

**6** WORLD

● Taiwan says 6 Chinese balloons flew through its airspace and warplanes

● At least 27 people are reported killed in an attack on Donetsk

**8** NATION

● Delhi goes 'Ram maye' as people celebrate Ram Lalla 'pran pratishtha'

● Delhi's final electoral roll published with 1.47 crore voters

**Modi Sarkar ki Guarantee**  
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Distribution of assistive equipment and devices to 26 lakh Divyangjan in social empowerment camps

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## Ram Lalla consecrated at Ayodhya temple

*Ram is not a dispute, but a solution; Ram is not just ours but belongs to everyone: Modi*

AYODHYA, Jan 22: The new Ram Lalla idol was consecrated at the Ayodhya temple on Monday, an event led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi who said it marked the advent of a new era.

Lakhs of people watched the 'pran pratishtha' ceremony on television at their homes and in neighbourhood temples, becoming part of the historic event held just months ahead of the Lok Sabha elections.

Along with the scrapping of Article 370 that gave a special status to Jammu and Kashmir and the implementation of a uniform civil code, building a grand Ram temple in Ayodhya has been on the BJP's agenda for decades.

Army helicopters showered flower petals on the newly constructed Jannabhooni temple as



the 'pran pratishtha' ceremony took place. And celebrations broke out in parts of this Uttar Pradesh

temple town with people singing and dancing.  
"Today, our Ram has arrived.

After a long wait for ages, our Ram has arrived. Our Ram Lalla will no longer live in a tent. Our Ram Lalla will stay in a magnificent temple," Modi said in his address that followed the consecration, which also marked the inauguration of the temple. He recalled there were times when some people said the country would be on fire if the Temple was built.

"I would urge those people to re-think. Ram is not fire but energy. Ram is not a dispute, but a solution. Ram is not just ours but belongs to everyone. Ram is not just the present, but eternity," he said.

The PM performed a series of rituals in the 'grabhagriha' - the sanctum sanctorum -- with the 'pran pratishtha' taking place during the 84-second 'Abhijeet muhurta'. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## Biren Singh holds meeting with political parties to address current situation

IMPHAL, Jan 22: Manipur chief minister N Biren Singh said he has chaired a meeting with representatives of 10 political parties to address the current situation in the ethnic violence-hit state.

He also said "constructive discussions" were held during the meeting at the CM secretariat on Sunday.

"Chaired a meeting with representatives of the 10 political parties at my secretariat to address the current situation in Manipur. Constructive discussions were held, reflecting a united commitment to navigate challenges and work collectively for the well-being of our state," Singh said on social media.

After Sunday's meeting, Congress Legislative Party leader Okram Ibobi said, "the 10 political parties have urged the chief minister to seek an appointment with the prime minister



ter and his intervention to end the more-than-8-month-long crisis".

"Protecting the lives and properties of the people is the duty of the state government and the state has the right to ask the Centre for manpower and tools required for that," Ibobi added.

Representatives of the Congress, JD(U), Trinamool Congress, AAP

and CPI were among those who participated in the meeting.

Manipur has been rocked by ethnic violence since May last year and over 180 people were killed. The violence erupted on May 3 after a 'Tribal Solidarity March' was organised in the hill districts to protest against the Meitei community's demand for (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

### HT BRIEFS

#### KSA meeting

DIPHU: Forming another faction of Karbi Students Association (KSA), a group of KSA members in its first executive meeting at Dokmoka. In the meeting of the central committee held on January 20 at Dokmoka the house declared Jensing Timung as president, Sarchingji Phangcho and Rustom Englang as vice presidents, Sumit Timung as general secretary and Sarchiphong Kramsa and Bharat Timung as assistant general secretaries. Gabriel Terang was appointed as office secretary, Welson Teron as office secretary, Mindar Phangcho as propaganda secretary, Jising Ronghang as education incharge, Rajesh Phangcho as sport incharge, Sonasing Hanse and Rangsarpo Rongpi as cultural in charge. 12 others were inducted as executive members.

#### Drugs seized

IMPHAL: Manipur Police on Monday seized drugs worth around ₹ 11.65 crore in the international market from a 28-year-old youth while checking vehicles at Tera Urak in Bishnupur district, police said. According to police, they found the drugs in a Nagaland-registered SUV coming from Churachandpur that was headed towards Imphal. The drugs packed in soap cases were hidden in a secret chamber attached to one of the doors, police said. The arrested person was identified as Md. Sahidur.

#### Nagaland Police

KOHIMA: Nagaland deputy chief minister Y Patton on Monday flagged off the Nagaland Police Outreach and Civic Action cum Beat Patrolling project. He also virtually commissioned the GCMS instrument for state's Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL). The official programme was held at the Police headquarters here. Addressing the gathering, the deputy chief minister said Nagaland Police Force has come a long way since its inception, evolving into a professional and capable force committed to upholding law and order and serving the people.

## CM: Ram temple consecration ceremony reawakening of national consciousness

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Jan 22: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday hailed the consecration ceremony at the Ram temple in Ayodhya as a pivotal "turning point" and a "reawakening of national consciousness."

Across the state, numerous programs unfolded in celebration of the 'Pran Pratishtha' of the idol of Ram Lalla - the childhood manifestation of Lord Ram -- at the Ayodhya temple.

Sarma observed the consecration ceremony at the Harijan Colony in the city, and simultaneous special prayers and lively festivities, including fireworks, resonated in various locations as the event was streamed live across multiple platforms. "The return of Dashrathnandan Ram to His Bhavya Mandir marks a turning point in our civilisation and a reawakening of national consciousness," Sarma wrote on X.

He said the events being organised during the day will inspire "more than a thousand future generations to uphold Sanatan Dharma to its fullest glory".



"The sacred events, we in Bharat collectively witnessed today, has inspired more than a thousand future generations to uphold Sanatan Dharma to its fullest glory. As Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri @narendramodiji leads the nation to restore a vital dharmic and sanskrit link, I am eternally grateful to Prabhu Shri Ram for allowing me to exist in this (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## Rahul not allowed to visit Sankardeva's birthplace

NAGAON/MORIGAON, Jan 22: The Congress' Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Assam was marked with high drama on Monday, as Rahul Gandhi was not allowed to proceed towards the birthplace of iconic Vaishnav saint Srimanta Sankardeva at Batadrava in Nagaon, besides being barred from holding a meeting in Morigaon district. As a consequence, the fifth day of the Yatra in the state did not proceed as per the programme chalked out by the party in the two districts. In the evening, Gandhi and his entourage entered Meghalaya.

AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh alleged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi exerted pressure on the Assam government to prevent Gandhi from visiting the birthplace of Srimanta Sankardeva. Sankardeva is an Assamese saint-scholar, social-religious reformer, poet, playwright and a towering figure in the cultural and religious history of Assam from the 15th-16th century. Gandhi had left for the Sattrra (Vaisnavite monastery) at Batadrava early in the morning but was stopped at Haibargaon, around 17 km away,

prompted him and other party leaders to sit on a dharna.

Tight security arrangements were in force around the sattrra.

The Sri Sankardeva Sattrra authorities on Sunday announced that they will not allow Gandhi to visit the sattrra before 3 pm on January 22, after chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma had said at a press conference that he requested Gandhi not to visit it before the consecration ceremony at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya.

Party MP Gaurav Gogoi and Batadrava MLA Sibamoni Bora went to the sattrra to resolve the issue but failed. After returning, Gogoi claimed there was no crowd in and around the premises.

They offered prayers on behalf of Gandhi and the priests extended their blessings to him.

"A rumour was spread that a law and order situation could have risen if Gandhi had visited the place," Gogoi said. After the two returned, Gandhi told reporters that he believes in the philosophy of Sankardeva saying: "Like him, we believe in bringing people together and not (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## Sonowal highlights cultural significance of Ram Mandir

HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Jan 22: Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal on Monday said the Ram Mandir is not just a symbol of faith but a testament of culture, compassion and value system of Sanatan Dharma.

He said this while joining scores of Pran Pratishtha of Shri Ramlalla Sankar in Ayodhya on the Auniati Shakra Satra Naamghar here on Monday.

"As we gather on this sacred day of Pran Pratishtha of Bhagwan Shri Ramlalla in Ayodhya, let us embrace the spirit of unity and tolerance that defines our great nation. May Ram Mandir temple stand not

just as a symbol of faith, but as a testament to our collective commitment towards harmony, inclusivity, and the shared values that bind us together. In the consecration of this divine abode, let it be a beacon of peace, inspiring a future where the light of understanding shines brighter than ever before, fostering a society where love transcends divisions and humanity prevails. Ram Mandir is not just a symbol of faith but a testament of culture, compassion and value system of Sanatan Dharma," said Sonowal.

Sonowal began his day by taking part in 'Swachh Teerth' campaign at Hanuman Mandir as well as at Ramdev Mandir near Thana Charilai. Following (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## Manipur MLAs demand revoking of SoO

IMPHAL, Jan 22: Thirty-four legislators of the ruling alliance in Manipur, including seven Naga MLAs, have urged the Centre to revoke the Suspension of Operations (SoO) with Kuki militant groups, as well as replace the Assam Rifles with other security forces "that have the ability to act".

The legislators claimed that in several areas, the Assam Rifles was "not responsive" and remained "mute spectators" when unarmed civilians, mostly farmers, came under attack by armed men.

"SoO agreements with the militant groups and the immunity it provides to them from central forces are the main cause of the never-ending cycle of violence. Thus SoO... should be abrogated immediately. It should not extended (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## India records 203 fresh Covid cases

NEW DELHI, Jan 22: India reported a single-day rise of 203 Covid cases while the active case-load was recorded at 2,034, the Union Health Ministry said on Monday. Two deaths -- one each in Kerala and Maharashtra -- have been reported in 24 hours, according to the data updated at 8 am.

The number of daily cases had dropped to double-digits till December 5 but began to rise after the emergence of a new variant and cold conditions. A single-day rise of 841 fresh infections -- 0.2 per cent of the peak cases reported in May 2021 -- were recorded on December 31, official sources here said. Of the total active cases, a large majority of around 92 per cent are recovering in home isolation. "The currently available data suggests that the JN.1 variant is neither (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)



Large numbers of devotees gathering at Fancy Bazer took out a celebration rally during the Ayodhya Lord Ram Lalla 'Pran Pratishtha' Mahotsav in Guwahati on Monday. UB Photos

*'May the spirit of Ayodhya continue to illuminate the path towards a brighter future for all'*

## Diphu radiates unity and joy in grand celebration of Ram Lalla Pran Pratishtha

HT Bureau

DIPHU, Jan 22: The vibrant streets of Diphu came alive with a festive spirit as saffron flags adorned with the image of Lord Ram graced the iron railings of dividers and shops, marking the joyous celebration of Ram Lalla Pran Pratishtha at Ayodhya on Monday.

In a heartening display of unity, people from diverse backgrounds, irrespective of caste, language, and community within the Hindu faith, joined in the jubilation of Ram Lalla Pran Pratishtha.

On the occasion, Diphu's market witnessed a Diwali-esque transformation, with shops beaded in plantains and balloons. Saffron flags, featuring the revered image of Lord Ram, fluttered proudly atop roofs, buildings, and houses,



adorning two-wheeleders and vehicles traversing Diphu town.

The morning unfolded with chief executive member (CEM) Tuliram Ronghang of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) participating in a spirited procession originating from

Marwari Vivah Bhawan. The lively parade meandered through Diphu market, Shiv Mandir, Shivbari road, and returned to Marwari Vivah Bhawan. Enthusiastic participants on motorcycles, cars, and three-wheelers resonated with chants of 'Jai Shree Ram.'

CEM Ronghang also took to social media site and said, "Today, January 22, 2024, marks the historic inauguration of the grand Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, concluding a 500-year-long journey for countless devotees. May the spirit of Ayodhya continue to illuminate the path towards a brighter future for all." The event was organised by Marwari Samaj, Diphu, with over 2000 participants, transcending age, gender, and cultural boundaries, as highlighted by organiser Ramjil Moond. Leading up to (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## VPP temporarily suspends sit-in protest

SHILLONG, Jan 22: The Voice of People's Party (VPP) has temporarily suspended its sit-in demonstration for demanding reinstatement of the removed Lokayukta officials after the assurance of the state government to hold a meeting with the leaders of the party.

The decision was taken after the minister in-charge Law Ampareen Lyngdoh invited the legislators of the VPP for talks in her chamber and informed that chief minister Conrad K Sangma will be meeting them within a day or two.

"Since there will be a meeting between the party and the chief minister along with high officials (of the government), we feel it would be appropriate on our part to

keep this agitation in abeyance," VPP chief and Nongkrem legislator Ardent Miller Basaiamwoit told reporters after the meeting with Lyngdoh.

He said, "We know for sure that the law minister cannot give any decision and we cannot arrive at any logical conclusion but we want to convey a clear message that as a party we don't want to create any trouble as our decision to hit the streets is not to create troubles but we have a valid reason that when the government unceremoniously removed and terminated the services of those three officers, we feel it is our duty to take up the matter and we are not convinced with the clarification of the government that (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## Domestic coal-based power generation rises 7% in April-December

**NEW DELHI, Jan 22:** Domestic coal-based power generation increased 7.14 per cent to 872 billion units (BU) in the April-December period of the current fiscal.

The rise in domestic coal-based electricity generation reflects an ample supply of coal to meet the growing energy demand in the country, the coal ministry said in a statement.

Domestic coal-based power generation was 813.9 BU in the year-ago period, it said.

In the country, power is generated from conventional sources -- thermal, nuclear and hydro-- and renewable sources -- wind, solar, biomass etc. Thermal power producers use coal as the main fuel to run the units and the dry fuel contributes to more than 70 per cent of the total electricity generation.

Coal-based power generation in the country registered a growth of around 10.13 per cent during April-December period of FY'24, as compared to the corresponding period of previous year while overall power generation grew 6.71 per cent during the same period, the ministry statement said.

Coal imports for blending dropped by 40.66 per cent to 17.08 MT during April-December period of current fiscal from 28.78 MT in the corresponding period of previous year, despite the rising power demand.

"It showcases the nation's commitment to self-reliance in coal production and minimising overall coal imports," it said.

Coal-based power generation has played a significant role in meeting India's energy demands. The country is experiencing a substantial increase in power demand, driven by a combination of factors like industrial growth, technological advancements, population growth, and economic development. (PTI)



# Sony terminates \$10 bn Zee India merger

Sony seeks USD 90 million as break-up fees for violating terms of merger pact, invoking arbitration

**NEW DELHI, Jan 22:** Sony Group Corp on Monday said it is calling off a USD 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 back, and is seeking USD 90 million as break-up fees 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.

The deal would have created an entertainment conglomerate with more than 70 Indian TV channels,

popular Bollywood studios and an extensive film library to take on global powerhouses Netflix and Amazon.

"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 in a statement.

The definitive agreements provided for the merger to close within 24 months. On expiry of such a period, the deadline was extended by a month.

"The merger did not close by the end date as, among other things, the closing conditions to the merger were not satisfied by then," the filing said.

Sony said it was "extremely disappointed that the conditions to the merger were not satisfied" by the deadline, which had been set as January 21. The company added that it "remained committed to growing our presence" in India.

In a stock exchange filing, Zee said it had also received a demand from Sony for a USD 90 million termination fee over "alleged



breaches" of the terms of the deal.

"The company categorically denies all claims and assertions" by Sony and is evaluating all options, Zee said in the filing adding it "will take all the necessary steps to protect the long-term interests of all its stakeholders, including by taking appropriate legal action".

Zee said it had taken "all efforts and steps" in line with the merger agreement and had consistently worked towards implementation of the deal.

The Indian firm had seen a decline in financial performance with profits declining due to rising streaming costs and falling advertising revenue. Zee's four-year agreement with Disney's Star for TV broadcasting rights for certain

cricket events may be at risk after the deal collapses as it has to pay USD 1.32-1.44 billion over the tenure of the pact. Sony-Zee deal, which won approval from regulators in August, would have created a USD 10 billion entertainment behemoth in which Sony was supposed to own a 50.86 per cent stake, with Goenka's family owning 3.99 per cent.

The collapse of the deal will now send Zee to redraw its strategy to compete against such a giant as the possible merger of media operations of Reliance Industries Ltd and Walt Disney Co.

Sony too will have to relook at its India strategy as it no longer will benefit from Zee's deep library of content in regional lan-

guages and its bouquet of dozens of television channels.

The merger, which would have created a USD 10-billion entity had already received regulatory approvals from NCLT, fair trade regulator CCI, bourses NSE and BSE, shareholders and creditors of the company.

However, an interim order by Sebi barring Essel Group chairman Subhash Chandra and Goenka from holding the position of a director in any listed company after market regulator found them diverting funds from the company, changed the game.

Though the Sebi order was stayed by the Securities Appellate Tribunal, Sony is not comfortable with Goenka leading the merged entity during the probe due to the stringent corporate governance policy in Japan. The combined entity would have owned over 70 TV channels, two video streaming services (ZEE5 and Sony LIV) and two film studios (Zee Studios and Sony Pictures Films India), making it the largest entertainment network in India.

Sony had plans to invest USD 1.575 billion in the merged entity and have majority stake. Chandra family was also free to increase its shareholding from the current about 4 per cent to up to 20 per cent. (PTI)

## Hero MotoCorp to set up assembly plant in Nepal with partner CG Motors

**NEW DELHI, Jan 22:** Hero MotoCorp on Monday said it will set up a facility for assembling products in Nepal in partnership with CG Motors, its newly appointed distributor in the country.

The facility will be located in Nawalpur district and have a capacity of 75,000 units per annum, the country's largest two-wheeler maker said in a statement.

Operations will begin in March 2024, it added. Hero MotoCorp forayed into Nepal in 2014. Over the years, the company has established itself as a leading player in the country.

"With their vast expertise and diversified business knowledge, Chaudhary Group (CG) will provide an

enormous fillip to our operations here," Hero MotoCorp Head-Global Business Sanjay Bhan said. In the near future, the company plans to further strengthen its operations across the country and introduce a slew of new products that will excite the market, he added.

"This partnership marks CG Motors' ambitious re-entry into the automotive market, leveraging Hero MotoCorp's renowned products and services," Chaudhary Group Managing Director Nirvana

Chaudhary stated. Hero MotoCorp sells models like Super Splendor, Glamour, HF Deluxe and Xpulse 200 motorcycles in Nepal. It also sells Destini 125, Maestro Edge, and Pleasure+ scooters in the market. (PTI)



## OPPO Reno 11 Series Unveiled at City Center Showroom

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Jan 22:** Leading smartphone manufacturer OPPO has officially launched its much-anticipated OPPO Reno 11 Series at the exclusive OPPO showroom on the 3rd floor of City Center, GS Road, Guwahati. The launch event featured renowned YouTubers Ripun & Pooja and Darshana, who enthusiastically unboxed the Reno 11 Series in the presence of company officials, including Mr. Anishuz Zaman, Zonal Sales Manager, and Mr. Sandeep Choudhury, Showroom & LFR Head, along with the OPPO showroom team. Addressing the audience, the featured YouTubers expressed their admiration for OPPO's reputation as a beloved, innovative, and stylish brand in the smartphone and IoT product market. The OPPO Reno 11 Series, available in two variants -- Reno 11 Pro and Reno 11 -- boasts outstanding features, a natural aesthetic design, a 32MP telephoto portrait camera, 80W SUPERVOOC Flash Charge, and the brand-new ColorOS 14. Sandeep Choudhury, Showroom & LFR Head, further added that customers purchasing the Reno 11 Pro or Reno 11 can enjoy attractive offers, such



as cashback of up to ₹ 4,000 from leading banks like ICICI, Kotak, SBI, and more. Additionally, the option of no-cost EMI for up to 9 months is available. Early customers will also be entitled to various attractive gifts. OPPO is also offering an enticing bundling discount of ₹ 500 on its TWS (True Wireless Stereo) IOT product, Echo Air2 Pro, if purchased along with the Reno 11 Series 5G.

## Jindal Stainless elevates Tarun Khulbe as CEO



**NEW DELHI, Jan 22:** Jindal Stainless Ltd on Monday said it has elevated whole time director Tarun Khulbe as chief executive officer (CEO). A decision in this regard was taken at the company's board meeting last week, Jindal Stainless Ltd (JSL) said in a regulatory filing.

"The board has approved the elevation of Tarun Khulbe as the chief executive officer and whole time director," it said.

He has been serving as the whole time director of the company since May 2018. He will continue to hold the post besides that of the CEO, the company said. Khulbe has around 35 years of industry experience in business development, supply chain management, people practices and IT enablement.

"His experience in crafting long-term business strategies and strengthening all facets of operations and sales has been commendable. At a time when the company is expanding and maturing its upstream and downstream linkages, having Khulbe at the helm of affairs is critical to our growth plans," JSL Managing Director Abhyuday Jindal said.

Khulbe joined JSL as a general manager for the cold rolling mills at Hisar, Haryana, in October 2004. Part of O P Jindal Group, Jindal Stainless is India's largest stainless steel manufacturer. (PTI)

## SJVN inks pact to provide technical consultancy services to NHAI

**NEW DELHI, Jan 22:** State-owned power producer SJVN on Monday said it has signed an agreement with NHAI to provide technical consultancy services for highway projects.

The agreement was signed in the presence of NHAI Chairman Santosh Kumar Yadav and SJVN Director (Projects) Sushil Sharma in the national capital, SJVN said in a statement.

"SJVN CMD Nand Lal Sharma has informed that SJVN has inked a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI). The primary focus of this MoU is to utilise the expertise of SJVN in Technical Consultancy Services," it said.

SJVN will review slope protection works at various locations, particularly on the hillside from the Par-

wanoo-Solan-Shimla section of NH-05, Kullu Manali Highway, and various NHAI projects located in Himachal Pradesh, the company said.

Furthermore, SJVN will provide design review services, peer review services, and technical vetting of designs of NHAI and will also monitor the construction works and recommend quality-control tests and construction methodologies as and when required.

This consultancy service will be initially provided for a period of 24 months by SJVN to NHAI.

"This significant collaboration will lead to expertise and knowledge sharing, resource optimisation and promoting synergy between the power and highway sectors, ultimately advancing infrastructure development," the SJVN CMD said. (PTI)



## Senco Gold & Diamonds Unveils 'SiyaRam Collection'

**HT Bureau**  
**GUWAHATI, Jan 22:** Senco Gold & Diamonds, announced the launch of a special 'SiyaRam Collection' in commemoration of the inauguration of the

Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on January 22. This distinctive collection pays homage to the enduring bond of devotion between Lord Ram, Sita, Lakshman, and Hanuman, celebrating the upcoming temple as a beacon of cultural, spiritual, and social unity during the sacred "Pran Pratishtha" of Lord Ram.

The contemporary and meticulously crafted 'SiyaRam Collection,' featuring exquisite pendants, necklaces, and earrings, honors Ram as the ideal leader, Sita as the ideal wife, Lakshman as the ideal brother, and Hanuman as the ideal worshipper, embodying virtues that transcend time. The intricate designs perfectly capture the grandeur of the Ram Mandir, commemorating the legendary moment of Ram and Sita's coronation, with their devoted companions Hanu-

man and Lakshman by their side. This innovative collection aims to celebrate this significant occasion and spread love, peace, and happiness to all who appreciate its beauty.

Expressing his excitement about unveiling this thoughtful collection, Suvankar Sen, MD & CEO of Senco Gold & Diamonds, stated, "The atmosphere of devotion to Lord Ram is palpable everywhere in anticipation of the Ram Mandir inauguration. Drawing inspiration from the magnificence of Ram

Mandir, Ram Sita coronation, and the Dus Avatars, our SiyaRam Collection captures the essence of exemplary leadership, companionship, and devotion. Our intricately detailed jewelry pieces represent a unique fusion of traditional craftsmanship and symbolism, carrying profound meaning within the allegorical narrative of Ram and Sita. We are dedicated to this majestic embodiment of peace, love, and perfection and are optimistic that our loyal consumers will warmly embrace this collection."



## Tamilnad Mercantile Bank's Q3 net profit remains flat at ₹ 284 cr

**MUMBAI, Jan 22:** Private sector lender Tamilnad Mercantile Bank's net profit remained flat at ₹ 284 crore in the December quarter despite a massive growth in lending.

The bank, based out of Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, had reported a net profit of ₹ 280 crore in the year-ago period.

Tamilnad Mercantile Bank (TMB) MD and CEO S Krishnan said the lender's total income improved to ₹ 1,387 crore from ₹ 1,173 crore last year during the quarter under review.

The share of its retail and farm loan book increased to 91 per cent at ₹ 34,883 crore, taking the total advances to ₹ 38,386 crore from ₹ 34,802 crore, the bank said.

The lender saw its net Non-Performing Assets (NPAs) inching down to 1.69 per cent in the third quarter of the ongoing fiscal from 1.70 per cent a year ago.

The bank's total business during the quarter stood at ₹ 85,185 crore, registering a growth of 8.87 per cent, of which deposits consisted of ₹ 46,799 crore, and disbursements of ₹ 38,386 crore.

Its advances to the priority sector increased to ₹ 28,725 crore, up from ₹ 25,636 crore, while its advances to the agriculture sector stood at ₹ 13,338 crore, constituting 34.75 per cent of the total advances. (PTI)

Company spent ₹176.20 crore in the financial year ending in March 2023, spent ₹190.39 crore in first six months of current fiscal

## ZEEL spent ₹366.6 crore on compliances for its merger with Sony

**NEW DELHI, Jan 22:** Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd (ZEEL) spent ₹ 366.59 crore on compliances till September 2023 for its now-failed merger with Sony, which called off the deal on Monday. The company had spent Rs 176.20 crore in the financial year that ended in March 2023. Besides, it spent Rs 190.39 crore in the first six months of the current fiscal, according to a regulatory filing by the Subhash Chandra family-promoted media entity.

After signing an agreement, ZEEL was racing to receive a series of regulatory clearances from SEBI, CCI, ROC, etc.

It also got a go-ahead from the National Company Law Tribunal after receiving approvals from shareholders and creditors and closed all formalities for the merger.

However, Sony Group Corp on Monday called off the USD 10 billion merger of its India unit with Zee Entertainment, following a stalemate over who will lead

the merged entity, besides not satisfying other conditions for the merger.

It sent a termination notice to Zee on the deal, which was announced more than two years back, and is seeking USD 90 million as break-up fees for violating the terms of the merger pact and "invoking arbitration", which ZEEL said it will contest legally. According to experts, this would bring the stock of ZEEL under pressure in near terms.

The industry dynamics are also going to change as global media giant Walt Disney Co has signed a non-binding agreement last month with billionaire Mukesh Ambani-led Reliance Industries for a mega merger of their broadcasting businesses.

Had it been completed, the Zee-Sony merger would have been the biggest deal in the media and entertainment sector in India, creating one of the largest entities having over 100 channels and two leading OTT platforms.



The merged entity would have competed Disney Star with leading media houses as Star which called off merger and other rival OTT platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime.

"Sony which has around 7-8 per cent market share and ZEEL with around 16 per cent market share, the ideal situation would be a merger because the industry dynamics for the rest of the players are

changing dramatically," said Nuvama Institutional Equities Executive Director Abneesh Roy.

With the deal collapsing, both Sony and ZEEL will get marginalised, while Disney-Star and Network18 would have a strong market share of almost over 35 per cent, he added.

Similarly, Karan Taurani, SVP of Elara Capital, said: "We believe the termination will have a negative impact on both parties, as both companies are going through stiff competition from digital media and face a potential threat from the merger of RIL/Disney over the near term." ZEEL has reported a muted performance in terms of growth and profitability over the last two years, as revenue growth has converged to 2.2 per cent due to losses in the OTT segment and lower growth in the linear TV segment. The Chandra family-promoted firm has also signed a contract with Disney for

ICC tournament rights on the linear TV side and yet to pay the first tranche of USD 1.4 billion fee.

Disney-Star India business consists of a linear network of Star India and 70 television channels running in eight languages and the OTT platform Disney+ Hotstar.

Reliance Industries through its step-down firm Viacom 18 has around 38 channels. Besides, it has streaming platform JioCinema, which had earlier this year bagged the media rights, both digital and TV, to broadcast India's domestic matches as well as all the domestic tournaments hosted by BCCI for the next five years.

If the Sony-Zee merger was completed, the combined entity would have owned over 70 TV channels, two video streaming services (ZEE5 and Sony LIV) and two film studios (Zee Studios and Sony Pictures Films India), making it the largest entertainment network in India. (PTI)

## NAME CORRECTION

I, Riazul Karim do hereby solemnly affirm and declare that I am a permanent resident of the below mentioned address and citizen of India by birth. That my actual and correct name is Riazul Karim and my father's name is Rustam Ali. But my name has wrongly been recorded in some of my school documents as Md Riazul Karim and my father's name as Md Rustam Ali and Md. Rustum Ali respectively. That this affidavit is required to be produced before the authority concerned as a piece of document.

Sd/-  
Riazul Karim  
SO- Rustam Ali  
Vill- No. 1/2 Baruahjar  
PO- Galandi,  
PS- Dalganj  
Dist- Darrang (Assam)  
PIN - 784115

# State adorns festive aura as thousands celebrate 'Pran Pratishtha' of Ram Mandir

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Jan 22:** Haflong was bathed in festive splendour as a multitude of people gathered to celebrate the 'Pran Pratishtha' of Lord Sri Sri Ram Lalla at Ayodhya on Monday. Festivities reached a crescendo with a spirited rally that commenced from Lal Field, traversed the main thoroughfare of Haflong to Council Rotary, and culminated its journey back at Lal Field, resonating with fervent chants of 'Jai Sri Ram'.

This joyous occasion is part of a nationwide celebration, drawing participation from various temples like Sri Sri Jagannath Bari, Ramkrishna Mandir, Haflong Kali Bari, ISKON, Hanuman Mandir, Devi Mandir, among others in and around Haflong, including the Gurdwara. The long-anticipated Pran Pratishtha celebration unfolded in a grandiose manner, showcasing the unity of diverse faiths.

The event witnessed the active involvement of prominent figures such as NCHAC CEM Debolal Gorlosa, MAC from Haflong Donphainon Thaosen, MAC from Hatikhali Nirajan Hojai, BJP district president in-charge Glonjo Thaosen, along with dedicated karyakartas and devout followers from across the district.

It is noteworthy that 'Pran Pratishtha' holds significance in both Jainism and Hinduism, symbolising the installation of a deity's idol at a consecrated place like a temple. The rituals accompanying this ceremony involve intricate rites performed by priests amid the resonating chants of Vedic hymns. The term 'Pran' signifies life force, while 'Pratishtha' denotes establishment, encapsulating the essence of invoking life force into the idol.

In a historic moment on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, joined by other dignitaries, spearheaded the 'Pran Pratishtha' ceremony in India. This solemn ritual marked the sanctification of the idol of Lord Rama, the youthful incarnation of Lord Ram, symbolising a momentous occasion in the religious tapestry of the nation.

**Our Sivasagar correspondent adds:** Jubilant celebrations commenced in the historic township of Sivasagar on the momentous occasion of the consecration and installation of Ram Lalla in Ayodhya on Monday. A spontaneous overflow of Sanatani fervour was evident among the Hindu people, transcending language and class differences, while individuals of



other faiths are mostly staying indoors throughout the day. Most households are illuminating earthen lamps, creating an atmosphere reminiscent of the festival of lights celebrated twice within months.

A significant number of women actively participated in processions, carrying dharmawajja in their hands. RSS Sivasagar district, VHP, and BJP followers, Amolapatty Hindu Dharma Namghar Samaj, Marowari Panchayat, Shyam Mandal, Marowari Yuva Mancha, and Barowari Puja Samity marked the day with religious processions and performances. The first massive procession commenced from Hanuman Mandir in Thanaghat.

**Our Jorhat correspondent adds:** On Monday, thousands of people across the town participated in a massive procession to celebrate the consecration of the grand Ram Temple in Ayodhya.

Men, women (including the elderly), youths, and children dressed in saffron attire joined the procession, with many holding flags of Lord Rama and chanting 'Jai Shree Ram'. Devotees atop vehicles adorned with Lord Rama's flags were also part of the vibrant procession.

Devotional songs praising Lord Ram resonated through loudspeakers on the vehicles. Roads, streets, and lanes were adorned with flags of Lord Ram, creating a religious fervor throughout the town.

In observance of the occasion, busi-

nesses remained closed, and vehicular traffic was notably low as people chose to stay indoors to watch the live broadcast of the consecration ceremony on TV channels and social media platforms.

Several localities witnessed the bursting of crackers to mark the celebration. Decorative lights illuminated buildings in the evening, and diyas were lit in front of residences, adding to the festive atmosphere.

**Our Demow correspondent adds:** As the grand ceremony of Pran Pratishtha of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya took place on Monday, the Demow Sitla Mandir Committee, in front of Demow Sitla Mandir, the Demow Thakurbari in Thakurbari, and Sri Sri Ramjanki Thakurbari situated in Sukanpukhuri near Demow organised various programs on the auspicious day.

The day commenced with a Puja offered in front of the photo of Lord Ram in Demow. Colourful cultural processions were conducted in Demow and its surrounding areas throughout the day. Participants in the vibrant processions carried flags and chanted 'Jai Shree Ram'.

In the evening, Prasad was distributed among the devotees in Demow, and earthen lamps were lit in residences, business establishments, and temples in Demow and its surrounding areas.

**Our Margherita correspondent adds:** The historic inauguration of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya on Monday was cele-

brated with fervour and enthusiasm by the people of Bargolai, which falls under the 83-number Margherita constituency of Tinsukia district. They joined the rest of the country in witnessing the auspicious occasion.

The people from Bargolai marked the event by organising various cultural and religious programs, including bhajans, kirtans, puja, and prasad distribution. On Monday, more than 5000 people from different groups and individuals, including socio-cultural and religious bodies, irrespective of caste, creed, race, language, and religion, jointly took out a rally from Bargolai Hanuman Mandir towards Ledo to express their happiness at the inauguration of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya.

The rally passed through the main roads of the Bargolai area, with participants carrying saffron flags, banners, posters, and portraits of Lord Ram along with Lord Hanuman. They chanted slogans such as 'Jai Shri Ram' and 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai'.

The rally saw participation from people of all walks of life, regardless of their caste, creed, religion, or political affiliation. The organisers highlighted that the rally symbolised the unity and harmony of the people of Bargolai, showcasing respect and celebration of the diversity of the country.

Participants expressed gratitude to the government for facilitating the construc-

tion and inauguration of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya, considering it a long-cherished dream of the Sanatan community people. Sumit Dey, the working president of the celebration committee, also expressed hope that the inauguration of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya would usher in a new era of peace, prosperity, and development for the country.

**Our Dalgaoon correspondent adds:** After about 500 years of penance, the life of Shri Ram Lalla was consecrated in the newly built grand temple of Shri Ram Lalla in Ayodhya on Monday. On this historic occasion, Ram devotees decorated their villages and cities in celebration. In the same spirit, a grand festival was celebrated at Kharupetia.

A Prabhat Pheri was taken out at 5:30 am under the auspices of the Ayodhya Shri Ram Mandir Pran Pratishtha Day Organising Committee, Kharupetia. Hundreds of people participated in the Prabhat Pheri, starting from the local Shri Hanuman temple while playing Ram dhun. After the city tour, the Prabhat Pheri concluded by reaching the temple.

Following this, a grand Maha Aarti was organised in the temple, and after the Aarti, Ram devotees recited Sunderkand. A huge bike rally with a music system was then taken out, with nearly two thousand bikes riding in pairs and chanting 'Jai Shri Ram'. Approximately four thousand youths carrying flags participated in

this bike rally, traversing the main intersections and by-lanes of the city.

Later in the day, another grand procession took place, with around twenty thousand Ram devotees, including men and women, participating. The procession featured young men dressed as Lord Shri Ram, Sita, and Hanuman. Gurujyoti Das, president of Assam Pisces Corporation, and officials of District Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh also took part.

The procession reached the temple premises, where participants danced and sang to the tune of Ram. A grand Aarti of Lord Ram was performed in the temple, followed by fireworks at 6:30 pm and a spectacular display of soft fireworks and a laser light show at 7:00 pm. Thousands of people attended the event. Mahaprasad was organised at the end of the program.

Deepak Buchha, the general secretary of the Shri Hanuman Temple Committee, mentioned that this auspicious day marks the culmination of 500 years of penance, and Ram Lalla is now seated in his grand temple. The program was organised to make this historical moment memorable, in collaboration with the Shri Ram Mandir Pran Pratishtha Day Organising Committee, Kharupetia. Sand art with clay depicting the form of Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir has been created in the temple premises, and the area has been illuminated.

## CM Sarma lauds Bodo Sahitya Sabha for contribution to Bodo culture and language



**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, Jan 22:** The 63rd annual conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) concluded after a three-day colourful program held at Boko Gandhi Maidan in Kamrup district. The conference extensively discussed various crucial issues, including the upliftment of Bodo literature, the Bodo language, the educational environment in Bodo medium, and cultural integration.

During the open session of the concluding day on Sunday, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma graced the event as the chief guest. CM Sarma praised the Bodo

Sahitya Sabha for its role in the development of the Bodo language, culture, and tradition, which has led to the present state of Bodo literature and language.

"The Bodo Sahitya Sabha has made significant contributions to preserving the heritage and consciousness of the Bodo tribe," he said. The chief minister also highlighted the steps the state government is taking for the overall welfare and development of the Bodo society.

CM Sarma made several important announcements, including the immediate implementation of the decision to upgrade 50 high

schools in Bodo medium to the higher secondary level, a donation of ₹ 20 lakh for the construction of Sahitya Sabha buildings in Tinsukia, Charaideo, Golaghat, Hojai, Morigaon, Lakhimpur, Biswanath, Kamrup, Barpeta and Sonitpur district, approval of 7 posts in the Assam Legislative Assembly for the transmission of Bodo language, and approval of Rs 1 crore to Kamrup District Literary Sabha for building an auditorium.

He also assured to construct Boko Chakrapani, 10 kilometer road connecting National Highway from Sathkali village, Public Health Center connecting National Highway, 3 kilometer road connecting Boko Railway Station, development of road connecting Boko Girls High School-Tepesia Primary School.

Pramod Boro, the chief executive member of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), attended the conference as a special guest. He appreciated the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and its leaders for organising a successful annual conference that focused on the upliftment and development of the Bodo language, education, and literature.

Other prominent attendees included state cabinet Minister Urkhao Gwra Brahma and vice president of Sahitya Akademi, Prof Kumud Sharma. The annual conference featured a multi-community cultural demonstration, fostering cultural integration and amusement among the audience.

## Man dies by suicide

**HT Correspondent**

**SIVASAGAR, Jan 22:** Rajiv Phukan (47), a resident of Kalibari, Sivasagar, tragically took his own life on Sunday morning. According to neighbours, the man committed suicide while his wife went to the police station to lodge a complaint against him. Phukan worked as a vendor in the DTO office. Domestic troubles were cited as the cause of this tragic incident, as reported by neighbors. The man is survived by his wife, a son, and mother.

## Medical camp held

**HT Correspondent**

**BISWANATH CHARIALI, Jan 22:** Assam Rifles, in collaboration with civil doctors, organised a commendable medical camp as part of the 'Swasthya Sewa Abhiyan' at Addabari Tea Estate at Lokra on Monday, according to a press release. The proactive initiative aimed to promote health and well-being within the community.

The medical camp provided essential healthcare services, including screenings, consultations, and the distribution of medical resources. Assam Rifles' commitment to 'Swasthya Seva Abhiyan' underscores their dedication to serving and uplifting local communities by addressing healthcare needs.

Such events contribute significantly to fostering a culture of health and awareness, leaving a positive impact on the residents of the area and reinforcing the role of the armed forces in community welfare. A total of 259 patients availed the services provided at the medical camp.

## Consecration ceremony of Shri Shri Krishna Sewashram Hari Mandir Namghar

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Jan 22:** On the momentous occasion of Ram Mandir Pran Pratishtha at Ayodhya, the consecration ceremony of the reconstructed premises of Shri Shri Krishna Sewashram Hari Mandir Namghar at Son- aighuli, Dakhingaoon, near Don Bosco School, unfolded with profound spirituality and cultural significance.

Established in 1975, the Namghar, a symbol of religious and community harmony, stood witness to a day filled with sacred activities. The newly built building of the Namghar was dedicated to the devotees on Monday.

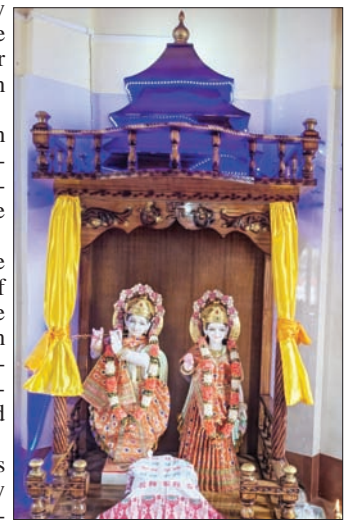
The ceremony commenced with the lighting of earthen lamps at various corners of the temple, symbolising the dispelling of darkness and the arrival of divine light.

The highlight of the day was the grand unveiling of the new idols of Lord Krishna and Radha. Amidst the soul-stirring chants of Naam Kirtan and Harinam, the consecration ceremony took place, infusing the atmosphere with divine energy and sanctity.

As the day unfolded, the religious ambience was further heightened by the enchanting Nagara Naam performance by talented artists from Rangia. Their rhythmic beats and melodic tunes echoed through the surroundings, creating an immersive experience for all present.

The reconstructed premises now stand as a testament to the enduring legacy of Shri Shri Krishna Sewashram Hari Mandir Namghar, embodying the spirit of devotion and community unity. The event drew devotees and well-wishers from the surrounding areas, fostering a sense of togetherness and shared reverence.

The management committee of the Namghar, headed by president Dilip Gogoi, general secretary Ranjit Deka, additional general secretary Biren Sil, advisors Ramakanta Boro and Rabindra Nath Sarma, and members Pratibha Haloi and Jugomai Chetia, expressed their gratitude to the attendees and contributors who made this auspicious occasion a resounding success. The reconstructed premises symbolise not only a physical rejuvenation but also a spiritual renewal for the entire community.



## Rahul Gandhi expresses regret over denied access to Barduwa Than

**HT Correspondent**

**MORIGAON, Jan 22:** With the aim of making the 'Unite India March' (Bharat Jodo Yatra) a great success in preparation for the 2024 MP election, Congress senior leader and MP Rahul Gandhi, along with MPs Joy Ram Ramesh and Gaurav Gogoi, reached Baghara's Galsepa under Jagiroad constituency in Morigaon district.

The Bharat Jodo Yatra was set to move to the birthplace of the saint Sankardeva, Barduwa Than. However, the program led by MP Rahul Gandhi was disrupted in Nagoan, where the administration halted the proceedings. Rahul Gandhi took a rest for almost two and a half hours in his private mobile car.

A press meet related to the Congress's Bharat Jodo Yatra program was held, addressed by MP Joy Ram Ramesh. Addressing the media, MP Ramesh expressed regret for not being allowed to visit Barduwa Than by the Nagoan district administration. Despite repeated appeals to allow Rahul Gandhi to visit Barduwa Than, they were unsuccessful, causing disappointment. The appeal also included a request for the local MLA of Batadrava constituency, Sibamoni Bora, and MP Gaurav Gogoi to visit the Than, but the district administration did not grant permission.

MP Gaurav Gogoi expressed concern that the disruption to Rahul Gandhi's visit to Barduwa Than was a smear on the saint's sacred place. Later, Rahul Gandhi met with leaders of the district committee.

## Senior journalist Sanjib Nandy passes away in Dibrugarh

**HT Correspondent**

**DIBRUGARH, Jan 22:** Dibrugarh mourns the loss of a distinguished figure in the journalism community, as senior journalist and staff reporter of the Bengali daily Dainik Jugasankha, Sanjib Nandy, passed away on Monday morning at around 8:30 am. Nandy, aged 59, was admitted to the Assam Medical College and Hospital (AMCH) after suffering a massive brain stroke at his residence on January 18. Despite undergoing treatment, including a brain operation on January 18, his condition did not improve. He is survived by three elder sisters and a large number of admirers. Born on January 20, 1965, in Dibrugarh, Nandy received his early education at Bengali High School, Dibrugarh, and completed his graduation in Commerce from DHSK Commerce College, Dibrugarh.

## 1920 youth trained by NFR under Rail Kaushal Vikas Yojana

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Jan 22:** To empower youth through entry-level skill training in Railway Training Institutes, the Rail Kaushal Vikas Yojana (RKVY) has been initiated on Indian Railways. Under RKVY, Railways provide technical training to unemployed youth in various trades to enhance their employability and entrepreneurship.

Since its launch by minister of Railways, Communications, Electronics, and Information Technology, Ashwini Vaishnav, in September 2021, a total of 1920 candidates have successfully completed their training at different training institutes over NF Railway until December 2023. In the current financial year until December 2023, 554 trainees have successfully completed training under RKVY. NF Railway plans to induct more trainees in the last quarter of this financial year.

Over NF Railway, six training institutes (Supervisors' Training Centre/New Bongaigaon, Multi-Disciplinary Zonal Training Institute/Alipurduar, Multi-Disciplinary Divisional Training Institute/Katihar, Multi-Disciplinary Divisional Training Institute/Rangiya, Specialised Training Centre/Pandu, Guwahati,



and Specialised Training Centre/Dibrugarh) have been imparting technical training to unemployed youths in various trades. The trades include fitter, electrician, welder, machinist, mechatronics, AC mechanic, concreting, track laying, and basics of information technology and signalling & telecommunication in Indian Railways.

Under this scheme, there is no provision for providing employment to the trainees. However, RKVY is a skill development program for the unemployed youth of India to impart

technical training in various trades, enhancing their employability and entrepreneurship. The scheme aims to improve not only the employability of the youth but also upgrade the skills of the self-employed and those working with contractors through re-skilling and up-skilling, contributing towards the Skill India Mission. Applications can be submitted through the RKVY portal <http://railkvy.indianrailways.gov.in> or through official websites of NF Railway <https://nfr.indianrailways.gov.in/>.

## Conference of Sonitpur Zila Sahitya Sabha concludes

**HT Correspondent**

**BISWANATH CHARIALI, Jan 22:** The 10th edition of the mid-term conference of Sonitpur Zila Sahitya Sabha, organised by the Rangachakuwa branch of the district committee in collaboration with the general public of Rampur, Hatinga, concluded on Sunday at the Kalaguru Auditorium in Rampur, Hatinga, in the northern part of Jamugurihat. The day-long program commenced with the planting of a sapling by Dhaneswar Hazarika, followed by the hoisting of the institutional flag by Sharanan Deva Nath, the vice president of the district committee. Smriti tarpan was offered by Dulal Nath, the secretary of the district committee. A multicultural procession, inaugurated by Bhaben Chandra Nath, a retired teacher, was followed by a delegates' session.

The delegates' session was attended by representatives from Balingara, Panchmile, Paschim Bihaguri,

Karmabir Chandra Nath Sarma, Bahbari, Da-Parbatiya, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Borjhar Teleriya, Rangapara, Uttar Jamuguri, Rangachakuwa, Khanamukh branches, along with the office bearers of the district committee. Mridul Kumar Nath inaugurated the delegates' session. The open session, chaired by Dr Bhupen Saikia, the president of the district committee, was inaugurated by Indra Prasad Saikia, former president of the district committee. Puspita Thapa delivered a welcome address, and Jayanta Madhab Bora, Sahitya Akademi awardee writer, graced the open session as the chief guest. Mahendra Kumar Nath, central executive member of the district committee, unveiled the souvenir edited by Kalpajyoti Nath. Dilip Phukan, recipient of Dhrubajyoti Bora Sahitya Puraskar, was warmly felicitated by the district committee, followed by a prize distribution ceremony.

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

*Our work is the presentation of our capabilities.*  
- Edward Gibbon

## Beginning of new era

In a historic move on January 22, the consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya marked a significant step toward redefining India's character. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's month-long tour of south India, dedicating time to various temples and mathas, has raised eyebrows as it blends politics with religion, prioritizing religious endeavors over addressing the needs of the country's impoverished. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has long aimed to transform India into a Hindu Rashtra, and Modi's recent actions suggest a strategic move to mobilize Hindu sentiment for electoral gain. However, the traditionally tolerant and inclusive nature of Hinduism in south India has posed a challenge to the RSS's efforts. Despite attempts by RSS-affiliated organizations to incite communal tension in southern states, their endeavours to polarize communities have largely failed. South Indian Hindus, known for their inclusive approach to Hinduism, have shown reluctance to align with the RSS's Hinduva ideology. The cultural norms of Hinduism in the region have historically accommodated various beliefs, contributing to a more harmonious coexistence.

Following the consecration of the Ram Temple, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat announced an ambitious programme for the "reconstruction of Bharatvarsh," emphasizing harmony, unity, progress, peace, and well-being for all. The RSS aims to leverage this occasion to communalize the Hindu community, projecting the private celebration organized by the Ram Janmabhumi Trust as a national event, furthering its political Hinduva agenda. Bhagwat's call to end the conflict and bitterness surrounding the Ayodhya dispute signals a shift in focus toward a broader campaign for the reconstruction of Bharatvarsh. The renaming of India to Bharat is a key part of this agenda, with the RSS seeking to replace the former with the latter. The consecration event is being equated with India's Independence Day, and there are indications that the official name change may coincide with the formation of the BJP government for a third consecutive term after the Lok Sabha elections. Modi's efforts to popularize Ram in south India, particularly in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, indicate a strategic move to make the region more receptive to the RSS's vision of a Hindu Rashtra. Despite these efforts, the states' historical support for left and secular parties poses a challenge to the BJP's electoral strategy.

The article highlights the contrasting dynamics between the RSS-led BJP and the disarray within the INDIA bloc, emphasising the pivotal role of the upcoming elections for the RSS's long-standing vision. A defeat for the BJP would not only impact its political standing but would also jeopardize the RSS's century-long effort to shape India into a Hindu Rashtra. The disunity within the INDIA bloc, particularly in Bengal, Bihar, and UP, suggests a lack of concern for the potential threat posed by the RSS and BJP. In conclusion, the consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya signifies a crucial moment in India's political landscape, with the RSS pushing for a shift towards a Hindu Rashtra.

# Netaji's enduring legacy: A vision for new India

Beginning in 2022, the Republic Day celebrations will kick off on January 23, marking the 125th birth anniversary of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Designated as 'Parakram Diwas' or the Day of Valour, this observance reflects the Modi Government's commitment to ensuring that significant milestones in our freedom struggle, such as this, are duly recognized and embedded in the historical narrative. Unlike previous administrations, which made minimal efforts to rectify historical oversights and acknowledge the valorous sacrifices of Bose and the Indian National Army, the current government seeks to give due credit to these legends of our independence movement.

India undeniably boasts a rich civilization, yet regrettably, our authentic history has suffered from inadequate documentation. The saying, "history is written by the victors," holds true, and while our forefathers and the collective civilization emerged victorious in gaining independence from the British Raj, the historical narrative that unfolded immediately after 1947 disproportionately credited Gandhiji and Nehru. This overshadowed and consigned to the archives the monumental contributions of key figures like Sardar Patel and Netaji. The Modi government deserves acknowledgment for the commendable step of declassifying papers related to Bose, bringing them into the public domain.

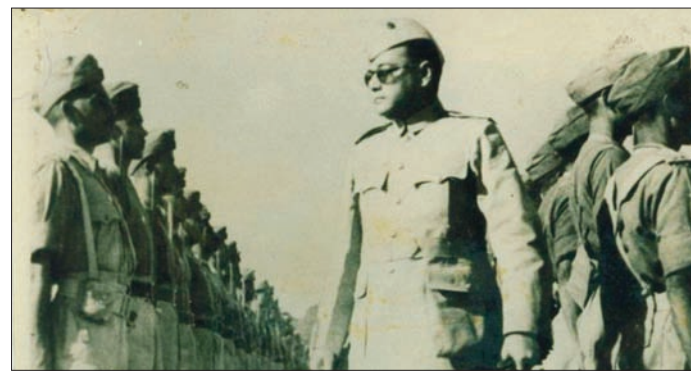
In the 21st century, the relevance of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose persists in India, necessitating the integration of his ideology into contemporary politics and governance. While Netaji's significant contributions to the freedom

struggle are well-documented, there is a compelling need to reassess his governance priorities for a liberated India. This prompts a closer examination of how the vision of a New India, under the leadership of the Modi government, aligns and embodies the ideals set forth by Netaji.

In his renowned Haripura address as the President of the Indian National Congress in February 1938, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose presented a forward-looking blueprint for the future of Free India, earning him the title of the 'pioneer of Indian planning.' Netaji's vision encapsulated a rich legacy of ideas, ideals, and dreams, outlining the trajectory for a liberated India in social, economic, and governance realms. Acknowledging that the socio-economic and political landscape has undergone significant transformations over the past 84 years, it is fair to note that the current government may not have explicitly embraced Netaji's vision in its entirety. Nevertheless, a distinct imprint of his principles can be discerned in the prevailing priorities across various sectors, as I will delineate.

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's foremost priority upon India's liberation was unequivocal: "The moment India is free, our immediate focus should be on organizing national defense to manufacture arms essential for self-defense." This sentiment resonates in the Prime Minister's Vijaydashami address from the past year, where he articulated the ambition to position India as the world's largest and most potent military power through the promotion of indigenous defense production.

India is now on the verge of emerging as a colossal defense



manufacturing hub, emphasizing not only 'Make in India' but also global exports. In line with Netaji's advocacy for women in the armed forces, the contemporary reality manifests in women assuming combat roles, leading units in both the air force and army.

Following the imperative of national security, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose directed his attention towards mitigating poverty, unemployment, and addressing agricultural indebtedness. In his role as the president of the All India Trade Union Congress in 1931, Netaji passionately championed the cause of labor, articulating that, "It is the duty of the State to ensure employment for all. Should the State falter in fulfilling this obligation, it must assume the responsibility of supporting every citizen."

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, a staunch advocate for safeguarding labor rights and addressing poverty, has left an indelible mark on contemporary policies. This is evident in the myriad Yojnas, social sector initiatives, and welfare schemes implemented by the Modi government. These endeavors specifically cater to the unorganized labor sector, constituting 84 percent of the workforce, ensuring a form of Universal Basic Income and a fundamental Ease

of Living. Recognizing that a lack of social security heightens the vulnerability of the economically disadvantaged to financial shocks, the emphasis on progress underscores the imperative that every segment of society reaps equitable benefits.

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, a fervent advocate for the protection of labor rights and the alleviation of poverty, has significantly influenced present-day policies. This influence is discernible in the diverse Yojnas, social sector initiatives, and welfare schemes implemented by the Modi government. These initiatives are tailor-made for the unorganized labor sector, representing 84 percent of the workforce, guaranteeing a form of Universal Basic Income and ensuring a fundamental Ease of Living. Acknowledging that a lack of social security exposes economically disadvantaged individuals to heightened vulnerability during financial shocks, the commitment to progress underscores the necessity for every segment of society to enjoy fair and equitable benefits.

In expressing his perspective, Modi highlighted, "Every decision by Bose in his life was geared towards liberating the country from foreign dominance, with a focus on making the nation

genuinely Atmanirbhar." This ethos of Netaji resonates in the government's unwavering dedication to achieving self-sufficiency, evident in initiatives like Make in India and the PLI schemes. These measures foster a conducive environment for manufacturing, aspiring to position India as the primary manufacturing hub in Asia. The amplification of economic activities on a larger scale carries a ripple effect, generating employment opportunities and fostering prosperity - a rising tide that elevates the prospects for all.

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, in a poignant reminder, urged citizens never to lose faith in India's destiny. His vision encompassed elevating India's prestige to the extent that a liberated nation would emerge as a formidable force in the global world order.

In conclusion, it is imperative to emphasize that the attainment of global respect hinges on two critical pillars: achieving economic prosperity and bolstering our defense capabilities. This vision, articulated by Netaji even before the dawn of freedom, underscores the foundational elements essential for garnering international recognition.

As the Prime Minister and his team fervently re-craft India's narrative, the emergence of New India @75 unfolds with unwavering determination. We will persist with a singular focus, drawing inspiration from Netaji's resounding call to action: "Badayey jaa, badayey jaa, Kadam kadam badayey jaa..." propelling us onward in the pursuit of economic prosperity. This journey aligns with Modi's guiding principle of "Sab ka saath, sab ka vikaas, sab ka prayasaas," symbolizing collective effort and inclusive development.

Jai Bharat, Jai Hind. (The writer can be reached at [dipaknewslive@gmail.com](mailto:dipaknewslive@gmail.com))

## Iran's strikes indicate shifting relationship between nations during Gaza war

By Girish Linganna

The involvement of Iran in the escalating conflict between Israel and Gaza has been somewhat downplayed and indirect. However, in the last week, a series of direct retaliatory actions by Iran have sparked fresh discussions about Tehran's strategic objectives.

There is growing speculation about whether China might be requested to intervene as a mediator between Iran and its neighbouring countries. This comes as analysts suggest that Iran's decision to launch air strikes against non-state groups in Pakistan and Iraq earlier this week was based on a possible misjudgement. Tehran presumably believed that neither nation would be inclined to respond with retaliatory actions.

In retaliation for Iran's missile and drone strikes, which targeted purported bases of Israel's Mossad in northern Iraq and a separate ethnic Baloch insurgent group located in western Pakistan, both Pakistan and Iraq have withdrawn their ambassadors from Tehran. They have also expelled Iranian envoys. These attacks, conducted by Iran against the group fighting in its southeastern Sistan and Baluchistan province, occurred on Monday and Tuesday.

According to Abdul Basit, a senior associate fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, Iran's assumption that Pakistan wouldn't retaliate, fearing entanglement in the broader Middle East conflict stemming from the Israel-Gaza war, was certainly a miscalculation on Iran's part.

Indeed, Basit indicated that Pakistan was compelled to respond. He suggested that not retaliating would have projected an image of weakness to India, its longstanding adversary, and to the Taliban insurgents who are currently battling Pakistani security forces from positions in Afghanistan.

Iran has described its air strikes in Pakistan, Iraq, and on Islamic State (ISIS) positions in Syria as a response to terrorist attacks that occurred on its soil in December and January. On January 3, twin suicide bombings by ISIS in the southeastern Iranian city of Kerman resulted in the deaths of at least 90 indi-

viduals. The attackers were traced by Iranian investigators back to Afghanistan.

Ali Alfoneh, a senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, conveyed to media that the current scenario poses a challenge for Iran, given its lack of interest in entering into a confrontation with the Taliban government. However, Alfoneh noted that to maintain its reputation and fulfill its promise of retaliation, Iran chose to strike at various non-specific targets in Iraq and Syria, and, in a somewhat unexpected move, also in Pakistan.

Alfoneh, author of "Political Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Demise of the Clergy and the Rise of the Revolutionary Guards Corps," suggested to the media that Iran's selection of targets is subject to various interpretations. However, factors like the ease of striking these targets and the anticipated minimal repercussions were likely considerations in Iran's decision-making process.

However, he mentioned that the situation with Pakistan is "somewhat distinct". Iran has generally refrained from direct involvement in the Israel-Gaza conflict, choosing instead to act through its allies in the so-called Axis of Resistance. This includes the continuous assaults on commercial vessels in the Red Sea, carried out by Yemen's Houthi rebels.

Experts believe that Iran's strikes in Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria are intended to convey messages to its rivals. According to Guy Burton, an independent analyst and former instructor of international politics at the University of Kurdistan Hewler in Arbil - the northern Iraqi city hit by Iran on Monday - one of the key messages is Iran's demonstration of its status as a regional power with the ability to take decisive action when it deems necessary.

The air strikes by Iran also underscored certain vulnerabilities in the region, such as Iraq's incapacity for retaliation. Furthermore, a third message from Iran, according to Burton, is its capability to indirectly target American and Israeli interests, while likely indicating its preference to avoid escalating the situation into a more direct conflict.

Burton, the author of "China and Middle East Conflicts: Re-

sponding to War and Rivalry from the Cold War to the Present," suggests that Tehran is likely weighing how much they can escalate confrontations without triggering internal dissent. Such domestic unrest could potentially impact the regime's standing and stability.

Realistically, given its current economic challenges, the Iranian regime is not in a position to handle the potential repercussions of an escalated conflict. Certainly, Tehran is likely deliberating on the extent to which they can intensify confrontations without causing internal unrest that could lead to opposition, potentially jeopardizing the regime's stability and position, as noted by Burton, author of "China and Middle East Conflicts: Responding to War and Rivalry from the Cold War to the Present."

The timing of the US and UK air strikes against the Houthis, occurring just days apart, not only diminishes Western criticism of Iran's air strikes but also highlights that both sides are capable of similar military strategies. Analysts suggest that to avoid further escalation of Iran's misstep, China might need to step in diplomatically. This would involve leveraging its strong ties with Pakistan and its political influence with both Iran and Iraq.

During a regular press briefing on Thursday, Mao Ning, spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, expressed Beijing's earnest desire for both parties to remain calm and restrained, to prevent any further escalation of tensions.

Mao Ning further stated that China is ready to contribute positively to de-escalate the situation if both parties desire it. China has significant investments in Pakistan's Balochistan province, particularly the Gwadar port on the Indian Ocean, which is linked by land to its southwestern Xinjiang region. Similarly, China has made considerable investments in the oil and gas sector of Iraq.

Beijing holds the role of a strategic ally to Tehran and served as the key facilitator in an agreement reached last March. This agreement was pivotal in reinstating diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, ending a seven-year break in relations.

According to Singapore-based Basit, considering its economic and strategic stakes, China cannot afford to remain a

passive observer in the face of rising tensions. He also noted that this situation is as much a test of China's diplomatic clout and influence in these regions and countries as it is a potential threat to its economic investments, should tensions escalate further.

Contrary to Pakistan, Iraq couldn't respond militarily to Iran, as its Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's government is heavily influenced by a political coalition aligned with Tehran, known as the Coordination Framework (CF).

Al-Sudani is facing increasing pressure from his coalition partners to remove the 2,500 U.S. troops stationed in Iraq. This comes in the wake of clashes between the U.S. military and Shia militias backed by the CF, which began with the onset of the Israel-Gaza conflict on October 7.

Analysts have noted that while he has publicly consented, Al-Sudani has not established a timeline and appears to be delaying action. "Iraq remains a fragile state, lacking the strength to resist external influences, be it from other countries or non-state entities. This includes Iran-backed militias which also possess a local base and support within the country," Burton observed.

Since most of China's investments in Iraq are in the southern region, as opposed to the Kurdish north affected by Iran, Beijing might be less motivated to engage in diplomatic efforts. Rather, the Chinese authorities would probably view attacks in Pakistan's Balochistan province unfavourably, "particularly if they were seen as impacting Chinese interests in that area," Burton suggested.

If China were to attempt to "curb Iranian actions," specifically in areas where its own interests are at stake, it might encounter resistance, with Iran potentially leveraging its relationship with India. Similar to China's involvement in developing Pakistan's Gwadar port, Iran aims to advance the Chabahar port, with support from India, following an agreement between the two nations this Monday.

Thus, Tehran might perceive any disruptions at Gwadar as a beneficial scenario for them and Chabahar, Burton noted. "The Chinese and Iranians do not agree on everything," he added. (IPA Service)

## A confident Sheikh Hasina is set to combat West's political pressure in her fresh term

By: Ashis Biswas

In Bangladesh, the recent Awami League (AL) victory in the 2024 parliamentary polls has left major world powers sharply divided and common people confused. Significantly, the none-too-uncertain outcome has not left too many Bangladeshis noticeably jubilant, excepting ruling AL leaders.

The comfortable margin of the AL's victory has bought ruling Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed a much needed breathing space after a prolonged, unusually acrimonious pre-election campaign.

However her relief may yet be short-lived, in the context of the formidable economic and political challenges Bangladesh is currently up against. What worries even her friendliest advisers is whether in the medium term, world economic trends will remain as acutely unfavourable for most developing countries as at present.

This is particularly important for Bangladesh, a country which observers now concede, has re-elected to power the AL, because of its aggressive promotion of economic development in recent years. The undeniable economic progress made during the AL tenure leading to booming exports, rising remittances and a sustained growth in the domestic economy through spectacular infra development projects providing mass employment, is admitted - however grudgingly - by even her powerful political opponents in the US and EU.

The 2024 poll results therefore provide confirmation of conventional political wisdom among policymakers that most voters respond to visible economic progress, while sidelining other controversial issues. This is exactly what the beleaguered Prime Minister and her party had been desperately hoping, would happen. For once, the ugly mix of corruption, nepotism and authoritarianism in Bangladesh's domestic politics, mattered less than economic growth.

The Western bloc of countries, while generally deprecating the poll outcome, have warned Dhaka that they would continue to monitor whether the AL addresses these problems transparently, going forward. To the US, EU and some United Nation officials, the size of the AL's one-sided victory did not mean a thing.

Since the poll stats have been widely reported in various media, there is little point in repeating them. Suffice it to say that the eventual figures released by the Bangladesh Election Commission did not satisfy the critical norms set by the West.

Statements from top Western politicians in fact put Bangladesh on notice that the new government would remain very much under their critical

scanner. In view of reports of intimidation, widespread arrests of opposition workers, the major boycott of polls by the biggest challenging party, the outcome of 2024 Bangladesh Parliamentary elections remained open to questioning. The overall polling percentage exceeding just 40%, was also suspect.

Significantly however, while the Western bloc indicated its disapproval of Bangladeshi poll results, the country could not be dismissively sidelined. Three major countries, including immediate neighbours China and India as well as Russia, promptly congratulated the reigning PM on winning yet another term and expressing their support for the future as well.

Presumably following this ringing endorsement of Bangladesh from the non-western bloc, some more countries including such international heavyweights as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Japan and Singapore, also sent congratulatory messages.

The relief in Dhaka, according to most observers, was palpable. As senior AL leaders had repeatedly stressed in private conversations, securing the support of China and India in their immediate neighbourhood was top priority. China had helped Bangladesh massively in recent years, with an assured financial package of \$22 billion over the next five or so years. Present Indian assistance to Bangladesh exceeds \$5 billion. The comparative lack of similar investments from the West (excepting Japan), makes ensuring the present levels of support from Beijing and Delhi an all important task for Dhaka.

The Western reaction could not dismiss the 2024 election results as manipulated or rigged, as it done while referring to earlier elections - not yet, that is. This has considerably added to the disappointment of the opposition in Bangladesh. Some senior Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leaders, enjoy considerable support/sympathy from Western governments as well as various HR groups and institutions in recent years. They now feel let down. Many were hoping for an automatic rejection of the poll results in the West in view of the continuing non-participation of the BNP in the polls, for the second time running. It seems they had overplayed their hands and miscalculated.

But this is not to suggest that the AL is looking forward to a smooth sailing from here on - far from it. The West still fully retains its powers to impose economic sanctions on countries it considers unfriendly, including developing countries. Bangladesh has already had a mild taste of US/imposed sanctions. Quite apart from imposing visa restrictions for selected political individuals/officials, there could be more damaging sanctions in store -- a

sanction on the present level of imports of Bangladesh-made garments in the West for instance, could immediately sabotage the hefty export earnings that Dhaka enjoys within the EU and in the US-- these constitute the bulk of \$40 billion or so earned during a good year!

Is there an immediate threat of this happening? No, but Bangladeshi analysts have warned of such a possibility sometime in the future, depending on the future course of the patently uneasy relations between Bangladesh and the Western bloc.

As it is, there is the strong possibility of Bangladesh earning less from its exports from 2027-28 onwards, as the traditional advantage it enjoyed as an exporting LDC would no longer be available. Bangladesh policymakers are hard at work to arrange for the production of high quality garments too to compete with China on level terms.

Dhaka would also have to repay heavy amounts on official loans it had taken from various international agencies and institutions, which would certainly strain its forex reserves. As it is, its reserves are down to around \$15/16 billion at present, on account of the Ukraine war and the attendant economic impact. Earlier, it had reserves to the tune of \$40 billion or so.

The point: the ruling AL despite its impressive election victory, can hardly afford to antagonise the West in the medium term and must undertake convincing efforts to improve its domestic political functioning, its HR record and cut down on mounting corruption and political partisanship.

The contrasting reactions from the West and the non-aligned bloc headed by the BRICS countries over the Bangladeshi poll results further indicate that the new emerging alignment among major nations over recent world developments such as the war in Ukraine, continues. The West, regardless of the relative strength of the US dollar as the World's leading currency and economic domination, cannot hope to dictate as before to many African as well as Asian countries to fall in line with its objectives or political agenda.

The effective fightback against US/EU sanctions by Russia and the international support it continues to enjoy, cannot fail to encourage countries like Bangladesh. Many developing countries, thanks to the level of economic progress achieved by the BRICS countries, are well aware that they would not face the crippling pains of sanctions and boycotts a la Cuba in the past.

Bangladesh is no exception. If the West carries its threats too far, it may end up driving Bangladesh, an important South Asian country of 170 million people with a fairly strong economy, into the eager embrace of China. (IPA Service)

# Mr. Kashyap, Vanga's 'honesty' is ok! What about abuse and disrespect?

By: Tina Sequeira

Animal has been nothing short of controversy way before its release. Remember Sandeep Reddy Vanga's infamous interview with Anupama Chopra where he made some wacky statements? "When you are deeply in love and deeply connected to a woman (and vice versa) if you don't have the liberty of slapping each other, then I don't see anything there." He delivered on his promise of an actually violent movie with Animal. I'd not watched Arjun Reddy or Kabir Singh before watching this interview. What struck me was the gut feeling that Vanga will stay in the industry for long. First, because of his deep conviction in his work, that's both good and bad, and which I'll explain at the end. Second, being a newbie director, he displayed an unusual courage to take on the bigwigs in the industry.

Then, I watched Kabir Singh. Frankly, this kind of Alpha male is not my cup of tea. A man who dictates who I should befriend in college (remember the inane "fat chicks make good friends" philosophy that Kabir does out to Preeti) and sleeps with other women while on a temporary break-up is definitely not my kind of partner. I'd run a thousand miles away from such neanderthals. I'm sure there are many women like me, who value their freedom over a man's control over their lives—and self-respect over a man's infidelity. The roaring success of Vanga's movies indicates one thing. Vanga's beefed-up caricature of the alpha male is the wet dream of the average sanskaar Bharatiya man. Throw in some Islamophobia like in Animal, it becomes an orgy.

While the audience has given its verdict with the movie's box-office success, I'd like to focus on the industry reactions.

## Anurag Kashyap

The most recent enabling voice from the industry is from Anurag Kashyap who praised Vanga to the skies. "Had a great evening with @sandeepreddy.vanga The most misunderstood, judged and reviled filmmaker at the moment. To me he is the most honest, vulnerable and a lovely person. I wanted to meet the man and I had questions and he answered everything I asked of him about his film that I actually saw twice. Thank you for being patient and being yourself."

I'd like to disagree respectfully with Kashyap here. I'm sure Vanga has good qualities too, like all of us. But when there are obvious and valid criticisms coming his way, it's irresponsible to brush it under the carpet because he's a hit film director. Would Kashyap, Varma and Johar's tunes be the same had Animal been a box-office dud?

## Ram Gopal Varma

One of Animal's earliest praises came from Ram Gopal Varma. This "once upon a time" veteran and versatile director who gave gems like Shiva, Kshana Kshanam, Raat, Kaun, Satya, Company, Sarkar, Rakta Charitra and more, has now clearly lost both his midas touch and mind. Today, he's downgraded to making subpar movies and acting horny with young aspiring actresses and sharing the despicable visuals on his social profiles.

The eulogizing tone in his open letter to Vanga, where he expressed his ardent de-

sire to lick Ranbir's feet and kiss Vanga's mouth was nothing short of hilarious and embarrassing.

It's okay to love and praise one's work, but not at the cost of being blindsided by the obvious faults of the movie.

But I guess, these kinds of men are all cut from the same cloth with a similar outlook on women being nothing more than meat.

## Ranbir Singh

I can see only two reasons for Ranbir Kapoor doing this film. One, for a box-office blockbuster and two, for proving his versatility as an actor.

Ranbir Singh is a smooth operator. Otherwise, how can one explain his chameleon-like statements during the promo interviews? In one interview, he said,

"Alia and I speak so much about each other's work. I really respect her as an artist and I really respect her mind and how she thinks. Every scene or every day when I am going to shoot the film, I would discuss it with her and she has helped me with scenes where I was scared as an actor that 'Is it sounding too wrong?'"

I have never pushed the boundaries so much as a character. I have always tried to portray goodness on the screen. She played that barometer, saying, 'Listen, it is fine. It's a character, and it is making sense. There is an idea and thought behind it.'

Ranbir washed his hands clean and shared the blame subtly with his wife, Alia Bhatt. I'm sure he knew what he was getting into while signing up for Animal. Ranbir's goody-goody act is nullified by his previous statement, where he called Kabir Singh as the greatest love story ever.

"Main Sandeep ka bohut bada fan raha hoon. I have watched 'Arjun Reddy' and 'Kabir Singh'. Jab maine 'Arjun Reddy' dekhi, 'Kabir Singh' ke announcement se pehle, mujhe laga ki isse better love story koi ban hi nahi sakti. Aur Sandeep ne phirse wahi love story 'Kabir Singh' mein banayi. Maine kaha main challenge deta hu, ye hit ho hi nahi sakti. 'Arjun Reddy' ne jo kamal kiya tha, jo performances the, jo music tha, wo recreate ho nahi payega. But he did it again. When he offered me this film, ye mera saubhagya tha, I was grateful ki I was given an opportunity to work for a filmmaker like him."

So, it's clear Ranbir Kapoor took on the role of Animal with full conviction of his character and the good faith and admiration in his director, Sandeep Reddy Vanga.

That Ranbir Kapoor is playing a virtuous Lord Ram next opposite Sai Pallavi, who plays his lead as Sita in Ramayan, couldn't have been better timing and strategic move. His image makeover from a Casanova to a family man and doting dad helps too.

## Karan Johar

Now, this was a major disappointment and contradiction from a director who delivered the recent blockbuster "Rocky Aur Rani Ki Prem Kahaani". KJo discussed the societal implications of the success of Kabir Singh and Arjun Reddy in the Koffee with Karan 7 episode with Ananya Panday and Vijay Deverakonda. Ananya Panday spoke for all us like-minded people when she called out its toxicity.

"I love the songs in the film and I thought their performances were amazing,

but I don't think that's something I would be okay with in a relationship or if I see it around me with any of my friends. The thing with cinema is a lot of people see it happening on screen, so they think it's okay to start behaving like that in real life."

It came as a shock when Karan Johar sang praises for Sandeep Reddy Vanga's Animal, calling it 2023's Best Film. I do not know if it's his favourite Alia Bhatt connection or the fact that as producer, nothing's more important than box-office success that propelled him to the double take. Or was it honestly a genuine admiration for Vanga's style of filmmaking? One can never tell for sure now.

## My Take

It's true there's nothing that succeeds like success. So, Vanga's solid support from the likes of Karan Johar, Anurag Kashyap, Ranbir Kapoor, Alia Bhatt who described Animal as "Khatarnaak" in a flattering tone, and Ram Gopal Varma in the industry seems to come from a place of shallowness and callousness.

A right is a right and wrong is a wrong, irrespective of its commercial performance. It's why I have respect for the likes of Ranveer Singh who rejected the role of Kabir Singh as it was 'too dark', Javed Akhtar who termed Animal's success as 'dangerous', Masaan's director Niraj Ghaywan and Varun Grover who critiqued Anurag Kashyap's post, even Kangana Ranaut who expressed her disappointment in the audience's taste for misogynistic movies, and Shah Rukh Khan who indirectly took a jab at Animal and his responsibility as an artist.

Earlier, I'd mentioned how Vanga would stay in the industry for long because of his strong self-belief that's both good and bad. Good, because he can always stay resilient and focused despite the mounting criticism. Bad, because when your self-belief gets extreme, bordering on and even crossing all levels of arrogance and stubbornness, it's a sure-shot recipe for downfall. You're not open to learning from others' perspectives and working on your blind-spots that can elevate you from being a 'good' to a 'great' filmmaker. The worst is when you abuse the likes of Javed Akhtar, Rajeev Masand, and Sucharita Tyagi for having a different perspective.

Also, a movie's commercial box-office is no sign of its excellence. We've had so many box-office duds such as Lamhe, Andaz Apna Apna, Tamasha, Lootere, Jagga Jaasos, or Swades that proved to be gems with lasting power. We have so many mediocre to less than mediocre movies minting crores at the box-office, only to be forgotten soon forever.

I rest my case with Shah Rukh Khan's words. He played negative roles with elan in the past and spoke out against its glorification.

"I am a guy who is hopeful and tells happy stories. The heroes I play do good things, they give hope and happiness. If I play a bad guy, I make sure he suffers a lot, he dies a dog's death, because I believe goodness begets goodness. And I believe badness deserves a kick in the back side. I should play honest roles that give people courage to dream. I should keep working hard quietly with the hope that life doesn't topple my apple cart anytime soon." (Courtesy: Youth Ki Awaaz)

# Could dark chocolate have a blood pressure-lowering effect?

By Jessica Freeborn

High blood pressure can be dangerous to cardiovascular health. Prevention and management of high blood pressure can help ensure many positive health outcomes but researchers are still seeking to understand the best methods for preventing high blood pressure.

A recent study published in Nature Scientific Reports examined how the intake of dark chocolate may help decrease the risk of essential hypertension (high blood pressure).

The results also suggest that consuming dark chocolate may decrease blood clot risk, but researchers couldn't establish a causal relationship.

The results point to the potential benefits of this food and the need for future research into its potential health benefits.

## The dangers of hypertension and the benefits of dark chocolate

High blood pressure or hypertension is when the force blood exerts on the arteries in the body gets too high.

Essential hypertension or high blood pressure involves high blood pressure that doesn't have a known cause. Non-study author Dr. Rigved Tadwalkar, a board certified cardiologist at Providence Saint John's Health Center in Santa Monica, CA, explained to Medical News Today:

## How dark chocolate lowers essential hypertension risk

Researchers wanted to understand more about how dark chocolate may help lower the risk for several cardiovascular diseases.

One way researchers can look into possible causality as well is to use a technique called Mendelian randomization. This method involves looking at genetic differences to provide evidence that a particular intervention has a causal effect and helps eliminate the risk of reverse causation.

While not perfect proof, it allows for safety and data collection that isn't always possible with other studies due to ethical concerns.

Researchers of this study were able to use data from publicly available genome-wide association studies. They looked at dark chocolate intake and risk for several cardiovascular diseases, including essential hypertension, coronary heart disease, heart failure, stroke, blood clots beginning in the

pressure prevention. Research like this could lead to people making more specific healthy food choices.

Dark chocolate is one food with many potential health benefits that researchers are interested in studying. Non-study author and registered dietitian nutritionist Karen Z. Berg explained to Medical News Today:

"For chocolate to be considered 'dark chocolate' it has to contain at least 50% cocoa solids, and many dark chocolate is made up of 70% or even 90% cocoa which leaves a lot less room for other additives like sugar. This is why dark chocolate tends to be more bitter than milk chocolate varieties."

"Cocoa is rich in flavanols, so the higher the percentage of cocoa in your chocolate, the more health benefits are possible. [D]ark chocolate is also a good source of fiber, iron, magnesium, phosphorus and zinc.

It is important to note that to get the most benefits, you want to choose more natural forms of cocoa. It is also important to note that the higher the percentage of cocoa you have, the more caffeine it will contain." — Karen Z. Berg

## How dark chocolate lowers essential hypertension risk

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veins, and heart attack.

The analysis results were promising for the positives of dark chocolate intake. Researchers found that genetically predicted dark chocolate intake may help lower the risk for essential hypertension. The data further points to a possible causal relationship between dark chocolate intake and decreased risk for essential hypertension.

They also found a possible association between dark chocolate intake and a reduced risk for venous thromboembolism, which is when a blood clot forms in a vein.

## Chocolate-derived treatments for hypertension?

Dr. Tadwalkar noted that the results held promise despite the study's limitations.

"The study's findings hold significant promise for the prevention of essential hypertension. If future research confirms the causal relationship, it could pave the way for not only dietary recommendations but also dark chocolate-derived bioactive compounds or extracts in the development of novel therapies for the prevention or management of essential hypertension. Ultimately, the study offers exciting possibilities for the future of essential hypertension prevention."

The researchers did not find any associations between dark chocolate intake and other cardiovascular diseases. Dr. Cheng-Han Chen, a board certified interventional cardiologist and medical director of the Structural Heart Program at MemorialCare Saddleback Medical Center in Laguna Hills, CA, who was not involved in the study, commented with his thoughts on the study to MNT:

"Of the diseases studied, dark chocolate intake was specifically associated with reduced risk of hypertension, but not any other conditions. While this is a notable finding, its clinical implication is limited."

"The clinical cardiovascular concern for hypertension would be on its potential impact on rates of resultant conditions such as heart attack and stroke, but no other associations between dark

chocolate intake and other cardiovascular conditions were identified. I wouldn't discourage dark chocolate intake based on this study, but I also wouldn't recommend increasing dark chocolate intake based on this study alone," Dr. Chen added.

## Will eating more chocolate improve my heart health?

This research also presents particular challenges and limitations.

First, the sample size exposure data was small, which may have impacted the results. Second, they lost some of the single nucleotide polymorphisms summary-level data for stroke and heart failure, which could have affected the results. The research also utilized data from European ancestry, meaning the results cannot be generalized to other populations.

Their research did not allow for certain analyses, such as looking at the amount of dark chocolate intake or the risk for cardiovascular diseases based on factors like age or gender.

There was also some potential bias because of sample overlap. Finally, there may have been some risk of confounding regarding coronary heart disease data.

Overall, the results point to the potential benefits of dark chocolate for preventing essential hypertension. It also opens the door for future research in this area.

Dr. Tadwalkar noted the following:

"Several exciting research avenues remain open in the wake of studies like this one. Next steps include unraveling the precise mechanisms by which dark chocolate consumption influences cardiovascular health.

This could involve utilizing advanced genetic techniques to understand how dark chocolate intake might influence gene expression patterns relevant to cardiovascular health."

"Also, further research could delve into the potential impact of dark chocolate on other cardiovascular endpoints, such as atherosclerotic plaque formation and progression, cardiac function and remodeling, as well as blood clotting and fibrinolysis," he added. (Courtesy: Medical News Today)

# Bihar school of Athens: How a 19<sup>th</sup> century art society brought together Indian and European artists

By: Sonal

In the year 1824 in the city of Patna, straddling the crossroads of rising European trade and a declining Mughal empire, an unlikely group of people met for an even more unlikely purpose. Under the stewardship of amateur English artist Charles D'Oyly, the group, made up of Europeans and Indians, decided on July 1 to form the Bihar School of Athens.

It was to be an art society for the "promotion of arts and sciences and for the circulation of fun and merriment of all descriptions".

This Bihar School of Athens, also called the United Patna and Gaya Society, would meet at the Patna house of Raja Mitrajit Singh, the ruler of Tekari, known for his interest in poetry and history. Patna of that time was a city of mixed ethnicity with the factories of European trading companies and their bungalows alongside the lavish houses of Indian merchants and landlords interspersed with mosques and temples.

Glimpses of the bustling city with its crowded bazaar street and picturesque countryside were captured in the artwork produced by members of D'Oyly's society. Patna of the early 19th century was also a leading centre for the collection of opium – and D'Oyly was Bihar's opium collection agent. The lucrative crop was cultivated along the Ganga River, processed at the Gulzarbagh factory into balls of opium and shipped in crates to Calcutta.

With the expanding power of the British East India Company and Calcutta's emergence as a distinct British India stronghold,

it was Patna that retained its unique, cosmopolitan character. In a departure from solidifying racial divisions and norms, D'Oyly's "Athenians" also included "native" Indians.

D'Oyly himself was disdainful of British high society. But it was this disdain that brought together like-minded artists rooted in the liberalism of 19th-century India, leaving behind a unique legacy of British Indian visual history.

## Past and present

As much as D'Oyly may have scorned British high society, he was very much a part of it, having been born into nobility and benefitted from influential connections. He was born in 1781 in Murshidabad where his father, Sir John Hadley D'Oyly, was a resident at the court of the Nawab of Bengal. D'Oyly was the godson of the wife of Governor-General of Bengal Warren Hastings.

D'Oyly's parents moved back to England when he was four and he completed his education there. When D'Oyly turned 17, he received a recommendation from Hastings and joined the Bengal civil services as the Collector of the Customs at Calcutta.

The time during which D'Oyly grew up as a child in Bengal was that of Hastings's orientalism that was defined by a keen interest in Indology and the free intermingling of British and Indians. But things had changed entirely by the time D'Oyly returned to serve as a member of the Bengal Civil Services under Charles Cornwallis as governor general.

Cornwallis had a contempt for inter-racial mingling and shunted the British in Calcutta who had married to Indians to the outskirts of the colonial capital. The British-Indian society of Calcutta,

characterised by its Europeanness in architectural style and segregation of natives and British, did not appeal to D'Oyly.

D'Oyly was derivative of the British imperialists and the Indian babus in their service. His European in India, published in 1813, was a satirical take on the lives of the British in India as well as a racist mockery of the Indians who served them.

In 1785, Hastings was removed from Bengal and sent to London and would soon face trial for corruption. But D'Oyly had continued his correspondence with the influential British administrator, who suggested that the young Englishman turn to the countryside rather than political Calcutta for his postings.

Artistically, too, it seemed that D'Oyly was becoming inclined towards the Indian countryside. During his tenure in Dacca from 1808 to 1812, D'Oyly had met George Chinnery and later James Atkinson, two leading artists of the time. Chinnery's lasting influence on D'Oyly's style of art turned his attention to the picturesque countryside of Bihar and Bengal. After serving as the Collector of Dacca and later as the Collector at Calcutta, D'Oyly became a commercial resident of Patna in 1820. A year later, he was appointed the city's opium agent and worked in Patna till 1831, which were his most productive years as an artist.

## Patna of the old and new

Unlike Calcutta, Patna was a decadent city reminiscent of the old aristocracy. Segregated due to ethnicity from the times of Cornwallis, it was art that brought literary and visual artists and patrons together in Patna. The creation of a distinct British-India

in Calcutta had sidelined Anglo-Indians, many of whom were part of D'Oyly's circle, or were close to his father and Warren Hastings's family.

The Bihar School of Athens, thus, was a distinct outlier, becoming an artistic haven for British, Anglo-Indian and Indian artists and migrants.

The Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta, for instance, which had been pursuing oriental research since 1784, admitted only European members until 1828. Similarly, the Indian Museum, established in Calcutta in 1814, did not have any Indian artists in its collection though it held the work of leading European artists of the time. London, by then, had a history of founding art societies, the most prominent of which was the Royal Academy of Arts. The Academy had art schools that trained students through copying old masterpieces as well as drawing directly from nature.

D'Oyly, in many ways, was perhaps trying to establish a similar art movement in Patna and hoped to train local Indians to draw directly from nature, with accuracy. A detail from a drawing of a European gentleman with his 'munshree' or teacher of native language, from 'European in India'. Credit: Williamson, Thomas, Captain. The European in India, London: Published and sold by Edward Orme, 1813, via the Yale Center for British Art.

But unlike the Royal Academy, which did not admit amateurs – including D'Oyly – as its members, the Bihar School of Athens was a body of amateur artists interested in promoting art. The "Athenians" included George Chinnery as patron, D'Oyly as president and CW Smith, a bird

painter and naturalist, as vice president.

Other "Athenians" were D'Oyly's wife, Elizabeth Jane, an artist herself, and James Young, an officer of the Bengal Horse artillery and an amateur artist. John Elliot, son of Lord Minto, as well as Mary Fendall, the wife of Sir John Hadley O'Doyly II, were also members. Others such as Sarah Amherst, the wife of Lord Amherst and a botanist, and Robert Smith, an engineer were also part of the group.

Between 1828-'32, D'Oyly set up the Behar Lithographic Press. The Behar Amateur Lithographic Scrapbooks, published between 1828 and 1830, comprise the work of several artists who were "Athenians". The work of two Indian artists, Shiv Dayal and Jai Ram Das, can also be found among the pages of the scrapbook. Das, who was D'Oyly's assistant in the Behar Lithographic Press, was an artist of the Bihar School of Athens and made prints in stone of some of the artworks for D'Oyly. His cousin, Hulas Lal, had moved from Benares and came to Patna where he was hired as a draughtsman by the East India Company. He worked for Indian and European patrons and several of his works have been found dated 1816.

Nisar Mehdi was another artist who migrated from Murshidabad to Patna. He, too, produced artwork as part of the Bihar School of Athens. Mehdi worked about the same time as Sewak Ram, another famous artist who had also moved from Murshidabad to Patna. Mehdi came from a family of artists who had painted for the Mughals and later for the nawabs of Murshidabad.

Fakir Chand Lal, who had his

atelier in Lodi Katra where he taught art, also made drawings for Christopher Webb and D'Oyly's Oriental Ornithology, published by the Behar Lithographic Press in 1829.

During his Patna days, D'Oyly's Behar Lithographic Press also published the Indian Sports (1829), a visual account of the hunting expeditions of Indians and British. Costumes of India (1830), Sketches of the New Road in Journey from Calcutta to Gyah (1830) and Feathered Game of Hindostan (1828).

## Art transcends divides

Away from the racial politics and openness of British Calcutta, the Athenians focused on scenes from everyday life, landscapes and flora and fauna – the three artistic themes in vogue in the 19th century. D'Oyly gained a reputation in England as an amateur artist who had introduced the picturesque to native artists in Patna. But at the same time, D'Oyly was also influenced by the artists of Patna.

Although it is difficult to precisely point out who influenced whom, there are two ways of seeing D'Oyly's approach: he was either liberal for his era and believed that Indians and the British could both be part of an art society, unlike the segregation in place in Calcutta. Or he felt that Indian artists lacked skills but could be taught in European style, which is symptomatic of the British civilising mission of Indians from the late 18th century onwards.

But there is another possible interpretation, the more likely one, which is that the Patna to which D'Oyly had arrived in was already a centre of artistic pro-

duction blending Mughal, Murshidabad and European styles. Patna was already a centre of artistic pursuit and artists sold their work to patrons on demand. D'Oyly and other European artists, may have been just as influenced by the ancient city and also introduced the European style in art.

The commingling of art with Patna's other nerve centres was also where the "Patna Kalam" was born, a unique art style influenced by the Mughal era, Bengal's Murshidabad – another great centre of art – and the Europeans. The Patna Kalam was characterised by its "kajli siayhi", which literally translates to black ink, which was used to draw the outline of illustrations.

D'Oyly's corpus of work is replete with the picturesque of the British aesthetic theory and later romanticism and realism. But the influence of the Patna Kalam is evident in the depictions of the everyday lives of people and the streets. It was the demand for artwork from Europeans and a growing Indian middle-class bureaucracy that the culture of consumption of artworks emerged from.

D'Oyly's influence really lay in his zeal for the promotion of art and the Bihar School of Athens and the Behar Lithographic Press were his attempts to popularise art. In promoting the free mingling of artists, regardless of ethnicity, and the opening up his residence and studio to anybody keen on art, at a time when racial segregation and pomp of the British headquarters in Calcutta were a norm, D'Oyly also made a political statement intertwined with his rich artistic legacy. (Courtesy: Scroll.in)

# Palestinian death toll in Gaza surpasses 25,000 while Israel announces the death of another hostage

**RAFAH, Jan 22:** The Palestinian death toll from the war between Israel and Hamas has soared past 25,000, the Health Ministry in the Gaza Strip said on Sunday, while Israel announced the death of another hostage and appeared far from achieving its goals of freeing more than 100 others and crushing the militant group.

The war's deaths, destruction and displacement are without precedent in the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The war has divided Israelis while the offensive threatens to ignite a wider conflict involving Iran-backed groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen that support the Palestinians.

Furious with the Israeli government and demanding the release of remaining hostages, relatives and others set up a tent camp outside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's residence in Jerusalem and vowed to stay until a deal is reached.

Netanyahu, in a defiant new statement, said he stressed in his conversation Friday with U.S. President Joe Biden that he rejects Hamas demands for a cease-fire, Israeli forces' withdrawal and the release of Palestinians held by Israel in exchange for the remaining hostages. He said that

agreeing means another devastating Hamas attack "would only be a matter of time." Netanyahu also rejects calls from U.S. its closest ally, for postwar plans that would include a path to Palestinian statehood. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the refusal to accept a two-state solution unacceptable.

"The Middle East is a tinderbox. We must do all we can to prevent conflict igniting across the region," Guterres added. "And that starts with an immediate humanitarian cease-fire to relieve the suffering in Gaza."

The war began with Hamas' attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7. Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took about 250 hostages back to Gaza.

Israel's military announced the death of 19-year-old Sgt. Shay Levinson, who was buried Sunday in south Lebanon. His date of death was given as Oct. 7, but there were no further details. According to Israeli media, his body is still in Gaza.

Israel has responded to the Oct. 7 attack with a bombing campaign and ground invasion that laid waste to entire neighborhoods in northern Gaza and spread south, striking some areas where it told civilians



to seek refuge. Ground operations are now focused on the southern city of Khan Younis and built-up refugee camps in central Gaza dating to the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation.

"The plumes of smoke from tanks, artillery and the planes of the air force will continue to cover the sky over the Gaza Strip until we will achieve our goals," Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said.

Since the war started, 25,105 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, while another 62,681 have been wounded, the Health Ministry said. The toll included the 178 bodies brought to Gaza's hospitals since Saturday, Health Ministry spokesperson Ashraf Al-Qidra said.

The overall toll is thought to be higher

because many casualties remain buried under rubble or in areas that medics cannot reach, Al-Qidra said.

The Health Ministry does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its figures but says about two-thirds of the people killed in Gaza were women and minors. The ministry is part of the Hamas-run government, but its casualty figures from previous wars were largely consistent with those of U.N. agencies and even the Israeli military.

The Israeli military says it has killed around 9,000 militants, without providing evidence, and blames the high civilian death toll on Hamas because it positions fighters, tunnels and other militant infrastructure in dense neighborhoods. The military released footage of a tunnel under a residential neighborhood in Khan Younis where the army believes at least 20 hostages were kept at different times.

Israel's military said the demolition last week of a key building at Israa University in Gaza was under review, and asserted that preliminary findings indicated Hamas had used the compound for military purposes. The university has said the "attack" came weeks after Israeli forces occupied the building.

The war has displaced some 85% of Gaza's residents, with hundreds of thousands packing U.N.-run shelters and camps in the south. U.N. officials say a quarter of the population of 2.3 million is starving as a trickle of humanitarian aid reaches them because of the fighting and Israeli restrictions.

Israel said 260 trucks of aid entered Gaza on Sunday, the highest number since the war began. About 500 entered daily before that, according to the U.N.

"Bread does not suffice for one hour," said Ahmad Al-Nashawi, who accepted donated food at a tent camp in the southern city of Rafah. "You can see how many children we have other than women and men. What matters most for a child is to eat." At the new protest camp outside Netanyahu's Jerusalem residence, hostages' families urged the government to act.

"It's not logical that you're telling us the war must continue, and you keep saying that because of military pressure we will release them, but we don't see a single one released because of this pressure," said Gilad Korengold, the father of hostage Tal Shoham.

Some top Israeli officials have begun to acknowledge that Netanyahu's goals of

"complete victory" over Hamas and returning the remaining hostages might be mutually exclusive. A member of Israel's War Cabinet, former army chief Gadi Eisenkot, said last week that the only way to free the hostages was through a cease-fire.

But Netanyahu's far-right coalition partners push him to step up the offensive, with some calling for the "voluntary" emigration of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from Gaza and the re-establishment of Jewish settlements there.

Hamas is believed to be using the hostages as shields for its top leaders. Israel has rescued one hostage, and Hamas says several have been killed in Israeli airstrikes or during failed rescue operations.

Hostages' families want an exchange like the one during a weeklong November cease-fire. Other Israelis are frustrated by the security failures ahead of the Oct. 7 attack and by Netanyahu's handling of the war. Near the site of an Oct. 7 massacre during a music festival, families of Israeli victims planted trees.

"What happened after 109 days? Nothing. We're just still waiting," said one father, Idan Bahat. (AP)

## Strike kills Hezbollah fighter, civilian in Lebanon, amid seeming Israeli shift to targeted killings



**SIDON, Jan 22:** An Israeli airstrike hit two vehicles near a Lebanese army checkpoint in south Lebanon on Sunday, killing a Hezbollah member in one car and a woman in the other and wounding several other people, Lebanese state media and health officials reported.

The strike appeared to be part of a shift in Israeli strategy toward targeted killings in Lebanon after more than three months of near-daily clashes with Hezbollah militants on the border against the backdrop of the war in Gaza.

Hezbollah announced that one of its members, identified as Fadel Shaar, had been killed in the strike in the town of Kafra.

Several hours later, Lebanon's National News Agency reported that a civilian woman wounded in the strike, Samar al-Sayed Mohammed, had died of her injuries.

Local civil defense and hospital officials said several others were wounded.

Video from the scene showed a passenger sedan in flames next to a small truck stopped in the middle of the road. The Israeli military did not comment on the strike.

Since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war on Oct. 7, Hezbollah forces have engaged in near-daily clashes with Israeli troops along the border.

While the clashes had previously been limited mainly to a narrow strip within a few kilometers (miles) from the border, Israel in recent weeks appears to have moved to a strategy of targeted killings of figures from Hezbollah and allied groups, sometimes hitting in areas relatively far from the border, as was the case in Sunday's strike.

On Saturday, another strike near the Lebanese port city of Tyre

killed two people in a car - one of them a Hezbollah commander - and two people in a nearby orchard. The commander, Ali Hudruj, was buried Sunday in south Lebanon. The other occupant of the car, tech sector businessman Mohammad Bagir Diab, was identified as a civilian and was buried in Beirut on Sunday.

On Jan. 2, a presumed Israeli airstrike killed a top Hamas official, Saleh Arouri, in a suburb of Beirut, the first such strike in Lebanon's capital since Israel and Hezbollah fought a brutal one-month war in 2006.

Speaking at Hudruj's funeral Sunday, Hezbollah Member of Parliament Hussein Jeshi said Israel had "resorted to the method of assassinating some members of the resistance" to compensate for being unable to reach a military victory against Hamas after more than 100 days of war in Gaza.

The Lebanese militant group said in a statement later Sunday that it had launched an attack against the town of Avivim in northern Israel in retaliation for the strike in Kafra and for other "attacks that targeted Lebanese villages and civilians."

Israel did not comment on the strike specifically but announced it had struck Hezbollah targets in several locations in Lebanon on Sunday. It later said that an anti-tank missile had hit a house in Avivim and no injuries were reported.

With dangers of a regional conflict flaring on multiple fronts, officials from the United States and Europe have engaged in a flurry of shuttle diplomacy in recent weeks between Israel and Lebanon, attempting to head off an escalation of the conflict into a full-on war on the Lebanese front. (AP)

## Landslide in mountainous southwestern China buries 47 people

**BEIJING, Jan 22:** A landslide in southwestern China's mountainous Yunnan province early on Monday buried 47 people, killing at least two, and forced the evacuation of 200 more amid freezing temperatures and falling snow. The disaster struck just before 6 a.m. in the village of Liangshui in the northeastern part of Yunnan province. Rescue efforts were underway to find victims buried in 18 separate houses, the Zhenxiang county publicity department said.

Two bodies were pulled from the rubble, according to state broadcaster CCTV. The cause of the landslide wasn't immediately known as survivors and rescuers struggled with snow and freezing temperatures that were forecast to persist for at least the next three days.

Luo Dongmei, 35, was sleeping when the landslide struck, but she survived and was relocated to a school building by local authorities.

"I was asleep, but my brother knocked on the door and woke me up. They said there was a landslide and the bed was shaking, so they rushed upstairs and woke us up," Luo said.

Luo, her husband and their three children, along with many other residents, have been provided with food at the school but are still waiting for blankets and other protection from the cold weather, she said.

Luo said she's been unable to contact her sister and aunt, who lived closer to the site of the landslide. "The only thing I can do is to wait," she said. Last week, rescuers evacuated tourists from a remote skiing area in northwestern China where dozens of avalanches triggered by heavy snow had trapped more than 1,000 people for a week. The avalanches blocked roads, stranding both tourists and residents in a village in Altay prefecture in the Xinjiang region, close to China's border with Mongolia, Russia and Kazakhstan.

Landslides, often caused by rain or unsafe construction work, are not uncommon in China. At least 70 people were killed in landslides last year, including more than 50 at an open pit mine in China's Inner Mongolia region. (AP)

The dispatch of such balloons, which generally disappear into the Pacific to the east, appears to be on the rise

## Taiwan says 6 Chinese balloons flew through its airspace and warplanes and ships also detected

**TAIPEI, Jan 22:** Taiwan said on Monday that six Chinese balloons either flew over the island or through airspace just north of it, while Chinese warplanes and navy ships were also detected in the area. The dispatch of such balloons, which generally disappear into the Pacific to the east, appears to be on the rise, though their purpose has not been publicly announced.

The Defense Ministry noted the balloon sightings on a list of Chinese People's Liberation Army activity in the waters and airspace around Taiwan. One passed near the southern city of Pingtung, while the others flew just north of the port of Keelung, where Taiwan has an important naval base.

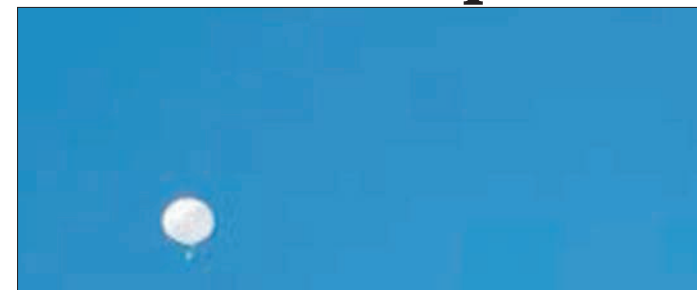
It remains unclear whether the balloons have an explicit military function, but they appear to be part of a campaign of harassment

against the self-governed island, which China claims as its own territory and has vowed to reclaim by force if necessary.

In the leadup to Taiwan's presidential election earlier this month, China had been stepping up such activities, along with its rhetorical threats, though Beijing's threats are generally seen as backfiring.

The independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party won a third straight term in the presidency, this time under current Vice President Lai Ching-te, or William Lai. The pro-unification Nationalist Party won just one more seat in the legislature than the DPP. The party of former Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je siphoned votes off both parties, especially by appealing to young people fed up with politics as they are.

In the U.S. early last year, Presi-



dent Joe Biden vowed sharper rules to track, monitor and potentially shoot down unknown aerial objects after a three-week drama sparked by the discovery of a suspected Chinese spy balloon transiting much of the United States.

The U.S. labeled the balloon a military craft and shot it down with a missile. It recovered what it said was sophisticated surveillance equipment. China responded an-

grily, saying it was only a weather balloon that had blown off course and called its downing a major overreaction.

Those are sometimes referred to as China's "gray area tactics" that cause consternation among its foes without sparking a direct confrontation. China has long blurred the lines between military and civilian functions, including in the South China Sea, where it operates

a huge maritime militia — ostensibly civilian fishing boats that act under government orders to assert Beijing's territorial claims.

China's campaign of intimidation against Taiwan includes the regular deployment of Chinese warships and planes in waters and airspace around the island, often crossing the middle line of the 160-kilometer (100-mile)-wide Taiwan Strait that divides them. The two split following the seizure of power by Mao Zedong's Communists on the Chinese mainland.

Between Sunday and early Monday morning, four Chinese warplanes and four navy ships were detected around Taiwan, the Defense Ministry said. Taiwan's military monitored the situation with combat aircraft, navy vessels and land-based missile systems, the ministry said. (AP)

## At least 27 people are reported killed in an attack on Donetsk in Russian-occupied Ukraine

**KYIV, Jan 22:** Moscow-installed officials said Ukrainian shelling killed at least 27 people and wounded 25 on Sunday at a market on the outskirts of Donetsk, a Russian-occupied city in the eastern part of the country.

Among the injured in the suburb of Tekstilshchik were two children, said Denis Pushilin, the local leader.

Ukrainian officials in Kyiv did not comment on the incident, and the claims could not be independently verified by The Associated Press. Both sides have increasingly relied on longer-range attacks this winter amid largely unchanged positions on the 1,500-kilometer (930-mile) front line in the nearly 2-year-old war. The artillery shells that hit the area had been fired from the area of Kurakhove and Krasnohorivka to the west, Pushilin said, adding that emergency services responded to the scene.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres "strongly condemns all attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, including today's shelling of the city of Donetsk in Ukraine," according to a U.N. spokesperson, adding that all such attacks are prohibited under international humanitarian law.

Donetsk is one of four regions in Ukraine that Russia annexed illegally in 2022, months after Moscow launched its full-scale invasion. Russia's Foreign Ministry also blamed Ukraine and described the strike as a "terrorist attack."



Also on Sunday, a fire broke out at a chemical transport terminal at Russia's Ust-Luga port following two explosions, regional officials said. Local media said the Baltic Sea port, 165 kilometers (about 100 miles) southwest of St. Petersburg, had been attacked by Ukrainian drones, causing a gas tank to explode.

The blaze was at a site run by Russia's second-largest natural gas producer, Novatek. In a statement to Russian media outlet RBC, the company blamed the fire on an "external influence," saying operations at the port were paused. Yuri Zapalatsky, the head of the Kingisepp district on the Gulf of Finland where the port is located, said there were no casualties but the area was on high alert.

News outlet Fontanka reported that two drones had been detected flying toward St. Petersburg on Sunday morning, but were redirected toward the Kingisepp district. AP could not independently verify the reports.

Russia's Defense Ministry did not report any

drone activity in the Kingisepp area in its daily briefing. It said that four Ukrainian drones had been downed in Russia's Smolensk region, and that two more were shot down in the Oryol and Tula regions.

Russian officials previously confirmed a Ukrainian drone had been downed on the outskirts of St. Petersburg on Thursday.

In fighting on the front line, Russia's Defense Ministry said Moscow's forces had taken control of the village of Krokmalne in Ukraine's Kharkiv region. Ukrainian forces confirmed the settlement had been occupied, but described its capture as temporary.

Ukrainian Ground Forces Command spokesman Volodymyr Fityo said Kyiv's troops had been pulled back to reserve positions from the village, which had a population of about 45 people before the start of the war.

"That's five houses, probably," he was quoted as saying by Ukrainian news outlet Hromadske. "Our main goal is to save the lives of Ukraine's defenders."

Recent Russian attacks have tried to find gaps in Ukraine's defenses by using large numbers of missiles and drones in an apparent effort to saturate air defense systems.

The massive barrages — more than 500 drones and missiles were fired between Dec. 29 and Jan. 2, according to officials in Kyiv — are also using up Ukraine's weapons stockpiles. (AP)

## Pakistani security forces kill 7 militants during a raid near the border with Afghanistan

**QUETTA, Jan 22:** Pakistan security forces killed seven militants in a shootout in the country's volatile southwest near the border with Afghanistan, the military said on Monday.

The military said the intelligence-based operation was conducted in Zhob district in southwestern Baluchistan province. In a brief statement, it said security forces also recovered munitions after the shootout. Quetta is the capital of Baluchistan province, where Baloch nationalists, Islamic militants and the Islamic State group have claimed responsibility for attacks on security forces in recent years.

Gas-rich Baluchistan province at the border with Afghanistan and Iran has been the scene of a low-level insurgency by Baluch nationalists for more than two decades. They initially wanted a share of provincial resources, but later demanded independence. (AP)

## Saudi Arabia won't recognize Israel without a path to a Palestinian state, top diplomat says

**JERUSALEM, Jan 22:** Saudi Arabia's foreign minister says the kingdom will not normalize relations with Israel or contribute to Gaza's reconstruction without a credible pathway to a Palestinian state.

Prince Faisal bin Farhan's remarks in an interview with CNN broadcast late Sunday were some of the most direct yet from Saudi officials. It puts them at odds with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has rejected Palestinian statehood and described plans for open-ended military control over Gaza.

The dispute over Gaza's future — coming as the war still rages with no end in sight — pits the United States and its Arab allies against Israel and poses a major obstacle to any plans for postwar governance or reconstruction in Gaza.

Before the Oct. 7 Hamas attack that triggered the war, the U.S. had been trying to broker a landmark agreement in which Saudi Arabia would normalize relations with Israel in exchange for U.S. security guarantees, aid in establishing a civilian nuclear program in the kingdom, and progress toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian con-

flict. In September, Netanyahu had said Israel was "at the cusp" of such a deal, which he said would transform the Middle East.

In the interview with "CNN's Fareed Zakaria GPS," the host asked: "Are you saying unequivocally that if there is not a credible and irreversible path to a Palestinian state, there will not be normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel?"

"That's the only way we're going to get a benefit," Prince Faisal replied. "So, yes."

Earlier in the interview, when asked if oil-rich Saudi Arabia would finance reconstruction in Gaza — where Israel's air and ground offensive has devastated vast swaths of the impoverished territory, Prince Faisal gave a similar answer.

"As long as we're able to find a pathway to a solution, a resolution, a pathway that means that we're

not going to be here again in a year or two, then we can talk about anything," he said. "But if we are just resetting to the status quo before Oct. 7, in a way that sets us up for another round of this, as we have seen in the past, we're not interested in that conversation."

The Palestinians seek a state that would include Gaza, the Israeli-occupied West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem, territories Israel captured in the 1967

Mideast war. Israel views all of Jerusalem as its capital and the West Bank as the historical and biblical heartland of the Jewish people. It has built scores of settlements across both territories that are home to hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers. The last of several rounds of peace talks broke down nearly 15 years ago.

The current war between Israel and Hamas, the fifth and by far

deadliest, began when Palestinian militants broke through Israel's defenses and rampaged through several nearby communities, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, taking around 250 people hostage and shattering Israelis' sense of security.

Israel's offensive has killed at least 25,105 Palestinians in Gaza and wounded more than 60,000, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory. The ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants but says around two-thirds of those killed were women and children.

The Israeli military says it has killed around 9,000 militants, without providing evidence, and blames the high civilian death toll on Hamas because it positions fighters, tunnels and other militant infrastructure in dense residential areas.

Some 85% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million have fled their homes, seeking elusive shelter in the south as Israel continues to strike all parts of the besieged enclave. U.N. officials say one in four people in Gaza are starving as the ongoing fighting and Israeli restrictions hinder the delivery of human-

# Article 371(A) accords special category status to Nagaland as state NPCC expresses shock at NDPP MP's remark on Art 371 (A)

HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, Jan 22:** The Nagaland Pradesh Congress Committee (NPCC) expressed shock at the ruling Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) Lok Sabha MP Tokheho Yephthomi's recent statement advocating revocation of Article 371 (A) in Nagaland.

Condemning Yephthomi's statement, the NPCC said his subsequent rejoinder does not offer an iota of merit in terms of course correction necessitated by his original statement.

"It leads one to wonder as to whether the initiative was at all about course correction or one aimed at adding salt to injury," the Pradesh Congress said in a release issued by its communication department on Monday.

Clarifying his statement, Yephthomi said he made the remark only to "provoke the minds of fellow citizens" in respect to misuse of Article 371 (A) in matters of development activities.

The NPCC reminded the MP that Article 371(A) not only accords special category status to Nagaland as a state, but also serves



as an acknowledgment as well as a constant reminder to all concerned about the uniqueness of the history of the Nagas as a people.

"We fail to see any justification that could

be considered as even minutely justification enough for the atrociously ill-advised take of the lawmaker," the NPCC said. It hoped that Yephthomi take back his words with an

unconditional apology to the people of Nagaland.

It further said the NDPP's reaction towards this unfortunate development orchestrated by its MP is not at all helpful either.

"It's a textbook lesson in political dereliction, coming from a place of utter ideological bankruptcy," the Pradesh Congress said.

Reacting to Yephthomi's remark, the NDPP said the statement of the MP is neither the view nor the opinion of the party or its leadership.

According to the NPCC, the office that the MP holds and the issue at hand are way too serious and consequential to be brushed aside simply by disowning it.

"It is a collective tragedy that the NDPP's 'anything for power' ideology has turned it into a pliable agent of the RSS/BJP's grand majoritarian scheme for uniformity and singularity across the nation. It cannot even muster enough moral agency to censure and mete out proportionate disciplinary action against its MP for so blatantly taking a stand against the hard-fought rights of the people of Nagaland," the NPCC added.

## Cong questions naming 'security personnel, others' in Jorhat FIR



**MORIGAOON, Jan 22:** The Congress on Monday claimed that they have not violated any rules and rejected claims of any purported route deviation by them on the first day of its Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Jorhat and alleged that the FIR registered was politically motivated.

Congress leaders criticised the Assam police for registration of an FIR in the eastern Assam district against security personnel (of Rahul Gandhi) and others, claiming that if any barricade was broken, it was done by party leaders.

A suo motu FIR was registered at Jorhat Sadar police station on January 18 for alleged route deviation by the yatra as it moved through the main town.

Addressing a press conference here, party in-charge of Assam Jitendra Singh said, "I was present at the 'padyatra' (foot march) that day. There were a large crowd in the area and when we reached a trijunction, we proceeded on a straight road.

"If anyone broke any barricade, it was politicians like me, Jairam Ramesh, Gaurav Gogoi, Bhupen Borah, Debarata Saikia. Why has the FIR been lodged in the name of security personnel, workers?" he questioned.

Assam Congress chief Bhupen Kumar Borah, reading out a part of the FIR, said it named KB Biju and 'unknown others' of instigating others to break the police barricade and proceed.

The Congress also showed a video of the incident claiming that no violation of rules was done.

Borah said he along with other leaders was in the front and wanted

to clear any kind of confusion on the Yatra route.

"When we reached the trijunction and were confused with the route, we asked police personnel who pointed to one of the three roads leading away from that point. We proceeded on the route pointed to us," Borah said, claiming that it was he and the leader of the opposition in the state assembly Debarata Saikia who were leading the rally.

"We had prepared the route plan and KB Biju had nothing to do with it or fixing the route. The FIR is an attempt to malign the yatra," he asserted, saying the FIR has been registered to defame him.

"This FIR has been registered as part of a conspiracy for political reasons," he alleged.

Biju is a former SPG personnel, who currently looks after the security arrangements of Gandhi.

All India Congress Committee general secretary Jairam Ramesh said three more days of the Yatra are left in Assam and the Yatra is traversing the same route as travelled by BJP chief J P Nadda.

He said even the Bajrang Dal took out a bike rally on the same route in Guwahati, which they plan to move on.

Jitendra Singh also said that the cases and impediments created for the Yatra are all out of frustration of the chief minister, who wants to scare them.

"People of Assam are showering their love and affection on Rahul Gandhi and also the Yatra, which is for everyone to see. The way FIR was registered is it showed the CMs cowardice as well as of Assam police," he said. (PTI)

## MSME-DFO organised lean awareness in East Garo Hills

HT Correspondent

**WILLIAMNAGAR, Jan 22 :** The micro, small and medium enterprises -DFO, Tura, in collaboration with the ministry of micro, small and medium enterprises, New Delhi based Madhukar Livelihood Foundation and DCIC, East Garo Hills, organised a one-day lean awareness programme in Williamnagar on Monday.

Deputy commissioner of East Garo Hills district, Vibhor Aggarwal was the chief guest on the occasion.

Speaking on the occasion, the deputy commissioner assured full support of the district administration for obtaining lean certification for the micro, small and medium enterprises of the region.

During the programme, Nilesh Trivedi, assistant director of MSME-DFO, Tura, highlighted the various components of lean while Brijendra Singh Rajawat, senior scientist of the Krishi Vignyan Kendra, East Garo Hills gave a presentation on lean man agent for micro, small and medium enterprises.

Others who spoke during the awareness programme included Modhe R Marak, GM, DCIC, Williamnagar.

## Cong's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra enters Meghalaya

**NONGPOH (MEGHALAYA), Jan 22:** Congress' Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra commenced its Meghalaya leg on Monday with a 'padyatra' (foot march) by Rahul Gandhi, who is helming the march.

The Yatra entered Meghalaya from Assam's Morigaon district late in the afternoon.

Gandhi and his entourage participated in a padyatra near Nongpoh, the headquarters town of Ri Bhoi district, soon after entering the state's borders.

He will also attend a public meeting organised by the state Congress committee at Nongpoh, before spending the night at Bymihat in the same district. (PTI)

## HYC gives NEIGRIHMS ultimatum to address recruitment issues

**SHILLONG, Jan 22:** The Hyniewtrep Youth Council (HYC) served a 10-day ultimatum to the North Eastern Indira Gandhi Regional Institute of Health and Medical Sciences (NEIGRIHMS) today to address the 6-point charter of demands related to the recruitment process in the institute.

In a letter to the director of the Institute, HYC president Roy Kupar Synrem said the council strongly protested against the anti-tribal/anti-local policies of the NEIGRIHMS management in the past few months with regards to job opportunities to local indigenous youth and job applicants.

"We hope and urge upon you as the head of the institute to consider our just and reasonable demands for the welfare of our youths and the State as a whole and inform us within a period of 10 days from today," he said.

Synrem also warned, "On failing, we shall be compelled to call upon all our youths and job aspirants to march to NEIGRIHMS and to put your office building under lock and key."

Highlighting the six charter of demands, the HYC president said that the decision by NEIGRIHMS to recruit nursing officers through NORCET has greatly affected the

## Tripura celebrates Ayodhya Ram temple consecration

**AGARTALA, Jan 22:** Special prayers at various temples were held and processions were taken out in Tripura on Monday as part of the celebrations of the Ram Mandir consecration in Ayodhya.

Tripura chief minister Manik Saha performed a special 'yagna' at the Durgabari here.

"Today, a 500-year-old wait has ended with the consecration of Ram temple in Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Ram. With this the country has begun its journey towards Ram Rajya", the chief minister told reporters.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi deserves to be applauded by Ram Bhakts. The Prime Minister has been trying to meet the people's basic needs and we are also trying to serve the people in the best possible way. This is called good governance or sushan", he said.

Union minister of state for social justice and social empowerment, Pratima Bhoumik also performed 'yagna' at Meher Kalibari at Pragati Road.

"Today, I am overwhelmed by



'pran pratistha' of Ram Lalla in Ayodhya. It ends a 500-year wait. This marks the country's entry to Ram Rajya in which welfare, wealth and justice are ensured for the people', she told reporters.

Deputy speaker of Tripura assembly Ram Prasad Paul organised a rally at Suryamaninagar in the West district to mark the occasion. Various organisations also worshipped Ram on the occasion of the

consecration ceremony of Ram temple in Ayodhya. The northeastern had declared a half-day holiday in government offices including educational institutions, to celebrate the occasion. (PTI)

## Sikkim CM hails consecration ceremony at Ram temple in Ayodhya

**GANGTOK, Jan 22:** Sikkim chief minister Prem Singh Tamang hailed the consecration ceremony to be held at the newly constructed Ram temple in Ayodhya on Monday, stating that the convergence of faith and cultural heritage transcends regional boundaries.

He also said that Sikkim takes immense pride in being a part of the shared national joy and the people of the Himalayan state are thrilled to stand united with the nation in jubilation of the historic event.

The temple town of Ayodhya is all set to welcome Lord Ram with Prime Minister Narendra Modi scheduled to participate in the consecration ceremony at the temple.

"January 22, 2024 will forever be etched in the illustrious history of our nation as a day of unparalleled significance. On this momentous occasion, Ram Lalla, the revered deity, is poised to return to his sacred birthplace in Ayodhya," the chief minister said on X, formerly Twitter.

The grandeur of the day will be magnified by "the mega 'Pran-Pratistha' ceremony, marking the consecration of Lord Ram Lalla's idol within the newly constructed Ram Jannabhoomi Temple", he said.

The 'Pran Pratistha' of the idol of Ram Lalla -- the childhood form of Lord Ram -- will be attended by people from all walks of life, including representatives of major spiritual and religious sects of the country, representatives of various tribal communities and prominent personalities.

"Sikkim is thrilled to stand united with the entire nation in jubilation and celebration of this historic event. As the echoes of joy resound from Ayodhya to every corner of our diverse land, the collective spirit of reverence and unity binds us together. "This convergence of faith and cultural heritage transcends regional boundaries, and Sikkim takes immense pride in being a part of this shared national joy," the chief minister said. (PTI)

## NPCC protests against attacks on Gandhi-led yatra in Assam

HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, Jan 22:** The Nagaland Pradesh Congress Committee (NPCC) on Monday staged a protest demonstration at Congress Bhavan in Kohima in condemnation of the repeated attacks on the Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra convoy allegedly by BJP workers in Assam over the past three days.

The protest was led by the senior leaders of the state Congress. The NPCC said Rahul Gandhi, as envisioned, has been championing the causes of the women, youth and other marginalised sections of society through this yatra and has successfully covered the three states of Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal

Pradesh peacefully without any untoward incidents.

"It is regrettable that in Assam, the Himanta Biswa Sarma-led BJP government is desperately putting everything at its disposal to stop the yatra ranging from tearing down of posters and banners to carrying out multiple planned attacks on the convoy, leading to many casualties among the yatra, including injuries to the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee president Bhupen Bora," the PCC said.

The NPCC said it strongly condemned the state-sanctioned acts of violence against the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra convoy in Assam and reaffirmed its full support and commitment towards the success of the yatra.

## Nagaland cabinet approves recruitment of constables for 7 departments

**KOHIMA, Jan 22:** The Nagaland cabinet on Monday approved the recruitment of constables for seven departments, including police.

Nagaland deputy chief minister Y Patton said this on the sidelines of an official programme held at the police headquarters in Kohima on Monday.

He said that the other six departments include the prisons, forests, home guards, fire and emergency services, lokayukta, and civil defence.

He said that the recruitment of constables for these departments will be conducted through the department recruitment board with representatives from the personnel and administrative reforms (P&AR) department.

He said that the decision was taken as no recruitment was conducted for the last three years. (PTI)

## Special prayers, rallies organised in various parts of state during Ram temple consecration Arunachal soaks in religious fervour on Ram temple consecration

**ITANAGAR, Jan 22:** Arunachal Pradesh on Monday soaked in religious fervour on the occasion of the consecration ceremony at the newly constructed Ram temple in Ayodhya, with special prayers and rallies organised in various parts of the northeastern state, an official said.

In the state capital, markets were closed voluntarily to witness the historic occasion. Many private schools in the state also declared a holiday on the occasion, the official added. Capital superintendent of police, Rohit Rajbir Singh told PTI that adequate security personnel were deployed to maintain law and order.

"Security has been tightened at temples where devotees of Lord Ram thronged in large numbers to offer prayers," he said.

LED screens were put up at various places across the state to live stream the ceremony from Ayodhya, and attended by senior BJP leaders, ministers and MLAs.

Union earth sciences minister Kiren Rijiju witnessed the historic event at the Northeast Regional Institute of Science and Technology (NERIST) campus at Nirjuli, chief minister Pema Khandu at Lower Dibang Valley, deputy chief minister Chowna Mein at Namsai and BJP state president Biyuram Wahge at the party office here.

Arunachal chief minister Pema Khandu hailed the historic event and greeted people.

Wish you all the best on the occasion of the inauguration of Ram Lalla in the newly



built Ram temple in Ayodhya Dham. May Lord Sri Ram grant happiness and prosperity to all and bring welfare to the world. Jai Shri Ram. Khandu posted on X.

Meanwhile, Governor Lt Gen (Retd) KT Parnaik participated in the sacred recital of Ram Naam Sankirtan (Bhajan) at Niti Vihar Durga Mandir here.

He offered prayers and prayed for peace

and prosperity for all, a Raj Bhavan communique informed here.

Parnaik extended greetings and good wishes to the people of Arunachal Pradesh on the sacred occasion of the consecration of the Ramlalla at the Shri Ram Jannabhoomi Temple, Ayodhya.

"Lord Ram is the embodiment of righteousness, devotion, and sacrifice and is

renowned for his courage, loyalty and devotion. Lord Ram is a symbol of perseverance and justice and a role model of perfection in every human being," he said.

The governor appealed to the people to imbibe the chivalry, virtue and morality of Lord Ram, the epitome of values and principles that are revered by millions of people across the world.

He exhorted all to follow the principle of Ram Rajya and the spirit of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, and Sabka Prayas' to realise the vision of Viksit Bharat, the communique said.

Later, the governor witnessed the live telecast Pran Pratistha programme along with people from all walks of life at the temple premises.

Earlier, state environment and forests minister Mama Natung and members of the temple committee, cordially received the governor.

Large numbers of officials, professionals and people from all communities participated in the programme, the communique added.

Sadhaav Arunachal, a social organisation, distributed five kg of sweets in each of the 18 temples in the state capital, its chairman Tadar Niglar informed.

The NGO, till Sunday evening, had distributed as many as 10,800 Ram Jyoti (earthen lamps) to the people of the state capital. (PTI)

## Delhi goes 'Ram maye' as people celebrate Ram Lalla 'pran pratishtha'



**NEW DELHI, Jan 22:** Ram posters dotting the city, saffron flags with the deity's picture everywhere, devotional songs blaring through loudspeakers and special screens live-telescating the Ram Lalla 'pran pratishtha' from Ayodhya! Delhi was drenched in the devotion of Lord Ram on Monday.

Temples across the national capital have been decorated with special lights and flower patterns while chants of 'Jai Shri Ram' rent the air as people held Sundarand recitals, took out rallies and organised 'bhandara' to celebrate the consecration of the Ram Lalla idol at the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

"There is an atmosphere of joy and happiness in markets. Traders distributed sweets and at many places. Sundarand recitals were organised. People took out Roshni Yatras and burst crackers. In many areas, music bands also performed," Brijesh Goyal, the Chairman of Chamber of Trade and Industry (CTI), told PTI.

People in the religious processions danced to devotional songs. Markets will be lit up with

diyas in the evening. With demand skyrocketing, the prices of saffron flags, Lord Ram posters and photos have gone up.

The new idol of Ram Lalla was consecrated at the newly constructed temple here amid grand celebrations in the temple town, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi participating in the rituals.

At the heart of Delhi -- Connaught Place -- the bustling hub of commercial and leisure activities, arrangements were made to show the live telecast of the 'pran pratishtha' ceremony from Ayodhya.

Amit Gupta, joint secretary of the New Delhi Traders' Association, said the celebrations in Connaught Place commenced at 11 am.

There is a "bhajan-kirtan" programme with a playlist curated by five DJs. An 11-kg laddoo was offered to Lord Ram. Gupta said they will light up diyas at the inner circle of Connaught Place.

Rakesh Kumar Yadav, president of Sadar Bazar Trade Association, said, "Puja and aarti have been completed, and 'dhol' was played.

Bhandara prasad was also distributed among the devotees."

The temples in the city performed special puja and aarti. The offered food through bhandaras while people were seen donating winter clothes. Bhandaras

The Shri Sidh Shakti Peeth Shanidham Mandir at Asola installed its own idol of Lord Ram. "We have installed an idol of Lord Ram in the temple coinciding with Ayodhya's idol installation ceremony," it said.

The residents of Madhuban Enclave, IAS Officers Colony in East Delhi organised mega festivities which included a cultural programme and Sundarand Path.

The programme was attended by BJP MLA Om Prakash Sharma.

"I have been serving the Madhuban Mandir Samiti since 1980, and it gives me immense joy to witness the resurrection of the holy Ram temple in Ayodhya," Madhuban Mandir Samiti president Harish Seth said.

"All the residents of Madhuban Enclave have contributed to making today's event a great success. The heartfelt devotion of residents to Lord Ram has culminated in today's festivities," he said.

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, Uttar Pradesh Governor Anandiben Patel, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, actors Amitabh Bachchan, Abhishek Bachchan, Vicky Kaushal, Katrina Kaif, Arun Govil, former cricketer Sachin Tendulkar, Ravishankar Prasad and industrialist Anil Ambani, among others, attended the event in Ayodhya.

Actors Anupam Kher and Manoj Joshi, singers Kailash Kher and Jubin Nautiyal, lyricist Prasoon Joshi were also among the guests who arrived here early.

Hema Malini, Kangana Ranaut, Sri Sri Ravishankar, Morari Bapu, Rajnikant, Pawan Kalyan, Madhur Bhandarkar, Subhash Ghai, Shefali Shah and Sonu Nigam also attended the event. (PTI)

## Delhi's final electoral roll published with 1.47 cr voters

**NEW DELHI, Jan 22:** The final electoral roll of Delhi published on Monday ahead of the Lok Sabha polls showed a significant 85 per cent rise in the number of young voters in the 18 to 19 years age group as well as improved registration of the women voters.

As per the Special Summary Revision - 2024 completed with publication of the final electoral roll, the total number of electors (voters) stood at 1,47,18,119, including 79,86,572 males, 67,30,371 females and 1,176 third gender electors, stated a statement from the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Delhi. The final electoral roll, 2024, showed a drop of over 58,182 voters as compared to the final roll of 2023. The total number of electors as per final electoral roll of 2023 was 1,47,76,301.

The number of male and female voters -- 79,86,572 and 67,30,371 -- in 2024 final roll also dropped as compared to 2023. The number of male and female voters as per final roll of 2023 were 80,38,676 and 67,36,470.

Under house to house verification, total 3,97,004 entries from the electoral roll were deleted which included 3,07,788 names of permanently shifted electors, 56,773 dead electors and 32,443 multiple entries.

With special efforts made during the special summary revision exercise (qualifying date January 1, 2024), the gender ratio of the electors has improved by 5 points - from 838 to 843, demonstrating significant progress in efforts towards intensification of electoral inclusion of women, said CEO.



Delhi, P Krishnamurthy.

"The final electoral roll published today shows a significant increase in the number of young electors in Delhi, demonstrating the commitment of young electors towards the electoral process," said Krishnamurthy.

Special focus was on enrolment of young voters in the 18 to 19 years age group. Total 67,930 young voters were added in the electoral rolls of Delhi during the special summary revision which means 26.7 per cent of the total addition of 2,54,470 names added during the revision were young voters, the statement said.

The enrolment of young electors in the 18 to 19 years age group has increased by 9.69 per cent as compared to final roll of last year and by 85.8 per cent during the special summary revision - 2024 only, it

stated.

Prospective voters who are going to attain the age of 18 years with respect to the subsequent qualifying dates in the year 2024 - April 1, July 1 and October 1 -- have also filed advance claim for inclusion of their names in the electoral roll which will be considered and decided in the respective quarter of the year with reference to the respective qualifying date, the statement said.

A total of 9,335 prospective voters applied for registration in the electoral rolls of Delhi during special summary revision, 2024, it said.

Krishnamurthy said that in order to achieve good quality electoral roll, purification of electoral roll is also necessary as addition and deletion of names is a continuous process. (PTI)

## J'khand govt to review 'failure' of its ambitious petrol subsidy scheme

**RANCHI, Jan 22:** Call it a technical hurdle or departmental failure, very few have taken advantage of the Jharkhand government's flagship petrol subsidy scheme.

In all, 30,287 people benefited from the scheme between April and December 2023, an official said on Monday.

In a bid to support the families covered under National Food Security Scheme (NFSS) amid rising prices of petrol, Jharkhand government on January 26, 2022 had launched the scheme for the families who owned two-wheelers. Under the scheme, a monthly subsidy of ₹ 250 for buying 10 litres of petrol is credited to the bank account of a beneficiary.

Out of over 57 lakh families covered under the NFSS in Jharkhand, the government had hoped to benefit at least 20 lakh families when the scheme was launched. But, its beneficiaries started declining a few months after the scheme was launched.

Admitting the fact, state food and public department secretary Amitabh Kaushal told reporters here, "There is

not much enthusiasm for petrol subsidy. We are reviewing to find out the reasons for it. If there is any issue in our policy, we will sort it out. We are trying to remove the bottlenecks so that people could gain from the scheme."

Speaking on the paddy procurement scheme, he said the government aims to procure six lakh metric tonne of paddy this year.

"Against the Minimum Support Price of ₹ 2,183 per quintal by the government of India, state government is giving a bonus of ₹ 117. So, farmers are getting ₹ 2,300 for a quintal of paddy," he said. He said the government has also increased the rate for rice millers to ₹ 60 per quintal from ₹ 20 per quintal.

Apart from foodgrains, the government is also distributing a kg of pulse at ₹ 1 per family covered under the NFSA and State Food Security scheme, he said.

In a bid to increase the income of dealers of Fair Price Shop, the PDS stores are being developed as common service centre (CSC). Out of 10,000 PDS shops identified, 6,671 shops have already been developed as CSC. (PTI)

## Mamata begins all-faith harmony rally in Kolkata

**KOLKATA, Jan 22:** West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee on Monday began the all-faith harmony rally in the metropolis, aligning with the Ram temple consecration ceremony in Ayodhya this afternoon.

The feisty TMC boss, accompanied by religious leaders of various faiths and party leaders, began the 'Sanghati March' from Hazra More here.

Clad in her trademark white and blue bordered cotton sari with a shawl wrapped around her neck, Banerjee was seen greeting people and onlookers on both sides of the road with folded hands.

Banerjee began the rally after offering puja and prayers at the iconic Kalighat temple in the city.

Banerjee, who had earlier criticised the BJP over the Ram temple event as a "gimmick show before the Lok Sabha polls", is leading the rally from Hazra More, during which she will visit various places of worship representing different religions, including mosques, churches, and gurdwaras.

The rally is slated to culminate at the Park Circus Maidan with a mega gathering. (PTI)

## ED remand extended, Shiv Sena (UBT) functionary moves HC against 'illegal arrest'

**MUMBAI, Jan 22:** The "proceeds of crime" received by Shiv Sena (UBT) functionary Suraj Chavan, an accused in a money laundering case, were used to buy properties and for investment in dairy business, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) claimed before a court here on Monday.

The special PMLA court in Mumbai extended Chavan's ED custody till January 25 in the money laundering case linked to the alleged irregularities in the distribution of 'khichdi' to migrants during the Covid-19 period.

He later moved the Bombay High Court claiming his arrest was illegal and also challenged the legality and validity of the order passed by a special court here granting his custody to the Enforcement Directorate on January 18.

Chavan, who is a core committee member of the Yuva Sena, youth wing of the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (UBT), was arrested on January 17 under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) after he was questioned at the agency's office here.

He is said to be a close associate of Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Aaditya Thackeray.

As Chavan's initial ED custody ended on Monday, the probe agency sought an extension of his remand for seven days, claiming the accused played a "very crucial role" in the offence of money laundering.

In the High Court, Chavan's plea came up for hearing before a single bench of Justice PD Naik.

Chavan's lawyer sought time to amend the plea to include the special court's second remand order copy, which the HC permitted and posted the matter for hearing on January 29.

In his plea, Chavan termed his arrest and pursuant remands illegal claiming it was not done in compliance with the provisions of the law.

The plea contended Chavan was not named as an accused in any scheduled offence and, hence, he cannot be arraigned as an accused by the ED.

He sought the HC to quash the remand orders of the special court and declare his arrest as illegal.

The money laundering case stems from an FIR of the Mumbai Police's Economic Offences Wing (EOW).

According to police, alleged irregularities took place while giving contracts by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) for providing 'khichdi' to migrants during the Covid-19.

The probe agency said for the supply of khichdi packets, an amount of ₹ 8.64 crore was transferred by the BMC in the bank account of Force One Multi Services (which was given the work order for khichdi).

The investigation conducted under PMLA revealed that Force One Multi Services has generated the "proceeds of crime" of around ₹ 3.64 crore, of which ₹ 1.25 crore were diverted to the personal bank account of Chavan and ₹ 10 lakh to the bank account of his partnership firm - Fire Fighters Enterprises, the ED claimed. (PTI)

## BJP accuses JD(U) of upending its EBC outreach, threatens stir

**PATNA, Jan 22:** The opposition BJP in Bihar has accused chief minister Nitish Kumar's JD(U), an ally turned adversary, of sabotaging its plans to celebrate the birth anniversary of legendary socialist leader Karpoori Thakur here later this week.

State BJP president Samrat Choudhary has threatened to stage a demonstration in front of the JD(U) office here on January 24, taking exception to the ruling party putting up tents at the Miller High School ground where the saffron party had sought administrative clearance for holding its event.

"The JD(U) is holding its own function at the veterinary college ground, which is a few kilometres away. Why does it then need another ground elsewhere for its workers coming from outside the state", an indignant Choudhary asked.

He alleged that though the BJP had planned the event way back in November when it had also moved the requisite application before the district administration, the JD(U) used its

clout to get both grounds booked for itself.

However, senior JD(U) leader and Bihar minister Ashok Choudhary rejected the charge, saying "It is not in our character to put hurdles in the way of other programmes planned by other parties. We are not occupying the Millar High School ground without any authorization. If the BJP thinks the administration should not have allowed us to bring our party workers here, then we cannot help it."

Choudhary also pointed out, "We had organized a Bhim Sansad in November which attracted huge crowds. The venue was the same veterinary college ground but party workers were put up at the same Millar High School ground. We cannot leave our workers to fend for themselves in the biting cold. If BJP wants to create a scene, we can only express regret".

The district administration has, so far, remained tight-lipped on the controversy involving the two parties, one in power and the

other a partner until Nitish Kumar snapped ties with the BJP less than two years ago.

Notably, Thakur, who served as chief minister of Bihar in the 1970s, had been a mentor to many current generation leaders of the state, including Nitish Kumar and his ally Lalu Prasad, the RJD president.

His tenure is best remembered for implementation of the recommendations of Mungeri Lal Commission, whereby quotas for backward classes were introduced in the state, much before the 1990s' Mandal Commission changed the national political contours.

A highlight of the Mungeri Lal Commission was a separate sub-category called Most Backward Classes, which provided the template for the "ati picchda" plank built by Nitish Kumar years later.

Following last year's caste survey, followed by a hike in quotas for all deprived castes, Kumar, who assumed his party's presidency last month, aims to galvanize the extremely backward classes (EBCs). (PTI)

## Nirmala Sitharaman alleges police misuse in TN; Governor Ravi claims 'repression'

**CHENNAI, Jan 22:** Tamil Nadu Governor RN Ravi on Monday alleged that priests and staff of a Shri Ram temple here, under the control of the state government, faced 'repression' while the entire country celebrated the 'Pran Pratishtha' of Ram Lalla in Ayodhya.

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman speaking to reporters in Kancheepuram alleged that the Tamil Nadu police 'is being misused' by the 'Hindu hating' DMK regime to thwart public screening of the Ayodhya ceremony and celebrations to mark the event. The DMK 'is clearly showing its personal hatred' for the Prime Minister and 'suppressing worshippers,' she alleged.

Against the background of the BJP alleging a 'ban' by the DMK regime for celebrations and public screening to mark the consecration, Ravi visited a temple here and seemingly backed the Saffron party's accusation.

The Governor said on X: "This morning I visited Sri Kodandaramaswami Temple, West Mambalam, Chennai, and offered prayers to Prabhu Sri Ram for the well-being of all. This temple is under HR & CE Dept. (Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department of the state government)." He alleged: "There was an all-pervasive sense of invisible fear and apprehensions writ large on the faces of priests and temple staff. A stark contrast to the festive environment in the rest of the country. While the entire country is celebrating the Pran Pratishtha of Ram Lalla, the temple premises here exude a sense of acute repression."

The TN government has dismissed the BJP's allegation that permission is denied by the HR and CE Department to hold celebrations in temples to mark the Ayodhya ceremony. (PTI)

## We must rethink our path to progress, says historian Ramachandra Guha

**BENGALURU, Jan 22:** Stating that multiple forms of environmental degradation have pushed India towards a deep civilisational crisis, Babu Ke Log, a nation-wide coalition of Gandhians, has put together a manifesto intending to mitigate the effects of the present crisis.

The manifesto was officially released on Sunday by Anil Hegde, Rajya Sabha MP representing Bihar.

In his speech at the event, historian Ramachandra Guha said we must rethink our path to progress.

"Even if climate change was not occurring, India will be an environmental disaster. Climate change is making the problem much worse and less predictable," he said.

Babu Ke Log's manifesto tells us how to rethink, Guha said. "It tells us how to forge a path for our country that is suitable to not just its culture, but to its environmental constraints," he added.

To put a check on the "rapid downfall of our society", Guha suggested measures like degrowth wherever needed, political decentralisation, renewal and revitalisation of civil societies and re-orientation of society.

Prasanna, a noted theatre personality and Gandhian, who was instrumental in drafting the manifesto, suggested a 70-30 economy -- where at least 70 per cent human labour is involved in the production of all goods and services -- to lift the society from its current predicament.

He said the manifesto was shaped by many organisations and individuals across the country and that a book will be brought out detailing the idea.

"We believe annihilation of labour, or the process of complete automation, is at the root of our present crisis," said Prasanna. (PTI)

## It was all worth it, feel I am luckiest person: Sculptor Arun Yogiraj on Ram Lalla idol consecration

**AYODHYA, Jan 22:** 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 his 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, told PTI. 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 told PTI 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, Arun Yogiraj trained for six months in the HR Department of a private company.

"But I listened to my inner voice and left the private sector job and returned to Mysuru to carry forward the family tradition," he said.

Yogiraj had earlier sculpted the 12-foot-tall idol of Adi Shankaracharya,



which has been placed in Kedarnath, and the statue of Subhas Chandra Bose which has been installed near India Gate in Delhi. The 21 feet tall Hanuman statue at Chunchanakatte in Mysore district, 15 feet tall statue of Dr B R Ambedkar, a white amritashila statue of Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa in Mysore, six feet tall monolithic statue of Nandi, six feet

tall statue of Banashankari Devi and a 4.5 feet tall white Amrita Shila statue of the King of Mysore Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar are among the idols sculpted by him.

According to a UGC-emeritus professor at the Department of Earth Sciences, University of Mysore, the idol carved by Yogiraj, which is now gracing the sanctum sanctorum of Ram

Temple in Ayodhya, has been sculpted from a three-billion-year-old rock.

"Based on extensive geological, petrological, and geochronological studies carried out by the Department of Earth Science, for more than three decades, it has been found that the rock used to carve the idol of Sri Ram Lalla is the oldest rock from South India," he said.

The azure-coloured Krishna Shile (black schist) was excavated from Gujigowdanapura at Jayapura Hobli in H.D. Kote Taluk. It is a fine to medium-grained, sky-blue-coloured metamorphic rock and this type is generally called soapstone because of its smooth surface texture and is an ideal rock for sculptors to carve idols.

"Krishna Shile" was found while levelling the agricultural land of Ramadas (78) and a local contractor who assessed the quality of the stone drew the attention of the temple trustees at Ayodhya through his contacts. On assessment, it was found to be of supe-

rior quality and was selected for sculpting the idol of Ram Lalla at Ayodhya. Ramadas has now announced he will donate four 'guntas' of his land for the construction of a Ram temple at the site from where the stone was mined. Meanwhile, special rituals for the temple foundation laying were performed on Monday at the same spot where the black stone for the Ayodhya idol was found.

The rituals were performed at 6.30 am and were attended by Chamundeshwari MLA GT Deve Gowda and community leaders of the village and surrounding areas. Yogiraj has also been requested to prepare an idol for the temple when it is constructed. Rama Lalla's idols were made by three sculptors - Ganesh Bhatt, Arun Yogiraj and Satyanarayan Pandey. The temple trust had said that of the three idols, one will be placed in the sanctum sanctorum, while the remaining two will be kept in other parts of the Ram Mandir. (PTI)

# Left trying to control INDIA bloc's agenda, will not accept it: Mamata

**KOLKATA, Jan 22:** Amid the internal discord within the INDIA bloc in the state over seat-sharing, TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee asserted on Monday that the Left is striving to control the opposition bloc's agenda, underscoring that no one confronts the BJP as directly as she does.

Addressing an all-faith rally in the city, the TMC leader expressed her unwillingness to accept the Left Front led by CPI(M) controlling the agenda of the INDIA bloc meeting.

"I suggested the name INDIA during the opposition bloc meeting. But whenever I attend the meeting, I find the Left trying to control it. This is not acceptable. I cannot agree with those with whom I had fought for 34 years," she said.

Banerjee remarked, "Despite such insults, I have adjusted and attended the INDIA bloc meetings."

In an apparent reference to Congress leader Rahul Gandhi being stopped in Assam from visiting the birthplace of Vaishnav saint Sri-mant Sankardeva, Banerjee remarked, "Just going to the temple isn't enough."

She highlighted her proactive stance against the BJP, stating, "How many politicians today took on the BJP head-on? Somebody went to one temple and thought it was sufficient, but it was not. I am the only one who visited the temple, gurdwara, church, and



mosque. I have been fighting for a long time. When the Babri Masjid issue (demolition) happened, and violence was taking place, I was on the streets."

Banerjee's remarks came as she embarked on a symbolic journey of religious harmony, leading an all-faith rally that included visits to diverse places of worship, such as a temple, mosque, church, and gurdwara, aligning with the consecration ceremony of Ram temple in Ayodhya earlier in the day.

The CPI (M)-led Left Front, Congress, and TMC collectively constitute the 28-party strong INDIA opposition bloc. However, in West Bengal, the CPI(M) and Congress have aligned against the

TMC and BJP.

Without explicitly mentioning the Congress, Banerjee criticised them for delaying seat-sharing discussions in the state.

"I have the power and mass base to take on the BJP and fight against them. But some people don't want to listen to us about seat sharing. If you don't want to fight the BJP, then at least don't give away seats to them," she remarked.

Her comments followed her assertion during an internal party meeting three days ago that the TMC is prepared to independently contest all 42 Lok Sabha seats in Bengal if not given due importance. Fissures within the INDIA opposition bloc have become evi-

dent, particularly between its key allies, Congress and TMC, regarding seat-sharing for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls in West Bengal.

The TMC's offer of two seats based on Congress's 2019 Lok Sabha election victories was deemed insufficient by the grand-old party, escalating tensions between the two parties.

The development coincided with state Congress president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, a vocal TMC critic, asserting that his party wouldn't "beg" for seats from the TMC.

In the 2019 elections, TMC secured 22 seats, Congress won two, and BJP secured 18 seats in the state.

Chowdhury, also the Congress leader in Lok Sabha, won the Baharampur seat, while Abu Hasem Khan Chowdhury, a former Union minister, secured a third consecutive term from Malda Dakshin seat. The TMC recently decided to abstain from an INDIA bloc virtual meeting and emphasised the necessity for Congress to recognise its limitations in Bengal and permit the TMC to spearhead the state's political battle.

The TMC had previously allied with the Congress in the 2001 assembly polls, the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, and the 2011 assembly polls, leading to the ousting of the CPI(M)-led Left Front government of 34 years. (PTI)

## EC publishes Uttarakhand's final electoral roll with 82.4 lakh voters



**DEHRADUN, Jan 22:** The final electoral roll of Uttarakhand published by the Election Commission of India on Monday showed a total voter count of 82,43,423 in the state.

Of the total electorate, 42,70,597 are males, 39,72,540 are females and 286 third gender voters, according to the published data.

Sharing the electoral roll figures at press conference here, Uttarakhand Chief Electoral Officer V Shammugham said there are a total of 93,357 service voters in Uttarakhand, including 90,763 men and 2,594 women.

The highest number of voters were recorded in the 30-39 age group at 22,44,926, followed by 17,04,523 electors in the 40-49 age group, 16,59,290 in 20-29 age group, 11,86,686 in 50-59 years.

A total of 7,50,563 voters are in the 60-69 age group, 4,14,114 aged 70-79 years, 1,54,259 voters aged above 80 years, and 129,062 in 18-19 age cohort, he said.

There are 11,729 polling stations in the state, of which 3,461 are in urban areas, while 8,268 in rural areas. (PTI)

## All 11 convicts surrender at Godhra jail shortly before end of deadline

**GODHRA, Jan 22:** All 11 convicts in the Bilkis Bano case have surrendered at the Godhra sub jail in Gujarat's Panchmahal district in keeping with the deadline set by the Supreme Court.

The 11 convicts surrendered before jail authorities late Sunday night, local Crime Branch inspector NL Desai said.

"They reached the jail before midnight of January 21, which was the deadline set for them to surrender," he said.

The top court on January 8 annulled the remission granted by the Gujarat government to the 11 convicts in the high-profile case while slamming the state for being "complicit" with an accused and abusing its discretion.

It ordered the convicts, who were released prematurely on Independence Day in 2022, to go back to jail within two weeks.

The apex court on Friday rejected pleas of the convicts for grant of more time to surrender and asked them to do so by Sunday.

The 11 convicts are Bakabhai Vohania, Bipin Chandra Joshi, Kesarbhai Vohania, Govind Nai, Jaswant Nai, Mitesh Bhatt, Pradeep Mordhiya, Radheshyam Shah, Rajubhai Soni, Ramesh Chandana and Shailesh Bhatt.

Bilkis Bano was 21 years old and five months pregnant when she was gang-raped



while trying to escape the horror of the communal riots that broke out after the Godhra train burning incident in February 2002. Her three-year-old daughter was among the seven family members killed.

On August 15, 2022, the 11 convicts, who spent 14 years in jail as part of the life sentence, were granted premature release after the Gujarat government accepted their remission applications in accordance with its 1992 policy, citing their 'good conduct' during imprisonment.

The 11 convicts are residents of Singvad and Randhikpur villages in Singvad taluka of Dahod district near Panchmahal.

Quashing the remission order, the Supreme Court had ruled that the Gujarat government lacked jurisdiction to grant premature release to the convicts as the case trial was held in Maharashtra.

Days after the SC order, the convicts moved the top court seeking more time to surrender on various grounds such as failing health, impending surgery, son's marriage and harvesting ripe crops.

These applications were dismissed by the apex court on Friday with the observation that the reasons cited had no merit. (PTI)

## Govt may increase agri-credit target to ₹ 22-25 lakh crore turn in interim budget

**Govt's agri-credit target is ₹ 20 lakh crore for the current fiscal year**

**NEW DELHI, Jan 22:** The government is likely to announce in the upcoming interim budget, a substantial increase in the agricultural credit target to ₹ 22-25 lakh crore for the next fiscal year and ensure every eligible farmer has access to institutional credit, according to sources.

The government's agri-credit target is ₹ 20 lakh crore for the current fiscal.

Currently, the government provides interest subvention of two per cent on short term agri-loans of up to ₹ 3 lakh for all financial institutions. This means farmers are getting a farm loan of up to ₹ 3 lakh at a concessional rate of 7 per cent per annum.

An additional interest subvention of 3 per cent per annum is also being provided to farmers who repay on time. Farmers can also avail long term loans but interest rate is as per the market rate.

For the 2024-25 fiscal year, there could be a sharp increase in the agri-credit target to ₹ 22-25 lakh crore, sources said.

According to the sources, there is more focus on agri-credit and the government is implementing



several campaigns to identify the left out eligible farmers and bring them in the credit network.

The agriculture ministry has also created a separate division on 'credit' in order to give a focused approach, the sources added.

Further, the sources mentioned that the credit disbursal for various agricultural and allied activities has been exceeding the target in the last 10 years.

In the current fiscal, about 82 per cent of the agri-credit target of ₹ 20 lakh crore has been achieved till December 2023. About ₹ 16.37

lakh crore was the outstanding amount as on March 31, 2023.

As per the 2019 NSS report on Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and Land and Livestock Holdings of Households in Rural India, the percentage of indebted agricultural households is 50.2 per cent in the country. Out of which, 69.6 per cent of the outstanding loans were taken from institutional sources.

Looking at the NSS report, the sources said there is still a large segment of agricultural households who do not have an access to the institutional credit. The government is targeting to bring such people under the formal credit network.

As a result, the government has been focusing on achieving 100 per cent saturation in KCC in the last three months through three different initiatives 'Ghar Ghar KCC campaign', 'Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra' and 'PM-JANMAN' campaign focusing on Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), they added.

KCC is being issued to left out farmers, fishermen, and tribal farmers. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## Ram Lalla consecrated

At the end, the PM prostrated himself before the 51-inch idol that depicts the child Ram. The ceremony took place in the presence of Uttar Pradesh Governor Anandiben Patel, chief minister Yogi Adityanath and RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat. Outside, Ayodhya resident Anil Singh called it a "priceless moment" that he would treasure forever. "As a resident of Ayodhya, I feel proud that I live in this spiritual city," he said. Leaving the sanctum sanctorum, Modi moved to another location in the complex to address a gathering of about 8,000, which included sadhus, people linked to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and celebrities from fields like entertainment, sports and industry. As soon as the PM left, the temple was thrown open to these invitees. Hundreds rushed in, creating complete chaos in the chamber before the 'garbhagriha'.

The PM also visited Kuber Tila shrine, unveiled a statue of Ramayana figure Jatayu and showered petals on workers who built the temple. The first phase of the temple built by a trust has so far cost ₹ 1,100 crore. It is expected to open Tuesday to the public. Senior BJP leaders including party chief J P Nadda and Union home minister Amit Shah watched the live streaming of the consecration ceremony.

The run-up to the ceremony was marked by much sparring between the ruling BJP and the Opposition. Top opposition leaders skipped the temple inauguration, calling it an RSS-BJP event.

But Himachal Pradesh minister Vikramaditya Singh, who is the son of state Congress chief Pratibha Singh, arrived at the venue. Several states declared the day a holiday to allow people to watch the ceremony on tv and also take part in events at local temples.

The new idol depicts Ram at the age of five, and was carved from black stone by Mysuru-based sculptor Arun Yogiraj. It was draped in a yellow dhoti, and adorned with stone-studded jewellery and flowers in shades of red, yellow and purple. Fifty traditional musical instruments from across the country were part of a devotional "mangal dhvani" that resonated during the ceremony. Orchestrated by Ayodhya's celebrated poet Yatindra Mishra, the rendition was supported by New Delhi's Sangeet Natak Akademi.

Devotees arrived from several parts of the country to the temple town to be part of the occasion, though the main ceremony was only for the invitees.

Ceremonial gates depicting 'Jai Shri Ram' in floral patterns and illumination visible at night added to the aura of the ancient city, which has undergone a massive infrastructural growth in the last couple of years.

A temple-mosque dispute had simmered over the spot where the 16th century Babri mosque stood.

Many Hindus believe that the mosque was constructed after the demolition of a temple that existed on the site of Lord Ram's birthplace. Kar sewaks demolished it on December 6, 1992.

After a long legal battle, the top court in 2019 ruled in favour of the construction of the temple. It also ordered allotment of a five-acre plot for building a mosque. (PTI)

## Biren Singh holds meeting

Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Meiteis account for about 53 per cent of Manipur's population and live mostly in the Imphal Valley, while tribals, which include Nagas and Kukis, constitute 40 per cent and reside mostly in the hill districts. The chief minister also held a meeting on Sunday with the state ministers and MLAs of the ruling alliance.

However, five MLAs, including Wangjing Tantha legislator Paonam Brojen and Uripok MLA Kh Raghmani, were absent from the meeting. Brojen and Raghmani had cited medical reasons, an official said.

Notably, Brojen had, in April last year, resigned from the chairman post of the Manipur Development Society while Raghmani had stepped down from the chairmanship of the Manipur Renewable Energy Development Agency in the same month. (PTI)

## CM: Ram temple consecration

particular time of history, a Swarnim Yug," he added. The state government had earlier declared a half-day holiday in the state, with government offices and institutions to open from 2 pm on Monday.

Government schools, colleges and universities remained closed for the day, while private educational institutions had also been urged to declare a holiday.

At a press conference on Sunday, Sarma had urged people of all faiths to hold special prayers on the occasion of the Ram temple consecration to promote harmony. A 'dry day' has also been declared on Monday, and shops selling non-vegetarian food items will remain closed till 4 pm, he said.

He also appealed to people across the state to light lamps outside their homes, shops and business establishments as well as visit 'namghars' (community prayer halls) on Monday evening.

## Sonowal highlights cultural

this, Sonowal attended Hari Kirtan at the Auniati Satra Sakha Naamghar in Lakhi Nagar where he joined scores of devotees of Ram to watch the Mahotsav from Dibrugarh.

Adding further, Sarbananda Sonowal that Ram Mandir is an emotional expression of India for its glorious past. "Tomorrow, aspirations of crores of people will become reality with Ram Mandir Pran Pratistha ceremony. Ram Mandir is now for all of us and forever for us. As Narendra Modi ji attends the ceremony as main Yajman, I am blessed to be joining this programme virtually from the pious Auniati Satra in Dibrugarh along with devotees of Ram and watch the pious Pran Pratistha ceremony at Ram Mandir," he added.

## Manipur MLAs demand

beyond its expiry date of February 29, 2024," the MLAs said in a statement. The SoO was signed with the Centre, the Manipur government and two conglomerates of Kuki militant outfits – the Kuki National Organisations and United Peoples Front. The pact was first inked in 2008 and extended periodically.

"These forces (Assam Rifles) and their leadership (chain of command) need to give strict instructions and be held accountable, and replace with forces that have the ability to act by returning suppressive fires when they observe that unarmed civilians are being fired upon," it said. The MLAs have also called for "complete disarmament of illegal arms in the possession of unauthorised persons" in the state at the earliest. The legislators asserted that if the Union government is "unable to take any positive action as per these demands", the MLAs will take "appropriate action in consultation with the public". (PTI)

## India records 203 fresh

leading to an exponential rise in new cases nor a surge in hospitalisation and mortality," the official sources have said. India has witnessed three Covid-19 waves with the peak incidence of daily new cases and deaths being reported during the Delta wave in April-June 2021. At its peak, 4,14,188 (4.14 lakh) new cases and 3,915 deaths were reported on May 7, 2021.

Since the pandemic began in early 2020, there have been more than 4.50 crore people getting infected and over 5.30 lakh deaths in about four years since then across the country. The number of people who have recuperated from the disease stands at more than 4.40 crore with a national recovery rate of 98.81 per cent, according to the ministry's website. The website said 220.67 crore vaccine doses have so far been administered in the country. (PTI)

## Rahul not allowed

spreading hatred'. 'He is like a guru to us and gives us direction. So I had thought when I came to Assam, I should offer my respects to him,' he said. Gandhi said that they had received an invitation on January 11 but "we were told that there is a law and order situation. This is strange as there is a law and order situation in the area, but Gaurav Gogoi and all can go but only Rahul Gandhi cannot go." The former Congress president said he would go to Batadrava after getting an opportunity. "It is my belief that both Assam and the entire nation should follow the path shown by Sankardeva", he said. Gogoi, who visited the satra along with the Congress MLA, said that there was no crowd in and around the premises. "A rumour was spread that a law and order situation could have risen if Gandhi had visited the place. The chief minister has stamped a black spot in the history of Batadrava and the legacy of Sri Sankardeva", the Congress MP from Kaliabor said.

Gogoi claimed they offered prayers of peace and harmony on behalf of Gandhi and all priests who were present in the premises extended their blessings to him.

Earlier, when Nagaon SP Navaneet Mahanta and additional district commissioner Lakhajyoti Das explained why he could not be allowed to visit the satra, Gandhi questioned, "Will PM Modi now decide who will visit a temple and when?"

Ramesh said when the authorities had said there could be a law and order problem, Gandhi offered to go there alone but this too was refused. "We were given permission to visit the Satra on January 11 and the managing committee had welcomed the visit but suddenly on January 20, we were told that he could visit only after the consecration of the Ram temple is over", Ramesh said. After Gandhi was not allowed to visit Batadrava, the Morigaon district administration in a letter to the district Congress organisers asked Gandhi to refrain from holding street corner meetings and a foot march as a part of the Yatra saying miscreants may try to disrupt peace in the district.

"In the interest of Rahul Gandhi's safety and security, who is a 'Z plus Advance Security Liasoning (ASL) protectee along with our responsibility to avert any probable law and order disruption in Morigaon district, we request that the party refrain from proposed street corner meeting and padyatra in Morigaon town", the letter read. The authorities also requested the party not to stop carcade during his roadshow at Morigaon district till he reached the Golsopa alighting point for lunch and rest. "This negates all earlier permissions accorded by the district administration for holding any public meeting/Padyatra in Morigaon district in connection with the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra on January 22", the letter stated. (PTI)

## VPP temporarily suspends

whatever the government has done is because the appointment of those officials is against the law. So we question the government as to how it overlooks such a section which is too glaring in the act."

"We have clearly told the Law minister to convey all these pertinent points to the chief minister so that in the next meeting we can sit and solve the matter once and for all," he added. Basaiaiwmoi however maintained that the agitation will resume if the government fails to justify its decision to remove the Lokayukta officials. He alleged that the terminated officials of the Lokayukta were investigating a corruption case involving a relative of the chief minister. Asserting the need to further strengthen the Meghalaya Lokayukta Act, Basaiaiwmoi said, "Stop interfering with the functioning of the Lokayukta so that you will witness many, who will get arrested and put behind bars due to corrupt practices." (NNN)

## Diphu radiates unity and

Ram Lalla Pran Pratistha, a cultural extravaganza unfolded with readings of Hanuman path, Ramayan path, Sundrakanth, and deep prajalan over four days. In adherence to government directives, educational institutions, schools, and colleges remained closed on this auspicious day. Meat and fish sellers shuttered their shops from early morning until 4 pm. The evening brought a serene glow to temples, private houses, and shop fronts, adorned with the soft flicker of earthen lamps. Diphu resonated with unity, celebration, and spiritual fervor as the community came together to honor the momentous occasion of Ram Lalla Pran Pratistha.

## Manoj Bajpayee-starrer 'The Fable' in Encounters segment of Berlinale 2024

NEW DELHI, Jan 22: Manoj Bajpayee-starrer 'The Fable', directed by Raam Reddy, is the only film from India this year to compete in one of the key categories at the Berlin International Film Festival.

The film, a follow up to Reddy's celebrated debut 'Thithi', will premiere at the 74th edition of the festival in the Encounters Competition segment, which also features 14 other titles from around the globe. A US-Indian co-production, 'The Fable' also stars Deepak Dobryal, Priyanka Bose, Tillotama Shome, Hiral Sidhu and child actor Awan Pooika.

Bajpayee, who most recently featured in critically-acclaimed 'Joram' and is part of Netflix streaming show 'Killer Soup',

called working on the movie "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. Our film's presence at Berlinale signifies the global reach and artistic caliber of Indian storytelling," the actor said in a statement.

Reddy, who also wrote the film, said "The Fable" is not just a film but an unadorned piece of my soul. I feel fortunate for many things: being able to collaborate with Manoj ji's brilliance and such a wonderful cast, premiering in a competitive section of Berlinale, having global backing for the film. But most importantly, for the opportunity to tell

this story exactly as I envisioned." The film is backed by veteran producer Sunnim Park, who also supported Reddy's 'Thithi'.

The last Indian film in Encounters Competition was 'The Shepherdess and The Seven Songs' by Pushpendra Singh in 2020. There has been no Indian film in Main Competition since 'Shelter of the Wings', directed by Buddhadeb Dasgupta in 1994.

Indian films like 'The Adamant Girl', "In the Belly of a Tiger" will feature in the Forum segment of the festival.

"O Seeker", "Remote Occasions", "Two Refusals" and short films 'Sour Candy' and 'The Girl Who Lived in the Loo' will also screen at the festival that runs from February 15 to 24. (PTI)



## DELHI HC TOLD SUPER CASSETTES, CINE 1 STUDIOS SETTLED DISPUTE ON RELEASE OF 'ANIMAL' ON OTT PLATFORM

NEW DELHI, Jan 22: Delhi High Court was informed on Monday that Super Cassettes and Cine 1 Studios - the co-producers of "Animal" - have settled their dispute regarding alleged violation of contractual obligations relating to the Bollywood film.

Cine 1 Studios had filed a suit in the high court against Super Cassettes and sought to restrain the release of the film on digital streaming platforms and its satellite broadcast.

The film, directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga, was released in theatres on December 1. It is set to be released on Netflix on January 26.

On Monday, the counsel for Cine 1 Studios and Super Cassettes told Justice Sanjeev Narula that a settlement agreement was signed between the two parties and it will be brought on record.

The high court noted the submissions of the lawyers and asked them to bring on record the agreement and listed the matter for consideration on January 24.

On January 18, the high court issued summons to Super Cassettes Industries Private Limited, Netflix India and Cluver Max Entertainment Private Limited (formerly Sony Pictures Networks Limited), with which an agreement was signed for granting of the film's satellite rights, on the suit and sought their responses.

It had said the three defendants must also file affidavits of admission or denial of the documents produced by the plaintiff, without which their written statements would not be taken on record. While Cine 1 Studios had claimed a breach of agreement and said it was not paid a single penny, Super Cassettes contended that Rs 2.6 crore was paid to the plaintiff that it did not disclose to the court.

However, Cine 1 Studios' counsel had argued that the document shown was allegedly "ex-facie forged and fabricated". The plaintiff, in its interim plea, sought a stay on the release of the film on OTT, digital and satellite platforms.

The Cine 1 Studios' counsel had said the plaintiff did not get any information about the revenue the film earned, its collection at the box office, the music, satellite or Internet rights. The suit said the two production houses had entered into an agreement to produce the film.

Under the agreement, Cine 1 Studios claimed it had a 35 per cent profit share and was entitled to 35 per cent intellectual property rights in the film. It further claimed that without Cine 1 Studios' approval, Super Cassettes incurred expenses for making/promoting/releasing the film, received revenues from box office sales but did not share the details with it. (PTI)

## Meghna Gulzar's 'Sam Bahadur' to stream on ZEE5 on Republic Day

MUMBAI, Jan 22: ZEE5 has set the digital premiere of the Vicky Kaushal-starrer Sam Bahadur on January 26 on the occasion of the 75th Republic Day, the streamer announced on Monday. Directed by Meghna Gulzar and produced by Ronnie Screwvala's RSVP production, the war biopic chronicles the extraordinary life of Sam Manekshaw, from his early days of being the chief of Army staff to his well-deserved retirement, exploring the milestones and triumphs of his illustrious journey. Sam Bahadur, which released in cinemas on December 1, also stars Pooja Sharma, Sanya Malhotra, and Mohit Zeeshaan Ayub.

Namish Kalra, Chief Business Officer, ZEE5, said the platform takes pride in announcing the digital premiere of Sam Bahadur on January 26. "Our collaboration with Ronnie Screwvala productions has been exceptional, and it has helped us offer back-to-back patriotic films like Tejas and Sam Bahadur. Post Sam Bahadur's success in theatres, we are confident that viewers will enjoy watching this movie on our platform as well," Kalra said in a statement. Screwvala said Sam Bahadur is a special project. "This film is my humble attempt to bring forth the inspiring narrative of a brave hero, Sam Manekshaw, and share it with the world. Collaborating with ZEE5 for its world digital premiere is a wonderful opportunity to give this beautiful story the platform it deserves. I hope audiences appreciate the remarkable journey we have embarked on with this film," he said. (PTI)



## Hopkins 'honoured' to meet Salman Khan, shares photo from Joy Awards

NEW DELHI, Jan 22: British cinema and stage veteran Anthony Hopkins shared a picture with Salman Khan on social media and said he was honoured to meet the Indian superstar at the Joy Awards in Saudi Arabia.

Hopkins attended the ceremony on Saturday in Riyadh, where he received the Lifetime Achievement Award.

The two-time Oscar winner posed a picture with Khan, who presented Egyptian actor Essad Younis with the Lifetime Achievement honour at the awards, on his Instagram Story.

"It was an honor to meet you @beingsalmankhan #JoyAwards #RiyadhSeason," he captioned his post on Sunday.

Hopkins also expressed gratitude to the Joy Awards for the

honour. "Thank you #JoyAwards for honoring me with the Lifetime Achievement Award. We depart this beautiful city with gratitude for the kindness and generosity bestowed upon us. @Turki\_alalshikh #RiyadhSeason," he posted on X.

At the ceremony, Indian actor Alia Bhatt received the honorary entertainment makers award and in her acceptance speech, she dedicated the trophy to the "magic of movies".

Later at the event, Khan and Bhatt also posed for a group photograph alongside Hopkins, and other Hollywood bigwigs, including Salma Hayek, Zack Snyder, John Cena, and Anthony Anderson. (PTI)



## Alia Bhatt honoured at Joy Awards, dedicates award to 'magic of movies'

MUMBAI, Jan 22: Alia Bhatt was presented with the honorary entertainment makers award at the Joy Awards in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and the actor dedicated the trophy to the "magic of movies".

The National Award winner, whose latest release was "Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahani", received the award at a ceremony held on Saturday. Alia shared a series of pictures from the event along with a clip of her acceptance speech on Instagram. "It's truly an extraordinary night. I'm obsessed with movies, that is all I know. When I was born, I came out on 'Lights, camera, action'. That's how much cinema means to me. To a night of culture, honour & cinema," she captioned her post. (PTI)



## Bachchan, Rajini, Alia-Ranbir attend Ram temple consecration; Parvathy, Jeo Baby share Preamble pics

NEW DELHI, Jan 22: Amitabh Bachchan, Rajinikanth, Alia Bhatt and Ranbir Kapoor were some of the prominent Indian cinema personalities who attended the consecration ceremony at the Ram temple in Uttar Pradesh's Ayodhya on Monday.

Actor couple Vicky Kaushal and Katrina Kaif, filmmakers Rohit Shetty, Rajkumar Hirani, actors Ayushmann Khurrana, Madhuri Dixit Nene along with her husband Sriram Nene and producer Mahaveer Jain also made an appearance as part of the contingent from the Indian film industry at the ceremony.

Amitabh Bachchan left for Ayodhya from Mumbai on Monday along with his son, actor Abhishek Bachchan. At 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". The Bachchans also met BJP MP Ravi Shankar Prasad and industrialist Anil Ambani at the venue.

Earlier in the day, Chiranjeevi was photographed disembarking from a chartered plane at the Ayodhya airport. He was accompanied by his wife Sarekha and son, "RRR" star Ram Charan. Actor Kangana Ranaut, who reached Ayodhya on Saturday, previously hailed the ceremony as a "divine experience".

After the completion of the rituals, several personalities including Sarod maestro Anjad Ali Khan, actor Ajay Devgn, and singer Shreya Ghoshal extended their wishes on social media.

"Can't believe I'm lucky enough to witness something as historic & auspicious as #RamMandiPranPrathisha in my lifetime. Proud to see how our entire

nation has united to welcome our Ram Lalla back home in Ayodhya!" Devgn said on X.

"May the inauguration of the Ram Mandir bring peace, harmony, and spiritual enlightenment to all. Wishing everyone a joyous and fulfilling darshan at the Ayodhya Ram Mandir," Khan wrote on the microblogging site.

"Jai Shree Ram. My eyes are filled with tears of joy to see the divine face of Ram Lalla," Ghoshal captioned her video of watching the ceremony live on TV. Actor Deepika Padukone shared a photograph of a lamp on her Instagram Stories.

Ranaut shared a video of the Army helicopters' flower shower over the temple as she screamed "Jai Shri Ram!".

"Ram as gaye," she captioned her post. In an Instagram post, singer Harisharan said taking part in the ceremony is a

"truly humbling experience". "Standing before the majestic Ram Mandir, embraced by a sense of peace and devotion... Gratitude for this blessed moment," he wrote.

Several names from the Malayalam film industry such as Parvathy Thiruvothu, Ashiq Abu, Jeo Baby, Kam Kusurthi, Rima Kallingal and Divya Prabha shared an image of the Preamble of the Indian Constitution on social media, a move which many dubbed as a method of novel protest.

Smriti Kiran, artistic director of the MAMI Mumbai Film Festival, and "Faram" actor Kunal Kapoor were also among the names from the Hindi film industry who shared the Preamble on Instagram.

Documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan, best known for "Ram Ke Naam" which explored the campaign

waged to build a Ram temple at the site of the Babri mosque and the violence that it triggered, shared a post on Facebook in an apparent swipe at the consecration ceremony.

"Murkhon ka bazaar kabse bana mera desh? (Since when did my country become a market of fools?)" Patwardhan wrote in Hindi against a saffron background. On Instagram, "Kantara" actor Kishore G shared a quote which he attributed to social reformer Basavanna alluding to the construction of the Ram temple. His co-star Rishabh Shetty from the 2022 Kannada film festival, and "Faram" actor Kunal Kapoor were also among the names from the Hindi film industry who shared the Preamble on Instagram.

"Those that have wealth build temples. What can I, a poor man build. Here, my feet are the pillars. My body The sanctum sanctorum, My head shining dome of the temple, My God Koodalasangama knows very well.

That which is stationary will perish, and that which moves and is dynamic, stays on forever," his post reads on social media.

Hema Malini, Rajinikanth, Pawan Kalyan, Madhur Bhandarkar, Subhash Ghai, Shetal Shah, Vipul Shah, Ran-deep Hooda, Lin Laishram, Aadinath Mangeshkar, Anu Malik and Sonu Nigam arrived in the temple town on Sunday. Actors Akshay Kumar and Tiger Shroff, who are currently shooting for their upcoming film "Bade Miyan Chote Miyan", had wished fans ahead of the ceremony through a video message on social media.

"It's a big day for all devotees of Lord Ram across the world. After a wait of hundreds of years Ram Lalla is returning to his abode in a grand temple in Ayodhya. We wish you and your family on this pious day," Akshay said in the clip. (PTI)

## PBL, organised by SportzLive, had emerged as one of the world's top badminton leagues PBL likely to be back in new avatar by end of this year or early 2025: BAI

**NEW DELHI, Jan 22:** Dormant for the past three years following the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Premier Badminton League could see a revival by the end of this year or early 2025, the national federation's secretary Sanjay Mishra has revealed to PTL.

Mishra said efforts are on by the Badminton Association of India (BAI) to resolve "some internal issues" which were coming in the way of bringing the event back on the calendar. "Badminton league is important for our players. Unfortunately, it hasn't been conducted since the 2020 pandemic. There were also some internal issues but those would be solved soon," Mishra said, without elaborating any further.

"We have spoken to the organisers and asked them to get back in a month or two. So I am hopeful that by the end of this year or early next year, we should be able to host the event," he asserted.

PBL, organized by SportzLive, had



emerged as one of the world's top badminton leagues with stars like Olympic champions Carolina Marin and Viktor Axelsen, Tokyo Games silver-medallist Tai Tzu-Ying and former World No. 1 Lee Chong Wei, participating in the last five editions.

But after the 2020 edition, which was conducted just before the out-

break of Covid-19, the league couldn't be held. The BAI tried to organise it in December-January of 2022-23 but it didn't materialise.

"...there was a second wave (of Covid-19) in 2021 and this led to a financial crunch. But we are trying to raise funds and there are a few investors who are interested," said

Prasad Mangipudi, Co-founder of SportzLive and PBL.

"So, we are hopeful that we will be back in some form or the other by year end or early next year."

A conglomerate of investors has shown interest in organising the PBL. They are in talks with BAI.

"We are interested in working with BAI and SportzLive to see if we can acquire the property and for this, we are waiting on Himanta sir (BAI head and Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma) for the elections to finish," Arvind Bhat, co-owner of two-time PBL title winner Bengaluru Raptors, said.

"We have invested a lot of money and are yet to see the returns on it. If conducted over a long term, we believe this is a very good league for the betterment of the sport and players."

Around 15 leagues -- in sports such as hockey, football, tennis, table tennis, Kabaddi, volleyball, kho kho and even arm wrestling -- have been launched in India over the last decade

and a half but not all were able to survive over the long term.

The Indian Badminton League (IBL), which was launched in 2013 before being revamped into the Premier Badminton League after a gap of two years in 2016, was one of the first leagues to come up after the now-defunct Premier Hockey League (PHL) and the Indian Premier League (IPL).

"BAI should look at reviving PBL, there is a lot of interest. Get a 21-day or a month's off from the BWF circuit and if the right management is done, we can do that," former India chief coach Vimal Kumar said. "We have super 750, 300 and 100 and challenge events in India but the badminton league gives us real visibility."

"International players have been eager to come here. It will give more exposure to our young players. When PBL was happening, our players like Satwik and Chirag got exposure. Badminton has grown, there are a lot more players, coaches and money in the sport now," he explained. (PTI)

## Cook worries over England's lack of preparation

### Backs Bazball for success in India



**LONDON, Jan 22:** England's "lack of match preparation" in India ahead of the gruelling five-Test series could be a "problem" but the team can bank on its 'Bazball' approach to upstage Rohit Sharma and his men, feels Alastair Cook, who led the Englishmen to a memorable Test triumph in the country back in 2012. Having opted for a month-long training camp in 'subcontinent-like conditions' of Abu Dhabi, Ben Stokes and Co. arrived in Hyderabad on Sunday, just four days before the opening Test on Thursday. "A problem England will have is a lack of match preparation," Cook, who had top-scored with 562 runs in the 2-1 come-from-behind win over India in the 2012-13 series, wrote in his column for 'The Sunday Times'.

"It is the nature of the modern tour. When we won in India in 2012 we had three warm-up games against good sides -- Yuvraj Singh, Ajinkya Rahane and Murali Vijay were in the top four in the India A side we faced and Cheteshwar Pujara played in one of the other games," he recalled.

"...I can understand why England want to practise in a controlled environment where they know what the nets and facilities are going to be like and there's nothing too unpredictable."

Cook said at least one warm-up game should have been scheduled. "It would be good if there was some sort of unwritten agreement between countries to put on decent practice matches in decent conditions for touring teams...at the moment too many series are totally dominated by the home side and I don't think that's healthy for Test cricket," the 39-year-old said.

Since their defeat in 2012, India have not lost at home, remaining undefeated in 14 Test series.

Cook, however, was confident in England's Bazball approach, which advocates an attacking style of play. The team demonstrated it

in the successful tour of Pakistan (3-0) last year.

"...there is no doubt what England are going to try to do in India and I now think it is their best chance of success. They won't follow the traditional rules of batting in the subcontinent. I always found the key time was the first 30 balls when you are trying to acclimatise," Cook said.

"When you walk out to bat, particularly as a middle-order player coming in against spin, you're surrounded by close fielders. There is a lot of noise and chatter

"...if you can find a way to get past that then you find that the subcontinent is one of the nicest places to bat because you don't get the changing conditions you get in England, where it's sunny one minute then a bit of rain changes everything."

Cook said the English team has the attack to unsettle the star-studded Indian batting line-up.

"I'll be very interested to see how India react. I think this England side can put the India bowlers under pressure straight away."

"It might upset their rhythm and how they go about it. They just won't be used to it as most sides try to hang in there, but that generally doesn't work against India at home."

"The key will be adapting the aggressive shots they play based on the pitch they are confronted with. If it is turning excessively, the odds aren't in your favour if you are rushing down the wicket and having a massive hack."

Identifying Joe Root as a key asset, Cook hailed the former England captain as one of the best-ever players of spin.

"He's scored a lot of runs in the subcontinent in recent years in Sri Lanka and India, and he has done it by being very proactive, but in what seemed to be a very risk-free way. There's a lot of the other batsmen can learn from how he goes about it," he explained. (PTI)

## Gough hails Anderson's spirited commitment

**LONDON, Jan 22:** Former England cricketer Darren Gough is full of admiration for James Anderson's unwavering commitment to the game, especially as the 41-year-old fast bowler made adjustments to his run-up ahead of the gruelling five-Test series in India.

Set to become the oldest player to feature in an overseas Test for England in almost three decades, Anderson in an interview has earlier revealed that he is coming with a "better run-up to get that speed and momentum".

He has worked on it after a forgettable Ashes at home last year where he returned with five wickets from four Tests at 85.40 apiece.

"It just goes to show the desire to carry on playing. The only thing is when you've been doing something so long as Jimmy has, when you start quickening up, you bring more injuries into play, more hamstring, calf, groin-type injuries," Darren Gough told English publication Inews.

"Let's hope not because I think even at his age he can perform. Everybody talks about his age but with Jimmy you have to take age out of it. If he keeps taking wickets he keeps playing. If he doesn't, he doesn't, it's that simple," Gough said. (PTI)

## Milan keeper Maignan wants stronger action after racist abuse

**MILAN, Jan 22:** AC Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan says too many people are "complicit" in allowing racism to continue blighting soccer, and urged authorities to take stronger action after he suffered racist abuse on Saturday night. And FIFA President Gianni Infantino suggested "an automatic forfeit" for any team "whose fans have committed racism."

Maignan, who is Black, walked off after being abused by Udinese fans during a top-tier Italian league game, prompting the match to be suspended briefly during the first half. Maignan later told DAZN that he had been subjected to monkey noises.

On Sunday, he delivered a strongly worded response.

"It's not the player who was attacked. It's the man, it's the father. It's not the first time it's happened to me and I'm not the first person it's happened to," Maignan wrote in French on X, formerly known as Twitter. "We've had statements, publicity campaigns, protocols and nothing has changed. Today it's a whole system that must take responsibility."

Maignan said there still isn't enough being done to eradicate racial abuse. "The authorities and the prosecutor, with everything that's happening, if you don't act then you will also be complicit," he wrote.

The 28-year-old Maignan, who is France's No. 1 goalie, said that those who witnessed the racist incidents should have called out the perpetrators, and that Udinese should have acted more firmly at the time.

"The fans in the stands, who saw everything, who heard everything but decided to stay quiet, you are complicit," Maignan continued on X. "The club Udinese, who spoke only of interrupting the game, as if nothing had happened, you are complicit." Maignan had also told the referee about monkey chants earlier during the match. After being stopped, the Serie A game resumed about five minutes later. There have been numerous racist incidents in Italian and European soccer for years, with cases in Italy aimed at Kevin-Prince Boateng, Mario Balotelli and Romelu Lukaku among others. Infantino called the latest incident "totally abhorrent and completely unacceptable" and said world soccer's governing body could initiate tougher punishments.

"We need ALL the relevant stakeholders to take action, starting with education in schools so that future generations understand that this is not part of football or society," he wrote in a statement on X.

"As well as the three-step process (match stopped, match re-stopped, match abandoned), we have to implement an automatic forfeit for the team whose fans have committed racism and caused the match to be abandoned as well as worldwide stadium bans and criminal charges for racists."

Maignan's France teammate Kylian Mbappé posted a message of support for Maignan. "We are all with you," Mbappé wrote on X. "Always the same problems and still no solution. Enough is enough."

Maignan, whose brilliant performances helped Milan win the Serie A title in 2022, praised those who helped him to cope.

"I would like to say thanks once again to my club AC Milan, to my teammates, to the referee, to the Udinese players who sent me messages, who called me, who supported me privately and publicly," Maignan said, before concluding.

"It's a difficult fight, which will take time and courage. But it's a fight that we'll win." Udinese also issued a statement on Sunday.

"Udinese deeply regrets and condemns every act of racism and violence," the club said. "We reaffirm our aversion to any form of discrimination and express our profound solidarity with the AC Milan player Mike Maignan in light of Saturday's deplorable incident at our stadium."

"Udinese will collaborate with all investigating authorities to ensure immediate clarification of the incident, with the aim of taking any necessary measures to punish those responsible."

"As an institution, we will continue to work diligently, as we always have, to promote diversity and integration of all ethnicities, cultures and languages among our players, staff, fan base and city." (AP)

Zaka formed an inquiry committee to look into Conflict of Interest allegations against the former skipper

## Inzamam blames ousted PCB Interim Committee chairman Zaka for mess in Pakistan cricket

**KARACHI, Jan 22:** A furious former skipper and chairman of selectors Inzamam ul Haq squarely blamed Pakistan Cricket Board's outgoing top boss Zaka Ashraf for being responsible for country's disastrous ODI World Cup performance in India last year.

Zaka, who was named head of an Interim Management Committee to run PCB affairs in July, announced at a meeting of the committee a few days back that he was resigning immediately as Chairman and as a member of the board.

Inzamam, was in fact, removed after the end of the tournament on allegations of 'Conflict of Interest' that he is managed by the same UK-based management firm that also looks after business interests of some of the active players.

"Can you imagine the mindset of the players when during an important event like the World Cup in India they hear that the PCB Chairman is saying the team selected was not done by the board but by the captain and chief selector only," Inzamam said on a Pakistani television channel.

Inzamam was referring to a press release issued by PCB at Zaka's behest after Pakistan lost few games in World Cup, completely disowning any responsibility about the selected team along with hints that skipper Babar Azam will be sacked after the tournament.

"Just think what must be going through the players mind when they hear that an inquiry committee has been formed against the chief selector and he has resigned," he said.

"Where does this happen?," the normally cool Inzamam thundered.

Zaka formed an inquiry committee to look into Conflict of Interest allegations against the former skipper.

"I am still waiting for that report of the inquiry committee against me which was formed to probe whether I had committed a conflict of interest while being the chief selector," he said sarcastically.

Inzamam said everyone had a clear idea of how the PCB management was under Zaka.

Inzamam also felt that the PCB and Pakistan cricket shouldn't be run on an

## Former players say it's depressing Pak hockey team fails to qualify for Olympics



**KARACHI, Jan 22:** Pakistan's embattled men's hockey team has failed to qualify for the Olympic Games for a third consecutive time after losing its final shot at a Paris ticket in the FIH Qualifiers in Oman, a result that left the game's former greats here sad and outraged in equal measure.

After losing 0-4 to Germany in the tournament's semi-final, Pakistan went down 2-3 to New Zealand in the third-place match last night, ending their chances of making it to this year's Paris Olympics as only the top-three made the cut.

Pakistan's last Olympic appearance was in the 2012 Games where the team signed off 7th, a marginal improvement from its worst ever 8th place finish in the Beijing Games in 2008. The team is overall an eight-time medallist in the mega-event, three of them being gold (1960, 1968, and 1984).

"What do you expect bhai (brother), when the team is sent to the Olympic qualifiers with just 18 days training whereas all the other teams have come there with months of preparation and training," Olympian Wasim Feroze, who was a member of Pakistan's 1994 World Cup and Champions Trophy winning teams, said. Pakistan hockey has been in doldrums and was faced with a financial crisis leading to non payment of allowances and contract salaries to players and coaches. The financial crunch at times forced the PHF to pull out of international events.

But two months back the crisis took a new turn when Brigadier (ret) Khalid Sajjad Khokhar, who was PHF President since 2015, was removed by the patron in chief, the caretaker prime minister Anwar ul Haq Kakar. This led to total chaos with Khokhar refusing to

accept the government decision and effectively created a situation of parallel authorities with the players also not sure about their future and coaches coming and going.

Khokhar even threatened to go to the FIH and get the PHF suspended as he claimed only he was recognised by the world body. Arch-rivals India qualified for Paris with an Asian Games gold last year.

Feroze, who has remained a national selector, said the country should suspend playing international hockey events until it sort out its internal problems.

"There is no money for players and there is so much politics in the national federation and even at grass root level. Better we first resolve these things then go and play in international events and get embarrassed," he said. Former captain, Samiullah said he felt depressed after seeing the level to which Pakistan hockey had fallen.

"I mean, if we can't even win one match which was like a final for us what is going to happen? In the last quarter of the match against NZ the players just didn't have the fitness or spirit to secure victory," he said.

Samiullah said it was a shame that Pakistan would now miss its third successive Olympics.

His contemporary, Islahuddin Siddiqui agreed and said the players were just not well-prepared for the qualifiers.

"Pakistan hockey has been in a mess for the last four-five years because of the governance. Coaches have changed so rapidly and players are not sure about their financial security. It is so sad," he said.

Islahuddin was captain of the Pakistan team that won the World Cup in 1978 in Argentina. (PTI)



ad-hoc basis anymore.

"These changes affected the performance of the team and just imagine when they can put pressure on a world class performer like Babar Azam what would the other players be thinking. The team was struggling in the World Cup and they needed to be given full confidence but this didn't happen."

He also expressed surprise how

quickly PCB got rid of Babar and head coach Mickey Arthur hours after Pakistan's exit from World Cup.

"What does this mean? That the PCB had already decided in advance what they wanted to do?"

Inzamam said he still believed that the Pakistan team had good players who just needed to be given confidence.

"There is no problem with the team,

they just need confidence and backing."

A senior PCB official Mustafa Ramday corroborated Inzamam's complaints, stating that Zaka's autocratic ways became detrimental for the board.

Mustafa, who was named by former PM Shahbaz Sharif as one of the two candidates for the PCB's Board of Governors and Chairmanship, alleged Zaka ran a one man show/structure and it caused a lot of damage to Pakistan cricket.

"You can see how the team's performances have been compromised and this is a failure on our part Interim Management Committee," Ramday said on Geo News channel.

"It is unfortunate that cricket has been run on ad-hocism for the last one year and it has affected the performance of the team," he said.

Ramday also said that elections for formation of Board Of Governors (BOG) could be held in two weeks when the extension of the IMC expires on 4th February.

"I told Zaka he should not resign and hold the elections but for some reason

he said he can't carry on because of governmental interference," Ramday added.

Ramday said that perhaps this was done intentionally because there was a question mark over Zaka's qualification.

To a question, Ramday made it clear that the IMC was not involved in the spate of appointments of new coaches, selectors or decisions which led to Babar Azam stepping down as captain.

"We used to get notifications to give de-facto approval. The inclusive concept was not there in management of cricket and members were not involved. Some members also sent letters, unfortunately it fell on deaf ears."

Ramday said it was time the ad-hocism was ended in Pakistan cricket and BOG formed which would give a sense of permanency and positive decisions can be taken for betterment of the team and players.

"We have already suffered an unbearable loss as far as our cricket is concerned and our cricket fans deserve better than this," he added. (PTI)

# Morocco missed the chance to secure a spot in the knockout stage with a game to spare Tempers flare in the heat at Africa Cup as Morocco and Congo draw 1-1

**ABIDJAN (IVORY COAST), Jan 22:** A melee broke out between Morocco and Congo players and coaching staff at the end of their 1-1 draw at the Africa Cup of Nations.

It started after the game when Morocco coach Walid Regragui approached Congo captain Chancel Mbemba, who had already received a yellow card for arguing with the referee.

Mbemba clearly disagreed with what Regragui said and made signs for the video referee as players from both teams rushed in and officials struggled to control the pushing and shoving that ensued.

"It's the heat. It's a big match between two big nations," Congo coach Sebastien Desabre said. "It's very hot. Very, very, very hot."

The temperature in San Pedro was 32 degrees C (90 F) when the game started.

Morocco missed the chance to secure a spot in the knockout stage with a game to spare as Congo forward Silas Katomba Mvumpa canceled Achraf Hakimi's early goal for the "Atlas Lions."

Hakimi scored from Hakim Ziyech's corner in the sixth minute, but Silas equalized in the 76th for Congo's second successive draw in the tournament.



Morocco leads Group F with four points from two games after its opening 3-0 win over Tanzania, followed by Zambia and Congo on two points, and Tanzania on one.

The game's first cooling break was needed. It also allowed tempers to cool — albeit only briefly — after a series of robust challenges.

There was another break for treatment to Congo defender Henock Inonga Baka, who had to have his head bandaged to stem a heavy blood flow after he jumped for a set piece and received a blow.

When he returned, the referee awarded Congo a penalty after checking video replays for a possible hand ball by Selim Amallah. He also booked the Morocco defender.

But Cédric Bakambu hit the post with the penalty. It was just one example of the "Leopards" lacking accuracy in front of goal as they otherwise finished the half strongly.

Congo's Inonga Baka went off at the break for Dylan Batubinsika, who almost had an immediate impact with an effort that went just wide of the post.

Congo kept pushing, however, and finally scored when Meschack Elia cut the ball back for Silas to fire in the equalizer.

"There was room at the end for us to get all three points," the Stuttgart forward said.

**TAIFA STARS RUE MISSED CHANCE**

Tanzania failed to see out its first win in coach Hemed Suleiman's debut as 10-man Zambia fought back to draw 1-1 in the other Group F match.

Simon Msuva fired the Taifa Stars ahead in the 11th minute, and it got worse for Zambia when team captain Roderick Kabwe was sent off before the break with his second yellow card for an acrobatic lunge at Tanzania forward Mbwana Samata.

The "Copper Bullets" refused to buckle, however, and Patson Daka equalized for Zambia in the 88th minute.

Tanzania changed its coach before the game after Adel Amrouche was banned for eight matches for pre-tournament comments he made about Morocco's alleged influence on the African soccer confederation (CAF).

South Africa played neighboring Namibia later Sunday as it looks for its first points in Group E. (AP)

# India look for win against Syria to keep alive faint hopes of reaching Asian Cup knockouts

**AL KHOR (QATAR), Jan 22:** Winless, and pointless, after losing two group matches, India need nothing more than a win against a tricky Syria to keep alive their faint hopes of making the knockout stage of AFC Asian Cup football tournament here on Tuesday.

A 0-2 and 0-3 defeat to Australia and Uzbekistan laid bare India's inability to give strong competition to the top teams of the continent but a win against Syria can salvage some pride for the Sunil Chhetri-led side.

Syria are currently ranked 91st in the FIFA chart, 11 places above India (102nd) but a victory is not impossible for the Igor Stimac-coached side as they had won in the past — in 2007, 2009 and 2012 Nehru Cup tournaments.

The last time the two sides met, the match ended in a 1-1 draw in the 2019 Intercontinental Cup in Ahmedabad, and Stimac was also in charge of the Indian team then.

India will finish third in Group B if they beat Syria at Al Bayt Stadium but even that will not guarantee them a place in the round of 16.

With a goal difference of minus five — the deciding factor if teams are tied on points — after two matches, it may be difficult for India to be one of the four third-placed teams out of six to progress to the knockout stage.

The last group matches will be held on Thursday (Group E and F) and India will have to wait till then to know their fate even if they beat Syria on Tuesday.

India adopted an ultra defensive approach against the mighty Australians who have been a regular in the FIFA World Cup for some time but they tried to express themselves a bit in the match against Uzbekistan and, coupled with some costly mistakes by defenders, they failed to put up a good fight. It was not that India did not get any chance against Uzbekistan. They did get at least three, including the one from Rahul KP that hit the crosspiece.

With nothing to lose from the match, Stimac may be tempted to go all out for a win against Syria



but he could be wary of any mistake from his players, like the one committed by Rahul Bheke, which led to Uzbekistan's second goal in the 18th minute.

"At this level, there's never a convenient time to concede goals. If you allow time and space to a side like Uzbekistan, they will kill you. We need to work on ourselves," Stimac said.

"Our main problem has been the backline. We take too long to react inside the box and we definitely need to be more alert when facing crosses from opponents."

Usually highly reliable in front of goal, captain Chhetri has also been not at his best as could be seen once each against Australia and Uzbekistan, though nobody can fault him as he has been the lone ranger most of the time to get goals for India for many years.

"Syria are not much different from those two teams (Australia and Uzbekistan), in that they are a very physical team. The good thing is that we have already played two matches against such sides. We can't change what's happened in these matches, what we can do is to rectify the small mistakes that we've made," said Chhetri.

Syria, who have one point from two matches, will also be looking for a win as doing so will boost their knockout prospect. So, the West Asian side are expected to come down hard on India, who, however, can exploit the situation to their advantage if they score first.

India would take heart from the fact that Syria also failed to score

in their earlier two matches — 0-1 with Australia and 0-0 with Uzbekistan.

More importantly, Syria have managed only one shot on target in the tournament, which is fewer than any other team. India have done better at least in that aspect of the game.

"All credit to Syria for those two results. They are a physical side that play a compact 4-4-2 system. But they have also been facing similar problems as us scoring goals. They have created their chances, but have not converted them," Stimac said of the opposition team.

"We will try to keep playing our football. We have worked on changes in mindset and our philosophy. Defeats are a part of the process, but our strength needs to be to bounce back from it."

India though will be a bit upbeat as the whole squad, including key midfielder Sahal Abdul Samad, who missed the first two matches as he was recovering from an injury, will be available for the Syria match.

"I am pleased to have my whole squad back and am expecting a good match. It's a crucial tie for Syria as well as India as we both need to win to stand any chance of qualifying for the knockout stage," said Stimac.

Stimac's comments would mean that winger Lallianzuala Chhangte, who missed the Uzbekistan game as he was not 100 per cent fit, could also be back for Tuesday's match. Chhangte had featured in the Australia match. (PTI)

## Gill, Shastri to be honoured at BCCI Awards

**HYDERABAD, Jan 22:** Former India all-rounder and head coach Ravi Shastri will be honoured with BCCI's Lifetime Achievement Award here on Tuesday.

Shubman Gill will be presented with Cricketer of the Year award following a memorable 12 months when he became the fastest to cross the 2000-run mark in ODIs and also scored five hundreds in the format. "He (Shastri) has been chosen for the honour while Gill will be awarded the cricketer of the year," said a BCCI official.

The BCCI awards will be held for the first time since 2019 and both India and England teams are expected to be in attendance ahead of the first Test beginning here on Thursday.

Shastri, 61, represented India in 80 Tests and 150 ODIs. After retirement, he made a name for himself in the broadcasting world.

He also donned the coaching hat twice for the national team, first as a team director from 2014 to 2016 before returning to the team as head coach with captain Virat Kohli until the T20 World Cup in 2021. The highlight of his tenure was the back-to-back Test series win in Australia. However, India could not win an ICC title when Shastri and Kohli were in charge. India also reached the WTC final when Shastri was around but came short against New Zealand in the final. In 2019, India reached the semifinals of the ODI World Cup. After his farewell event in the UAE in 2021, Shastri had said that he could not be more proud of the team. "The quality of cricket this team has played over the last five years across all formats, the performances are there for everyone to see. When you perform in that fashion, when you go across the globe, across all formats and beat teams, then you know you're part of one great cricket team," he had said. (PTI)

## Congo captain Chancel Mbemba subjected to online racist abuse

**ABIDJAN (IVORY COAST), Jan 22:** Congo captain Chancel Mbemba was subjected to a torrent of racist abuse on social media after leading his team to a 1-1 draw against Morocco at the Africa Cup of Nations. Mbemba's Instagram account was targeted by many users who replied to his latest posts with monkey or gorilla emojis, or wrote racist comments.

The 29-year-old Mbemba, who is Black, plays for top-tier French club Marseille.

Mbemba had a heated exchange with Morocco coach Walid Regragui after the match. It led to a melee between players and officials from both teams

that continued as they left the field and went down the players' tunnel.

Regragui sought Mbemba after the game when the player was with his knees giving thanks in a personal moment. Mbemba took Regragui's hand and clapped him on the back as it appeared he thought it was a friendly exchange.

But Regragui kept hold of Mbemba's hand and carried on talking. The player angrily pulled his hand away and gestured for the video referee before players from both sides jumped in.

Mbemba suggested to journalists after the game in San Pedro that Regragui had insulted him. (AP)

## Bayern Munich loses 1-0 to Werder Bremen

**MUNICH, Jan 22:** Bayern Munich coach Thomas Tuchel was left questioning his team's attitude after a 1-0 loss at home to Werder Bremen dented its chances of catching Bundesliga leader Bayer Leverkusen.

Former Bayern player Mitchell Weiser scored the only goal as Bremen earned its first win over Bayern since 2008 to leave the defending champions seven points off Leverkusen.

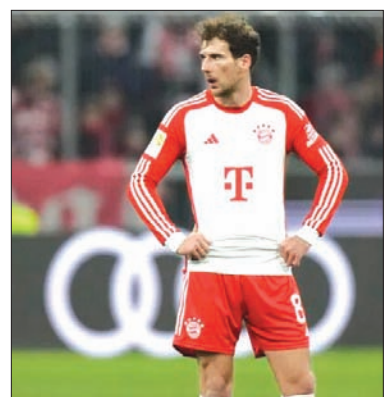
Speaking to broadcaster DAZN, Tuchel accused his team of playing for most of the game "as if we had a 10-point lead and a Champions League game coming up on Tuesday," pointed criticism of a team which has won the German league 11 years running.

Tuchel reeled off a list of problems with Bayern's game, from a lack of movement to allowing a "crazy" number of counterattacks, and suggested his team had only realized the seriousness of the situation in the last 20 minutes.

"A deserved loss because 20 minutes just aren't enough," he said.

Bremen repeatedly tested Bayern on the counter in the first half — and had a goal for Justin Njinmah ruled out for an earlier foul — while Bayern made little progress getting through the compact Bremen defense.

Weiser — who previously played for both Leverkusen and Bayern — gave Bremen the lead in the 59th minute with



a moment of individual skill as he beat left back Alphonso Davies out wide, cut inside and blasted a shot past Manuel Neuer in the Bayern goal.

Bayern had the Bremen goal under siege after that and came close to scoring with Mathys Tel's header that bounced off goalkeeper Michael Zetterer, against the post, back onto Zetterer and into the post again before Bremen could clear.

Tel dragged another shot just wide of the far post in the final seconds of stoppage time.

While Bayern trails Leverkusen, which beat Leipzig 3-2 on Saturday, it has one extra game to play against struggling Union Berlin on Wednesday. That was rescheduled from last month

because of snow. Bremen ended the day 13th in the 18-team league.

It was Bayern's first loss since a shock 5-1 defeat to Eintracht Frankfurt on Dec. 9, and Bremen's first win since beating Augsburg the same day.

Bayern was playing for the first time in nine days, a spell of rest Tuchel's team had used for a midseason training camp in Portugal, before attending Friday's memorial service for Franz Beckenbauer.

Harry Kane failed to add to his 22 goals in the Bundesliga so far this season. It was only his fourth league game of the season without a goal since joining Bayern.

Also Sunday, Augsburg recovered from a goal down to beat Borussia Muenchengladbach 2-1. American forward Jordan Pefok gave Gladbach the lead before two goals in the space of four minutes from Phillip Tietz and Arne Engels for Augsburg, which moves up to 10th. Gladbach is 12th.

The game was delayed nearly 10 minutes in the first half as Gladbach fans threw objects onto the field in the latest in a series of protests in Germany against the league's plans to involve an outside investor. Austrian defender Stefan Lainer came off the Gladbach bench to a standing ovation in his first game since he was diagnosed with a form of cancer in July. (AP)

## Salah remains convinced he will win the Africa Cup with Egypt 'sooner or later'



**ABIDJAN (IVORY COAST), Jan 22:** Despite his injury and Egypt's underwhelming start to the Africa Cup of Nations, Mohamed Salah is still convinced he will win the tournament "sooner or later." The two-time African player of the year has never won the Africa Cup, coming closest at the last edition and in 2017 when Egypt lost in the final on both occasions. "I've won everything possible but this is the one I did not, yet," the Liverpool star said Sunday. "It will happen somehow. That's what I believe. And whatever I believe, I achieve. So, it will happen. Sooner or later, it will happen."

To make sure Egypt advances to the knockout stage of the current edition in Ivory Coast, the "Pharaohs" on Monday first need to beat Group B winner Cape Verde — and without the injured Salah. Salah has a hamstring injury from Egypt's 2-2 draw with Ghana and is expected to sit out two games.

"We're not doing great at the moment, but we are a fantastic team, we have a great coach.

So we just need to stay focused and have a good vision and be positive. And I believe with the hard work, everything will be possible," Salah said. Egypt has won more Africa Cup titles than any other country but Salah said the team was determined to extend its record to eight trophies.

"I think everybody knows what it means to any player to win the Africa Cup. We're always proud to wear that shirt," Salah said. "We were unlucky at the last one, the one in Gabon (in 2017) also, a bit unlucky. I think the players are very motivated to win the tournament. We all want to win it."

Egypt is not the only pre-tournament favorite to be struggling to reach the knockout stage. Also in Group B, Ghana needs a win against Mozambique to maintain its hopes of progressing. The top two in each group advance to the last 16, while the best four third-placed finishers in each group also progress.

Host nation Ivory Coast and Nigeria face anxious games Monday against Equatorial Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, respectively, in Group A. Cameroon, Algeria and Tunisia are among the potential title candidates struggling.

"It's really tricky," said Salah, who noted that improving standards were making games more unpredictable. "I think the African football is improving a lot. You also saw at the World Cup, we went so far with Morocco and the whole of Africa was behind them. So I think it's improving a lot." (AP)

# Madrid gets 3 favorable VAR decisions to beat last-place Almeria

## SPANISH LEAGUE

**MADRID, Jan 22:** Real Madrid needed help from VAR — a lot of help — to avoid an embarrassing setback at home against last-place Almeria in the Spanish league on Sunday.

Madrid got three favorable video reviews in the second half, then scored a winner nine minutes into stoppage time to rally to a 3-2 win over Almeria, the only team yet to win in the league this season.

The dramatic late win moved Madrid two points in front of Girona, which hosts relegation-threatened Sevilla later Sunday.

Barcelona moved back into third place with a 4-2 win over Real Betis, with substitute João Félix breaking the deadlock in the 90th minute and Ferran Torres completing his hat trick in stoppage time. The Catalan club remains seven points behind Madrid.

Dani Carvajal scored Madrid's winner from close range after a cross into the area, erupting the crowd at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium and sending the Almeria players into despair.

The goal came after three separate

VAR decisions allowed Madrid to stay in the game after trailing 2-0 in the first half. Madrid was awarded a penalty kick that made it 2-1, saw an Almeria goal disallowed that would have made it 3-1, and got the 2-2 equalizer after the goal had been initially disallowed by the referee.

"We played a good match, but someone decided that we couldn't win here," Almeria defender Marc Pubill claimed.

Almeria coach Gaizka Garitano was sent off in the final minutes for complaining, and said it wasn't the first time this had happened to him at the Bernabeu.

"What can I say... I don't have words to summarize what has happened here," he said.

Madrid was coming off a loss to Atletico Madrid in extra time in the round of 16 of the Copa del Rey on Thursday.

It was the fifth straight game in which Madrid conceded at least a goal. Opponents scored 10 times against Madrid in the team's last four matches in all competitions.

"We played very poorly in the first half and I'm mad at myself because I didn't



evaluate the last practice session properly. The team was tired," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said.

"I understand why Almeria is upset with the VAR decisions, but I think they

were all correct."

Almeria took a surprising two-goal lead into halftime after Largie Ramazani scored from inside the area in the first minute and Edgar González found the top

corner with a long-range strike in the 43rd. Both goals came after mistakes by Madrid defender Nacho Fernández. Madrid had no attempts on target in the first half and coach Carlo Ancelotti made three changes at halftime, replacing Nacho with Brahim Diaz, Ferland Mendy with Fran Garcia and Rodrygo with Joselu.

Madrid improved and Bellingham moved Madrid closer by converting a penalty kick in the 57th after VAR and the referee determined there was a handball by an Almeria defender. Bellingham calmly rolled his shot from the spot into the middle of the net for his 14th league goal in his first season with Madrid.

Almeria thought it had regained a two-goal lead when Sergio Arribas scored in a 61st-minute breakaway, but a video review said there was a foul by Almeria player Dion Lopy on Bellingham in the buildup.

In the 67th, Vinicius Junior had a goal disallowed by the referee because of a handball, but VAR notified the referee again, and he said the Brazil forward used his shoulder to score.

Almeria also complained after the referee gave 11 minutes of stoppage time. The game eventually ended with 13 min-

utes of added time. The visitors will hope for more detail when the VAR audios are released after the match.

Almeria, winless in 21 matches, had held second-place Girona to a 0-0 draw at home in its previous match. The Saudi-owned club had also played well in a 3-2 loss to Barcelona and in a 2-1 defeat to Atletico Madrid.

**TORRES' HAT TRICK**  
Barcelona kept pace with Madrid despite squandering a two-goal lead after Torres' pair of first-half goals.

Iscó scored both goals for Betis, which dropped to ninth place. Manuel Pellegrini's team has only one win in its last eight matches in all competitions.

Barcelona hasn't impressed recently but has still won six of its last seven matches. The setback was a 4-1 loss to Madrid in the final of the Spanish Super Cup in Saudi Arabia this month.

**OSASUNA WINS**  
Osasuna squandered a two-goal first-half lead but earned a 3-2 victory over Getafe with a winner by Jesús Areso in the 80th.

Osasuna moved to 11th, one point behind 10th-place Getafe, which hasn't won in the league since December. (AP)

"We wanted to hit the podium but we are disappointed we could not win but we are still hungry"