro line 6 (Swami Samarth Nagar in Andheri Lokhandwala to Vikhroli, Eastern Express Highway (EEH)) for procurement of rolling stock, signalling & train control, telecommunications, carshed machinery, platform screen door, for the project. The previous tender for procurement of rolling stock and other technical systems was cancelled due to MMRDA's failure to meet the mandatory guidelines instituted by the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) in the tender document, along with issues



over the proposed Kanjurmarg depot land ownership. The MMRDA had earlier proposed to procure 108 standard gauge cars (coaches) for metro line 6. The current tender is valued at Rs 2064.63 crore The work involves design, manufacturing, supply, testing, commissioning and maintenance. Interested bidders are required to submit bids by April 2nd. The elevated 15.31 km long Mumbai Metro Line 6 is over 60 per cent complete and is being constructed at cost of Rs 6,716 crore, with funding through the National Development Bank (NDB). The expected timeline for completion is November or December 2024. The state approved the elevated metro line 6 in 2017.

# Mahalaxmi racecourse land to be handed over to BMC to set up theme park

**Mumbai**

Mumbai's largest green spot is soon to be transformed into a theme park as the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's proposal for transforming the existing Mahalaxmi Racecourse received a nod from the members of the Royal Western India Turf Club (RWITC) on Tuesday, following a two-day voting session of the RWITC club members. Of the 708 members who cast their votes, 540 voted in support of BMC's proposal while 168 members voted against it.

The RWITC is the parent body of the racecourse, which is spread across 211 acres in Mahalaxmi, making it one of the largest green open spaces in the space-starved financial capital of the country. The land is jointly owned by the BMC and state government and has been leased out to the RWITC since 1914. The last lease agreement had expired in 2013, and for more than a decade now, the lease was not renewed by the authorities, even though the racecourse continued to exist. However, in January this year, the civic authorities had proposed that the lease of this land would be renewed only after the major portion of this land parcel is acquired solely by the authorities.

The BMC had proposed that out of the 211 acres, nearly 120 acres shall be acquired by the authorities while the remaining 91 acres will stay with the RWITC. Suresh Sanas, who is the current chairman of RWITC, told Express that race tracks, helipad, grandstand, which is a Grade II – B heritage structure and some of the horse stables will stay under the 91-acre portion which will stay with the racecourse.

'While the remaining 120-acre plot will house the jogging tracks, some of the stables, the parking area and portion of the lawn.

Municipal commissioner Iqbal Singh Chahal on January 18 gave a presentation to the members tabling his proposal of creating the theme park, when he had also said that no civil construction would be taken up in the plot which the BMC is set to take back from the authorities. He also maintained that the primary objective of setting up a park is to ensure that the land parcel becomes universally accessible.

As a result, the RWITC management called for open voting of members in order to support or reject the civic authority's proposal. Total 708 members voted, out of which 540 members voted in support of BMC's proposal while 168 members voted against the proposal.

# CAA to be implemented in country within a week: Union minister Shantanu Thakur

**Kolkata**

Union minister Shantanu Thakur on Monday said the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) would be implemented in the country within a week.

During an interview with a news channel, Thakur, a BJP MP from Bongaon, an area with the majority of people belonging to the Matua community in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district, said swift implementation of the contentious legislation would be made within seven days.

The CAA, enacted by the BJP-led government at the Centre in 2019, aims at granting Indian citizenship to persecuted non-Muslim migrants, including Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis and Christians, from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan who entered India before December 31, 2014.

"The CAA will be implemented very soon. It will be implemented within seven days. This is my guarantee," said Thakur, also a leader of the Matua community.

Thakur, the union minister of state for ports, shipping and waterways, had made a similar comment on Sunday.

He has been claiming that the CAA would be implemented in the country ahead of the Lok Sabha polls this year.

Matuas, who constitute a large chunk of the state's Scheduled Caste population, had been migrating to West Bengal since the 1950s, primarily due to religious persecution in erstwhile East Pakistan which later became Bangladesh.

Since the nineties, political parties in West Bengal have actively sought to secure the support of the Matuas, who, due to their significant population and tendency to vote together, are considered a valuable voting bloc akin to the minorities.

The Matua community is believed to benefit the most from the implementation of the CAA.

Thakur's assertion on the CAA's implementation comes amidst reports this month, suggesting that the rules for the legislation would be notified "much before" the announcement of the Lok Sabha election.

His remarks elicited strong reactions from the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) in the state, which has vehemently opposed the CAA, labelling it "divisive".

"Our party supremo and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has clearly said that CAA won't be implemented in West Bengal. The BJP leaders are attempting political gimmickry by making such false promises before the Lok Sabha election," TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh said.

# FIR against ED officials for 'maligning image' of Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren, spreading fake news

**Ranchi**

Jharkhand Police on Wednesday registered an FIR against officials of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) for "maligning the image" of Chief Minister Hemant Soren by propagating "false news" about him.

According to the police, the FIR was lodged after Soren wrote a complaint to the police on the ED raid at his Delhi residence. The police said that the FIR has been registered under the provisions of the SC/ST Act. However, more details are awaited.

Ranchi SP Chandan Sinha said, "An FIR has been registered at the instance of Chief Minister Hemant Soren. As per the information provided to me by the SHO (Station House Officer of SC/T Police Station in Ranchi), the CM in his complaint has said that his image has been maligned by the ED officials who reached his Delhi residence without any information and propagated false news."

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The FIR comes on a day when Soren is being questioned by the ED. After the agency's visit to his Delhi residence, his party, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), said the ED action in Delhi was unwarranted given that Soren had intimated his availability through a letter to the ED.

The JMM said Soren had responded to the ED on January 28, Sunday, stating that he would be available for questioning on January 31 at 1 pm at his residence.

JMM General Secretary Supriyo Bhattacharya said, "The ED's spontaneous arrival at the official residence of Chief Minister Hemant Soren early in the morning of January 29 with hundreds of soldiers armed with firearms does not appear to be legal. After all, what was the hurry that the ED could not wait even for two days to interrogate and that too when seven hours of interrogation had already taken place a week ago?"

The JMM added that it was an insult to the honour and respect of a CM as well as to the 3.5 crore people of the state, and asked, "Have constitutional institutions like the ED become puppets in the hands of the BJP? Will governments be formed or fallen in the states now through these agencies? Will the Centre always try to do something to the chief ministers when they visit the country's capital?"

Meanwhile, BJP state president Babulal Marandi said that due to the fear of the ED, Soren had absconded from his residence in Delhi and had gone underground for eighteen hours. Before the CM appeared along with the ruling coalition MLAs on Tuesday, Marandi also posted a 'CM Missing' poster on X.

# Gujarat Government Transfers 50 IAS Officers Ahead Of Lok Sabha Polls

**Ahmedabad**

Ahead of the Lok Sabha polls due in a few months, the Gujarat government has transferred 50 IAS officers, including various collectors and district development officers (DDOs). The state General Administration Department issued a notification to this effect on Tuesday night, an official said. As per the notification, Jamnagar district collector B A Shah has been transferred as the new collector of Vadodara district. AB Gor, currently serving as the Vadodara collector, has been appointed in the Chief Minister's Office in Gandhinagar as Officer on Special Duty (OSD). Surat collector Aayush Oak has been transferred as the new collector of Valsad. Sourabh Pardhi, currently serving as the managing director of the Tourism Corporation of Gujarat Ltd, has been appointed as the new collector of Surat. Morbi district collector GT Pandya has now been appointed as the collector of Devbhumi Dwarka

district. Navsari collector Amit Prakash Yadav has now been made the collector of Kheda district, replacing KL Bachani, who has been appointed as the new director of information in Gandhinagar. Valsad collector Kshipra Agre has been made the new collector of Navsari. Gir-Somnath collector HK Vadhvaniya has been appointed as the additional secretary in the health and family welfare department, Gandhinagar. Chhotaudepur district collector Stuti Charan has been appointed as the chief executive officer of the Water and Sanitation Management Organisation, Gandhinagar. Nitin Sangwan, the 2016 batch IAS officer currently serving as the director of fisheries in Gandhinagar, has been appointed as the new DDO of Junagadh. Junagadh municipal commissioner RM Tanna has been appointed as the DDO of Surendranagar. He has been replaced by 2016-batch IAS officer Om Prakash, currently serving as the DDO of Mehsana.

# Gyanvapi mosque row: Hindu side moves Supreme Court for scientific investigation of 'Shivlingam' found at site

**New Delhi**

Days after an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) report suggested existence of a large Hindu Temple prior to the construction of the existing structure at Gyanvapi mosque complex, Varanasi, the Hindu side on Monday moved the Supreme Court seeking directions to the ASI to make necessary investigation of the "Shivlingam" found at the site in 2022.

In an application filed before the top court, the Hindu side also urged it to vacate its May 19, 2023 order that put on hold the Allahabad High Court order allowing a scientific examination of the "Shivlingam" without causing any damage to it.

A Varanasi Court had on July 21, 2023 allowed their plea for



a scientific survey of the entire building, excluding the sealed area i.e. the place where the "Shivlingam" was found and the report has already been submitted to the court in December 2023.

"The area of Shivlingam has been surrounded by raising artificial walls which are modern construction connected with the original building," the applicants said, adding that "the area has no religious significance for Muslims as according to them there is an alleged fountain," the Hindu side submitted.

"Now it's necessary that the sealed area be also surveyed by ASI, otherwise the very purpose of survey would be frustrated as there will be no report of ASI regarding the area under seal," they submitted in their application filed through its counsel Vishnu Shankar Jain.

The Supreme Court had on January 16 allowed Hindu women plaintiffs' plea for cleaning the water tank (wazukhana) in the Gyanvapi mosque that is located in an area sealed on its orders under the supervision of the Varanasi district magistrate after being told that there were dead fish in it.

A 'shivling' was reported to have been found there during a survey in May last year.

A Bench led by CJI DY Chandrachud – which issued the direction on a request made by the Uttar Pradesh government -- noted that a similar plea has been filed by the Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Committee, the management body of the mosque, before a Varanasi court.

The "wazukhana" (used to perform ritual ablutions), where a structure claimed by the Hindu litigants to be a "Shivling" exists, will not be part of the survey, in view of an earlier Supreme Court order protecting that spot in the mosque complex.

A Varanasi court had, on July 21, 2023 directed the ASI to conduct a "detailed scientific survey" -- including excavations, wherever necessary -- to determine if the Gyanvapi mosque located next to the Kashi Vishwanath temple was built upon a pre-existing temple.

# Defamation plea filed by former business partners not maintainable: MS Dhoni to Delhi High Court

**New Delhi**

Former Team India cricket captain MS Dhoni on Monday submitted before the Delhi High Court that a defamation plea filed against him by his two ex-business partners was not maintainable.

The high court refused to pass any interim order, at this stage, against Dhoni and several media houses and social media platforms to injunct them from posting or publishing any alleged false defamatory content against the plaintiffs on any platform which could tarnish their goodwill and reputation.

Plaintiffs and former business partners Mihir Diwakar and his wife Soumya Das have approached the high court seeking a permanent injunction and damages against Dhoni, several social media platforms and media houses and thereby restraining them from making, publishing, circulating per se defamatory, ex facie false and malicious statements against them.



Dhoni's counsel appeared before the court and submitted that the plaint against him was not maintainable and he has just filed a case against the couple in a Ranchi court.

His counsel further said that he has not received the copy of the plaint and related documents and was only informed by the high court registry about filing of the case.

To this, the court asked the plaintiffs' counsel to supply a complete set of documents to Dhoni's counsel within three days.

The lawyer appearing for the plaintiffs submitted that he only wanted a fair reporting by the media and claimed the media reporting against his clients was not fair as they have already been labelled as thugs and thieves.

Advocate Siddhant Kumar, representing one of the media houses, also argued that the plea was not maintainable and placed an earlier judgment to contend that unless and until specific allegations are set out against each of the defendants, including media houses, no case will be made out.

He also raised the issue of lack of territorial jurisdiction of this court to deal with the matter.

Justice Singh asked the plaintiffs' counsel to take necessary steps to set out allegations against the defendants and listed the matter for further hearing on April 3.

The high court had earlier asked its registry to inform Dhoni about filing of the defamation plea against him by his two former business partners.

# Will Remain In NDA Fold "Forever" Now: Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar

**Patna (Bihar)**

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Wednesday said that now he will stay in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) forever and will continue to work for the people of his state.

The Janata Dal (United) supremo's remarks came days after he dumped the Mahagathbandhan (grand alliance) and the INDIA bloc to form a new government with the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Bihar.

Hitting out at the opposition's grouping, which has vowed to take on the BJP at the Centre in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, Mr Kumar said that the alliance's name --INDIA-- was christened even after his requests to choose another one.

"I was urging them to choose another name for the alliance. But they had already finalized it. I was trying so hard. They did not do even one thing. Till today they haven't decided which party will contest how many seats," Mr Kumar told reporters here.

He said, "Then I left them and came back to who I was with initially. Now I will stay here forever. I will keep working for the people of Bihar."

Nitish Kumar said that the new government will seek a trust vote in the state assembly on February 10.

Nitish's comments come after the Congress and the RJD accused him of being a master of U-turns.

Congress General Secretary (Communication) Jairam Ramesh said, "I thought Narendra Modi was a master of U-turns... but Nitish Kumar has left even the master of U-turns behind."

Nitish Kumar took the oath as Chief Minister of Bihar for the ninth time in Raj Bhawan, Patna, switching sides again, this time with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

It was for the second time in two years that Nitish Kumar had jumped the ship, his fifth crossover in a little over a decade.

# PM Narendra Modi: Kid's report card shouldn't give parents bragging rights

**New Delhi**

In his interaction with students at the seventh edition of 'Pariksha Pe Charcha', Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday urged parents not to boast or discuss their child's marks as it puts pressure on them. "Parents should not treat report cards of their children as visiting card," he said.

The PM also stressed reducing screen time and bridging trust deficit between parents, teachers and students to prevent children from slipping into depression.

He urged the students to prepare themselves mentally by giving the example of travelling from one extreme climate condition to the other where the



mind already prepares to face extreme conditions. He asked the students, families and teachers to collectively address the issue of external stress while evolving the process rather than implementing a systematic theory.

The PM said while competition is imperative, it should be healthy. He pointed out that often the seeds of unhealthy competition are planted in the family situations and urged parents to avoid comparison among the children. Stressing "excess of anything is bad", PM Modi said no electronic gadgets should be allowed during dinner and no-gadget zones should be created in the house. He also asked students to make conscious efforts to reduce screen time.

# Krishna Janmabhoomi row: SC extends stay on Allahabad High Court order for survey of Shahi Idgah in Mathura

**New Delhi**

The Supreme Court on Monday extended the stay on the Allahabad High Court's order for a court-monitored survey of the Shahi Idgah mosque complex adjoining the Krishna Janmabhoomi temple at Mathura in Uttar Pradesh as it deferred hearing on petitions challenging the high court's order.

"Interim orders wherever granted shall continue," a Bench led by Justice Sanjiv Khanna said, posting a petition filed by the Committee of Management Trust Shahi Masjid Idgah, Mathura, for further hearing in April.

Directing the parties to complete the procedural formalities, the Bench said all petitions before it on the issue will be taken up together in April.

Another plea filed by the mosque committee challenging the May 26, 2023, order of the high court transferring to itself all matters related to the dispute pending before a Mathura court was also pending before the top court.

Noting that the Hindu side's application for appointment of a court commissioner for a court-



monitored survey of the Shahi Idgah mosque complex adjoining the Krishna Janmabhoomi temple was "vague", the Supreme Court on January 16 stayed the December 14, 2023, Allahabad High Court order for the appointment of a court commissioner to oversee the survey of mosque premises which, the Hindu side claimed, had signs suggesting it was a temple in the past.

The stay order had come on a

petition filed by the Committee of Management Trust Shahi Masjid Idgah at Mathura challenging the high court's order allowing a court-monitored survey of the mosque.

While issuing notice to the Hindu side, the Bench had clarified that the proceedings before the high court, including with regard to maintainability of the suit under Order 7 Rule 11 of the Civil Procedure Code (CPC), will go on.

On behalf of the mosque

management committee, advocate Tasneem Ahmadi had said the high court could not have passed such an order when an application seeking rejection of the suit for being barred by the Places of Worship Act, 1991, was pending. The 1991 Act put a bar on the change of character of religious places as on August 15, 1947.

Senior counsel Shyam Divan, who represented Bhagwan Shri Krishna Virajman and others, had opposed the stay order and urged the top court to allow the high court to work out the modalities of the commission survey.

However, the Bench had stayed the high court's order, saying certain legal issues had arisen for consideration.

The Hindu side has filed the suit in the court of Civil Judge Senior Division (III), Mathura, seeking shifting of the Shahi Idgah mosque, alleging it was built on a part of the 13.37-acre plot of the Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi Trust. They demanded that the high court must conduct an original trial as was done in the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi title dispute case.

# Chhattisgarh: 3 CRPF personnel killed, 14 injured in Bastar Naxal attack

**New Delhi**

Three personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), including two commandos of its elite jungle warfare unit CoBRA, were killed and 14 injured in an encounter with Maoists in Chhattisgarh's Bastar region on Tuesday.

The incident, which is the first major Naxal attack since the new BJP government came to power in the state last month, took place hours after a security camp was set up in Tekulagudem village, around 600 km away from Raipur.

In 2021, 23 security personnel were killed in a similar attack in Tekulagudem. According to reports, after setting up the new camp, a joint team of CoBRA, the Special Task Force and the District Reserve Guard was conducting anti-Naxal operations in the Jonaguda-Aliguda area when Maoists opened fire. The security personnel retaliated following which Maoists ran into the forest area.

The 14 injured personnel have been airlifted to Raipur.

The attack comes days after Home Minister Amit Shah held a meeting to discuss the Left-wing extremism situation in Chhattisgarh.

# Shah rolls out Rs 225 cr plan to digitise cooperatives

**New Delhi**

Union Home Minister and Minister of Cooperation Amit Shah on Tuesday launched a Rs 225-crore computerisation scheme for the offices of the Registrar of Cooperative Societies and Agriculture and Rural Development Banks (ARDBs) of states.

The Computerisation Project for Agricultural and Rural Development Banks aims to computerise 1,851 units of ARDBs in 13 states and UTs. The government is also considering linking all Primary Cooperative Agriculture and Rural Development Banks and State Cooperative Rural Development Banks with NABARD's national software. This will strengthen the linkage of agricultural loans.

# Mahagathbandhan will fight for social justice in Bihar, no need for Nitish Kumar: Rahul

**Purnea (Bihar)**

Congress MP Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday asserted that the 'Mahagathbandhan' will continue fighting for social justice in Bihar, and the alliance "does not need" Chief Minister Nitish Kumar for the cause.

Speaking at a rally in Purnea district, where his 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' entered during the day, Gandhi also took a swipe at Kumar for switching sides frequently.

"He (Kumar) cannot exert pressure… he immediately takes a U-turn," the former Congress president said.

Kumar on Sunday took oath as the chief minister of Bihar for a record ninth time after a dramatic volte-face, ditching the 'Mahagathbandhan' and the opposition bloc INDIA and forming a new government with the BJP, which he had dumped less than 18 months ago.

"The 'Mahagathbandhan' (grand alliance) will fight for social justice in Bihar; we don't require Nitish Kumar for that purpose, we don't require him at all," Gandhi said.

Congress is a part of the 'Mahagathbandhan', which also comprises the RJD and Left parties.

Gandhi also said Dalits and backward classes don't get due representation in all sectors of the country.

"Our country needs a caste-based census to determine the exact population of Dalits, OBCs, tribals and others," the Congress MP told the rally at Ranghbhumi Maidan.

Commenting on Manipur, he claimed that it is experiencing an "atmosphere of civil war" and Prime Minister Narendra Modi is yet to visit the ethnic strife-torn state.

The Congress, TMC, AAP and CPI(ML)L are a part of the 28-party opposition bloc INDIA.

AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge, who was scheduled to speak at the rally, could not reach Purnea, as his flight failed to land at the airport due to low visibility, Bihar Congress chief Akhilesh Prasad said.

Kharge, however, spoke virtually at the public meeting.

Former Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel and CPI(ML)L general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya also addressed the gathering.

# BJP threatening people to send ED, CBI to their homes if they don't vote for party: Mamata Banerjee

**Cooch Behar/Siliguri**

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Monday accused the BJP of threatening people to send central probe agencies to their homes if they do not vote for the saffron party in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

The TMC supremo advised locals in Cooch Behar, particularly Rajbanshis, to ensure that their names are on the voters' list to "protect themselves" from the Citizenship (Amendment) Act or CAA.

"The BJP is using central agencies for elections... it is threatening people over the phone to send Enforcement Directorate (ED) and Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) sleuths to their homes if they do not vote for the saffron party," Banerjee said at a public distribution programme here.

The West Bengal Chief Minister also asserted that she will not follow any diktat of the BJP to worship any particular god.

"I follow Ramayana, Quran, Bible and Guru Granth Sahib... I do not do drama by visiting poor people's homes to eat food brought from outside," she said.

While referring to the ethnic violence in BJP-ruled Manipur, she claimed that over 200 churches have been gutted and several women paraded naked during the strife in the northeastern state.

"In Manipur, they have set on fire 200 churches and women were paraded naked," she alleged, adding that the Christmas holiday was also cancelled.

Banerjee alleged that the Centre is bringing up the issue of CAA to do politics before the Lok Sabha polls.

"They (BJP) have again started to speak about CAA. This is nothing but politics. We have given citizenship to everyone (and) they (people in border areas) are getting everything. They are citizens, which is why they are allowed to vote," she said.

Earlier in the day, Union minister and BJP leader Shantanu Thakur claimed that the CAA will be implemented across India within the next seven days.

# Will return to present a full budget, says PM Modi ahead of Budget Session; asks Parliament disrupters to introspect

**New Delhi**

In his final pre-Parliament Session remarks ahead of the 2024 general election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi showed confidence of a poll victory saying his government would return and present a full budget later in the year, while Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presents an interim budget on Thursday.

Flanked by four ministers, the prime minister launched a scathing attack on disruptive opposition MPs saying no one would remember them.

"In the last 10 years, people chose the paths they wanted to choose in conducting themselves in Parliament. But I do hope those habituated to creating ruckus will introspect. Let them ask 10 people in their own parliamentary segments. No one will remember them. The Budget Session is the last session of this Lok Sabha and an opportunity to repent and leave some good footprints," Modi said a day after the Rajya Sabha chairman revoked suspension of 11 opposition MPs on the



government recommendation.

The prime minister said India witnessed all-pervasive and all-inclusive development in the 10 years of the BJP-led NDA rule.

"I have faith that this journey will continue uninterrupted with

the blessings of people," he said exuding enthusiasm for the 18th general election in which Modi will seek to equal late Jawaharlal Nehru's record of returning to PMO thrice in a row.

The prime minister also hailed the rising woman power which, he said, was on grand display during the Republic Day parade.

He referred to Wednesday's joint address of Parliament by

President Droupadi Murmu, followed by FM Sitharaman's presentation of the interim budget on Thursday as "a festival of celebration of women power".

The PM said disrupters should take the Budget Session as an occasion to redeem their reputations.

He added that the sharpest of government critics who illuminated Parliament with their high discourse would be valued and remembered but those who stuck to negative and chaotic behaviour would be forgotten.

"We are sticking to precedence and presenting only an interim budget on the eve of the Lok Sabha polls. We will return to present a full budget later," he said.

The Budget Session of Parliament starts on Wednesday with the President's address to both Houses of Parliament, her first joint address at the new Parliament building.

The budget session will last till February 9.

# Rahul Gandhi's claim that Bihar caste survey was done under Congress pressure is nonsensical: Nitish Kumar

**Patna,**

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Wednesday said Rahul Gandhi's claim that the caste survey in the state was conducted under pressure from the Congress was 'nonsensical'.

Talking to reporters three days after he dumped the 'Mahagathbandhan' in which the Congress is a constituent, and returned to the BJP-led NDA, Kumar, the JD (U) president, claimed that he did not like the nomenclature of the opposition bloc INDIA.

"His (Rahul) claim that the caste survey in the state was done under pressure from the Congress is nonsensical. Everybody knows that the initiative was taken by me only. Now, people are taking credit," Kumar said.

Addressing a public rally in Purnea district as part of his 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra', Gandhi



had on Tuesday claimed that Kumar was feeling trapped after getting a caste survey conducted under pressure from the 'Mahagathbandhan' partners and the BJP "provided him with a way out".

Commenting on the opposition bloc INDIA, Kumar said, "They were not doing anything...not even discussing seat-sharing. Frankly speaking, the name (INDIA) given to this alliance was not my choice at all. They decided on their own. Now, I have come back here (NDA). There is no question of going anywhere else."

Asked about his views on the Enforcement Directorate's action against Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren and RJD leaders, the JD(U) supremo said, "The investigation agency is doing its work. There were charges against them…and the ED is investigating those cases."

# In last 10 years, 25 crore people have come out of poverty, says President Droupadi Murmu while addressing Budget Session of Parliament

**New Delhi**

President Droupadi Murmu on Wednesday addressed a joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament at the start of the Budget Session.

The President said, "This is my first address in new Parliament building which was built at the beginning of 'Amrit Kaal'."



She congratulated PM Modi for passing the women's reservation bill.

Building of Ram temple has been a dream of centuries, it is a reality now, President Murmu said.

According to NITI Aayog, in the last 10 years, nearly 25 crore people have come out of poverty, she said, adding, "In the last 10 years, we have seen India become one of the top five economies from 'Fragile 5'."

Earlier, the country's rate of inflation was in double digits which is now within 4 per cent, the President said.

In the last 10 years, India has seen completion of many such works in national interest for which people had been waiting for decades, Murmu said, adding, "We have been hearing slogans of eradicating poverty for long; now for the first time, we are seeing poverty being eradicated on a large scale."

# Imran Khan, wife sentenced to 14 years in jail in Toshakhana corruption case

**Islamabad**

Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi were sentenced to 14 years in prison on Wednesday in a corruption case for retaining expensive state gifts when he was in power, dealing another blow to the jailed former premier, a day after he was handed a 10-year jail term for leaking sensitive state secrets.

The verdict, which comes eight days before the February 8 general election, has increased the legal woes of the 71-year-old cricketer-turned-politician who is already serving a three-year jail term after being convicted of corruption.

Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) faced numerous troubles before the election starting with the denial of its election symbol, the cricket bat, to the rejection of nomination papers of Khan, former foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and several other party leaders.

Accountability Court Judge Mohammad Bashir conducted the hearing at Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail, where the former premier is incarcerated, in the Toshakhana corruption case.

Khan and his wife were also barred from holding any public office for 10 years and slapped with a fine of Rs 787 million each. Bushra Bibi did not appear before the court on Wednesday.

Last month, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) filed a fresh case against the two in an accountability court for retaining a jewellery set received from the Saudi crown prince against undervalued assessment.

Khan told the court that his wife had nothing to do with the case and was being humiliated by being forcibly dragged into it.

At the outset of the hearing on Wednesday, Judge Bashir asked Khan if he recorded his statement. To this, the former premier said that he would submit his statement once his lawyers came.

"I have been deceived as I was only called to mark my attendance for the hearing," said the PTI founder.

The sentence comes just a day after a special court established under the Official Secrets Act sentenced Khan and Qureshi to 10 years in prison for the breach of state secrets.

The latest conviction and sentencing are Khan's third since 2022 when he was ousted from power.

According to reports, Khan and his wife received 108 gifts from various heads of state, out of which they kept 58. They were also undervalued by them while paying a mandatory price to the state.

Under the rules governing Toshakhana — a Persian word meaning "treasure house" — government officials can keep gifts by paying a price for them but first the gift should be deposited. The two either failed to deposit the gift or got it for a low price by allegedly using their authority.

# Israel intensifies attack on Gaza as US vows to respond to Jordan killings

**WASHINGTON**

Israel launched an assault overnight on Gaza's main northern city weeks after pulling back from there, residents said, while Washington promised to respond to the first deadly strike on its forces in West Asia since the Gaza war began. Three US servicemen were killed and at least 34 wounded in a drone attack by Iran-backed militants in northeastern Jordan near the Syrian border, US Central Command said on Sunday, an escalation in the violence that has erupted beyond Gaza. US President Joe Biden said the attacks were carried out by radical Iran-backed militant groups operating in Syria and Iraq. Iran denied any role, but the first fatalities in what have been scores of attacks on US forces in West Asia since the Israel-Hamas war broke out prompted calls from US politicians for a direct response. Biden has ordered retaliatory attacks on Iranian-backed groups but has stopped short of attacking Iran directly for fear of igniting a broader war amid violence that has already hampered world trade through attacks on ships in the Red Sea."Have no doubt, we will hold all those responsible to account at a time and in a manner of our choosing," he said on Sunday. Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis, behind regular attacks on shipping in the region, said on Monday they had fired a rocket at US warship Lewis B Puller in the Gulf of Aden on Sunday. There was no immediate response from Washington. Inside Gaza, residents said air strikes on neighbourhoods across Gaza city killed and wounded many people. While tanks shelled the eastern areas of the city, naval boats fired shells and gun rounds at the beachfront areas in the west, they said.

# 15 killed in terrorist attacks in Pakistan's Balochistan

**Karachi**

Heavily armed terrorists launched three coordinated attacks, including one on a high-security prison, in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province, leaving four law enforcement personnel and two civilians dead and triggering a gunbattle in which nine of the militants were also killed.

The attacks took place on Monday in Mach town, some 70 kilometres from the provincial capital Quetta, officials said.

A press release issued from the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) on Tuesday night said that on the night between January 29 and 30, "multiple terrorists, including suicide bombers, attacked Mach and Kolpur Complexes in Balochistan, which was effectively responded by law enforcement agencies (LEAs)." Nine terrorists were killed and three injured and captured by security forces when they tried to apparently penetrate the high-security central Mach Jail where some dangerous militants and death row prisoners are incarcerated.

The ISPR also confirmed the death of four security personnel and two civilians since Monday night.

It said security forces in the vicinity were immediately mobilised and were carrying out an "ensuing operation".

"Nine terrorists, including three suicide bombers, were "sent to hell till now" while three were injured," the statement said.

A senior police official earlier said at least 15 rockets were fired at the Central Mach Jail.

The banned separatist group the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) Majeed group has claimed responsibility for the attacks.

After the attacks, a heavy gunbattle lasting several hours ensued between the security forces and the attackers who tried to retreat into the mountains.

The caretaker Balochistan Information Minister Jan Achakzai said that the final clearance operation in Mach is still underway.

"The situation in the area has been stabilised," Achakzai said on social media platform X.

Monday night's attack against security forces is the deadliest by militants this year. Last year in November at least 14 soldiers were killed when militants ambushed them in the port town of Gwadar.

The attack was an apparent retaliation for Pakistani strikes on what the country said were insurgent hideouts in Iran earlier in January. The BLA threatened to launch attacks on security forces in Balochistan and elsewhere following Pakistan's January 18 strikes on their camps in Iran that left at least nine persons dead.

The strikes were made in response to an Iranian strike in Pakistan that appeared to target a different Baloch militant group with similar separatist goals.

Pakistan's Balochistan province, as well as Iran's neighbouring Sistan-Baluchistan province, have faced a low-level insurgency by Baloch nationalists for more than two decades.

Although the government says it has quelled the insurgency, violence in the province has persisted. Iran and Pakistan share a 900-kilometer, largely lawless, border, across which smugglers and militants freely roam.

# Judicial reforms

CHIEF Justice of India (CJI) DY Chandrachud has called for addressing the structural issues affecting the judiciary, such as the pendency of cases, archaic procedures and the culture of adjournments. Speaking at a function to mark the diamond jubilee of the Supreme Court, he stressed upon developing a culture of professionalism. The CJI flagged the contentious issue of long vacations in higher courts and said he was ready for a conversation on alternatives such as flexitime for lawyers and judges.

The pendency of cases in Indian courts crossed the 5-crore mark last year. These include over 4.4 crore cases in district and taluka/tehsil courts and around 62 lakh in high courts. The judiciary has barely 21,000 judges to handle this staggering caseload. The inadequate working strength of judges — well short of the number of sanctioned posts, especially at the district level — has a bearing on the disposal of cases and the

delivery of justice. The district judiciary, rightly described by the CJI as the first point of contact for the citizens, is in

urgent need of reforms to improve its functioning.

The delay in recommending or approving judicial appointments is a major stumbling block. It was a

decade ago that the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) Act was enacted. The legislation had laid down the procedure to be followed by the NJAC for recommending names for appointment as the CJI and Supreme Court judge and the Chief Justice and judge of high courts. However, in 2015, the apex court had struck down the Act as 'unconstitutional' and upheld the collegium system of appointments. The NJAC can be made a viable alternative to the existing system, provided the executive and the judiciary are on the same page. With President Droupadi Murmu endorsing the proposed All India Judicial Service a couple of months ago, it's time to revive the debate on the NJAC and give it a relook.

**// satyasya paramaṁ nidhānam //**

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

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# 'Nari Shakti'

## R-Day parade showcases women's empowerment

WOMEN'S empowerment in diverse fields took centre stage during the parade in New Delhi on the 75th Republic Day, marking several historic firsts. The impressive strides made by women in male-dominated domains were evident as their tri-services contingent led the impressive march-past on the Kartavya Path and female pilots enthralled the spectators with the flypast. The Central Armed Police Forces and Agniveers, too, were represented by women, who performed awe-inspiring stunts. The spotlight was also on female scientists of the Defence Research and Development Organisation as they highlighted the advances the nation has made in defence

technology to bolster its military might.

'Nari Shakti' was also symbolised by the

women who played a variety of traditional Indian musical instruments during the grand show, besides the dancers from across the country

whose performances showcased our rich cultural heritage. The 'Anant Sutra' of hundreds

of ethnic saris and drapes, woven and embroidered by generations of gifted artisans, formed a captivating backdrop.

President Droupadi

Murmu unfurling the Tricolour perfectly synchronised with the theme of gender inclusivity. However, there is still a long way to go as far as adequate representation of women in politics is concerned. The Women's Reservation Bill was passed by both Houses of Parliament in September last year. It seeks to reserve one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and legislative assemblies for women. However, the Union Government has stated that the legislation will not be implemented before 2029 — after the completion of the delimitation exercise. The long delay will only act as a dampener for the women aspiring to carve a niche for themselves in the political arena.

# Attack on US outpost

## America getting sucked into a regional war

ADRONE attack on a small US outpost on the Jordan-Syria border on Sunday night claimed the lives of three servicemen and gravely injured over two dozen. American military camps in several grey zone areas of West Asia have witnessed over 170 strikes by militia groups in the past four months or so. The drone managed to breach the US military's elaborate air defences. This is the first time the Pentagon has acknowledged the death of US soldiers in West Asia as collateral damage for backing Israel's disproportionate response to the October 7 Hamas attacks.

The portents are dire. On the campaign trail, US President Joe Biden has vowed retaliation and chosen to explicitly blame Iran. Historically, the US has got sucked into a military quagmire whenever it has sought to fight asymmetrical battles. In West Asia, the attacks from a bewildering number of directions show that it has too many enemies to be counted. Targeting Iran, as the Republicans have been urging Biden to do, will be like disturbing a beehive. The immense resilience of the region's militia groups is proven by their survival for decades in a very tough neighbourhood.

The situation can get out of hand for the US. The entire world will suffer the consequences, going by the adverse impact of the Red Sea attacks. The reason for the sudden burst of hostility by Islamist groups is obvious: American backing for Israel's unabated military assault on Gaza. Western countries need to reassess their policies that have allowed the killings to continue. With the most sophisticated systems unable to protect its troops, the US needs to address the cause that has brought its soldiers in the line of fire.

# Incorrigible Nitish

## Bihar CM switches allies yet again

TRUE to form, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has dumped his Mahagathbandhan allies and returned to the NDA's fold. The Janata Dal (United) chief has formed the government with the BJP, the very party he had snapped ties with just a year and a half ago. His latest U-turn has jolted not only the Mahagathbandhan — which includes the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the Congress and the Left Front — but also INDIA, the Opposition bloc that was formed last year to take on the BJP in the 2024 General Election. Nitish had projected himself as the face of the alliance, but suggestions about naming Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge as INDIA's prime ministerial candidate left him fuming.

It's nothing new for Nitish to switch allies, but he has been doing it with increasing regularity over the past decade. Having once said 'Mitti mein mil jaayenge magar BJP ke saath nahin jaaenge,' Nitish has opportunistically patched up with the saffron party yet again in a bid to survive and thrive. His decision shows that he is anticipating the BJP's victory and INDIA's debacle in the General Election. This is also a desperate attempt by him to revitalise his party, which had ended up way behind the RJD and the BJP in the 2020 Assembly election. Though the BJP will be calling the shots in the new government in Bihar, it won't be easy for the party to justify taking Nitish back on board after having ruled out his return to the NDA.

Even as Nitish seems to have abandoned his prime ministerial ambitions, INDIA finds itself sinking deeper into the mire. Discord over seat-sharing in West Bengal and Punjab has exposed the alliance's frailties. Nitish's crossover indicates that more Opposition leaders might jump ship as the Lok Sabha elections draw nearer.

# Errant doctors

## Medical officers under scrutiny in Haryana

AS many as 45 government medical officers of Haryana have been accused of indulging in various kinds of malpractices in the course of performing their duties. This reflects poorly on the government health services across the state. While initiating an inquiry against the doctors is a commendable step, the unethical or illegal activities allegedly prevalent statewide necessitate regular monitoring of health centres. These doctors allegedly indulged in inappropriate behaviour with patients, referred them to private hospitals or demanded money for issuing medico-legal reports. In a related matter, several other medical officers are under scrutiny as their doctor spouses are working at private clinics in the same town. The situation is particularly deplorable as most of their patients are from the underprivileged section. Being subjected to harassment in government hospitals adds to the woes of the poor.

It is also imperative to address some critical ills plaguing the system. As per the Haryana Civil Medical Services Association, there is a shortage of hundreds of doctors in government-run hospitals of the state. The attrition rate is high as they are quitting government service in favour of the highly lucrative private sector or absenting themselves from duty. Particularly crippling is the loss of potential specialists as medical officers pursue government quota PG courses and find ways to sidestep the legal bond that contracts them to work with the government for a certain number of years. These posts, thus, remain blocked for years before being finally filled.

# Karpoori Thakur

## Well-deserved Bharat Ratna for socialist stalwart

SOCIALIST icon and former Bihar Chief Minister Karpoori Thakur has been chosen for the Bharat Ratna, and deservedly so. What makes the honour all the more special is that it was announced on the eve of his birth centenary, even as Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a glowing tribute to the backward-caste leader in a special article. The PM wrote that Thakur's relentless pursuit of social justice had made a positive impact on people's lives. Popularly known as Jan Nayak (hero of the masses), Thakur came into the limelight in 1967 when he became the Deputy CM and Education Minister in Bihar's first non-Congress government. He carried out a major reform by doing away with English as a compulsory subject in schools. Thakur's path-breaking move was aimed at helping the majority of the students, particularly from underprivileged sections, who were not proficient in English.

Rising from the humble Nai Samaj (barber community), Thakur went on to serve as the CM twice in the 1970s, though he never had a full five-year term. Despite his short tenures, he made a lasting impact with his pro-people decisions and unblemished governance. It was during his term (1977-78) that reservation for backward classes was introduced as per the recommendations of the Mungeri Lal Commission. There were protests across Bihar against the OBC quota, but Thakur stood firm as he had the courage of his convictions.

The country's highest civilian award has been bestowed on him nearly 36 years after his death. It is not uncommon for the Bharat Ratna to be given posthumously, and that too decades after the recipient's demise. The Opposition's criticism of the government over honouring Thakur in the election year, presumably with an eye on OBC votes, is pure politics. The ensuing tussle over the socialist leader's legacy is expected. Thakur's lifelong struggle against social discrimination and inequality should be an inspiration for all political parties, irrespective of their contrasting ideologies.

# Rahul yatra

## After Sarma, Mamata makes it more difficult

RAHUL Gandhi's Kanyakumari-to-Kashmir Bharat Jodo Yatra, which ended on January 30 last year, witnessed constant sparring — both political and personal — between the Congress and the BJP. It was not limited to social media and TV debates. At one point, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that Gandhi, with his scraggly grey beard, had started looking like the late Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. The Congress responded that Sarma sounded like a troll. Now one can sense heightened bitterness between the former party colleagues during the Assam leg of Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. Personal egos seem to have got the better of both. Gandhi called Sarma, who shifted to the BJP in 2015 and is credited for its rapid expansion in the region, the country's most corrupt CM. The former Congress chief has been booked on the charge of provoking the crowd at an event in Guwahati. Sarma has threatened to have him arrested after the Lok Sabha elections.

The Congress' last major public outreach programme before the elections, the Manipur-Mumbai yatra intends to cover 100 Lok Sabha seats before it ends on March 20. Starting it in violence-ridden Manipur was astute. The message from Assam perhaps got lost in the slugfest. Gandhi faces less in-your-face antagonism but a far more politically challenging journey as his march enters West Bengal. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has made clear the TMC's intention to go solo for all 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state. This has put paid to the seat-sharing plans of the 28-party INDIA bloc. Mamata's tough stand against the Congress is bound to overshadow Gandhi's yatra.

Political alignments need delicate nurturing, and tough posturing is part of the process. Gandhi's negotiating and conciliatory skills are on test. The primary task for now is 'INDIA jodo'.

# Canada at it again

## Fresh allegation without proving earlier one

FOUR months after Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau alleged that there was 'credible intelligence' linking Indian government agents to the June 2023 murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, who was designated a terrorist by India, a commission set up by the Trudeau government has declared its intention to probe alleged Indian interference in Canadian federal elections in 2019 and 2021. Notably, the Foreign Interference Commission was formed in September, the month in which the Canadian PM visited India for the G20 summit and later made the startling allegation in the Nijjar case. Initially, the commission was investigating alleged interference by China and Russia, but now India has been dragged into the row.

The development is set to worsen the India-Canada relations, which have come under strain in recent months over Ottawa's unsubstantiated accusations about New Delhi's role in Nijjar's killing. India has repeatedly sought 'specific and relevant information' and offered to cooperate with the investigators, but Canada has remained evasive. The probe continues to be shrouded in secrecy and opacity. Last month, Canada's leading daily The Globe and Mail reported that two men who had allegedly committed the murder were likely to be arrested soon. The report also claimed that the duo had not left Canada after the killing and had been under police surveillance for months. However, the follow-up action, if any, has not been made public so far.

Canadian Immigration Minister Marc Miller recently admitted that diplomatic tensions had led to a sharp drop in the number of study permits issued by Canada to Indian students. The onus is on Ottawa to resolve the standoff, failing which bilateral trade may also be adversely impacted. Canada, which has been treating religious secessionists and terrorists with kid gloves for long, should refrain from pointing a finger at India unless it has credible and verifiable evidence to support its allegations. Lack of transparency will only aggravate mistrust between two vibrant democracies.

# iRobot to lay off 350 employees after Amazon terminates acquisition deal



**San Francisco**

iRobot, which makes consumer robots, has announced to lay off around 350 employees -- about 31 per cent of its workforce -- and its founder and CEO, Colin Angle, would also step down.

The layoffs came after the Amazon-iRobot $1.7 billion deal was mutually terminated over regulatory hurdles. Shares of iRobot fell 10 per cent after the deal termination news.

As part of this workforce reduction, iRobot expects to record restructuring charges between $12 million and $13 million, primarily for severance and related costs, over the first two quarters of 2024, with the majority of the restructuring charges anticipated in the first quarter of 2024.

"We must rapidly align our operating model and cost structure to our future as a standalone company. Though decisions that impact our people are difficult, we must move forward with a more sustainable business model, and a renewed focus on profitability," said Andrew Miller, Chairman of the iRobot Board.

Glen Weinstein, iRobot's Executive Vice President and Chief Legal Officer, has been appointed Interim CEO, and Miller has been appointed Chairman of the Board. iRobot anticipates reporting full-year 2023 revenue of $891 million, a 25 per cent reduction as compared to the same period last year.

Under the terms of the merger agreement, Amazon will pay iRobot a $94 million termination fee.

After payment of financial advisor fees of approximately 20 per cent of the termination fee, the company shall apply $35 million dollars of the termination fee immediately to repay the term loan, and the remainder of the termination fee will be set aside to be used for future repayments of the term loan. "We are disappointed with the Company's 2023 performance - but our focus turns now to the future," said Miller.

# FinMin report: India can be $7 trillion economy by 2030

**New Delhi**

Due to steps taken by the government since 2014, the Indian economy is projected to grow close to 7 per cent in the 2024-25 financial year, the Finance Ministry said in its monthly economic review. This will mark the fourth year of nearly 7 per cent growth in succession and compares extremely favourably as compared to low global growth.

India's economy grew 7.2 per cent in 2022-23 and 8.7 per cent in 2021-22. It is expected to grow 7.3 per cent in the current financial year 2023-24, remaining the fastest-growing major economy, said the review. If the growth rate holds, India can aspire to become a $7 trillion economy in the next six to seven years (by 2030), it said.

The review said there was considerable robustness in domestic demand. This extended to both the private consumption and investment sectors and has been due to reforms and measures implemented by the government over the last 10 years, said the report. "The supply side has also



been strengthened with investment in infrastructure — physical and digital — and measures that aim to boost manufacturing. These have combined to provide an impetus to economic activity in the country," observed the review.

"Accordingly, in FY25, the real GDP growth will likely be closer to 7 per cent. There is, however, considerable scope for the growth rate to rise well above 7 per cent by 2030," added the report.

"The rapidly expanding digital infrastructure is continuously improving institutional efficiency. Technological progress is picking up pace with rising collaboration with foreign partners in the production of goods and services. Decisive steps have been taken to speed up human capital formation. Finally, the overall investment climate is increasingly becoming more favourable with sustained enhancement in the ease of doing business," it said.

# Nirmala Sitharaman to equal record of former PM Morarji Desai by presenting 6 budgets in a row

**New Delhi**

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will equal the record of former Prime Minister Morarji Desai when she presents her sixth straight budget on February 1.

Sitharaman, the first full-time woman finance minister of the country, has presented five full budgets since July 2019 and will present an interim or vote-on-account budget next week.

With the presentation of interim budget on February 1, Sitharaman will surpass the records of her predecessors like Manmohan Singh, Arun Jaitley, P Chidambaram, and Yashwant Sinha, who had presented five budgets in a row.

Desai, as finance minister, had presented five annual budgets and one interim budget between 1959-1964. The interim budget 2024-25 to be presented by Sitharaman on February 1, will be a vote-on-account that will give the government authority to spend certain sums of money till a new government comes to office after the April-May general elections.



As the Parliamentary elections are due, Sitharaman's interim budget may not contain any major policy changes. Speaking at an industry event last month, Sitharaman had ruled out any "spectacular announcement" in the interim budget, saying it would just be a vote-on-account before the general elections.

A vote-on-account, once approved by Parliament, will authorise the government to withdraw money from the Consolidated Fund of India on pro-rata basis to meet expenditure for the April-July period.

The new government, which is likely to be formed around June, will come up with a final budget for 2024-25 sometime in July. Usually, interim budgets do not contain major policy announcements, but nothing stops the government from taking steps which are necessary to deal with the urgent issues facing the economy.

# Red Sea crisis: No disruption in oil flows to India, only freight up, says HPCL head

**New Delhi**

The ongoing attacks on shipping vessels by Houthi militants in the Red Sea have not impacted the flow of crude oil to India but freight has gone up due to rerouting via the Cape of Good Hope, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) chairman Pushp Kumar Joshi said.

India, the world's third-biggest oil importer, gets a bulk of its Russian supplies through the Red Sea. Russian supplies made up for over 35 per cent of India's total crude imports in 2023, amounting to 1.7 million barrels per day.

Russian ships and cargoes are not being prime targets of the attacks at this stage however rerouting of ships around the southern tip of Africa instead of transiting through the Suez Canal and Red Sea has led to ships taking longer voyages, resulting in the shortage of ships and rise in freight charges.

In a post-third quarter earnings call with investors, Joshi said HPCL has tied up crude oil supplies till mid-April and it does not see any supply disruptions.

HPCL meets 44-45 per cent of its crude oil needs on term contracts with national oil companies such as those in Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The remaining is on the spot or from the current market, he said.

"Term crude has not been impacted (due to the Red Sea crisis)," he said, adding the spot imports are on DES basis where the shipping is arranged by the supplier. "The spot supplies too are not impacted."

HPCL, he said, has "already tied up crude requirements till fiscal year end (in March) and the first couple of weeks of April".

"Crude oil supplies have not seen any disruption as of now. This has definitely impacted the freight rates and freight rates have travelled northward."

Spot imports include opportunity crude such as Russian oil which is sold at a discount because some western nations have shunned it due to Moscow's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

"So far as supply is concerned, I am quite confident that supply requirements are being met. We also have to see how this situation unfolds in the next few weeks, basis that we will have to take a call but as far as the procurement side is concerned, I am already in a comfortable situation till March 31 and two weeks of April," he said.

Joshi said HPCL has tied up both term and spot supplies including opportunity crude till mid-April. "We are not experiencing any disruption there."

On Russian imports, he said Russian oil made up for 30 per cent of all crude oil imported by HPCL in 2023.

While the supplies are not being impacted, the rerouting of ships could inflate insurance costs and crimp refining margins.

Shippers are avoiding the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait after a US-led coalition struck Iran-backed Houthi militants in northern Yemen. This however has impacted diesel exports to Europe. Longer voyages have hit diesel cargo cost, which has increased by USD 850,000-1 million.

Due to the rerouting of a voyage through the Cape of Good Hope instead of going through the Suez Canal, shipments from India to the US will take an additional 10-14 days, while shipments from Europe/the Mediterranean will take 20-25 days.

# Ola's Krutrim becomes India's first AI firm to turn unicorn after $50 million fundraise

**New Delhi**

Ola group's artificial intelligence (AI) firm Krutrim has raised USD 50 million at a valuation of USD 1 billion in a funding round led by Matrix Partners, the company said on Friday.

This makes Krutrim the first AI unicorn from India.

"Krutrim, India's own AI company focused on building the complete AI computing stack, announced the successful closure of its first round of funding. The funding round, led by prominent investors such as Matrix Partners India and others, garnered an investment of USD 50 million in equity at a valuation of USD 1 billion," the company said.

The funds raised would be instrumental in accelerating the company's mission to revolutionize the AI landscape, drive innovation, and expand its reach globally.

"India has to build its own AI, and at Krutrim, we are fully committed towards building the country's first complete AI computing stack. We are thrilled to announce the successful closure of our first funding round, which not only validates the potential of Krutrim's innovative AI solutions but also underscores the confidence investors have in our ability to drive meaningful change out of India for the world," Krutrim Founder Bhavish Aggarwal said.

Krutrim unveiled its base Large Language Model (LLM) last month. With the largest representation of Indian data used for its training, Krutrim claims to power generative AI applications for all Indian languages.

Trained by a team of leading computer scientists, based in Bangalore and San Francisco, the model would also power Krutrim's conversational AI assistant that claims to understand and speak multiple Indian languages fluently.

Krutrim is a family of LLMs, including Krutrim base and Krutrim Pro which would have multimodal, larger knowledge capabilities, and many other technical advancements for inference.

Krutrim last month announced that it would run an early access programme until January 2024 with a simple sign up page on the website.

Additionally, Krutrim's open APIs (tool to embed it with apps) would open to all developers by February 2024.

# Air India to take delivery of five more A350s by June

**New Delhi**

Air India will add five more wide-body A350 aircraft to its fleet by June, and the process of upgrading 40 of its legacy Boeing 787 and 777 planes will begin in July, its chief Campbell Wilson said on Thursday.

As Tata Group's takeover of loss-making Air India completes two years on January 27, Wilson also said on average, one aircraft will arrive every six days throughout 2024.

There will be an addition of five more A350s, which will progressively take to India's skies between January and June 2024, the Air India CEO and MD said.

# PM Gati Shakti: 3 infra projects worth Rs 9,600 cr recommended for approval



**New Delhi**

Three infrastructure projects of roads and railways worth Rs 9,600 crore have been recommended for approval under the PM Gati Shakti initiative, an official statement said on Thursday.

These projects were assessed in the 64th Network Planning Group (NPG) meeting on October 17.

"During the meeting, the NPG discussed three proposed greenfield projects of Ministry of Railways (one) and Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (two), with an aggregate project cost worth about Rs 9,600 crore," the Commerce and Industry Ministry said. The meeting was chaired by Special Secretary (Logistics), Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade Sumita Dawra.

The initiative was launched to develop an integrated infrastructure to reduce logistics costs. All logistics and connectivity infrastructure projects, entailing investments of over Rs 500 crore are routed through the NPG.

# Maruti Suzuki to launch mid-size electric SUV next fiscal

**Chandigarh**

Maruti Suzuki will launch a mid-size electric SUV in the next fiscal year and it will be powered by a 60kWh battery pack offering up to 550 km driving range. Besides domestic market, the company will be exporting it to Europe and Japan. This will be the company's first electric vehicle (EV) in the sports utility vehicle (SUV) segment and is codenamed eVX. Maruti Suzuki India Limited (MSIL) had revealed the concept electric SUV eVX at the Auto Expo last year, showcasing MSIL's plans towards electric mobility in India. "We will launch a mid-size electric SUV in 2024-25. It will be like Grand Vitara but a bit bigger than that. It will be powered by 60Kwh battery pack and a range of 550 km. It will also be exported to Europe and Japan," said Shashank Srivastava, senior executive officer, marketing and sales, MSIL, in an interaction with The Tribune in Chandigarh. According to experts, eVX will be competing with electric vehicles, such as Tata Punch, Tata Nexon and XUV 400. On being asked about EV adoption, he said, "The current EV adoption in India is 2.2 per cent, which is very less. The main reason behind low adoption is that the price of the electric vehicle is very high and also we don't have charging infrastructure in the country. Battery constitutes 50 per cent of the total cost of the vehicle. So, if we lowered down the battery cost then only the cost of the vehicle will go down. And the battery cost will come down only if we localised it.

# Supreme Court cancels bail of DHFL's Wadhawans

**New Delhi**

The Supreme Court on Wednesday cancelled the bail granted to former DHFL promoters Kapil Wadhawan and his brother Dheeraj in the multi-crore bank loan scam case. A Bench of Justices Bela M Trivedi and SC Sharma said the high court and the trial court committed error in granting bail to them. It also directed that Wadhawans be taken into custody forthwith.

# Axis Bank posts 5% rise in Q3 net profit

**Mumbai**

Axis Bank on Tuesday reported a 4.91 per cent growth in its consolidated net profit to Rs 6,491.66 crore, dragged down by higher operating expenses.

On a standalone basis, the third largest private sector lender's net profit for the October-December period grew less than 4 per cent at Rs 6,071 crore. Its core net interest income grew 9 per cent to Rs 18,087 crore, while non-interest income was up 22 per cent to Rs 5,555 crore. The assets grew 14 per cent, while the net interest margin narrowed to 4.01 per cent from 4.26 per cent in the year-ago period, and 4.11 per cent in the preceding quarter.

# Tata Motors to hike passenger vehicle prices from February 1, 2024

**New Delhi**

Tata Motors on Sunday said it will increase prices of its entire passenger vehicle range, including EVs, by an average of 0.7 per cent with effect from next month.

This increase will be effective February 1, 2024, and is being taken to partially offset the rise in input cost, Tata Motors said in a statement.

# Climate change may cut labour productivity in India to 40 per cent by 2100: Study

**New Delhi**

Labour productivity could fall as low as 40 per cent in countries like India and Pakistan by the end of the century due to climate change, threatening global food production, according to a study.

The research, published in the journal Global Change Biology, predicts that other regions in southeast and south Asia, west and central Africa, and northern South America are expected to see physical work capacity reduced to 70 per cent.

"Assessments consistently conclude that climate change will reduce crop yields making food security challenges worse," said study lead Gerald Nelson, a professor at the University of Illinois in US.

"But it's not only crops and livestock that are affected. The agricultural workers who plant, till, and harvest much of the food we need will also suffer due to heat exposure, reducing their ability to undertake work in the field," Nelson said.

The study involved using computational models to predict the physical work capacity—defined as 'an individual's



work capacity relative to an environment without any heat stress'—under different predicted climate change scenarios.

The models, developed by Loughborough University in UK, are based on data from more than 700 heat stress trials—which involved observing people working in a wide range of temperatures and humidities, and differing weather conditions, including sunshine and wind.

The maximum work capacity achievable by individuals in a cool climate was used as the benchmark for the study—representing 100 per cent physical work capacity, the researchers said.

Reductions in capacity mean people are limited in what they can physically do, even if they are motivated to work. This may translate as farmers needing extra workers to do the same job, or if these are not available, then reducing their crop sizes, they said.

The study shows that agricultural workers are already feeling the heat, with half the world's cropland farmers estimated to be working below 86 per cent capacity in 'recent past' (1991–2010) climate conditions.

The researchers also considered potential adaptation to mitigate the impact of climate change on agricultural workers.

Switching to night time or shade work to reduce direct solar radiation, was shown to lead to 5-10 per cent improvement in worker productivity, they said.

A second option is to increase the global use of mechanical machinery and equipment, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where agricultural practices largely involve hard physical labour, according to the researchers.

# Science Fiction as the Blueprint: Informing Policy in the Age of AI and Emerging Tech

## PART II

Science Fiction and Technological Innovation

Scientists and technologists often view science fiction as exaggerating current scientific abilities and skewing public expectations about future technologies. Although many futuristic visions remain unrealised, the genre's true purpose is not to predict but to explore potential futures, acting as a creative playground for emerging tech trends. For instance, since 2011, the critically acclaimed series Black Mirror has taken current technologies like VR, social media, robot dogs, and drones, and used them to extrapolate radical futures based on current trends.[ However, the genre is not limited to sociopolitical commentary and has historically spurred innovation, influencing even everyday objects like cell phones; notably, Martin Cooper of Motorola credits the flip-phone design to the communicator in Star Trek. Science fiction thus continues to inspire real-world technological advancements by pushing the imagination to its limits.

The feedback loop between science fiction and science is not new and can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. For instance, a company started by the American inventor Simon Lake created the first operating submarine in 1898 called the Argonaut. Lake attributed his motivation for building submarines to his fascination with underwater travel and exploration after reading Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea by Jules Verne. Science fiction also had a crucial influence on spaceflight. Specifically, stories by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells had a tangible impact on the work of early rocketry pioneers Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Hermann Oberth, and Robert H. Goddard. After reading Verne's 1865 novel From Earth to the Moon, Tsiolkovsky formulated the idea of producing incremental acceleration to achieve escape velocity for exiting Earth's atmosphere using chemically fueled multistage rockets. The work of Verne also influenced Oberth, but his work remained theoretical. Conversely, Goddard managed to build the world's first liquid-fueled rocket that launched successfully in 1926 and stated that he dedicated his life to spaceflight after reading War of the Worlds by Wells.

As the twentieth century progressed, the overlap of science fiction with technology grew, especially with the rise of computers, telecommunications, and mass media since the 1980s. At the same time, new iterations of the science fiction genre started entering the mainstream. Instead of galaxies 'far, far away', fictional narratives started presenting near-future technologies like AI, VR, BCIs, and the internet. The emergent subgenre was called 'cyberpunk' and spawned various books and well-known films.[b] Narratives depicting the transition from space operas to more intimate urban technological imaginary were generated primarily in the West, particularly Silicon Valley, as it was the axis mundi of tech innovation in the late twentieth century. In India, occasional cyberpunk stories only emerged following the economic liberalisation



of the 1990s and the resultant IT boom. Some notable works include The Calcutta Chromosome (1995) by Amitav Ghosh, Harvest (1997) by Manjula Padmanabhan, The Simoqin Prophecies (2001) by Sumit Basu, and The Beast with a Billion Feet (2008) by Anil Menon. Given India's position as a developing economy in a Western global order, Indian science fiction narratives at the turn of the century depicted a struggle between the need for industrialisation, globalisation, and technological development and the fear of a cultural neocolonialism emerging with the adoption of Western technological imaginaries. Some prominent examples of Western cyberpunk works that dominated the global techno-cultural gestalt in their heyday are TRON (1982), Blade Runner (1982), The Terminator (1984), RoboCop (1987), and The Matrix trilogy (1999-2003). The narratives occurred in heavily urbanised dystopian future worlds with large, sprawling cities controlled by powerful corporations that wielded more sociopolitical and economic authority than governments. The stories generally depicted characters with bodies existing co-dependently with technological prostheses like BCIs.

This subgenre has had a lasting influence on cultural imaginations about the future of digital technologies and the technological lexicon commonly used today. For instance, consider the European Parliament's AI policy discussions in 2018, which stated that "AI-based systems can be purely software-based, acting in the virtual world."[23] The use of the term 'virtual world' is intriguing because such a world does not exist. The term ascribes spatial properties to the internet and information displayed on computer screens. However, there is no space or "world" where digital information exists. The notion originates from William Gibson's 1984 novel Neuromancer, which introduced 'cyberspace' and other concepts like superintelligent AIs and VR into mainstream culture. Gibson was embedded in the tech culture of Silicon Valley in the 1980s and onwards and exchanged various ideas with technologists and entrepreneurs. Gibson's interactions with Silicon Valley figures, including VR pioneer Jaron Lanier, who acknowledged Gibson's dubious influence on tech development, demonstrate the mutual exchange between science fiction and technology.

Mark Pesce's development of VRML in the early 1990s, inspired by Gibson's cyberpunk literature, aimed to give the internet a spatial dimension.[26] VRML was designed to graphically add a third dimension to the internet's web of hypertexts, URLs, and webpages. Though it did not take off due to technical and cost barriers, the idea of a perceptual internet persisted, influenced by Neal Stephenson's works like Snow Crash (1992) and Cryptonomicon (1999). Stephenson's narratives, steeped in cyberpunk elements like AI and VR, extended his impact beyond literature. In his seminal novel Snow Crash, the story unfolds in a near-future US dominated by a virtual reality space known as the Metaverse. The protagonist juggles his life as a pizza delivery person for the Mafia in reality and as a warrior and hacker in the Metaverse. His path crosses with a young skateboard courier, and together, they uncover a conspiracy revolving around a new drug and computer virus called 'Snow Crash.' This virus uniquely affects users in both the Metaverse and the real world. As they delve deeper, they uncover its connections to ancient Sumerian culture and language, exploring themes of language, consciousness, and control. The novel vividly depicts a dystopian world fragmented into corporate franchise states, devoid of a central government.

John Hanke, ex-director of Google's Geo division, credits Snow Crash with inspiring 'Earth Viewer,' which evolved into Google Earth.[27] Additionally, Stephenson's role as a 'futurist' at Blue Origin, Jeff Bezos's aerospace company, underscores his dual influence on tech innovation and fiction. Stephenson's coining of the term 'Metaverse' in Snow Crash is his seminal contribution to technology, envisioning the internet as an immersive realm. His involvement in merging science fiction with tech policy further highlights his influence.

Contemporary Examples

Stephenson's 1990s concept of an immersive Metaverse coincided with the rise of graphic user interfaces (GUIs) and the 1989 creation of the World Wide Web by Sir Tim Berners-Lee.[28] Based on GUI platforms, Stephenson's narrative extrapolated what it would feel like to inhabit and experience cyberspace in the future. Stephenson's background in programming enriched his portrayal of the Metaverse, leading Mark Pesce to compare sections of Snow Crash to "detailed software designs" at a 1999 MIT forum. Not only did Stephenson receive various literary awards for his work, but he was also able to create a conceptual framework or a use case from which engineers and developers could derive inspiration.

Snow Crash has had a pervasive influence on Silicon Valley culture since its publishing, with journalists stating that there is perhaps no established entrepreneur untouched by its ideas.Even Google co-founder Sergey Brin said in 2000 that the book greatly influenced him as it anticipated technological development a decade ahead of its time. In recent years, however, the most influential manifestation of Stephenson's ideas has been Zuckerberg's project to create a real Metaverse, announced in December 2021. He stated that the Metaverse project aims to create an "embodied internet where you're in the experience." The emphasis on being on the internet experientially is a clear parallel to Stephenson's vision in the 1990s. Dean Eckles, a scientist at the company, has stated that, at one point, Zuckerberg made Snow Crash compulsory reading for all product managers. This fascination with Snow Crash in particular and science fiction in general has led some to associate it directly with Meta's acquisition of the VR company Oculus in 2014 for US$3 billion.

# With new tech comes new responsibilities

Human imagination is the foundation for everything in the world around us. As motivational writer William Arthur Ward famously said "If you can imagine it, you can create it."

Throughout history, it was the people with seemingly audacious and imaginative fantasies who invented so many of the technologies we take for granted today such as electricity, planes, organ transplants, the internet, and mobile phones—all having far-reaching implications for society and the global economy. With the convergences of multiple technologies in this Fourth Industrial Revolution, the technological fantasies that inventors have are even more audacious—flying anywhere around the world in 30 minutes, extending eternal life, 3D printing entire cities, managing agriculture from space, communicating to the computer through thought, and creating artificial intelligence that is equal to the cognitive capability of a human brain and being able to talk to communicate with animals. These are just some of the many technological fantasies that people are pursuing today.

AI builds on top of all previous technologies such as the Internet, mobile phones, the Internet of Things (IoT) and synthetic biology.

It is these types of bold technological fantasies that drive innovation and will impact society. We have had many General Purpose Technologies (GPT) in our history (most notably fire and electricity), however, what is different in our historical moment is the speed with which general purpose technologies are being introduced into our society, economies, and homes. AI builds on top of all previous technologies such as the Internet, mobile phones, the Internet of Things (IoT) and synthetic biology. This rapid integration presents a tremendous economic and social opportunity but also comes with the potential for immense social peril.

Social cohesion and mental well-being at the whim of decision architecture

As we live in an era of proliferating emerging technologies, it is worth appreciating the power of decision architecture that influences the decision-making process of people. The best example to showcase this is the underappreciated and underestimated power that social media decision architecture has had on the fabric of our society. Social media was created on the basis of the bold technological fantasy—'What if there could be a digital platform where everyone could be in touch with all their friends'. Since then, while it has remained a platform to connect with your friends, it has also expanded to become a utility for businesses, a precision advertising platform, and a loudspeaker for public officials and terrorists alike. Over the years, the algorithms began to change and technologists and software engineers were asked to design algorithmic systems that incentivise keeping people on social

media platforms for as long as possible so that they can view as many ads as possible. One such example is Facebook where 97.5 percent of all its revenue comes from ads. Corporate decisions that singularly focused on ad revenue, without regard for societal impact, have had many consequences for the mental health of all demographics across the population.

The algorithms began to change and technologists and software engineers were asked to design algorithmic systems that incentivise keeping people on social media platforms for as long as possible so that they can view as many ads as possible.

At the individual level, algorithmic decision architecture that exclusively favours corporate incentives has adversely impacted mental well-being. The Wall Street Journal conducted an investigative journalism report on TikTok's algorithm and found that it was able to classify and show viewers items they were interested in even if they did not explicitly search



for it. More concerningly, they found that what keeps people viewing more videos on the platform isn't necessarily what they are interested in and what they like, but what they are most "vulnerable" to. Facebook and Instagram have been found to exacerbate body image issues for teenagers, particularly girls. Meta is aware of it and how its platforms create low self-esteem for kids and teens. A study on the social media use of adolescents who committed suicide found various themes relating to the harmful effects of social media such as "dependency, triggers, cyber victimisation, and psychological entrapment." These negative consequences of AI on social media have not been fully managed and continue to cause harm today.

At the societal level, algorithmic decision architecture that exclusively favours corporate incentives without consideration of downstream order effects has created polarised and fragmented societies. The Center for Humane Technology outlines the impact of AI on society in their AI Dilemma presentation by Aza Raskin and Tristan Harris. In this presentation, they create a distinction between society's first interaction with

AI which was through social media; and they label society's second interaction with AI as occurring in 2023 with the current and emerging generative AI tools. Information overload, doomscrolling, addiction, shortened attention spans, sexualisation of children, polarisation, fake news, cult factories, deepfake bots, and the breakdown of democracy are a few of the harms that have been identified from society's algorithmic interaction with social media. While the software developers did not have malicious intent, they overlooked their duty to society when they singularly focused on creating algorithms that were incentivised to maximise engagement on the platform. Raskin and Harris' assessment of what is socially unfolding with the next interaction with AI is a reality collapse due to an excess of fake everything, in turn, resulting in a trust collapse. In his book The Coming Wave, Mustafa Suleyman, founder of Google's DeepMind, also flags his concern about the ubiquitous nature of generative AI and its ability to democratise the creation of cyberweapons, exploit code, and our very biology. These concerns that are unfolding each day have not been fully managed and are notable threats today.

While the software developers did not have malicious intent, they overlooked their duty to society when they singularly focused on creating algorithms that were incentivised to maximise engagement on the platform.

While it is important to grapple with the social challenges of existing algorithms, there are new algorithms and new ways through which they will be embedded deeper into our lives.

New fantasies, new technologies, new responsibilities

As a coping mechanism for dealing with grief after her best friend passed away, Eugenia Kuyda created a conversational AI bot of him based on all their text exchanges. She did this so that she could continue to chat with him posthumously. Out of this experience, she created the company Replika where anyone can create a personalised AI companion to chat with. The testimonials feature many happy users who feel they found a friend and that this digital algorithmic companion has alleviated their loneliness. In fact, Replika and other digital companion AI companies are creating a valuable technology that addresses a growing social problem. In May 2023 the US Surgeon General released an advisory report calling out the public health crisis of loneliness and social isolation. Currently, two countries

in the world have appointed a minister for loneliness—the United Kingdom and Japan. However, studies show that this epidemic of loneliness and social exclusion has a strong foothold in Africa and India as well and in other parts of the world where studies have not yet been conducted.

Given the adverse social implications AI has had with social media, as new AI-based chatbots and digital companions are created to alleviate the growing problem of loneliness, it will be imperative to consider the first rule in the "Three Rules of Humane Tech" outlined by the Center for Humane Technology: "When you invent a new technology, you uncover a new class of responsibilities." This rule is not only relevant to those who invent a new technology, but it applies to all those who use this technology. Within the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) policy governing how personal data is managed, there is a section on the "Right to be Forgotten" which did not need to exist until computers could remember us in perpetuity. Will new laws need to be created to force companies to maintain the cloud infrastructure of digital companions across the lifetime of an individual? Will rights be needed for these algorithmic companions so that those who rely on them do not have to grieve, or feel lonely without them? What if people want to marry their AI companion? If AI companions become an important form of social infrastructure and part of human intimacy, new laws will need to be created to protect these customised algorithms and access to them.

Within the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) policy governing how personal data is managed, there is a section on the "Right to be Forgotten" which did not need to exist until computers could remember us in perpetuity.

In due course, there will be new government policies and regulations to mitigate and manage the social implications of existing and new AI technologies, yet, the current state of technological advancement continues to exceed the speed with which regulations are legislated. The absence of regulation does not mean companies should abdicate their responsibility for it. In an era where loneliness and isolation are on the rise, those who design algorithms have an outsized role to play in creating algorithmic systems that do not destroy social cohesion, exacerbate loneliness, or push teenagers to commit suicide. Those who leverage algorithms built by others need to hold themselves and others accountable to ensure that algorithmic systems cause no harm.

In the meantime, the wild technological fantasy we should all embrace today should be to design algorithmic systems that create incentives for human flourishing and socio-economic prosperity.

# Guardians of tomorrow: How AI shapes the future of the armed forces

The history of Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption in the military is a compelling narrative unfolding against the backdrop of technological evolution, geopolitical shifts, and the relentless pursuit of military supremacy. The journey commenced in the mid-20th century when the seeds of AI were planted in endeavours to automate complex computations and data analysis.

As the Cold War unfolded, intelligence agencies, particularly the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) handling foreign intelligence for the United States (US), alongside its counterpart, the National Security Agency (NSA), embraced rudimentary forms of AI. During this period, the foundation for contemporary natural language processing (NLP) techniques was laid through the machine translation of foreign language documents. The late 1950s saw the advent of early AI systems such as the general problem solver (GPS), designed to emulate human-like problem-solving capabilities. Concurrently, the US Department of Defense initiated projects like the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) to delve into the military applications of AI, paving the way for more ambitious developments in the ensuing decades.

The late 1950s saw the advent of early AI systems such as the general problem solver (GPS), designed to emulate human-like problem-solving capabilities.

Advancing into the early 21st century, a significant shift occurred driven by progress in machine learning and data analytics. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), commonly referred to as drones, became essential instruments for surveillance and reconnaissance, now featuring advanced AI capabilities. Empowered by extensive datasets, AI algorithms assumed a central role, analysing information, identifying patterns, and notably enhancing situational awareness on the battlefield. The incorporation of AI into military applications progressed into a broader, more refined, and integral facet of contemporary warfare.

The notion of AI-enabled warfare has become increasingly significant. This encompasses a range of technologies, including autonomous systems, swarming drones, and machine learning algorithms for predictive analysis. Ground vehicles equipped with AI for autonomous operations have been designed to undertake tasks spanning logistics to reconnaissance, particularly in challenging environments. Nations globally are engaged in a competitive pursuit to develop and incorporate the latest emerging technologies into their arsenals. India appears to be cognizant of this trend and is now actively making concerted efforts not only to partake in this global race but potentially take a leadership role in it.

### India's AI Ambitions

The Indian Armed Forces are set to leverage AI across various domains, revolutionising threat assessment, logistics optimisation, cybersecurity, and surveillance with AI-powered UAVs. Similar to AI's disruptive impact on the economy, these military advancements are poised to redefine the landscape in the near future.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has committed an annual budget of INR 100 crore (US$12 million) for the next five years to the Defence Artificial Intelligence Project Agency (DAIPA). This funding will support AI projects, infrastructure development, data preparation, and capacity building. In a recently released document, it is emphasised that the Indian defence industry is making strides, positioning the armed forces among the world's most advanced. This collaborative effort involves public and private sectors, research organisations, academic institutions, start-ups, and innovators, ushering in a new era of cutting-edge AI innovation. Unique products have emerged in areas such as data, logistics, surveillance, and weaponry. Among several significant developments is the creation of the enhanced collaborative autonomous rover system (ECARS) unmanned ground vehicle (UGV), a versatile modular platform powered by AI for multi-terrain movement. Its perception and navigation modules enable full unmanned control, enhancing operational capabilities and mitigating risks in critical missions, ultimately ensuring the safety of our forces.

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Another groundbreaking advancement emerges with the development of cognitive radar, addressing challenges faced by present-day radars in ensuring a robust detection mechanism within dynamic environments. The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) Young Scientist Laboratory, specialising in cognitive technologies, tackles these challenges through the application of deep neural network and reinforcement learning methodologies. This amalgamation of cutting-edge technologies signifies a notable leap forward, showcasing a commitment to innovation and mastery over radar applications.

### AI's transformative potential

The impact of emerging technologies extends beyond commercial jobs, making a significant imprint on military practices. Several technological revolutions often find their genesis with military considerations in mind. The wealth of data and the development of AI models hold tremendous potential to enhance decision-making across various domains within the armed forces. For instance, the strategic approach known as A2AD (anti-access/area denial) stands to gain substantially from these advancements. A2AD employs a sophisticated blend of cutting-edge technologies and tactical manoeuvres to restrict an adversary's access to specific areas, posing significant challenges to their operational effectiveness within defined regions. This concept intricately intertwines with discussions on modern warfare and defence strategies, poised to be influenced by the ascent of emerging technologies such as AI.

The wealth of data and the development of AI models hold tremendous potential to enhance decision-making across various domains within the armed forces.

The intense global competition to bolster military capabilities is striking. Both the US and China are directing increasingly substantial resources towards their armed forces, placing a distinct emphasis on investments in the development and integration of AI into military practices. In this dynamic landscape, India, driven by aspirations, rapid growth, and its emerging role as one of the leaders in the global South, cannot afford to fall behind. China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), as an example, has made substantial investments in AI technologies, showcasing a dedicated commitment to incorporating AI into its defence capabilities. For India to sustain its standing and make meaningful contributions, active participation in the AI race is imperative, potentially positioning itself as a leader in shaping the future of military technologies globally. More crucially, it is paramount for India to secure its national defence, especially amid rising threats from neighbouring regions.

Additionally, a significant recent development lies in AI in cyber warfare. AI-driven tools and algorithms play a pivotal role in detecting and responding to cyber threats, fortifying military networks, and safeguarding critical infrastructure. The capacity of AI to analyse extensive volumes of data in real-time serves to bolster the military's resilience against the ever-evolving landscape of cyber threats.

The history of AI in the military is a complex story, ranging from early computation to today's focus on machine learning and autonomous systems. AI has significantly changed military operations globally, with nations investing heavily in research to stay technologically advanced. While discussions about ethical standards for AI affecting future jobs are widespread, collaboration in military AI development remains unclear. However, this doesn't signify a dead end. The US has released a declaration featuring non-legally binding guidelines that highlight best practices for the responsible military use of AI. These principles underscore crucial aspects such as the audits of military AI systems, explicit and well-defined use cases, rigorous testing and evaluation throughout their lifecycle, the ability to detect and prevent unintended behaviours, and a senior-level review for high-consequence applications. The future of AI development is unclear, given the unprecedented scale and impact of the innovation, making regulation challenging. Embracing change seems evident and imperative, especially for the armed forces.

The US has released a declaration featuring non-legally binding guidelines that highlight best practices for the responsible military use of AI.

In hindsight, it's clear that the internet revolutionised the armed forces by providing extensive access to information. Similarly, AI could be seen as having a comparable impact. The internet granted access to vast amounts of data, and now, with AI, this data can be processed into insights at a remarkable pace. The ongoing narrative of AI in the military involves finding a balance between fostering innovation and seeking military dominance.

# Modi, Macron And the World



French President Emmanuel Macron may be facing political trouble at home but his visit to India, full of pomp and ceremony, underscored the special place of France in Indian strategic calculus. The roadshow in Jaipur with a 'chai pe charcha' capped by the pageantry of Republic Day celebrations where he was the chief guest was a reminder of how the strategic elite as well as ordinary Indians view France as a trusted partner that has always stood by India. This is no mean feat in a world which continues to evolve and where there are no permanent friends.

Macron has become the first French president to be accorded this honour of being welcomed as the chief guest at Republic Day celebrations twice. Last year, it was PM Modi who was the chief guest at the Bastille Day military parade hosted by Macron when an Indian tri-services contingent had also participated in the march. And at this year's Republic Day celebrations, a 95-member marching contingent and a 33-member band contingent from France joined in.

Even as the French President and Indian Prime Minister Narendra PM Modi deliberated on global problems like the war in Gaza and the turmoil in the Red Sea,



they also found ways to further bolster their bilateral engagement. This involved adopting a roadmap on defence industrial cooperation to enhance opportunities in co-design, co-development and co-production in key sectors such as air and space, maritime tech,cyber, robotics and artificial intelligence. And there is also an attempt to bring the two societies together closer with the announcement of a 'Young Professionals' scheme for people between 18 to 35 years of age.

India and France have been close partners but under PM Modi and Macron there has been a sustained attempt to work towards making this critical partnership respond to the 21st century realities and challenges. In this 25th anniversary year of the Indo-French Strategic Partnership, there

is no attempt to simply sit on past laurels. The strategic realities are evolving rapidly and any partnership, to remain relevant, should also evolve. Such an evolution is relatively easy when there is a historic comfort level in engagement.

In the case of India and France, this high degree of comfort level could be gauged from the fact that New Delhi could invite Macron after, reportedly, the US President couldn't make it to the Republic Day celebration and Macron accepted it without any hesitation. This suggests a level of understanding quite rare in global engagements with the result that New Delhi and Paris have been able to reconfigure their ties nimbly in the light of changing global realities.

If France was one of the first western nations to bet on India during the Cold War when most of the West saw India as the "other," it also understood much better than most the need for New Delhi to acquire its independent nuclear deterrent. From standing by India after the 1998 nuclear tests to supporting India's membership at the Nuclear Suppliers' Group and permanent membership at the UN Security Council, France has been a critical anchor for India as India sought to create newer platforms like the International Solar Alliance. On issues such as terrorism and Kashmir, France's support has been key for

India in standing its ground against a large part of the globe.

And as India sought diversification in its defence inventory, France emerged as a priority nation. New Delhi has also welcomed a more robust French engagement in the Indian Ocean as India seeks greater maritime stability in the Indo-Pacific in partnership with like-minded nations. Just a few days back, The Indian Air Force conducted Exercise Desert Knight in collaboration with the French Air and Space Force (FASF) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Air Force over the Arabian Sea to enhance synergy and interoperability between the three air forces.

Both nations value strategic autonomy and so they understand each others' priorities better. With Europe facing a prolonged crisis in Ukraine and with the Indo-Pacific balance of power shifting rapidly, Paris and New Delhi will have to work even closer now to lead and provide solutions to emerging challenges. The shadow of Donald Trump also looms large over the American political landscape, so it is also time to start preparing for even greater disruption. PM Modi and Macron have succeeded in developing a close personal bond, which has been instrumental in further consolidating the bonds between two nations. But as the world faces disruption from multiple sources and the US domestic polity undergoes another significant churn, New Delhi and Paris will have to start looking beyond the bilateral to shaping an international order that is demanding serious attention.

# Fans have told me not to take 4 year-break again, says actor Shah Rukh Khan

Superstar Shah Rukh Khan, who was on a four-year hiatus before he returned to the movies last year, says fans' love for his three films "Pathaan", "Jawan" and "Dunki" is a sign that they don't want him to stay away from the big screen for a long time.

Shah Rukh was speaking at the fan meet-and-greet for "Dunki", his last film of 2023. He had started the year with "Pathaan" and followed it up with "Jawan". All three films turned out to be commercial successes.

For someone who has been working continuously for 33 years, taking "such a big gap" was new for him, the 58-year-old actor said.

"Normally, you feel a little nervous and you feel that, 'I hope I've got the film right'. Previously, some of my films didn't do well so I thought I'm not making good films. But I think more than my films, it was the love of the people for 'Pathaan', 'Jawan' and 'Dunki'...

"This whole country and people outside of India have actually taken me to their heart more than the films and said that, 'Don't take a break for four years, two to four months are fine'. So, I'm very, very thankful to all of you, to the audience and the whole world for making me realise that what I do is right and I should keep on doing it," Shah Rukh said at the event on Monday.

"Dunki", directed by Rajkumar Hirani, opened to mixed reviews upon its release on December 21. The comedy drama, based on an illegal immigration technique 'donkey flight', also stars Taapsee Pannu, Vicky Kaushal, Boman Irani, Vikram Kochhar and Anil Grover.

Every film has a different destiny and Hirani's movies talk about the matter of the heart, added Shah Rukh.

"Those films aren't made so that people gather in the cinemas to watch them on a weekend and make a lot of noise. Those are films that talk about our lives and what I liked the most about 'Dunki' was about home and family.

"The whole being that you may leave your home, but home never leaves your heart. It's about where you belong... In India, these roots are really strong... People cherish this thought... It's a very touching film," he said.

# 'Fighter' joins Rs 100-cr club

The craze around actors Hrithik Roshan and Deepika Padukone-starrer action thriller film Fighter doesn't seem to end soon. The film has now entered the Rs 100 crore club in India.

On Sunday, the film minted Rs 30.20 crore, which took its total four-day collection to Rs 123.60 crore in India till now. Helmed by Siddharth Anand, the film also starred Anil Kapoor, Karan Singh Grover and Akshay Oberoi in pivotal roles. Fighter was released in the theatres on January 25 and received amazing reviews. The film features Hrithik as Squadron Leader Shamsher Pathania aka Patty, Deepika as Squadron Leader Minal Rathore aka Minni, and Anil as Group Captain Rakesh Jai Singh aka Rocky, fighting for the country. It marks Hrithik and Deepika's first-ever on-screen collaboration.

# 'Some magic happened there': Vishal Bhardwaj on 20 years of 'Maqbool'

Some magic happened there, says Vishal Bhardwaj about his much acclaimed "Macbeth" adaptation "Maqbool", which completes 20 years of its release struggling just recently to make 'Maqbool'. It didn't do well in theatres. It didn't do any business but so much appreciation," he said.

on Tuesday.

The film, the first of his Shakespeare trilogy, didn't do well in theatres, didn't make much money and there was no actor willing to take on the title role finally played by Irrfan.

"Maqbool", which also starred Tabu, Pankaj Kapur, Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri, set the Shakespearean tragedy in the Mumbai underworld.

"When I look back, the one thing that I feel very nice and proud of is that I could achieve a timeless quality in that film. It is not just because of me but the whole unit and actors... Some magic happened there," Bhardwaj told PTI in an interview.

He credits the film, which released on January 30, 2004, for making him a "star filmmaker" overnight.

"Even now, when you watch the film, it does not feel dated. I have to sometimes remind myself that it's already 20 years because it feels like I was

Bhardwaj, 58, started out as a music composer in the film industry and turned to direction with "Makdee" in 2002. He already had the script ready for "Maqbool" at the time.

"But when I tried to make 'Maqbool', I could not get money or stars. I approached everybody, except Aamir, Shah Rukh and Salman, and almost everyone rejected it. Some said, 'Arrey, hero loser hai', 'Arrey, ye to badi depressing film hai', 'Underworld is done to death, 'Satya and Parinda are already there so who can make a better film than this'?" he recalled.

The filmmaker said he struggled till 2004 before getting a chance to make the film and rest, as they say, is history.

Bhardwaj later went on to complete his Shakespeare trilogy with "Omkara", an adaptation of "Othello" in 2006, and "Haider" from "Hamlet" in 2014.

He now wants to look at Shakespeare's comedies but said it will take some time.

# My first live singing performance was everything I could wish for: Parineeti Chopra

Actress Parineeti Chopra finally made her live singing debut and said the performance was everything she could wish for. Parineeti took to Instagram, where she shared a motley of pictures giving a glimpse of what her concert looked like. She also shared a video where she said the event was special because she performed in her own city — Mumbai.

For the caption, she wrote: "And it's done…. I have tears of joy as I type this: my first ever live singing performance was last night and it was everything I could wish for and more. Thank you all for the love and kindness you all have shown. It means a lot to me." Earlier this month, Parineeti shared that she was now having two careers – acting



and music. Talking about her acting career, Parineeti, who made her debut in 2011 with the film 'Ladies Vs Ricky Bahl', was last seen on screen in 'Mission Raniganj' opposite Akshay Kumar. Her next is with Diljit Dosanjh and the title of the film is 'Chamkila'.

# Baba Ramdev's wax impression unveiled, to adorn Madame Tussauds Museum in New York

Yoga guru Baba Ramdev became the latest global icon to find pride of place at New York's Madame Tussauds Museum, as his wax statue was unveiled on Tuesday.

On Tuesday, the Yoga guru's wax impression was unveiled at an event in Delhi in the presence of Baba Ramdev.

Baba Ramdev's wax figure has been carved in the Vrikshasana pose, which involves standing on one leg with the other leg bent



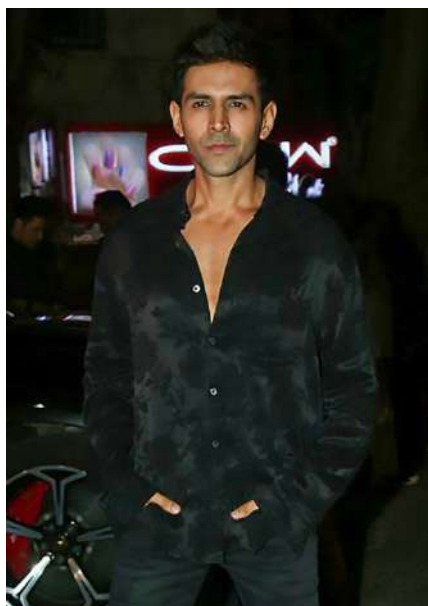and the sole of the foot resting against the inner thigh of the standing leg.

On the occasion, Baba Ramdev said, "I feel honoured that my wax statue is being installed at Madame Tussauds in New York. It's not just a piece of recognition for me but is also a recognition of yoga and ayurveda and India's eternal culture.

This also shows that not only are icons from Bollywood, Hollywood, and the world of politics celebrated and recognised but a seer can also claim similar recognition." At the event, Baba Ramdev also put a 'tika' on the forehead of his wax impression while unveiling it.

# Kartik Aaryan fans break barricade, fall on each other at event to meet star

Bollywood actor Kartik Aaryan was in shock after he saw fans breaking the barricade and falling on each other after he went to greet them.

Kartik made his entry at the event and paused to shake hands with some of his fans.

In the clip, the 'Dhamaka' star was seen walking on the red carpet while making his way to an awards show held on Sunday. Fans in thousands gathered to catch his glimpse of the actor. He waved and even went on to greet them.

As he went towards the swarm of fans who stood behind the barricade, the crowd broke the barrier to greet him. A concerned Kartik quickly took a step back and asked the security to take care of what happened.

On the work front, Kartik will be next seen in his upcoming film 'Chandu Champion' by filmmaker Kabir Khan.



The incident was shared by a celebrity paparazzo Viral Bhayani on Instagram, where

# 69th Filmfare Awards: Ranbir Kapoor's 'Animal' wins Best Music Album award

Actors Ranbir Kapoor, Bobby Deol and Anil Kapoor starrer action thriller film 'Animal' won the Best Music Album award at the 69th Filmfare Awards.

This year's grand award function is being held in Gandhinagar, Gujarat.

Team 'Animal' including director Sandeep Reddy Vanga and the musicians collectively received the award for Best Music Album.

'Animal' won the award beating Dunki, Jawan, Pathaan, Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani, Tu Jhoothi Main Makkaar, and Zara Hatke Zara Bachke.

Songs of 'Animal' like 'Arjan Vailly', 'Satranga', 'Papa Meri Jaan', 'Hua Main', 'Pehle Bhi

Main', 'Saari Duniya Jala Denge', and 'Abrar's entry: Jamal Kudu' received massive responses from the fans.

Also, singer Shreyas Puranik



won the RD Burman Award for Upcoming Music Talent for his song 'Satranga' from 'Animal'.

The film has been nominated in 19 categories tonight including Best Film, Best director and Best

Actor categories.

Helmed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga 'Animal' was one of the biggest blockbusters of 2023. However, it was also criticized for its alleged depiction of misogyny.

The film also starred Rashmika Mandanna, Anil Kapoor, and Bobby Deol in the lead roles.

The film left many fans excited as it had a post-credits scene, teasing a sequel titled 'Animal Park', in which Ranbir would potentially have a double role.

'Animal' revolves around a troubled father-son relationship and has Ranbir in the role of Rannvijay Singh, who goes on to exact revenge after there's an assassination attempt on his father. The film raked in over Rs 800 crore at the box office.

# Swept off their feet: Audacious Ollie Pope cracks spin code, forcing India to go back to drawing board



**HYDERABAD**

England vice-captain Ollie Pope's batting masterclass in the opening Test here has jolted India into a rethink of their plans ahead of the second Test in Visakhapatnam this week.

The hosts suffered only their fourth defeat in a home Test in the last decade after Pope smashed 196 in arguably the best knock by a touring batter in India.

The right-hander played audacious scoops and numerous sweep shots — both traditional and reverse — to disrupt the rhythm of the Indian spinners and forcing the hosts to alter their field placements.

Pope's approach was a refreshing change from that adopted by most touring batters, who often try just to hang around and hope for success.

India head coach Rahul Dravid was amazed at how Pope nailed so many "high-risk shots" and acknowledged they would have to put a plan together for the batter before the second Test gets underway on Friday.

"I haven't seen a better exhibition of sweeping and reverse sweeping in these conditions against that quality of bowling," the former skipper said after their defeat. "Having said that, for us now it's important that we respond and come up with some plans and some strategies and see how we can maybe make him play those shots from probably even more difficult lengths."

India's spin trio of Ravichandran Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel claimed a combined 14 of the 20 English wickets but Dravid felt they could have bowled better. "Credit to him (Pope), but we were a little bit off. In the next Test match, if we get our execution right, I hope he makes a mistake," Dravid said.

Pope's 21 fours included a no-look reverse ramp shot, the batter scooping the ball over wicketkeeper Srikar Bharat's head to the boundary.

The 26-year-old said playing reverse sweep in India was a safer and more profitable option than trying to defend the ball with the obvious risk of edging it to the slip.

"The guys we are facing are very skilled bowlers," Pope told reporters after their 28-run victory. "If you try to defend each ball, there's probably more chance to get out than if you play a cross-batted shot. If we can keep nailing them (reverse sweeps), we get more bad balls. As batters, if we can hit their best ball for four with a reverse sweep, that is going to lead to more short balls and more half-volleys and open up the outfield."

## Rahul, Jadeja out of second Test

Hyderabad: India all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja and batter KL Rahul were today ruled out of the second Test against England, dealing a blow to the hosts after a shock loss in the series opener here.

Jadeja sustained a hamstring injury while going for a quick single on Sunday while Rahul complained of pain in his right quadriceps.

Worryingly, Rahul had also injured his right thigh while fielding in the IPL in May last year and that required a surgery, keeping him out of the game for four months. BCCI has added Mumbai batter Sarfaraz Khan, left-arm spinner Saurabh Kumar and all-rounder Washington Sundar to the squad for the second Test. It is a maiden national call up for Sarfaraz after scoring a truckload of runs in domestic cricket and more recently in the India A series against England Lions.

# Shubman Gill has got cushion that Cheteshwar Pujara didn't get, needs to come good in Vizag: Anil Kumble



**Hyderabad**

Former India captain Anil Kumble feels the embattled Shubman Gill has been given the kind of "cushion" that veteran Cheteshwar Pujara never got and the young batter needs to make it count in the second Test against England or risk being under tremendous pressure.

The 24-year-old Gill has not scored a half century in his last 11 Test innings. He scored a 128 in India's first innings against visiting Australia in Ahmedabad in March last year, but after that his highest score has been 36.

He made 23 and 0 in the two innings of the first Test against England here, which India lost by 28 runs on Sunday.

"He (Gill) has been given the cushion perhaps even a Cheteshwar Pujara didn't get, although he (Pujara) has played over a 100 Tests," Kumble said on 'JioCinema'.

"I keep coming back to him (Pujara) mainly because that was his place (No 3) not too long ago. Pujara played in that World Test Championship final and post that, it's been Shubman Gill, who's been moving from the opener's slot, and he himself wanted to bat at No. 3."

The 36-year-old Pujara last played a Test in June 2023 -- the World Test Championship final against Australia -- and he was ignored after that. He scored a double hundred (243 not out) in a Ranji match earlier this month. Skipper Rohit Sharma, before the start of the England series, said younger players were being preferred in a bid to look ahead in Indian cricket.

Kumble said he needs to work on his mindset and also adjust his technique slightly for the second Test starting on February 2.

"So, when you want to bat at No. 3, especially in India, because you have that talent, you certainly need to work on your game. He has the skills, he is young and he's learning, but he needs to do it in Vizag (in second Test), otherwise the pressure will be on him," he observed.

"He needs to be a lot freer, score runs. He needs to come up with his own plan to tackle spin, because he has hard hands.

"It's good for good surfaces where the ball is coming on nicely and the faster bowlers are bowling at you. But when the ball is turning, when it's slow, you need to use your hands and control and check your shots. That's something he needs to work on. It can't be one flow all the time."

But can Gill change his skill sets just four days before the next Test?

"I think it's all the mindset. You can certainly work on your mindset, and you have the best possible person as the coach (Rahul Dravid) to manage that for Shubman Gill," he pointed out.

Indian batters are known for playing spin better than others but they were outwitted by England in the first Test here. Kumble advised the Indians to think out of the box in the remaining matches.

# Spinners selected gives us best opportunity to beat India: Stokes

**Visakhapatnam**

Long before debutant spinner Tom Hartley bowled England to a famous win in the first Test against India, skipper Ben Stokes had asserted that the tweakers picked for the series "give us the best opportunity" to humble the Asian giants in their own backyard.

Playing in his first Test, left-arm spinner Hartley picked up seven wickets in the Indian second innings to script a 28-run victory for the tourists, who gambled with a lone specialist pacer in Mark Wood in Hyderabad.

"I think sometimes inexperience can be looked at into a bit too much. There's no doubt that experience makes players feel more comfortable and settled, especially in this environment," Stokes said in an interview with 'JioCinema' when asked about his approach behind selecting spinners just before the start of the series opener.

He added: "But the spinners we've selected on this tour are ones we think will give us the best opportunity to beat India. For me, it's not just about the spinners but understanding the talent they have and allowing them to go out there and express that talent and giving them the platform and the best possible opportunity to not worry about the outcome too much and focus on what cricket actually is."

In the run-up to the five-match series, there was a bit of chatter around the visitors' inexperienced spin unit, but Stokes is not one to read much into all these analysis.

"As a bowler, your job is to think about taking wickets. As a batsman, it's about going out there and scoring runs. Anything more than that is overcomplicating it. I'm just taking away that fear and anxiety around the outcome." No team has beaten India in India since 2012, when England under Alastair Cook emerged triumphant after losing the first Test, and that is not lost on Stokes.

On the challenge of beating India in India, Stokes said, "India is a hard place to come and win a game, never mind a five-match series. It's been a mission for any team who've come here to turn over India. We understand that and respect that.

"But again, it comes down to opportunity. We've got an amazing opportunity ahead of us. The squad we've picked from spinners to our seam bowlers to our batters, I think it's going to give us the best opportunity to win a series in India."

Having led the country to some fines wins since taking over Test captaincy from Joe Root, Stokes says he never aspired to be a leader.

"It's something I never had any aspirations to do or really thought about too much, to be honest. I never really had too much responsibility around captaining or anything, either in age-group cricket or any other level.

"I had a little taste of it with the Durham Academy. This opportunity presented itself to me and it was something I couldn't turn down. It's a role I have grown into, it's a role that I've really enjoyed.

"I love everything that comes with it, the responsibility of looking after people from different types of angles. Whether it be out in the field or away from the field. Understanding different individuals and personalities, because in a team sport, you have got a lot of people and not everyone is the same. That's helped me mature as a person.

When the discussion turned to 'bazball', he said the team tries to stay away from the term.

"It's a phrase that was created by the media. Something that we try and stay away from. It just came from what we have managed to do over the last two years and how we've played.

"We don't necessarily like it, Baz (coach Brendon McCullum) hates it! Whenever that word pops up, we just try to say that's how England plays Test cricket," Stokes said.

Speaking about the Test format, Stokes said it remains the pinnacle of cricket for him.

"I'm from that mould of cricketers who have fortunately been able to go through the transition of where cricket is. Test cricket, in particular, is where it's all up for me.

"It's my favourite format. Part of that is because of how much hard work you have to put into it to come out a winner.

"When Test matches go five days and you're sitting in the changing room after winning that game, there's nothing more satisfying than looking back on the five days and how much hard work you've had to put in to get that moment. Test cricket for me, is the pinnacle of cricket, regardless of where cricket has transitioned to," Stokes said.

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# It felt like my time in this world was up: Indian cricketer Rishabh Pant on horrific car accident

**New Delhi**

India wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant felt his "time in this world" was over when he met with a horrific car accident in December, 2022.

Opening up for the first time on the life-threatening accident near his hometown Roorkee, Pant said he nearly felt he would die after his Mercedes burst into flames after hitting a divider on the wee hours of December 30, 2022.

The accident left Pant with a ligament tear in his right knee and two cuts on his forehead and the 26-year-old stumper has been out of action since then.

"First time in my life I felt like my time in this world is up. During the accident I was aware of the wounds, but I was lucky as it could have been even more serious," Pant told Star Sports.

"I was feeling that someone saved me. I asked the doctor how long will it take for me to recover, he said it would take 16-18 months. I knew I had to work hard to cut this recovery time," he added.

The accident forced Pant to undergo a surgery in Mumbai and he is expected to return to action in the IPL.

Pant is expected to lead Delhi Capitals in the upcoming IPL after he was part of the franchise delegation during the IPL 2024 Auction in Dubai last year.

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# India slip to fifth spot in World Test Championship rankings after Hyderabad loss

**Dubai**

India have dropped to fifth behind Bangladesh in the World Test Championship (WTC) standings after their shock 28-run defeat to England in the first Test in Hyderabad.

India were briefly on top after drawing the two Test series with South Africa before being overtaken by Australia following their victory over Pakistan. Rohit Sharma's men have suffered in terms of accumulated percentage points, going down from 54.16 after the South Africa series to 43.33 currently. Chasing 231 for a win in the fourth innings, India were all out for 202 in the first Test on Sunday. England's Tom Hartley (7/62) spun a web around the home team batters to cause a collapse. The rare defeat at home took Rohit Sharma's side down to fifth spot in the latest WTC rankings with 55 percentage points. India currently have 43.33 percentage points in their kitty.

Australia's sensational eight-run defeat to the West Indies in Brisbane on Sunday did not have much impact on them as they continued to lead the WTC rankings.

South Africa, New Zealand and Bangladesh—all with 50 percentage points—are at second, third and fourth spots, respectively.