

Across State

Year -7 Issue - 13

Mumbai, Thursday 04- 10Jan '24

EDITOR IN CHIEF: SANJAY M. BHAIRE

Rs.5/- PAGES- 24

'LDF, UDF Govts Considered Nari Shakti Weak': PM Modi At BJP Mahila Conference In Kerala



Thrissur

Acknowledging the prominence of Nari Shakti, PM Modi said, "Women like 'Velu Nachiyar & Savitribai Phule represents India's powerful Nari Shakti". Speaking on the daughters of Kerala, PM Modi said, "The daughters of Kerala have shaped India's Freedom, Culture, and constitution". He said that various daughters of Kerala, including Bhagirathi Amma, Anju Bobby George and PT Usha, among others, have brought great laurels to India.

Speaking on the prominence of 'Modi's guarantee' as a term, PM Modi said, "India's Nari Shakti will ensure the 'Sankalp se Siddhi' of a Viksit Bharat". Lamenting the LDF-UDF, PM Modi said, "The politics of LDF-UDF has always been to weaken the Nari Shakti". He added that Modi guaranteed to empower Nari Shakti through the passage of the 'Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam' and the Act prohibiting 'Triple Talaq'. Reiterating his vision for a Viksit Bharat, PM Modi said, "We intend to create a Viksit Bharat by developing an empowered force of Nari Shakti". Speaking on the four castes in India, PM Modi said, "Nari Shakti, Youth, Farmers and the

Poor are the only four castes in India". He said that the government is striving for the empowerment of all. PM Modi said, "The LDF-UDF Governments in Kerala only intended to deprive its people of true development". He remarked, "Over the last ten years, the N.D.A. has only striven to ensure last-mile saturation of schemes, enabling the progress of all". Referring to the significant impediments in the form of the COVID pandemic, Ukraine crisis, Sudan crisis and the recent crisis in Gaza, PM Modi said, "No matter the size of the problem or situation, the B.J.P. has always ensured the safety of its citizens both home and abroad. He added that even when Indian nurses were stuck in Iraq, the government had evacuated them safely. He reiterated that Modi guarantees to ensure the safety and security of Indian citizens both at home and abroad. Reflecting on the politics of LDF-UDF, PM Modi said, "LDF-UDF & Congress in Kerala stand for Corruption, Crime & Nepotism". He added that now, with the formation of the I.N.D.I alliance the various parties have allied to loot the people of India and Kerala. He retorted that it is only

the B.J.P. that can ensure the proper development of Kerala. Where the B.J.P. stands for robust infrastructure and connectivity, the I.N.D.I alliance only stands for gold smuggling, loot and creating impediments towards every infrastructure project.

PM Modi further stated, "I.N.D.I. alliance only aims to hurt the religious sentiments of the people." He added that the I.N.D.I. alliance has made temples and various religious festivals a loot medium. He said the incidents during the Thrissur Pooram festival and the Sabarimala temple were tragic. On the contrary to this, B.J.P. has always sought to promote Sabka Saath and Sabka Vikas. He added that he had a very fruitful meeting with the prominent Christian personalities in Delhi who also praised the government's efforts in the progress and development of India.

PM Modi said, "We all have to be a part of the collective effort to make India a 'Viksit Bharat' and to ensure Kerala's pivotal role in the same". He said that it is essential for Nari Shakti to emerge as a collective force. Ultimately, he thanked all the people of Kerala for turning up in such large numbers.

Inside...

'Delay in infrastructure projects cause difficulty to people, burden state exchequer': Bombay HC

[Read Story On page 2](#)

CM Shinde directs state admin to prioritise Maratha survey work

[Read Story On page 3](#)

No ground to order investigation by SIT into allegations against Adani group, says Supreme Court

[Read Story On page 4](#)

In 2019, India registered 9.3 lakh cancer deaths, second highest in Asia, says study

[Read Story On page 6](#)

'Delay in infrastructure projects cause difficulty to people, burden state exchequer': Bombay HC

Mumbai

The Bombay High Court on Wednesday observed that delay in infrastructure projects such as the Mumbai-Goa National Highway (NH-66), whose repair and widening work was undertaken in 2011, causes difficulty to the people and becomes a burden on the state exchequer with rising construction costs.

Once assured by the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) that the entire work on NH-66 (Panvel to Sawantwadi) will be completed by December 2024, the bench disposed of a PIL raising concerns of commuters.

"The entire stretch shall be complete in all aspects, including road widening and repairs by December 31, 2024. This direction is based on assurance of state PWD, NHAI," the court said.

The court added that the entire stretch shall be completed within the assured date and any deviation from the timeline will be dealt with seriously by it which may amount to issuing contempt proceedings against the authorities.

A division bench of Chief Justice Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya and Justice Arif S Doctor was hearing a PIL by lawyer Owais Anwar Pechkar, a resident of Chiplun in Konkan, who commutes along



the highway.

Pechkar had sought directions to the state government and the NHAI to resolve issues faced by the commuters, including measures to fix potholes on NH-66, which is prone to accidents and to expedite the widening work and complete the project at the earliest.

Pechkar argued that authorities had been extending the deadline to complete the project every year and they should finish the work at the earliest for ease of commuters.

In November last year, the High Court had directed the NHAI and the Maharashtra Public Works Department (PWD) to file a current status report about the widening work and had directed the panel of experts to submit a report into a collapse of a certain structure, a portion of an under-construction bridge.

The bench noted that the road widening and other repair works are not yet complete despite "12 long years" since it was undertaken.

"Delay in such infrastructure projects

not only causes numerous difficulties to the population which uses roads, but ultimately comes as a burden on the state exchequer. Any delay in such projects necessarily entails rising construction costs which is ultimately borne by public at large," the bench noted in its order.

The NHAI and the state government submitted that while some packages of the project being constructed by them are complete, all of them will be completed by December 31, 2024.

Ruling alliance in Maharashtra announces joint rallies in all districts on Jan 14 ahead of Lok Sabha polls

Mumbai

The tripartite ruling alliance of the BJP, Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde) and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP-Ajit Pawar) on Wednesday kickstarted its campaign for the Lok Sabha polls in Maharashtra by announcing joint rallies in all districts on January 14 in a bid to bring workers of all three parties together.

Speaking at a joint press conference of the three parties, state BJP chief Chandrashekhar Bawankule announced, "We have decided to organise joint rallies at the district level on January 14 which will see the participation of senior leaders of all three parties. After district rallies, there will be divisional-level rallies and once the distribution of seats is decided, we will have Lok Sabha constituency-level programmes." "We will also take this from district to booth level to ensure that the workers of all parties will work together," he added. The press conference was also attended by Shiv Sena minister Dadaji Bhuse and Sunil Tatkare, chief of

NCP (Ajit Pawar) Maharashtra unit. "We will also ensure that irrespective of which party gets the Lok Sabha seats, workers of all three parties will strive tirelessly to ensure victory. We will win more than 45 seats with 51 per cent vote share," said Bawankule, claiming that the only aim is to create an India as envisioned by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "I want to assure you that we will win more than 225 seats in the Assembly polls as well." The BJP leader underlined that several leaders from different parties are queuing up to join the three ruling parties. "There will be only leaders in the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) and they will be left with no workers soon," he said. All three leaders accepted that the decision of the central leadership in terms of seat sharing will be accepted. "There will be workers who would want to contest every seat till the last moment. Ultimately it is the central leadership which will take the final call. The voting will be for the leadership of Narendra Modi and nothing else," asserted Bawankule.

Subscribe Today!

Across State

SUBSCRIMEDIAON FORM

अक्रॉस मुंबई

Name :

Address :

.....

.....

.....

City : State:

.....

Phone : E-mail:

☐ 1 year subscrimediaon of both Across State (English) & Across Mumbai (Marathi+Hindi) – 500/- Rs.

☐ 1 year subscrimediaon of Across State (English) 240/- Rs.

☐ 1 year subscrimediaon of Across Mumbai (Marathi+ Hindi) 240/- Rs.

Kindly, send the Cheque in favour of
BHAKTI PRINT MEDIA PRIVATE LIMITED.

Send Your Subscrimediaon Here:

B wing, 512, Knox Plaza, Mindspace,
Off. Link Road, Behind Inorbit Mall,
Malad (W), Mumbai-64.

Signature

Contact :
Mr. Sanjay M. Bhaire
(9819991194)

CM Shinde directs state admin to prioritise Maratha survey work

Mumbai

Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde on Tuesday directed the state administration to prioritise the Maratha community survey work undertaken by the state backward class commission and complete it in a timely manner. "The survey undertaken by the state backward class commission is of utmost importance to prove the backwardness of Maratha community. All district collectors and divisional commissioners should give priority to this work. This work must be completed through a special cell in a time bound manner," said Shinde. He was speaking at the cabinet sub-committee meeting on Maratha reservation.

While speaking at the state



legislative assembly, Shinde had said that the commission was tasked with preparing a report to prove the social and educational backwardness of the Maratha community.

He had said that based on that report a special session of the state legislature will be

held in February 2024 to give reservation to the Maratha community.

A curative petition regarding the same is presently pending in the Supreme Court and the survey data can also be used for the same.

Shinde asked the district

collectors and divisional commissioners to ensure that the questionnaire sent to them is filled accurately. "The Supreme Court had raised several objections to the previous report and therefore it is important that the report we give now will be accurate," he said.

State backward class commission chairperson Adv (retired) Sunil Shukre recently held a meeting of all district collectors and a questionnaire prepared by Pune's Gokhale institute was submitted to them. The state government has made Rs 367 crore available to the commission.

The cabinet sub-committee also directed the administration to ensure that the data regarding

Hyderabad (since Marathwada region was once under the Hyderabad Nizam rule) is also accessed at the earliest to ensure old Kunbi (OBC) details are included.

Later, Shinde also held an online meeting with Maratha activist Manoj Jarange-Patil who has threatened to launch fast unto death from January 20 in Mumbai demanding Kunbi (OBC) status to Marathas in the state.

While Shinde assured Jarange-Patil that the government is expediting the process, the activist reiterated his demand of extending Kunbi status to Marathas and also demanded that the cases against Maratha protesters should be withdrawn.

Maharashtra govt to set up new corporation to boost textile industry

Mumbai

In order to give the state's textile industry a boost, the Maharashtra government has decided to set up a new corporation for the textile industry on the lines of Maharashtra Industrial Development corporation (MIDC).

The corporation will be called Maharashtra State Textile Development Corporation (MSTDC) which will be set up after the merger of three existing textile corporations of the state – Maharashtra State Handloom Corporation, Maharashtra State Powerloom Corporation Ltd and Maharashtra State Textile Corporation – into the MSTDC.

The government has formed a committee to prepare a draft for the law to set up MSTDC, which is aimed at developing a sustainable and fertile environment for the textile industry's growth.

Principal secretaries of the textiles, finance, planning, industries and law & judiciary departments and other officials are part of the committee that will prepare a draft to enact the law.

According to the officials, the MSTDC will be setup under the state's new Integrated and



Sustainable Textile Industry Policy 2023-28, which was approved by the state cabinet in May last year. The new textile policy is aimed to attract investment of Rs 25,000 crore in the sector in the near future and boost investment in the state's cotton production industry.

As per the new policy, the Textile Commissionerate and the Silk Directorate will be merged to form the Textile and Silk Commissionerate, and the office at the regional level will be known as the Regional Deputy Commissioner – Textile and Silk. The government also aims to establish six technical textile parks across the state under the new policy and Maharashtra Technical Textiles Mission will

also be undertaken to ensure "aggressive growth" of the sector. "The MSTDC will be statutorily setup on the lines of MIDC as announced in the Integrated and Sustainable Textile Policy 2023-28. All the corporations under the department of textiles will be merged into the MSTDC and all the assets of the existing corporations will be transferred to the MSTDC and all payments will be restructured as per the government directives. MIDC has been established under the Maharashtra State Industrial Development Act, 1961. On a similar line, the Maharashtra State Textile Development Act will be setup by law," the official said.

Area of state affected by drought rises to 73 per cent

Mumbai

More than 73 per cent of Maharashtra is now considered drought-affected after a cabinet sub-committee on Relief and Rehabilitation on Tuesday decided to include an additional 220 circles in the list of drought-affected regions. This comes following continuous demands for the same from different parts of the state.

Two months ago, the Maharashtra government had announced a drought in 229 tehsils, which has 1,290 circles. With the decision from the sub-committee, a total of 1,510 circles out of 2,068 are now drought-affected, covering more than 73 per cent of the state.

While the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) will be used for relief and rehabilitation in 40 tehsils (269 circles) announced in October 2023, the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) will be used for the newly added drought-affected region. "Different parts of the state are facing a difficult situation. There are issues related to the availability of water and fodder. The government will ensure aid is received by

all," said Maharashtra Relief and Rehabilitation minister Anil Patil. Under the present revenue administration, each district is divided into subdivisions for administrative convenience. Each division may consist of 4 to 5 talukas. These talukas are further subdivided into revenue circles and each circle has around six to eight villages.

Due to stringent criteria such as specifications about the scarcity of rainfall, paucity of available groundwater, remote sensing criteria, vegetation index, moisture of soil, area under sowing and condition of crops, only 40 tehsils were declared in the list of drought-affected areas in the first phase in October. In the previous of meeting of the cabinet sub-committee, it was decided a report will be sought from districts about circles lacking installed rain gauge machines. "The report from the district collector was to be vetted by the Agriculture department and based on that, further decision about giving benefits was to be taken," the minutes of the meeting stated.

No ground to order investigation by SIT into allegations against Adani group, says Supreme Court

New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Wednesday rejected petitions seeking to transfer the probe into allegations of stock price manipulation levelled by Hindenburg Report against Adani Group from SEBI to an SIT.

A three-judge Bench led by CJI DY Chandrachud -- which had reserved its verdict in the case on November 24 last year -- said there was no ground here to transfer the probe in this case and it could only be raised if there was wilful or deliberate violation of rules.

Noting that SEBI had already completed probes into 22 of the 24 matters, the Bench directed SEBI to complete the investigation in the other two cases in three months.

The Bench, however, said, "This court has the power under Articles 32 and 142 to transfer the probe to CBI, etc, but

such powers can only be used sparingly and this court will not ordinarily supplant this role, and the petitioners must put forth

"The Govt of India and the SEBI to look into if there is any infraction of law by Hindenburg Report on short selling, and if so,

interests of the Indian investors.

The report of OCCRP cannot be taken into account to doubt the SEBI investigation, it said.

"The reliance on OCCRP report is rejected and reliance on a third party organisation report without any verification cannot be relied upon as a proof," the top court said.

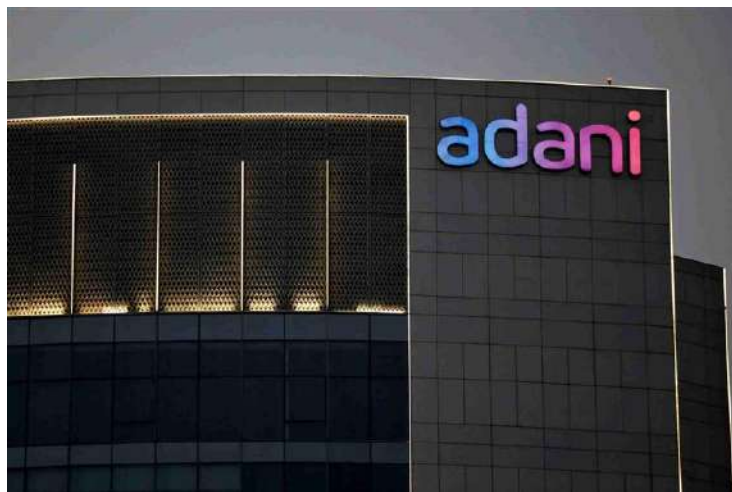
While reserving the verdict, the top court had on November 24 said that it had no reason to "discredit" SEBI, which probed allegations against the Adani group, as there was no material before it to doubt what the market regulator had done and the court did not have to treat what was set out in the Hindenburg report as a "true state of affairs".

Alleging conflict of interest against members of an Expert Committee set up by the Supreme Court to probe into allegations of accounting fraud and stock price manipulation against the Adani

group in the Hindenburg report, a petitioner had in September urged it to constitute a new expert panel to look into the allegations afresh.

Acting on PILs, the Supreme Court had in its March 2, 2023 order also asked SEBI to investigate if there was any manipulation of stock prices in contravention of existing laws and if there was any failure to disclose transactions with related parties and other relevant information concerning related parties to the market regulator.

SEBI told the Supreme Court on August 22 last year that 22 of the 24 investigations into allegations of market manipulation against the Adani Group levelled in the Hindenburg report had been finalised while the remaining two were of interim nature. The market regulator said it "shall take appropriate action based on the outcome of the investigations in accordance with law".



strong evidence to show that the investigative agency acted in a biased manner."

It also rejected allegations of conflict of interest against the Expert Committee appointed by it to look into the matter.

take action in accordance with law," the CJI said, pronouncing the verdict.

It directed the Centre and SEBI to take into consideration the recommendations of the Expert Committee to protect

DRDO develops system for real-time, site-specific weather forecast in mountains

New Delhi

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has developed a new system for real-time and site-specific weather forecast over the north-western Himalayan region during winter months.

According to DRDO scientists, the system will be instrumental in the mitigation of natural hazards such as extreme temperature, heavy snowfall, avalanches, and landslides. This will not only assist in the movement and deployment of troops in mountain regions, but also be beneficial for the civil administration and the local population of such areas.

Real time weather forecast in remote and difficult terrain assumes significance in the backdrop of not only a high level of operational deployment, but also in the growing tourist influx and increasing socio-economic activities in areas such as Ladakh. Many road axis in this region, which are not only strategically important but also frequented by visitors, are prone to vagaries of nature such as heavy rain,

snow, and avalanches.

Developed by the Defence Geoinformatics Research Establishment

in high altitude snow-bound areas, sources said.

DGRE's mandate is to create a geospatial information system for operational planning and military intelligence, provide cutting edge engineering solutions for ensuring safe movement of troops in all kinds of terrain and build artificial intelligence-enabled solutions for deployment.

The system, called analog ensemble, uses meteorological observations of 20-30 previous winter seasons from observatories located in the Shamsawari Range, Pir Panjal Range, and the Great Himalayan Range to predict surface meteorological variables such as temperature, wind, and precipitation for up to 72 hours.

Several recent studies on high-altitude weather patterns, including those conducted by the DRDO have indicated a perceptible change in

climate owing to global warming and anthropological activities. This has led to an increase in freak weather events, necessitating monitor and observation.

Studies have noted that the Himalayans have become warm in the last 25 years with significant climate change seen especially after 2000. The amount of snowfall has decreased whereas rainfall has increased, with the snow line in many areas also receding.

In fact, a recent report tabled in Parliament by the Departmentally Related Standing Committee on Water Resources observed that there is a severe shortage of meteorological and monitoring stations in the Indian Himalayan region. Presently DGRE has set up three Mountain Meteorological Centres for avalanche study and the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology has five meteorological and discharge stations located in the high-altitude regions. The Central Water Commission has set up 46 meteorological observation stations in the Himalayan region, out of which only 35 are telemetry-based stations.



(DGRE) located at Chandigarh, the system functions as an independent weather forecast system and has undergone trials

Fresh protest erupts in Indian wrestling; this time against Bajrang, Sakshi and Vinesh

New Delhi

The ongoing crisis in Indian wrestling took a fresh twist on Wednesday when hundreds of junior wrestlers assembled at Jantar Mantar here to protest against the loss of one crucial year of their careers, a situation for which they blamed top grapplers Bajrang Punia, Sakshi Malik and Vinesh Phogat.

Loaded in buses, the junior wrestlers arrived from different parts of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Delhi, taking the police unawares.

Close to 300 of them came from Arya Samaj Akhara in Chhaprauli, Baghpat, while many others came from the Virender Wrestling Academy in Narela. Many are still packed in buses and they plan to deboard and join their colleagues when more wrestlers arrive at the landmark protest site.

The security personnel struggled to control them as they shouted slogans against Punia, Malik and Phogat.

The protesters were carrying banners that read: 'UWW save our wrestling from these 3 wrestlers'.



Ironically, almost a year back at the same protest site, the top three wrestlers had managed to draw huge support for their cause when they called for the arrest of former WFI chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh after accusing him of sexually harassing women wrestlers.

Thousands of people from different sections of society, including farmers groups, social workers, politicians, women's groups and members of the wrestling fraternity, came out to support Malik, Phogat and Punia.

The three are now facing protests from within their community with those assembled at Jantar Mantar, accusing them of ruining their careers.

Since January 2023, national camps and competitions have been on hold as the WFI has been suspended twice and an ad-hoc panel is running the sport.

Those protesting on Wednesday demanded that the suspended WFI be restored after disbanding the ad-hoc panel which has been appointed to run the sport by the sports ministry.

Modi govt wants to arrest Arvind Kejriwal to stop him from campaigning in general election: AAP

New Delhi

Delhi minister and AAP leader Saurabh Bharadwaj on Wednesday accused the BJP-led Centre of hatching a conspiracy to arrest Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal to stop him from campaigning in the general

election. answered in what capacity is he being summoned -- as a witness or an accused. The entire excise policy case is political and an attempt to stop Kejriwal from campaigning in the general election. The BJP-led Centre has hatched a conspiracy to get him arrested," he said.



election.

Kejriwal on Wednesday skipped the third summons issued by the ED in the Delhi excise policy case and sent a written reply calling the notice illegal.

Addressing a press conference, Bharadwaj questioned the timing of the Enforcement Directorate summons.

"The ED has still not

Bharadwaj said former Delhi deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia, who has been in jail for nearly a year, would be proved innocent

sooner or later. Kejriwal was asked to appear before the ED on Wednesday for questioning in connection with an excise policy-linked money-laundering case.

This was the third ED notice to Kejriwal, also the AAP's convener, after he refused to appear before the federal agency on two earlier summonses for November 2 and December 21.

No ICU admission of critically ill without patient, kin consent: Govt guidelines

New Delhi

The recent guidelines released by the Union Health Ministry on ICU admissions state the criteria to admit a patient to ICU should be based on organ failure and need for organ support or in anticipation of deterioration in the medical condition.

The guidelines, compiled by 24 doctors with expertise in critical care medicine working in different hospitals across the country, recommend that hospitals cannot admit critically ill patients in the intensive care unit (ICU) in case of refusal by them and their relatives.

It is futile to keep terminally ill patients on whom the treatment will not make an impact in the ICU. Besides, based on the assessment of

resources during pandemic or disaster situations, the patients should be admitted to the ICU, the norms stipulate.

Altered level of consciousness of recent onset, need for respiratory support, patients with severe acute (or acute-on-chronic) illness requiring intensive monitoring and those who underwent major surgery and are at the risk of developing postoperative complications should be the criteria for admissions to the ICU. According to the norms, blood pressure, pulse rate, respiratory rate, breathing pattern, heart rate, oxygen saturation, urine output and neurological status should be monitored in a patient awaiting an ICU bed.

Supreme Court asks Lok Sabha Secretariat to respond to Mahua Moitra's petition against her expulsion

New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Wednesday asked the Lok Sabha Secretariat to respond to TMC leader Mahua Moitra's petition challenging her expulsion from the House.

A Bench led by Justice Sanjiv Khanna, however, refused to allow Moitra -- who represented Krishnanagar constituency in West Bengal before her expulsion -- to take part in proceedings of the Lok Sabha.

"No, no. We will take it up when listed," the Bench told senior advocate AM Singhvi after he sought permission for Moitra to take part in House proceedings.

"Let reply be filed by first respondent (Lok Sabha Secretariat) in two weeks,



rejoinder in three weeks thereafter," the Bench said, posting the matter for hearing in March.

It said her plea for interim relief would be considered after examining the Lok Sabha Secretariat's reply.

Moitra has challenged her expulsion that took place after the Lok Sabha adopted the report

of its ethics committee that held her guilty of accepting gifts and illegal gratification from a businessman.

Moitra had equated her expulsion with hanging by a "kangaroo court" and alleged that a parliamentary panel was being weaponised by the government to force the opposition into submission.

In 2019, India registered 9.3 lakh cancer deaths, second highest in Asia, says study

New Delhi

India registered about 12 lakh new cancer cases and 9.3 lakh deaths in 2019, becoming the second highest contributor to the disease burden in Asia for that year, according to a new study published in The Lancet Regional Health Southeast Asia journal.

Researchers found that India, China and Japan were the three leading countries in Asia in terms of number of new cases and deaths, where they say cancer has become a more significant public health threat with 94 lakh new cases and 56 lakh deaths in 2019.

Of these, while China contributed the most with 48 lakh new cases and 27 lakh deaths, Japan recorded about 9 lakh new cases and 4.4 lakh deaths, the international team of researchers including those from the National Institute of Technology Kurukshetra and All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Jodhpur and Bathinda, said.

"We examined the temporal patterns of 29 cancers in 49 Asian countries between 1990 and 2019 using estimates from the Global Burden of Disease, Injuries and Risk Factors 2019 Study (GBD 2019)," they wrote in their study.

They found that in Asia, the leading cancer was that of tracheal, bronchus, and

lung (TBL), resulting in an estimated 13 lakh cases and 12 lakh deaths. It was also found to be most frequent in men and third most frequent in women.

Specifically among women, cervical cancer is ranked second or among top five cancers in several Asian countries. The human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, introduced in 2006, has proved to be effective in preventing the disease and reducing HPV-related deaths, the researchers said.

Overall, in the continent and individual countries, TBL, breast, colon and rectum cancer (CRC), stomach and non-melanoma skin cancer were among the top five most frequent cancers in 2019 with a few countries having leukemia, prostate, liver and pancreatic cancers in the list, they said in their study.

Further, smoking, alcohol consumption and ambient particulate matter (PM) pollution remained dominant among the 34 risk factors for cancer, they said.

"The rising cancer burden due to increasing ambient air pollution is concerning in Asia," they wrote.

Five of the top 10 countries with regard to population-weighted annual average of PM2.5 in 2019 are present in Asia - India, Nepal, Qatar, Bangladesh and Pakistan, they said quoting the State of Global Air

Report, produced annually in collaboration with the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation's (IHME's) GBD project.

The researchers said the primary reasons for increasing air pollution in Asia were industry-led economic growth along with urbanisation, rural-to-urban migration and increasing usage of motor vehicles.

They said a high prevalence of smokeless tobacco (SMT) such as khaini, gutkha, betel quid and paan masala is a public health concern in South Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh and Nepal, with India alone accounting for 32.9 per cent of global deaths and 28.1 per cent of new cases of lip and oral cavity cancer in 2019.

"More than 50 per cent of the oral cancer burden has been attributed to smokeless tobacco, whose prevalence has grown in recent times in South Asia, including India," the team wrote.

SMT not only increases the risk of oral cancers but also enhances the risk of esophageal and pancreatic cancer, they said.

They wrote that improved water and sanitation can help reduce the transmission of Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori) and, in turn, potentially lower the risk of stomach cancer.

The researchers wrote that as countries underwent development, they observed a common pattern of reducing cancer burden in younger age groups and increasing cancer burden associated with increasing life expectancy.

They found a reduced burden of cancers such as leukemia among those under five years of age between 1990 and 2019.

Simultaneously, they found a raised burden of cancers associated with longer lifespan such as prostate, pancreatic and breast cancer over the same time period.

"Mere availability of screening might not improve the survival rates if cancer treatments are either unavailable or unaffordable," the team wrote.

In the low- and medium-income countries (LMICs) of Asia, oncologic infrastructure is either scarce or unaffordable, particularly in rural areas. Combined with a weak referral system, patients end up getting delayed diagnosis and treatment, leading to lower survival rates, the researchers said.

Therefore, along with timely availability of cancer screening and treatment, its cost-effectiveness or coverage of treatment expenses must also be a policy priority, they said.

Eyeing LS poll, Modi unveils projects worth Rs 20K cr in TN

New Delhi

Not counting alone on the infrastructural push, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday simultaneously heaped praise on Tamil traditions and culture to endear himself to the people of Tamil Nadu before the Lok Sabha elections.

While dedicating to the nation and laying the foundation stone of projects worth Rs 20,000 crore in Tiruchirappalli in Tamil Nadu today, Modi said that he mentioned Tamil culture at every opportunity during his travels abroad.

The Prime Minister said the establishment of sacred 'Sengol' in the new Parliament building and Kashi Tamil Sangamam and Saurashtra



Tamil Sangamam events organised by the government at his instance were efforts directed at creating enthusiasm for Tamil culture throughout the country.

Addressing a gathering at Tiruchirappalli, the PM said Tamil Nadu was a reflection of India's

prosperity and culture.

Chief Minister MK Stalin, Union Minister for Civil Aviation Jyotiraditya Scindia, Union Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting L Murugan and Governor RN Ravi were among those present at the function.

"Tamil Nadu is home

to the ancient language of Tamil and it is a treasure trove of cultural heritage," the Prime Minister said and mentioned saint Thiruvalluvar and Subramania Bharati among those who created magnificent literature. Modi mentioned Nobel Laureate CV Raman and

said the astrophysicist's memory instilled new energy in him whenever he visited Tamil Nadu.

Referring to the rich history of Tiruchirappalli, Modi said in Tiruchirappalli, one can find remnants of good governance models of old dynasties such as Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas and Nayaks.

The Prime Minister also paid tribute to Vijaykanth who passed away recently. He said the actor-turned-politician was a 'captain' not only in the field of cinema but also in politics. The PM also paid tribute to MS Swaminathan and recalled the role played by him in ensuring food security for the country.

PILs in SC challenge new law on appointing CEC, ECs

New Delhi

Days after the Centre notified the newly-enacted law on appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners, two PILs in the Supreme Court have challenged its validity, contending it gave sweeping powers to the Centre by dropping the Chief Justice of India from the three-member selection panel.

Gopal Singh, an advocate, and Madhya Pradesh Congress leader Jaya Thakur have challenged the validity of the Chief Election Commissioner and the other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Condition of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 notified in the official gazette on December 28 on the ground that it violated the principles of free and fair election and went against the Supreme Court's verdict in Anoop Baranwal versus Union of India.

Singh has sought a direction to put in place an independent and transparent system of selection, constituting a neutral and independent selection committee for appointment of the CEC and ECs. He has also urged the top court to stay the implementation of the law.

"It is inherent in a democratic



set-up that the agency which is entrusted the task of holding elections to the legislatures should be fully insulated so that it can function as an independent agency free from external pressures from the party in power or executive of the day. This objective is achieved by setting up an Election Commission, a permanent body, under Article 324 (1) of the Constitution," Thakur submitted.

Ending the 73-year-old system of the government appointing the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners, the Supreme Court had on March 2 last year ordered creation of a three-member panel comprising

the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha or leader of largest Opposition party and the CJI to select them. In a unanimous verdict, a five-judge Constitution Bench led by Justice KM Joseph (since retired) had, however, said that "This norm will continue to hold good till a law is made by Parliament."

Under the new law, the CJI has been replaced by a Union Cabinet Minister to be nominated by the Prime Minister as a member of the selection panel while the other two members – the Prime Minister and Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha remain the same.

"Purrs In The Wild": 3 Cheetah Cubs Born In Kuno National Park

New Delhi

One of the cheetahs in Kuno National Park, named Aasha, has given birth to three cubs. Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav shared a video and photo of the three cubs on X, formerly Twitter, and called it a roaring success for 'Project Cheetah'. The newly-born spotted felines can be seen resting and letting out little roars in the video.

He shared the post on X with caption, "Purrs in the wild! Thrilled to share that Kuno National Park has welcomed three new members. The cubs have been born to Namibian Cheetah Aasha. This is a roaring success for Project Cheetah, envisioned by PM Shri @narendramodi ji to restore ecological balance. My big congrats to all experts involved in the project, the Kuno wildlife officials, and wildlife enthusiasts across India."

Before this, a cheetah named Siyaya had given birth to four cubs in March 2023. However,

only one of them survived.

Both Aasha and Siyaya are among cheetahs translocated to India from Namibia under PM Modi's 'Project Cheetah'. The project is aimed at re-introducing Cheetahs, the only large carnivore species that went extinct in independent India, to Indian



wildlife.

The first batch of eight cheetahs were introduced in India in September, 2022. However, one of those cheetahs, Sasha, had died due to kidney failure.

The second batch of 12 cheetahs were flown in from South Africa to India on February 18, 2023. In the most recent addition, two male cheetahs, Agni and Vayu, were released in Kuno National Park on December 17, 2023.

Parliament security breach: Court seeks response from Delhi Police on accused's bail plea

New Delhi

A court here on Tuesday directed the Delhi Police to file its response to the bail application of Neelam Azad, the only woman arrested in the Parliament security breach case, by January 10.

Additional Sessions Judge Hardeep Kaur also adjourned for January 5 the hearing of an application filed by the city police seeking permission to conduct polygraph (lie detector test) of all six people arrested in the case.

The court later adjourned the matter after noting that the legal aid counsel, appointed by the judge to

represent the accused was not available today.

Police had brought all the six arrested accused before the court for the hearing of the application.

The accused- Azad, Manoranjan D, Sagar Sharma, Amol Dhanraj Shinde, Lalit Jha and Mahesh Kumawat- are currently in police custody till January 5.

The Delhi Police, represented by Public Prosecutor Akhand Pratap Singh, had earlier told the court that the December 13 "attack was well planned."

In a major security breach on the anniversary of the 2001 Parliament terror

attack, Sagar Sharma and Manoranjan D jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber from the public gallery during Zero Hour, released yellow gas from canisters and shouted slogans before they were overpowered by some MPs.

Around the same time, two other accused Amol Shinde and Azad sprayed coloured gas from canisters while shouting "tanashahi nahi chalegi" outside Parliament premises.

These four were taken into custody from the spot, while Jha and Kumawat were arrested later.



Citizenship Amendment Act rules to be notified 'much before' Lok Sabha poll announcement: Official

New Delhi

Rules for the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019 will be notified "much before" the announcement of the Lok Sabha elections, a senior government functionary said on Tuesday.

Under the CAA brought in by the Narendra Modi government, Indian nationality will be granted to persecuted non-Muslim migrants—Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis and Christians—from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan who had come to India till December 31, 2014.

There were massive protests in some parts of the country after the CAA was passed by Parliament in December 2019 and received the presidential assent subsequently.

"We are going to issue the rules for the CAA soon. Once the rules are issued, the law can be implemented and those eligible can be granted Indian citizenship," the functionary said.

Delayed by more than four years, rules for the CAA are a must for its implementation.

Asked whether the rules will be notified before the announcement of the next Lok Sabha elections that are likely to be held in April-May, the functionary said, "Yes, much before that."

"The rules are ready and the online portal is also in place and the entire process will be online. The applicants will have to



declare the year when they entered India without travel documents. No document will be sought from the applicants," the functionary said.

On December 27, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had said that no one can stop the implementation of the CAA as it is the law of the land and accused West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of misleading people on the issue.

Addressing a party meeting in Kolkata, Shah said it was the BJP's commitment to implement the CAA.

The TMC, led by Mamata Banerjee, has been opposing the CAA.

The promise of implementing the controversial CAA was a major poll plank of the BJP in the last Lok Sabha and Assembly polls in West Bengal. The saffron party's leaders consider it a plausible factor that led to the rise of the BJP in the state.

According to the manual of parliamentary procedures, the rules for any legislation should have been framed within six months of presidential assent or seek extension from the Committees on Subordinate Legislation in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.

Since 2020, the home ministry has been

taking extension in regular interval from the parliamentary committees for framing the rules.

More than a hundred people lost their lives during the protests or police action after Parliament passed the law.

Meanwhile, in last two years, more than 30 district magistrates and home secretaries of nine states have been given powers to grant Indian citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians coming from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan under the Citizenship Act of 1955.

According to the annual report of the Ministry of Home Affairs for 2021-22, from April 1, 2021 to December 31, 2021, a total of 1,414 foreigners belonging to these non-Muslim minority communities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan were given Indian citizenship by registration or naturalization under the Citizenship Act, 1955.

The nine states where Indian citizenship by registration or naturalization is given under the Citizenship Act of 1955 to non-Muslim minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan are Gujarat, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Maharashtra.

Authorities of none of the districts of Assam and West Bengal, where the issue is politically very sensitive, have been given the powers so far.

Political rumours abound; what actually is happening in Bihar

New Dehi

Soon after Chief Minister Nitish Kumar was reappointed the JD-U chief, his deputy, RJD's Tejashwi Prasad Yadav, cancelled his official Australia tour that was to begin from January 6, according to reports emanating from Bihar. The reason was said to be the "political uncertainty" in the state following the removal of Lalan Singh as JD-U chief.

On Sunday, a meeting between Bihar Assembly Speaker Awadh Bihari Chaudhary and RJD president Lalu Prasad further added fuel to the fire. According to Chaudhary (who is also from RJD), he was only calling on Lalu Prasad to pay respects and exchange greetings on the eve of the New Year. Observers, however, are reading these political developments as reiteration of the buzz surrounding growing "differences and mistrust" between the two main allies of ruling 'Mahagathbandhan'—the Janata Dal-United and Rashtriya Janata Dal—in Bihar.

Nitish Kumar—Bihar's longest serving chief minister and founder member of the JD-U—last week reiterated his status as its sole 'karta dharta', eliminating the possibilities

of multiple power centres and groupism amid the buzz of a "split" being engineered in his party to benefit the RJD.

He replaced Lalan Singh, who is said to be close to Lalu Prasad.

BJP watching closely

Quite naturally, the BJP—Nitish Kumar's friend-turned-foe-turned-friend-turned-foe—is watching the developments with great interest.

Senior Bihar leaders like Giriraj Singh, who have been regularly putting the ruling alliance into the dock over issues, are now calling "game over" for Nitish Kumar. As per Giriraj Singh and state BJP chief

Samrat Choudhary, the Mahagathbandhan government can fall any time because of internal contradictions.

Though saffron leaders say that another tie-up with Nitish Kumar is not possible as the BJP is in a position to get a majority on its own, they add that if Nitish Kumar shows any interest this time, it will be at their terms and conditions.

In other words, Nitish Kumar cannot stake claim to the chief minister's office, this time.

What is RJD thinking

According to reports, Lalan Singh had proposed to Nitish Kumar to make Tejashwi Yadav the CM. After Nitish Kumar shot down the idea, several JD-U MLAs also held a secret meeting in Patna.

Nitish had already announced that Tejashwi would lead the 'Mahagathbandhan' in the next election.

As per sources, the RJD needs the support of just eight to 10 JD-U MLAs to overthrow Nitish.

The majority mark in the 243-member Bihar Assembly is 122.

The RJD at present has 79 MLAs. It also has the support of 19 Congress MLAs and 16 MLAs of Left parties.

The JD-U has 45 MLAs and the BJP 78.

RJD, Congress and Left parties together have 114 MLAs, just eight short of a simple majority.

While Tejashwi Yadav has rubbished speculation regarding any differences between partners, the internal turmoil in JD-U provided fresh fodder to rumour mills.

According to reports, Tejashwi did not share dais with Nitish on four occasions in December.

Sources add that ambitions apart, the RJD is also unhappy over the way Nitish "embarrassed" his deputy with direct and indirect reference to 'misrule' during its government.



Planes collide, catch fire at Japan's Haneda airport; 5 killed

Tokyo

A passenger plane and a Japanese coast guard aircraft collided on the runway at Tokyo's Haneda Airport on Tuesday and burst into flames, with five people on the smaller plane killed, officials said.

All 379 people on Japan Airlines flight JAL-516 got out safely before the plane was engulfed in flames, Transport Minister Tetsuo Saito confirmed. The pilot of the coast guard plane escaped but the five crew members died, Saito said.

Tuesday's accident was the first time one of the Airbus A350, among the industry's newest large passenger planes, was severely damaged. It entered commercial service in 2015.

The Japan Airlines A350 had flown from Shin Chitose airport near the city of Sapporo, the transport minister said.



Coast guard spokesperson Yoshinori Yanagishima said its Bombardier Dash-8 plane, which is based at Haneda, had been due to head to Niigata to deliver relief goods to residents affected by a deadly earthquake in the region on Monday. The turboprop Dash-8 is widely used on short-haul

and commuter flights.

The coast guard pilot reported to his base that his aircraft exploded after colliding with the commercial plane, Vice Commander Yoshio Seguchi told reporters.

Shigenori Hiraoka, head of the Transport Ministry Civil

Aviation Bureau, said the collision occurred when the JAL plane landed on one of Haneda's four runways where the coast guard aircraft was preparing to take off.

Transport safety officials were analysing communication between aviation control officials and the two aircraft and planned to interview JAL officials to determine what led to the collision.

Hiraoka praised JAL for "taking appropriate procedures" to safely evacuate all passengers and crew members.

Swede Anton Deibe, 17, a passenger on the Japan Airlines plane, told Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet that "the entire cabin was filled with smoke within a few minutes. We threw ourselves down on the floor. Then the emergency doors were opened and we threw ourselves

at them.

"The smoke in the cabin stung like hell. It was a hell. We have no idea where we are going so we just run out into the field. It was chaos," Deibe added.

Another passenger told NHK television that cabin attendants were calm and told everyone to leave their baggage behind, then all lights went off and the temperature inside the cabin started rising. The passenger said she was afraid she might not get off the plane alive.

The transport minister said officials were doing their utmost to prevent any delays in the delivery of relief goods and other operations for the disaster-hit region. Transport officials said the airport's three other runways had reopened.

Would help bridge Indo-Pak divide if elected, says PPP candidate Saveera Parkash

Peshawar

Dr Saveera Parkash, the first Hindu candidate to contest the general elections from the Buner constituency in the restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, has said that if elected, she would help build diplomatic bridges between Pakistan and India.

A doctor by profession, 25-year-old Saveera last week filed her nomination papers from the Pakistan People's Party for the general seat of PK-25 in Buner district.

Saveera, a candidate of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), said she has received the title 'daughter of Buner', while the "Muslim brothers" have not only assured her of getting their votes but also their complete support, Geo News reported on Tuesday.

If elected as a lawmaker, Dr Saveera said she would help solve the problems of Hindus living in Pakistan.

Saveera said she is a patriotic Hindu and after receiving the 'daughter of Buner' title her morale has further increased.

If elected as a provincial assembly member, she said she will play a positive role towards the relations between Islamabad and New Delhi, while the Hindu community - both in Pakistan and across the border - will be able to contact her without any hesitation, the channel



reported.

The politician, who will contest one of the most crucial elections in the country's recent political history, termed PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's Goa visit in May a positive development towards fostering Indo-Pak relations.

Saveera said people stand with her because of this she has never felt ostracised. She does not only have the PPP's backing but is also receiving support from other parties, which is an indication that she will receive votes from Muslim voters as well.

"I was proud to be a part of the Pashtun culture, but when I got the party ticket for the general elections and people, including my Muslim brothers, came to know about it, I received several congratulatory and encouraging messages," she said, sharing astonishment at receiving immense support after which her morale "rose higher than the Himalayas".

After winning the elections to be held on February 8, her priorities as a lawmaker would include promoting education and addressing issues like health and environmental pollution. She is also concerned about the lack of health facilities available in her district, along with the lack of education and awareness about healthcare.

Saveera chose to become a doctor following the footsteps of her father, Dr Om Parkash, who worked with a passion for humanitarian service.

"Buner is a backward district where problems are aplenty and facilities are lacking," she said.

During her house surgency, the young doctor realised that she would have to do something different to rid the district of its problems.

She completed her MBBS from the Abbottabad International Medical College in 2022 and is also the general secretary of the PPP women's wing in Buner.

Israeli strike kills top Hamas leader in Beirut

Gaza

Israel killed Hamas deputy leader Saleh al-Arouri in a drone strike in Lebanon's capital Beirut on Tuesday, Lebanese and Palestinian security sources said, as its forces kept pummeling parts of Gaza, vowing further "high-intensity" warfare against the Islamist militant group in the enclave.

Hundreds of Palestinians took to the streets of Ramallah in the West Bank to condemn Arouri's killing, chanting, "Revenge, revenge, Qassam!"

Hamas' Al Aqsa Radio and Lebanon's pro-Iranian Mayadeen TV confirmed word from security sources that Arouri, a member of the Palestinian Islamist movement's politburo based abroad and a co-founder of Hamas' military wing, the Qassam Brigades, had been killed when a drone struck a Hamas office in south Beirut. Lebanon's caretaker PM Najib Mikati termed it a "new Israeli crime" and said it was an attempt to pull Lebanon into war.

Choppy waters

THE maritime conflict linked to the Gaza war is assuming alarming proportions. American helicopters repelled an attack by Iran-backed Houthi militants on a Singapore-flagged vessel in the Red Sea on Sunday, sinking three ships and killing 10 militants. The incident came less than a fortnight after the US launched Operation Prosperity Guardian, while claiming that more than 20 countries had agreed to take part in efforts to safeguard ships in the Red Sea waters near Yemen. The Yemen-based Houthis have been targeting vessels in the region since November in solidarity with the Hamas group, which has been fighting Israeli forces in Gaza for the past almost three months. The attacks have forced major shipping companies to take the longer and costlier route around Africa's Cape of Good Hope rather than through the Suez Canal, which accounts for about 12 per cent of the global trade and is

a key waterway for the movement of goods between Asia and Europe.

America's belligerent approach is



likely to trigger a fierce retaliation from the Houthis, even as Iran is facing increasing pressure from the West to intervene for stopping the mayhem in the Red Sea. New Delhi has got sucked into the maelstrom after two India-bound commercial vessels were

attacked more than a week ago. Liberia-flagged MV Chem Pluto, with 21 Indian crew members, was hit by a drone off India's west coast on December 23. MV Sai Baba, having 25 Indian crew members, was targeted in the southern Red Sea. Though there were no fatalities, the twin strikes were a wakeup call for India to bolster its maritime security.

It is laudable that the Indian Navy has enhanced surveillance in the region, deploying frontline destroyers and frigates. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's statement that India will track down the attackers 'even from the depths of the seas' has sent out a strong message. At the same time, India's reluctance to join the US-led coalition indicates a pragmatic approach guided by its maritime interests.

// satyasya paramarṇ nidhānam //

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

The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing. -

Walt Disney

Printer-Publisher & Editor In Chief

Sanjay Mangesh Bhaire
Allied publication Across Mumbai (Marathi & Hindi)

Managing Editor
Suchita Bhaire

Editor
Sreeraj N.

Legal Advisor
Adv. Ameet Mehta

Special Correspondents
K V Raman
Vinod Raghavan
Asha Menon

Chief Designer
Vikram Jadav

Cartoonist
Sunil Vinekar

Photographers
Ajit Raut
Bhooshan Koyande

Contributors and Advertising
Satish Shetty
Savita Tiwari
J D Rodrigues

Circulation Dept.
Dinesh Gupta
Suchit Kumar Saytonday

HAVING conquered the moon in 2023 with its historic Chandrayaan-3 mission, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has begun the new year with another exciting journey into space with the successful launch of its PSLV-C58 rocket, which is carrying 11 satellites. Thanks to meticulous planning, the PSLV deployed the X-ray Polarimeter Satellite (XPoSat) into orbit 21 minutes later. This satellite is poised to unravel the mysteries of black holes by delving deeper into the X-rays emitted by celestial bodies. The latest cosmic exploration cements India's position in the space sector, which is dominated by the US, China and Russia.

Once again, wondrously, the XPoSat has cost a mere



\$30 million (Rs 250 crore) as against the \$188-million NASA IXPE mission, which is on a similar foray

in space since 2021. In addition, XPoSat's expected lifespan is five years as compared

to the two years that its US counterpart has. However, this feat is nothing new for ISRO; the organisation has time

and again stunned the world by its ability to make quality rockets and satellites on shoestring budgets.

This cost-effectiveness can be a game-changer as India gingerly opens the space domain to the private sector. The business of satellite-building has skyrocketed, with many domestic startups showing huge potential as they forge tie-ups with foreign companies. There is merit in ISRO Chief S Somanath's recommendation that regulations in the sector be eased so as to enable growth in space science development and eventually make India a hub of satellite-manufacturing.

WFI poll charade

Tainted ex-chief will continue to call the shots

BJP MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh has managed to retain control of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) as one of his loyalists has succeeded him as its president. This is a major setback to the wrestlers' agitation against the outgoing chief, who has been accused of sexual harassment by several women grapplers. A heavily garlanded Brij Bhushan — brazenly unapologetic as ever — flashed the victory sign after

promptly announced her retirement from wrestling. Sakshi, along with fellow international wrestlers Vinesh Phogat and Bajrang Punia, has been spearheading an agitation seeking justice for Brij Bhushan's alleged victims. A thorough clean-up of the WFI was another key demand of the protesters, but things are back to square one after Thursday's lopsided results.

Brij Bhushan has promised that the new dispensation will work impartially and the protesting wrestlers will not face vendetta. However, his words are not enough to pacify the aggrieved players. They wanted that no supporter of Brij Bhushan should become an office-bearer of the WFI; according to them, the government had given them a reassurance in this regard. They have every reason to feel frustrated and betrayed now.

Punia has decided to return the Padma Shri award. This is a sad reflection on the administration of Indian wrestling; it is also symptomatic of the all-pervasive politicisation of sports in the country. Such unsavoury developments have undermined India's stature in the international sporting arena. This does not augur well for the nation's athletes in the run-up to the 2024 Olympics.

the panel led by his aide Sanjay Singh clinched 13 of the 15 posts in the WFI poll. The results were a foregone conclusion and Brij Bhushan had exuded confidence on poll eve that Sanjay's team would easily defeat the panel led by Commonwealth Games gold medallist Anita Sheoran.

Disheartened by the outcome, Olympics bronze medallist Sakshi Malik

The year 2023 — headlined by the wars in Gaza and eastern Europe — concluded with a peace pact signed by the Central and Assam governments with the Arabinda Rajkhowa-led faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) on December 29. While the Paresh Baruah-led hardline faction of ULFA is not a party to the agreement, it is a historic breakthrough in more ways than one.

Most importantly, it envisages the culmination of the 44-year-old armed struggle launched by ULFA in 1979, seeking a 'sovereign' Assam. The negotiations between the Centre and the pro-talks ULFA faction began in 2011 and have finally borne fruit, holding out hope for the insurgency-ridden state to expedite development projects with financial aid from the Centre. Simultaneously, a resolution of the socio-cultural strife in Assam

is on the horizon as the pact promises to address the issues of illegal immigration and land rights for indigenous communities.

However, the Centre will have to tread warily as it still needs to deal with the hardline group of ULFA, whose leader Baruah is hiding somewhere along the China-Myanmar border. A series of kidnappings, extortion cases, killings and bomb

Extraditing Saeed

Vital for India to mount pressure

PAKISTAN'S unwillingness to accede to India's request for the extradition of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) founder Hafiz Saeed was obvious. As expected, within hours of India making its demand public, Islamabad effectively rejected it, stating that the two countries had no bilateral treaty to address such matters.



Nevertheless, the message conveyed by New Delhi is significant. Pakistan's patronage of the mastermind of the 2008 Mumbai attacks continues unabated. The LeT and other terror groups are flourishing. Reports that Saeed's son Talha plans to contest February's general election is an endorsement of India's stand that mainstreaming of terrorist groups is a state policy in Pakistan. India had designated Talha as a terrorist under

the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in 2022. He serves as the LeT's second-in-command, controlling its finances.

A Pakistani court had sentenced Saeed to 31 years in prison in 2022 after he was convicted of terror financing. He had been found guilty on similar charges in 2020 and awarded a 15-year sentence. India views the prison terms as the outcome of the pressure exerted by the Financial Action Task Force and Western powers. Its request for extradition this time round also lists charges of money laundering for terror purposes. It's a reminder that international efforts against designated terror groups and their sponsors still lack a coherent and all-encompassing strategy.

The LeT and Jamaat-ud-Dawah, a front for the terror group, have been banned by the US and the United Nations. China remains a stumbling block, shielding Islamabad against sanctions by a UN committee that focuses on the principal perpetrators of the 26/11 attacks. Whatever the odds, it's vital for India to keep mounting pressure for action against the likes of Saeed. He represents an ideology that incites hatred and justifies terror. It has to be defeated.

Though the Act has been revoked in some parts of the state in the past two years, CM Himanta Biswa Sarma must work towards withdrawing it

ULFA peace pact

Assam hopes to expedite development projects



blasts led to ULFA being outlawed in 1990, even as the draconian AFSPA was invoked, giving sweeping powers to the armed forces to crack down on violators of the law in Assam.

from the remaining areas too. Lasting peace and the end of a long chapter of insurgency are possible by ensuring that every citizen is part of the mainstream.

Qatar reprieve

Alleged mercenary role of ex-officers worrisome

INDIA'S diplomatic intervention has helped eight former Indian naval officers get off death row in Qatar. The Gulf country's Court of Appeal has commuted their sentence in an alleged espionage case. The verdict comes weeks after Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani on the sidelines of the COP28 summit in Dubai. The Indian nationals, who were working on a submarine project with a Doha-based private company, Al Dahra Global Technologies, were taken into custody in August 2022. They were sentenced to death by Qatar's Court of First Instance in October this year. Even though the Qatari authorities have not made the charges public, the former Navy personnel have reportedly been convicted of spying for Israel.

The prisoners have one legal option left — they can appeal to the Court



of Cassation, the highest court in the Qatari judicial system. India is hopeful that the convicts would be allowed to serve their remaining sentence back

home under a 2014 agreement between the two nations. In the best-case scenario, they can be pardoned by the Emir. Going by India's handling of the

issue, it seems unlikely that the charges against them are all trumped up.

Amid the widespread relief and backslapping over the commutation of sentence, there is no denying that the case has caused embarrassment to the Indian government. It has been a tough tightrope walk for New Delhi as it enjoys friendly ties with Doha as well as Tel Aviv. The alleged use of India's retired defence personnel as mercenaries by another nation is a matter of grave concern. Such James Bond-style adventurism can adversely impact bilateral relations, besides having wider geopolitical ramifications. Considering the ongoing conflict in West Asia, where Qatar is acting as a mediator between Israel and Hamas, India needs to be wary of nefarious moves that can damage its reputation in the global arena.

Riverbed mining

Landowners in league with the mafia

RATHER than showing a decline, the trajectory of illegal mining of riverbed sand in Haryana seems to be going northward, with novel methods being employed. While unlawful quarrying of sand on panchayat land has been

of the audacity of the locals as of the authorities' inability to prevent this open loot of a precious resource, or worse, their alleged complicity in this crime. Sand from riverbeds is being dug out without permits throughout the state. Flagging the threat to riverine biodiversity and the ecosystem of rivers, the National Green Tribunal had in July ordered the Haryana State Pollution Control Board to take action against officials who had failed to check unregulated sand mining along the Yamuna belt. Such murky goings-on,

smacking of a deep criminal nexus between the mining mafia, powerful politicians and unscrupulous officials, must be checked. Small players like tractor-trailer drivers who transport sand are being caught, but little effort is being made to net the big fish or hold government officials accountable for the incessant plunder. This laxity is unpardonable. At stake is the survival of the region's flora and fauna, which are irreversibly shrinking.



the norm, it has now come to light that owners of land located around Dohan and Krishnawati rivers in Mahendragarh district have been allowing sand to be illegally extracted from their property at lucrative rates of up to

Rs 20 lakh per acre. This trend of landowners having a piece of the pie is worrisome as it makes illegal mining all the more difficult to curb.

The rampant continuation of the banned activity is as much reflective

MPhil imbroglio

Symptomatic of crisis in higher education

IN alignment with the New Education Policy-2020 that aims to reform the education system of the country by streamlining it, the two-year MPhil degree was discontinued in 2020. While the intent of doing away with it was laudable as it enabled a reduction in the students' time and cost spent in obtaining a PhD degree, the confusion around its implementation has caused problems, costing many an unsuspecting research scholar dear. As per a warning issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) to students on Wednesday, alerting them against pursuing this course, it has come to fore that some universities are still offering the scrapped programme, rendering unsuspecting students vulnerable to taking up an endeavour that is not valid anymore.

It reeks of misdemeanour by the universities/colleges concerned, ostensibly with the mala fide intention of garnering fees — ranging from Rs 30,000

to Rs 1 lakh per annum — from students in the scrapped course. Even the UGC's reaction to the sordid affair is knee-jerk. Had it strictly enforced its new rule and issued regular, prominently advertised cautionary notes against this derecognised course since 2020, the malpractice would not have continued as long as three years down the line.

This development is but a symptom of the crisis in that country's higher education system. Public universities, worrisomely, have become favour-dispensing mechanisms for the ruling governments that have been blatantly interfering in their academic affairs and appointment processes. The erosion of autonomy and the rot are evident in the increasing intolerance to dissent and the stifling of the culture of free debate on campuses. Underfunding is the other bane of the sector, affecting both the teachers and pupils as innovation and the quality of human resources take a hit.

Adani ropes in global team for Dharavi slum overhaul

GST collection rises by 10% to Rs 1.64L cr in December



New Delhi

Billionaire Gautam Adani's joint venture with Mumbai's slum rehabilitation authority has hired a global team to redevelop Dharavi, a key step in rebuilding one of Asia's biggest slums amid growing opposition to the project.

Dharavi, about three quarters the size of New York's Central Park, is a crowded area that houses thousands of poor families

in cramped quarters in the centre of India's financial capital. Many residents have no access to running water or clean toilets. Rebuilding it is a mammoth task, which was first mooted in the 1980s.

The Maharashtra Government in July last approved Adani's \$619 million bid to redevelop the area that covers 625 acres (253 hectares), and has been described

by officials as "the world's largest urban renewal scheme".

The joint venture, Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRPPL), said on Monday it was partnering with architect Hafeez Contractor who has done many social housing projects, US design firm Sasaki, and consultancy firm Buro Happold from the UK for the redevelopment.

DRPPL was set up in July last and hiring of the team assumes significance as it comes amid allegations from a rival bidder that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's allies afforded Adani favourable treatment while residents worry about his capacity to deliver amid high-profile financial setbacks.

The Adani Group has said the Dharavi project was awarded through a fair, open and internationally competitive bidding process. The state government has denied any wrongdoing.

New Delhi

The gross goods and services tax (GST) collection in December was Rs 1,64,882 crore. The government said it was 10 per cent higher than the intake in the same month last year, which was Rs 1.49 lakh crore. Notably, this marks the seventh month so far this financial year with the collections exceeding Rs 1.60 lakh crore, said an official news release.

However, near-term figures showed that the collection in December represented the second consecutive month of decline. In November, Rs 1.68 lakh crore GST was collected whereas in October, it was Rs 1.72 lakh crore. But this decline of Rs 4,000 crore appears to be on account of softening of imported commodities. The collection of Integrated GST (IGST) on imports as well as cess collected on imports were down by Rs 2,000 crore each in December as compared to November.

During the first nine months of the current fiscal, the cumulative

GST collection stood at Rs 14.97 lakh crore with a growth rate of 12 per cent. The gross GST collection averaged Rs 1.66 lakh crore in first nine months of the fiscal. The corresponding figure for the last fiscal was Rs 13.40 lakh crore or about Rs. 1.49 lakh crore per month in the first nine months.

Among North Indian states, the highest GST was collected in Haryana at Rs 8,130 crore. However, this was a big drop as compared to the collection of Rs 9,732 crore in November. But collections were higher than the intake of Rs 6,678 crore in December last year.

Delhi's collection was the second highest at Rs 5,121 crore, but it was lower than the Rs 5,347 crore collected in November this year. The collection in December last year was Rs 4,401 crore.

The GST intake from Punjab was down to Rs 1,875 crore as against Rs 2,265 crore in November. Rs 1,734 crore GST was collected from Punjab in December last year.

All you need to know about UPI payment rules that are changing in 2024

New Delhi

As the new year starts, there are certain changes in Unified Payments Interface (UPI) that have come into effect from January 1, 2024.

The National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) has instructed payment apps such as Paytm, GPay, PhonePe, etc., and banks to deactivate UPI IDs and numbers that remain inactive for more than a year.

A 1.1 per cent interchange fee will be imposed on certain merchant UPI transactions above Rs 2,000, made by using prepaid payment instruments (PPI) like online wallets.

A 4-hour time limit will be applicable each time a user starts the first payment exceeding Rs 2,000 to another user with whom they have not previously transacted. This has been done in order to



check rising cases of online payment fraud.

As per NPCI, the daily payment limit for UPI transactions will be Rs 1 lakh.

However, the RBI, in its December 8, 2023 order, had raised the transaction limit for UPI payments to hospitals

and educational institutions to Rs 5 lakh.

RBI in collaboration with Japanese company Hitachi, will also roll out UPI ATMs all across India wherein one can scan a QR code to withdraw cash from bank account.

HFCL bags Rs 1,127 cr BSNL order

New Delhi

HFCL Ltd (HFCL) on Monday said it has secured a Rs 1,127 crore order from BSNL aimed at transforming the Optical Transport Network infrastructure across the state-owned telco's pan-India network.

HFCL's network upgrade will not only cater to the requirements of enterprise and FTTH/broadband services but also position BSNL for the future launch of 4G services and the anticipation of 5G services in the coming years.

"Leveraging its unparalleled expertise in integrating complex systems, HFCL has strategically partnered with the Nokia Network to deploy state-of-the-art optical technology," the statement said.

Passenger vehicle sales touch record high in 2023 at 41.08 lakh units, SUVs continue strong growth

New Delhi

Passenger vehicle sales in India touched a record high of 41.08 lakh units in 2023, growing by 8.3 per cent over the previous year driven by SUVs, which accounted for almost half of the total dispatches from manufacturers to dealers.

The record sales have been achieved despite an increase in the average price of vehicles to Rs 11.5 lakh last year as compared to Rs 10.58 lakh in 2022.

Market leader Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai Motor India, Tata Motors and Toyota Kirloskar Motor reported their best-ever annual sales in 2023.

"If you look at January to December 2023, wholesales crossed 41.08 lakh. This is the first time the industry has ever crossed the 4 million mark. That, I think is a huge milestone in the history of the Indian passenger vehicles (PV) industry," Maruti Suzuki India Senior Executive Officer (Marketing and Sales) Shashank Srivastava told reporters in a call.

He further said, "This is against wholesales of 37.92 lakh units for the calendar year 2022. Therefore, there is a growth of 8.3 per cent in the calendar year 2023." The previous record for the highest annual PV sales was recorded in 2022.

Srivastava further said the industry estimate for retail sales in 2023 is 40.51 lakh against 37.30 lakh in 2022, at a growth of 8.6 per cent.

"Most of the growth in the industry was largely driven by SUVs, which grew by 26 per cent," Srivastava said.

In terms of contribution to the overall PV sales, he said, "The SUV percentage went up from 42 per cent in 2022 to 48.7 per cent in 2023. For hatchbacks, it has come down from 34.8 per cent to 30 per cent in the calendar year 2023, sedans also decreased from 11 per cent to 9.4 per cent while for multi-utility vehicles it remained the same at 8.7 per cent."

He, however, said the contribution of SUVs to the overall PV sales is likely to



saturate at around 50-55 per cent going forward.

Srivastava said the overall PV sales growth has come in despite the increase in the average selling price (ASP) of vehicles.

"So far in the industry what we have seen in the last few years is a jump in the ex-showroom price," he said, adding as per the company's calculation the ASP in the industry has gone up to almost Rs 11.5 lakh in 2023 as compared to Rs 10.58 lakh in 2022.

The ASP has gradually increased over the last four years and it was at only Rs 8.2 lakh in 2019-20 due to an increase in prices of commodities, more sales of bigger vehicles like SUVs which cost more, he said.

Besides, even within a segment consumers prefer higher variants with more features. The regulatory stringency has also led to an increase in vehicle prices, he added.

Maruti Suzuki India crossed the annual sales milestone of 20 lakh units in calendar year 2023, which includes its highest ever calendar year exports of 2,69,046 units.

"This is the first time ever in a calendar year that Maruti Suzuki's total sales exceeded 2 million units...This was also the highest ever rural sales at 7.76 lakh

and highest ever pre-owned car sales at 4.68 lakh," Srivastava said, adding the company's premium retail outlet NEXA also clocked its best ever annual at more than 5 lakh units.

Hyundai Motor India Ltd (HMIL) reported a 9 per cent year-on-year increase in total sales at 7,65,786 units in 2023, on the back of record annual domestic sales. The company had sold a total of 7,00,811 units in 2022.

The company achieved its highest-ever domestic sales in a calendar year, crossing the six lakh sales milestone in 2023 as it sold 6,02,111 units, up 9 per cent over previous year's 5,52,511 units, Hyundai Motor India Ltd (HMIL) said.

HMIL COO Tarun Garg said the company has not just kept pace but surpassed the estimated industry growth of around 8.2 per cent.

"Also in 2023, we proactively expanded our annual production capacity by 50,000 units to meet the increasing demand from our customers," he added.

Homegrown automaker Tata Motors also said it clocked its best sales in a calendar year.

"For Tata Motors, CY23 was the third consecutive year of posting highest ever sales of around 5.53 lakh units led by its

commanding position in the compact SUV segment and strong growth in hatches despite the hatch segment de-growing at an industry level," Tata Motors Passenger Vehicles Ltd. and Tata Passenger Electric Mobility Ltd Managing Director Shailesh Chandra said.

On the industry crossing the significant 4 million mark, he said it has been "supported by a strong supply situation, new nameplates launched in the SUV segment, and a robust demand during the longer festive period".

Another automaker, Toyota Kirloskar Motor also reported its best ever annual sales with a 46 per cent growth in wholesales at 2,33,346 units in 2023. The company's wholesales stood at 1,60,364 units a year ago.

"(The) growth of 46 per cent as compared to last CY (calendar year) came from across the product portfolio. The consistent month-on-month performance, coupled with a year-round upward trend, indicates a growing customer interest in all our line-up of cars," TKM Vice President of Sales and Strategic Marketing Atul Sood said.

Similarly, MG Motor India reported an 18 per cent growth in total retail sales at 56,902 units in 2023 as compared to the previous year. It had around 25 per cent of its total sales coming from electric vehicle (EV) models and flagship EV, ZS and the Comet have clocked around 20,000 units till date.

Mahindra & Mahindra said its passenger vehicles sales in December 2023 stood at 35,174 units, as against 28,445 units in December 2022, up 24 per cent.

"We continued to face some supply challenges on select parts. We are working closely with our suppliers to mitigate these challenges going forward," M&M President, Automotive Division Veejay Nakra said.

Nearly 97.38 per cent Rs 2,000 notes returned to banking system; Rs 9,330 crore still with public: RBI

Mumbai

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Monday said that nearly 97.38 per cent of the Rs 2,000 bank notes have been returned to the banking system, and only about Rs 9,330 crore worth of the notes are still with the public. On May 19, the RBI announced the withdrawal of Rs 2,000 denomination bank notes from circulation. "The total value of Rs 2,000 bank notes in circulation, which amounted to Rs 3.56 lakh crore as at the close of business on May 19, 2023,

when the withdrawal of Rs 2,000 bank notes was announced, has declined to Rs 9,330 crore as at the close of business on December 29, 2023," the RBI said in a statement. Thus, 97.38 per cent of the high-value currency in circulation as of May 19, 2023, has since been returned to the banking system, it added. "The Rs 2,000 bank notes continue to be legal tender," the RBI added. People can deposit and/or exchange Rs 2,000 bank notes at the 19 RBI offices across the country. People can also send Rs 2,000 bank notes through India Post from

any post office to any of the RBI Issue Offices for credit to their bank accounts in India. Public and entities holding such notes were initially asked to either exchange or deposit them in bank accounts by September 30. The deadline was later extended to October 7. Deposit and exchange services at bank branches were discontinued on October 7. Starting October 8, individuals have been provided with the choice of either exchanging the currency or having the equivalent sum credited to their bank accounts at the 19 offices of the RBI.

Air India to start operating A350 aircraft from January 22



New Delhi

Air India will start operating its first A350 aircraft on the domestic routes from January 22, with the first flight from Bengaluru to Mumbai.

The A350-900 aircraft

will have a three-class cabin configuration with 316 seats. There will be 28 business class, 24 premium economy and 264 economy seats.

"India's first Airbus A350 will enter commercial service on 22

January 2024," the airline said in a release on Monday.

Initially, the aircraft will be deployed on domestic routes for crew familiarization and regulatory compliance purposes.

The plane will operate flights from Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad and Mumbai, the release said.

"The A350 aircraft will be later deployed for longer-haul flights to destinations across continents," it added.

Air India on Monday started bookings for the flights to be operated by the A350.

The airline's first of the 20 A350-900 aircraft landed in the national capital on December 23.

ATF price cut by 4 pc; commercial LPG rate reduced marginally by Rs 1.5 per cylinder



New Delhi

Jet fuel or ATF price on Monday was cut by 4 per cent, the third straight monthly reduction, and commercial cooking gas (LPG) rates were marginally lowered by Rs 1.50 per 19-kg cylinder in line with international benchmarks.

However, the price of domestic LPG -- used in household kitchens for cooking purposes -- remained unchanged at Rs 903 per 14.2-kg cylinder.

Aviation turbine fuel (ATF) price was cut by Rs 4,162.5, or 3.9 per cent, in the national capital to Rs 101,993.17 per kl, according to price notifications of state-owned fuel retailers.

This is the third straight monthly reduction in jet fuel prices. ATF price was cut by almost 6 per cent (Rs 6,854.25 per kl) in November and by Rs 5,189.25, or 4.6 per cent, in December.

The three rounds of reduction have wiped away almost 45 per cent of the Rs 29,391.08 per kl increase in rates effected in four monthly tranches starting July 1.

The reduction in the price of jet fuel, which makes up for 40 per cent of an airline's operating cost, will ease the burden on already financially strained

airlines.

Alongside, oil firms also reduced the price of commercial LPG - used in various establishments such as hotels and restaurants - by Rs 1.50.

A 19-kg commercial LPG cylinder will now cost Rs 1,755.50 in the national capital and Rs 1,708.50 in Mumbai.

The price hike follows a Rs 39.5 per cylinder reduction in rates effected on December 22.

State-owned Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) revise cooking gas and ATF prices on the 1st of every month, based on the average international price in the previous month. The revision on December 22 was an outlier.

Petrol and diesel prices continued to remain on freeze for a record 21st month in a row. Petrol costs Rs 96.72 per litre in the national capital, and diesel costs Rs 89.62 per litre.

State-owned fuel retailers are supposed to revise petrol and diesel prices daily, based on a 15-day rolling average of benchmark international fuel prices, but they haven't done that since April 6, 2022.

India's export of processed food, agricultural products sees decline of 9.32%

New Delhi

India's export of agricultural and processed food products has seen a 9.32 per cent decline from April to October in the fiscal year 2023-24 when compared to the last fiscal.

Traders suffered a loss of around \$1,438 million as the overall export earnings came down to \$13,985 million, year-on-year basis from April to October 2023 from \$15,423 million in the same period of the previous year, revealed the latest export data released by the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA).

This decline in agricultural exports is noteworthy, especially against the backdrop of specific commodities demonstrating contrasting trends.

The overall exports of cereals suffered a decline of nearly 24 per cent during this period. It came down to \$6,290 million from \$8,258 million, as the wheat exports were the worst affected and reported a fall of nearly 98 per cent due to the blanket



ban imposed on exports by the government to counter spiralling prices in the domestic market.

However, the basmati rice export witnessed a 16.27 per cent rise, reaching \$2,959 million from \$2,545 million during the previous year as the country exported a total 2,608 million tonnes (MT) of rice against 2,545 MT. The figure revealed that total exports of long-grained aromatic rice increased to 26.08 lakh MT during this year against 24.10 lakh MT during the previous year.

Due to the ban, the country's non-basmati rice

export suffered a setback with a decline of 20.16 per cent.

Interestingly, India's buffalo meat export has registered 11.31 per cent increase during this period as the meat traders exported 7.34 lakh MT meat against 6.70 lakh MT last year. Despite the positive momentum in basmati exports, the overall scenario is marked by a challenging landscape for the farm sector. The Centre's imposition of curbs on shipment of various commodities has played a significant role in shaping this trend.

Civil-military fusion for ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT

Today, India stands at a critical juncture in its ongoing military reforms that will better integrate the functioning of the armed forces. True jointness can only be achieved when there is better integration at every level, both within the uniformed services as well as between them and civil society. It has five fundamental planks:

(1) Integration of the functioning of the three services and their resources;

(2) Jointness of purpose and seamless coordination between the armed forces and the paramilitary forces such as the Border Security Force (BSF), Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), Sashastra Seema Bal and Assam Rifles that guard our borders,

(3) Jointness between the armed forces as end-users and the defence manufacturing establishment in India, particularly the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) as well as the Defence Public Sector Undertakings under the Department of Defence Production;

(4) Jointness between the end-users of indigenously manufactured defence equipment and both industry and academia that are increasingly part of the efforts to achieve Atmanirbhar Bharat in the defence sector, and,

(5) Common vision and convergence of action between the uniformed services and the civilian bureaucracy to attain the goal of a Viksit Bharat (developed country status for India) by 2047.

Today, the words 'jointness' and 'integration' are used interchangeably. However, there are subtle differences. Jointness perhaps implies closer collaboration and cooperation between distinct service structures to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in a particular task or operation. An integrated structure is more difficult to achieve since it calls for a structural change to bring about an amalgamated and common chain of command, as envisaged in the proposed creation of theatre commands.

Theaterisation of the Armed Forces

The mandate given to the Chief of Defence Staff in 2019 to integrate the armed forces indicated the enormity of the scope of reforms. It was a task that required consensus among the three services for any major restructuring exercise to be undertaken, especially the creation of theatre commands.

The broad contours of the reform process are beginning to emerge. This includes the possible creation of geographical theatre commands to deal with the threats along our northern and western borders, besides securing India's vast maritime space.

Given the complexity of the process, there are bound to be some differences in outlook among the three services. The public discourse on the subject has added value to the task at hand. It helps arrive at decisions after considering the entire spectrum of views and opinions.

The litmus test for any structural

change would naturally be whether it enhances operational effectiveness and efficiency by shortening the chain of command and leading to faster decision-making.

The human resources aspect in



integrating the armed forces is both real and relevant. The armed forces hierarchy represents one of the steepest pyramidal structures among all the services. All three services have their own glorious history and culture. The Air Force, for example, is a formidable fighting force just like the other two services. It is not just a supporting arm. Many analysts have wondered if the outcome during the border conflict with China in 1962 might have been different had the Government of the day decided to use the offensive power of the Indian Air Force.

The litmus test for any structural change would naturally be whether it enhances operational effectiveness and efficiency by shortening the chain of command and leading to faster decision-making.

The skewed tooth-to-tail ratio of the armed forces has been highlighted by many as a concern in the context of defence reforms. At the Combined Commanders Conference on board the aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya in December 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the country had been slow in reforming structures within the armed forces to promote jointness. There was a call for efforts to "shorten the tooth-to-tail ratio". As the Army Chief, Gen Rawat had emphasised the need for "right-sizing" the Army, stating that the "less liability we have under the salary head, the higher the budgetary allocation we will have for modernisation". "Multi-tasking" by troops and "optimising" the combat potential of troops through technological modernisation are important considerations.

The task for our armed forces is increasingly more challenging given the rapid march of technologies. The role of ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) and net-centric capabilities in modern warfare is growing, as is the salience of artificial intelligence (AI), beyond visual range weapons, drones and disruptive technologies.

Given the outsized impact of technology on modern warfare, most frontline militaries are in the process of right-sizing their armed forces. In India's

case, there is a need to strike a judicious balance between human resources and technologies, taking into account the nature of the terrain on which future wars would be fought as well as the grey-zone tactics adopted by adversaries. Our armed

forces need to encourage specialisation in high-tech areas among their ranks, through longer tenancing of posts, especially in cyber, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and deep tech.

Integration through reforms

Today, the process of creating synergy at all levels of the armed forces beyond what already exists is underway. Under the Integrated Defence Staff Headquarters, several training nodes across the three services have converged as one. Now, several logistics nodes are also being integrated. In parallel, the government of India has ensured a greater role for women within the rank and file of the armed forces.

Recently, the armed forces introduced the Agniveer scheme in recruitment. This initiative will help improve the qualitative edge in the three services. Simultaneously, the military ethos, discipline and motto "service before self" that characterises the Indian armed forces will also percolate into society through the demobilised personnel, thus strengthening our social fabric. This is also a form of jointness which contributes to civil-military fusion.

Similarly, the National Cadet Corps also contributes to civil-military jointness at the popular level. Its expansion, especially to vulnerable border areas, enhances security.

In the Indian context, the border guarding forces play a major role. The BSF and the ITBP are deployed alongside, and often ahead, of the army in peacetime. In some places, they operate under an integrated command structure as in the case of the BSF along the Line of Control. The Army and the ITBP carry out joint patrols in Ladakh. It should be our endeavour to strengthen jointness among the various forces and personnel deployed along a particular border, in terms of information flow, training and equipment profile. The Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard have a high degree of operational jointness. They share assets such as air stations, dockyards, jetties and human resources. They have established mechanisms for synergy, despite having distinct roles and responsibilities.

Jointness in defence production

Another area that calls for jointness and new forms of integration in the Indian context relates to Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence production. Recently, the government of India appointed a Review Committee to enhance the efficacy of the DRDO. The organisation has done commendable work over the decades, but there is considerable scope for improvement in terms of a better tandem with end-users, industry and academia.

Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence production does not mean self-sufficiency. It is not an autarkic concept to close our doors to collaboration with foreign partners. It implies a degree of self-reliance in which India is not unduly dependent on foreign imports and supply chains for defence equipment that are expensive, potentially subject to monopolistic supply and vulnerable to manipulation and disruptions.

Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence production means a self-reliance which enhances our strategic autonomy, one which adds value to our defence industry, meets our defence needs rapidly and adequately, and, makes India more competitive within global defence supply chains, including as an exporter. India has set a target of US\$ 5 billion for annual defence exports, up from the current figure of a little under US\$ 2 billion. A key point is the need for our armed forces to place greater confidence in "Made in India" equipment. This will promote Indian defence products in global supply chains.

Our armed forces are tasked with keeping our continental borders, our vast air space and extensive maritime domains free of threats and challenges. They need to operate with maximum efficiency, supported by adequate resources, fit-to-purpose organisational structures, and, cooperation with paramilitary forces as well as the civilian bureaucracy.

India also needs a new kind of self-reliance in which our defence research laboratories and industry develop their own IP, with greater potential for delivering spin-off benefits to the national economy through dual-use technologies, to SMEs, MSMEs, large industry and academia. Transfer of Technology for production, without joint development of IP or ownership of IP, has limited benefits.

Conclusion

India faces unique threats such as unresolved boundary disputes, cross-border terrorism, infiltration across vulnerable borders and illegal human, arms and drugs smuggling. Our armed forces are tasked with keeping our continental borders, our vast air space and extensive maritime domains free of threats and challenges. They need to operate with maximum efficiency, supported by adequate resources, fit-to-purpose organisational structures, and, cooperation with paramilitary forces as well as the civilian bureaucracy.

Global implications of the Sino-Russian biotechnology collaboration

In 2019, China and Russia reinforced their collaboration in scientific innovation and technology. This collaboration, traced back to the 1990s, was relaunched in a signed letter by Chinese President Xi Jinping in March 2023, before he visited Russia. In 2021, Russia and China launched their lunar research and exploration roadmap. The collaboration between these two countries has also included remote sensing, electronic components for space flight applications, and space debris monitoring. In nuclear technology and energy cooperation, the two countries have undertaken the construction of the seventh and eighth power units. The Tianwan Nuclear Power Plant's third and fourth power units of the Xudabao Nuclear Power Plant in China were launched in May 2021. Additionally, the countries have promised the completion of a cross-border pipeline to supply natural gas across the Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin routes.

The collaboration between these two countries has also included remote sensing, electronic components for space flight applications, and space debris monitoring.

Additionally, the Russia-China Investment Fund was established by the Russian Direct Investment Fund and China Investment Corporation. Much of the funding and investments upcoming in this area of collaboration between China and Russia are attributed to the Belt Road Initiative, which is expanding research in university research centres in biology, material sciences, and space exploration. This history of cooperation underpins a strategic convergence towards the biotechnology sector, as both nations recognise the potential of this field to not only drive their scientific advancement but also reshape the global scientific landscape.

There are multifaceted dimensions of the Sino-Russian biotechnology collaboration, delving into its historical roots, far-reaching implications, hurdles, and potential consequences, including its impact on biowarfare and biosecurity.

China has outlined biotech goals in its Made in China 2025 strategy, including innovative medicine. Similarly, Russia released its Pharma 2030 strategy in December 2021. This strategy aims to enhance the production of medicine and medical equipment and innovation,

One of the pivotal domains of this collaboration lies in genetics and genomics. The immense genetic diversity within both nations provides an unprecedented

platform for joint research to unravel the intricate genetic underpinnings of various diseases. By pooling their vast resources, expansive datasets, and scientific expertise, China and Russia can accelerate the pace of genomic research and chart the course for personalised medicine and innovative approaches to disease prevention. This has implications for their populations and the broader global healthcare and biotechnology innovation landscape.

The immense genetic diversity within both nations provides an unprecedented platform for joint research to unravel the intricate genetic underpinnings of various diseases.

Both countries have seen an increase in biotechnology capacities in the last decade. China, for example, has a biotechnology market value of nearly USD 4 billion as of 2021. Similarly, Russia has also begun expanding research and market investment in biotechnology, especially since the advent of their SARS-Cov vaccine, Sputnik V. Though Russia's market expansion is yet to grow to compete with other larger economies, its collaboration with China may indicate future growth in this area.

Despite limitations in their national biotech industries, Russia and China have increased collaboration in the field of biotechnology; one notable example includes the Russian company Biocad and Chinese manufacturer Shanghai Pharmaceuticals Holding (SPH) collaborating to commercialise medicines in the Chinese market. This venture received significant funding, with SPH holding 50.1% and Biocad 49.9%.

Global Implications

However, the growth of Chinese and Russian biotech programmes and their collaboration has sparked concerns in other countries. Many countries, including the United States (US), highlighted them as countries to monitor due to "unreliable information", as stated in the Biodefence Posture Review 2023.

In 2022, the US released a renewed National Biodefence Strategy and Implementation Plan and its Biodefence Posture Review 2023. The 2023 Biodefence posture review highlights the need for a biosecurity approach to biodefence. Similarly, the United Kingdom (UK) has released a biological security strategy, where the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been highlighted in a case study linked to an increase in the Avian Flu. Outside of concerns directly related

to Russia and China, these strategies, including India's Biosafety Manual for Public Safety Laboratories, highlight a pressing need for biowarfare preparedness and underscores the significance of collaboration in the biotechnology realm to address non-reported activities or non-state actors and bioterrorism.

The United Kingdom (UK) has released a biological security strategy, where the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been highlighted in a case study linked to an increase in the Avian Flu.

In response to the global shift in investment and innovation into biotechnology, preceded by the concerns



of the pandemic and the potential for future pandemics, other regions, including the European Union and Africa, are also prioritising biosafety and biosecurity strategies.

Biosafety and Biosecurity are growing concerns for nation-states in the coming decade, so many have highlighted these areas in their strategies. However, with collaborations between countries attributed to unreliable, this strategy must also consider responding to misinformation and malintent.

Responding to Sino-Russian collaboration

As the potential threat of biowarfare looms, strategies are not enough and collaborative efforts of larger economies can prove to become pivotal in developing advanced strategies for detecting, preventing, and mitigating bioterrorist threats. Their combined expertise in genetics and biotechnology offers the potential to create rapid response systems, advanced diagnostics, and countermeasures against potential biowarfare agents. Such collaboration can address strategies' applications and concerns around Sino-Russian cooperation, non-state actor threats and future pandemics.

Creating a collaborative bilateral alliance between India and the USA in

the field of biotechnology growth and innovation can help counter the potential of the Sino-Russian collaboration that does not inhibit global development but still prioritises the needs of other economies. Such an alliance can also be developed under multilateral partnerships like the Quad (Quadrilateral Strategic Alliance (India, Japan, Australia, US)) or I2U2 (India, Israel, UK, US). We have already seen India progress in the global market with collaborative advancements in vaccine development. The same expanded diagnostics and surveillance technologies testify to their commitment to international security and preparedness. They provide the global south and upcoming economies with a more significant platform to compete with economies like Russia and China.

Creating a collaborative bilateral alliance between India and the USA in the field of biotechnology growth and innovation can help counter the potential of the Sino-Russian collaboration that does not inhibit global development but still prioritises the needs of other economies.

The journey of Sino-Russian biotechnology collaboration, specifically emphasising biowarfare preparedness, is challenging. Geopolitical considerations, intricacies surrounding medical innovation, trade and investment, and the complexities of regulatory harmonisation necessitate navigation. Sustaining the success of this collaboration demands cultivating further global partnerships between other countries at bilateral/trilateral levels, mutual trust, equitable resource allocation, and sharing knowledge in an atmosphere of camaraderie.

Conclusion

The recent strides taken during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the urgency and effectiveness of global cooperation in addressing emerging infectious diseases and bioterrorist threats. The international community witnessed how rapid vaccine development and distribution can be achieved through collaborative cross-border efforts. Joint initiatives are poised to yield breakthroughs in biopharmaceuticals, regenerative medicine, bioinformatics, and biowarfare preparedness.

The international community witnessed how rapid vaccine development and distribution can be achieved through collaborative cross-border efforts.

Chinese and Russian choices impact India's approach

Foreign policy is a murky business. All nations across the world, given a choice, would want to be strategically autonomous. That is, they would want to make their choices from as wide a menu as possible. All countries would want to be multi-aligned, building partnerships with one and all, depending on the issue at hand. All nations would also want to be friends with most others. Why spend resources on national defence if favourable outcomes can always be achieved by talking sweetly to others? Wars are highly risky and expensive ventures, as we are being reminded every day with the goings-on in Eurasia and the Middle East. It, therefore, makes sense for nations to get along with each other and partner with most others.

It's just that an inherent drive for power among nation-states in an anarchical world comes in between, and so countries are forced to see the world as divided between friends and foes. And more often than not, it is the choices that others make which force the hands of countries trying to make sense of the world. For decades, Indian policymakers believed that they had found a modus vivendi with China, despite India having lost a war to its northern neighbour in 1962. It was assumed that by focusing on economic and people-to-people dimensions of cooperation, the two Asian giants would be able to have a normal relationship and the difficult task of settling mutual border disputes could be made marginal by continuing to hold talks about it. But it was not to be, as the Chinese had other plans.

The choice that Beijing made of bullying New Delhi into submission forced India to clarify its own policy choices. As India doubled down on its own internal capacity building and shut China off from critical sectors of the Indian economy and infrastructure, it also ended up forging stronger partnerships with countries of the West. From the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), involving India, Japan, Australia and the US, to the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) project, which has the US as a benefactor and relies on Indian ties with nations across the Arabian Sea, the world seemed to emerge as India's oyster in its search for a response to China's belligerence and malevolence.



As India doubled down on its own internal capacity building and shut China off from critical sectors of the Indian economy and infrastructure, it also ended up forging stronger partnerships with countries of the West.

The strategic choices of Russia today are equally consequential for India. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visits Russia this week, India-Russia ties are once again under a scanner. The Ukraine War has raised a plethora of questions about a relationship that is important for India in its quest to meet regional and global aspirations. Even after the end of the Cold War and Russia's decline as a global power, successive Indian governments have continued to invest in this partnership, and for good reasons.

India's reliance on Russia for defence supplies is just one part of the story. The two nations have critical anchor roles to play in Central Asia, and have viewed each other as balancing the China factor in their respective foreign policies. It also makes perfect sense for New Delhi and Moscow to leverage each other's economic strength.

Yet, the choices that Russia has made in the past few years has left the future

trajectory of India-Russia relationship rather unpredictable. Moscow's war against Ukraine has not only brought the internal vulnerabilities of Russia—economic, military, political and societal—out into the open for the world to see, it has also constrained Indian foreign policy options.

A war that the Russian military was supposed to have won within just a few weeks has now dragged on for almost two years, exposing the Russian military's weaknesses as a fighting force.

For India, Russia's reliability as a defence partner for the long-term is now no longer a matter of debate. For all the steadfastness that Russia has historically shown in helping the country secure its defence and security interests, New Delhi's defence-supply diversification away from Moscow is getting accelerated.

Russian economic revival is now contingent on how much energy China and others in the developing world will buy from it.

Russia's European periphery, for all its show of strength, is gravitating towards the West. The membership map of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) is even closer to Russia today than at the

start of its war against Ukraine in February 2022. Russian economic revival is now contingent on how much energy China and others in the developing world will buy from it. Most damagingly for India, Russia's perceived dependence on China will also raise questions in New Delhi about Russia's long-term reliability. Russia may declare some kind of victory vis-à-vis Ukraine at some point, but India-Russia ties have already been a loser.

It is striking that the two nations have not held their annual bilateral summit for two years in a row, even as India's engagements with the West have continued to grow despite some earlier differences over Ukraine. New Delhi has indeed not termed Russia an 'aggressor,' something that the West would have liked it to do, but Prime Minister Narendra Modi, unlike Chinese President Xi Jinping, has also publicly told Russian President Vladimir Putin that this is not a time for war.

In an ideal world, India would like to balance its ties with Russia and the West, and that is exactly what it has striven to do so far. But the underlying trends are telling a different story, one where the choices that Russia is making are driving Moscow and New Delhi apart. It is unlikely that Jaishankar's latest visit is going to rectify that.

The Year India Engaged The World On Its Own Terms

As we bid adieu to the year 2023, we are witnessing a global order that has been fundamentally reconfigured - politically, economically and diplomatically. Trends that were simmering below the surface for the last few years have burst into the open, revealing in all their complexities the challenges that are becoming difficult to manage by extant frameworks and institutions. There is an intellectual void at the very heart of international relations and it is being filled by the overuse of the term "disruption." Whatever the world can't seem to grapple with or come to terms with is being labelled "disruptive." Indeed, this is an inflection point but the underlying forces shaping it had been there with us for some time now.

The world is grappling with the fundamental transformations brought in by shifting power balance, technological overreach, and institutional decay. These underlying shifts have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and wars in Eurasia and the Middle East, resulting in global inflationary pressures, food and energy crises, and widespread economic downturn. Nations are frantically scraping their coffers to provide for their citizens' basic needs, and we are standing farther from achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The post-COVID international landscape has been marred by increasing geo-political and geo-economic tensions. In the Indo-Pacific, the central theatre of global competition, several of these have culminated to present India with a series of challenging questions. These include navigating great power rivalry, conflicts, economic crises, deglobalisation, and adverse climate events, all against the backdrop of a weakening multilateral order.

However, each of these challenges is equally offset by opportunities for India. Most notably these include the chance to regain trust and leverage in its neighbourhood, gain from the relocation of global supply chains, expand cooperation with the west, push its agenda for clean energy transition and solidify its credentials as a global leader while steering international discourse and cooperation. Successful navigation of these challenges and opportunities by India in the Indo-Pacific has the potential



to elevate its status in the global order and ultimately provide it with crucial strategic gains.

This year saw India taking on the global leadership role with aplomb as its G-20 presidency gave New Delhi a chance to shape the agenda for global cooperation in a world emerging from the shadows of the COVID-19 pandemic. For India, this was an opportunity to underline its emerging status as a "leading power." The G-20 is unique in so far as it brings together the developed and the developing nations to discuss and create solutions to global governance challenges. New Delhi used this platform vociferously in giving voice to the aspirations of the Global South, at a time when few global powers have neither the time nor resources to cater to the most vulnerable-occupied as they are with their own domestic woes. The pressures of global disruption are being absorbed most by the poorer economies and few powers are willing to consider their challenges with the seriousness they deserve. By hosting one of the highest-profile international gatherings ever at a time of great turbulence and managing to forge consensus among key global stakeholders despite fragmentation, New Delhi signalled its readiness to think big and deliver big-something that much of the world had long expected from India.

This is in sync with India's desire to play a larger global role by not only participating in key global alliances and multilateral for a but also creating

new ones, thereby demonstrating its commitment to collaborative and inclusive global governance in areas as diverse as climate change, sustainable development, global health, and peacekeeping. As a responsible global stakeholder, India's role as the "first responder" during natural disasters or conflicts has been key in enhancing its global profile. From being a persistent naysayer to a nation willing to share responsibility for global governance has been one of the most striking trends in Indian foreign policy.

The second trend visible this year was India's continuing ability to balance its key partnerships. New Delhi's ties with major global powers continued to grow despite challenges. The Ukraine war did not create a rupture in India's ties with the West, something that was anticipated when the conflict had begun last year. Instead, these relations continued to grow and evolve. Despite the US accusations pertaining to the planned assassination of a Sikh separatist leader and US citizen Gurbhagat Singh Pannun, Indo-US ties have retained their momentum with cooperation on critical and emerging technologies emerging as a key driver. The dramatic resurgence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue - the Quad - is the strongest manifestation of this new reality where the US and India are willing to forge a new partnership based on emerging realities. At the same time, India has been able to maintain its close defence and strategic ties with Russia.

The final aspect of India's external engagement this year has been a growing realisation that there is no substitute to building domestic capacities in critical sectors. Only a strong and self-reliant India can take on an increasingly belligerent China and sustain it through regular systemic disruptions. If COVID-19 alerted India to the need for self-reliance in critical infrastructure, the Russia-Ukraine war made it aware of the challenges that lie ahead with an acute dependence on other actors for defence supplies. In 2023, India clocked its highest defence export value of Rs.15,920 crores or roughly \$5 billion-10 times more than the Rs.1,521 crores it garnered in 2016-17 for defence exports. This is a pivotal moment for the country's burgeoning military-industrial complex, while also significant for the government's larger 'Atmanirbhar' Initiative, where the defence industry is arguably leading the transition. In the economic realm, this has translated into a greater openness to forge substantive trade partnerships with like-minded nations.

This is an inflection point for the global order and for India. India is on the cusp of achieving something dramatic: not only a top-tier economic power that is also a multicultural democracy but also a top-tier geopolitical player that can lead, not simply balance. The choices that New Delhi will make over the next few years will define the contours of that rise.

Arjun Kapoor celebrates new year with new 'phoenix' tattoo

Bollywood actor Arjun Kapoor, who is known for '2 States', 'Ishaqzaade' and 'Mubarakan', has got a new ink. The actor rang in the new year with a positive thought as he got a new tattoo on his calf. It reads 'rise'.

The tattoo takes inspiration from a phoenix. The actor took to his Instagram on Tuesday and shared a video of the process of tattoo design.

He wrote in the caption, "For only from the ashes of who we were, can we rise up to become who we are to be".

Jr NTR returns from quake-struck Japan, hopes for country's swift recovery

Hyderabad

'RRR' star Jr NTR on Tuesday morning said he had returned from Japan and wished for its swift recovery after a series of powerful earthquakes hit the island country.

The quakes struck the western region of Japan, leaving at least eight people dead and damaging buildings, vehicles and boats, with officials warning people in some areas on Tuesday to stay away from their homes because of a risk of more strong quakes.

Jr NTR, who spent the last week in Japan, in a post on X said he was "deeply shocked" by the earthquakes in the country.

"Back home today from Japan and deeply shocked by the earthquakes hitting. Spent the entire last week there, and my heart goes out to everyone affected. Grateful for the resilience of the people and hoping for a swift recovery.



Stay strong, Japan," the actor wrote on the microblogging site.

His film 'RRR', a period action drama also starring Ram Charan, had emerged as

the highest grossing Indian film upon its release in Japan in 2022. The SS Rajamouli directorial had raised over 410 million yen (Rs 24.13 crore approximately) at the Japanese box office. On Monday, the quakes, the largest of which had a magnitude of 7.6, also started a fire and collapsed buildings on the west coast of Japan's main island, Honshu, causing the country to drop its highest-level tsunami alert after issuing one following a series of major earthquakes.

Aftershocks continued to shake Ishikawa prefecture and nearby areas a day after a magnitude 7.6 temblor slammed the area on Monday afternoon.

Eight people were confirmed dead in Wajima city, officials said. Seven others were seriously injured, while damage to homes was so great that it could not immediately be assessed, they said.

Decoding happiness

Randeep Hooda and Lin Laishram celebrated their first New Year together as the newly-wed couple in Kannur, Kerala.

The lovebirds took to social media and shared glimpses of their New Year getaway. Randeep and Lin are seen posing for a selfie, while standing against the picturesque backdrop of the sunset.

The post was captioned as: "Last sunset of 2023."

The geotag was of Kannur, Kerala. Randeep gave the music of the song Sooraj Dooba Hain to the post.



Rashmika's 'happiest' wishes

Rashmika Mandanna on Monday extended warm greetings for the New Year to her fans, and shared a selfie, leaving the internet in awe of her natural beauty.

The Dear Comrade actress enjoys 40.9 million followers on Instagram. She has a vibrant social media account and is often seen sharing glimpses of her day to day life.

As we embark on a fresh year, Rashmika took to Instagram Stories and penned a heart-warming wish. The post was

captioned: "Good morning! Happiest new year my loves! 2024 has a goooooo ring to it no?"

In another Story, Rashmika shared a glimpse of a board game, and wrote, "Let's goooooooo 2024!"



Wedding bells ring for Rakul Preet, Jackky



Rakul Preet Singh and Jackky Bhagnani are set to tie the knot in February. The couple will get married in Goa in an intimate ceremony. The couple made it official on Instagram back in October 2021. Earlier this year, Jackky Bhagnani shared a reel featuring the moments he and Rakul have spent together so far, wishing the actress on her birthday. The reel features glimpses of their vacation diaries, red carpet walks as well as on stage performances. An official announcement from the couple with regards to their wedding plans is awaited.

Shura Khan shares adorable video of Arbaaz Khan proposing her before marriage

Actor-producer Arbaaz Khan tied the knot with make-up artist Shura Khan in an intimate nikah ceremony at his sister Arpita Khan Sharma's residence in Mumbai. Now, Shura has shared a cute video of Arbaaz proposing to her.

Shura posted a video on her Instagram handle in which she can be seen blushing as Arbaaz proposes to her with a huge bouquet of flowers in the presence of their family members. Arbaaz's sister, Arpita Khan, was seen with them. Arhaan Khan, Arbaaz's son, can also be seen in the video.

Shura wrote in the caption, "From saying YES on the 19th and getting Married on the 24th Dec...That was quick @arbaazkhanofficial..Alhumdulillah.."

After her post, Ridhima Pandit mentioned, "Adorable.. God bless you both." Ravi Dubey also dropped a heart emoji.

The social media reacted to the adorable video. One of them wrote, "Beautiful, may your relation be protected and blessed." While another commented, "o happy to see you in love... @arbaazkhanofficial you're very lucky to have shuruuu." Arbaaz married make-up artist Shura Khan in an intimate nikah ceremony. Several videos and pictures from the ceremony have gone viral on social media. One of the videos from Arbaaz and Shura Khan's wedding has surfaced on social media, which shows Salman Khan dancing to his songs.

In a video shared by one of the fan clubs on Instagram, Salman can be seen shaking his leg to his song 'Tere mast mast do nain' from 'Dabangg'. Arhaan Khan, Alvira Khan Agnihotri, and Shura Khan were also seen dancing along with him.

Dharmendra, Salman Khan recreate Bobby Deol's 'Jamal Kudu' step from 'Animal'



Veteran actor Dharmendra and Bollywood superstar Salman Khan recreated Bobby Deol's 'Jamal Kudu' step from 'Animal' in the weekend ka vaar episode of 'Bigg Boss 17'.

In the promo shared by Colors TV, Dharmendra can be seen having a great time on the 'Bigg Boss 17' stage with Salman Khan and others. Dharmendra balances the glass in his mouth while dancing to the song 'Jamal Kudu'. Dharmendra even tried to balance it on his palm, and others joined in.

Salman was also seen attempting to balance the glass on his head, but it toppled and he caught it with his hands the next second. Sohail Khan and Mika Singh took the same step and joined in.

Setting the bar high

Zahrah S Khan, known for her melodious hits like Kusu Kusu and Dance Meri Rani, talks about the year gone by. Zahrah says, "It was an incredible year, beginning with the collaboration with Edward Maya for Love Stereo in January 2023. Embarking on my first tour with a remarkable team was another highlight. Signing up for the film Vrushabha brought about another fantastic feeling. Working on Love Stereo was an absolute blast, especially dancing alongside Tiger. This experience fueled my drive to improve as a dancer, and the overall balance between work and personal happiness was truly uplifting".

The caption reads, "Get ready to channel your inner 'Animal.' Only on this new year special episode!"

Actors Ranbir Kapoor- and Bobby Deol-starrer action-thriller film 'Animal' has received massive love from the audience. It has emerged as Ranbir's career biggest opener.

'Animal' helmed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga also stars Rashmika Mandana, Shakti Kapoor and Triptii Dimri.

It showcases a story about a father-son relationship, played by Anil and Ranbir Kapoor. Ranbir's character is protective and obsessive about his father's love and is seen threatening everybody who comes in the way of his love for his father.

Talking about her journey, Zahrah says, "I am immensely grateful for the growth I've experienced every year since entering the industry as a professional playback singer in 2021. There has been no looking back since then; each year has been progressively more significant and fulfilling professionally. I am thankful to God for continuously blessing me with work. I'm excited to see what unfolds in 2024. I'm set to finish shooting for Vrushabha by March. My goal is to work on scripts that showcase a new side of me with each film. I hope to achieve what my mother did as both an actor and a singer."

Sonali Bendre, enjoys rickshaw & cable car rides with family before Ganga Aarti in Haridwar



Actress Sonali Bendre, who visited Haridwar with her husband Goldie Behl and son Ranveer for their New Year

getaway, shared a sneak peek of their "amazing" day.

The 'Diljale' actress is an avid social media user, and

enjoys 4.4 million followers on Instagram. She is often seen sharing updates of her daily life with her fans on the photo-sharing application.

The actress shared a string of photos, wherein she can be seen enjoying cable car and rickshaw rides with her family. The candid pictures show Sonali laughing her heart out as she enjoys her day in Haridwar. Later, the family also took part in Ganga Aarti in Haridwar. The post was captioned: "E-rickshaw, cable car rides, what a day in Haridwar with the most amazing Gangaji Aarti... Thank you @pilibhithouseharidwar for sneaking us in and out so smoothly!!!!"

Fans showered love on Sonali's photos.

On the work front, Sonali was last seen in the series 'The Broken News

It's over for now: Big B gets emotional as he bids adieu to 15th season of KBC

Goodbies are not easy. Ask megastar Amitabh Bachchan who got teary-eyed while bringing the curtains down on the 15th season of Kaun Banega Crorepati. Big B recently bid adieu to the 15th season on an emotional note.

In a video shared by Sony TV's Instagram handle, Amitabh Bachchan said, "Devi aur sajjano, ab hum jaa rahe aur kal se yeh manch ab nahi sajega. Apno se yeh keh pana ki kal se hum yahan nahi aa payenge, na kehne ki himmat hoti aur na kehne ka mann hota hai (Ladies and gentleman, now it's time to go as the stage won't be the same. It's difficult to let everyone know that we won't be returning here from tomorrow)."

'Not for comic relief': Shabir on his female avatar in Pyaar Ka Pehla Naam Radha Mohan



Meanwhile, on the film front, Big B will be next seen in the sci-fi action thriller film Kalki 2898 AD alongside Deepika

Padukone and Prabhas. The film is scheduled to release in January. He also has a courtroom drama film Section 84 in his kitty.

What lies in store for the audiences in the upcoming track of Zee TV's Pyaar Ka Pehla Naam Radha Mohan is bound to give them goosebumps, as fans of Shabir Ahluwalia will see their icon transform physically into a female avatar. This bold transformation of Mohan's persona promises to flip the tale on its head! Shabir says, "Many actors have cross-dressed at some point in their careers, but it has usually been for comic relief. In contrast, my character's transition into a female avatar will elevate the drama quotient and the intensity of a much-awaited highpoint in the plot. I've embraced it as a challenge, giving it my all. I have refrained in not caricaturising the look or mannerisms but playing it with subtlety and restraint. I hope I've done justice to the script, and the audience feels the impact of this gripping sequence."

Who stole David Warner's cap; 'emotional' Pakistan's skipper Shan Masood calls for 'country-wide search'

Pakistan Test skipper Shan Masood has urged the Australian government for a "country-wide search" after David Warner in an emotional plea on social media revealed that his 'Baggy Green' cap had been stolen.

Warner, on Tuesday, shared an emotional video on Instagram following the misplacement of his Baggy Green caps, purportedly taken while in transit from Melbourne to Sydney for the Test match.

"There should be a country-wide search right now from the Australian Government. We might need the best of detectives to get that back," Shan Masood was quoted by Fox Cricket.

"He's been a great ambassador, and he deserves every bit of respect, every bit of celebration for his unbelievable career. I hope they find it. It's the most precious thing for any cricketer, and I hope David Warner gets it back," he added.

The veteran opener, who is gearing up to wrap up his remarkable 12-year Test career in the upcoming third Test against Pakistan at the Sydney Cricket



Ground, expressed his distress in an Instagram video, expressing the sentimental value of the bag, particularly containing his cherished Baggy Green cap.

"Inside this backpack was by baggy green. It's sentimental to me, and something that I would love to have back in my hands walking out there come this week," said David Warner in an

Instagram video.

The 37-year-old opener will play his final Test match at the SCG against Pakistan, beginning on January 3, departing as Australia's fifth-highest run-scorer in the format. Of his 8695 runs at 44.58 in Test cricket, the 37-year-old has compiled 793 runs at 49.56 at his home venue, making four centuries.

Deepti Sharma backs team to break duck against rampant Australia

Ace off-spinner Deepti Sharma today backed India to end Australia's winning streak against them at home "as soon as possible" after losing nine consecutive ODIs, including two games in the ongoing series.

Australia clinched a narrow three-run win in the second ODI here at the Wankhede Stadium on Saturday to take an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series.

The last time India beat the Aussies at home was at Chennai on February 23, 2007. "Look, winning and losing is a part of the game — but we have improved as a team, be it as a bowling unit or batting. We will try to break their winning



streak as soon as possible," Deepti said today. "There have been a lot of improvements. Earlier, whenever we would play against Australia the games never used to go that close. This is one positive (from the last match) that we are able to take it till the end," she added.

Deepti said the team will focus on the positives drawn from the second game across departments. "We did well as a bowling unit, the spinners and the pacers restricted them. At the same time, the batters did well, their partnerships in between were good," she said.

CBI closes 2019 IPL betting cases over lack of evidence

The CBI has closed two cases related to alleged fixing of Indian Premier League matches in 2019 "based on inputs" from Pakistan due to lack of evidence, officials said on Tuesday.

The agency had filed two FIRs in May 2022 against seven people after receiving information that "a network of individuals involved in cricket betting are influencing



the outcome of Indian Premier League (IPL) matches based on inputs received from Pakistan".

The CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) named Dileep Kumar, based in Delhi's Rohini, and Gurram Vasu and Gurram Satish -- based in Hyderabad -- as accused in its first FIR. Sajjan Singh, Prabhu Lal Meena, Ram Avtar and Amit Kumar Sharma, all from Rajasthan, were named as accused in the second FIR.

After nearly two years of probe, the CBI could not find enough evidence to proceed with the prosecution against them.

The agency filed a closure report in a special court on December 23, in which it has given detailed description of the allegations and its probe in the matter, besides citing reasons for recommending the closure of the case, officials said.

It will now be up to the court to decide whether to accept the report filed by the agency or order it to continue further investigations, they said.

The agency had booked these people on allegations that they were running the racket for more than 10-13 years with suspicious cash transactions being made from their accounts, the officials said.

The CBI had alleged that

these individuals were in touch with Pakistani individuals through a Pakistani mobile number.

The two networks getting inputs from Pakistan were allegedly deceiving the public by "inducing them for betting", the FIR had said.

The FIR had alleged that the racketeers had bank accounts (mule accounts) using fake identities and know your customer (KYC) documents, in connivance with unidentified bank officials.

The CBI alleged that Dileep Kumar was operating a number of bank accounts in which domestic cash deposits worth more than Rs 43 lakh had been made since 2013, defying "economic rationale", the officials said.

The central agency had also alleged that in the six bank accounts operated by Gurram Satish, cash deposits worth Rs 4.55 crore (domestic) and Rs 3.05 lakh (foreign) were made during 2012-20. In the case of Gurram Vasu, the amount was Rs 5.37 crore during the same period. The agency had alleged that there was no recognisable business rationale to explain the transactions. "The information reveals that this network of individuals was involved in cricket betting during Indian Premier League (IPL) matches held in the year 2019," the FIR related to Delhi-Hyderabad racket alleged. "The persons involved are running the racket of cricket betting, committing fraud by inducing betting by the general public and thereby deceiving the public of their hard-earned money and also indulging in impersonating their identities in operating various bank accounts," it stated. "The information reveals that this network of individuals was involved in cricket betting during the then-ongoing Indian Premier League (IPL) matches held in the year 2019 in Delhi and other places," the FIR had alleged.

Brisbane International: Winning return for super mom Naomi Osaka



needed three match points in the tiebreaker before converting a 6-3 7-6(9) victory over Tamara Korpatsch today at the Brisbane International.

Osaka didn't play the Australian Open last year and later revealed she was pregnant. She and her partner, rapper Cordae, became parents to daughter Shai in Los Angeles in July. "It's a big change overnight," former No. 1-ranked Osaka said of returning to the tour as a mom. "For me, I love it a lot because ... in a way I would say (Shai) has helped me grow up so much so quickly."

Osaka will now play Karolina Pliskova in Round 2.

Motherhood has helped give Naomi Osaka a new mindset when things are getting tough on court.

In her first competitive match since September 2022, the four-time Major winner was broken while serving for the match and

Australian former world champion Melissa Hoskins killed in car crash



Hoskins, 32, won gold in the team pursuit at the 2015 world championships and was a member of the Australian team at the 2012 London and 2016 Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympics.

A statement from the state police of South Australia released on Sunday said a 32-year-old woman died in the hospital after being hit by a car in an inner northern suburb of Adelaide, the capital of South Australia.

Police said a 33-year-old man has been arrested and charged with causing death by dangerous driving, driving without due care and endangering life. The driver was known to the woman and given bail to appear in court on March 13, police said.

A police spokesperson said they do not confirm the names of victims or accused involved in an incident.

Australian Olympic track cyclist and former world champion Melissa Hoskins has died after a car accident in the country's south, the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) said on Monday.

Australian media has widely reported that Hoskins' husband and twice world individual time trial champion Rohan Dennis

has been arrested and charged over her death. "The AOC has expressed the utmost sadness at the loss of Olympic cyclist Melissa Hoskins after the tragic events in Adelaide," it said in a post on social media platform X.

"Our condolences go to Melissa's family, friends and the cycling community at this extremely difficult time."

New Zealand beat Bangladesh by 17 runs in final T20 to level series 1-1

New Zealand skipper Mitchell Santner took four wickets before a rearguard batting effort helped the hosts beat Bangladesh by 17 runs via the Duckworth-Lewis-Stern (DLS) method in the rain-hit third and final Twenty20 international on Sunday to level the series.

Santner elected to bowl after winning the toss and took 4-16 to help dismiss Bangladesh for a modest 110 at Mount Maunganui, leaving the tourists with a daunting task to seal their maiden series victory of any kind in New Zealand.

Great hip and shoulder rotation makes Rabada a special bowler: Allan Donald



Kagiso Rabada's hunger for success and an impeccable technique to release the ball easily makes him a modern-day South Africa legend, reckons former fast bowling great Allan Donald.

Explaining what makes Rabada special, Donald said Rabada's hip-rotation is like a javelin thrower and that adds pace to his bowling. Donald said Rabada's bowling style is similar to the past legends of the game.

The 28-year-old, who has competed in 61 matches, is just 13 scalps away from completing 300 Test wickets.

"Skill is one thing but he has got an amazing ability to run the ball away. He has got some amazing wickets with stunning balls in the first Test match," Donald, who is now an acclaimed pace bowling coach, told PTI in an interview.

In the series-opener, Rabada took seven wickets, including a five-wicket haul in the first Indian innings at Centurion.

"He was outstanding to watch as he always is and I just think his thirst for success drives his consistency. Anyone who gets success, doesn't matter what sport he plays, is judged by consistency," said Donald, who is now attached with Cricket South Africa academy.

"If you look at Dale Steyn, he brought that thirst for consistency for himself and KG is no different as he is such a hungry individual. I see in him to be the absolute best competitor on the field that he can be."

The Technical Part

To bowl fast, smooth hip and shoulder movements are prerequisites and Rabada is a cut above the rest technically, the "white lightning" said.

"All genuine quicks have got great hip and shoulder rotation and if you observe him technically, he gets in a fantastic position in the air. We always talk about the launch, how they launch off the floor or how big they get at the crease.

"Look at other greats like Curtley Ambrose, Courtney Walsh, Ian Bishop, Michael Holding all these got off the floor to give them time to pull the trigger and that's what KG does beautifully. That hang time (off the ground) we talk about.

"Also if you see at point of backfoot strike, the hips are slightly closed and open up very-very quickly. They don't spend too much time on backfoot. KG is very quick." Donald likened Rabada's hip rotation to that of a top javelin thrower.

"If you listen to his feet, every ball is so quick. KG's hip rotation is similar to a javelin thrower's right side release through the impact area. He knows his rhythm and action so well so technical point he is solid. He understands biomechanics as much as a Pat Cummins or a Mitchell Starc," Donald said.

Initially his partnership with Fannie de Villiers, Brian McMillan, Brett Schultz was talked about much and later on he formed a lethal partnership Shaun Pollock.

Ayodhya Gears Up To Feed Lakhs Of Devotees On Jan 22



Ayodhya

In an exemplary show of solidarity, people from across the country are sending vegetables, rice and other food items to Ayodhya as a contribution for the grand consecration ceremony on January 22. The Ram Temple ceremony is expected to be attended by lakhs of devotees.

Approximately 300 tons of food ration, including essentials like rice, spices, vegetables, and other food materials, are being dispatched to Ayodhya. All the food is being stored at the 'karyashala' in Ayodhya, and will be used once the devotees start streaming into the temple town.

Rice trucks are also coming from Raipur, which is the maternal home of Lord Ram in Indian mythology.

Media visited Ayodhya this week and found that construction activities are in full swing on the first phase of the Ram Temple, which is expected to be completed in a few days. Decoration work will begin after that.

The site is dotted with mounds of Makrana Marble brought from Rajasthan's Bharatpur district and stone from other places that are being used in the construction of the grand temple.

Renowned sculptor Arun Yogiraj's idol of Ram Lalla chosen for Ayodhya's grand temple

Ayodhya

The meeting of the trust was held on Friday to undertake voting to decide the idol of Lord Ram Lalla. Days after the idol of Lord Ram Lalla for 'Pran Pratishtha' (consecration) was finalised by the temple trust in Ayodhya, Union minister Pralhad Joshi on Monday said the idol carved by Karnataka's renowned sculptor Arun Yogiraj will adore the grand Ram temple.

In a social media post on X, Joshi said, "The selection of the idol for the Prana Pratishthapana of Lord Rama in Ayodhya has been finalized. The idol of Lord Rama, carved by renowned sculptor of our country Yogiraj Arun, will be installed in Ayodhya."

The minister also shared a photograph of Yogiraj posing alongside the idol of Lord Ram. The grand consecration ceremony of Ram temple will be held on January 22. Former Karnataka Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa also expressed joy on social media, congratulating sculptor Arun Yogiraj and expressing pride in the selection of Lord Ram's idol for installation in Ram Mandir.



Ram Rajya Coming, Pran Pratishtha, 2024 Elections Both Will Be 'Shubh': Temple Chief Priest

Ayodhya

This new year, 2024, will be significant as Ram Lalla will be seated in the sanctum sanctorum of the Ram temple in Ayodhya and the general elections will be held, and both will be "shubh (auspicious)," the Ram temple's chief priest Acharya Satyendra Das said.

Speaking to PTI at his residence in the Ramghat area of the city on Monday, the octogenarian praised the development work happening in

offered to Ram Lalla on Monday had come in a specially made box bearing a design that depicted Lord Ram and the upcoming temple, from a very old shop in Lucknow, his aide said, adding that it has been coming from the very same place for the last few years.

"This New Year is very significant, and it is significant because in this month, on January 22, Ram Lalla will be seated in the sanctum sanctorum (of the under-

in the sanctum sanctorum. And Lok Sabha elections will also take place in this year, 2024, and all these will be 'shubh (auspicious) and good.' The consecration ceremony will take place a few months ahead of the Lok Sabha polls.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the temple town on December 30, during which he held a roadshow, inaugurated the redeveloped Ayodhya railway station and the newly built airport, and laid the foundation stone for a slew of other projects.

On August 5, 2020, he performed the 'bhoomipujan' ceremony in Ayodhya for the upcoming temple.

Settling a fractious issue that goes back more than a century, the Supreme Court, in a historic verdict in 2019, backed the construction of a Ram temple by a trust at the disputed site in Ayodhya and ruled that an alternative five-acre plot must be found for a mosque in the Hindu holy town.

On December 6, 1992, a mob of kar sewaks gathered in the holy town from different parts of the country to demolish the mosque, triggering communal violence in many parts of the country.

While much has changed in Ayodhya since the landmark verdict, the Ram temple issue and the history of the dispute continue to weigh on the minds of many people.

Asked if lasting peace will return to Ayodhya after the construction of the Ram temple, Das, the Ram temple's chief priest, said, "Development is happening in Ayodhya. The airport has come up, a new railway station (building) has been built, and Ram Path has been developed. Many such roads are proposed, and through these projects, Ayodhya will be seen in its grand form. People will come and have 'darshan'. It is a very auspicious month (January), and it may bode well for everyone, which is my blessing."



Ayodhya

"Not just peace; 'Ram Rajya' is coming. Ram Lalla will be seated in the sanctum sanctorum," he said, and he quoted a couplet: "Ram Raj baithe trialoka, harshit bhai, gaye sab shoka."

"Grief, pain, and tension will cease to exist, and everyone will be happy," he said.

"Ram Rajya" is a term used to refer to an ideal of governance where everyone is happy.

"My greetings and blessings to all countrymen on the New Year. Ram Lalla will be offered 'Chhapan Bhog', and 'prasad' will be offered," he said, shortly before heading for the Ramjanmabhoomi temple site to perform the 'aarti'.

As per the customs, 'Bhog aarti' is performed at noon. A 'Chhapan Bhog' is offered to Ram Lalla on special occasions such as Holi, Ramnavmi, Basant Panchami, New Year, Independence Day, and Republic Day, his side said.

"So, the new year will be very good," said the Ram temple's chief priest.

The 'Chhapan Bhog'

construction temple), and this will be very beneficial for the people of the country," Acharya Das said.

Meanwhile, in Ayodhya, organisers began distributing worshipped 'akshat'-rice grains mixed with turmeric and ghee on New Year's Day, and this will continue up to January 15, a week before the consecration ceremony at the Ram temple.

Ayodhya rang in the New Year on December 31 night, amid chants of 'Jai Shri Ram' as many residents and others had gathered at the iconic Lata Mangeshkar Chowk near Naya Ghat.

A large number of people took holy dips in the Saryu river on the New Year, while others visited the Ramjanmabhoomi temple to have a 'darshan' of Ram Lalla, as well as the Hanumangarhi temple to seek the blessings of Lord Hanuman.

Asked about the further construction of the Ram temple this year, Das said, "A lot of work is to be done in 2024. One is that Ram Lalla will be seated