

Across State

Year -7 Issue - 14

Mumbai, Thursday 11- 17Jan '24

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Rs.5/- PAGES- 24

CM-led faction is real Shiv Sena RULES ASSEMBLY SPEAKER

Rejects disqualification pleas against Shinde Sena MLAs



Mumbai

Maharashtra Assembly speaker Rahul Narvekar, while announcing his verdict on disqualification matters on Wednesday, said the faction led by now CM Eknath Shinde was the real Shiv Sena at the time the rival factions emerged. He also rejected the disqualification pleas against Shinde Sena MLAs. "The last relevant constitution submitted to ECI before the rival groups emerged was of 1999. I hold that Constitution of Shiv Sena party provided by ECI to Speaker is relevant constitution of Shiv Sena to decide which is the political party," he said.

Stating that the submission by Shiv Sena UBT that respondents from Shinde faction went incommunicado after the party split ceases to hold any meaning for purpose of disqualification as Shinde faction held to be real political party when rival factions emerged, Speaker Rahul Narvekar rejected disqualification pleas against Shinde Sena MLAs.

"There is a submission by UBT faction that respondents from Shinde faction deliberately remained absent in meeting dated June 21, 2022. It will not be correct to say

that Sunil Prabhu had any authority to call the said meeting. Petitioners' submission that respondents from Shinde faction are liable to be disqualified due to non attendance is rejected," Narvekar ruled.

Speaker Rahul Narvekar overturned Uddhav Thackeray's removal of now CM Eknath Shinde as a group leader of Shiv Sena. "It would be appropriate to note that the Shiv Sena constitution does not have a position called a Paksh Pramukh (which Uddhav Thackeray was holding). The will of the Paksha Pramukh is not synonymous to will of political party. The party president does not have a right to remove anyone from the position," he said.

Speaker Rahul Narvekar said that the leadership structure in 2018 was not in conformity with the Shiv Sena constitution. "The 2018 leadership structure mentions Shiv Sena pakshapramukh as highest office. However, in the SS constitution, the highest office is Shiv Sena Pramukh and Rashtriya Karyakarini is the highest authority."

Thus, Narvekar said, it cannot be taken as yardstick to determine which faction was the real political

party at the relevant time. "The (Shiv Sena) UBT faction submitted that decision of Paksha Pramukh is synonymous to the will of political party in case of rift. This proposition is devoid of merit," he said.

Rahul Narvekar has brought down dignity of post: NCP's Jitendra Awhad

Jitendra Awhad (NCP-Sharad Pawar faction) leader has said that the post of Assembly Speaker is the highest but Rahul Narvekar has brought down the dignity of the post.

"MLA disqualification hearing will be held today, but the Speaker of the Assembly never understood before that whatever papers were scrutinized should also have been shown to the countrymen through live view. How does the Assembly Speaker himself go to the residence of Chief Minister Eknath Shinde even before the disqualification? The post of Assembly Speaker is the highest but Rahul Narvekar has brought down the dignity of the post," he said.

Meanwhile, Shiv Sena (UBT faction) leader Sanjay Raut questioned the timing of an upcoming visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the state ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. On the eve of the verdict, Shinde said numbers were stacked in favour of the Shiv Sena led by him, while asserting that even the Election Commission has recognised that the majority of the party's lawmakers were with him. On the other hand, Uddhav Thackeray said his party had filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court objecting to a meeting between Shinde and Narvekar before the crucial verdict.

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PM Modi to inaugurate Mumbai Trans Harbour Sealink, longest sea bridge in the country, on Friday

Mumbai

The 21.8km-long Mumbai Trans Harbour Link (MTHL), officially called Atal Setu Nhava Sheva Sea Link, is all set for opening to traffic, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi slated to inaugurate it on Friday.

Promising a merely 20-minute drive from Sewri to Chirle, the bridge is poised to significantly shorten travel time between Mumbai and Navi Mumbai. However, decisions regarding bus services on this toll road are yet to be finalised by transportation authorities.

Constructed over seven years by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA), the MTHL stands as the country's longest sea bridge, designed to last a century. It features three interchanges connecting various highways and roads, projecting significant traffic growth from 39,300 passenger cars in its initial opening year to an estimated 1.03 lakh cars by 2032, as per the MMRDA's quarterly progress report.

The Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation is still deliberating the rollout of bus services on the MTHL bridge. Municipal Commissioner Rajesh Narvekar told The Indian Express that given its length, how it would be useful for



bus passengers was being looked into. The absence of bus stops along the bridge has also contributed to the uncertainty about bus services.

He also emphasised the need to assess passenger demand in less-densely populated areas served by two interchanges—Chirle and Ulwe—on the bridge. While toll considerations are secondary, passenger count is a primary concern for public bus services, he added. The municipal corporation operates buses

to Mumbai along the Mantralaya route, primarily used by office-goers.

Similarly, the Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST), a part of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, has yet to finalise plans for introducing bus services on the MTHL bridge owing to uncertainties over toll payment.

The Maharashtra government has disclosed a toll of Rs 250 for one-way single-journey vehicles, with tolls for other vehicle types yet to be announced.

The MMRDA quarterly project report from January to March 2023 proposed a toll of Rs 550 for buses.

Meanwhile, the cash-strapped BEST, which incurs toll charges at Mumbai's entry points owing to its services in Navi Mumbai and the Mira Bhayander Municipal Corporation areas, wants toll-free access to the MTHL, as per sources. However, a government decision in this matter is awaited.

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Mumbai Housing societies to get 1.2 lakh waste bins

Mumbai

In a bid to promote waste segregation, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) is set to distribute over 1,20,000 waste bins — one wet and one dry each — in the city's housing societies. Having already procured the dustbins at the cost of Rs 8 crore, civic officials have said that the bins will be distributed among housing societies within 10 days of them writing to the BMC for the provision of the same.

While the plan is not a new initiative, earlier societies would write to their local corporators seeking the supply of the wet and dry waste dustbins. According to officials, the initiative is making a comeback after one year.

At a press conference, Guardian Minister, Mangal Prabhat Lodha said, "Taking the PM's Swachh Bharat, Swasth Bharat yojana forward, we will now be introducing this initiative again. If a housing society writes a letter to the BMC, within 10 days, they will be provided with two dustbins, one for wet

waste and another for dry waste. This will promote the waste to get segregated directly at the society level."

Deputy Municipal Commissioner, Sanjog Kabare added, "We have appointed three companies and already procured 1,20,000 dustbins which include wet and dry waste bins. Approximately Rs 8 crore have been spent on them. We will distribute them to any society and in slum pockets that write to us or approach us on our number."

Kabare added that each waste bin will have a capacity of 120 litres. Meanwhile, Lodha said that the civic body may also consider procuring more dustbins to supply them to more societies in the future. "BMC has both the resources as well as the means to procure more bins, if there is a need," he told reporters.

Housing society members seeking to avail these services can drop mails to the ward level SWM department or approach them on the number, 7030079777.

MahaRERA implements three-tier scrutiny process for home buyers



Mumbai

In a bid to eliminate future complaints from home buyers, the Maharashtra Real Estate Regulatory Authority (MahaRERA) has implemented a three-tier scrutiny process for registering housing projects. Each project application will undergo rigorous evaluation in legal, financial, and technical aspects by independent teams, as outlined in an official statement released by MahaRERA on Tuesday.

These enhanced scrutiny measures aim to ensure timely project completion without obstacles, striving toward a zero-complaint goal from

homebuyers. Projects failing to meet MahaRERA's criteria will not receive registration numbers.

Ajoy Mehta, MahaRERA chairman, emphasised that adherence to legal, financial, and technical parameters is crucial for obtaining a MahaRERA registration number. The three-tier system ensures comprehensive verification to prevent project stress, empowering the homebuyers.

Simultaneously, MahaRERA conducted a workshop to aid developers in addressing their queries and uncertainties, further supporting transparency and compliance within the real estate sector.

Rashmi Shukla takes over, says starting on a 'fresh, positive note'

Mumbai

Rashmi Shukla, a 1988-batch IPS officer, took charge as the 48th DGP of Maharashtra on Tuesday, making her the first woman officer to head the state police. "I am starting afresh and on a positive note," she said while talking to media persons soon after.

Shukla had a tumultuous relationship with the government when Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) alliance was in power. Two FIRs were registered against her on charges of allegedly recording phone calls of opposition leaders while she was the state intelligence chief. The FIRs were eventually quashed by the Bombay High Court.

When asked by media persons about her appointment, NCP leader Sharad Pawar said the precaution they will have to take will be to ensure that their phones are not tapped.

Speaking to the media, Shukla

said, "Maharashtra is known to have good law and order and my priority will be to ensure that it continues. Women's safety is also going to be an area of focus. Another new challenge is the newer forms of cyber-crime and we will take steps to curb it. Further, we also want to reduce deaths on highways due to

years." On being asked about returning to the state she said "I am very happy as this is my house. I have spent 33 years in the state."

Shukla has over the past five years seen several twists and turns. Seen as a blue-eyed officer of Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, she had served as Pune police commissioner and later went on to serve as the head of State Intelligence Department (SID), a post which usually sees the appointment of officers considered close to those in power.

After the MVA government came to power, she was

transferred to a non-executive post following which she went on central deputation. Later, the MVA government registered two FIRs against her which were eventually quashed by the Bombay High Court last year paving the way for her appointment as the state DGP.



accidents. These are my priorities as the state DGP."

On being asked by the media about comments made by the opposition leaders on her being appointed as the state DGP, Shukla said, "It is a new year and I want to begin afresh on a positive note. I have spent 33 years in the state and was away for two

BJP sets up poll management panel led by Ashish Shelar for Mumbai's 6 Lok Sabha seats

Mumbai

The BJP on Tuesday announced that a poll management committee for the six Lok Sabha seats in Mumbai and its suburbs was set up under the leadership of Ashish Shelar, the party's city unit president.

All the Mumbai MLAs, MLCs and office-bearers of the ruling BJP have been assigned specific roles for the polls as each of the six Lok Sabha seats comprises as many as Assembly segments each.

Senior MLA Atul Bhatkalkar will look after the advertisement department with the help of other members. The job of preparing an election manifesto has been



given to MLA Amit Satam. Also among the leaders roped for the elections are MLC Praveen Darekar, Prasad Lad and senior MLA Parag Alvani.

The six Lok Sabha seats

are Mumbai North, Mumbai North West, Mumbai North East, Mumbai North Central, Mumbai South Central and Mumbai South. In 2019, the BJP and the undivided Shiv

Sena contested the elections as alliance partners and won three seats each. The seats that the BJP won are Mumbai North (Gopal Shetty), Mumbai North East (Manoj Kotak) and Mumbai North Central (Poonam Mahajan). The Shiv Sena won Mumbai South (Arvind Sawant), Mumbai South Central (Rahul Shewale) and Mumbai North West (Gajanan Kirtikar).

After the split in the Shiv Sena in June 2022, 40 MLAs and 13 MPs switched loyalties from the Uddhav Thackeray-led faction to Chief Minister Eknath Shinde's faction. They included Rahul Shewale and

Gajanan Kirtikar.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP will field candidates for its three seats. While the Shinde-led Sena stakes a claim to three seats, the NCP faction led by Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar also has pitched for one seat.

A highly placed source in the Mumbai BJP said, "At this moment, we are working in all six constituencies. The BJP has appointed six Lok Sabha in-charges to oversee the work. Apart from this, each Assembly segment will have a head to pursue the programmes and plans rolled for the 2024 elections."

'Swarn Dwar' installed at Ayodhya's Ram temple; pictures go viral on social media

Chandigarh

At the Ram Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya, the first swarn dwar (golden gate) has been installed on Tuesday. The pictures of the same surfaced over social media and went viral.

Two elephants in the welcome position can be seen in the central panel of the golden entrance of the Swarn Dwar photo. Two servants stand with their hands folded in a shape that resembles a palace



in the upper portion of the image. Besides, four squares at the bottom of the door are engraved with exquisite works of art.

Lord Ram's idol inaugural ceremony also called 'Ram Mandir Pran Pratishtha' will be held on January 22 in Ayodhya. Many noted personalities have accepted the invitation for the event.

Over 7,000 people have received invitation to the consecration ceremony, including 3,000 VVIPs such as priests, donors and politicians.

UP Govt declares holiday, dry day on January 22

New Delhi

The Uttar Pradesh Government on Tuesday declared a holiday and a dry day on January 22, the day of the consecration ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

Terming the occasion as a "national festival", Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said that liquor shops in the state should be closed on that day.

"Considering the significance of the consecration ceremony of the eagerly awaited new idol of Shri Ram Lalla in Ayodhya Dham, the CM has declared holiday in educational institutions on January 22," an official release issued here said.

During his visit to Ayodhya on Tuesday, the Chief Minister held a meeting with officials of the temple trust — Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, the release said.

25 years after Kargil War, battle areas to turn into tourist spots

Jammu

The Ladakh administration is deliberating on coordination and collaboration strategies with the Army for promotion of tourism in border areas. Locals of border regions have been demanding for years to open a path for holistic and sustainable development of tourism for them.

Army assistance sought

- Many areas in Kargil will be developed as tourist spots for which the Ladakh administration has sought the Army's help
- Army urged to enhance infrastructure at locations close to LoC with Pakistan and Line of

Actual Control (LAC) with China Areas, including Mushkoh Valley, Kaksar, Chulichan and Gargardo, are set to get a facelift to increase tourism potential

As a result, 25 years after the Kargil war, many areas will be developed as tourist spots for which Ladakh administration has sought Army's help. Mushkoh Valley is among the areas which witnessed battles between Indian and Pakistani forces.

Other areas which saw battles including Kaksar, Chulichan, and Gargardo in Kargil are also set to get a facelift to increase tourism potential of these places.

Secretary, Tourism and Culture Department, Ladakh, Kacho Mehboob



Ali Khan, recently held a meeting with Army officials and discussed the issues of bolstering tourism and enhancing infrastructure at locations close to LoC with Pakistan and Line of Actual Control

(LAC) with China.

The Tourism department has held discussions with the 8 Mountain Division, Kargil, and 14 Corps based in Ladakh for Army's support in development of the infrastructure in border areas.

"The discussions also focused on the promotion and sustainable development of tourism in these border areas by harnessing the unique attractions the region has to offer. The discussions acknowledged the strategic importance of Mushkoh Valley, Kaksar, Chulichan, and Gargardo and sought ways to leverage them to foster sustainable tourism," said Secretary Tourism.

Dress code for Hindu devotees to come into force in Bengaluru temples; shorts, torn jeans prohibited

Bengaluru

The temple managements in Bengaluru are implementing a dress code from Wednesday and will allow devotees to enter temples only in Indian traditional attire.

The Karnataka Devasthanam Mahasangha and Hindu Janajagruta Samiti will put up boards before temples in this regard and implement strict rules in this regard from Wednesday onwards.

As per the dress code, men are not allowed in shorts, bermuda, torn jeans, T-shirt showing chest and women will not be allowed inside the temples in shorts, midi, torn jeans as well.



The board will also appeal to devotees not to enter temples cladding in indecent, vulgar dresses. It also maintains that protecting the sanctity of the temple is the bounden religious duty.

Karnataka Temples-Mutts and Religious Institutions Association had convened the meeting of all temples last month and decided to implement the rule in January.

An appeal was made earlier and Hindu organisations supported the decision. A dress code

campaign for temples will also be launched by installing a board in this regard in front of the Sri Laxmi Venkataramana temple in Vasanth Nagar in Bengaluru.

Respond to online gaming cos' plea against 28% GST, Supreme Court tells Centre

New Delhi

The Supreme Court (SC) on Monday asked the Centre and the Directorate General of Goods and Services Tax Intelligence to respond in two weeks to a petition filed by the E-gaming Federation against levying 28 per cent Goods and Services Tax (GST) on all forms of online real-money gaming.

A Bench, led by CJI DY Chandrachud, issued the notice after hearing the submissions of senior advocate Harish Salve for the federation and Additional Solicitor General (ASG) N Venkataraman, representing the government.

Salve and the ASG said several high courts were seized of similar petitions and were passing orders filed by Dream 11, Games 24x7, and Head Digital Works. The GST Council had, in one of its meetings in July last year, recommended that online gaming along with casinos and horse racing be taxed at a uniform rate. The GST council had decided that there should not be any distinction between 'games of skill' and 'games of chance'.

Vibrant Gujarat Summit: Mukesh Ambani, Gautam Adani have multi-billion plans to expand green energy facilities in Gujarat; Suzuki to make electric vehicles in state

New Delhi

CEOs of top global and domestic corporations, including the Adani Group, Suzuki, Reliance, Tatas and Simmtech Korea, announced major investments in Gujarat in advanced or green technologies over the next decade.

At Vibrant Gujarat Summit, PM Narendra Modi lists 10 key areas; asks global majors to invest in 'pillar of stability' India

The highlight was the announcement of semiconductor plants by the Tatas and the Korean major Simmtech which follows the June announcement of a chips plant by world major Micron whose CEO was also present at the Tenth Vibrant Gujarat Summit which opened in Ahmedabad on Wednesday in the presence of PM Narendra Modi, several cabinet ministers and diplomats, Gujarat CM Bhupendra Patel, and Presidents of the UAE, Mozambique and Timor Leste.

Major automobile manufacturer, Suzuki Motor Corporation, Japan, said it was undertaking a major expansion of its operations in Gujarat which would include the production of its electric vehicles (EVs) for worldwide sales, the launch of a second car plant in the state and the start of four biogas production plants from cow dung in association with NDDB and



Banas Dairy.

Gautam Adani, Chairman of the Adani Group, declared a combined investment of Rs 2 lakh crore in Gujarat that will create over one lakh direct and indirect jobs. The Group's previous announcement of investing Rs 55,000 crore by 2025 had been nearly fulfilled while job creation had exceeded the projected 20,000. The Group is in the process of setting up the world's largest green energy park

and expanding the green supply chain.

Jeffre Chun, CEO of Simtech South Korea, announced a co-location project next to the upcoming semiconductor plant of another global chip major Micron. The company has already set up co-location plants alongside Micron in Malaysia and China more than 10 years ago. These have proven that co-location investments boost the growth

of the semiconductor system in the region and make India's presence in the semiconductor supply chain network much stronger.

Giving an update, Micron CEO Sanjay Mehrotra said phased construction of the memory and test facility in Gujarat with the Tatas had started and hirings of 5,000 professionals would start by early 2025. The combined investment of Micron, and the

Centre and state governments could be \$ 2.75 billion.

N Chandrasekaran, Chairman of Tata Sons, said his group was on the verge of concluding negotiations for a huge semiconductor fab in Dholera, Gujarat. The group was confident of beginning operations this year itself. With its origins in Navsari, 21 Tata group companies have a very strong presence providing jobs to 50,000 in Gujarat. It is also expanding the EV production line in Sanand.

Dubai-based DP World's CEO Ahmed bin Sulayem announced an investment of \$3 billion over the next three years that will include a state-of-the-art terminal at Kandhla with handling capacity of two million containers to add to its substantial presence in Gujarat since 2003.

Ambani Group patriarch Mukesh Ambani made several commitments including sourcing half of the corporate's renewable energy needs from Gujarat by 2030, aided by a complex in Jamnagar to produce green products and materials which would be commissioned in the second half of this year. Reliance Foundation will also partner with others to contribute to India's attempt to host the 2036 Olympics.

PM Modi, UAE President hold roadshow in Ahmedabad

Ahmedabad

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and United Arab Emirates (UAE) President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan held a roadshow in Ahmedabad on Tuesday evening. Before the roadshow, PM Modi welcomed the UAE president at the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel International Airport when the latter arrived there.

Sitting in a car, both the leaders waved at the people who gathered in large numbers on both sides of the road to greet them. The roadshow that lasted 15 minutes, began from the airport and ended at the Indira Bridge, a distance of around three kilometres. Banners were erected on the road to welcome the UAE president.

From the bridge circle, both the dignitaries headed to their respective destinations in Gandhinagar, officials said.

PM Modi is scheduled to inaugurate the 10th edition of the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit (VGGGS) at the Mahatma Mandir Convention Centre in Gandhinagar on Wednesday, where the UAE president will be the chief guest.

Earlier in the day, Modi held bilateral meetings with President of Timor-Leste Jose Ramos-Horta and Mozambique President Filipe Jacinto Nyusi, followed by a meeting with CEOs of top global corporations Mahatma Mandir in Gandhinagar.

At around 3 pm, he inaugurated the Vibrant Gujarat Global Trade Show.

The VGGGS is a global forum for business collaboration, knowledge sharing and strategic partnerships for inclusive growth and sustainable development.



'Mauni Mata' to break her 3-decade vow of silence after Ram temple inauguration

Dhanbad (Jharkhand)

An 85-year-old woman from Jharkhand will break her three-decade-long 'maun vrat' (vow of silence) after her dream comes true on January 22 with the inauguration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

Saraswati Devi started her vow on the day Babri Masjid was demolished in 1992, promising to break it only when the Ram temple was inaugurated, her family claimed.

The Dhanbad resident reached the temple town in Uttar Pradesh on Tuesday evening, where she was greeted by disciples of Pathar Mandir Ashram near Choti Chavni, her abode in Ayodhya, to witness the inauguration of the temple.

Devi, who is popularly known as 'Mauni Mata' in Ayodhya, used to communicate with family members through sign language but wrote down complicated sentences.

Though she took a break from 'maun vrat' and spoke for an hour at noon every day till 2020, she went completely silent the day the foundation for the temple was laid by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"The day Babri Masjid was demolished on December 6, 1992, my mother took a vow to observe silence till the Ram Mandir was constructed in Ayodhya. She has been jubilant ever since the date

of consecration of the temple was announced," 55-year-old Hare Ram Agarwal, Devi's youngest child, told PTI.

"She left for Ayodhya on Monday night aboard Ganga-Sutlej Express from Dhanbad Railway Station. She will break



her silence on January 22," Hare Ram, a resident of Bhowra in Baghmara block, said.

He said Devi has been invited by disciples of Mahant Nritya Gopal Das to participate in the Ram temple inauguration event.

A mother of eight children, including four daughters, Devi devoted her life to Lord Ram after the death of her husband Devkinandan Agarwal in 1986, spending most of her time on pilgrimages, family members said while neighbours vouched for her.

Devi is currently living with

her second-eldest son Nand Lal Agarwal, an official with Bharat Coking Coal Limited (BCCL), an arm of Coal India, at Dhaiya in Dhanbad.

Nand Lal's wife Innu Agarwal (53) said that a few months after her marriage, she saw her

mother-in-law embracing the vow of silence in devotion to Lord Ram.

"Mostly, we understood her sign language. But she used to write down complicated sentences on a piece of paper," Innu Agarwal said.

"After the demolition of Babri Masjid, my mother-in-law visited Ayodhya and took a pledge of 'maun vrat' till Ram Mandir was constructed. She used to remain silent for 23 hours a day, taking an hour-long break only at noon. The rest of the

time, she communicated with us

through pen and paper," she said.

"However, when the foundation of the Ram Mandir was laid in 2020 by PM Modi, she went for a 24-hour 'maun vrat' and pledged to speak only after the temple was inaugurated," Innu said.

In 2001, Devi did 'tapasya' (penance) for seven months at Chitrakoot in Madhya Pradesh where Lord Ram is believed to have spent a major part of his exile, Innu claimed.

"Besides, she also went on pilgrimages across the country," she said.

According to Innu Agarwal, her mother-in-law wakes up around 4 am every morning and undertakes 'sadhana' (meditation) for around six to seven hours in the morning.

"She studies religious books such as Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita in the evening after 'Sandhya Aarti'," she said.

Devi eats food only once a day and consumes a glass of milk in the morning and evening. She maintains a vegetarian diet consisting of rice, pulses and roti.

Devi's immediate neighbour, Sunita Devi Dalmia (50) said, "We respect Mata Ji. We have never seen her talking...She uses sign language to communicate and most of her time is devoted to either prayers or in upkeep of her plants."

Another neighbour Manikant

Pandey (55), Chief Manager, BCCL headquarters, who lives in the same apartment Mangaldeep Residency said he had never seen Devi talking.

"She is a saintly figure and her aura reflects her spirituality. She is generous and kind-hearted and blesses all in the locality. Despite old age, she is fit and healthy."

Another neighbour Babita Sharma (55), a resident of Bekarbandh of Dhanbad who has known the family for more than a decade, said Devi has been an inspiration for her.

"I draw inspiration from Mataji who is kind-hearted and loves me like her own child. She never uttered a word but displays affection to all and most of the time we have seen her performing puja. Since she communicates in sign language, we now understand this. She is fond of greenery."

Jharkhand BJP termed her as "Shabri Mata" of the epic Ramayana and said her 30 years 'tapasya' will bear fruits now.

Mahant Manish Das of Pathar Mandir Ashram told PTI over phone from Ayodhya: "The saint fraternity here has known her for the past over three decades. She stays with disciples of the Ashram here whenever in Ayodhya. She is a regular during Ram Navami and other festivals."

'Congress yet to get permission for Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra's launch from Manipur'

Guwahati

The Congress on Tuesday said that it is yet to receive permission to begin the 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' from Manipur on January 14, with the state government informing it that the application has been sent to the Centre for "approval".

Addressing a press conference, AICC general secretary KC Venugopal said Manipur has been chosen to start the march to "heal the wounds" of its people who have been affected by the ethnic violence.

"The Congress's Manipur unit had applied to the chief secretary for the permission a week back. Today, they are telling us that they cannot give the sanction, and our application has gone to Delhi for approval," he said.

"Is it the duty of the central government to give approval to a political party meeting?" he questioned.

The Yatra, to be led by MP Rahul Gandhi, will

commence from Imphal on January 14 and culminate on March 20 in Mumbai.

The Congress has applied to launch the march from Hatta Kangeibung in the Imphal East district.

Congress national president Mallikarjun Kharge is scheduled to flag off the programme in the presence of chief ministers of Congress-ruled states and top leaders of the party. Venugopal, who also reviewed arrangements for the Assam leg of the programme scheduled from January 18 to 25, claimed that permission to hold a public meeting at a school in this state has also been cancelled.

"In a democratic system, every political party has the right to hold demonstrations. This Yatra is not even a political programme and is not connected to elections. It is to ask the government to give justice to the poor, the women and the youths of the nation," he maintained.

He claimed that the government's delay or denial of

permissions is giving more publicity to the programme.

"Don't make unnecessary publicity for us. If you (the government) try to stop the Yatra, it will mean extra publicity for us," he said. On choosing Manipur for the launch, Venugopal said the decision was not taken from any political point of view. "We all know how much the people of Manipur have been affected by the violence. We need to heal the wounds of the people of Manipur. We don't want to politicise the issue but want to give the message that we are with them," he said.

Venugopal claimed that people from different walks of life have already expressed their willingness to join the programme. "It will be the biggest platform to raise the issues of the people and what they deserve. In the 'Bharat Jodo Yatra', we raised the issue of love and affection against anger and hatred. This Yatra will focus on the issues of the common people," he said.

At Vibrant Gujarat Summit, PM Narendra Modi lists 10 key areas; asks global majors to invest in 'pillar of stability' India

Ahmedabad

The Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi inaugurated the 10th edition of Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit 2024 at Mahatma Mandir, Gandhinagar today. The theme of this year's summit is 'Gateway to the Future' and includes the participation of 34 partner countries and 16 partner organizations. The Summit is also being used as a platform by the Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region to showcase investment opportunities in the North-Eastern regions.

Multiple industry captains addressed the occasion. Chairman of ArcelorMittal, Shri Lakshmi Mittal, Mr Toshihiro Suzuki, President of Suzuki Motor Corporation, Japan, Shri Mukesh Ambani of Reliance Group, Mr Sanjay Mehrotra, CEO of Micron Technologies, USA, Gautam Adani, Chairman of Adani Group, Mr Jeffrey Chun, CEO Simmtech, South Korea, Shri N Chandrasekaran, Chairman Tata Sons Limited, Chairman of DP World, Mr Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, Shri Shankar Trivedi Sr VP Nvidia and Nikhil Kamat, Founder and CEO of Zerodha addressed the gathering and informed about their business plans. The business leaders praised the Prime Minister's vision.

Mr Shin Hosaka, Vice Minister for International Affairs, Japan, Mr Ibraheem Yoosef al Mubarak, Assistant Minister of Investment, Saudi Arabia, Mr Tariq Ahmed, Minister of State for the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Commonwealth and United Nations, UK, Mr Vahan Kerobyan, Minister of Economy, Armenia, Mr Tiit Riisalo, Minister of Economic Affairs and Information Technology, Mr Ryad Mezzour, Industry and Commerce Minister, Morocco, Mr Prakash Sharan Mahat, Finance Minister of Nepal, Mr Tran Luu Quang, Deputy Prime Minister of Vietnam, Mr Petr Fiala Prime Minister of Czech Republic, and Mr Filipe Nyusi, President of Mozambique, Mr José Ramos-Horta, President of Timor Leste also addressed the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit. President of the United Arab Emirates & Ruler of Abu Dhabi, H.R.H Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan also made his address at the beginning of the Summit.

Addressing the gathering, the Prime Minister started by conveying his greeting for 2024. He reiterated the pledge to make India 'viksit' by 2047, making the next 25 years 'Amrit Kaal' of the country. "It is time for new dreams, new resolutions and continuous accomplishments", he said. He noted the significance of the first Vibrant Gujarat Summit of the 'Amrit Kaal'

The Prime Minister said that the participation of H.R.H Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates & Ruler of Abu Dhabi in the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit as Chief Guest is special as it signifies the deepening ties between India and UAE. PM Modi said that his thoughts and support towards India are filled with warmth and heartiness as he mentioned Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit becoming a global platform for economic development and investment-related discussions. He highlighted the India-UAE partnerships in increasing support to the renewable energy sector,



innovative healthcare, and investments of several billion dollars in India's port infrastructure. He also mentioned the initiation of operations by UAE's Sovereign Wealth Fund in GIFT City and aircraft and ship leasing activities by transworld companies. The Prime Minister gave huge credit to H.R.H Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan for the soaring partnerships between India and UAE relationships. Referring to the august presence of the President of Mozambique, Mr Filipe Nyusi, an alumnus of IIM Ahmedabad, the Prime Minister expressed pride for the inclusion of the African Union of G20 permanent membership during India's Presidency. He said President Nyusi's presence has deepened the India-Mozambique as well as India-Africa ties. Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, Mr Petr Fiala's first visit to India as Prime Minister of his country, PM Modi said, signifies the Czech Republic's old ties with India as well as with Vibrant Gujarat. PM Modi mentioned cooperation in the automobile, technology and manufacturing sectors.

The Prime Minister also welcomed Nobel laureate and President of Timor Leste, Mr José Ramos-Horta and highlighted his use of Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence with his country's freedom struggle.

Referring to the 20th anniversary of

the Vibrant Gujarat Summit, the Prime Minister remarked that the Summit has showcased new ideas, and created new gateways for investments and returns. Throwing light on this year's theme of 'Gateway to the future', the Prime Minister said that the future of the 21st century will be brightened by shared efforts. During India's G20 Presidency, the Prime Minister said that a road map for the future has been presented and it is being forwarded by the vision of Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit. He also mentioned the strengthening of partnerships with I2U2 and other multilateral organizations along the principles of 'One World, One Family,

One Future which has now become a prerequisite to global welfare.

"India is moving forward in the role of a 'Vishwa Mitra' in a fast-changing world. Today India has given the world confidence in achieving common collective goals. India's commitment, efforts and hard work for global welfare is making the world safer and prosperous. The World looks at India as an important pillar of stability. A friend who can be trusted, a partner who believes in people-centric development, a voice that believes in global good, an engine of growth in the global economy, a technology hub for finding solutions, a powerhouse of talented youth and a democracy that delivers", said the Prime Minister.

"The priorities and aspirations of India's 1.4 billion citizens and their belief in human-centric development coupled with the government's commitment to inclusivity and equality is a major aspect of world prosperity and development", the Prime Minister remarked. Today, the Prime Minister mentioned that India is the 5th largest economy in the world while it lagged at 11th position 10 years ago. He also underlined that in the next few years, India will go on to become one of the top 3 economies in the world, as predicted by various rating agencies in the world. "Experts can analyze this, but I guarantee that India will become the 3rd largest economy in the world", PM Modi

emphasized. He further added that India has become a ray of hope for the world at a time when the world has witnessed multiple geopolitical instabilities. Reflecting on India's priorities whose glimpse can be seen in the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit, the Prime Minister mentioned sustainable industries, manufacturing and infrastructure, new age skills, futuristic technologies, AI and innovation, green hydrogen, renewable energy, and semiconductors. PM Modi urged everyone to visit the trade show in Gujarat, especially the school and college students. Speaking about spending time in this trade show with His Excellency Nyusi and His Excellency Ramos Horta yesterday, the Prime Minister said that the trade show has showcased products made with world-class state-of-the-art technology in sectors like E-Mobility, Start-Ups, Blue Economy, Green Energy and Smart Infrastructure. He said that new opportunities are constantly being created for investment in all these sectors. The Prime Minister elaborated on the government's focus on structural reforms as the basis of the Indian economy's resilience and momentum as these reforms have enhanced the economy's capacity, capability, and competitiveness. He said that recapitalization and IBC have led to a robust banking system, abolition of about 40 thousand compliances have led to ease of business, GST has removed the labyrinth of taxation, better environment for diversification of global supply chain, the recent signing of 3 FTAs, including one with UAE; opening of many sectors for automatic FDI, record investment in infrastructure and 5 times increase in capex. He also mentioned unprecedented strides in green and alternatives sources of energy, 3 times increase in renewable energy capacity, 20 times capacity in solar energy capacity, affordable data prices have led to digital inclusion, optical fiber to every village, roll out of 5G, third largest startup ecosystem with 1.15 lakh registered startups. He also touched upon the overall record increase in exports.

PM Modi reiterated that the transformations taking place in India are improving Ease of Living and empowering them. He mentioned that in the last 5 years, more than 13.5 crore people have come out of poverty while the average income of the middle class has been constantly on the rise. He also touched upon the record rise in the participation of female workforce which is a great sign for India's future. "With this spirit", the Prime Minister said, "I appeal to all of you to become part of India's investment journey."

Aiming For 400 Seats, BJP Sets Up Panel To Recruit Opposition MPs: Sources

New Delhi

Having set itself a mammoth target of winning 400 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats in the upcoming elections, the BJP is looking at all avenues, including bringing in leaders from other parties, to achieve it..

At an important strategy meeting held on Tuesday, BJP President JP Nadda assigned different responsibilities to various general secretaries of the party. BJP General Secretary Vinod Tawde has been given charge of the joining committee.

"This committee will explore the possibility of bringing influential leaders and sitting MPs from other parties to the BJP. The decision will be taken based on the person's influence in the constituency and his or her ability to win elections," a source said, adding that the party may explore this option particularly in seats where it does not feel it has a candidate capable of winning.



This decision also ties in with the party's focus on 160 seats that it lost during the last election.

The only time a single party has crossed

the 400 figure in the Lok Sabha was the Congress, led by Rajiv Gandhi, in 1984. That election was also the last time a party had won a majority on its own until

the Narendra Modi-led BJP stormed into power in 2014.

Other Responsibilities

Party General Secretary Radhamohan Das Aggarwal has been entrusted with the task of making the vision document for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

The election campaign, publicity and other related work will be looked after by Sunil Bansal and other general secretaries, while Dushyant Gautam will organise conferences of Buddhists across the country and tell them about the work carried out by the Narendra Modi government.

BJP chief Nadda held the meeting with party general secretaries and Union ministers Dharmendra Pradhan, Bhupendra Yadav, Ashwini Vaishnaw and Mansukh Mandaviya. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma also joined through video conferencing.

Railway Ministry Shares Cabin View Of Vande Bharat Train, Calls It "Unparalleled"



New Delhi

The Vande Bharat Express trains have become quite popular since its launch four years ago. Known for its facilities and services, the train has become a hit among those who regularly travel by railways. The Indian Railways recently shared a video of the "cabin view" of the train which has high-end features like world-class interiors, state-of-the-art amenities, and energy-efficient technologies.

In a recent post on X, the Ministry of Railways urged internet users to fully engage with the Vande Bharat experience. The ministry released a timelapse video that offered a rare and unmatched look inside the loco pilot's vision while sitting in the cabin as the train moved smoothly

towards its destination. "The #VandeBharat experience lived by a few, on your screens! Delve into unparalleled perspective with the loco pilot's view as the #VandeBharatExpress progresses to its destination," they wrote while sharing the video.

Since being shared, the video has amassed 89,000 views and 1,900 likes on the platform.

"A suggestion: Cabin view may be displayed intermittently in the coach display units to make the travel even more interesting to the traveling public," added another person.

"Super view," said another person.

"That overbridge and sudden light . . . Train Drivers are simply WOW!" remarked a person.

Meanwhile, PM Narendra

Modi flagged off two new Amrit Bharat trains and six new Vande Bharat trains from the redeveloped Ayodhya Dham Station recently.

The Amrit Bharat trains, which are a new category of superfast passenger trains, feature the 'push-pull' technology, which increases their speed as well as passenger comfort. They also have improved amenities, including better seats, roomier luggage racks, LED lights, CCTV cameras and a public information system. They are being dubbed as the sleeper version of the Vande Bharat trains.

The Vande Bharat train is an initiative of the government under PM Modi's vision of 'Make in India'.

Aligarh University Can't Be Minority Institution: Centre To Supreme Court

New Delhi

Aligarh Muslim University cannot be a minority institution given its "national character", the Centre on Tuesday told the Supreme Court, which began hearing the hugely disputed question of the minority status of AMU.

It said AMU is not and cannot be a university of any particular religion or religious denomination as any university which has been declared an institution of national importance cannot be a minority institution. In his written submissions filed before the top court, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said the university has always been an institution of national importance, even in the pre-independence era. The university was founded in 1875.

"Therefore, as per the submission of the Union of India, the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) is an institution of a national character. A survey of the documents surrounding the establishment of the Aligarh Muslim University and even the then existing legislative position enunciates that the AMU was always an institution having a national character," the document said.

While referring to debates in the Constituent Assembly, it said, it is clear that a university which was and is clearly an institution of national importance, has to be a non-minority university.

"It is submitted that owing to the obviously secular ethos and nature of the nation and the Constitution, considering the fact that AMU is an institution of educational 'national character' it cannot be considered to be a minority institution irrespective of the question whether it was established and administered by the minority at the time of inception or not," Mr Mehta said.

The top law officer said AMU is not a university dominantly functioning as a Muslim university as it is not established and administered by the minority.

"Aligarh Muslim University is not and cannot be a University of any particular religion or religious denomination as any University which is declared by the Constitution of India to be of national importance should, by definition, cannot be a minority institution," Mr Mehta said in his written submissions.

Hafiz Saeed in Pakistan government custody serving 78-year imprisonment sentence: United Nations

United Nations

Mumbai terror attack mastermind and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba leader Hafiz Saeed is in the custody of the Pakistan government and is serving a 78-year imprisonment sentence following his conviction in terror financing cases, the UN has said in updated information.

Saeed, 73, was designated as a global terrorist by the UN Security Council's Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in December 2008.

He is in the "custody of the Government of Pakistan serving a 78-year imprisonment sentence since 12 February 2020 as a result of a conviction in seven terror financing cases," the Sanctions Committee said in an amended

entry posted through a press release on the UN website.

Saeed's address is listed as House No. 116E, Mohalla Johar, Lahore Tehsil, Lahore City, Lahore District, Pakistan "as of"



May 2008.

In December, India asked Pakistan to extradite Saeed, the 2008 Mumbai terror attack mastermind who Indian probe agencies want in several terror cases.

Last month, the Security

Council 1267 Committee enacted a few amendments to certain entries on its ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions List of individuals and entities subject to assets freeze, travel ban and arms embargo. Saeed is among those whose information has been amended and the updated details have been made available through the press release.

Under these amendments, the Sanctions Committee also noted that Hafiz Abdul Salam Bhuttavi, founding member of Lashkar-e-Tayyiba and deputy to Saeed is "confirmed deceased".

Bhuttavi, a UNSC-designated terrorist who trained the Lashkar-e-Taiba attackers for the 2008 Mumbai terror attack and acted as the outfit's chief on at least two occasions, died in a prison in May last year in Pakistan's Punjab province while serving a sentence for terror-financing.

Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu turns to China for tourists, faces ire at home



New Delhi

Even as his request for a visit to India remains pending, Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu sought more tourists from China and described it as one of country's closest allies.

New Delhi let it be known today that the Maldivian government had conveyed to the Indian High Commission in Male about Muizzu's wish to travel to India next month. The request was put before a spat on X led to a diplomatic row between India and the Maldives. Muizzu did not make India his first overseas destination after becoming President and had opted to first visit Turkey.

The domestic after-effects continued in Maldives from the derogatory remarks about PM Modi posted by the now-suspended three junior Maldivian Ministers. The opposition was pressing for a no-confidence vote against Muizzu while many Maldivian figures pointed out how India had always stood by the Maldives. "India has been our 911 call, whenever we need it, we give a call and you all come to our rescue. When you see such disparaging remarks about friends like this, it is sad for everyone concerned," said former Maldives Defence Minister Mariya Ahmed Didi.

Alarmed over the possibility of losing some of the two lakh Indians visiting the Maldives every year after the

spat prompted several Indian celebrities to begin promoting Indian leisure destinations, all the country's tourism associations condemned the comments against PM Modi. Makemytrip, in which the largest shareholding is of the Chinese but the top executives are Indian, blocked bookings for Maldives from India.

Even as a visit to India remains in the works, Muizzu said there would be increased cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and that Male would examine the revival of the free trade agreement that had not yet been activated.

Muizzu arrived in China on Monday for a five-day state visit that would include meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang in Beijing. He is the first head of state to arrive in China this year. Speaking at the "Invest Maldives business forum" in Fuzhou, Muizzu said Male would continue to cooperate with China in key Maldives infrastructure plans. Under the BRI, China helped expand the Velana International Airport and built a cross-sea bridge.

Male is also being courted by the US. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken last week called up his Maldivian counterpart Moosa Zameer to discuss cooperation on defence and other issues.

We're lucky, India is a trusted friend: Sheikh Hasina

New Delhi

Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina on Monday termed India a "trusted friend" of Bangladesh. "We are very lucky...India is our trusted friend. They supported us during our Liberation War in 1971 and also in 1975, when we lost our whole family and only we two (Hasina and her younger sister Rehana) survived... They gave us shelter. So, we have our best wishes to the people of India," she said.

In August 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his wife and their three sons were assassinated in their home by military officers. His daughters Hasina and Rehana survived the purge as they were abroad. "We consider India as our next-door neighbour. We had many problems but we resolved it bilaterally. So, I really appreciate that we have a wonderful relationship with India," she said while responding to a question.

Meanwhile, the ruling Awami League swept to a comfortable three-fourth majority in Parliament on the back of an election boycott by the main opposition alliance which contributed to a low 41% polling.

The Awami League won 222 out of 298 seats

where polling took place followed by independent candidates as the next biggest bloc with 62 seats. India, China and Russia which have backed Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina with Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally calling her up to congratulate her on her victory for a fourth consecutive term.



Maldives row

THE suspension of three Maldivian deputy ministers after they made derogatory remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi would in normal course be seen as effective disciplinary action. The Mohamed Muizzu government has said the ministers' personal views do not represent its opinion. That may not be enough for New Delhi. The Maldives High Commissioner has been summoned by the Ministry of External Affairs over the ministers' comments in response to the Prime Minister's video promoting tourism in Lakshadweep. What's expected of Male apparently is a more decisive interjection, given the anti-India sentiment implicit in the social media posts, which have since been deleted. President Muizzu is seen to be close to China. One of his first announcements after taking over was to call for the withdrawal of Indian military

personnel from the island nation. The latest controversy marks a new low in



the bilateral ties.

The backlash has seen several Indians, including celebrities, announcing cancellation of trips. A home-grown travel company has decided to stop bookings for Maldives, claiming that nationalism is greater than personal interest. That may be seen as an overreaction, but underscores the

need to draw a line on unacceptable conduct. It also recognises the heft of the globe-trotting Indian tourists — prosperous, willing to spend and accounting for huge numbers.

There are citizens of the island nation who view Prime Minister Modi's Lakshadweep visit as trying to draw tourists away from the globally popular Maldives. A competitive spirit can do wonders for the tourism industry and the tourists, but having a grip on reality is vital. Lakshadweep lacks the infrastructure or the framework to cater to the tourist demand.

Equally critical is preserving its delicate ecological balance. India's strong objection to Male is not without reason, but normalisation of ties has to be the larger goal.

// satyasya paramarñ 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

LORD SHREE RAM'S FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF EXILE AND RETURN TO AYODHYA

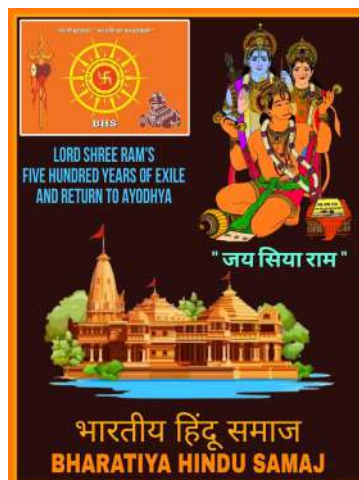
Kochi

For every Sanatanis it is the moment of pride and celebration that Lord Shree Ram's exile is over. Followed by Ram Rath yatra i.e on 30 th October 1990 and 2 nd November 1990 two firing incidents took place which lead to the Killing of karsewaks. Death toll according to the then UP Government report was 50, but the real number was several folds higher according to local people and several other people were injured.

The notable and important aspect was that Babari was eventually demolished on 6 th December 1992.

Initiative taken by Hon'ble Prime Minister of Bharat, Narendra Modi ji and Hon'ble Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath ji is praise worthy.

The support of Sants, Mahants, and other Hindu Organizations were miraculous



to Rebuild the religious faith and cultural heritage of Bharat.

Finally it is the time for "Prana Pratishtha" but most of us forgotten the martyrs.

As a Rambhakt and praja of Ram Raj did we forget the families of those men ventured it ?

We can see several big names from different states who are going to be at the venue.

Unfortunately a few of them

don't know the geographical location of Ayodhya and thirty nine successors of Lord Shree Ram.

We BHS feel very much hurt at a point where Kerala film industry people (Used to be frequent visitors of Dubai and alleged to have involved in several Anti - National activities) are given a different kind of treatment by ignoring hindu sanyasis of Kerala and the other hindu organization members who were active participants of Ram Janmabhoomi struggle.

The ceremonial elegance and glory of "Ram Raj" is to be celebrated on 22 nd of January 2024 at Ayodhya.

We BHS request the concerned people to honour the families of the martyred and injured Karsewaks either separately or at the venue.

The struggle of Ram Janmabhoomi coasted us blood and flesh and we aspire this may

establish the real "Ram Raj" which may unify sanatanis.

At the same time it may pave the way for our country to the position as "Vishwaguru", where we could contribute the world "Vasudhaiva kutumabakam" with no place for terror, rape and inequality for every one who comes under the umbrella of "Ram Raj".

May the Lord Shree Ram bless us in all our future endeavors.

Bharat Mata ki ji..

Jai Siya Ram !

Jai Ram Raj !

Jai Hindu Rashtra !

BHS - BHARATIYA HINDU SAMAJ

National High - Power Committee.

UNK (SUMESH KRISHNA)

National General Secretary

BHS - BHARATIYA HINDU SAMAJ.

Printer-Publisher & Editor In Chief

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

Managing Editor
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Editor
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Circulation Dept.
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Rift within INDIA

TMC-Congress tussle bodes ill for the bloc

TWO major constituents of the Opposition's INDIA bloc, the Congress and the Trinamool Congress (TMC), are at loggerheads over seat-sharing in West Bengal for the Lok Sabha elections. Reacting to reports that the TMC would spare only two seats for the Congress, state Congress president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury has said that the grand old party would not 'beg for seats'. His statement has elicited a sharp response

in the 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections, which saw the Trinamool retaining power with a thumping majority. In March last year, the Congress had won the Sagardighi bypoll; Left-supported candidate Bayron Biswas had stormed the ruling party's bastion. The victory had prompted Chowdhury to comment that the Trinamool and Banerjee were not invincible in the state. However, Biswas had later switched

over to the TMC. The INDIA bloc was formed a few months after the bypoll, but the Congress and the TMC continue to work at cross-purposes.

The Congress' apparent reluctance to take its allies along was cited as a major reason by the TMC

for the former's poll debacle in the Hindi heartland states last month. The Congress might be the biggest party within INDIA in terms of Lok Sabha seats, but its shrinking national footprint in recent years has considerably weakened its standing. The party should engage pragmatically with its partners to finalise seat-sharing at the earliest. Prolonged bickering and one-upmanship will only play into the hands of the BJP.

from the Mamata Banerjee-led TMC, which has asserted that 'badmouthing alliance partners and seat-sharing can't go hand in hand'.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the TMC bagged 22 seats and was followed closely by the BJP (18). The Congress, which had won two seats, now wants a bigger piece of the pie. The party needs to adjust its aspirations to the ground reality. The Congress had drawn a blank

ON the basis of recommendations made by the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the US State Department annually releases a list of countries and non-state actors that commit or tolerate violation of religious freedom. The department designates them as Countries/Entities of Particular Concern (CPC/EPC) and imposes sanctions on the agencies and officials concerned.

Like in the past few years, the USCIRF has expressed disappointment over the department not including India in its red list, which was released last month and has designated 11 countries as CPC. But the double standards and partisanship of the USCIRF are evident as nowhere in its outburst does it mention the omission of Israel from the list. Among those

on the EPC list are the Hamas-supporting Houthis. Gaza is being brutally attacked by Israel for the past three months. While the USCIRF points out that the department has overlooked the alarm it had sounded over the situation in India, its silence on Israel's exclusion is deafening. Does the US religious freedom watchdog not believe that Israel

Polluting units

Haryana must firmly curb toxic discharge

FOUL-SMELLING drains, polluted rivers and people suffering skin diseases and other ailments — these are some of the ill-effects caused by effluent-spewing industrial units all over Haryana. Complaints registered with the authorities concerned against the units violating pollution norms generally run into the familiar red tape. With the authorities moving at a snail's pace, the

Supreme Court.

The latest case involves 128 firms of Rewari, with the NGT directing the HSPCB to inspect them for waste discharge as hundreds of acres of the dried-up Sahibi riverbed are reported to be full of filth. Earlier, it was reported that for years, the toxic waste of Yamunanagar-Jagadhri industries had been dumped into the Dhanora

drain built to divert surplus water into the Yamuna. Similarly contaminated is the Markanda rivulet of Ambala. It also came to the fore that the board was investigating allegations that some Panipat textile units secretly release effluents directly into the ground through illegal borewells



contamination continues to play havoc with the ecosystem as well as the health of the surrounding flora and fauna. The rigmarole of processes to set things right includes the inspection or monitoring of effluent management by a slew of agencies and platforms: the Haryana State Pollution Control Board (HSPCB), the National Green Tribunal (NGT) and, at times, even the high court and the

instead of making their effluent treatment plants functional.

These murky goings-on show that the more things are apparently changing, the more they seem to remain the same. When will the discharge of untreated domestic sewage and industrial effluents stop? It's vital to ensure that the treatment plants operate efficiently.

Biased outburst

US religious freedom watchdog partisan



has been blatantly using its might to harass, jail and kill Palestinian civilians solely on the basis of their faith and beliefs?

Not surprisingly, India has denied that the minorities are facing discrimination in the country, with the Foreign Ministry dismissing the USCIRF comments since 2020 as 'biased and tendentious'. While India does not really need to defend itself before a watchdog like the USCIRF, which is unashamedly prejudiced, it would do well to introspect why its secular and democratic credentials are being questioned and try to set things right — for the sake of its own citizens.

Navy rescue

Commendable alacrity on the high seas

INDIA is not part of a US-led Red Sea task force formed last month to repel attacks by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis. That has not dented its resolve to play the role of a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region. By rescuing all crew members from a vessel in the Arabian Sea after a hijacking-related distress call, the Indian Navy has exhibited professionalism of the highest order. Its commendable alacrity in responding to emergencies sends out reassuring signals. After a string of shipping attacks, including a drone strike near India's west coast, the Navy had in December deployed several warships to maintain a deterrent presence. Its successful mission to thwart the hijacking demonstrates a commitment to ensuring the safety of merchant shipping in the region.



Many vessels continue to be rerouted from the Red Sea to avoid the drone and missile attacks being carried out by Houthi rebels to express

solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza. Amid the disruption to traffic headed for the Suez Canal, the re-emergence of hijacking poses a fresh challenge.

Attacks by Somali pirates on vessels were at their peak between 2010 and 2015. They have declined drastically since as a consequence of patrolling by US and allied naval forces. The pirates could now be taking advantage of the shift in the focus of maritime forces from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea.

As effective counter-measures are put in place, vigorous activation of diplomatic channels is the way forward to prevent the West Asian conflagration from spreading to the Indian Ocean. Security concerns apart, the economic impact of disruptions along the Red Sea trade route are being felt worldwide. Shipping and insurance costs are up as longer routes are being taken to avoid attacks. Costlier import and export of goods are bound to be reflected in the input costs in various sectors.

Myanmar fencing

Ending Free Movement Regime a pragmatic step

THE 1,643-km border between India and Myanmar runs through four northeastern states. The mutually agreed Free Movement Regime (FMR) allows people residing on either side of the border to venture 16 km into each other's territory without a visa. Members of the hill tribes can cross over on production of a border pass with one-year validity and stay for up to two weeks. The plan to scrap the arrangement and fence the border comes late in the day, but bears the stamp of inevitability. The Centre's decision is aimed at stopping the misuse of FMR by insurgent groups and putting the brakes on the influx of illegal immigrants. Curbing the cross-border narcotics trade, fuelled by the proliferation of poppy cultivation on the Indian side, would be a challenging task. The unfenced border is shared by Manipur (398 km), Arunachal Pradesh (520 km), Nagaland (215 km) and Mizoram (510 km). Though Manipur suspended the FMR in 2020, unregulated



migration through the porous border is cited as a factor for the ethnic violence in the state. Smart fencing is expected to tighten controls. Mizoram has seen an influx of anti-junta rebels since the military coup in Myanmar in 2021. The coup has created a breeding ground for armed insurgent groups and the influx of refugees is believed to have worsened the volatile situation in Manipur. India has already conveyed to Myanmar its anxieties over the spillover of the simmering crisis in the neighbourhood.

As the experience in Punjab and J&K has shown, fencing alone cannot be a foolproof mechanism to secure borders. In view of the huge drug and weapon hauls, the Centre is in the process of deploying an indigenously developed anti-drone system along the entire western border. Technology demonstrators are being run on a pilot basis. A judicious mix of various methods can improve border surveillance.

Cybercrime surge

Need to strengthen cybersecurity system

CYBERCRIME cases are rising at an alarming rate in the country, according to data shared by the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre. Over 15 lakh cases were reported on the National Cybercrime Reporting Portal last year. The count was far less in the preceding years — around 9.6 lakh in 2022 and about 4.52 lakh in 2021. More than Rs 10,300 crore fell into the hands of cybercriminals from April 1, 2021, to December 31, 2023, of which the agencies concerned managed to block around Rs 1,127 crore. Only 9-10 per cent of the blocked amount has been restored to the victims' accounts.

What is particularly worrying for the northern region is that Delhi recorded the highest number of cybercrime complaints among all states and union territories last year — 755 per lakh people. Chandigarh (432) was second, followed by Haryana (381). Mewat (Haryana) has emerged as a hub of sextortion, which is underreported as many victims are keen to avoid

ignominy and embarrassment. Most of the SIMs used in cybercrimes were issued in Assam, West Bengal and Odisha. These findings underline the need for close coordination among the states, and also between the Centre and the states, to nab the culprits.

Cybercriminals are having a field day despite the fact that law enforcement agencies have blocked over 2.95 lakh SIM cards, 2,810 websites/URLs and 595 mobile applications on the basis of the complaints received. With tens of crores of Indians making digital transactions, especially through the UPI (Unified Payments Interface), it is imperative to ensure the safety of their money. Strengthening the cybersecurity system should go hand in hand with a nationwide campaign to raise citizen awareness about cyberfraud. The world's fastest-growing major economy cannot afford to let its impressive march be impeded by fraudsters who are brazenly targeting individuals as well as financial institutions.

India's ultra rich buy Rs 7,200 crore luxury flats in Gurugram in just 72 hours



Gurugram

Real estate major DLF has recorded sales of luxury residences in its latest offering, 'Privana South' here, at over Rs 7,200 crore.

This comes as part of its pre-formal launch sales. The units were sold off within 72 hours in its pre-launch phase.

DLF on Monday said the residential project is spread across about 25 acres in Sectors 76 and 77 in Gurugram.

The exclusive enclave will comprise 1,113 luxury residences across seven towers, presenting 4 BHK apartments and penthouses.

The project offers a clear view of the Aravalli Range and is in the vicinity of the upcoming Haryana government's Safari Park project spread over 10,000 acres.

DLF officials said each buyer was allotted only one unit, with about 25 per cent of the sales coming from NRIs, with a booking amount of Rs 50 lakh.

Sectors 76 and 77 are well connected with direct access to all major hubs of Gurugram and Delhi. They offer smooth road travel to prominent destinations like Jaipur, Manesar, Panipat, Sonapat, Karnal and beyond.

ACC buys Asian Concretes and Cements for Rs 775 cr

New Delhi

Adani Group firm ACC on Monday said it has acquired the remaining 55% stake in Asian Concretes and Cements from its existing promoter at an enterprise value of Rs 775 crore, making it a fully-owned subsidiary.

ACC Ltd, a subsidiary of Ambuja Cements, is a part of Adani Cement. Earlier, ACC held 45% stake in Asian Concretes and Cements Pvt Ltd (ACCPL).

The company has done a "successful acquisition of 55% stake in ACCPL from its existing promoter at an enterprise value of Rs 775 crore resulting in entire ownership of ACCPL," said an ACC statement.

The enterprise value includes cash and cash equivalent of Rs 35 crore, it added. ACCPL has a 1.3 MTPA cement capacity in Nalagarh, Himachal Pradesh, while its subsidiary Asian Fine Cements Pvt Ltd (AFCPL) has a 1.5 MTPA cement capacity in Rajpura, Punjab.

"This acquisition is funded through internal accruals and will

help ACC & its parent company Ambuja to further bolster market leadership in the lucrative North India market," it said.

With this acquisition, ACC's

Cement Business by 2028," it said.

While ACC has an existing tolling arrangement with the Nalagarh unit, the Rajpura plant's



cement capacity has increased to 38.55 MTPA (million tonne per annum) and together with its parent company Ambuja, the capacity of Adani Cement has risen to 76.10 MPTA.

"This strategic move enhances ACC's cement capacity and progress on overall target of 140 MTPA capacity of Adani's

additional 1.5 MTPA capacity will strategically cater to a vast customer base across three states – Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Punjab.

Both ACC and Ambuja Cements possess sufficient clinker to support the Rajpura plant, inclusive of its future expansions.

MFs' assets surpass Rs 50L cr in 2023

New Delhi

After a lacklustre performance in 2022, the mutual fund industry saw a substantial rebound in 2023 with its asset base surging by nearly Rs 11 lakh crore,

reaching over Rs 50 lakh crore mark fuelled by an optimistic equity market, awareness about financial stability and a robust economic expansion.

"This noteworthy



Costs of veg, non-veg meals decline in December on fall in onion, tomato prices

Mumbai

Fall in onion and tomato prices in December led to a month-on-month decrease in the cost of a vegetarian and non-vegetarian thali or a meal by 3 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively, a report said on Monday.

Rates of home-cooked veg and non-veg thalis fell 3 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively, in December, according to Crisil Market Intelligence and Analytics (MI&A) Research 'Rice Roti Rate' estimates.

Easing of veg and non-veg thali costs was due to a 14 per cent and 3 per cent month-on-month decrease in prices of onion

and tomato, respectively, with the



declined faster due to a 5-7 per cent month-on-month decline in the price of broilers, which account for 50 per cent of the cost, it added. The average cost of preparing a thali at home is calculated based on input prices prevailing in north, south, east and west India. The data also reveals the ingredients (cereals, pulses, broilers, vegetables, spices, edible oil and cooking gas) driving the change in the cost of the thali.

festive season coming to an end, said the report.

The cost of a non-veg thali

The report further revealed that on a year-on-year basis, the cost of the veg thali rose 12 per cent, while that of a non-veg meal declined 4 per cent.

The rise in veg thali cost was led by a substantial increase of 82 per cent and 42 per cent in prices of onion and tomato, respectively, the report said.

Prices of pulses, which account for 9 per cent of the veg thali cost, also increased 24 per cent year-on-year, it stated.

The decline in the cost of the non-veg thali was due to 15 per cent decline in broiler prices year-on-year amid higher production, the report added.

achievement comes against the backdrop of India's growth story, highlighting the MF industry's ability to win investors' trust by providing low-cost, long-term-oriented wealth creation avenues," the Association of Mutual Fund Industry (Amfi) said on Monday.

The year 2023 has seen a substantial increase in overall inflow reaching Rs 2.74 lakh crore. This was supported by the increasing popularity of Systematic Investment Plans (SIPs), which drew in Rs 1.84 lakh crore. The inflow has pushed the assets under management of the MF industry by 27%, adding Rs 10.9 lakh crore in 2023.

MakeMyTrip observes 3,400 per cent rise in Lakshadweep searches on platform since PM Modi's visit

New Delhi

MakeMyTrip, on Monday, said it has observed a 3,400 per cent increase in on-platform searches for Lakshadweep ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the islands.

"We have observed a 3400 per cent increase in on-platform searches for Lakshadweep ever since Honorable PM's visit. This interest in Indian beaches has inspired us to launch a 'Beaches of India' campaign on the platform with offers and discounts to encourage Indian travellers to explore country's stunning beaches. Keep watching this space!" MakeMyTrip said in a post on social media platform X.

Lakshadweep has emerged as a preferred tourist destination after Modi's visit. People started comparing the Indian island with globally sought-after beach destinations like Maldives and Seychelles. This came close on the heels of comments by



Maldivian ministers against the Indian prime minister on social media, triggering a diplomatic row between the two nations.

Meanwhile, the Maldivian envoy to India was summoned to the external affairs ministry and was conveyed strong concern

over remarks posted on social media against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, sources said.

The government of the

Maldives, on Sunday, suspended three deputy ministers for derogatory social media posts against Modi.

The deputy ministers criticised Modi for his post on X following his visit to Lakshadweep, inferring that it was an attempt to project the union territory as an alternative tourist destination to Maldives.

According to Maldivian media reports, deputy ministers in the youth ministry, Malsha Shareef, Mariyam Shiuna and Abdulla Mahzoom Majid, have been suspended over their posts.

In New Delhi, official sources said the Indian high commission in Male strongly raised the matter with the Maldivian foreign ministry.

The disparaging remarks by the ministers have drawn flak in India, with many celebrities urging people to explore domestic tourist destinations instead of going to Maldives.

Mercedes Benz lines up Rs 200 cr investment, to launch over 12 products in 2024

New Delhi

German luxury carmaker Mercedes-Benz would invest Rs 200 crore in India this year on new products, manufacturing operations and digitisation, to strengthen its position after recording sales of 17,408 units in 2023, a top official of the company said on Monday.

Mercedes-Benz India would have more than 12 launches in 2024, including three electric vehicles (EVs), out of which half would be in the Top-end Vehicle Segment (TEV) and would be priced Rs 1.5 crore onwards.

"This year marks a special year as we celebrate 30 years of Mercedes Benz in India. We are going to invest Rs 200 crore more into our factory in Pune. This makes a total investment of Rs 3,000 crore in India. So that's a strong statement of intent," Mercedes-Benz India Managing Director & CEO Santosh Iyer said in an interview.

These investments would be towards manufacturing operations, new product startups and digitisation of the



manufacturing process, he added.

In 2023, Iyer said, the company recorded its best-ever sales in its history in India with 17,408 units and a growth of 10 per cent.

Mercedes-Benz India had recorded its best-ever sales in 2022 when it clocked 15,822 units.

On the outlook for 2024, Iyer said

the company is looking for "double-digit" growth despite volatility in both supply and demand.

Currently, the company's order bank stands at 3,000 units.

On the product launch plan, Iyer said, "We are looking at more than 12 new car lines to be launched in 2024. 50 per cent of them will be in TVS. These will include three new EVs."

The TEV segment continues to drive aspiration for the brand, Iyer said, adding that three new EVs to be launched in 2024 would build up the company's EV portfolio.

"EVs now comprise 4 per cent of our total sales and the segment witnessed a trebling growth in 2023," he added.

Mercedes-Benz India also launched its new GLS luxury SUV in both petrol and diesel versions priced at Rs 1.32 crore and Rs 1.37 crore, respectively.

Iyer said SUVs account for 55 per cent of the company's total sales and sedans 45 per cent.

On three new EVs, he said it will be across the entry luxury, core luxury, and

TEV segments.

When asked about the contribution of EVs to total sales going forward, he said, "We are still looking forward to 20-25 per cent of our sales coming from EVs in the next four years' time."

To get closer to customers in servicing, he said Mercedes-Benz India would create 20 new workshops in 2024 in 10 new cities, including Jammu, Udaipur, Amritsar, Patna, Valsad, Agra, Kannur and Kottayam.

On reports of American electric carmaker Tesla seeking special incentives to set up plant in India, Iyer said, "We are pretty confident that if the government announces any policy it will be a level playing field for the current manufacturers who have invested in India." He, however, added that new players in the segment are welcome "because that will only intensify adoption of EVs to the market".

"We have always been supportive of free trade and imports as long as it is a level playing field for the existing investments and new ones," Iyer said.

GST officers detect over 29,000 bogus firms involved in fake ITC claims of Rs 44,000 crore

New Delhi

The government on Sunday said GST officers have detected 29,273 bogus firms involved in fake Input Tax Credit (ITC) claims of Rs 44,015 crore in eight months till December 2023 during a drive against fake registration, which helped save revenue of Rs 4,646 crore.

In the October-December quarter, 4,153 bogus firms that involved suspected ITC evasion of around Rs 12,036 crore were detected. As many as 2,358 of these bogus firms were detected by the Central GST Authorities.

Maharashtra topped the list with 926 bogus firms detected, followed by Rajasthan (507), Delhi (483) and Haryana (424). The detection during the December quarter protected revenue of Rs 1,317 crore of which Rs 319 crore has been realised and Rs 997 crore has been protected by blocking ITC. As many as 41 persons were arrested in these cases while 31 of these arrests were made by Central GST Authorities, the finance ministry said.

“Since the initiation of the special drive against fake registrations in mid-May 2023, a total of 29,273 bogus firms



involved in suspected Input Tax Credit (ITC) evasion of Rs 44,015 crore have been detected. This has saved Rs 4,646 crore of which Rs 3,802 crore is by blocking of ITC and Rs 844 crore is by way of recovery. So far, 121 arrests have been made in the cases,” it said in a statement.

During the December quarter, the suspected tax evasion by 926 bogus firms in Maharashtra worked out to be Rs 2,201 crore. 11 persons were arrested. In case of Delhi, the suspected tax evasion by 483

bogus firms was Rs 3,028 crore and 11 people were arrested.

In case of Andhra Pradesh, the suspected tax evasion by 19 bogus firms was Rs 765 crore, while in case of Haryana 424 bogus firms were detected involved in the evasion Rs 624 crore.

In Uttar Pradesh, 443 bogus firms were detected involved in suspected GST evasion of Rs 1,645 crore. Five persons were arrested in the state during the quarter.

To curb fraud in Goods and Services Tax (GST) and increase compliance, the GST formations, under the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) and the State/UT Governments, across the country are carrying out a focused drive on the issue of non-existent / bogus registrations and issuance of fake invoices without any underlying supply of goods and service.

The ministry said the Government has taken various measures to strengthen the GST registration process. Pilot projects of biometric based Aadhar authentication at the time of registration have been launched in the States of Gujarat, Puducherry and Andhra Pradesh.

Besides, the Government has endeavoured to curtail evasion of tax through measures such as sequential filing of GST returns, system generated intimation for reconciliation of the gap in tax liability in GSTR-1 & GSTR- 3B returns and of the gap between ITC available as per GSTR-2B & ITC availed in GSTR-3B returns, use of data analytics and risk parameters for detection of fake ITC, etc., the ministry added.

SEBI tightens norms governing short-selling

New Delhi

Markets watchdog SEBI on Friday said institutional investors have to disclose upfront at the time of placing an order whether

“The brokers shall be mandated to collect the details on scrip-wise short-sell positions, collate the data and upload it to the stock exchanges before the



a proposed transaction is a short sale or not, a significant move aimed at curbing market volatility.

The SEBI has made certain changes with respect to norms pertaining to short-selling in the market.

commencement of trading on the following trading day. “The stock exchanges shall then consolidate such information and disseminate the same on their websites for the information of the public on a weekly basis,” it said.

India’s GDP likely to grow 7.3 per cent in 2023-24: Govt estimates

New Delhi

The Indian economy is estimated to grow by 7.3 per cent in the 2023-24 fiscal against 7.2 per cent a year ago, mainly due to good show by mining and quarrying, manufacturing and certain segments of services sectors.

As per the first advance estimates of national income released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) on Friday, the manufacturing sector output is estimated to grow to 6.5 per cent in the current fiscal compared to 1.3 per cent in 2022-23.

Similarly, mining sector growth is estimated at 8.1 per cent in the current fiscal against 4.1 per cent in 2022-23.

Financial services, real estate and professional services are estimated to record a growth of 8.9 per cent this fiscal compared to 7.1 per cent in FY23.

“Real GDP or GDP at

Constant (2011-12) Prices in the year 2023-24 is estimated to attain a level of Rs 171.79 lakh crore, as against the Provisional Estimate of GDP for the year 2022-23 of Rs 160.06 lakh crore, released on 31st May 2023,” an NSO statement said.

According to the statement, the growth in real GDP during 2023-24 is estimated at 7.3 per cent compared to 7.2 per cent in 2022-23.

The NSO estimates are higher than the 7 per cent GDP growth projection of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for the current fiscal.

It also said that nominal GDP or GDP at Current Prices in the year 2023-24 is estimated at Rs 296.58 lakh crore against the provisional estimate of GDP for the year 2022-23 of Rs 272.41 lakh crore.

The growth in nominal GDP during 2023-24 is estimated at 8.9 per cent compared to 16.1 per cent in 2022-23.

The size of the economy, as per the current estimates, is slated to be at Rs 296.58 lakh crore or USD 3.57 trillion (@ Rs 83/USD) during 2023-24. The agriculture sector is projected to see a growth of 1.8 per cent this fiscal, lower than the four per cent expansion recorded in the previous financial year. Trade, hotel, transport, communication and services related to broadcasting segment is estimated to grow at 6.3 per cent, down from 14 per cent in 2022-23.

The construction sector is likely to grow at 10.7 per cent year-on-year from 10 per cent in the current fiscal.

Similarly, public administration, defence and other services growth is estimated to grow by 7.7 per cent this fiscal against 7.2 per cent in FY23.

The growth in gross value added (GVA) at basic prices is pegged at 6.9 per cent this fiscal, down from 7 per cent in 2022-23.

Maldives Should Avoid Provoking New Delhi

In this day and age of social media, diplomacy is facing new challenges. At times, the cacophony of social media drowns out the really important issues that need engagement, but sometimes it manages to bring to the fore the underlying trends that otherwise would take time to shape up. The India-Maldives spat is one such case where the simmering tensions have boiled over with some needless comments from Male highlighting how the once-close neighbours seem to be drifting away. The rhetorical exuberance of some members of the new government in the Maldives have exposed the substantive differences between New Delhi and Male as well as with the Maldives.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lakshadweep last week seems to have triggered a social media and a diplomatic storm, which continues to reverberate in multiple dimensions. From social media influencers to local politicians and from Bollywood celebrities to the strategic community, everyone seems to have a view. The Indian Prime Minister visited Lakshadweep to inaugurate the Kochi-Lakshadweep Islands Submarine Optical Fiber Connection and some other projects but while doing so he also took time out for some snorkeling and leisure activities that took social media by storm.

The India-Maldives spat is one such case where the simmering tensions have boiled over with some needless comments from Male highlighting how the once-close neighbours seem to be drifting away.

As some in India suggested that boosting tourism in Lakshadweep would be a good idea, some in the Maldives saw Modi's visit as an attempt to project Lakshadweep as an alternative tourist destination to the Maldives. In the process, derogatory remarks against Indians and the Prime Minister were made, which led to a strong reaction in India. Some of these comments came from deputy ministers in the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Information and Art of the Maldives in response to which the hashtag #BoycottMaldives started trending on X, with many Indians expressing their displeasure and some even cancelling their plans to visit the Maldives.

The governments sprung to action quickly, with the Ministry of External Affairs summoning Maldivian ambassador Ibrahim Shaheeb. This was followed by the Maldivian government summoning the Indian High Commissioner, Munu Mahawar.



The government of President Mohamed Muizzu understood the gravity of the situation and has responded by suspending three deputy ministers for their offensive social media posts. In a statement, the Maldivian ministry of foreign affairs acknowledged "the existence of derogatory comments on social media platforms directed at foreign leaders and dignitaries," and underlined that "these comments are personal views and do not align with the official stance of the Maldives."

From a high under Ibrahim Solih, relations between the Maldives and India have been on shaky grounds since President Mohamed Muizzu came to power. He had run his campaign on an anti-India platform his 'India out' campaign garnered significant attention



India first after taking office.

The latest crisis has further reinforced this divergence between two traditionally close neighbours. All states in South Asia and Indian Ocean region have to balance between their two regional behemoths - India and China. It requires a fine diplomatic balance. In the case of the Maldives under Muizzu, that balance has gone haywire and it is this imbalance that is leading to a dangerous situation where not only ties between the two governments but also between the two peoples are likely to be impacted by long term consequences.

Despite domestic posturing, there has been a realisation in the Maldives in the past that India remains a valuable security partner in the region, making up for Male's scarce maritime surveillance capacity and capabilities. It is no coincidence that even Abdullah Yameen, under whose Presidency Male drifted closer to China, continued defence cooperation with India even during the roughest phase of bilateral relations. India is also the Maldives' biggest trade partner, a top export destination, and a traditional donor. Tourism sustains the economy of the Maldives and the largest number of visitors to the island nation come from India. It doesn't require great foresight to conclude that Male should avoid provoking New Delhi. If for New Delhi the Maldives is an important partner, given its critical geography in the Indian Ocean, then for Male too India remains a critical economic and security anchor in the region. This makes it imperative that mutual sensitivities are respected with clearly articulated red-lines.

last year. Accusing India and the previous Maldivian government of violating the country's sovereignty, Muizzu had asked India to remove its troops from the country immediately after being sworn in. Turkey was Muizzu's first destination for a bilateral visit and he is in China this week, breaking a long held tradition whereby his predecessors used to visit India first after taking office. Male was absent from the Colombo Security Conclave meeting in December. And more recently, Muizzu's government decided to not renew an agreement with New Delhi that allowed India to conduct hydrographic surveys in Maldivian waters.

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Overcoming a climate of mistrust

As COP28 in Dubai came to a close, much like at other recent meetings, the plenary hall and the media quarters shared a feeling of achievement with more than a grain of frustration. It seems nobody is really satisfied, let alone happy, with the result.

Yes, a fund for helping vulnerable countries overcome irreversible climate damage was finally operationalised, but the contributions fall short of what is needed, and when and how the money will be delivered is still an open question. While the new language on fossil fuels is finally agreed upon, many see it as watered down and full of loopholes, allowing for major operations in oil, gas, and coal to continue and expand indefinitely. Granted, nations agree that more climate finance for both mitigation and adaptation is needed, but the modes, values and even having quantified adaptation goals are still undecided, while the fate of carbon markets—a crucial financing instrument—is hanging in the air after a last-minute failure in Dubai.

As any negotiator will tell you, if everyone is equally unhappy, then you have a balanced deal. Balanced as these last deals may be, it is hardly a revelation that they also tend to be underwhelming in terms of delivering on the goals of the Paris Agreement—mitigation, adaptation, and finance.

A key reason for this is deepening mistrust between developed and developing nations, most vividly seen in the UNFCCC and G20 processes.

Progress has been incremental at best—in contrast to the increasingly alarming science and the growing realisation of the scale of transformations economies and societies would have to undergo to deal with the climate crisis. A key reason for this is deepening mistrust between developed and developing nations, most vividly seen in the UNFCCC and G20 processes. Dwindling trust makes negotiators see hidden agendas in whatever the other side is suggesting, promotes entrenchment in positions and a papering-over of the really hard issues.

The great book of grudges

Whenever the world comes together to agree on further climate action, any slight disagreement seems to trigger a barrage of mutual grievances. Taken to the extreme, the accusations sound something like this. The Global North is arrogant and selfish, dismissive of the Global South's efforts in decarbonisation and denying it the well-deserved chance to develop and achieve living standards of dignity, even less—prosperity. The South, in turn, is sluggish and free-riding, unwilling to take responsibility for its prevalent and growing emissions.

Most of these grudges are not completely groundless. Broken promises are about as bad for trust as it gets. Developed countries have been

systematically underdelivering on the US\$100 billion climate finance obligation and have been softening that obligation with conditions and qualifications at every turn. They enjoy advantages in technology adoption and capacity that allow them to decarbonise quicker and the higher living standards make climate-consciousness an affordable luxury.

At the same time, developing countries are not in a rush to take up the mitigation ambition that science tells us is necessary to avert the worst impacts of climate change. Even though renewables deployment in key developing economies has been unprecedented and ambitious targets are set for emissions intensity and peaking, the atmosphere only really cares about absolute emissions and GHG concentration. Having the carbon space to develop and getting the financial support needed for net zero makes complete sense in terms of justice, but doesn't at all if getting to the living standards of developing countries comes at a price of a climate catastrophe for all countries.

Developed countries have been systematically underdelivering on the US\$100 billion climate finance obligation and have been softening that obligation with conditions and qualifications at every turn.

Another major issue is the very mechanisms and platforms where these issues are discussed. Developed countries are leveraging their historic and political influence, as well as technical and capacity advantages in multilateral institutions, with all their institutional legacy. This makes developing nations feel like the negotiations game is rigged, from English still dominating the negotiation space to the mundane costs of sending a proper delegation to an international meeting imposed on a low or middle-income bureaucracy.

Other ways to cut a cake

The rift between the developing and developed nations, albeit the most visible, is not the only one and may not even be the one defining long-term dynamics. Within the developing world—as understood by the infamous annexes to the 1992 Convention—there are the major economies, capable of maintaining infrastructure megaprojects, dominating specific global markets, sending people to space and financing development in poorer countries. And then there are the vulnerable, small-island, land-locked or least developed economies, often demanding the highest ambition given that their literal existence depends on it.

Under the broad moniker of 'developed' we do have highly advanced, rich by per capita income, far ahead in their decarbonisation journey. But we also have the larger economies, internally diverse and often dependent on fossil fuel production and consumption, facing political and social challenges to workforce

transition and strong interest groups, much like large emerging economies.

However, the divisions between negotiating parties, though proving crucial to the intergovernmental process, may not define the broader long-term efforts to tackle climate change. In this weird age of globalisation-cum-fragmentation, accumulated imbalances and inequality, other delineations have to be addressed.

Under the broad moniker of 'developed' we do have highly advanced, rich by per capita income, far ahead in their decarbonisation journey.

Whether the world will succeed in averting a climate disaster or not, one can be sure that the elites will be better off. It



is not the vulnerable countries that will be hit hardest, but the dispossessed in all countries. The blessed upper classes in Mumbai, San Paolo and Riyadh will be just as protected as their peers in London, Tokyo, and Melbourne, while the manual labourers of San Diego, Moscow, and Brussels—just as vulnerable as those in Kinshasa, Jakarta, or Bogota.

The damages and the costs will be differentiated at every level of analysis. The superrich will be able to afford a bunker on a far-off mountain, the 'regularly' rich – all-day air conditioning. The relatively poor could perhaps afford to migrate from the unbearable heat or rising sea, but those suffering extreme poverty will simply continue to suffer, with no exit strategy whatsoever.

What is to be done

What could be some of the ways to deal with these divides?

Simply honouring commitments would be a good place to start, but countries should go beyond that and start thinking about making better and more honest ones in the first place. The dilution of decision texts, the caveats and the jargon mean that internationally agreed climate policy documents, be it COP decisions or G20 declarations are often read with a sceptical smirk by both the negotiators themselves and their constituencies. The aforementioned COP decision on the Global Stocktake puts the UN-speak asterisk of 'as appropriate' 18 times throughout the document—three times in a single paragraph at one point – and conditions 16 other statements with

references to national circumstances. A separate paragraph even 'reaffirms the nationally determined nature of nationally determined contributions'.

This is not to devalue the importance of national circumstances, crucial for efficient climate action, but to call for common sense. The nationally determined element is deeply engrained in the Paris Agreement and it is really unlikely that any nation would do something going against the grain of local context. Qualifying these commitments and pledges at every turn, however, makes it impossible for the reader to understand what is it that parties are committing to and whether they intend to do something. Such nuances only further erode trust.

The dilution of decision texts, the caveats and the jargon mean that internationally agreed climate policy documents, be it COP decisions or G20 declarations are often read with a sceptical smirk by both the negotiators themselves and their constituencies.

Another good way to restore confidence would be for both sides to take responsibility for their impact on the planet and not wait for others to do so. Justice is important to create trust, but so is goodwill. As long as parties avoid responsibility, be it for accumulated, per capita or current absolute emissions, climate finance, or local adaptation, traded carbon or consumption patterns, and use this to stall action, the world will keep doubting that climate change is much of a problem. If governments, informed by science, can afford to wait for others to act, then the threat might not be that existential, right?

The third approach could be truthful pragmatism, as an alternative to dogma and formulaic reiterations. What does 'keeping 1.5 within reach' actually mean? What happens if we don't get there? How much climate finance do we need? How are we going to spend it and where can we find that? Which development challenges do we intend to prioritize against climate change? Do we really need to bring everything to universal multilateral fora if emissions reductions are a global good anyway?

There should be no naïve expectation that nations sitting at the high table of climate policy will become collectively and individually committed, self-aware, responsible and truthful to the point where trust will flow. After all, we are trying to solve an existential issue through the ever-imperfect means of global politics and economics. Non-state actors have to build horizontal alliances and solidarities, taking as much responsibility as they can.

But for states, this is the only game in town and a collectively beneficial outcome will require that they overcome victimhood and embrace agency in building trust with others.

North Korea's artillery fire and regional implications

On Friday, 5 January, North Korea fired 200 artillery rounds near its disputed western sea boundary with South Korea, in a significant breach of the 2018 military agreement between Pyongyang and Seoul, a pact that was instrumental in reducing military tensions and averting accidental clashes. In a situation that was already tense due to the steady upgrade of Pyongyang's missile programme, Friday's firing is likely to result in a further escalation of military tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Referring to the drills as a provocation, Seoul also fired artillery rounds in response later in the day and ordered the evacuation of Yeonpyeong, a front-line island. The firing continued over the weekend with a third round of 60 firings on 7 January.

An important aspect of the agreement was the confidence-building measure that involved the removal of several guard posts within the DMZ and the clearing of landmines in specific areas.

Formally known as the "Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain", or the Comprehensive Military Agreement, the 2018 military agreement was part of a broader effort to reduce military tensions and build mutual trust between the two Koreas. Central to this agreement was the commitment to cease all hostile acts against each other, a move aimed at reducing the risk of armed conflict and accidental military clashes, especially along the heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and the maritime boundary. This included the establishment of a no-fly zone near the DMZ for various types of aircraft, addressing the potential for airspace violations that could escalate tensions. An important aspect of the agreement was the confidence-building measure that involved the removal of several guard posts within the DMZ and the clearing of landmines in specific areas. In the maritime domain, the agreement sought to transform the disputed western sea border area into a peace zone. The agreement, however, never really lived up to its projected potential. In late 2023, South Korea suspended parts of the

agreement after North Korea launched a spy satellite into orbit

While Pyongyang has breached the 2018 agreement several times in the past, with the most recent one being in December 2022, the 5 January drills are significant for



two reasons. First, these firings follow closely in the wake of Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington agreeing to and launching a scheme for sharing year-round real-time data on North Korean missiles. The plan was first decided during the trilateral meet at Camp David in August 2023 and launched in December 2023 with the three countries also poised to devise guidelines for a joint nuclear deterrence strategy by the summer of 2024 at the second meeting of the Nuclear Consultative Group. The establishment of a real-time data-sharing mechanism is a substantial step forward in strengthening the missile defense capabilities of the United States (US), South Korea, and Japan.

In the face of North Korea's evolving missile capabilities, the agreement underscores a shared understanding among the three nations that the traditional approach to security must be adapted to effectively counter contemporary threats.

Timely and accurate information about

North Korean missile launches is invaluable for planning and executing effective countermeasures with real-time data allowing for quicker decision-making and a more coordinated response to potential threats. It contributes significantly to the deterrence posture of the three nations. In

The two leaders share an interesting relationship with Trump being the first sitting US President to have visited North Korea during his previous term in office. Relations between the two countries during the previous Trump administration were marked by significant fluctuations, featuring both heightened tensions and unprecedented diplomatic engagements. Trump's direct engagement with Kim, including exchanging personal letters, was a departure from the more cautious approach of previous administrations. However, these engagements did not result in a clear roadmap for denuclearisation or a significant change in North Korea's nuclear posture. By the end of Trump's term, the US-North Korea relationship remained complex and unresolved, with the fundamental issues around denuclearisation and sanctions relief still largely unaddressed.

Relations between the two countries during the previous Trump administration were marked by significant fluctuations, featuring both heightened tensions and unprecedented diplomatic engagements.

the face of North Korea's evolving missile capabilities, the agreement underscores a shared understanding among the three nations that the traditional approach to security must be adapted to effectively counter contemporary threats. This move is indicative of a strategic alignment in response to a common adversary, signifying a departure from historical tensions and a commitment to regional stability. The development was met with fierce criticism from North Korea which vowed to bolster its war-preparedness.

Second, it is believed that Pyongyang is looking to step up its defense capabilities and also demonstrate the same through repeated provocations along the land and sea border with South Korea to boost its chances of drawing concessions from the US in case Donald Trump is re-elected as President in 2024's forthcoming US elections. Intelligence reports also indicate that Pyongyang may try to carry out a seventh nuclear test later in 2024 to coincide with the US midterm elections.

If North Korea indeed remains true to its threats, South Korea, alongside its allies, particularly the US, would be compelled to respond, potentially leading to a heightened state of military readiness or even countermeasures, which could further aggravate the security of the Korean peninsula. It is also likely to have a substantial impact on the internal politics of the involved countries. In South Korea, it could lead to a hardening of public and political attitudes towards North Korea, impacting the South Korean government's policy and approach to the North. South Korea's parliamentary elections are also scheduled for April 2024. In North Korea, it could be used by the regime to bolster internal support by projecting strength against external threats.

Pyongyang's choices, going forward, could not only disrupt the fragile peace in the region but could also set in motion a series of events with far-reaching consequences for regional stability, diplomacy, and the global economy.

Japan's new security assistance to the Indo-Pacific region

Today, Japan is no longer a bystander in the international security and defence fields. Tokyo is now actively promoting and establishing defence cooperation with wide-ranging countries and has launched a new programme that provides security aid to developing countries.

On 3 November 2023, during Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's visit to Manila, Japan signed an agreement with the Philippines, committing 600 million yen in Official Security Assistance (OSA) grant aid for supplies of military equipment that would enhance the Philippine security and deterrence capabilities. Two weeks later, Japan signed a similar agreement with Bangladesh, committing 575 million yen under OSA.

Similarly, an agreement committing 400 million yen to Malaysia under OSA was signed on 16 December 2023, on the sidelines of the Tokyo summit, commemorating 50 years of Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) ties. Japan signed the fourth and final agreement for the current fiscal year with Fiji two days later, committing 400 million yen.

The budget for the programme is likely to increase annually, and more countries are likely to be aided under it because Japan has committed to increasing its defence budget over the next five years, of which a small part will support OSA.

Providing military grant aid to developing nations in the Indo-Pacific region is a new programme Japan established in April 2023. For fiscal 2023-24, Japan allocated 2 billion yen for this programme. Although small and limited to a few nations initially, this programme signifies a new direction in Japan's long-held policy of not aiding foreign militaries. The budget for the programme is likely to increase annually, and more countries are likely to be aided under it because Japan has committed to increasing its defence budget over the next five years, of which a small part will support OSA.

Although Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs administers both, OSA differs from Official Development Assistance (ODA). As a member of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Japan has been one of the most significant aid donors to developing countries since the ODA programme was established in the post-Second World War era. Preliminary OECD

data indicate that Japan was the third largest donor in 2022, spending nearly US\$17 billion on developing countries. Given Japan's pacifist constitution and imposed constraints, Tokyo refrained from military-type aid. It allocated its ODA budget only for non-military purposes, such as human security, maritime security, and peace-building.

Japan has taken this new policy direction because of its assessment of the changing global strategic environment and shifting military balance in the Indo-Pacific region. China's growing military assertiveness, North Korea's



sabre rattling, the war in Ukraine and Japan's commitment to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific have driven Tokyo to a new path-breaking course. Tokyo has skilfully crafted this new direction without changing the peace norm of the Constitution that prohibits military activities by introducing new legislation in support of its national security strategy, as articulated in the two documents Tokyo issued in 2013 and 2022.

China's growing military assertiveness, North Korea's sabre rattling, the war in Ukraine and Japan's commitment to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific have driven Tokyo to a new path-breaking course.

Japan began to use ODA strategically after the 2013 NSS and the 2015 Development Cooperation Charter, which some regard as securitisation of aid or providing ODA for security purposes. Following the 2013 NSS language, the 2015 Charter incorporated the phrase 'pro-active contribution to peace', under which Japan began to offer 'capacity building' support to developing countries. Support essential to maintaining regional peace, stability, the rule of law, and maritime

sovereignty began to be provided under the new Charter. This included the supply of surveillance boats to Vietnam and the Philippines and capacity-building assistance to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar. Even before the 2015 Charter, Japan supplied three patrol boats to Indonesia, using its grant aid to combat terrorism and piracy, allowed under the 2003 ODA Charter.

The four nations that have received military-related aid under the new OSA in 2023 are Indo-Pacific 'like-minded' nations, strategically located and important to Japan's security interest

invasion of Taiwan. Since the coming of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. into office in the Philippines, Tokyo has elevated its defence and other ties with Manila. A Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) is currently being negotiated, and when signed, this will be Japan's first RAA with an ASEAN member.

Bangladesh will receive four patrol boats under OSA for surveillance and maritime security in the Bay of Bengal, a crucial part of the Indo-Pacific. Notably, Bangladesh has been one of the largest recipients of Japan's ODA in recent years. The China factor also plays a crucial role in Japan's thinking. Fiji will also receive patrol boats for the 'maintenance and enhancement of maritime security in the seas around Fiji and Indo-Pacific region'. As China's influence rises in the South Pacific, Japan attempts to blunt it with ODA and now also with OSA.

Although, at the moment, OSA remains low-key with only a small budget of under US\$2 million, this programme is likely to expand. The Japanese government is in conversation with Vietnam and Djibouti as two other potential 'like-minded countries' to receive OSA in the next fiscal year, which will begin in April 2024. In November, Japan upgraded its ties with Vietnam to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership', and their bilateral relationship has strengthened, particularly in the economic field, with many Japanese companies investing in Vietnam. Furthermore, Vietnam has a dispute with China in the South China Sea. Djibouti in East Africa, on the other hand, hosts a temporary base for Japan's defence personnel for anti-piracy purposes and acts as a counterforce to China's presence.

The Japanese government is in conversation with Vietnam and Djibouti as two other potential 'like-minded countries' to receive OSA in the next fiscal year, which will begin in April 2024.

Japan also may have a larger agenda behind the provision of OSA. Japan has long been trying to export military wares to foreign countries, including amphibian aircraft to India. But Japanese companies have yet to be successful in any such deal. It is possible, as one analyst puts it, that the insight and lessons learnt from OSA could be used to design larger-scale defence equipment transfers, using loan arrangements similar to what Japan has been doing in large infrastructure projects such as the bullet train project in India.

and foreign policy objectives, and each faces significant strategic challenges from China.

Malaysia, for example, disputes China's claims of territorial rights in the South China Sea. With Chinese vessels entering the country's exclusive economic zone, Japan has decided to support Malaysia to deter China. Malaysia's strategic location connecting the Indian Ocean and East Asia is crucial for sea transportation. Moreover, the two countries have elevated their ties to the 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'. Japan's military aid is believed to improve security capabilities and surveillance of the critical sea lanes.

With Chinese vessels entering the country's exclusive economic zone, Japan has decided to support Malaysia to deter China.

Similarly, the Philippines is vital for the protection of sea lanes. Still, more importantly, the country is crucial to maintaining regional security and stability, mainly because Japan believes that a Ukraine-like situation may arise in the Indo-Pacific, that is, a possible Chinese

'Cinema demands hard work, not what's shown on Insta': Pankaj Tripathi on filmmaking challenges

Actor Pankaj Tripathi, famed for his refined acting abilities and diverse unconventional performances has opened up on what actually goes behind filmmaking and emphasises the challenges that actors face.

In an interview with ANI, Tripathi points out that there is much confusion and misconception about the film industry and film fraternity, particularly fuelled by updates posted on social media.

"People think there is lot of fun happening in film industry. Just because actors make their PR machinery to their fun footages like spotted at an event, airport, etc. People think actors have dreamy life," the actor said.

Tripathi goes on to detail the difficulties he faced while shooting the soon-to-be released biopic 'Main Atal Hoon'

in which he wears prosthetics to resemble late Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The National Award-winning actor said, "Shooting is a very difficult task. For the film 'Main Atal Hoon', I had to do prosthetic make up on my face and nose. There is a rule in prosthetic make up that you should stay in at least 22 degree or beyond temperature zone so, that you don't sweat.

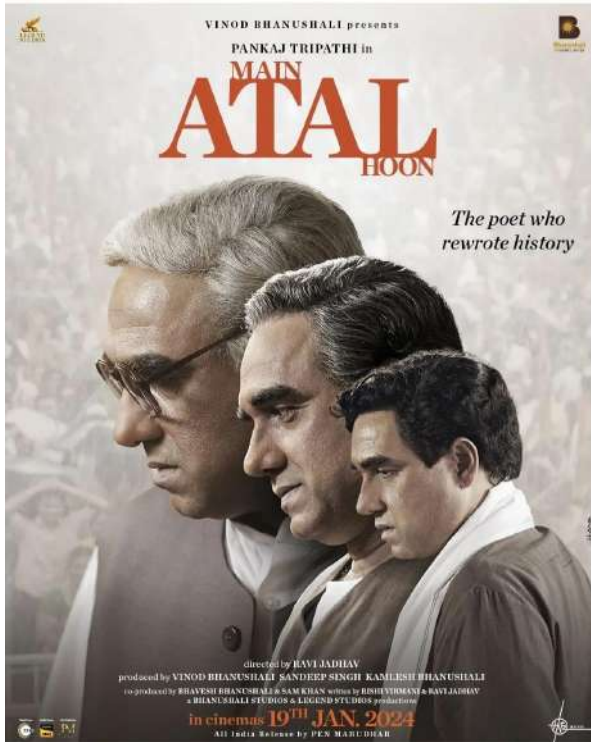
Otherwise the prosthetic will start melting and due to which actors get distracted.

"I shot with prosthetics in 46-degree temperature in Lucknow. I was shooting for 12 hours straight. And when there is so many problems happening in body then it gradually effects your mind. It also effects your performance. For me, I didn't want this problem to show in my performance," the actor said.

He added, "As its Atal ji's film, you can't make any improvisation in it. You can only play with posture and gesture not with his speech and dialogues. Filmmaking is all about hard work. Cinema demands hard work, not like what's shown on Insta. There is gruelling 12-hour shoots for which we have to arrive on sets one hour prior. It's not an easy task as it seems to be."

Directed by Ravi Jadhav, the film 'Main Atal Hoon' written by Rishi Virmani and Ravi Jadhav is all set to hit theatres on January 19.

It is backed by Bhanushali Studios Limited and Legend Studios, Vinod Bhanushali, Sandeep Singh, Sam Khan and Kamlesh Bhanushali.



Singing maestro Yesudas turns 84

For the fourth year in succession, master singer K.J. Yesudas who turned 84 on Wednesday is missing his date with the famed Kollur Mookambika temple in Mangalore in Karnataka.

Since the Covid pandemic stuck, Yesudas has been in Dallas, USA and hence, he has not been able to take part in the musical tribute at the temple, which has been a practice of him and his family for close to four decades, where they arrive at the temple on his birthday and sings hymns.

This temple is a very revered place among performers in the

music and art.

In a music career extending to over six decades now, he has recorded over 80,000 songs in



over 14 languages, including Arabic, Latin and Russian.

Yesudas, over the years, has won a record eight national awards, and a record 25 state awards.

The singer has also been conferred the Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan. Apart from his songs, the singer is known for his characteristic attire: a white kurta and a white dhoti, and in the recent years, he has been sporting a flowing white beard too.

The nearly a dozen news TV channels in Kerala on Wednesday are airing special programmes of the veteran singer and so are the high profile personalities in the state from politicians to actors and those in the music industry are all excited and applauding Yesudas.

Sunny Leone's Teri Laal Chunariya surges to #1 in just two days



Sunny Leone's newest track Teri Laal Chunariya has been creating a buzz on YouTube since its debut. Featuring Pawan Singh alongside Sunny Leone, the song has garnered over an impressive 7 million views. The song has been trending at #1 within just two days of its release on January 7. The song is receiving acclaim for its infectious melody and lively rhythm.

Sung by Jyotica Tangri, created by the musical duo Javed-Mohsin, and choreographed by Adil Shaikh, the video is also admired for its stunning visuals and dance moves.

Adah Sharma to star in Sunil Grover-starrer Sunflower 2

Adah Sharma is all set to play an exciting role opposite Sunil Grover in the web show Sunflower Season 2.

The show is a crime comedy and revolves around a middle-class housing society in Mumbai called Sunflower featuring an array of quirky characters.

Expressing her excitement about the web show Adah said, "I did drama in Kerala Story, action in Commando. So, I thought it would be nice to do comedy and this is a role to die for! I can't reveal too much but she's very unique and creepy. This season revolves around her and she moves into Sunflower society and turns everyone's lives upside down."

Created by showrunner Vikas Bahl and directed by Navin Gujral, the show also features Sunil Grover in the lead role alongside Ashish Vidyarthi, Ranvir Shorey, Mukul Chaddha and Girish Kulkarni in other prominent roles.

The release date of the second season has not been announced



yet.

Meanwhile, Adah will also be seen in Bastar. Bastar: The Naxal Story is produced by Vipul Amrutlal Shah, co-produced by Aashin A Shah, and directed by Sudipto Sen.

Zeenat Aman, Neetu Kapoor to get candid over a cup of coffee with Karan Johar

Veteran divas Zeenat Aman and Neetu Kapoor will be seen talking about partying and their secret crush on the upcoming episode of Koffee with Karan.

They make surprising revelations brimming with nostalgia and discuss the untold stories from Bollywood's golden era.

Curious as ever, Karan asked, "What according to you is the wildest thing you did in the 70s?"

Zeenat revealed, "I really did not party but when the floodgates burst, they really did."

"Do you mean that by the men that entered your life?" asked Karan.



"No comment," quipped Zeenat. Talking about crushes, Karan asked, "One Bollywood heartthrob from your time, who was your secret crush?" "Shashi Kapoor," replied Neetu Kapoor

Surprised, Karan Johar said, "You were crushing on your uncle?" Koffee with Karan Season 8 is brewing on Disney+ Hotstar.

'Never missed watching Irrfan Khan on big screen,' says Mudasir Bhat

Mudasir Bhat, known for his performance in Crackdown 1 and 2, has embraced the New Year with joy, hopes, and optimism. Having recently featured in Watcho's Oh My Wife!, he has shared insights into his sources of inspiration in the acting realm. Alongside expressing his admiration for the late actor Irrfan Khan, Mudasir also acknowledged his reverence for the veteran actor Dilip Kumar.

Mudsair said, "I really admire the late Irrfan Khan. He was the one who showed everyone what natural acting is all about. Every time his movies came out in theatres, I never missed watching them on the big screen. I learnt a lot from him—how he approached characters and presented them on screen. He was like an acting encyclopedia, a gem in the industry who could convey so much without even using many words; his eyes were enough to connect audiences with the character and the story. I truly miss a talent like his."

He added, "I'm also fond of Naseeruddin Shah and George Clooney. George Clooney is my favourite actor; he's a Hollywood star and a style icon. Dilip Kumar sahab is timeless and also someone I look up to."

The actor recently played the role of Vivek, a forensic expert, who is entangled in personal challenges while solving a high-profile murder case, in Watcho Exclusives Oh My Wife! The series stars Sneha Singh Sisodia as Sujata, Vivek's wife.



Poonam Pandey cancels Maldives shoot; says unity, respect for nation should come first



Actress and model Poonam Pandey has decided to cancel her upcoming shoot in the Maldives after anti-India barbs by ministers of the island country.

In light of disrespectful remarks made by three Deputy Ministers in the Maldivian cabinet regarding Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lakshadweep, the actress took a principled stand by prioritising national respect over monetary gains.

These ministers implied that the visit aimed to promote Lakshadweep as an alternative tourist destination to the Maldives.

Expressing her unwavering support, she posted on X, "It is essential to uphold the dignity of our country and its leaders. I stand firmly with the decision to suspend those who have shown disrespect towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Our unity and respect for our nation should always come first."

Actor Rajinikanth-starrer 'Lal Salaam' gets new release date



Film "Lal Salaam", starring Rajinikanth, will now hit the screens on February 9.

Directed by Aishwarya Rajnikanth, the film was previously scheduled to be released during the Pongal festival in January.

Production house Lyca Productions shared the new release date on its official X page.

"LAL SALAAM hits the big screen on February 9th 2024! Save the date!" the banner announced on Tuesday.

Presented by A Subaskaran, the film has AR Rahman on board as music composer.

Rajinikanth's last big-screen outing was Nelson Dilipkumar's "Jailer", backed by Sun Pictures.

Shreyas Iyer added to Mumbai squad for Ranji Trophy game against Andhra

Mumbai

India batter Shreyas Iyer was on Tuesday added to the Mumbai squad for their next Ranji Trophy game against Andhra to be played here from January 12-15.

Having struggled with the bat largely during India's two-match Test series in South Africa in challenging conditions, the right-handed batter would be looking to regain form and bolster preparations for the Tests against England beginning January 25.

Iyer has replaced middle-order batter Sarfaraz Khan, who will join the India A team for

the series against England A in Ahmedabad.

However, Mumbai will be without the services of all-



rounder Shivam Dube who has been summoned to the national team for the upcoming three-match series starting against

Afghanistan beginning on January 11.

The 41-time winners in the Ranji Trophy, Mumbai, are coming off an outright win against Bihar in Patna.

Mumbai bagged seven points after they crushed Bihar by a margin of an innings and 51 runs with their fast bowlers ruling the roost.

Mumbai squad:

Ajinkya Rahane (c), Shreyas Iyer, Jay Bista, Bhupen Lalwani, Amogh Bhatkal, Suved Parkar, Prasad Pawar (wk), Hardik Tamore (wk), Shams

Mulani, Tanush Kotian, Atharva Ankolekar, Mohit Avasthi, Dhaval Kulkarni, Royston Dias, Sylvester Dsouza.

Rashid ruled out of India series but Afghanistan skipper confident others would step up

Mohali

Afghanistan will be without their trump card Rashid Khan in the T20 series against India starting here on Thursday but skipper Ibrahim Zadran was upbeat about the team's chances in their strongest format.

The celebrated spinner, who underwent a back surgery after the ODI World Cup in November, has been named in the squad but will not be available for the three games as he undergoes his rehab.

"He is not totally fit. He is doing his rehab. We will miss him in the series. Without Rashid there are a few players we trust," said Zadran in the pre-match press conference.

"We have many players like Mujeeb (Zadran) who have played a lot of cricket. We have trust in them. We will struggle without Rashid but one should be ready for any kind of situation," he asserted.

The performance of Afghanistan in the ODI World Cup in India was among the highlights of the tournament.

The team was very much in the running for a semifinal berth after beating defending champions England and Pakistan in the league stage.

Zadran, who opens the innings, has hardly been home since the high of that tournament but knows that the fans' expectations have gone up significantly.

"I only went home for one day but what I heard from teammates, they said all the people were happy. Nowadays, all around the country people expect lots of things from us. It is the only thing in the country that is giving happiness to people of Afghanistan," said Zadran.



"Playing against India on their home soil is difficult but we are here to win, show our skills. We have lots of good players in T20 and we are good in this format, I am sure we will perform well." The games will help Afghanistan fine-tune their preparations for the T20 World Cup and Zadran feels the team must improve in the batting department.

"We have one of the best spinners in the world, we have fast bowlers as well but our aim is to improve batting

skills," said the 22-year-old who also believes that dew won't be a factor despite the cold conditions prevailing in North India.

"We have been training here last two three days, there was no dew," he pointed out.

Zadran wants to improve his strike rate in the lead up the World Cup in Americas. He has a strike rate of 103 in 27 games, leaving a lot of scope for improvement. Zadran is expected to open alongside Rahamanullah Gurbaz.

"I play the anchor role in the team in ODIs. In T20s, the aim is to improve my strike rate but it also depends on the situation. When team needs you, you should be able to play fancy shots.

If it is in your destiny, it is bound to happen, says Mohammed Shami as he receives Arjuna award



New Delhi

Recovering from an ankle injury, star India pacer Mohammed Shami said his prime focus is to achieve optimum fitness keeping in mind the upcoming home Test series against England.

The 33-year-old, one of the stars of India's ODI World Cup campaign, was bestowed with the Arjuna award, the second-highest sporting honour in the country, on Tuesday.

"My aim is to keep myself fit as far as possible, as the next two tournaments and series are big. I will focus on fitness," Shami, who took 24 wickets in seven World Cup games, told PTI on Monday night during a reception hosted by the sports ministry for this year's national sports awards winners.

"There is no tension about my skill, as I believe if I maintain my fitness, skill will be there on the

ground."

Shami, who is currently undergoing rehabilitation at the National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bengaluru, had missed the recent South Africa series after not being cleared by the BCCI medical team.

The five-Test series against England begins on January 25.

Shami is the lone cricketer and one of the 26 sportspersons to receive the honour.

"It's a dream come true, it's my life's biggest achievement, the fruit of my hard work," said the Uttar Pradesh-born cricketer, who has taken 229 wickets in 64 Tests so far.

"No one can change your luck. If anything is decided by destiny, it is bound to happen. One must continue to work hard; it will pay off."

Rohit should captain in T20 WC: Ganguly

Kolkata

Former captain Sourav Ganguly today backed stalwarts Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli to feature in India's squad for the T20I World Cup in June. The duo has not featured in a T20I for about 14 months.



"Of course Rohit should captain the team in the T20I World Cup. Virat also should be there. Virat is an outstanding player, nothing will happen (even if they are coming back to the T20 fold after a long gap)," Ganguly said. Former South Africa captain Graeme Smith reckons

leaving out the likes of Rohit and Kohli from any team is extremely tough. "It's a very tough decision to leave out two players who have been incredible," said Smith.

Hockey India announces 26-member men's team for South Africa Tour

New Delhi

Hockey India on Wednesday announced the 26-man squad for a Four Nation Tour in Cape Town, South Africa, starting January 22.

The tournament will feature France, Netherlands, India and hosts South Africa.

The Indian team will be led by Harmanpreet Singh and FIH Player of the Year winner Hardik Singh will shoulder the responsibilities of vice captain. Youngsters Araijeet Singh Hundal and Bobby Singh Dhami have been included in the squad following an impressive outing with the junior side.

Goalkeepers PR Sreejesh, Krishan Pathak and Pawan have been included in the squad along with defenders Jarmanpreet Singh, Jugraj Singh, Amit Rohidas, Harmanpreet Singh, Varun Kumar, Sumit, Sanjay and Rabichandra Singh Moirangthem.

Midfielders selected in the team are Vivek Sagar Prasad, Nilakanta Sharma, Rajkumar Pal, Shamsher Singh,



Vishnukant Singh, Hardik Singh and Manpreet Singh. The forward line features Mandeep Singh, Abhishek, Sukhjeet Singh, Gurjant Singh, Lalit Kumar Upadhyay, Akashdeep Singh, Araijeet Singh Hundal, Bobby Singh Dhami.

Speaking about the South Africa Tour, Chief Coach Craig Fulton said: "We are quite excited to get on with the season in the Olympic year with the South Africa Tour where we will play quality teams. We have chosen a big squad in order to

give players exposure and it will also give me an opportunity to see some of the players in competition mode ahead of the FIH Hockey Pro League. We have a short camp in SAI, Bengaluru before we leave for the Tour. We have also included two young players in the Senior side, and it will be interesting to watch them adapt to the level we play."

Squad:

Goalkeepers: PR Sreejesh, Krishan Pathak, Pawan

Defenders: Jarmanpreet Singh, Jugraj Singh, Amit Rohidas, Harmanpreet Singh, Varun Kumar, Sumit, Sanjay and Rabichandra Singh Moirangthem

Midfielders: Vivek Sagar Prasad, Nilakanta Sharma, Rajkumar Pal, Shamsher Singh, Vishnukant Singh, Hardik Singh and Manpreet Singh

Forwards: Mandeep Singh, Abhishek, Sukhjeet Singh, Gurjant Singh, Lalit Kumar Upadhyay, Akashdeep Singh, Araijeet Singh Hundal, Bobby Singh Dhami

Cameron Green recalled for Australia as selectors opt not to pick a specialist opener to replace Warner

Melbourne

Cameron Green has been elevated to Australia's test XI after selectors opted not to pick a specialist opener to replace the retired David Warner for the series-opening match against West Indies.

Cricket Australia unveiled the 13-player squad Wednesday, without releasing a batting order but confirming all-rounder Green would start.

"We have selected a team we believe contains the best six batters in the country," Australia's chief selector George Bailey said.

Matt Renshaw, who has opened for Australia, and fast bowler Scott Boland were added to the squad as cover.

Speculation that Steve Smith could be moved up from No. 4 to open with Usman Khawaja has increased, with Green expected to be inserted in the middle order.

The first test against West Indies starts January 17 in Adelaide. The second match will be a day-night in Brisbane.

Warner played the last of his 112 tests in the third match of a 3-0 sweep against Pakistan in Sydney last week.

Renshaw, Marcus Harris and Cameron Bancroft were all considered options to fill the vacant spot.

Bancroft, who is among the



leading scorers in the domestic competition but has only played two tests since returning from his nine-month ban following the so-called "Sandpapergate" scandal, urged selectors to go with a specialist opener.

Ultimately, though, the 24-year-old Green's immense potential was a deciding factor.

A tall fast bowler, agile fielder and technically solid batter, Green made his debut as an all-rounder against India in December, 2020.

He played 24 tests, averaging 33.6

with the bat and taking 30 wickets, before losing the all-rounder spot to Mitch Marsh during the Ashes series in England last July.

He played in Australia's World Test Championship final win over India in London, and was also a part of the Australia squad that won the 50-over Cricket World Cup in India last November.

Selectors have started regenerating the limited-overs squad, with Warner retiring from the format and allrounder Marcus Stoinis and spinner Ashton

Agar left out of the squad to play West Indies in a three-match ODI series next month.

Frontline fast bowlers Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood and allrounder Mitch Marsh will be rested for the series, while paceman Lance Morris was included and expected to make his international debut.

Aaron Hardie, Matt Short, Jhye Richardson and Nathan Ellis were selected after missing out on the World Cup squad, and Joe Inglis was preferred as wicketkeeper to test gloveman Alex Carey.

Smith will return as captain to cover for Cummins.

Australia's test squad: Pat Cummins (captain), Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Cameron Green, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitch Marsh, Matt Renshaw, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc.

Australia's ODI squad: Steve Smith (captain), Sean Abbott, Nathan Ellis, Cameron Green, Aaron Hardie, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Marnus Labuschagne, Glenn Maxwell, Lance Morris, Jhye Richardson, Matt Short, Adam Zampa.

'Clearly an RSS-BJP event': Congress says won't attend Ram Mandir inauguration

New Delhi

The Congress party Wednesday said it will skip the upcoming inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on January 22,

"The inauguration of the incomplete temple by the leaders of the BJP and the RSS has been obviously brought forward for electoral gain," a statement released by the party read. "While abiding by the 2019 Supreme Court judgment and honouring the sentiments of millions who revere Lord Ram, Shri Mallikarjun Kharge, Smt. Sonia Gandhi and Shri Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury have respectfully declined the invitation to what is clearly an RSS/BJP event."

Several top politicians, athletes and celebrities were invited for the consecration ceremony. Invitations were extended to Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi, Mallikarjun Kharge, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury as well as former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Other Opposition leaders that were invited for the event include Bihar CM Nitish Kumar, Lalu Yadav and Sitaram Yechury.

Prakash Ambedkar-led VBA joins MVA, INDIA bloc

Mumbai

A decision to include Prakash Ambedkar's Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi into the opposition's INDIA alliance and Maha Vikas Aghadi was taken at a meeting of MVA leaders held in Delhi, Shiv Sena UBT leader Sanjay Raut announced on Tuesday night after the meeting.

A meeting of Congress, NCP and Sena UBT leaders was held at the residence of Mukul Wasnik in Delhi to discuss seat sharing for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

After the meeting, Raut said talks over the seat sharing took place in a positive manner and the seat sharing formula will be decided upon later.

"As you can see we all have come out of the meeting... We all sat down to discuss seat-sharing... I want to assure everyone that we will fight elections together. We have no differences about seat sharing... We discussed each seat in detail," Raut said in Delhi.

"We had a detailed discussion about including VBA and Prakash Ambedkar in opposition bloc, following which all partners of MVA and INDIA have agreed to include the VBA in the MVA and INDIA," Raut said. He added that

the number of seats to be shared with VBA will be decided later on.

Earlier in the day, Raut had said that Sena UBT had staked claim on 23 seats since the party has been contesting on 23 seats for "several decades". "We (Sena UBT) have been contesting from 23 seats for the last several decades and hence we have staked claim on 23 seats. It is a fact that we have won 18 seats in the 2019 elections. But there is no fight for seat sharing in Maharashtra... There can be some differences on 2-3 seats but we will have a discussion over it," Raut said. He also stressed that the MVA partners will fight together against the dictatorial regime in the country and will win maximum seats.

"We will get 23 seats from the state which includes seats from Mumbai and Thane. If there are any differences, we will sit and discuss. Our senior leaders, Uddhav Thackeray, Sharad Pawar, Mallikarjun Kharge, Rahul Gandhi will meet and decide if there are any issues. I don't see any clashes here. This is our fight against the dictatorship going on in the country. Under the leadership of Uddhav

Thackeray, we have selected 23 seats after testing our base in 48 constituencies. You will see a new candidate for the post of Prime Minister in 2024," Raut said.

Earlier in the day, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) chief Sharad Pawar said Prakash Ambedkar led Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi should be a part of the MVA. "In these primary talks, Jitendra Awhad will represent us in Delhi. It is our opinion that in these elections, us, Congress, Uddhav Thackeray led Shiv Sena, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi and left parties should be together and we will present this position in the meeting," said Pawar. This was the first time that the NCP voiced favour to include the VBA in the MVA for the general elections. Till now VBA was an ally of the Shiv Sena UBT.

Commenting on a range of issues, including his criticism by estranged nephew and the state's Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar, Sharad wondered whether Ajit was unaware of his announcement, that he would not accept any parliamentary position after the completion of his present tenure in Rajya Sabha.

Across State अक्रॉस मुंबई



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सांस्कृतिक इंडियन फाऊंडेशन



संजय मंगेश भैरे
संपादक

मुंबई अध्यक्ष

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