

# Across State

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## RAM LALLA RISES IN AYODHYA

**Ram Lalla returns to abode; dawn of a new era: PM Narendra Modi**

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# PM sending development projects to Gujarat, ignored Maharashtra during crisis - Uddhav Thackeray

## Mumbai

Shiv Sena UBT president Uddhav Thackeray Tuesday alleged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is building a wall between Gujarat and rest of the country by sending all the investment and development projects to his home state.

Thackeray alleged that the Prime Minister is visiting the Maharashtra more as the elections are round the corner, whereas he ignored the state when it was facing crisis due to natural calamities.

"Modiji is now coming to Maharashtra just for the votes. He did not go to Manipur because there are only two Lok Sabha seats but Maharashtra has 48. So the number of his visits are increasing for electoral gain, but when there were calamities he did not come here. When Maharashtra was facing a crisis due to natural calamity of cyclone Tauktae, funds were not provided to Maharashtra despite asking for it. But Gujarat was given without asking," Uddhav said.

The Sena UBT chief was speaking at a public rally in Nashik's golf club ground on the occasion of his late father and Shiv Sena founder Bal

Thackeray's birth anniversary.

While addressing the rally, Uddhav also alleged that the BJP is



shifting everything to Gujarat from investments to all the developmental projects. "All those events which can generate revenue for Maharashtra through taxes are being shifted to Gujarat. Be it cricket world cup final match or the Bollywood's award functions. It is like Modi ji has Mann Ki Baat for Maharashtra but Dhan Ki Baat for Gujarat," Uddhav said further adding that the discrimination between Gujarat and other states has

built a wall between Gujarat and the country and it is not acceptable.

"They (BJP) are sowing poison

between Hindus and dividing Hindus itself. This is not our Hindutva. Modi is building a wall between the country and Gujarat," he added.

The former Maharashtra Chief Minister also alleged that just like the BJP uses and finishes off its alliance partners, the party also finishes and sidelines its own leaders when they become a threat for Modi.

Thackeray warned Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and BJP leader Yogi

Adityanath to be careful as just like the former BJP CMs in other states like Shivraj Chauhan of Madhya Pradesh, Devendra Fadnavis of Maharashtra were "sidelined", he may also be sidelined once the Lok Sabha polls are over. "I am not an opponent of Modi, I still call him Narendra bhai, I do not hide my relationship with him even today. Sena and BJP were together as friends. But the BJP's policy is not right. Efforts are being made to even finish off that Shiv Sena. Had the BJP fulfilled its promise, then we would have been with the BJP now," he said.

"But you(BJP) don't want opposition parties, you don't want alliance partners, you don't want your party leaders too. All the big leaders were sidelined by the BJP, be it Shivraj Singh Chauhan from Madhya Pradesh, Devendra Fadnavis from Maharashtra. Shinde will also be sidelined. Many such leaders were sidelined in a similar manner. Yogiji, now you take care of yourself... UP is a big state and has the highest number of Lok Sabha seats. After the polls, they would somehow also sideline Yogi," Uddhav added.

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## Bal Thackeray should have been alive to witness Ram temple in Ayodhya: Fadnavis

### Mumbai

Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis of the BJP paid tributes to Bal Thackeray on his birth anniversary on Tuesday and said the Shiv Sena founder should have been alive to witness the Ram Mandir inauguration in Ayodhya.

Fadnavis also posted a video on Bal Thackeray saying, "Balasaheb Thackeray was not just a powerful leader but also an ardent cartoonist whose impactful views resonated through his art. Salutations to the founder of Shiv Sena, Balasaheb Thackeray, on his birth anniversary. Late Hindu Hriday Samrat Balasaheb Thackeray was and will remain our inspiration."

In the video posted by Fadnavis, there were images of Bal Thackeray with BJP leaders Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L K Advani, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The video showed old clippings of Bal Thackeray where he was heard saying in an interview, "To me,

Hindutva is Rashtravad (nationalism). And if Rashtravad is a crime, I will commit it repeatedly."

Fadnavis said in the video, "Today, the Ram temple at Ayodhya has been consecrated under the leadership of PM Narendra Modi. I wish Balasaheb Thackeray were alive to witness the historic moment."

Fadnavis added, "When Babri Mosque was demolished, the media asked Bal Thackeray for his comments. In response, Balasaheb Thackeray said, 'If my Sainiks did the Babri Masjid demolition, I will be proud.'"

It is no secret that the BJP central and state leaders had always maintained cordial relations with Bal Thackeray, who died in 2012. Despite differences with Shiv Sena (UBT), led by Bal Thackeray's son Uddhav, BJP leaders at both centre and state have always exercised caution not to distance themselves from Bal Thackeray. In fact, the BJP leaders always go the extra mile to appropriate Thackeray senior and his Hindutva legacy.

# CM Eknath Shinde directs officials to keep entire system ready for a comprehensive survey on Maratha community

## Mumbai

Chief Minister Eknath Shinde on Saturday directed the state administration to keep the entire government machinery ready for the swift initiation of a comprehensive survey on the Maratha community to ascertain their social, economic and educational backwardness through the State Backward Classes Commission from January 23.

He also instructed the officials to carry out an accurate survey in a time-bound manner with the highest priority and asked them to go to villages, give information on notice boards and create awareness about the survey.

As Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange-Patil began his march to Mumbai from Antarwali Saarati village in Jalna district demanding reservation for Marathas and the march is expected to reach Mumbai on January 26, CM Shinde had convened a meeting of all divisional commissioners, district collectors and municipal commissioners on the issue of Maratha reservation.



Shinde as well as DyCM Devendra Fadnavis have appealed to Jarange-Patil to withdraw the march and that the government is positive on giving reservation to Marathas that would fit in a legal framework.

DyCM Ajit Pawar also said, "CM Shinde has already presented his and government's stand on the issue of

Maratha reservation. But one should not become adamant on the deadlines. One should not demand that a particular thing must happen on a particular day. It takes time since legalities are involved."

The survey work of the Backward Classes Commission will be held from January 23 to 31 during which nearly 2.5 crore of Maratha and non-Marathas

families of the state that falls in the open category will be surveyed.

During the meeting, Shinde instructed the administration that since the survey is important, all the necessary steps for its awareness should be taken on war-footing.

"Inform people about the survey through various means in every village. The surveyors should get information from every household so that the survey will be complete and accurate. Tehsildar and all concerned should report their work daily during the survey period. Training of the surveyors as well as the officers should be done accurately and keep a record of all the training sessions and meetings in the government report," Shinde said.

The chief minister also asked the administration to carry out a special campaign to provide the documents to people whose Kunbi caste records have been found.

He said that so far 1.47 lakh Kumbi certificates have been issued to Marathas since the formation of retired justice Sandeep Shinde committee.

## Rohit Pawar Appears Before Probe Agency In Bank Scam Case

### Mumbai

NCP lawmaker Rohit Pawar, grand-nephew of party boss Sharad Pawar, appeared before the Enforcement Directorate Wednesday morning in connection with a money-laundering probe linked to the alleged Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank, or MSCB, scam.

In a show of strength, Mr Pawar was escorted to the central agency's office in south Mumbai's Ballard Estate by senior members of the Nationalist Congress Party, including Working President Supriya Sule.

Before appearing at the ED office Rohit Pawar also visited his grand-uncle at the party HQ, a few hundred metres away, and sought his blessing; a video shared by news agency ANI showed Pawar junior, in a light blue shirt and khaki trousers, touching Sharad Pawar's feet. As he was going into the ED office Rohit Pawar, a first-time MLA from Karjat Jamkhed, said, "The officers are doing their job. Whatever documents they wanted, we have given. I will

appear and whatever information they ask, I will give them."

Speaking to reporters outside the ED office, after Pawar junior went inside, a confident Ms Sule said, "We are going to completely cooperate with all the agencies because we have nothing to hide."

Ms Sule, however, also responded strongly to questions about claims by opposition parties that the ruling BJP uses central agencies like the ED, to target and harass rivals, particularly before elections.

"I cannot comment on it, I am going on data and it speaks for itself. In Parliament there was a reply given by the Government of India... that 95 per cent of cases by Income Tax Department, CBI, and ED are against people in opposition parties. I am not making this allegation... I have very little to comment."

Specifically, Ms Sule had been asked about reports Ajit Pawar - who is Sharad Pawar's nephew and was a close aide till he rebelled - has been dropped from a new ED chargesheet in the MSCB case.

Ajit Pawar led a breakaway faction of the NCP in July last year, and was made a Deputy Chief Minister in a state government led by the BJP and a rebel unit of the Shiv Sena.

The Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank scam relates to the alleged fraudulent disbursement of loans amounting to ₹ 25,000 crore. The investigation was led by Mumbai Police's Economic Offences Wing under a FIR registered in August 2019. A petition before the Bombay High Court alleged some sugar mills had defaulted on these loans and, on default, were auctioned to office-bearers and politicians.

The initial case was closed in 2020 but the ED filed an intervention petition and began its inquiry.

On January 5, the agency searched the premises of Baramati Agro, a company owned by Rohit Pawar, and linked entities in Pune and other places. Last week Sharad Pawar hit out at the centre, accusing it of using the ED to "terrorise and silence political opponents".

## Incidents of violence at Mira Road, Panvel and Nagpur ahead of Ram Mandir consecration; 13 arrested

### Mumbai

Violent incidents of communal nature were reported from different parts of Maharashtra, ahead of the "Pran Pratishtha" ceremony at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya on Monday, following which Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said 13 people were arrested.

According to a senior IPS officer, communal incidents were reported from Mira Road, Panvel and Nagpur, apart from minor incidents in other parts of the state that included sloganeering and tearing posters. One person sustained serious injuries in the attack in the Naya Nagar area, while a few others received minor injuries.

According to police, two incidents were reported from Mira Road — one on Sunday night and the other Monday evening. Violence was also reported from Naya Nagar and Bhayander. "Two FIRs were registered and more may be lodged soon. We stopped

rallies of Hindus from entering lanes and areas where Muslim population is high to prevent any untoward incident," said a senior police officer.

Police said in the incident that occurred at around 11 pm Sunday, a group was passing by in their vehicles with saffron flags, chanting "Jai Shri Ram". They were stopped by local people and an argument broke out with people of another community. Soon a crowd gathered on both sides, said a senior police officer.

Several unverified videos were widely shared on social media, with "Mira Road" trending on X. Some of the X users who shared the video were those who faced police action during the Maha Vikas Aghadi regime in Maharashtra over objectionable messages. In one of the unverified videos, a youth is seen standing on a two-wheeler, who was part of a group wearing saffron, waving a fire arm and a stick during a rally.



## In a big setback to INDIA bloc, Mamata Banerjee rules out any alliance in West Bengal

New Delhi

In a much-anticipated move that will deal a massive blow to the INDIA bloc ahead of the general election, Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday called off the coalition's seat-sharing talks in West Bengal and declared that she would go it alone in the state.

The declaration came hours after Congress leader Rahul Gandhi dismissed reports of tension in the INDIA alliance in Bengal and also state Congress chief Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury's accusations that Mamata is an opportunist.

"My party and I are very close to Mamata ji. Talks are going on smoothly and there will be an outcome soon. These comments are routine. Sometimes their leaders say something, sometimes ours do that," Gandhi said on Tuesday.

Mamata was not impressed. On Wednesday morning, she said she had no idea that Rahul's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra was going to pass through Bengal.

She said she would contest alone in Bengal and defeat the BJP.

"I had no discussions with the Congress party. I have always said that in Bengal, we will fight alone. I am not concerned about what will be done in the country but we are a secular party and in Bengal, we will alone defeat the BJP. I am a part of the INDIA alliance. Rahul Gandhi's Nyay Yatra is passing through our state but we have not been informed about it," she said.

Mamata is not willing to cede more than two of the state's 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal to



the Congress though the Congress is asking for six.

The TMC is also not willing to work with the CPM, with Mamata declaring that her 34-year-old politics has been anti-Left.

In fact, Mamata had quit the Congress to form the TMC precisely to protest against the Congress diffidence in respect to the then ruling Left which was targeting Congress workers.

Mamata said her proposal to the Congress to contest 300 Lok Sabha seats out of 543 and leave the rest to regional parties was not accepted.

"We have had no seat-sharing talks with the Congress and will fight alone," she said, adding that the regional parties were together in the INDIA bloc.

Mamata's snub to the Congress could further weaken the grand old party's bargaining hold in other states like Punjab and Delhi where the Congress and AAP are engaged in hectic seat-sharing negotiations as part of the INDIA alliance.

Mamata feels the Congress needs to accord due importance to regional players in seat-sharing discussions if defeating the BJP is the goal.

## Karnataka Ex Chief Minister Predicts A South Surprise In Lok Sabha Polls

Bengaluru

Senior BJP leader Basavaraj Bommai today predicted surprising results from south India in favour of BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Mr Bommai claimed that there is a 'Modi wave' in the country as the whole country was eager to see Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister again.

"Surprise results will come from South India in the coming Lok Sabha election. The BJP will win maximum seats from Karnataka,

Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu," the former Chief Minister told reporters here.

According to him, the whole country looks at Prime Minister Modi with a lot of confidence. "There is a pro-BJP and pro-Modi wave from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. This time, the unexpected result is expected from South India

in the upcoming parliamentary polls. In Karnataka, BJP will win more than 25 seats," Mr Bommai claimed.

There are 28 Lok Sabha constituencies in Karnataka.

He said the SC/ST communities were disillusioned with the Congress party. Though many castes were included into the SC/ST categories, the percentage of quota has not been hiked, he said.

The BJP leader also alleged that the incumbent Congress government had done injustice to the Dalits by diverting ₹ 11,000 crore of the Special Component Plan (SCP) Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) for the implementation of guarantees and schemes.



**Across State** अक्रॉस मुंबई



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## Andhra Pradesh Congress charges Rs 25,000 for LS, Rs 10,000 for Assembly from seat aspirants as 'donation'

**Amaravati**

Kicking off the poll process, the Andhra Pradesh Congress unit on Wednesday started accepting applications from candidates planning to contest the Assembly and Lok Sabha elections to be held in a few months.

According to Manickam Tagore, AICC in-charge for AP, following the footsteps of the Karnataka and Telangana Congress model, the Andhra Pradesh unit will charge Rs 15,000 as the "donation" from the aspiring candidates of the reserved category and Rs 25,000 for the rest, for Lok Sabha while it is Rs 10,000 for candidates (unreserved category) and Rs 5,000 for the reserved in case of assembly ticket.

Applications will be accepted for the next two weeks, he said.

Tagore further said all the applications will be processed through the Pradesh Election Committee and afterward it will go through the screening committee of the AICC. Then the list will be sent to the Congress Central Election Committee headed by President Mallikarjun Kharge.

"It (Congress) is a democratic party. Therefore, any Congress worker can come and apply," Tagore said.

He said there is good response from the people to contest on Congress tickets and the donations can be made through 'Donate for Desh,' an online crowdfunding campaign.

Andhra Pradesh has 175 Assembly and 25 Lok Sabha seats.

Meanwhile, former APCC chief G Rudraraju said there

is tremendous response from the public for the meetings of newly appointed state party president YS Sharmila.

Currently, Sharmila is on tour of north Andhra Pradesh to revive the 'fortunes' of the Congress party, which lost most of its support base on splitting the united Andhra Pradesh in 2014. On Wednesday in Visakhapatnam, she alleged that her Chief Minister brother, YS Jagan Mohan Reddy, failed in getting special status for Andhra Pradesh which was promised during the state bifurcation. On Tuesday, she travelled in an APSRTC bus from Palasa to Ichapuram and interacted with the passengers. She threw a challenge to the YSRCP government to show her the development that the ruling party is claiming.

## PM Modi could claim 'full credit' for Bharat Ratna to Karpoori Thakur, says Bihar CM Nitish Kumar at Patna rally

**Patna**

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Wednesday took a dig at Prime Minister Narendra Modi, saying the latter might claim "full credit" for conferring Bharat Ratna on Karpoori Thakur.

Addressing a rally organised by the JD(U) on the birth centenary of the former Bihar CM, Kumar, who is also the party president, highlighted his relentless demands for the highest civilian award for his political mentor.

"I was told by Ramnath Thakur, my party colleague and the late leader's son, that the prime minister had called him up after the announcement. The PM has not called me so far. It is possible that he may claim full credit for the move.

Be that as it may, I thank the PM and his government for fulfilling a demand I have been raising since I assumed power in Bihar," Kumar said.

The JD(U) chief also said he "never tried to promote" any of his family members since he drew inspiration from late Karpoori Thakur who was known for probity in public life.

"It was also Karpoori Thakur who inspired our commitment to the cause of Other Backward Classes and Extremely Backward Classes. The caste survey, which we conducted and followed it up with many other welfare measures for the deprived sections, should be implemented across the country", Kumar told the rally.

# Congress welcomes Bharat Ratna to Karpoori Thakur; Rahul Gandhi says need 'real justice' not 'politics of symbolism'

**New Delhi**

The Congress, on Wednesday, welcomed the decision to confer Bharat Ratna on former Bihar chief minister Karpoori Thakur, even as Rahul Gandhi asserted that a caste census would be a true tribute to the socialist leader as the country now needs "real justice" and not "politics of symbolism".

The opposition party also slammed the BJP, saying it reflects the Narendra Modi government's "desperation and hypocrisy".

Two-time Bihar chief minister Thakur has been named for the country's highest civilian award Bharat Ratna posthumously.

"I pay respectful tribute to Jannayak Karpoori Thakur ji, an incomparable warrior of social justice, on his birth centenary. He is certainly a precious gem of India and the decision to award him Bharat Ratna posthumously is welcome," Gandhi said in a post in Hindi on X.

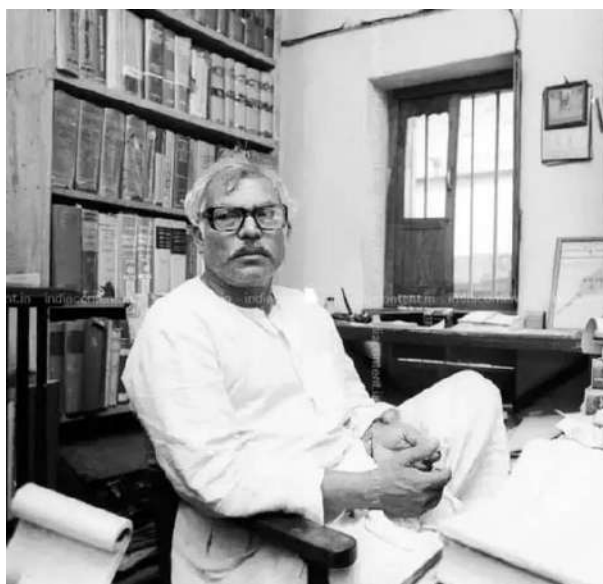
The former Congress chief alleged that the BJP government's "concealment" of the results of the social and economic caste census conducted in 2011 and their "indifference" towards a nationwide census is an attempt to weaken the movement for social justice.

"Justice of equal participation', one of the five justices of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, is at the centre of justice and social equality, which can begin only after the caste census," Gandhi said.

"In the true sense, this step will also be a true tribute to Jannayak Karpoori Thakur ji and his struggles for the rights of the backward and the deprived," he said.

"The country now needs 'real justice' not 'politics of symbolism'," Gandhi asserted.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said Thakur was a champion of social justice and conducting a nationwide caste census would be an appropriate tribute



to him.

"Even though it reflects the Modi government's desperation and hypocrisy, the Indian National Congress welcomes the posthumously awarded Bharat Ratna to the champion of social justice Jannayak Karpoori Thakurji," Ramesh said in a post on X.

"Bhagidari Nyay' is one of the five pillars of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. It will need a nation-wide caste census as a starting point.

"Rahul Gandhi has been consistently advocating this but the Modi government has all along refused to release the results of the Socio Economic Caste Census 2011 and also refused to commit itself to conduct an updated nationwide caste census which will be the most appropriate tribute to Jannayak Karpoori Thakurji," he said.

Addressing a press conference at the AICC headquarters

here, Congress leader and AICC in-charge NSUI Kanhaiya Kumar noted that today is the birth centenary of Karpoori Thakur to whom the government has decided to confer 'Bharat Ratna' posthumously.

"The entire Congress party and Rahul Gandhi have welcomed it, but has also raised the question that...If you want to pay true tribute to Karpoori Thakur ji, then implement his Karpoori model of participation," Kumar said.

"We are saying in relation to that—get the census done. The government does not want to get the census done. It is not willing to release social-economic data of 2011. Rahul Gandhi is saying that it is important to get an X-ray done to provide medicine for the disease. The government is running away from it. We hope the government will take into account the demand for social justice, end casteism, and carry a caste census for ensuring participation for all," Kumar said.

Thakur, who was born on this day in 1924 and passed away in 1988, was the first non-Congress socialist leader who became chief minister twice—first for seven months in December 1970 and later for two years in 1977.

Thakur, known affectionately as Jan Nayak (people's leader), is the 49th recipient of the country's highest civilian award. The award was last conferred on late president Pranab Mukherjee in 2019.

Born on January 24, 1924 in Nai samaj (barber society), Thakur is credited in Bihar politics for enforcing total prohibition of alcohol in 1970. The village where he was born in Samistupur district was renamed after him as Karpuri Gram.

He was inspired by heavyweights like Ram Manohar Lohia who spearheaded the socialist movement in post-Independent India. He was also close to Jayaprakash Narayan.



# AI surveillance tool can successfully predict sepsis risk: Study

New Delhi

An artificial intelligence (AI) model can quickly identify patients at risk of sepsis infection and potentially help save lives, a study has found.

Sepsis is a serious condition that happens when the body's immune system has an extreme response to an infection.

The study, published in the journal npj Digital Medicine, found that the AI algorithm, called COMPOSER, resulted in a 17 per cent reduction in mortality.

"Our COMPOSER model uses real-time data in order to predict sepsis before obvious clinical manifestations," said study co-author Gabriel Wardi from the University of California (UC) San Diego School of Medicine, US.

"It works silently and safely behind the scenes, continuously surveilling every patient for signs of possible sepsis," Wardi said.

Once a patient checks in at the emergency department, the algorithm begins to continuously monitor more than 150 different patient variables that could be linked to sepsis, such as lab results, vital signs, current medications, demographics and medical history.

Should a patient present with multiple variables, resulting in high risk for sepsis infection, the AI algorithm will notify nursing



staff via the hospital's electronic health record, the researchers said.

The nursing team will then review with the physician and determine appropriate treatment plans, they said.

"These advanced AI algorithms can detect patterns that are not initially obvious to the human eye," said study co-author Shamim Nemati, an associate professor at UC San Diego School of Medicine.

"The system can look at these risk factors and come up with a highly accurate prediction of sepsis. Conversely, if the risk patterns can be explained by other conditions with higher confidence, then no alerts will be sent," Nemati said.

The study examined more than 6,000 patient

admissions before and after COMPOSER was deployed in the emergency departments at UC San Diego Medical Center and at Jacobs Medical Center, both in the US.

It is the first study to report improvement in patient outcomes by utilising an AI deep-learning model, which uses artificial neural networks as a check and balance in order to safely, and correctly, identify health concerns in patients.

The model is able to identify complex and multiple risk factors, which are then reviewed by the health care team for confirmation, the researchers said.

"It is because of this AI model that our teams can provide life-saving therapy for patients quicker," Wardi added.

# No one can imagine INDIA bloc without Mamata Banerjee: Congress

Bongaigaon (Assam)

The Congress on Wednesday said no one can imagine the existence of the opposition INDIA bloc without West Bengal Chief Minister and TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee.

The Congress statement comes immediately after Banerjee announced that her party Trinamool Congress has decided to go alone in the state in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

Addressing a press conference at North Salmara in Assam as part of the party's 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra', Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh said that the Trinamool Congress is an "important pillar" of the opposition alliance.

"We cannot imagine the INDIA alliance without Mamata ji. The INDIA bloc will fight the Lok Sabha polls in West Bengal and all (partners) will participate," he said.

"Banerjee said that defeating BJP is the priority and prime responsibility of all of us. With this sentiment, our 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' will enter West Bengal tomorrow," Ramesh said when asked about the TMC supremo's statement regarding the seat-sharing talks.

The TMC supremo had on Tuesday criticised the Congress for causing a delay in discussions for seat-sharing in West Bengal, citing "unjustified" demand for 10-12 Lok Sabha constituencies when her party was willing to share only two.

Ramesh said, "Mamata Banerjee's full statement was that we want to defeat BJP and will take all possible steps for it. During a long journey, we get speed breakers and red lights. It does not mean that we will push back the journey. The journey

crosses the speed breaker and the red light turns green." Citing Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, he asserted that the TMC and especially Banerjee, who is a leader of West Bengal and India, are "very important pillars of the INDIA alliance".

Ramesh also claimed that seat-sharing talks are "going on" with the TMC for West



Bengal" and a solution to the stalemate will be found soon.

"We hope that the talks, which are going on, will find some middle path and the INDIA alliance will fight Lok Sabha polls in West Bengal and all partners will cooperate," he added.

Banerjee, however, asserted that she has not spoken to anyone in the Congress on the seat-sharing issue.

Talking about Banerjee's statement that she was not invited to participate in the 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' when it will enter West Bengal, Ramesh said Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge, Rahul Gandhi and the party's West Bengal in-charge have spoken to her.

"I know that Kharge ji has mentioned 3-4 times in his speech that all INDIA partners are invited to join the Yatra and invitations were sent to all parties. I don't know in what reference she said like this," he added.

# Aam Aadmi Party not to have alliance with Congress in Punjab, says Bhagwant Mann

Chandigarh

The Aam Aadmi Party will contest the general election independently in Punjab, Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann said here on Wednesday.

"In 2024, Punjab will create history by giving all 13 seats to AAP. There will be no alliance with the Congress in the state," said Mann, after presiding over a meeting of the Council of Ministers.

His statement comes after a meeting of the top leaders in Delhi on Saturday,

wherein Mann had told the party high command that it would be politically disastrous for the party to go in for an alliance with Punjab's main opposition party, Congress.

When questioned about the alliance of the AAP and Congress in Chandigarh for the mayoral polls, Mann was quick to reply that the AAP would contest all 13 Lok Sabha seats plus the Chandigarh seat independently. "Our voters will judge us on our good performance and we will

create history by winning all seats on our own," he said.

The Chief Minister said three candidates per constituency would first be selected and the best among them would be fielded in the polls. Mann and most of the top state leaders of the party have all along been opposed to the alliance with the Congress. This is because the ruling party in the past three years (including over a year before the 2022 assembly polls) has been labelling the Congress leaders as "corrupt".



# Ram Lalla returns to abode; dawn of a new era: PM Narendra Modi



The Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi today participated in the Pran Pratishtha (consecration) ceremony of Shri Ramlalla in the newly built Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Mandir in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. Shri Modi interacted with the shramjeevi who contributed to the construction of Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Mandir.

Addressing the gathering, the Prime Minister exclaimed that our Ram has finally arrived after centuries. "After centuries of patience, uncountable sacrifices, renunciation and penance, our Lord Ram is here", PM Modi remarked and congratulated the citizens on the occasion. The Prime Minister said that experiencing the divine consciousness inside the 'Garbh Grih' (inner sanctum) cannot be put into words and his body

is pulsating with energy and the mind is devoted to the moment of Pran Pratishtha. "Our Ram Lalla will not reside in the tent anymore. This divine temple will be his home now", the Prime Minister said expressing confidence and reverence that the events of today can be experienced by Ram Bhakts all around the country and the world. "This moment is supernatural and sacred, the atmosphere, environment and energy signify the blessings of Lord Ram upon us", Shri Modi said. He underlined that the morning Sun of 22nd January has brought a new aura along with it. "22nd January 2024 is not a mere date on the calendar, it is the origin of a new 'kaal chakra'", the Prime Minister said emphasizing that the joyous and festive mood of the entire nation was on a constant rise since the 'Bhoomi Pujan' of Ram Janmbhoomi Temple and the progress of the developmental works enthused new energy into the citizens. "Today, we have received the heritage of centuries of patience, today we have got Shri Ram's temple", the Prime Minister said. He underlined that the nation that breaks the shackles of the mindset of slavery and derives inspiration from the experiences of the past is the one which writes history. PM Modi said that today's date will be discussed in a thousand years from now and it is by the blessings of

Lord Ram that we are a witness to this momentous occasion unfolding itself. "Days, directions, skies and everything are brimming with divinity today", the Prime Minister said, stating that this is not an ordinary time period but an indelible memory path being imprinted on time.

Speaking about the presence of Shri Hanuman in every work of Shri Ram, the Prime Minister bowed to Shri Hanuman and Hanuman Garhi. He also bowed to Lakshman, Bharat, Shatrughan and Mata Janki. He acknowledged the presence of divine entities over the event. The Prime Minister apologized to Prabhu Shri Ram for the delay in seeing today's day and said that as today that vacuum has been filled, surely, Shri Ram will forgive us.

Recalling, Sant Tulsidas's return of Shri Ram in 'Treta Yug', The Prime Minister recalled the happiness that Ayodhya of the time must have felt. "Then the separation with Shri Ram lasted for 14 years and was still so unbearable. In this age Ayodhya and the countrymen suffered the separation of hundreds of years", he said. Shri Modi continued, despite Shri Ram being present in the original copy of the Constitution, a prolonged legal battle was fought after the independence. The Prime Minister thanked the Judiciary of India for "keeping the dignity of justice intact. Embodiment of justice, Shri Ram's

temple was constructed through just means", he emphasized.

The Prime Minister informed that the entire nation including small villages is witnessing processions and cleanliness campaigns are being carried out in temples. "The entire nation is celebrating Diwali today. Every household is prepared to light up the 'Ram Jyoti' in the evening", Shri Modi said. Recalling his visit to Arichal Munai, the starting point of Ram Setu, yesterday, the Prime Minister said that it was the moment which altered the Kaal Chakra. Drawing an analogy to that moment, the Prime Minister said that he got the belief that today's moment will also be the one to alter the circle of time and move forward. Shri Modi informed that during his 11-day anushthan, he attempted to bow before all the places where Lord Ram had set foot. Mentioning Pancwati Dham in Nashik, Thriprayar Temple in Kerala, Lepakshi in Andhra Pradesh, Shri Ranganathswamy Temple in Srirangam, Shri Ramanathaswamy Temple in Rameswaram and Dhanushkodi, the Prime Minister expressed gratitude for the journey from the sea to river Sarayu. "From the sea to the Saryu river, the same festive spirit of Ram's name is prevalent everywhere", he continued, "Lord Ram is connected to every particle of the soul of India. Ram resides in the hearts of



Indians". He further added that the feeling of oneness can be found within everyone's conscience anywhere in India and there could not be a more perfect formula for collectiveness.

Recalling his experience of listening to Shri Ram Katha in many languages, the Prime Minister said that Ram is there in the memories, festivals of traditions. "In every age, people have lived Ram. They have expressed Ram in their style and words. This 'Ram Ras' is continuously flowing like the flow of life. Ram Katha is infinite and Ramayan too is endless. Ideals, values and teachings of Ram are the same everywhere".

The Prime Minister expressed gratitude for the sacrifice of the people who made today's day possible. He paid tributes to Saints, Kar Sewaks and Ram Bhakts.

The Prime Minister said "Today's occasion is not only a moment of celebration, but at the same time it is also a moment of realization of the maturity of Indian society. For us, this is not only an occasion of victory but also of humility." Explaining the knots of history, the Prime Minister pointed out that the outcome of a nation's struggle with its history is seldom happy. "Still", he said "the gravity and sensitivity with which our country has opened this knot of history shows that our future is going to be much more beautiful than our past." Remembering the doomsayers, the Prime Minister said that such people did not realize the piousness of our social ethos. "The construction of this temple of Ramlala is also a symbol of peace, patience, mutual harmony and coordination of Indian society. We are seeing that this construction is not giving birth to any fire, but to energy. Ram Mandir has brought inspiration to every section of the society to move forward on the path of a bright future", he said. He continued "Ram is not fire, he is energy, he not conflict but solution, ram does not belong only to us but to all, Ram is not just present but is infinity"

The Prime Minister emphasized that the whole world is connected with the Pran Pratistha and the omnipresence of Ram can be witnessed. He said that similar celebrations can be seen in many countries and the festival of Ayodhya has become a celebration of the global traditions of Ramayana. "Ram Lalla's prestige is the idea of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'", he added.

PM Modi underlined that it is not just the Pran Pratistha ceremony of Shri Ram's idol but also the consecration of the unwavering faith in Indian culture manifested in the form of Shri Ram. He said that is the embodiment of human values and the highest ideals, which is the



need of the hour of the entire world. The Prime Minister said that the resolutions of welfare for all have taken the shape of Ram temple today and it is not just a temple but India's vision, philosophy, and direction. "This is a temple of national consciousness in the form of Ram. Lord Ram is India's

for thousands of years. Ram had been guiding the world for thousands of years", PM Modi said.

The Prime Minister asked every Ram Bhakt to introspect about the path ahead after the realization of the grand Ram Mandir. "Today, I feel with

a pure heart that the cycle of time is changing. It is a happy coincidence that our generation has been chosen as the architect of this critical path." PM Modi underlined the importance of the current epoch and reiterated his line 'Yahi Samay Hai Sahi Samay Hai', This is the time, the right time. "We have to lay the foundation of India for the next one thousand years. Moving ahead from the temple, now all of us countrymen take an oath to build a strong, capable, grand and divine India from this very moment", the Prime Minister exhorted the countrymen. For this, he said, it is important that Ram's ideal should be there in the conscience of the nation.

The Prime Minister asked the countrymen to expand their consciousness from Dev to Desh, Ram to Rashtra - from deity to nation. He asked them to learn from Shri Hanuman's service, devotion and dedication.

"These feelings of devotion, service and dedication in every Indian will become the basis of a capable, grand and divine India", he said. The Prime Minister continued and said that the spirit behind Mata Shabri's trust that 'Ram will Come' in every Indian's heart will be the basis of Grand capable and divine India. Referring to the depth and originality of Ram's affection for Nishadraj shows that all are one and this feeling of oneness and cohesiveness will be the basis of capable, grand and divine India.

The Prime Minister pointed out that

there is no room for despair in the country today. Highlighting the story of the squirrel, the Prime Minister said that those considering themselves to be small and ordinary must remember the contributions of the squirrel and get rid of any hesitancy. He noted that every effort, big or small, has its strength and contribution. "The spirit of Sabka Prayas will become the basis of a strong, capable, grand and divine India. And this is the expansion of the consciousness of the country from God and the consciousness of the nation from Ram", the Prime Minister exclaimed.

Throwing light on the Jatayu's integrity who knew about his imminent defeat when he fought Ravan, the ruler of Lanka who possessed extreme knowledge and immense power, the Prime Minister said that the culmination of such duty is the basis of a capable and divine India. Shri Modi pledged to dedicate every moment of life to nation-building and said, "With Ram's work, Rashtra's work, every moment of time, every particle of the body will connect the dedication of Ram with the goal of dedication to the nation.

Continuing his theme of going beyond self, PM Modi said our worship of Bhagwan Ram should be for the entire creation, from 'I' to 'us'. Our efforts, he said, should be dedicated to the creation of a Viksit Bharat.

Referring to the ongoing Amrit Kaal and young demographics, the Prime Minister noted the perfect combination of factors for the nation's growth. The Prime Minister asked the young generation to take the support of their strong heritage and move ahead with confidence. "India will reach the goal of prosperity by following the path of both the purity of tradition and the infinity of modernity", the Prime Minister said.

The Prime Minister underlined that the future is dedicated to successes and accomplishments and the grand Ram Temple will be a witness to the progress and rise of India. "This grand Ram temple will become a witness to the rise of Viksit Bharat", the Prime Minister said. Drawing lessons from the temple, the Prime Minister emphasized that a goal can be achieved if it is justified and born out of collective and organized power. "This is India's time and India is going to move forward. After waiting for centuries we have reached here. We all have waited for this era, this period. Now we will not stop. We will continue to reach the heights of development", the Prime Minister concluded paying his obeisance at the feet of Ram Lalla and wishing the very best.

Governor of Uttar Pradesh, Smt Anandiben Patel, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Shri Yogi Adityanath, Sarsanghchalak of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Shri Mohan Bhagwat and President of Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Teertha Kshetra Trust, Shri Nritya Gopal Das were present on the occasion among others.



faith, foundation, idea, law, consciousness, thinking, prestige and glory. Ram is flow, Ram is effect. Ram is Neeti. Ram is eternal. Ram is continuity. Ram is Vibhu. Ram is all-pervading, the world, the universal soul", the Prime Minister said fervently. He said that the impact of Lord Ram's Pratishtha can be felt for thousands of years. Quoting Maharishi Valmiki, the Prime Minister said that Ram ruled the kingdom for ten thousand years which signifies the establishment of Ramrajya for thousands of years. "When Ram came in Treta Yug, Ramrajya was established



# I feel like luckiest person: Sculptor Yogiraj

**Ayodhya**

Mysuru-based sculptor Arun Yogiraj, who chiselled the 'Ram Lalla' idol consecrated in the newly constructed temple in Ayodhya, on Monday, says he considers himself the luckiest person on the earth and believes that its Lord Ram who chose him for the task. "I have always felt that Lord Ram has been shielding me and my family from all the bad times and I strongly believe that it is him, who chose me for the auspicious task," Yogiraj, who has received effusive praise for his work, said. A fifth-generation sculptor, he was among the invitees to the grand consecration ceremony here. "I spent sleepless nights working on the idol with precision but it was all worth it. I feel I am the luckiest person on the earth and



today is the best day of my life," an excited "I learnt the art of sculpting from my father. He would have been very proud to see my idol here today," he said. While it was a proud moment for him to witness the historic event in person, his family back in Mysuru witnessed the ceremony live on TV. "He (Yogiraj) had many sleepless nights thinking and concentrated on making the Ram Lalla idol. There were days when we hardly spoke, and he hardly gave time to the family. All this is now compensated by this great news," his wife Vijeta had said last week. "The stone was very hard, so hard that its pointed flake pricked into his eye and it was removed through an operation. Even during the pain he did not stop and continued with the work," she said. An

MBA from the University of Mysore, Yogiraj left the private sector job and returned to Mysuru to carry forward the family tradition.

## Time to bury bitter past, says RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat after Ram Temple inauguration in Ayodhya

**Ayodhya**

Moments after the Ram Temple inauguration in Ayodhya on Monday, the ruling BJP's ideological mentor RSS called for burial of past bitterness that marked the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute, which the Supreme Court closed in 2019 by ruling in favour of Hindu petitioners.

Speaking after the consecration ritual for which he joined Prime Minister Narendra Modi and UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in the temple's sanctum sanctorum, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat said, "Josh mein hosh ki baat karney ka kaam mujhe hi diya jaata hai...(I am often tasked with being the voice of reason amid excitement). In the remarks that followed, Bhagwat said it was time to "bid farewell to rancour and bitterness to transform India into a world leader".

"We will have to quit the habit of fighting over small issues. We will have to adopt the conduct that citizens displayed in Ram rajya. They lived by four principles of satya (truth), karuna (compassion), shuchita (discipline)



and tapa (penance). The thought that what I believe in alone is right is not correct. Others have a viewpoint too...We have to maintain patience and discipline..." he said, describing the Ram Temple as a symbol of new India that would rid the world of chaos and terming citizen duty the highest form of patriotism.

Bhagwat also mentioned the reason why Lord Rama was exiled for 14 years in the first place.

"The reason was family conflict. The Lord finally returned after ending unrest in the world. He has returned again today. This is a

golden day when we salute the memory of those who sacrificed their lives to bring the temple to fruition. But it is equally a day that gives us the message of duty, inherent to Ram rajya. Good conduct like those of people in Treta Yuga when Lord Rama ruled is essential to establish Ram rajya," Bhagwat said.

Earlier, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath also struck a note of conciliation saying "Ram Lalla's installation in Ayodhya heralds the rise of Ram rajya, which is based on the principles of non-discrimination and

## Army copters shower petals on Ram Temple in Ayodhya, Indian instruments render 'Mangal Dhwani'



**Ayodhya**

After preparations over many days, the consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya culminated on Monday with Army helicopters showering flower petals over the attendees and a grand musical morning resonating with religious fervour.

The musical event that started

at 10 am and continued for two hours was orchestrated by Yatindra Mishra who hails from the royal family of Ayodhya. As many as 50 musical instruments from across the country were part of a devotional 'Mangal Dhwani', a musical event that echoed during the consecration ceremony. Singers Shankar Mahadevan, Anuradha Paudwal and Sonu Nigam added a musical touch by performing 'Ram bhajan' at Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple ahead of the 'pran pratishtha' ceremony. The Indian instruments included 'pakhawaj', flute and 'dholak' from Uttar Pradesh, 'veena' from Karnataka, 'algoja' from Punjab, 'sundari' from Maharashtra, 'mardala' from Odisha; 'santoor' from Madhya Pradesh, 'pung' from Manipur, 'nagada' and 'kali' from Assam; and 'tambura' from Chhattisgarh. There was also 'shehnai' from Delhi, 'ravanahatha' from Rajasthan, 'shrikhol' and 'sarod' from West Bengal, 'ghatam' from Andhra Pradesh, 'sitar' from Jharkhand, 'santar' from Gujarat, 'pakhawaj' from Bihar, 'hudka' from Uttarakhand and 'mridangam' from Tamil Nadu. The star-studded event in Ayodhya drew celebrities from various fields, including Amitabh Bachchan, Rajinikanth, Ranbir Kapoor, Abhishek Bachchan, Vicky Kaushal, Katrina Kaif, Anupam Kher, Chiranjeevi, Alia Bhatt, Randeep Hooda, Kangana Ranaut, Madhur Bhandarkar, Jackie Shroff, Vivek Oberoi, Ram Charan, Ayushmann Khurrana, Rohit Shetty and many more. The guests were given bells to ring while the ritual was underway.



# Ram temple

MAHATMA Gandhi's beloved hymn, 'Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram, Patita Paavan Sita Ram...', reverberated through the precincts of the Ram temple in Ayodhya during the 'Pran Pratishtha' ceremony, which was led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The PM described the consecration of the Ram Lalla idol as an extraordinary and historic moment that would enrich Indian heritage and culture and take the country's development journey to new heights. It is, indeed, the fervent hope of the entire nation that this monumental occasion will mark the dawn of an era of peace and communal harmony.

Gandhi had envisaged an India where there would be no room for inequality, injustice and intolerance. He had visualised Ram Rajya not as 'Hindu Raj' but as the kingdom of God on earth, where the prince and the pauper had equal rights and even the lowliest citizen 'could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure'. For him, Ram and



Rahim were one and the same deity. 'My Hinduism teaches me to respect all religions,' Gandhi had said. Lord Ram's ideals of truth, honour and

righteousness are most relevant in this conflict-torn age. India has a long way to go before it can turn the Ram Rajya of Gandhi's dreams into reality. Prosperous coexistence of various communities is a must for a nation which projects itself as a global leader or Vishwaguru and aspires to become the world's third-largest economy by the end of this decade. India should not let hatred and bigotry stall its all-round growth. President Droupadi Murmu has described the Ayodhya event as the commencement of a new cycle in the nation's resurgence. The onus is on every Indian to ensure that this optimism is not misplaced. The fact that the consecration ceremony has taken place in the run-up to Republic Day and Gandhi's death anniversary should spur us to rededicate ourselves to the cause of protecting the Constitution that celebrates diversity and inclusivity.

// satyasya paramarṇ nidhānam //

We would like to hear from you. Please share your comments on [editor.acrossstate@gmail.com](mailto:editor.acrossstate@gmail.com)

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

-Walt Disney

## Biannual exams

### Aimed at reducing stress, rote learning

THE Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has taken the lead in making a provision for holding exams for Classes X and XII twice a year from the 2024-25 academic session. The first set of exams is proposed to be conducted in November-December and if some students think that they could have done better, they can take the exam in February-March to improve their performance, with the best scores being counted as the final result. This is in sync with the changes envisaged in the national curriculum framework as per the National Education Policy, 2020.

Having two options is expected to negate one adverse effect of the



present system: the stress and anxiety associated with a single, make-or-break exam. It is this pressure that has pushed many students to the brink and even forced some to end their life. The CBSE step is also intended to steer children away from rote learning and comprehensively assess their command of fundamental academic concepts and skills. Allowing students the flexibility to choose

their subjects rather than confining themselves to the traditional streams of science, commerce and humanities is another laudable reform.

This revamp of the school education system would be successful if it achieves its objectives and makes assessment and evaluation fair and equitable, bringing students from underprivileged sections of society on a par with their peers

from better-off families. Bridging the yawning gap between the two groups is imperative for the country to reap the demographic dividend. As the education framework ultimately shifts to a modular system for all classes, the problems faced by a large proportion of teenaged students, whose basic reading, writing and computing skills are poor, may also be addressed.

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## Daring mafia

### Stone crusher owners cock a snook at govt

Rather than acting as a deterrent, the Haryana government's action against owners of some stone crushers operating illegally in Yamunanagar — and, in all probability, elsewhere too — is proving to be counterproductive. The Haryana State Pollution Control Board (HSPCB) had sealed 75 screening plants and stone crushers for violating air and

continues to thrive.

This flagrant flouting of the rules, despite the ban imposed by the National Green Tribunal or the HSPCB and the verdicts pronounced by the courts against unlawful mining, calls for a swift crackdown on the culprits. Otherwise, the very purpose of deploying the government machinery to enforce mining

rules and regulations and punish those violating them will be defeated.

There is a bigger cost of the illegal crushing of stones and gravel and quarrying, which The Tribune has been regularly reporting

from across the state. Significantly, some hillocks of the Aravallis have been wiped out, irreparably impacting the ecology and biodiversity of the region. Residents of the areas in the vicinity of the polluting units are the worst sufferers as they are grappling with skin, respiratory and other diseases caused by contaminated air and water.

water pollution norms. But several of these units are back in business after breaking the seals. This not only shows the audacity of the erring miners but also smacks of political and administrative patronage. Last May, 89 stone crushers of Yamunanagar had been caught misusing the e-Ravana portal, which was set up to tackle the mafia, but the criminal nexus

WHAT was supposed to be a fun-filled picnic for students and teachers of a Vadodara school ended in tragedy when an overloaded boat carrying them capsized in Harni lake near the Gujarat city. Twelve children and two teachers met a watery grave. Lamentably, this was a classic case of a tragedy waiting to happen. Safety norms were glaringly ignored and negligence was apparent all around — whether on the part of the boat contractor or the law enforcement agencies. The school authorities, too, seem to have overlooked the safety aspect of the boat ride.

The 14-seater boat had around 30 persons on board, and most of them were not wearing life jackets. But for some brave locals who jumped into the lake to rescue the victims, the toll would have been much higher. The authorities have pressed the routine levers: a probe has been ordered to fix responsibility for the mishap and three persons have been

arrested.

How many more lives would be lost before systems are put in place to prevent such fatal lapses? Just last May, a fishing boat had sunk in Kerala under similar circumstances. With the boat packed to double its capacity, the tragedy had left 22 local tourists, including 15 children, dead. That the boat had two decks revealed blatant flouting of safety rules. Though

## Weather warfare

### Precise data can help lay bare Chinese role

DEFENCE Minister Rajnath Singh did not name China in his striking observation that climate change in India's Himalayan border regions may not be just weather-related but could be an outcome of enemy forces taming the elements. However, the allusion to Beijing is apparent. The possibility of China weaponising weather modification

activities adds to the apprehensions. During the 2022 Winter Olympics, it exhibited capabilities to disperse storms, unleash rain and engineer a blue sky. The Beijing Weather Modification Office, with about 37,000 employees, is tasked with exploiting space conditions for a variety of purposes. China has spent billions of dollars on what it claims

are efforts to manipulate the weather to protect agriculture. However, it's the impact of cloud seeding beyond its borders that raises concerns. The consequent disruption of monsoon patterns can wreak havoc. The potential to alter weather conditions poses a huge risk to national security.

The Modi government's border infrastructure push has been commendable. The minister's remark that people living near the borders are no

less than soldiers reflects a policy shift. It aims to stop large-scale migration from border areas by ensuring that the benefits of India's growth story reach the last mile. That said, the spectre of China's weather-engineering cannot become a ruse to hide the role of man-made factors in natural disasters in the hill states. Climate change is for real, and reckless fiddling with nature needs to be dealt with sternly.

for strategic gains opens a new front. According to the minister, serious efforts are underway to gauge why Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Ladakh are increasingly being lashed by natural disasters, though the Himalayas extend to other states and UTs as well. It would be prudent to gather precise data through global collaboration to back the claims. India must also ramp up its technological knowhow.

The opacity that surrounds China's



## Boat tragedy

### Glaring lapses in enforcing safety norms

cruise tourism is thriving in the state's waterways, it remains largely

unregulated. Every mishap leads to a clamour for exemplary action against the culprits and the need to enforce the norms strictly. But things get watered down as the wheels of justice move painfully slowly.





# Antibiotic overuse

## Stakeholders must adhere to guidelines

RED-FLAGGING antimicrobial resistance (AMR) as one of the leading public health threats globally, India's Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) has asked doctors and pharmacists to ensure judicious use of drugs and follow prescription guidelines. Doctors have been instructed to mention 'indication, reason and justification' while prescribing antimicrobials, which include antibiotics, antivirals, antifungals and antiparasitics. Antibiotics are included in Schedule H and H1 of the Drugs Rules, 1945; as per the stipulation, they ought to be sold only on prescription by a registered medical practitioner. However, due to lax enforcement of the rules and widespread lack of awareness, these drugs are often sold over the counter without a prescription.

Misuse and overuse of antimicrobials contribute significantly to the development of drug-resistant pathogens.



Bacterial AMR was responsible for 1.27 million global deaths in 2019, while 4.95 million deaths were associated with drug-resistant infections. The DGHS has emphasised that AMR threatens effective prevention and treatment of infections

caused by resistant microbes, resulting in prolonged illness and greater risk of death. In 2016, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare had launched the 'red line' awareness campaign on AMR, asking people not to buy or

use medicines (including antibiotics) marked with a red vertical line without a prescription. A UK study, whose report was released later that year, had lauded India for this initiative and recommended that the labelling for antibiotic packaging could be improved, if required, and then expanded globally. It is vital to assess how the campaign has fared over the past eight years and plug the loopholes that are impeding its efficacy. Various stakeholders — doctors, pharmacists, pharma companies and customers — must adhere to the guidelines and rules in order to curb indiscriminate prescription, sale and use of antibiotics. At the same time, the AMR surveillance and research network, established by the Indian Council of Medical Research, needs to be strengthened to make India better prepared to deal with AMR-induced health hazards.

## Deepfake crisis

### Hold creators and disseminators accountable

THE hardening of the Centre's stance on deepfakes and misinformation powered by artificial intelligence is reassuring. Plans are afoot to notify new rules following the lukewarm response of social media platforms to the advisory to crack down with urgency on doctored videos. Victims will be

gaming app.

There is growing concern over the prospect of deepfake misuse and chatbots impersonating candidates during the ensuing Lok Sabha elections. It's essential to put a stringent regulatory framework in place. New rules equating the peddling of deepfake content with forgery puts the onus on social media platforms to tackle the menace with all the seriousness it deserves. It's a timely warning about the legal consequences of inaction or a casual approach to preventing harm.

Deepfakes use AI algorithms to generate videos, audio recordings or images that look and sound real. They blur the line between reality and fabrication by creating highly convincing fake content. Deepfakes also pose a threat to privacy. It is incumbent upon the regulators and the industry players to join forces to effectively address the issues involved. The task is tough, right from developing robust detection techniques to promoting proactive reporting and raising awareness. The key is to hold both the creators and disseminators accountable.



able to file criminal cases, as also anyone with the knowledge of the content being deepfake. Platforms found in violation of rules could be blocked. Penalties will be decided as per criminal law. There have been a slew of deepfake incidents targeting prominent individuals in recent months. Cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar, the latest victim, had to call out as fake an AI-generated video showing him promoting a

## Iran-Pakistan faceoff

### Both nations at fault for backing terrorists

IRANIAN missile strikes on terror bases in Balochistan have triggered a fierce retaliation from Pakistan, which targeted purported terrorist hideouts in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province on Thursday. The Inter-Services Public Relations, the Pakistan military's media wing, stated that hideouts used by two Baloch terrorist organisations were 'successfully struck in an intelligence-based operation'. It said Pakistan's armed forces were in a perpetual state of readiness to ensure the safety of its citizens against acts of terrorism. According to Pakistan's Foreign Office, Islamabad has been sharing its concerns with Tehran about the havens for Pakistan-origin terrorists in Iran, but to no avail.

The tit-for-tat attacks are a new low in the relations between Iran and Pakistan. Ironically, both nations — notorious for harbouring or supporting terrorists as well as militia groups — are playing the victim card. They are desperately trying to make the international community buy their argument that

they are more sinned against than sinning. Undoubtedly, Iran and Pakistan have been scorched by terrorism at times, but the onus is on them to first set their own house in order. Collaborative efforts are needed to fight the 'snakes in the backyard', which have started biting the very hand that fed them.

Terrorism is a global threat requiring a multilateral, multipronged strategy. Unilateral actions by Tehran and Islamabad are adding fuel to the raging fire in West Asia. The wider the conflagration spreads, the worse it will get for peace and economic progress in the region. Commenting on the Iranian strikes, India has said that it understands actions that countries take in self-defence, while reasserting its 'uncompromising position of zero tolerance' to terrorism. New Delhi should make it a point to condemn terrorism unequivocally, no matter which country sponsors it. At the same time, it is vital to emphasise the importance of diplomatic parleys for defusing tensions.



# Sony terminates \$10-bn merger pact with Zee

New Delhi

Sony Group Corp on Monday said it is calling off a \$10 billion merger of its India unit with Zee Entertainment, following a stalemate over who will lead the merged entity.

The entertainment giant sent a termination notice to Zee on the deal, which was announced more than two years ago, and is seeking \$90 million as break-up fee for violating the terms of the merger pact and “invoking arbitration”.

In a stock exchange filing on the issue, Zee on its part denied all claims made by Sony and said it is exploring legal remedies. “Zee has displayed utmost commitment towards the merger by undertaking several permanent and irreversible steps, resulting in one time and recurring costs for Zee,” it said.



A standoff over leadership is said to be the reason for the deal being called off. Sony had resisted demand by Zee chief executive Punit Goenka, who was investigated by market regulator SEBI over fraud allegations, to stay on after the merger.

The deal was seen as crucial for both companies for survival in the world's fastest-growing large economy.

“Sony Pictures Networks

India Pvt Ltd (now known as Culver Max Entertainment Limited), a wholly owned subsidiary of Sony Group Corporation, today issued a notice terminating the definitive agreements entered into by SPNI and Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd. relating to the merger of ZEEL with and into SPNI, which was previously announced on December 22, 2021,” the Japanese firm said.

# TaMo to start EV output at Sanand



New Delhi

Tata Motors plans to commence production of electric vehicles at the Sanand plant, acquired from Ford India, from April this year, as per a top company official. Tata Passenger Electric Mobility Ltd, a unit of Tata Motors, acquired the facility from Ford India for Rs 725.7 crore in January last year. “We are planning to commence electric vehicle production at Sanand with Nexon EV from April,” Tata Motors Passenger Vehicles MD Shailesh Chandra said. The company has already commenced production of internal combustion engine-powered versions of the Nexon at the manufacturing plant with an installed capacity of 3 lakh units per annum.

It can be further scaled up to 4.2 lakh units per annum. Chandra said.

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

New Delhi

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

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

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

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

The study involved using computational models to predict the



physical work capacity—defined as ‘an individual’s work capacity relative to an environment without any heat stress’—under different predicted climate change scenarios.

The models, developed by Loughborough University in UK, are based on data from more than 700 heat stress trials—which involved observing people working in a wide

range of temperatures and humidities, and differing weather conditions, including sunshine and wind.

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

Reductions in capacity mean

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

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

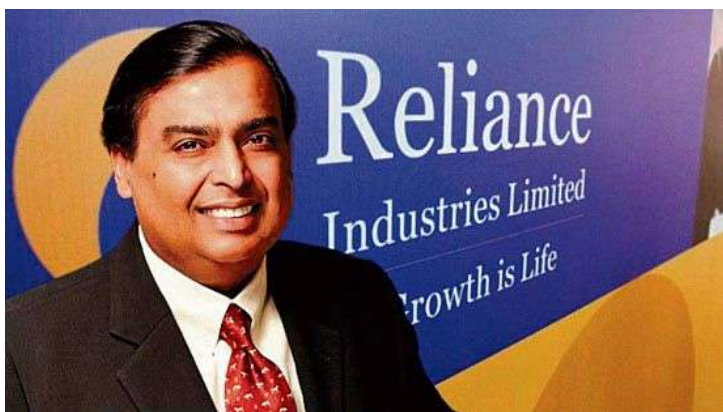
The researchers also considered potential adaptation to mitigate the impact of climate change on agricultural workers.

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

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



## Reliance Q3 profit rises 9.3% to Rs 17,265 crore



### New Delhi

Reliance Industries on Friday reported a 9.3% rise in its third quarter net profit as a planned maintenance-induced weakness in oil business earnings was offset by stability in retail and telecom verticals.

The consolidated net profit of Rs 17,265 crore, or Rs 25.52 per share, in October-December

— the third quarter of the current 2023-24 fiscal — was 9.3% higher than Rs 15,792 crore, or Rs 23.19 a share, earning a year ago.

Meanwhile, Reliance Jio posted an 11.6% rise in net profit to Rs 5,445 crore in Q3. Profits from the retail business climbed 40% to Rs 3,165 crore as store count rose to 18,774 from 18,650.

## Paytm's Q3 loss narrows to Rs 221 crore

### New Delhi

Fintech company One97 Communications, which operates under the Paytm brand, on Friday reported narrowing of losses to Rs 221.7 crore for the October-December (third) quarter, according to a filing.

The losses stood at Rs 392.1 crore in the year-ago period.

The revenue from operations jumped over 38% year-on-year to Rs 2,850.5 crore in the third quarter of FY2023-24.

## World must consider trust-shoring to reap biz benefits- -Vaishnaw

### Davos

Asserting that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made India the most-trusted country in the world, senior Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on Thursday said global businesses should consider "trust-shoring" to reap benefits of the resilience and steady high growth of the Indian economy.

In an interview at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, 2024, Vaishnaw said India will deliver 6-8 per cent economic growth



for at least 10 years, given the strong foundation laid by PM Modi and there would be opportunities for everyone across all sectors. "In my meetings with business leaders, investment bankers, tech CEOs and other leaders, one common factor that has come out very clearly is the resilience of the Indian economy and people want to know more about it. I had discussions with several top investment bankers and global CEOs on how PM Modi has given resilience to the Indian economy and how it has been given a stead growth path," he said.

## PM Modi inaugurates Boeing's global engineering & technology centre campus near Bengaluru

### Bengaluru

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday inaugurated Boeing's new global engineering and technology centre campus.

Built at a cost of Rs 1,600 crore, the 43-acre state-of-the-art Boeing India Engineering and Technology Centre (BIETC) campus is the planemaker's largest such investment outside the US, the company said.

The campus at Hightech Defence and Aerospace Park in Devanahalli on the city outskirts will become a cornerstone for partnerships with the vibrant startups, private and government ecosystem in India, and will help develop next-generation products and services for the global aerospace and defence industry, Boeing said. The Prime Minister also launched the Boeing Sukanya Programme that the company said aims to support the entry of more girl children from across India into the country's growing aviation sector.

The programme will provide opportunities for girls and women across India to learn critical skills in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields and train for jobs in the aviation sector, a company

statement said.

For young girls, the programme will create STEM Labs at 150 planned locations to help spark interest in STEM careers. It will also provide scholarships to women who are training to be pilots. Investments will support flight training curriculum, obtaining certifications, funding for simulator training, and career development programmes, Boeing said. "We are honored and privileged to support Prime Minister Modi's transformative vision for India, and we are grateful to have him dedicate the Boeing campus to foster aerospace innovation in the country," said David L. Calhoun, Boeing president and CEO.

Over the years, the statement said, Boeing India has grown its team in engineering and R&D talent to the largest number of employees in any country outside the United States, with more than 6,000 as of December 2023.

Karnataka Governor Thawarchand Gehlot, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, Leader of the Opposition in Legislative Assembly R Ashoka, and Boeing Chief Operating Officer, Stephanie Pope, were among those present on the occasion.

## India needs 2,840 new aircraft, 41,000 pilots in next 20 years: Airbus forecast

### Hyderabad

India will need 2,840 new aircraft and 41,000 pilots as well as 47,000 technical staff in the next 20 years, Rémi Maillard, President and Managing Director of Airbus India and South Asia said on Thursday.

Addressing a press conference on the sidelines of the aviation conclave and exhibition, Wings India 2024, Maillard said Airbus will double its sourcing from India to USD 1.5 billion by the end of the decade from the existing USD 750 million.

He said last year Airbus got orders for 750 aircraft and delivered 75 units to Indian carriers -- 41 to Indigo, 19 to Air India, 14 to Vistara and one to Go



First.

"India is a force that will power global aviation over the next decades...the forecast is that India will require 2,840 new aircraft over the next 20 years to serve the needs of its growing aviation market," he said.

He further said that the A350 aircraft is the catalyst of the revolution in international travel in India and already six of those planes were delivered to Air India last year.

Maillard predicted that in the next 20 years India will remain the fastest growing economy in the world with 6.2 per cent growth annually.



## Akasa Air says 'confident' about Boeing, orders 150 MAX aircraft



### HYDERABAD

India's Akasa Air said on Thursday it had ordered 150 Boeing 737 MAX narrowbody planes, showcasing its confidence in the troubled planemaker as the budget carrier seeks to fly to more destinations at home and abroad.

This is the first major order announcement for Boeing's MAX jetliner programme since a mid-air cabin panel blowout in the United States early this month, although Akasa's order does not include the 737 Max 9 version which is in the spotlight after the incident.

The order was announced at the "Wings India" air show in the southern city of Hyderabad,

which has attracted planemakers, airlines and government officials as they make the most of India's travel boom, with a greater focus on international routes. "We feel very confident about the aircraft type that we have ... even seeing Boeing's commitment to the way they've handled this problem," Priya Mehra, Akasa's chief legal, regulatory and strategic relations officer, said.

Akasa's order for 737 MAX 10 and MAX 8-200 does not include the MAX 9 version, which has been largely grounded over the Alaska Airlines cabin panel blowout incident. Mehra said the airline was not looking at diversifying its fleet.

## India to grow at 7% in FY25, inflation to ease further: RBI



### Davos

Indian economy should record a growth rate of 7% in the next fiscal and inflation is likely to ease further, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das said on Wednesday.

He also credited the government for structural reforms undertaken in recent years, saying they have boosted the medium and long-term growth prospects of the Indian economy. He said amid a challenging global macroeconomic environment, India presents a picture of growth and stability.

Speaking at a CII session on 'High growth, low risk: The India story' here during

the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, Das said recent information on the global economic front has been reassuring with inflation falling, though growth remains low.

"Chances of soft landing have improved and markets have reacted positively. However, geopolitical risks and climate risks remain matters of concern," he said.

The RBI Governor said the real GDP growth in India is expected at 7.2% this year.

"With strong domestic demand, India remains the fastest growing major economy... We have emerged stronger out of the recent spate of global shocks,"

he noted.

Das further said external balance is comfortably manageable with robust foreign exchange reserves.

"Headline inflation has substantially eased from highs of summer of 2022. This shows that our monetary policy action and rebalancing of liquidity is working.

"Core inflation has also gradually and steadily moderated, while proactive supply-side interventions by the government have also played a key role in handling food price shocks," he said.

## Tata Motors drives in Punch EV at Rs 11 lakh

### Chandigarh

With the launch of Punch EV — mid-sized electric SUV — today, Tata Motors aims to catapult the Indian electric vehicle (EV) market and leapfrog India into an era of pure EVs.

Punch EV is the first vehicle based on its recently introduced, advanced Pure EV architecture acti.ev. Launched with a starting price of Rs 10.99 lakh (ex-showroom, introductory), it has five variants with the top-end variant priced at Rs 14.49 lakh. "With Punch on new EV infrastructure, we will compete with over 20 internal combustion

engine (ICE) models placed in the same price bracket. We expect the sales from tier-III and tier-IV



cities will get a fillip with this launch," said Vivek Srivatsa, chief commercial officer, Tata Passenger Electric Mobility Ltd. Currently, tier-I and tier-II cities

contribute 70% of the total EV sales for the company. At present, the automaker has 73% share in the EV segment. Overall, EVs constitute 2% of the total passenger vehicle sales in India.

Shailesh Chandra, MD, Tata Motors Passenger Vehicles Limited & Tata Passenger Electric Mobility Ltd., said, "With the launch of the Punch.ev, we are taking our commitment to an all-new level by delivering a versatile EV that aligns with the evolving customer needs."

It comes with two battery options — 25 and 35 kWh — providing a range of 315 km and 421 km, respectively.

## Google Pay signs pact with NPCI to expand UPI payments outside India

### New Delhi

Google India Digital Services and NPCI International Payments Ltd (NIPL) have signed an agreement that will help expand UPI payments to countries outside India. The memorandum of understanding (MoU) will enable Indian travellers to make payments in other countries via Google Pay (also known as GPay), eliminating the need to carry cash or resort to international payment gateways. "The MoU has three key objectives. First, it seeks to broaden the use of UPI payments for travellers outside of India, enabling them

to conveniently make transactions abroad. Second, the MoU intends to assist in establishing UPI-like digital payment systems in other countries, providing a model for seamless financial transactions. Lastly, it focuses on easing the process of remittances between countries by utilizing the UPI infrastructure, thereby simplifying cross-border financial exchanges," Google Pay said in a statement. The deal focuses on easing the process of remittances between countries by utilising the UPI infrastructure, thereby simplifying cross-border financial exchanges.



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

## PART I

Emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) will be strategically pivotal in the twenty-first century. The rapid advancement of frontier technologies, including AI, virtual reality (VR), and brain-computer interfaces (BCIs), presents a pressing challenge for governments worldwide. The accelerating pace of technological innovation, the chaotic and sensationalist marketing strategies aimed by AI developers at non-experts, and the potentially asymmetric cross-sector impact of emerging tech platforms demand proactive policy responses and robust sociopolitical discussions. However, policymakers and analysts confront a unique difficulty: engaging in conversations about emerging technologies and platforms that are constantly evolving.

This issue came to the fore in 2017 during discussions on AI policy at the European Parliament. Following talks on possible near-future applications of AI in one of the world's first AI policy documents, the European Parliament adopted its Civil Law Rules for Robotics. The discussions opened with various references to science fiction, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Czech author Karel Capek's coinage of the term 'robot' in 1921, and the three laws of robotics posited in Isaac Asimov's 1943 short story *Runaround*. During the discussion, the Parliament requested the European Commission to submit a proposal for a directive on civil law rules for robots and "creating a specific legal status for robots in the long run". The request was seemingly made under the assumption that the speculated robot workers would be operating on an AI framework that could potentially afford them some form of sentience, thus conflating robots with AI. In another instance, the Parliament recommended that Asimov's three laws of robotics "must be regarded as being directed at the designers, producers, and operators of robots, including robots assigned with built-in autonomy and self-learning." Six years later, no sentient robots or robust AI frameworks have been developed, and neither are there any expectations for them to emerge in the near future, except in science fiction. The European Parliament discussion highlighted the influence of cultural narratives about

frontier technologies on attempts at anticipatory governance. This brief argues that due to their influence on the techno-cultural gestalt, science fiction narratives can be used to inform policy frameworks for emerging technologies.

The relevance of science fiction in socio-political discourse is likely to increase due to the exponential rate of technological growth and the wide-ranging opinions regarding humankind's



technological future. On one hand, researchers in the field argue that the dream of artificial general intelligence or superintelligent AI will never be achieved. Some disagree, like computer scientist Geoffrey Hinton (winner of the 2018 Turing Award[a] and often referred to as the godfather of AI), who left his position at Google, citing concerns about the risks of speedy AI development. Furthermore, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak recently stated that mitigating the threat of human extinction caused by AI needs to be a global priority alongside pandemics and war. Between these two extremes, recent years have seen unprecedented technological growth with large language model (LLM) text-generation platforms like GPT-4 capturing the world's attention, image-generation AI applications like DALL-E and Midjourney, and the demonstration of real-time photorealistic social interactions in Mark Zuckerberg's Metaverse. Moreover, industry leaders already indicate the high likelihood

of AI platforms becoming more autonomous and capable agents in the global economy within the next decade. The convergence of technologists and policymakers on the issue of regulating frontier technologies highlights the need to analyse them critically to anticipate future trajectories.

There is a growing realisation in policy circles that the range and speed at which new tech platforms are emerging

makes it exceedingly difficult to distinguish scientific speculations from science fiction expectations. Additionally, the rate of technological innovation has caused alarm in various sectors of the global economy as policymakers and technologists try to grapple

with their implications. For instance, in response to the developments in generative AI over the past year, the US Congress held its first AI regulation forum in September 2023, which was attended by the CEOs of Tesla, Google, Microsoft, and Meta, among others. Furthermore, in October 2023, US President Joe Biden issued an executive order to ensure the development of safe and responsible AI platforms using a risk-based approach. However, China is arguably leading the race towards governance of AI and frontier technologies. Following the near-constant growth of computing technologies, in 2021, the Chinese government published regulations on recommendation algorithms in social media and search engines. In 2022, rules for synthetically generated content were released, followed by draft regulations on generative AI platforms akin to ChatGPT in 2023. In addition to conventional policymaking frameworks, this brief asserts that cultural products,

particularly science fiction narratives deeply embedded in tech culture or "engineering culture," can serve as invaluable conceptual sandboxes to stimulate and shape sociopolitical dialogues concerning the trajectory of technological innovation globally.

As a genre, science fiction has a rich history of envisioning and reflecting upon emerging technologies while influencing societal perceptions and policy considerations. Science fiction, often perceived as a realm of exaggerated and sensationalised technological capabilities, is pivotal in elucidating the latent risks and biases inherent in evolving technologies by extrapolating various forms of their implementation in the future. This genre's importance is exemplified in George Orwell's *1984*, which, despite predating the technological feasibility of a panopticon-like surveillance state, has become a globally recognised metaphor warning against government overreach. Similarly, the portrayal of AI in popular media, notably the Skynet from the *Terminator* film franchise, has ingrained the notion of a machine-dominated future in the public consciousness. Indeed, the concept has contributed to ongoing activism to regulate the development of autonomous weapon platforms. While the idea of a global AI uprising remains as speculative as it was in the 1980s, its enduring presence in the cultural zeitgeist underscores the criticality of narratives in developing technological frameworks. Such science fiction narratives are crucial as they "are central to the understanding of our world and its reconfiguration, because stories, imaginations, epistemologies and materialities are intimately linked." These compelling narratives not only captivate but also shed light on the long-term socio-cultural and ethical implications of technologies in development, thereby underscoring the genre's contribution to policy discourse. To support this argument, this brief explores science fiction's unique role in facilitating policy decisions by examining its impact on the conceptualisation of technologies under development.

*To be Contd.*



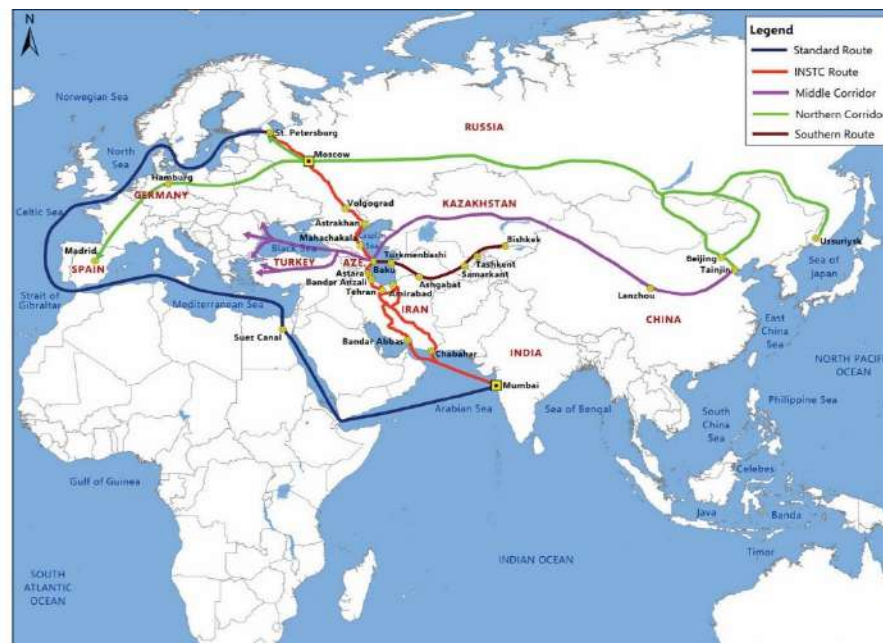
# Exploring Prospects for India-Azerbaijan Ties Through Connectivity Projects

The modern India-Azerbaijan relationship is built on cultural and economic ties that materialised via the ancient Silk Route. Evidence of this history is seen at the Ateshgah fire temple near Baku, an 18th-century monument with wall inscriptions in Devanagari and Gurmukhi and the 14th-century Multani Caravanserai in the town of Icherisheher in the oldest inhabited part of Baku. However, rivalry between Britain and the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century (while India was still under British rule and Azerbaijan was a Soviet state) weakened relations between India and Azerbaijan. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, India established ties with the newly independent countries in the Caucasus region through diplomatic efforts. India was among the first countries to recognise Azerbaijan after its independence in December 1991, establishing diplomatic ties in February 1992. In June 1998, the two countries signed an agreement on economic and technical cooperation, and in April 2007, they signed a deal to establish the India-Azerbaijan Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation. This allowed India to establish a stronger and more meaningful relationship with Azerbaijan, creating new opportunities for cooperation and mutual benefit. However, in recent decades, China's influence in Eurasia and hostility between India and Pakistan have impeded India's attempts to establish direct connectivity for strong trade and economic relations with the region.

Consequently, India has pursued certain connectivity projects to overcome the impediments to direct connectivity and revive its age-old relationship with the Caucasus region. In 2002, India, Russia, and Iran signed an intergovernmental agreement to construct the 7,200-km long International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The INSTC is a multimodal transport route that includes sea, railways, and road links to connect Mumbai (India) to Saint Petersburg (Russia) via Iran. India also invested heavily in the Chabahar Port in the Iranian province of Sistan-Balochistan. [6] However, these initiatives faced delays due to investment challenges after renewed US sanctions on Iran, inter-regional disputes, and bureaucratic hurdles for certain projects (such as the 628 km-long Chabahar-Zahedan railway line and 164 km Rasth-Astara railway line). Still, in July 2022, the INSTC

recorded its first shipment from Russia's Astrakhan Port to India's Jawaharlal Nehru Port.

Azerbaijan became part of INSTC in 2005, and its well-developed railways and a strategic seaport in Baku paved the way for the Western Route of INSTC that runs west of the Caspian Sea. The Western Route links the Iranian ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas in the Arabian Sea to the vast railway networks in Eurasia, especially with the Baku-Tbilisi-Batumi or the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars transnational rail connections constructed under Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR, sometimes also called the 'Middle Corridor'). The TITR is also a multimodal route that enhances connectivity between Asia and Europe and spans Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the South Caucasus. This



makes the Western Corridor of INSTC via Azerbaijan more economical and strategic for India. Additionally, the impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2021 Suez Canal blockade have highlighted the need for new transport corridors and connectivity projects between the whole of Eurasia (encompassing all of Europe and Asia, a whopping 54.76 million square kilometres and home to about 60 percent of the world's population). At the same time, India's robust economy needs connectivity to the vast Eurasian markets for reliable, resilient, and diversified supply chains. Improving connectivity between India and the larger Eurasia region is crucial for fostering regional stability and facilitating economic growth for the countries involved.

This brief explores how the

INSTC's Western Route and TITR will enhance the India-Azerbaijan economic relationship and give New Delhi the opportunity for more reliable connectivity to Eurasia and Europe.

**Azerbaijan's Advantage: At the Crossroads of Connectivity**

Located at the intersection between the East and West, Azerbaijan is gaining importance as a critical transit country along the Western Route of the INSTC. Azerbaijan has also invested heavily in upgrading its transportation infrastructure, especially its railways. Its railway infrastructure includes 4,286 km of rail track, 60 percent of which is electrified and 38 percent double-track, showcasing the country's commitment to enhancing its transportation capabilities. Between 2001 and 2016, Baku invested US\$1.2 billion [14] towards modernising the rail network along the INSTC and

giving the Central Asian Republics (CARs) access to the Arabian Sea and Indian ports. Construction of the Eastern Route began in 2009 following a trilateral agreement in 2007, with the Islamic Development Bank contributing US\$370 million of the total cost of around US\$1.4 billion.

The INSTC's Western Route connects India's Jawaharlal Nehru Port to Iran and Azerbaijan, spanning the western coast of the Caspian Sea and covering a distance of approximately 5,100 km from the Russian-Finnish border to the port of Bandar Abbas in Iran. The Western Route is not only the shortest but also connects the most populous provinces of Russia and Iran. The project gained traction in 2016 when Azerbaijan agreed with Russia and Iran to construct a railway line between the three nations. In 2017, they decided to lower tariffs to promote cross-border trade via the INSTC. In the same year, the Asian Development Bank granted a US\$400 million loan to modernise Azerbaijan's railway infrastructure, US\$250 million of which was spent on repairing the 166-km double-line main track that connects the country to Russia and Iran. Additionally, in 2022, Azerbaijan received US\$9.3 million in technical support from the Asian Development Bank to improve its sustainable transportation, specifically railways.

Azerbaijan also invested US\$10 million in building a 10-km cross-border railway line between Astara (Iran) and Astara (Azerbaijan). Azerbaijan's national railroad operator also signed a 25-year agreement with Iran to operate a 35-hectare freight transshipment facility within the Iranian border. In March 2019, Iran completed and inaugurated the Qazvin-Rasht railway line, spanning 175 km along the Western Route. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, cargo transit between Iran and Azerbaijan increased to 480,000 tonnes in 2020, with bilateral trade amounting to US\$339 million. In January 2021, the two countries signed a railroad cooperation agreement to increase cargo volume to two million tonnes annually. The volume of rail transportation along the INSTC increased by over 40 percent in the first five months of 2023 compared to the same period in 2022. Even though certain projects are still incomplete or under construction, most of the volume was transported through the Western Route

TITR to ensure it is well-positioned to serve as a hub for north-south and east-west trade.

**INSTC's Western Route**

The INSTC, initially proposed in September 2000 by Iran, Russia, and India, has now been ratified by 13 countries. The INSTC includes sea routes and rail and road links, connecting India to the whole of Eurasia. The Eastern Route of the INSTC, also known as the KTI corridor, connects Russia and India and runs through Iran, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, stretching about 6,100 km from the Russian-Finnish border to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. The route also connects Uzen in Kazakhstan with Gyzylgaya, Bereket, and Etrek in Turkmenistan, and ends at Gorgan in the Iranian province of Golestan,



# Deepening economic crisis in Nepal

Even though Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal recently painted a rosy picture of the Nepalese economy based on some positive trends in the hydropower sector, foreign exchange reserve and increased inflow of foreign tourists in the country, the people hardly feel their impact in their day-to-day life. The country is facing a severe economic crisis as agricultural and industrial production is falling, the trade deficit along with the unemployment problem is growing, the stock market is tumbling, the real estate business is sputtering, and restaurants and hotels apart from several other business activities are declining. On top of this, the inflation rate of 8.19 percent is fast eroding the purchasing power of the people.

The agricultural sector, the major driving force of the economy, is in trouble. The country that exported rice has started importing it for some years. In 2021-22, Nepal imported 1.4 million tonnes of rice from India worth US\$473.43 million. Later, India imposed a ban on exports of non-basmati white rice to Nepal along with other countries on 20 July 2023, but after some time it allowed Nepal to import 95,000 tonnes of non-basmati rice.

The country is facing a severe economic crisis as agricultural and industrial production is falling, the trade deficit along with the unemployment problem is growing, the stock market is tumbling, the real estate business is sputtering, and restaurants and hotels apart from several other business activities are declining.

Industries are either getting closed or are running far below their capacity. The cement industry, for example, which is one of the prime industries in Nepal is running below 30 percent of its capacity. Of late, the Government of Nepal has given certain incentives to the export industries. It approved a new customs bill that waives customs duty to the export industries on the import of industrial raw materials. This bill also makes provision for tax exemptions on fuel consumed on international flights, aircraft, spare parts, equipment and in-flight food and beverages. It is, however, not known how such provisions would address the problems in the industrial sector.

On account of the lower demand for credits, the profits of the Nepalese commercial banks dropped by 18.61 percent to INR 8.41 billion during the first three months of 2023-24. Several banks have been merged to save them from liquidation. In such a situation, to reassure the general public about the safety of their deposits, Nepal Rastra



Bank, the country's central bank, has made a provision whereby the banks and financial institutions would have to deposit certain amounts in the Deposit and Credit Guarantee Fund. Such a step is intended to ensure that in the case of a bank or financial institution facing liquidation, the Deposit and Credit Guarantee Fund would cover the losses of the depositor up to the amount of INR 312,500.

Furthermore, Nepal's exports as compared to the imports continue to decline year by year. Between mid-July to mid-December, Nepal exported goods amounting to INR 39.5 billion and imported goods worth INR 401.37 billion, which created a trade deficit of INR 361.87 billion. The exports formed merely 8.96 percent of Nepal's overall trade.

To reassure the general public about the safety of their deposits, Nepal Rastra Bank, the country's central bank, has made a provision whereby the banks and financial institutions would have to deposit certain amounts in the Deposit and Credit Guarantee Fund.

Besides, the Nepali rupee is gradually losing its value against the US dollar. In the 2022-23 fiscal year, one US dollar was equivalent to NRs. 128 (INR 80.0) on July 17, 2022, which shot up to NRs. 131.68 (IRs. 82.3) on 16 July 2023. Due to this change in the exchange rate between the US dollar and

the Nepalese rupees, Nepal incurred a foreign exchange loss worth INR 37.5 billion in the fiscal year 2022-23 as the country had to pay more to foreign creditors in domestic currency.

Over and above, the Nepalese youth, including the women are fleeing from the country in the same way the bees sometimes have to leave their hives when they develop the feeling of insecurity. Over a million young people are fleeing the country each year in search of job opportunities in foreign countries. Many of the youth are even forced to work in foreign countries in areas in which their life is endangered. Recently, of the 200 Nepalese youth who joined the Russian army as mercenaries against the policy of the Nepal government, 7 youths were killed and about 100 are feared missing and injured in their fight with the Ukrainian armies.

The exodus of youth on a large scale to foreign countries has resulted in a decline in the demand for goods and services, like smartphones, restaurants, alcohol, food, and beverages, bikes and

other items in the country. This not only eroded the trust of the private sector in the government, but it also negatively affected the investment climate in the country. Observing some of these developments in the Nepalese economy, Chandra Prasad Dhakal, President of the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) said "Nepal's economy is in a sensitive mode...The shutters of small and medium businesses have been closed. Agricultural products are losing more markets. Demand is shrinking. There is extreme frustration among businessmen and they are planning to escape instead of investing."

Observing some of these developments in the Nepalese economy, Chandra Prasad Dhakal, President of the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) said "Nepal's economy is in a sensitive mode..."

Recently, the World Bank has projected that Nepal's economic growth in the current fiscal year is not likely to exceed 3.9 per cent against the government's target of achieving six per cent economic growth. However, experts believe that the government will not be able to achieve even a 3-percent growth rate this fiscal year because the agricultural sector, the major driver of economic growth, is not responding positively.

Amidst this economic crisis, Nepal is facing the risk of getting greylisted by FATF, the global anti-corruption body. It has found that the country is not so serious about checking money laundering and terrorist financing. Also, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned Nepal about a severe financial crisis if due measures are not taken to improve the economy.

Before it is too late, Nepal needs to restructure its economy on a war footing to ensure that job opportunities are created, domestic production of goods and services is boosted, the trade deficit is reduced, and the purchasing power of people is increased through business promotion. But it is yet to be seen as to how the government amidst the growing political instability in the country can take bold steps in its attempt to revamp the economy.



# Supreme Court Case Should Consider the Growing Evidence against GM Crops and the Serious Flaws in Government's Edible Oil policy

In the on-going case on GM Mustard in the Supreme Court of India the bench has taken the very appropriate stand that the court cannot get involved beyond a point in research complexities but it will see to it that the national interests are protected. One of the best ways of doing this is to see carefully what the evidence so far is regarding the GM crops. The Court cannot turn into a research scientist, but it can look at what the most senior scientists known also for their commitment to the public interest have been saying. Surely the opinion of such scientists should get more impotence than the opinion of those who have been working with multinational corporations known to be very exploitative towards farmers and known also for their attempts of trying to dominate the farm and food systems of developing countries. If according to reviews by very reputed scientists it can be shown that GM crops have been a disaster, then this view should get adequate importance.

As the court debate has also gone into issues of increasing edible oil production and supply, it is also important to look at how the domestic shortage of edible oils was caused and what is the best way of increasing this. This will clearly show that it is by correcting serious policy distortions, which have been very unjust to traditional oilseed farmers, that the domestic edible oil production can increase, while relying falsely on GM crops for this is likely to accentuate problems instead of solving them.

Here we may note that GM crops and the herbicides accompanying them have been in court cases in other countries too and generally courts have been sympathetic to the victims of these crops and the agro-chemicals accompanying them. A case which attracted worldwide attention relates to the award of huge compensation to Johnson, a school groundskeeper, by a California jury on account of his health being damaged severely by a herbicide glyphosate which this groundskeeper had to use regularly, resulting in very painful and life-threatening blood-cell cancer. There was widespread sympathy for this victim and Edward Kennedy (he is now a Presidential candidate) was among the team of lawyers who argued this case.

For people involved in food safety issues this case had an additional significance. The herbicide in question is produced most prominently by a multinational company which is also in the forefront of the spread of GM crops. It has been involved in providing packages in which the company's GM seeds are closely tied to the marketing of the disputed herbicide whose serious health hazards had been the subject of much debate earlier also. In the course of the hearings of this case, however, it became increasingly clear that the so-called scientific evidence of safety of its products by which the giant multinational company had been swearing had many holes in it and at times its own findings were being passed off as the opinion of reputed scientists.

As the issues of food safety and health hazards are so important and as this and a few other multinational companies appear to be so determined to gain increasing domination of the world food and farming markets by relentless lobbying for GM crops

and agro-chemicals tied to these crops, it is important to look carefully at the scientific evidence available on this subject. All the time some of the most eminent scientists have been warning against GM crops but at the same time these powerful companies along with their influential collaborators in the government and the media have been claiming that the scientific evidence is on their side. So the common people are sometimes confused regarding whom to believe. This confusion can be cleared by looking at what the most eminent scientist of India on this subject said shortly before his death. This scientist was the most well-informed scientist in India on this subject. Our reference here is of course to Dr. Pushpa Bhargava.

Dr. Pushpa M. Bhargava was the founder of the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology and in addition he was also the Vice Chairperson of the National Knowledge Commission. Many people's science movements looked upon him as their mentor. He had been appointed by the Supreme Court of India as an observer in the



Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee as he was widely perceived to be not only a very accomplished expert on this issue and that too of the highest integrity but in addition he was also seen on the basis of his past record as a very strong and persistent defender of public interest.

Therefore it is very useful and interesting to see what this very senior scientist with a comprehensive understanding of this issue had to say about GM crops. First of all he made a strong and clear effort to break the myth which had been created by relentless manipulation by the very powerful forces trying to spread GM crops in India. According to this myth most scientific research supports GM crops. While demolishing this myth Dr. Bhargava wrote, "There are over 500 research publications by scientists of indisputable integrity, who have no conflict of interest, that establish harmful effects of GM crops on human, animal and plant health, and on the environment and biodiversity. For example, a recent paper by Indian scientists showed that the Bt gene in both cotton and brinjal leads to inhibition of growth and development of the plant. On the other hand, virtually every paper supporting GM crops is by scientists who have a declared conflict of interest or whose credibility and integrity can be doubted."

In another review of recent trends titled 'Food Without Choice' (published in the Tribune) Prof. Pushpa M. Bhargava, who was an internationally acclaimed authority on this subject, drew pointed attention to the "attempt by a small but powerful

minority to propagate genetically modified crops to serve their interests and those of multinational corporations (read the US), the bureaucracy, the political setup and a few unprincipled and unethical scientists and technologists who can be used as tools." Further he warned, "The ultimate goal of this attempt in India of which the leader is Monsanto, is to obtain control over Indian agriculture and thus food production. With 60 per cent of our population engaged in agriculture and living in villages, this would essentially mean not only a control over our food security but also over our farmer security, agricultural security and security of the rural sector."

The strong stand of Dr. Bhargava against GM crops is supported by other eminent scientists in various parts of world. A group of eminent scientists organized under the Independent Science Panel have stated in very clear terms, "GM crops have failed to deliver the promised benefits and are posing escalating problems on the farm. Transgenic contamination is now widely acknowledged to be unavoidable, and hence there can be no co-existence of GM and non-GM agriculture. Most important of all, GM crops have not been proven safe. On the contrary, sufficient evidence has emerged to raise serious safety concerns, that if ignored could result in irreversible damage to health and the environment. GM crops should be firmly rejected now."

The Independent Science Panel (ISP) is a panel of scientists from many disciplines and countries, committed to the promotion of science for the public good. In a document titled 'The case for a GMO-free Sustainable World' the ISP has stated further, "By far the most insidious dangers of genetic engineering are inherent to the process itself, which greatly enhances the scope and probability of horizontal gene transfer and recombination, the main route to creating viruses and bacteria that cause disease epidemics. This was highlighted, in 2001, by the 'accidental' creation of a killer mouse virus in the course of an apparently innocent genetic engineering experiment. Newer techniques, such as DNA shuffling, are allowing geneticists to create in a matter of minutes in the laboratory millions of recombinant viruses that have never existed in billions of years of evolution. Disease-causing viruses and bacteria and their genetic material are the predominant materials and tools for genetic engineering, as much as for the intentional creation of bio-weapons."

Several scientists involved in studying the implications and impacts of genetic engineering got together at the International Conference on 'Redefining of Life Sciences' organized at Penang, Malaysia, by the Third World Network. They issued a statement (the Penang Statement, or PS) which questioned the scientific basis of genetic engineering. This statement said:

"The new biotechnology based upon genetic engineering makes the assumption that each specific feature of an organism is encoded in one or a few specific, stable genes, so that the transfer of these genes results in the transfer of a discrete feature. This extreme form of genetic reductionism has already been rejected by the majority

of biologists and many other members of the intellectual community because it fails to take into account the complex interactions between genes and their cellular, extracellular and external environments that are involved in the development of all traits.

"It has thus been impossible to predict the consequences of transferring a gene from one type of organism to another in a significant number of cases. The limited ability to transfer identifiable molecular characteristics between organisms through genetic engineering does not constitute the demonstration of any comprehensive or reliable system for predicting all the significant effects of transposing genes."

Hence it is clear that to promote GM crops as a means of increasing crop productivity has no basis in scientific reality and is merely a manipulation tactic of the powerful GM lobby which uses highly selective data to somehow promote its case in the wake of ever-increasing evidence against GM crops. The powerful GM lobby uses many kinds of front-men but behind the scenes it is essentially controlled by the most powerful, resourceful and biggest multinational companies in the food, farming, agro-chemical and related sectors.

The edible sector and oilseeds sector is being guided more and more by big business interests, foreign interests and multinational company interests. At one point India was on the verge of achieving self-reliance in edible oils but this was disrupted due to reduced import duties and tariffs, resulting in the Indian market getting flooded by imported edible oil, harming and discouraging our oilseed farmers.

India has a very rich heritage of traditional oilseeds such as mustard, sesame, groundnut, coconut and a host of other crops. A rich diversity of traditional varieties known for their good yields, taste, suitability to local conditions are available, these are well-suited to local crop rotations and farmers have well-developed skills for growing these varieties. Ignoring this traditional wealth, the government policy under the influence of big business interests has opted for spreading palm oil and GM mustard varieties and both of these will prove highly disruptive for agro-ecology, according to all available evidence on palm oil as well as on GM crops. It is time today to stop big-business oriented disruption of our heritage and our environment and to opt for those available solutions which protect our farmers and protect our heritage and our environment.

In the course of recent hearings, the Supreme Court also expressed concern over the increasing dependence on chemical fertilizers. This dependence as well as dependence on highly dangerous herbicides and pesticides will only increase by opting for GM crops and all big business oriented farming systems as many multinational companies control seeds as well as agro-chemicals and try to spread those seeds and varieties which use more and more expensive agro-chemicals, thereby aggravating farmers' crisis and also harming soil and environment.



## Shriya Saran wears her wedding saree to celebrate Ram Mandir Pran Pratishtha

Actress Shriya Saran, who celebrated the pran pratishtha of Ram Temple at her home in Mumbai, wore her wedding

attire, and she looked graceful in the ethnic wear.

Shriya wore a magenta pink-coloured saree with silver work on it, and a golden full sleeves blouse. She tied her hair in a bun, keeping her makeup minimal.

The actress captioned her post on Instagram and wrote, 'Yesterday was magical. I wore my saree from my wedding for Sri Ram Puja at home, on the auspicious day of the inauguration of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya.'

In the stories section, she shared the same video and captioned it as, 'Ram puja at home by Iskcon'.

Shriya married her Russian boyfriend Andrei Koscheev in March 2018.

The couple have a daughter, who was born in January 2021.

On the work front, after 'Music School' in 2023, she would be seen in the Tamil film 'Naragasooran'.



saree for the auspicious occasion, calling the day 'magical'.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi completed the pran pratishtha ceremony of Lord Ram Lalla in Ayodhya on Monday.

The glimpse of the special occasion features the 'Drishyam' fame actress in her wedding

## Manoj Bajpayee-starrer 'The Fable' to compete in Berlin Film Festival



Acclaimed actor Manoj Bajpayee's film *The Fable*, which is directed by Raam Reddy, will have its world premiere at the upcoming 74th edition of Berlin International Film Festival in the competitive category of Encounters. The film, which also features Deepak Dobriyal, Priyanka Bose and Tillotama Shome, along with debutant Hiral Sidhu and child actor Awan Pookot, has been highlighted by the festival with an evening premiere on the opening day. The festival will begin on February 15 and the curtains will be brought down on February 25. Manoj said: "Joining the cast of *The Fable* has been a remarkable experience. Working with a creative mind like Raam Reddy and participating in an A-festival backed by an international production house for the first time has been incredibly inspiring."

## Happu Ki Ultan Paltan completes 1,200 episodes

Sanjay and Binaiferr Kohli's *Happu Ki Ultan Paltan* on &TV has just marked a remarkable milestone by completing 1,200 episodes.

Known as the king of comedy, Sanjay Kohli expressed gratitude to the channel and loyal viewers for the love bestowed upon the show. Binaiferr sees the achievement as a joyous occasion. Yogesh Tripathi, who plays the title role, says, "It is a great occasion. I am delighted to be part of the hit show. Audiences are part of our lives. We will do 12,000 episodes too."

Geetanjali Mishra, who plays the character of Rajesh in the series, shares her excitement, calling it a privilege to portray this character. "I



am thankful to producer duo Sanjay and Binaiferr Kohli for trusting in my talent. The ensemble cast, featuring seasoned performers such as Yogesh Tripathi (Daroga Happu Singh) and Himani Shivpuri (Katori Amma), has contributed to the show's success." Don't miss the

fun, tune in to &TV every Monday to Friday at 10 pm for a dose of laughter and entertainment!

## Somy Ali talks about the birth of No More Tears

Somy Ali, who helps rehabilitate the victims of human trafficking and rape through her NGO No More Tears, took to Instagram to share a throwback picture of the year she began her venture.

She says that she feels grateful to have been able to help so many people over the years. "This was the birth of @nomoretearsusa in 2007. We had an extremely tiny office where I would meet victims and plan out their futures. It's hard to believe that now we are going on our 17th year and have saved over 42,000 children, women, men, and members of our LGBTQ Community. As the founder, I thank our donors, our board and our fundraising committee for all that they have done," she wrote.

She added, "Without any of the people mentioned above, we wouldn't still be saving lives. Please know that it is you who keeps us afloat and helps us continue our mission. January is human trafficking awareness month and I urge everyone to educate themselves of the prevalence of this perpetual and lethal pandemic. We are eternally grateful to all, who have participated in keeping us alive, especially the victims who are now survivors because you cared."



## Marilyn Monroe's LA home where she died spared from demolition

Late Hollywood star Marilyn Monroe's former home, where she was found dead, has been rescued from demolition for the foreseeable future.

The Hollywood legend bought the 1929-built Spanish-style hacienda on 5th Helena Drive in Los Angeles just six months before she was found dead in August 1962 at the age of 36, but in September, a permit was approved to tear down the home.

The Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission, however, voted unanimously to declare the property a historic cultural monument on January 18.

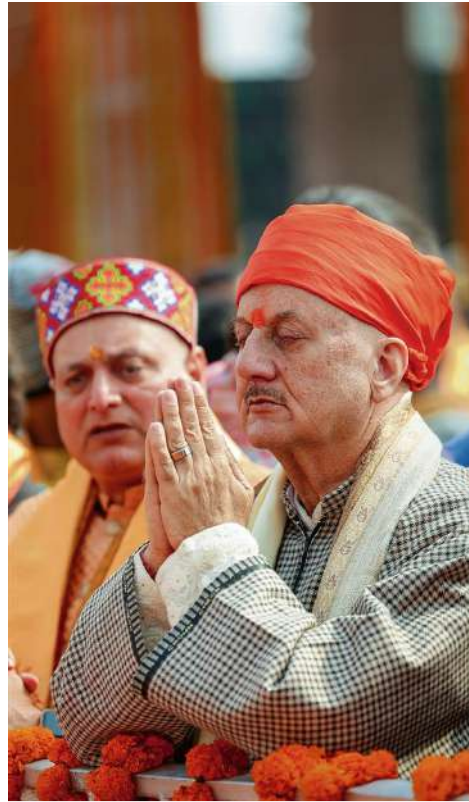
People magazine reports the commissioners noted that although Monroe only spent a

few months living at the property — which is where she was found dead in 1962, aged 36 — it was the only home she ever bought for herself.





# Magical, spectacular, historic—that's how celebs describe the Ram temple as they arrive at Ayodhya for the consecration ceremony



Filmstars, including Amitabh Bachchan, Abhishek Bachchan, Ranbir Kapoor, Alia Bhatt, Vicky Kaushal, Katrina Kaif, Ayushmann Khurrana, Anupam Kher, Kangana Ranaut, Hema Malini, Madhuri Dixit Nene, Randeep Hooda, Lin Laishram, filmmakers Madhur Bhandarkar, Subhash Ghai and Rohit Shetty, among others, were at the Shri Ram Janambhoomi complex in Ayodhya for the Pran Pratishtha ceremony on Monday. Cricket legends Anil Kumble, Sachin Tendulkar and Venkatesh Prasad were also present.

Vivek Oberoi shared his excitement, "It's magical, spectacular. I have seen so many images of it. But when you see it before your eyes, it seems that you are watching something magical." Anupam Kher, who has been in Ayodhya for the past few days, said, "Historic! Wonderful! I had never seen such an atmosphere for Hindu religion ever before. This is bigger than Diwali. This is the real Diwali... Maryada Purushottam Ram symbolised goodness and a sense of sacrifice. Today, those sentiments can be seen here." South Indian actor Chiranjeevi, who attended the ceremony along with his son, said, "This is a God-given opportunity, we are really happy to be here."

Megastar Rajinikanth wore a beige shawl over a white kurta pyjama. Several pictures and videos of him went viral. Actor Rishab Shetty was present along with his wife Pragathi Shetty. Amitabh Bachchan left for Ayodhya from Mumbai on Monday along with his son, actor Abhishek Bachchan. On the temple premises, the screen icon was spotted interacting with Arun Govil, the actor who became a household name with the portrayal of Lord Ram in the 1987 TV serial Ramayan.

Actress Dipika Chikhlia, who played Goddess Sita in Ramayan, said it was a day of immense happiness for everyone, "The temple is beautifully decorated. We can say today is Diwali because Lord Ram has arrived here after 500 years." Kangana Ranaut, who reached Ayodhya on Saturday, said it appeared as if she had been transported into a pauranik kaal. "This is a divine experience..." Ranaut said.

Actors Madhuri Dixit Nene and Jackie Shroff on Monday headed to Ayodhya as well. Madhuri looked beautiful as she wore a bright yellow saree, while her husband wore a red kurta paired with a white pyjama. Jackie Shroff donned a white kurta pyjama, and accessorised his look with a red scarf and black shades. He was seen holding a small plant. Ayushmann Khurrana was seen donning a kurta pyjama paired with a printed Nehru jacket. He also wore a pair of shades to compliment his look.

## Shankar Mahadevan, Sonu Nigam, Anuradha Paudwal perform bhajan

Singers Shankar Mahadevan and Sonu Nigam added a musical touch to the occasion by performing Ram bhajan at Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple in Ayodhya ahead of the Pran Pratishtha ceremony. Sonu Nigam sang Ram Siya Ram in his soulful voice. Singer Anuradha Paudwal, along with her daughter Kavita Paudwal, also performed Ram bhajan. She turned emotional after the performance, "I have no words. When God decides, nobody can stop him from arriving." She was dressed in a yellow saree that she teamed with a brown shawl for the auspicious day. Singer Kailash Kher was also present on the occasion.





# Rohit Sharma leads ICC ODI Team of the Year dominated by Indians



## Dubai

Rohit Sharma was, on Tuesday, named captain of the ICC ODI Team of the Year, which featured five other Indians including star batter Virat Kohli and the pace duo of Mohammed Shami and Mohammed Siraj.

The team mostly included the World Cup finalists Australia (winner) and India (runner-up) besides players from semi-finalists New Zealand and South Africa, the ICC said in a statement.

The top order includes openers Rohit and Shubman Gill. While the Indian captain accumulated 1,255 runs at an average of 52 runs last year, the latter struck a brilliant 208-runs against the Kiwis and also finished as the highest run-scorer (1,584 runs) in the format.

At number three was Travis Head, who was consistent throughout the year and performed exceptionally well during the global event, with his 137 runs in the final being the highlight.

The middle order comprised Indian stalwart Kohli, followed by Daryl Mitchell, Heinrich Klaasen and Marco Jansen.

Kohli finished as the second-highest run-scorer of the year in ODIs (1,337 runs) and slammed six centuries during the year. He surpassed Sachin Tendulkar's record of most international tons, besides winning the Player of the Tournament award

during the World Cup.

Mitchell scored five centuries and accumulated 1,204 runs at an average of 52.34 runs and a strike rate of 100.24.

Klaasen too dominated the whole year with the bat, with his highlight being the match-winning 174 runs versus Australia in Centurion.

The bowling attack was made up of Australian Adam Zampa along with the Indian trio of Mohammed Siraj, Kuldeep Yadav and Mohammed Shami.

Zampa took 38 wickets in the entire year at an average of 26.31 and also fetched a four-for in three successive World Cup fixtures, besides finishing as the second-highest wicket-taker in the competition.

Siraj came up with 44 wickets in the year, the high point being six for 21 against Sri Lanka during the Asia Cup final that India won deservingly.

Kuldeep captured 49 ODI wickets last year, with his best figures being five for 25 versus Pakistan during the Asia Cup's Super-Four stage.

Shami was dominant throughout the year, claiming four fifers, while his best figures were seven for 57 against New Zealand during the World Cup semi-final.

No Indian found a place in the ICC's women's team of the year.

## Suryakumar named captain of ICC men's T20I Team of the Year, 3 more Indians feature

Flamboyant middle-order batter Suryakumar Yadav has been named the captain of the ICC men's T20I Team of the Year, which also includes three more Indians in opener Yashasvi Jaiswal, spinner Ravi Bishnoi and left-arm pacer Arshdeep Singh.

The ICC Team of the Year recognises 11 outstanding individuals who have impressed throughout the year with the bat, ball or their all-round exploits.

Suryakumar found a place in the side for a second straight year and is in the running for T20I men's Cricketer of the Year.

The right-handed stroke-maker from Mumbai had a solid 2023.

His first innings of just seven to start the year against Sri Lanka was a mere speed bump in another prolific year, as he made scores of 51 (36) and 112 not out (51) in the next two matches.

# It's personal



## New Delhi

India's batting mainstay Virat Kohli has pulled out of the first two Tests against England due to personal reasons which "demand his presence and undivided attention", the BCCI said today.

The BCCI urged the fans and media to refrain from speculating about the exact reason for his forced break before the five-match series begins in Hyderabad on January 25. The board stated it will name a replacement for the star batter soon.

"Virat Kohli has requested the BCCI to be withdrawn from the first two Tests of the upcoming Test series against England, citing personal reasons," BCCI secretary Jay Shah said in a statement.

The BCCI also said that Kohli has discussed his decision with skipper Rohit Sharma and the team management. "Virat has spoken to captain Rohit Sharma, the team management and the selectors and has emphasised that while representing the country has always been his top priority, certain personal situations demand his presence and undivided attention," it stated.

It has been learnt that both Shah and chairman of selectors Ajit Agarkar were kept in the loop about the possibility of Kohli needing a break at some point during the England series.

Recently, Kohli also skipped the first T20I game against Afghanistan due to "personal reasons".

Before that, he had taken a short break, again for personal reasons, during India's tour of South Africa where he missed an intra-squad practice game and flew to London, within days after arriving in South Africa.

It is understood that one among the two heavyweight India A performers — Rajat Patidar of Madhya Pradesh and Sarfaraz Khan of Mumbai — are the frontrunners to replace Kohli.

## Big chance for Yashasvi

Chennai: Young opener Yashasvi Jaiswal could cement his place in the Indian Test side during the upcoming five-Test series against England at home, feels the legendary Sunil Gavaskar.

The former captain believes that the Indian pitches would allow the 22-year-old to express himself in a better manner than the hard and bouncy tracks of South Africa. "The home pitches would be different. The pitches in South Africa were tough due to extra bounce, and even experienced batters struggle, whereas Yashasvi is a youngster," Gavaskar told a TV channel.

"However, with the approach that he displayed in Centurion and even in the West Indies, there's a belief that he would cement himself on the Indian tracks. You need a left-hander in the top-order. Although I cannot say it with all certainty, he is likely to cement himself in the Test side in this series," he added.

Meanwhile, former India seamer Irfan Pathan has termed the No. 3 batting slot for Shubman Gill as a great responsibility, besides asserting that he will cherish it forever. Gill came up with a poor performance at No. 3 in South Africa, managing just 74 runs in four innings. However, Pathan believes that Gill is in the right zone with the correct mindset, and he should do well on the Indian pitches.



# India placed in tough Pool B in men's hockey competition of Paris Olympics

Lausanne (Switzerland)

Asian Games champions and Tokyo Olympics bronze medallists India have been placed in a tough Pool B in the men's hockey competition at this year's Paris Games.

Eight-time champions India, who clinched a historic bronze medal in Tokyo after a hiatus of 41 years, have been clubbed with reigning Olympic

creditable fourth in Tokyo, as they failed to qualify, having finished fourth after losing to Japan 0-1 in the Olympic Qualifiers in Ranchi on Friday.

Germany, USA and Japan sealed their berths from the Ranchi event.

Reigning Olympic champions Netherlands are placed in Pool A with Belgium Germany, Japan, China and hosts France, while Pool B comprises



champions and world no.2 Belgium, mighty Australia, Rio Games gold medallist Argentina, New Zealand and Ireland.

The Indians are currently ranked third in the world, behind Belgium and the Netherlands, and they had found it tough to beat Tokyo silver medallist Australia and Argentina in the past.

Pool A, meanwhile, consists of Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, France and South Africa.

The International Hockey Federation announced the pools of both men's and women's hockey competition after the completion of the FIH Hockey Olympic Qualifiers on Sunday.

In the women's competition in Paris, there will be no representation from India, who finished a

Australia, current silver medallist Argentina, Great Britain, Spain, USA and South Africa.

The participating teams have been allocated their respective pools on the basis of the FIH World Rankings as on Sunday.

The 12 teams per gender have qualified for the Olympic Games either as hosts, winner of their continental qualifier or top three finisher of their FIH Hockey Olympic Qualifier.

The top four teams from each pool in both men's and women's competitions will qualify for the quarterfinals.

The Paris Olympics will be held from July 26 till August 11 and hockey competitions will start from July 27 and end on August 9.

# 'Jai Shri Ram': South African cricketer Keshav Maharaj's message on Ram temple consecration ceremony



Johannesburg

South African spinner Keshav Maharaj, who likes walking in to the devotional tune of 'Ram Siya Ram' on the cricket field, has hailed the consecration ceremony at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, hoping that it brings peace and harmony to the entire humanity.

The 33-year-old posted a video on his social media pages to hail the pran pratishtha ceremony which was led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday. "I want to wish Mahesh Kumar (Consul General of India in Johannesburg) and the entire Indian community in South Africa all the best for the inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodha. May it bring peace, harmony and spiritual enlightenment to one and all," Maharaj said. In a recent interview, the left-arm spinner, who has his roots in Uttar Pradesh where the temple town of Ayodhya is located, spoke about his devotion to Lord Ram. When he walks into the middle during a game in South Africa, the in-house DJ makes it a point to play 'Ram Siya Ram, Jai Jai Ram'. According to him, the song in the background gets him "into the zone". "For me, God's been my greatest blessing. If I get an opportunity, it's the least I can do. It gets you in the zone and gets that respect from other players. Respecting religion and culture is important. It's a nice feeling to hear 'Ram Siya Ram' being played in the background," Maharaj had said earlier this month.

The new Ram Lalla idol was consecrated at the Ayodhya temple, an event watched by lakhs of people on television at their homes and in temples across India.

# 'Been divorced for a few months now': Sania Mirza's sister confirms tennis star's divorce from Shoaib Malik

Retired Indian tennis star Sania Mirza's sister Anam Mirza, on Sunday, confirmed the former's divorce from former Pakistan cricketer Shoaib Malik, saying that they were legally separated for "some months".

Taking to her personal handle on Instagram, Anam, who is married to former India skipper Mohammad Azharuddin's son Assaduddin, confirmed Sania's

divorce from Shoaib, posting, "Sania has always kept her personal life away from the public eye. However, today the need has arisen for her to share that Shoaib and she have been divorced for a few months now. She wishes Shoaib well for his new journey ahead!" The statement comes a day after the former Pakistan all-rounder tied the knot with Pakistani actress Sana Javed.





अक्रॉस स्टेट एंटरटेनमेंट प्रस्तुत

निर्माते  
संजय मंगेश भैरे  
सुचिता संजय भैरे

सोहम

दिग्दर्शक पुंडलिक यशोदा लक्ष्मण धुमाळ

छायांकन करण तांदळे संकलन विजय पांडुरंग खोचीकर क्लिपटव्ह निर्माता मांतेस जमादार

संगीत आणि पार्श्वसंगीत रवींद्र खरात नीत विपीन जाधव सहदिग्दर्शक शंकर धुलगुडे

गायक सुरेश वाडकर, अनुसाधा पौडवाल, ज्ञानेश्वर मेश्राम, सायली कांबळे, सुहास सावंत रंगभूषा माधव म्हापणकर, मयुरी चव्हाण

डॉ. आय. कलरिस्ट हितेंद्र परच ध्वनिअरेखन केविन गाला कास्टिंग डायरेक्टर वैभव वाघ

व्हिज्युअल प्रमोशन अरीयमर्मेयक क्रिएटर्स जाहिरात रचना मिलिंद मटकर पोस्ट प्रोडक्शन डिजिटल स्टुडिओ मुंबई

लवकरच सिनेमागृहात