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## Assam continues its fight against child marriage

### Third special drive against child marriage in state; 431 arrested

**GUWAHATI, Dec 22:** Assam Police have arrested more than 430 people and registered 345 cases in its third special drive against child marriage, a top officer said on Sunday.

He added that some more arrests are likely to be made.

Additional Director General of Police (ADGP) MP Gupta, addressing a press conference here, said, "The third special drive was conducted across the state last night, in which 431 accused were apprehended and 345 cases registered."

"Among those arrested are men who had married underage girls, family members and also two kazis, one each in Sonitpur and South Salmara districts," he added.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, in a post on X on Sunday morning, said, "Assam continues its fight against child marriage. In Phase 3 operations launched on the night of Dec 21-22, 416 arrests were made and 335 cases registered."



The arrested individuals will be produced in court today. We will continue to take bold steps to end this social evil."

The number of arrests and cases has increased since the post was made.

Gupta said that in the first special drive against the social evil in

February 2023, 3,425 arrests were made and 4,387 cases registered.

In the second crackdown in October 2023, 913 accused were held and 682 cases registered.

"A total of 5,348 cases have been registered and 5,842 people arrested in three special drives and regular instances of child mar-

riages being reported since last year," the ADGP added.

In the latest drive, Dhubri district registered the highest number of cases at 59 and also the most arrests at 68.

The highest number of cases was registered in Dhubri during the first two drives as well.

While five districts reported no case of child marriage in the third drive, the number of such districts was one and four in the first two phases.

Hamren is the only police district which did not report any case in the last two drives.

Gupta said chargesheet in 95 per cent of cases of the previous drives have been filed, with convictions obtained in many cases.

Asked about the communities to which most arrested belonged, he said the operation was carried out based on the crime and community considerations were not taken into account. The top officer claimed that as a (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## India, Kuwait elevate ties to strategic partnership after Modi-Al-Sabah talks

**KUWAIT CITY, Dec 22:** India and Kuwait on Sunday elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership and inked a key pact on forging deeper defence ties as Prime Minister Narendra Modi held extensive talks with the top leaders of the Gulf nation, including Emir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, on ways to intensify the overall trajectory of bilateral cooperation.

Besides the Emir, Modi held wide-ranging talks with Kuwaiti Prime Minister Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and Crown Prince Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah with a focus on giving new momentum to the overall bilateral ties.

In their delegation-level talks, the two prime ministers discussed a roadmap to strengthen the strategic partnership in diverse areas including trade, investment, energy, defence, security, health, education, technology and people-to-people ties, according to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defence will provide for cooperation in the areas of defence industries, supply of defence equipment, joint exercises, training, exchange of personnel and experts and collaboration in research and development, Arun Kumar Chatterjee, Secretary (Overseas Indian Affairs) in the MEA, said at a media briefing.

There other MoUs were also inked that will facili-



tate cooperation in areas of sports, culture and solar energy. In the meetings, the Indian side also showed keen interest in intensifying its cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) through Kuwait's presidency of the influential grouping.

In the meeting between Modi and the Emir at the majestic Bayan Palace, the two leaders deliberated on boosting ties in areas of information technology, pharmaceuticals, fintech, infrastructure and security.

Modi thanked the Emir for ensuring the well-being of over one million Indians in Kuwait while the Kuwaiti leader expressed appreciation for the contribution of the community in the development journey of the Gulf nation. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

### HT BRIEFS

#### Narcotics seized

**GUWAHATI:** Narcotics worth ₹ 20 crore has been seized and a person arrested in Assam's Cachar district, police said on Sunday. Acting on a tip-off, an operation was launched by the Special Task Force (STF) under the supervision of IGP Parthasarathi Mahanta at Silcoori Road that led to the seizure of Yaba tablets and heroin from a person who was moving in a motorcycle in the early hours of Sunday. The seizure included 60,000 yaba tablets and 125 grams of heroin, Mahanta told PTI. Yaba is a combination of stimulants, the most important being methamphetamine and caffeine. It has many aliases like 'Thai name' 'crazy medicine', 'madness drug' or 'Nazi speed'. The police arrested a person, identified as Sahil Ahmed Laskar, and seized the motorcycle. The IGP said that the street price of the seized narcotics was estimated to be around ₹ 20 crore.

#### Cabinet Meeting

**GUWAHATI:** Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who is on a two-day tour to Dibrugarh will chair a cabinet meeting tomorrow at 6.30 PM at the Chief Minister's Secretariat set up in Dibrugarh, an official statement said. Sarma has asked his council of ministers, present at Dibrugarh, to attend the cabinet meeting from the town. Ministers in Guwahati and in district headquarters should attend the cabinet meeting virtually from chief minister's secretariat in Dispur, and District Commissioners' Office respectively, Sarma said. Sarma will spend two nights in Dibrugarh and the chief minister's secretariat will be run over the next two days from Dibrugarh. "This has been done to improve governance, expedite grievance redressal and enhance administrative connectivity across nine districts", it stated.

#### Appointment letters

**NEW DELHI:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi will distribute more than 71,000 appointment letters to new recruits in various central government departments on Monday via videoconferencing, his office said. Rozgar Mela is a step towards fulfilment of the commitment of the prime minister to accord the highest priority to employment generation, according to a statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office. Modi will distribute more than 71,000 appointment letters to newly-appointed recruits through videoconferencing around 10:30 am on Monday. He will also address the gathering on the occasion, the PMO said. The Rozgar Mela will provide meaningful opportunities to youngsters for their participation in nation-building and self-empowerment. It will be held at 45 locations around the country. The recruitments are taking place for various central government ministries and departments. The recruits, selected from around the country, will join various ministries/departments, including the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, Department of Posts, Department of Higher Education, Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Department of Financial Services, among others, the PMO said.

## HM Amit Shah lauds BJP's role in Tripura

### HT Correspondent

**AGARTALA, Dec 22:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday lauded Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) workers for their relentless efforts in bringing a political transformation in the state.

While addressing a public gathering after inaugurating and laying the foundation stone for development projects worth over Rs 668 crore in Dhalai district, Shah highlighted the achievements of the BJP government in Tripura under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"The Modi government, in collaboration with the state government, has shown how democracy can lead to real development. BJP karyakartas worked tirelessly to overthrow the Communist government, which had failed to deliver

even basic amenities to the people," Shah said.

Recalling his 2017 visit to Tripura as BJP National President, Shah remarked, "When I came here in 2017, there were only six attendees at one of my programs and 11 members in our team.

Today, Tripura has transformed. Under CPIM rule, only about 2.5% of the population had access to clean drinking water. Now, nearly 85% of the population receives piped water. Similarly, while the CPIM failed to provide free rations to the poor, today 82% of economically weaker families benefit from the initiative."

Shah also interacted with members of the Bru Breg community at the Haduklaj Para Bru Settlement Colony (BRUHA PARA) in Dhalai. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Cong slams govt over different tax slabs for popcorn, asks if PM will show courage for GST overhaul

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** The Congress Sunday said the "absurdity" of three different tax slabs for popcorn under GST only brings to light the growing complexity of the system and asked whether the Modi government will show the courage to launch a complete overhaul for instituting a GST 2.0.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh also claimed GST evasion is significant, input tax credit fraud is common, and the number of bogus companies set up to "game" the GST system runs into thousands.

"The absurdity of three different tax slabs for popcorn under GST, which has unleashed a tsunami of memes on social media, only brings to light a deeper issue: the growing



complexity of a system that was supposed to be a Good and Simple Tax," he said in a post on X.

"GST evasion is significant, input tax credit fraud is common, and the number of bogus companies set up to 'game' the GST system runs into thousands.

"Tracking of supply chains is weak, the registration process is flawed, advantages are being taken of loopholes in turnover exemptions, compliance requirements are

still cumbersome, and misclassification of goods is frequent," Ramesh said. He said the recent data on tax frauds uncovered by the Directorate General of GST Intelligence (DGGI) reveal GST evasion of Rs 2.01 lakh crore in FY24.

"With the Union Budget now just 40 days away, will the PM and FM summon the courage to launch a complete overhaul and institute a GST 2.0?" Ramesh asked.

GST Council on Saturday agreed to issue a clarification on taxation of popcorn, saying that pre-packed and labelled ready-to-eat snacks will attract a 12 per cent tax while an 18 per cent GST will be levied if it is caramelised. There is no change in the tax rate of popcorn and the GST Council has only agreed that the Central Board (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Civil society group urges Centre to restore J-K's statehood without delay

**SRINAGAR, Dec 22:** A civil society group in Jammu and Kashmir on Sunday appealed to the Union government not to delay the restoration of statehood to the union territory.

"The Group of Concerned Citizens (GCC) Jammu and Kashmir has expressed serious concern over the delay in the restoration of statehood to Jammu and Kashmir and appealed to the Union Government not to hold it back any longer, especially in view of the direction of the Hon'ble Supreme Court (in December 2023)," the group said in a statement.

They also cautioned against the adverse impact of the "dual control" system on the quality of governance and, thereby, on the well-being of the people.

"The scheme of dual control is a sort of diarchy and a sure recipe for disjointed governance," the GCC said.

The group stated that the people of Jammu and Kashmir have undeservingly suffered from the lack of a representative government for over six years.

"The Union Government must respect the democratic aspirations of the people and restore full statehood in earnest. Only then can the newly elected government be held accountable to deliver on their legitimate demands, expectations, and aspirations," it added.

The GCC emphasised that any further delay or dithering would be counterproductive and not in the larger interest of Jammu & Kashmir and the country.

"By restoring statehood, the Union Government will be restoring to the people their right to have a responsible, responsive, and duly empowered government, as in other states of the country and as it was in J&K before the downgrade to UT in August 2019," it said. The GCC reaffirmed its faith in the assurances given by (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## Modi govt's 'calibrated erosion' of EC's integrity: Kharge on election rule

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Sunday hit out at the government for tweaking an election rule to prevent public inspection of certain electronic documents, alleging it is part of the Modi government's "systematic conspiracy" to destroy the institutional integrity of the Election Commission.

Kharge also said the Modi government's "calibrated erosion" of the ECI's integrity is a frontal attack on the Constitution and democracy.

The government has tweaked an election rule to prevent public inspection of certain electronic documents such as CCTV camera and webcasting footage as well as video recordings of candidates to prevent their misuse.

Based on the recommendation of the Election Commission of India (ECI), the Union law ministry on Friday amended Rule 93(2)(a) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict the type of "papers" or documents open to public inspection.

Reacting to the development, Kharge said, "Modi government's audacious amendment in the Conduct of Election Rules is another assault in its systematic conspiracy to destroy the institutional integrity of the Election Commission of India."

"Earlier, they had removed the Chief Justice of India from the Selection panel which appoints Election Commissioners, and now they have resorted to



stonewall electoral information, even after a High Court order," he said in a post on X.

Everytime the Congress party wrote to the ECI, regarding specific poll irregularities such as voter deletions and lack of transparency in EVMs, the ECI has responded in a condescending tone and chosen not to even acknowledge certain serious complaints, Kharge said.

"This again proves that the ECI, even though it is a quasi-judicial body, is not behaving independently," he said.

"The Modi government's calibrated erosion of ECI's integrity is a frontal attack on the Constitution and Democracy and we will take every step to safeguard them," Kharge said. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

## NDA to contest 2025 Bihar assembly polls under CM Nitish, PM Modi: Deputy CM

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** The NDA will contest the assembly polls in Bihar next year under the leadership of chief minister Nitish Kumar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, deputy chief minister and BJP leader Samrat Choudhary said on Sunday.

"There is no confusion," he said during a press conference at the BJP headquarters when asked to comment on speculation that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) could do a rethink on projecting Kumar as its leader in the polls.

He was responding to Union home minister Amit Shah's recent interview to a news channel in which he was asked if the NDA could go to the polls in Bihar without declaring a chief ministerial candidate, like it recently did with great success in Maharashtra.

Shah, a former BJP president who is still regarded as the party's principal strategist, had replied after

a pause, "We will sit together and decide. We will let you know after we have made a decision."

The cryptic response had led to furious speculation that the BJP could insist on not projecting Kumar in the 2025 polls.

Dismissing the speculation, Choudhary said, "The NDA is working under the leadership of Nitish Kumar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Bihar and we will continue to contest elections under the leadership of both leaders."

"In 2020, we contested after announcing (Kumar as the NDA's chief ministerial face) and, till date, we have considered Chief Minister Nitish Kumar only (as the NDA leader in Bihar). In future also, we will contest elections under the leadership of Nitish Kumar and Narendra Modi," the Bihar deputy chief minister added. Elections to the 243-member Bihar Assembly are due in late 2025. (PTI)

## 'Men with YCMD cannot benefit from medical treatment for improving the sperm count'

## ICMR develops AI tool to predict IVF outcomes in men with infertility

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) in collaboration with Amity University has developed an artificial intelligence-based tool to detect the type of 'Y' chromosome microdeletion -- a genetic cause of male infertility -- and predict IVF outcomes.

The study regarding the AI tool was published in the Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics last week.

In nearly 50 per cent of couples experiencing infertility, the problem is with the male partner, said Dr Deepak Modi, senior scientist at ICMR's National Institute for Research in Reproductive and Child Health (NIRRH) and the lead author of the study.

"In them there could be prob-



lems with sperm production. One of the leading causes, Y chromosome microdeletion (YCMD) is observed in one in every 10 men with infertility. Because of this ge-

netic defect, the testes are unable to make enough sperm leading to infertility," Dr Modi said.

Men with YCMD cannot benefit from medical treatment for im-

proving the sperm count.

To become fathers, such men require assisted reproductive techniques such as in-vitro fertilization (IVF) for parenthood, he said.

The AI-based tool -- 'Fertility Predictor' -- developed by the ICMR-NIRRH in collaboration with Amity University, Noida can predict sperm retrieval rates and success rates of assisted reproductive technology (ART) in men having this genetic problem.

It also predicts the rate of fertilization, clinical pregnancy and live birth rates based on the type of Y chromosome microdeletion, Dr Modi said. This helps the couples make informed decisions, he said.

However, Dr Modi cautioned that the male babies born through IVF from (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)



## Bigger gains expected in 2025 IPO boom: Record ₹ 1.6 trn raised in 2024

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** Fundraising via IPOs in India hit another landmark as economic growth, favourable market conditions and improvements in the regulatory framework helped companies raise a record ₹ 1.6 trillion in 2024, while the pipeline for the next year holds out bigger promise.

This exceptional year not only reflected the confidence of issuers but also highlighted investors' eagerness to seize listing-day gains or back companies with strong long-term growth potential.

The year was marked by Hyundai Motor India's historic IPO, the largest in the country's history, which raised ₹ 27,870 crore. Companies of varying market capitalisations -- large, mid, and small -- tapped into the IPO route in 2024, with the average issue size rising significantly from ₹ 867 crore in 2023 to over ₹ 1,700 crore in 2024.

The exceptional vibrancy of the IPO market was evident, with December alone seeing at least 15 launches.

"Rising retail participation, strong domestic inflows and active participation by FPIs (even though they have been net sellers in the secondary market), private capex increase and the government's strategic focus on infrastructure and key sectors have collectively laid a strong foundation for the fundraising momentum in India," V Prashant Rao, Director & Head - ECM, Investment Banking at Anand Rathi Advisors, said.

Fundraising momentum is expected to accelerate further in the New Year, potentially surpassing 2024's record figures, market analysts said. "Based on the 75 IPO documents, which are at various stages of approval/marketing and the deal pipelines, we expect issuance activity in 2025 to cross ₹ 2.5 lakh crore," Munish Aggarwal, Managing Director and Head of Equity Capital Markets at Equirus, said. The IPO pipeline for the next year is set to feature major offerings, including HDB Financial



Services' proposed ₹ 12,500 crore issue, LG Electronics India's ₹ 15,000 crore public float, and Hexaware Technologies' ₹ 9,950 crore offering.

According to data available with the exchanges, 90 maiden public issues were launched in 2024, collectively raising ₹ 1.6 lakh crore. This includes eight IPOs scheduled to conclude on December 23-24. Besides, the ₹ 500-crore IPO of Unimech Aerospace and Manufacturing is slated to open on December 23.

Additionally, Vodafone Idea raised ₹ 18,000 crore through a follow-on public offer (FPO).

About ₹ 1.6 lakh crore raised in 2024 far exceeded ₹ 49,436 crore garnered by 57 firms through IPOs in 2023.

By comparison, 2021 saw 63 companies raising ₹ 1.2 lakh crore, marking the best IPO year in two decades, driven by abundant liquidity, increased retail investor participation, and sustained euphoria in the primary market.

The resurgence in activity also extended to the SME segment, where a record 238 small and medium enterprises raised ₹ 8,700 crore, nearly doubling the ₹ 4,686 crore raised in 2023, according to the data provided by primedata-base.com.

This growth reflects increasing interest in SME public offerings,

although it comes with heightened risks for retail investors.

In response, Sebi decided to introduce stricter regulatory frameworks, including profitability requirements, a cap on the offer-for-sale (OFS) component and a "draw of lots" system for non-institutional investors (NIIs) to safeguard smaller investors.

Experts attributed this year's robust IPO activity to a stable economic environment, policy continuity at the central government level, and broad-based economic growth.

"Stable economic environment, policy continuity at the central government level combined with broad-based growth have encouraged companies and investors to raise funds. Foreign portfolio investors have also been big buyers, especially in the larger IPOs," said Pranjal Srivastava, Partner-Investment Banking at Centrum Capital.

Several factors, including private equity exits, sponsor-driven sales, and shifts in corporate funding strategies, have also driven the IPO activity.

"The resurgence of manufacturing and increased private capital expenditure are key contributors as companies look to fund expansion and modernisation. Many businesses are also focusing on diversifying their funding sources by shifting from debt-heavy models to

equity, ensuring stronger balance sheets and reduced leverage," said Neha Agrawal, MD & Head, Equity Capital Markets at JM Financial Institutional Securities. Among the year's largest main-board IPOs, Hyundai Motor India led the pack, raising ₹ 27,870 crore, followed by Swiggy (₹ 11,327 crore), NTPC Green Energy (₹ 10,000 crore), Bajaj Housing Finance (₹ 6,560 crore), and Ola Electric Mobility (₹ 6,145 crore).

In contrast, Vibhor Steel Tubes launched the smallest IPO, raising just ₹ 72 crore, indicating the diversity of companies accessing the capital markets.

For companies, going public provides crucial funds for expansion, working capital, and debt repayment while enhancing visibility and attracting new business opportunities. IPOs also serve as an exit strategy for long-term investors.

Interestingly, the IPO subscription ratios have been exceptionally high this year. Vibhor Steel Tubes saw an impressive subscription of 320 times, while other offerings like KRN Heat Exchanger and Refrigeration, Manba Finance, and Gala Precision Engineering were each subscribed over 200 times.

Additionally, IPOs of companies like One Mobikwik Systems, Unicommerce eSolutions, Diffusion Engineers, BLS E-Services, and Exicom Tele-Systems were subscribed more than 100 times.

This strong demand translated into substantial listing gains, with over 60 companies delivering positive returns on their debut day.

Vibhor Steel Tubes, BLS E-Services, Bajaj Housing Finance and KRN Heat Exchanger delivered more than 100 per cent gain, reflecting robust investor demand.

Meanwhile, India's equity markets also saw record-breaking performances, with the NSE Nifty 50 reaching an all-time high of 26,216 points on September 27 and the BSE Sensex peaking at 85,836 points on September 26, supported by the country's robust economic growth outlook. (PTI)

## Front-running case: Sebi bans 9 entities, impounds ₹ 21 crore illegal gains

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** Markets regulator Sebi has uncovered a front-running scheme involving PNB MetLife India Insurance Company equity dealer Sachin Bakul Dagli and eight other entities, who generated illegal gains of ₹ 21.16 crore.

The front-running by these entities continued for more than three years.

Sebi, through an interim order, prohibited Sachin Bakul Dagli and eight other entities from the securities market and impounded the unlawful gains made by them.

In a statement on Sunday, PNB MetLife stated that it has fully cooperated with Sebi in the investigation and taken disciplinary action against the individual involved.

"In line with our internal processes, we have taken disciplinary action. PNB MetLife is committed to upholding the highest standards of corporate governance,

transparency, and integrity," the statement noted.

Sebi had conducted an examination into the suspected front running of the trades undertaken by the Big Client, PNB MetLife India Insurance, by certain entities.

The focus of the investigation was to ascertain whether the suspected entity(ies) had front-run the trades of Big Client in connivance with other entities, including dealers and/or fund managers, if any, and thereby violated the provisions of the Sebi's PFUTP (Prohibition of Fraudulent and Unfair Trade Practices) rules and Sebi Act.

The investigation period has been taken from January 1, 2021, to July 19, 2024. In its investigation, Sebi found that most of the trading decisions in PNB MetLife were delegated to Sachin Dagli for execution.

The regulator, in interim passed on Friday, noted that Sachin Bakul Dagli (equity dealer, PNB

MetLife) and his brother Tejas Dagli (equity sales trader, Investec) accessed confidential, non-public information about impending trade orders of PNB MetLife and Investec's institutional clients.

They used this information to make trading decisions and shared it with Sandeep Shambharkar, who executed front-running trades through the accounts of Dhanmata Realty Pvt. (DRPL), Worthy Distributors Pvt. (WDPL) and Pragnesh Sanghvi.

Directors of DRPL and WDPL, including Arpan Kirikumar Shah, Kabita Saha, and Jignesh Nikulhai Dabhi, were also involved in facilitating this scheme.

This group colluded to create and execute a fraudulent front-running scheme, violating the Sebi Act and Prohibition of Fraudulent and Unfair Trade Practices (PFUTP) Regulations, resulting in unlawful profits. (PTI)

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## Assam continues its fight

result of these special operations, various positive impact has been seen, including improvement in Maternal Mortality Rate and Infant Mortality Rate. The MMR has dipped from 984 in 2020-21 to 372 in 2023-24. Similarly, number of child deaths has gone down from 9,472 in 2020-21 to 4,790 in 2023-24, he added. (PTI)

## India, Kuwait elevate ties

In a post on 'X', Modi described his meeting with the Emir as "excellent".

"Excellent meeting with His Highness the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah. We discussed cooperation in key sectors like pharmaceuticals, IT, FinTech, Infrastructure and security," he said. "In line with the close ties between our nations, we have elevated our partnership to a strategic one and I am optimistic that our friendship will flourish even more in the times to come," he added. On his arrival at the Bayan Palace, Modi was given a ceremonial welcome and received by Kuwaiti Prime Minister Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. In the meeting with Crown Prince Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, Modi conveyed that India attaches utmost importance to its bilateral relations with Kuwait. "The leaders acknowledged that bilateral relations were progressing well and welcomed their elevation to a strategic partnership," the MEA said. It said the two leaders emphasised close coordination between both sides in the UN and other multilateral fora.

"The prime minister expressed confidence that India-GCC relations will be further strengthened under the Presidency of Kuwait," the MEA said. The Crown Prince hosted a banquet in honour of Modi. Modi arrived here on Saturday on a two-day trip - the first to this Gulf nation by an Indian prime minister in 43 years. External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said the talks between the prime minister and the Emir focused on exploring ways to take India-Kuwait ties to "new heights". In their discussions, Modi and the Kuwaiti Emir recalled the strong historical and friendly ties between the two countries and reaffirmed their full commitment to further expanding and deepening bilateral cooperation.

The prime minister thanked the Emir for ensuring the well-being of the over one million-strong Indian community in Kuwait, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said. It said Modi appreciated the new initiatives being undertaken by Kuwait to fulfill its "Vision 2035" and congratulated the Emir for the successful holding of the summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) earlier this month. The GCC is an influential grouping comprising the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait. The total volume of India's trade with GCC countries stood at USD 184.46 billion in the financial year 2022-23. (PTI)

## HM Amit Shah lauds

During his visit, he also met with families and appreciated the efforts of the BJP-led government in addressing the long-standing issues faced by the community. Highlighting the plight of the Bru Reang community during previous regimes, Shah stated, "For nearly 25 years, the Bru Reang people lived in dire conditions without access to essential services like clean water, electricity, toilets, healthcare, education, and employment. The Congress and Communist governments that ruled Tripura ignored their pain. It was Prime Minister Modi who empathized with their suffering and resolved their issues."

Shah lauded the landmark agreement facilitated by the BJP government, which resulted in the resettlement of over 40,000 Bru Reang people. He detailed the provisions made for their welfare, including healthcare, education, clean drinking water, sanitation, and employment opportunities. He also highlighted initiatives for empowering women through cooperatives. "Under the previous government, many schemes remained mere announcements with no implementation on the ground. Today, those promises have turned into reality," Shah asserted, emphasizing the stark difference in governance between the past and the present. The Union Home Minister's remarks underscored the BJP's commitment to inclusive development and its focus on addressing the grievances of marginalised communities in Tripura. The home minister also a scathing attack on the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM), accusing it of neglecting the welfare of the people during its tenure in Tripura.

## Cong slams govt over different

of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) will issue a circular clarifying the current taxation regime of popcorn. "Ready-to-eat popcorn", which is mixed with salt and spices, and has the essential character of namkeens currently attracts a 5 per cent GST if it is not pre-packaged and labelled.

If it is supplied as pre-packaged and labelled, a 12 per cent GST is levied. However, when popcorn is mixed with sugar (caramel popcorn), its essential character changes to that of a sugar confectionary, and would therefore be classifiable under HS 1704 90 90 and attract an 18 per cent GST, as per the clarification. (PTI)

## Modi govt's 'calibrated erosion'

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh had said the party would legally challenge the amendment. Lok Sabha MP and Congress general secretary (organisation) KC Venugopal said the poll panel had chosen opacity and a pro-government attitude in its dealings thus far.

According to Rule 93, all "papers" related to elections shall be open to public inspection. The amendment inserts "as specified in these rules" after "papers". Law ministry and ECI officials separately explained that a court case was the "trigger" behind the amendment.

While documents such as nomination forms, appointment of election agents, results and election account statements are mentioned in the Conduct of Election Rules, electronic documents such as CCTV camera footage, webcasting footage and video recording of candidates during the Model Code of Conduct period are not covered. "CCTV coverage, webcasting of polling stations are not carried out under Conduct of Election Rules but are the result of steps taken by the ECI to ensure a level playing field," a former ECI official explained. (PTI)

## Civil society group urges Centre

the Prime Minister and Home Minister in Parliament. It urged all political formations to join ranks, rising above party affiliations, in seeking the restoration of statehood to J&K by the Union Government.

The GCC includes eminent people from a cross section of society including jurists, former vice chancellors, academicians, civil servants and business heads. (PTI)

## India, Sweden can forge

Sweden to India, highlighted the crucial role of Swedish companies in fostering sustainability in India. She mentioned the India-Sweden Innovations Accelerator programme, which has introduced over 70 Swedish green-tech firms to the Indian market over 12 years. "And only in this year, we have organised five workshops where we had participation of over 220 delegates representing 16 Indian industrial sectors," she said, underlining the programme's role in advancing clean energy, green hydrogen, and smart grids. Swedish companies operating in India are already making a significant impact on urban sustainability.

Sven Ostberg, Consul General of Sweden in Mumbai, cited examples of Envac's solid waste management systems in Mumbai and Gujarat, and IVL's wastewater treatment plant addressing pollution in the Mithi river. "We support these companies through consultancy and facilitate study visits to showcase their sustainable practices, impacting millions of Indian households," he said. Sweden's commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2045, according to Kamill, is driven by policies, innovation and collective responsibility. "Our strategy includes renewable energy, electrification, sustainable industrial practices and reforestation," he said.

The pioneering hybrid initiative uses green hydrogen in steel production, potentially eliminating emissions from one of the world's most carbon-intensive industries, he added. Cultural and business exchanges are also contributing to sustainability goals. "Swedish companies here prioritise people, planet and profit, working closely with local communities on education and sustainability projects," Ostberg said. These efforts, he added, are fostering cross-cultural understanding and spreading Swedish practices in India. (PTI)

## ICMR develops AI tool to

men with YCMD will inherit the same defect and will be infertile as it is 100 per cent transmitted from fathers to their sons. Developing this tool took about two years by collating data of more than 500 men having YCMD and undergoing ART. After applying an artificial intelligence algorithm based on machine learning on this data, the tool could predict the outcomes. This was then validated on another sub-set and it was found to have accuracy of about 80 per cent, Dr Stacy Colaco, a scientist at NIRRH and the first author of the study, said.

"Fertility Predictor also provides a numerical output for chance of clinical pregnancy and live birth in men with YCMD. The validation studies indicated its robustness and high accuracy in predicting both these parameters solely based on the type of YCMD," said Dr Abhishek Sengupta of Amity University, Noida. (PTI)

## Auro Sundram International to invest ₹ 250 cr in Bihar

**PATNA, Dec 22:** Auro Sundram International Pvt Ltd will invest around ₹ 250 crore to set up a starch manufacturing plant in the Araria district of Bihar, its Director Ashok Kumar Choudhary said.

He made the announcement at a global investors summit Bihar Business Connect 2024 held here on December 19-20. In an interview with PTI, Choudhary said the company already has a maize processing plant at Forbesganj in Araria district.

"We have invested ₹ 100 crore to set up this plant, which is operational from last year," he said.

From this plant, Choudhary said the company supplies maize grits to FMCG companies and also floating fish feeds to fish farmers. "We are now planning to set up a starch manufacturing plant on the same location with an investment of around ₹ 250 crore," he said.

The annual capacity will be 500 tonnes per day, and the plant will be operational by March 2027.

"We will be supplying starch to various industries, including pharma companies." (PTI)

## Railways' switch to accrual-based accounting to boost multilateral, green financing: ICAI

**KOLKATA, Dec 22:** Indian Railways has successfully transitioned to an accrual-based accounting system, a move expected to enhance financial transparency and ease resource mobilization from multilateral agencies and green financing, according to a top official of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI).

The transition to accrual accounting is now operational across all 26 zones of Indian Railways in real-time for the financial year 2023-24.

"Beyond improved budget management, the adoption of accrual accounting will simplify raising funds from multilateral agencies like World Bank and promote green financing with better accounting practices," ICAI president Ranjeet Kumar Agarwal told PTI.

"This move places Indian Railways on an accounting standard at par with government

entities of developed economies that have already embraced, shifting away from cash-based accounting. It will also inspire other government organizations to adopt similar practices, recognizing the significant benefits of accrual accounting," Agarwal said.

Indian Railways initiated the preparation of Accrual-Based Financial Statements in 2014 as part of its efforts to enhance financial transparency and accountability. The ICAI and its Accounting Research Foundation (ICAI ARF) have played a critical role in driving these reforms forward.

ICAI ARF developed a Transaction-Based Accrual Accounting System to facilitate the preparation of financial statements from FY2023-24 onwards aligning with Indian Railways' efforts towards achieving environmental, social, and governance (ESG) goals, the official said. (PTI)

## It's Bihar's time now, says minister Mishra as state gets record ₹ 1.81 lakh cr investment proposals

**PATNA, Dec 22:** "Ab humara samay hai" - The time for Bihar has come, said state's Industries and Tourism Minister Nitish Mishra after it received a record ₹ 1.81 lakh crore worth of investment proposals in its only second investor meet.

Mishra said the focus will now shift to providing all the promised support to the investors so that the units could start quickly.

"I am very happy personally and very satisfied, and I am thankful to my team in the industry department who has been for the last few months working on their toes, holding a series of events in different states, interacting with the business community, trying to pitch Bihar and the advantage Bihar," he said. The state signed with an array of companies' memorandum of understanding (MoUs), committing ₹ 1.81 lakh crore of investment at the second edition of the Bihar Business Connect investor summit last week. "To be very honest, even we were not expecting this kind of figure," he said. "From now on it will be the emergence of a new Bihar."

After the mega success of the investor meeting, the investing community started treating Bihar as an attractive designation for even private capital.

"I think the myth, which was there or the perception which the people had about Bihar (of the state being less investor-friendly), has gone. Now, it is a complete emergence of a new Bihar under the leadership of Nitish Kumar ji, and I am very positive that in years to come when these MoUs are converted into projects, it will have a big effect, big impact," he noted.



Hitherto considered a laggard, the state signed investment commitments with 423 companies at its only second investor meet, Bihar Business Connect 2024, on December 19-20.

Sun Petrochemicals will invest ₹ 36,700 crore in renewable energy projects, including pump hydro and solar plants. Adani Group, which is the largest private investor in the state, committed to investing about ₹ 28,000 crore in setting up an ultra-supercritical thermal power plant as well as expanding cement production capacity, food processing and logistics businesses.

NTPC Green, the renewable energy arm of the state-owned electricity generating giant, has committed to investing ₹ 10,000 crore in clean energy projects. SJVN, formerly known as Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam, committed a similar amount for the pump storage project. Construction and engineering major Ashoka Buildcon promised an investment of ₹ 9,000

crore in setting up a green hydrogen unit in the state.

NHPC, India's largest hydroelectric producer, committed an investment of ₹ 5,500 crore in setting up a 1,000 MW solar project, while SLMG Beverages (a bottler for Coca-Cola) committed ₹ 3,000 crore. Shree Cements ₹ 800 crore and Haldiram Snacks Pvt Ltd ₹ 300 crore.

Mishra, whose CEO-styled governance was instrumental in pivoting the change in perception about the state as an investment destination, said the first edition of the investor meet in 2023 got an investment commitment of ₹ 50,300 crore. Bihar now boasts one of the best infrastructures - from roads and highways to almost round-the-clock electricity, industrial parks and SEZs.

The MoUs signed cuts across sectors - from energy to tourism, information technology to food processing and much more, he said. "Bihar is a place where you will have a maximum opportunity

for growth." "Ab humara samay hai (It's now our time)... the time for Bihar has come," he said.

Mishra said the focus will now shift to start converting the MoUs into projects, according requisite sanctions and approvals.

"If you need the allotments of land, we have to allot them land. Maybe if they require some specific infrastructure or they require some specific policy support, we will try and provide," he said.

The state, he said, is redrafting its 2016 industrial policy and new sectoral investment policies.

"I want that in the coming days, our policies should be such that it should not only be competitive with policies of other states but also be very attractive."

When the current round of investment proposals gets on the ground, the industrial landscape of Bihar will change - from an agro and food processing heavy portfolio to one where clean energy's pie rises dramatically.

Information technology and general manufacturing also get a big boost. "If you will see now the complete dynamics of the investment in Bihar will completely change. It would be the emergence of a new industrial map," Mishra said. To investors who missed the bus, he said those still deliberating on investments should make the first move before the opportunities vanish.

"The future belongs to Bihar," he said. "My request (to investors) would be that do not go by the perception, see the reality. If you invest or when you invest in a different subject, please come to Bihar and see the state, its policies, people and resources. (PTI)



## Mother urges masses to find her two daughters missing since 2020



**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU, Dec 22:** A mother in North Cachar Hills district, whose two daughters have been missing since 2020, has urged the public to help her find her children.

The mother's appeal comes after the police couldn't find out the missing children.

As per a police complaint lodged at Langting Police Station in NC Hills district on November 20, 2020, with case No. PS C/No-22/2020, under section 363 of the IPC, the mother had gone to Langting market when her two young daughters, Momta Riyang and Momi Riyang, both aged 4 at the time, went out to their Jhum cultivation site accompanied by their two pet dogs while their grandfather was sleeping on November 15, 2020.

Surprisingly, the next day the two dogs returned home, while the two children failed to return. Following this, the villagers searched all the nearby areas and jungles, but could hardly find a trace.

Later, the Investigating Officer (I/O) inspected the place of occur-

rence, examined the complainant and recorded the statements of witnesses while an extensive search operation was conducted in the jungle and other areas for the two missing children.

The I/O further contacted some reliable sources several times to find the missing children. Besides this, the police also circulated the details of the girls across India, but have failed till date.

The victims are described as, Mamta Riyang, age-4 years (4 years back); height 3ft 8" (approx); complexion white; hair short; wearing brown and white colour T-shirt; language spoken Dimasa and shape of the face round.

Mami Riyang, age-4 years (4 years back); height 3ft 6" (approx); complexion white; hair short (less hair); wearing white colour T-shirt; language spoken Dimasa and shape of the face is round.

"Any person with the necessary information or knowledge of the missing children may inform or contact at 863838973 and 9101162410," urged the mother.

## Union Minister Pabitra Margherita distributes new ration cards to beneficiaries

### 21869 beneficiaries received new ration cards in Cachar

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 22:** Union minister of State for External Affairs and Textiles, Pabitra Margherita distributed ration cards to beneficiaries, said an official statement on Sunday.

The distribution of ration cards was held during a ceremony in Katigorah.

The event marked an important milestone in the state's efforts to ensure food security, aligning with the objectives of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) and the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY).

Delivering an inspiring address, minister Margherita underscored the government's commitment to eradicating hunger and uplifting vulnerable sections of society. He praised the Central Government's initiative to extend the PMGKAY scheme until 2028, which ensures free rice distribution to over 80 crore citizens nationwide.

"Since January 2023, the government has been relentlessly



working to eliminate malnutrition and hunger. The extension of PMGKAY reaffirms our pledge that no one in our country goes hungry," he stated.

The minister commended

Assam's proactive measures under chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's leadership, including the distribution of 10, 73, 489 ration cards earlier this year and enrolling over 19 lakh beneficiaries under

PMGKAY.

Margherita highlighted the chief minister's focus on Barak Valley, he appreciated the establishment of the Barak Valley Development Council, which prioritises infra-

structure and socio-economic development in the region.

During the ceremony, minister Margherita personally handed over ration cards to ten beneficiaries, while the remaining 2,985 cards were distributed among eligible residents of Katigorah.

In total, the second phase aims to benefit over 5 lakh people across 37 constituencies, with more than 11.5 lakh beneficiaries already covered under both phases statewide.

Meanwhile, similar distribution ceremonies were held in all seven Legislative Assembly Constituencies (LACs) of Cachar district as directed by the government.

Many prominent figures were attended the event including Kaushik Rai (Minister for Food, Civil Supplies, Mines, and Barak Valley Development Department) and MLAs Mihir Kanti Shome (Udhabornd), Dipayan Chakraborty (Silchar), and Nihar Ranjan Das (Dholai), graced the events.

## Nagaon Lions Club organises free eye check-up and diabetes test camp



**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, Dec 22:** Nagaon Lions Club in collaboration with 'Friends, a helping hand' organised a free eye check-up, free diabetes testing and a homoeopathic camp in Nagaon, an official statement said on Sunday.

Many eye specialists from the Lion Clubs Hospital in Guwahati conducted eye examinations where over 200 people were detected with cataract problem.

"All these patients will get the benefits of free cataract

surgery and spectacles in Guwahati soon," the statement added.

The statement further said that over 100 people were also detected with diabetic problem. The event was initiated with paying tribute to the late Surya Das, a famous singer, lyricist and composer as well as musical artiste from Nagaon.

Many dignitaries were present in the event including Ajay Mittal and Hardarshan Singh, the president and secretary of Nagaon Lions Club, Madan Saha, Bakul Bora, Biswajit Mahanta, Pawan Bora, Gurcharan Singh, Ganga Ballav Goswami, Jiten Agarwal, Malchand Agarwal, MIP Agarwal, Mala Bordoloi, Dhiraj Bordoloi, Roseline jaha, Swapna Neogi, Inamul Majid, Binod Khatawat, Gopichand.

## BJP government committed to the development of West Karbi Anglong: Tuliram

**HT Correspondent**

**HAMREN, Dec 22:** The BJP government is committed to the development of West Karbi Anglong said the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), Tuliram Ronghang.

Attending as the chief guest at the mass joining into BJP programme held at Rongchejeung, Zirikingdem in West Karbi Anglong the CEM of KAAC, Ronghang said that the Council under the BJP and the state government will continue to implement development schemes in the entire hilly district of West Karbi Anglong.

In the mass BJP joining programme, 2011 workers of All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHL) and 526 other opposition workers joined the ruling party.

The meeting was attended by MLAs Darsing Ronghang and Rupsing Teron; executive member of KAAC, Surya Rongphar and others.

## 4th Annual Shri Shri Mahavishnu Yagna begins from March 7

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 22:** In the spirit of "Bahu Jana Sukhaya Bahu Jana Hitaya" (For the happiness and welfare of many), preparations have commenced for the 4th Annual Shri Shri Mahavishnu Yagna at the sacred Ashwaktanta Temple, an official statement said on Sunday.

A public meeting was held under the chairmanship of Daloi Lakshwar Sharma were various key decisions were made to ensure the successful execution of the Mahavishnu Yagna.

"It was decided that the three-day Yagna will take place from March 7 to 9," Daloi said.

An organising committee was also formed for the event with Himanta Biswa Sarma and Riniki Bhuyan Sarma as the chief patron; Kamrup deputy commissioner Dev Kumar Mishra as the chairman; and Hemanta Choudhury, the chief minister's special

duty officer, as the working president.

The vice presidents are Ranjit Bhattacharya, Dr Bishnuram Nuncha, and Pranjit Deka, with Daloi Lakshwar Sharma as the general secretary and Akhil Bhattacharya as the joint secretary.

Additional joint secretaries Ashok Sharma and Bhaskar Hazarika, along with publicity secretary Mukuteswar Goswami, have also been selected. Dilip Sharma will oversee the Yagna Mandap (Yagna Pavilion).

The committee has also formed sub-committees to handle food, hospitality, medical services, transportation, and cultural activities, ensuring a well-organised celebration.

The Yagna will conclude on March 9 with a grand Purnahuti (final offering) after 51,500 oblations, marking the completion of the 4th annual Mahavishnu Yagna.

## 2nd phase of ceremonial distribution of new ration cards successfully conducted



**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Dec 22:** The 2nd Phase of the ceremonial distribution of new ration cards under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) was successfully conducted in Haflong, an official statement said on Sunday.

The event was organised by the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC), Haflong in collaboration with the Food, Public Distribution and Consumer Affairs Department.

The program was officially inaugurated via a live telecast from North Lakhimpur by chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

The ceremony featured esteemed guest Debolal Gorlosa, chief executive member of NCHAC, addressing the gathering with insights into the significant steps taken towards ensuring food security for all.

A total of 3,408 new ration cards were distributed while raising the cumulative total to 37092 across the entire district of Dima Hasao.

The theme of the program, "Assam Government's Continued Journey Towards a Healthy Society is a Fulfilment of a Promise," reflects the government's commitment to enhancing the welfare of its citizens.

In his address, Debolal Gor-

losa expressed gratitude to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma for their unwavering support in this initiative.

He also acknowledged the efforts of Ranjit Kr Dass Minister of Panchayat and Rural development for his role in successfully facilitating the distribution process.

"To ensure efficient use of resources, Gorlosa urged ineligible individuals to voluntarily surrender their ration cards, emphasising that one cannot hold both a job and a ration card simultaneously. He cautioned willful defaulters to act before any necessary enforcement actions are initiated," the statement said.

Furthermore, the chief executive member instructed the Food and Civil Supplies Department to ensure that entitled beneficiaries receive their full entitlement without any reductions.

Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs Nandita Gorlosa, elaborated on the detailed processes involved in ration card distribution.

She announced that provisions for pulses and sugar will soon be included in the ration card system, and efforts are underway to link the Orunodoi scheme with the ration card initiative.

## Book on freedom fighter Bhogeswari Phukanani released

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, Dec 22:** A book on freedom fighter Bhogeswari Phukanani named 'Bhogeswari Phukanani: Life and Times' was released by Bibha Phukan here in Nagaon Sahitya Sabha Bhavan on Sunday.

The book has been written on the life of Bhogeswari Phukanani, a freedom fighter, who played a crucial role in India's struggle for independence.

The event was attended by several prominent personalities, including Dr Rajen Saikia, a noted historian, who delivered the keynote address and also ceremonially released the book.

Dr Saikia highlighted the significance of India's freedom movement and the role played by women like Bhogeswari Phukanani, emphasising that the freedom movement was a modern-day epic that involved people from all walks of life. He praised the role of Mahatma Gandhi in leading the movement and making it a mass-based struggle.

## Good Governance Week held in Golaghat

**HT Correspondent**

**GOLAGHAT, Dec 22:** As a part of the nationwide campaign of Good Governance Week, Golaghat district administration has started the 'Prashasan Gaon ki ore' from Dec 19 to 24.

The initiative focuses on effective redressal of public grievances and improving visibility and aptness in service of the district administration. District Commissioner Pulak Mahanta urged all the departmental heads to work out all the pending public grievances clearly and with all speed so as to establish the objective of the campaign properly.

## Flower festival to commence from Dec 30 to Jan 1 in Golaghat

**HT Correspondent**

**GOLAGHAT, Dec 22:** KHUMTAI PLANT and FLOWER FESTIVAL -3 will commence from 30th December 2024 to 1st January, 2025 at Melamora Eco-Tea Tourism Centre, near Meluha, one of the Major tourist spots in the district of Golaghat. Various groups and NGOs of the state will take part in this unique festival and an exhibition cum sales of plants and flowers will also take place during the three-day celebrations, as told by Mrinal Saikia, MLA, Khumtai, to cheer up the young minds of the state.

## 49th annual conference on Boro Sahitya Sabha to be held on Dec 28 and 29

**HT Correspondent**

**HOWRAGHAT, Dec 22:** The 49th Annual Conference of Karbi Anglong District Boro Sahitya Sabha and the 22nd Annual Conference of Karbi Anglong District Boro Hariimu Afad will be held on December 28 and 29 at Jaljuri near Howraghat in Karbi Anglong district. President of Karbi Anglong District Boro Sahitya Sabha, Arabinda Uzir laid the lai khuta for the conference in the presence of Bodo community leaders.

## Upendra Nath Brahma Soldier of Humanity Award 2024 conferred on Nepal's Anuradha Koirala

### Fondly known as 'Mother Teresa of Nepal'

**HT Correspondent**

**KOKRAJHAR, Dec 22:** Padmashri Anuradha Koirala who is also the founder of 'Maiti Nepal' was conferred with the 21st Upendra Nath Brahma Soldier of Humanity Award 2024 at an award presentation ceremony held in Kokrajhar on Sunday.

The Upendra Nath Brahma Trust (UNBT) and All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) gives the Upendra Nath Brahma Soldier of Humanity Award to an internationally acclaimed personality from Nepal.

Anuradha Koirala, fondly known as "Mother Teresa of Nepal" has devoted her life to the cause of humanity, particularly in the fight against the exploitation of 'women and children'. Since founding Maiti Nepal in 1993, her efforts have led to the rescue and rehabilitation of over 50,000 survivors of sex trafficking. Her organisation provides safe havens, rehabilitation homes, and



preventive programs, ensuring survivors are empowered to rebuild their lives with dignity and unparalleled dedication has earned her numerous international accolades, including the CNN Hero of the Year Award (2010), the Mother Teresa Memorial International Award for Social Justice (2014), and the prestigious Padmashri (2017) from the

Sahitya Sabha president Dr Surath Narzary, renowned journalist, Patricia Mukhim, and ABSU president, Dipen Boro, chairman of UNBT Dr Dimacha Dwibrang Mwshahary presented the prestigious award to Koirala amidst the presence of a huge crowd. "The award motivates her to redouble her efforts in combating human trafficking. She has emphasised to build a good society with protection of women and girls amongst global communities," Koirala said. "Whenever I received the award, it encourages me more to work for the protection of women and daughters. I am working dedicatedly towards the welfare and protection of the women's fraternities across Nepal as well its adjoining countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan especially for the women and girls", Koirala added. "We must carry out awareness at the village level to create awareness on gender disparity amongst the citizens to ed-

ucate the girls, and boys to end the disparity of the gender amongst the communities," she concluded.

Gracing the occasion as chief guest, renowned journalist and Padmashri from Shillong, Mukhim stated that the human society must prevent the men and women from trafficking to build a healthy life. She has expressed her resentment over the situation like crimes on women and girls, human trafficking, kidnaping etc which are happening day to day life, said that the citizens must come forward while eradicating such kind of situations.

Among others, chairman of Bodo Kochary Welfare Autonomous Council, Anil Basumatary, BTR executive members, Nilut Swargiary, Ukil Mushahary, BKWAC executive member Mahipal Boro, MLA Lawrence Islay, Bodoland University registrar, Dr Subung Basumatary were prominent attendees in the event.



## QUOTE OF THE DAY

Money often costs too much.  
- Ralph Waldo Emerson

## Rupee vs dollar

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'friend', the US President-elect Donald J Trump, is set to move into White House, once again, it need not be particularly beneficial for India. If anything, Trump can be said to be "anti-India" even while remaining "pro-Modi". The camaraderie contrasts starkly with the president-elect's anti-India economic stance, which has already manifested in threats of retaliatory tariffs and a staunch defence of the US dollar as the global currency. Trump's assertion stems from his dissatisfaction with New Delhi's high tariffs on certain American products. This reflects his broader policy of prioritizing American economic interests, often at the expense of long-standing trade partnerships. For India, which is heavily reliant on exports to sustain its trade balance, such threats signal potential disruptions. A strained trade relationship with the US could exacerbate existing economic challenges, particularly when the Indian economy is grappling with a slowdown. One significant area of concern for India lies in Trump's unwavering support for a strong US dollar. His administration's emphasis on defending the dollar's position as the default global currency underscores a broader strategy to secure American dominance in the global financial system. Within days of his election, Trump issued warnings to BRICS nations, including India, against moves that could threaten the US dollar's supremacy.

India, while diplomatically downplaying these warnings, has engaged in rupee-based bilateral trade with certain countries to reduce dependence on the dollar. However, such initiatives are in their infancy and cannot offset the broader impact of dollar-centric global trade policies. The strength of the US dollar under Trump's presidency has already dealt a severe blow to the rupee, which has touched historical lows against the dollar. This decline is attributed to multiple factors, including robust U.S. economic data that reinforces the Federal Reserve's hawkish stance on interest rates. Higher U.S. rates attract capital flows away from emerging markets like India, exacerbating the depreciation of the rupee. A weaker rupee inflates the cost of imports, particularly crude oil, thereby widening the trade deficit and fuelling domestic inflation. The Reserve Bank of India's interventions to stabilize the currency have had limited success. Over-reliance on forex reserves to stabilize the rupee could deplete India's reserves, leaving the economy vulnerable to external shocks.

Domestically, the Indian economy is facing significant challenges that contribute to the rupee's decline. An economic slowdown characterized by subdued industrial output, declining consumer demand, and weakened investment sentiment has eroded confidence in the Indian economy. Slower economic growth reduces the appeal of the rupee to foreign investors, who perceive emerging markets as higher-risk during periods of uncertainty. Additionally, India's current account deficit, which arises when the country imports more than it exports, places sustained pressure on the rupee. With global oil prices recovering and India being a major oil importer, the demand for dollars to pay for these imports has surged, adding to the rupee's woes. Another crucial factor is the rising inflationary pressure. Inflation erodes the purchasing power of the currency and undermines investor confidence. For India, navigating the complexities of Trump's presidency poses formidable challenges and there is very little Modi can do to influence Trump's thinking, notwithstanding the highly overstated friendship between the two.

## Building futures: S.A.F.E. housing for Northeast migrant workers

By: Dipak Kurmi

The NITI Aayog's recently released report, "S.A.F.E. Accommodation—Worker Housing for Manufacturing Growth," has sparked optimism for thousands of industrial workers migrating from India's Northeast region. This strategic document highlights the urgent need for secure and affordable housing solutions in proximity to industrial hubs, thereby offering a potential lifeline to migrant workers striving to balance economic stability with the pursuit of better employment opportunities.

At the core of the issue lies the acute shortage of affordable housing near manufacturing zones, a predicament that leads to significant workforce instability, high attrition rates, and reduced productivity. These challenges are compounded for women workers, who often face disproportionate barriers to migration due to inadequate living facilities, further constraining the manufacturing sector's potential for competitiveness and growth. Recognizing these challenges, the report proposes the implementation of a holistic initiative under the acronym S.A.F.E., which stands for Secure, Affordable, Flexible, and Efficient housing.

## Reimagining Housing Through Dormitory-Style Models

The S.A.F.E. Accommodation Initiative envisions the development of long-term, dormitory-style housing that is well-equipped with essential amenities. This model is designed not only to reduce commute times but also to improve workers' overall well-being and contribute to the manufacturing sector's broader development objectives. By addressing workers' housing needs, the initiative seeks to strengthen the Northeast region's remittance economy, which has historically played a vital role in supporting agricultural and domestic investments through money sent back by migrant workers.

A key insight from the report is the economic impracticality of the current housing landscape for workers in industrial zones. Private developers have largely refrained from entering this market due to the high capital costs involved and the limited financial viability of affordable housing projects. For example, the report estimates that a private housing facility for workers would require a monthly rental payment of approximately ₹4,000 for an 80-square-foot unit. This figure con-

stitutes roughly 30% of a minimum-wage worker's salary, rendering such housing unattainable for the vast majority of the target demographic.

## Reforming Zoning Laws for Greater Flexibility

To address these systemic barriers, the report underscores the need for policy reforms, particularly in zoning regulations. It advocates for the relaxation of traditional zoning laws that restrict the use of residential spaces in industrial areas. By permitting mixed land-use zoning and streamlining building regulations, India could foster the creation of more affordable housing options near manufacturing zones.

A significant recommendation involves revisiting these zoning laws to allow for SAFE accommodation projects within industrial zones. This would not only enable cost-efficient construction but also ensure that workers have ready access to their workplaces. The report also emphasizes the need for safety regulations to ensure that such accommodations are resilient to disasters and provide adequate living conditions for occupants.

## Financing Models for S.A.F.E. Accommodation

The NITI Aayog identifies four primary models for the large-scale development of S.A.F.E. accommodation: government-owned and operated housing, government-owned but privately operated housing, public-private partnerships (PPPs), and privately owned worker housing. Among these, the PPP model is highlighted as particularly promising due to its scalability and potential for cost-sharing between government and private entities. By leveraging Viability Gap Funding (VGF) from the central government, states can jointly invest in these projects, ensuring financial feasibility while meeting the growing demand for worker housing.

The proposed VGF scheme could cover up to 30% of the total project cost, with funding jointly provided by the Department of Economic Affairs (20%) and the sponsoring Ministry of Government (10%). These funds could also be used to retrofit or upgrade existing worker accommodation facilities, particularly in brownfield sites, thereby extending the initiative's reach to areas with limited housing options.

## Implications for Migrant Workers and the Northeast Region

The recommendations outlined in the S.A.F.E. Accommodation report have profound implications for mi-

## Making the MGNREGA toothless has been neoliberal Modi govt's goal

The aim of all fascistic governments is to disempower the people and the Modi government is no exception. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which promised one member in every rural household a maximum of 100 days of employment per year, was a demand-driven scheme. In a limited sense, therefore, it gave people a right to employment, not to everyone and not for as many days as a person wanted, but a right nonetheless.

It ran counter to the logic of neoliberalism, but became possible because of pressure from the Left at a time when the government at the Centre was dependent on Left support. Since then, however, there has been a persistent attempt to whittle down the scheme on one pretext or another and this attempt has reached a climax under the current fascistic government of the BJP, whose opposition to it has been articulated by none other than the Prime Minister himself.

The BJP, like several other political parties, is perfectly willing to make cash transfers to women to get their votes. Indeed such transfers are supposed to have played a major role in ensuring the victory of its alliance in the recent Maharashtra Assembly elections; yet it is attempting to decimate the MGNREGS. The basic difference between the two schemes lies in the fact that the cash transfer scheme is a charity for which the recipient is supposed to be grateful, while MGNREGS confers a sort of right to employment on the beneficiary; the beneficiary gets a payment in return for work for which there is no question of any gratitude on his/her part.

It is this conferring of a right, which amounts to, according to the beneficiary, the dignity of citizenship, that irks the BJP. MGNREGS is a form of empowerment which cash transfers are not, for, while being useful, they can be cut off at any moment at the whim of the government. And fascistic outfits always seek to disempower the people which is why MGNREGS is under attack.

There are five distinct ways in which this attack is being launched. The first is through the government's insistence on the National Mobile Monitoring System which requires that the workers should upload their pictures to prove that they were present at the work-site and that the work was executed, and on the Aadhaar-Based Payments System which requires their bank accounts to be linked to their Aadhaar cards.

It is exceedingly difficult for workers to fulfil these requirements, one important reason for which is the sheer non-availability of the internet over large parts of rural India. As a result, large numbers of workers become ineligible for claiming work under

MGNREGS; in fact, according to a report in NewsClick, an NGO, LibTech India, has estimated that 67 million workers have become ineligible for MGNREGS owing to the absence of the Aadhaar link.

The second way is by denying MGNREGS funds to states, typically to those states that are ruled by opposition parties, on the plea that there is large-scale corruption associated with the scheme; West Bengal has been a prime victim here. Carrying out a social audit is the way to tackle complaints regarding corruption and the central government accuses states of not carrying out social audit. But the social audit units are supposed to be paid by the central government which has not paid them for quite some time. Besides, even assuming that the state government is at fault, any blanket denial of funds by the central government for a scheme that is supposed to be fully funded by the centre, amounts to punishing the people for the sins of the state government; this is just an excuse for running down the scheme.

The third way in which the scheme is being run down is through the building up of wage arrears. At a recent demonstration by MGNREGS workers in Delhi, many people complained that they had been paid their wages three years after the work they had done! The law provides that workers should receive compensation if wage payment is delayed, just as it provides that an unemployment allowance must be paid in case work is not assigned. But till now there has been no payment of either unem-

ployment allowance or any compensation; this is a gross violation of the law for which however nobody has ever been punished. Delayed wage payment discourages applicants and hence undermines the scheme.

The fourth way in which the scheme is being sabotaged is through inadequate allocations for it in the central government budgets, which, incidentally is one of the reasons for the delay in wage payments. This trait goes back to the UPA-II government. The then Finance Minister, P Chidambaram always underprovided for MGNREGS in the budget and when asked about it responded by saying that since it is a demand-driven scheme adequate provision would be made for it if the need arises. The problem, however, is that in the process of making this provision, when the need does arise, some time gets lost, which then results in delayed wage payments; this in turn gives rise to a lower demand for work because of a "discouraged worker effect". The BJP government has carried this to an extreme limit.

The budgetary provision for MGNREGS for 2024-25 was ₹ 86,000 crores, which,



after deduction for wage arrears, would come down to around ₹ 60,000 crores. This is so low that wage arrears would build up again, thus creating a permanent and ever growing pool of wage arrears that effectively discourages applications and serves to undermine the scheme. The revised budget for MGNREGS, when thousands of workers had trekked back to their villages because of the sudden lock-down on account of Covid, had been ₹ 1,13,000 crores.

This had provided them with a life-line. This has not been reversed despite the abatement of Covid, which means that the allocation, even at the current level of the scheme, should be in the neighbourhood of that very figure. Instead we have this year an allocation of just ₹ 60,000 crores after excluding wage arrears which only prolongs the syndrome of delayed wage payments and discouraged worker effect. In fact the protesting MGNREGS workers in Delhi on December 6 were demanding an extension of the scheme and an allocation of ₹ 2.5 lakh crores, which gives some indication of the scale of requirement.

The fifth way in which the government is strangulating the MGNREGS is by keeping the wage-rates inordinately low. An idea of how low wages have been, can be got from the following. The erstwhile Planning Commission had taken 2200 calories per person per day in rural India as the benchmark for poverty; and according to the NSS large sample survey for 2011-12, access to 2200 calories has come when the daily per capita expenditure has reached approximately ₹ 50.

## DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: Prabhat Patnaik

## The Constitution debate - A failed disclosure

By: M. R. Lalu

The winter session of the parliament has been absolutely stormy - the constitution debate, to be precise. It exacerbated the frustration of those who performed poorly in the recently concluded state elections. The winners have all reasons to be jubilant while losers have to sit back and contemplate. Leaders of the Congress party seemed to have lost control over their behaviour and its representative from the privileged clan of leaders from the party dynasty lost his intellectual lust to an unparadigmatic mimicry. Rahul Gandhi was visibly feeble while articulating his responsibility of being the Leader of Opposition. It could have been an amicable debate on the efficacy of the country's constitution on its 75th anniversary of adoption. But the leaders turned the proceedings in both the houses into an intolerable display of arrogance. Conceivably, both sides mostly focused on reasons to down size the other side.

As usual, Rahul Gandhi was once again candid, while giving an interesting stuff for laughter, a repetition of his defective understanding of the Indian epics. His reference on Eklavya with an undertone on the marginalized and youths in India landed him in a messed up terrain inviting sharp criticism from some Hindu acharyas. The version he narrated was of distorted taste and his story in the parliament was consumed to be an attempt to demean the essential values that Hinduism preserved, they critiqued. Whatever, one thing is clear, that Rahul Gandhi is intensely tutored by his close camaraderie but he, for some personal reasons, lacks true abilities to grasp the knowledge of the Indian spiritual tradition. The controversy erupted was not only about his falsified narration, but his convenient twisting of the crux. That guru Dronacharya chopped the thumb of Eklavya - an adivasi boy to connote in modern terms, a skilled archer, for eliminating his expertise permanently, was a well framed parallel to demean the government under Prime Minister Modi. It was Eklavya who shopped his thumb as his Gurudakshina to Dronacharya, a unique offering at least in his case, in tune with India's Guru-Shishya tradition. Gurudakshina was the tradition but thumb was quite unusual and an extreme offering. Rahul Gandhi's statement won him labels such as 'Hindu Virodhi' and 'Rashtra Virodhi'.

Addressing the Lok Sabha on the occasion, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was armed with facts that could substantiate the 'evils' of the Congress mostly exposing them chronologically starting from the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Except registering their murmur of discontent, occasional tootles and the disruption of the parliamentary proceed-



ings, the Congress and its clan of allies had been thoroughly disarmed by Modi as he spoke consistently with a challenging erudition. This session indeed experienced a renewed flavor of aggression at the Congress side as Priyanka Vadra's entry into the Lok Sabha gave it more power and stuff to recriminate the Modi regime. But the opposition's pandemonium once again exposed its predicaments sounding louder and the convulsion due to its defeat in the state of Maharashtra was eventually protruding. Priyanka's conscious depiction of a game-changing political upswing was visible when she entered the parliament with a Palestine print tote bag. Probably, this was an audacious attempt to redefine politics in her style and an ideal taunt on the ruling dispensation. Bag politics was unexpected. And the impact of such appealing responses needs to wait until the moment of testimony arrives-the elections. But there was a planned balancing act by the same person who, certainly with some reluctance, reached the premises of the parliament again with another bag and a compassionate catchphrase printed on it. This time it was for the Hindus in Bangladesh. Remember, the Congress and its supreme leader Rahul Gandhi remained silent on the fate of the Hindus and other minorities throughout the episode of atrocities in India's neighborhood. Their devastatingly demoralizing torture by radicals was left unnoticed by the party that for obvious electoral reasons kept its principle, its stand of minority appeasement. Priyanka Vadra seems to have deciphered the direction of the wind that remains nationalistic ever since the Modi regime began its power-play in 2014. Grappling with the inefficient and fractured political sensibility of her brother, the lady, new in the parliamentary scenario, seems to have been overburdened to undo his political gimmicks.

Despite having a reinvigorated presence in the house, the Congress once again

Since then there have been no comparable NSS surveys, but if we simply use the consumer price index for rural areas then the corresponding wage-rate for 2023-24 comes to ₹ 82. Assuming a household of five persons (husband, wife, two children and an elderly relative), this would require a daily wage rate of at least ₹ 410.

In fact the daily wage rate has to be even higher, both because some money needs to be set aside for emergencies, and also because the consumer price index does not fully capture the increase in the actual cost of living. This is because it does not capture the effect of the privatisation of essential services like education and healthcare which also makes these services more expensive.

Even a committee of experts appointed by the central government has recently recommended a daily wage rate of ₹ 375 for MGNREGS workers. By contrast not only are there large variations in wage rates across states, but in no state was the wage rate anywhere near ₹ 375. In fact only in four of the major states, Haryana, Kerala, Karnataka and Punjab, was the daily wage rate above ₹ 300; in all the remaining states the wage rate was between ₹ 200 and ₹ 300. Such abysmally low wages, which moreover remain unpaid for long stretches of time, act as a great disincentive for workers.

These are the ways in which the present government is running down a rights-based scheme which had been one of the most consequential pieces of legislation in post-independence India, and forcing people to beg for the mercies in the form of cash transfers. But then what else can one expect from a government headed by fascistic elements? (IPA Service)

failed to enhance its importance in the parliament ensuring its meaningful presence. It deliberately pulled on the Adani blame-game. On the larger framework of democratic participation what it actually failed to shed were its pursuing narrow political interests. All this anger, desperation and aggression began with the party's realization of its shrinking vote share in Haryana and Maharashtra. Before those elections, the party apparatus predicted that the results would be the reason for a stunning jubilation but they turned out to be a terrific jolt. Amid multiple political missteps and his personal arrogance, the foremost leader of the party, Rahul Gandhi once again brought a bitter sense of suspicion on his leadership and there have been murmurs of disgruntlement in the INDI alliance with some members vociferously drumming for a leadership change. There have also been rattling remarks generously demeaning a new savior and Mamata Banerjee being projected as a possible contender to check the political onslaught of the Modi regime.

Breaking all possibilities of consensus, the country's parliament witnessed a mystified ruling dispensation and opposition wrestle out their enmity in an upsetting manner leaving two MPs from the BJP injured. All in the name of their commitment to Ambedkar, their tussle, the wild altercation, reanimated their deep-seated discomfort and distrust. The fresh squabbles in the parliament engraved Rahul Gandhi's disruptor image deeper. His party and the INDI alliance have sensible reasons to make him believe that his behavior would undoubtedly bless them with more vulnerabilities and disgraceful moments. Understandably, the discourse on the country's constitution and its glory was filled with vengeance and unaffordable apathy and the whole process did reprehensibly hurt the electorate. (The author is a freelance journalist who can be reached at mr-lalu@30gmail.com)



# Pastries vs Sodas: Not all added sugars pose the same heart disease risk

By: Jessica Freeborn

As noted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), added sugar Trusted Source is the sugar put in foods and beverages during processing or preparation. Researchers are still examining the specific dangers associated with consuming too much added sugar.

A study published in *Frontiers in Public Health* examined the risk for cardiovascular diseases associated with consuming certain sources of added sugar.

The research revealed that consuming no sugar may be worse for cardiovascular health than consuming small to moderate amounts. The results also suggest that the sources of sugar affect risk.

## Cardiovascular disease risk from added sugar

Researchers wanted to delve deeper into the association between different cardiovascular diseases and sources of added sugar.

The researchers included data from the Swedish Mammography Cohort and the Cohort of Swedish Men, ultimately including data from 69,705 participants. They excluded participants with cancer, diabetes, or prevalent cardiovascular disease at baseline. They also excluded participants who had extreme intakes because these reports could be inaccurate.

The researchers collected dietary data from 1997 and again from 2009. They estimated how much added sugar participants were consuming and how much this contributed to overall energy intake. They looked at three broad groups of added sugar sources:

Sweet treats, such as ice cream and pastries  
Toppings, such as table sugar and honey  
Sweetened beverages, such as sodas and fruit drinks (excluding pure fruit juice)

The 2009 dietary questionnaire distinguished between beverages sweetened by sugar and those containing artificial sweeteners.

The researchers looked at several cardiovascular health outcomes among participants: stroke, heart attack, heart failure, aortic stenosis, atrial fibrillation, and abdominal aortic aneurysm. They followed participants through the diagnosis of cardiovascular disease, death, or to the end of 2019.

Throughout follow-up, 25,739 participants received at least one cardiovascular disease di-

agnosis.

The researchers used several different models that adjusted for various covariates in their analysis. Covariates included components like age, sex, smoking status, exercise levels, and body mass index.

The researchers did identify that increasing added sugar intake was associated with an increased risk for ischemic stroke and abdominal aortic aneurysm. However, with most cardiovascular disease outcomes, the lowest risk was for participants who had a low to moderate intake of added sugar, whereas the lowest intake group actually had the highest risk.

For example, they found that compared to the lowest intake group, the group with an over 5 to 7.5% energy intake from added sugar group had a lower risk for ischemic stroke, heart attack, heart failure, aortic stenosis, and atrial fibrillation.

## Do different types of sugar have different effects?

When looking at different types of added sugars, sweetened beverages appeared to pose the greatest risk to participants. They found that increased intake of sweetened beverages was associated with an increased risk for ischemic stroke, heart failure, atrial fibrillation, and abdominal aortic aneurysm.

Sensitivity analyses found that artificially sweetened beverages were associated with an increased risk for ischemic stroke and heart failure, while sugar-sweetened beverages did not have an identified association with cardiovascular disease.

Interestingly enough, increased sweet treat intake decreased the risk for cardiovascular diseases. Participants who consumed the lowest level of treats per week actually had the highest risk. For toppings, the results varied.

The groups outside the lowest intake group had lower risks for heart failure and aortic stenosis. However, there was a positive linear association for abdominal aortic aneurysm. Compared to the lowest intake group, the highest intake group for toppings had a 34% increased risk for abdominal aortic aneurysm.

Study author Suzzane Janzi, a research student in nutrition epidemiology at Lund University, noted the following highlights of the findings to *Medical News Today*:

"The research revealed that different sources of added sugar have varying impacts on cardiovascular diseases. For instance,

sweetened beverages were associated with a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, while treats like pastries and sweets were linked to a lower risk. Additionally, the study found non-linear associations between added sugar intake and several cardiovascular diseases, indicating that moderate intake might be less harmful than very low or very high intakes."

## Study limitations

The study does have some limitations that warrant further investigation.

First, the data was explicitly from participants in Sweden, limiting the findings' generalizability. The cohorts also had lower added sugar intakes than the general Swedish population.

Second, participants self-reported components like dietary data, and these reports may not be accurate. Only 42,327 participants completed the 2009 dietary assessment, limiting the data. It was observational, so it cannot establish cause.

The researchers' methods of data collection could mean that some data was missed. They also had to operate on certain assumptions, such as that participants with missing data on certain foods did not consume those foods. They also estimated components like total added sugar intake, which could be subject to errors. Researchers also acknowledge that things like confounding and misreporting were possible and could have affected the results. They didn't estimate dietary sodium intake or account for social networks, which could have affected the results. There was also a danger of chance findings.

The finding that sugar-added beverages did not appear to increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases could be explained by the low number of participants consuming at least one serving a week, limiting researchers' ability to assess this area. Researchers also note that the relationship between cardiovascular disease risk and artificial sweeteners could have been impacted by reverse causality.

The researchers acknowledge that cardiovascular disease risk factors like high blood pressure and their relationship to added sugar could explain some of the observed associations they found.

Participants were also between the ages of 45 and 83, so it may be helpful to look at data in other age demographics in the future.

The work received funding from several sources, including the Swedish Research



Council and the Heart and Lung Foundation. Janzi noted the following components that may have affected the results:

"In Swedish culture, 'fika' is a significant social tradition where people gather with friends, family, or coworkers for coffee and pastries. This practice is so ingrained in Swedish society that many workplaces have scheduled 'fika breaks' daily. It's possible that the consumption of treats during these social interactions is strongly linked to social relationships, which have previously been linked to cardiovascular health. This could mean that those who don't eat any treats might not have as many of these social interactions. It is also possible that some people avoid consuming treats due to preexisting health concerns, which be what increases the risk of cardiovascular disease."

## The effects of sugar are complex

Overall, the data implies that higher consumption of sweetened beverages is potentially harmful but that there is more complexity to sugar consumption than meets the eye. More research is required to confirm the results and understand their meaning.

Robert L. Salazar, MD, Interventional Cardiologist, Memorial Hermann, who was not

involved in the study, noted the following to *Medical News Today*:

"This study can help inform how we counsel patients about healthy eating habits and lifestyle modifications. In particular, sweetened beverage consumption should be minimized to improve cardiovascular health and avoid negative outcomes including abdominal aortic aneurysm, ischemic stroke, heart attacks, heart failure and atrial fibrillation."

"[T]he findings suggest that added sugar intake overall does not have to be completely eliminated for optimal health and that low-moderate and moderate intake may be healthy depending on the source of added sugar." — Robert L. Salazar, MD

## Janzi noted the following regarding future research:

"Further research is necessary to understand the mechanisms behind the associations between added sugar intake and specific cardiovascular diseases. For example, there are no known biological mechanisms to explain why treats might be linked to a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, and we believe the explanation might lie in the context of treats consumption rather than the treats themselves." (Courtesy: *Medical News Today*)

## Heart attacks: A leading cause of death and how to recognize the Warning Signs

By: Dr. Balbir Singh

Heart attacks are a very dangerous condition and occur when there is insufficient blood flow to the heart muscle. This lack of blood supply causes the heart tissue to become ischemic, leading to cell death. As a result, the heart's pumping ability weakens. Heart attacks are the leading cause of death worldwide, even surpassing cancer and other diseases. They are life-threatening emergencies, and a delay of even a few minutes can lead to death, permanent damage, or severe illness.

## The Prevalence of Heart Attacks

Heart attacks are extremely common and remain the leading cause of mortality. Alarmingly, half of the people suffering from a heart attack die before reaching the hospital. This highlights a significant issue in recognizing early symptoms and taking prompt action.

## Early Detection and Warning Signs

The problem lies in the fact that the warning signs of a heart attack are not always specific. Symptoms can vary greatly and may include mild discomfort or uneasiness, which is often ignored. These early warning signs typically occur days before a heart attack. Recognizing these symptoms and seeking immediate medical attention can save lives.

## Common Warning Signs of a Heart Attack:

Chest Discomfort: Heaviness, pressure, or uneasiness in the center of the chest, which may not always be painful.

Nausea and Vomiting: Often mistaken for gastritis.

Jaw Pain: Heaviness or discomfort in the jaws can indicate a heart attack.

Neck and Back Pain: Discomfort spreading to these areas.

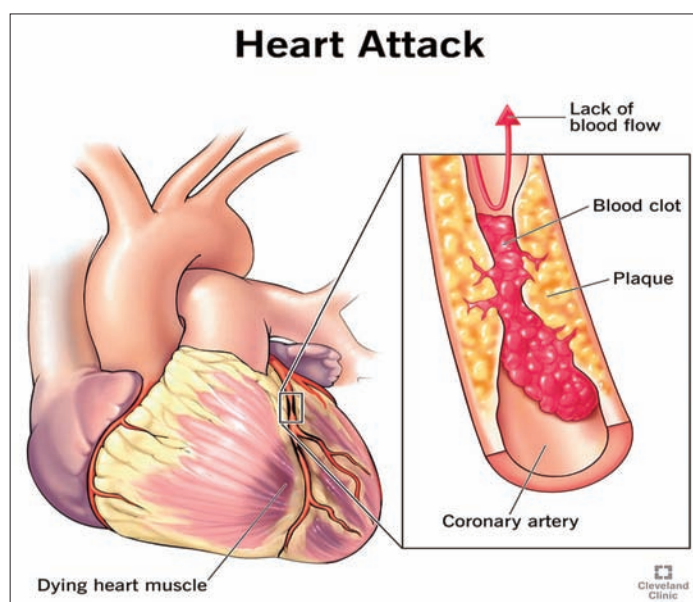
Arm Pain: While commonly associated with the left arm, pain can occur in both arms.

Shortness of Breath: Particularly in elderly individuals, this may occur without chest pain.

## Importance of the Golden Hour

Half of all heart attack deaths occur suddenly, outside the hospital, as patients fail to recognize symptoms and seek timely medical care. The first hour after symptom onset is referred to as the "golden hour."

If a patient receives treatment within this period, modern interventions like angioplasty and stenting can save lives and prevent



permanent damage to the heart. Hospitals must be equipped and teams prepared to act immediately to ensure effective treatment during this critical time.

## Hospital Response and Treatment

In our hospital, we have a protocol for heart attack emergencies. When a patient is diagnosed with a myocardial infarction (MI) in the emergency room, a specialized team, including cardiologists and anesthesiologists, is immediately mobilized. The time taken from the patient's arrival to the initiation of treatment in the catheterization (Cath) lab is meticulously audited. This "door-to-needle" time is continually monitored to improve outcomes and ensure golden-hour treatment for all patients.

## Diagnostic Measures:

Electrocardiogram (ECG): The first test performed to detect abnormalities.

Echocardiogram: To assess heart function.

Troponin Blood Test: Elevated levels of this heart enzyme indicate a heart attack. Sometimes, repeated tests are necessary to confirm or rule out an MI.

If the diagnosis is clear, the patient is immediately taken to the Cath lab to open the blocked artery. In cases of uncertainty, additional tests are performed to confirm the condition. Ruling out a heart attack is also important, and patients can go home reassured if no emergency is found.

## Prevention and Risk Management

Preventing heart attacks is not difficult but requires commitment to a healthy lifestyle and regular medical check-ups.

## Risk Factors and Recommendations:

Family History: Individuals with a history of heart disease, surgeries, or stenting in the family should remain vigilant.

Diabetes: Regular monitoring and control of blood sugar levels are crucial.

Lifestyle Choices: Avoid smoking, binge drinking, and overeating, particularly on weekends.

Exercise and Diet: Regular physical activity and a balanced diet can reduce risk.

Medical Tests: Regular checks for cholesterol, blood pressure, and stress levels are essential.

## Additional Precautions:

Avoid extreme cold exposure.

Recognize and act on warning symptoms like chest discomfort or shortness of breath.

## Role of Education

Educating the public about the warning signs of a heart attack and the importance of early treatment can significantly reduce mortality rates. Understanding that symptoms like nausea or jaw pain could signal a heart attack encourages individuals to seek medical help promptly.

## Conclusion

Heart attacks are emergencies that demand immediate attention. From prevention to early symptom recognition, every step is crucial in saving lives. With advancements in treatment and quick hospital responses, many patients can recover without lasting damage. However, the onus also lies on individuals to adopt healthier lifestyles and remain vigilant about their heart health. (The author is the Group Chairman - Cardiac Sciences, Pan Max & Chief of Interventional Cardiology and Electrophysiology, Max Hospital, Saket)

## Lifespan vs 'healthspan': The importance of muscle strength in living longer

By: Matthew Lees

We'd all like to live longer; at least, I would. But what about enjoying the time we have while we're here and living healthier?

Over the past century, human life expectancy has dramatically increased for a variety of reasons. Chief among these are our advances in sanitation, public health, nutrition and medicine that have reduced mortality, especially in young people. As a result, many more people are able to reach older age.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2021, Canadians had a life expectancy of 81.6 years, which is an astonishing increase of 24.5 years since 1921. By the year 2050, it is projected that the number of people aged 85 years and older will triple.

The extension of life expectancy in the 20th century and beyond is one of humanity's greatest achievements. However, it is crucial to draw a distinction between lifespan – the amount of time between birth and death – and healthspan, which is the amount of time during which a person is healthy within their lifespan. Older people are spending more time in poor health, and this represents a major individual and public health burden.

At an advanced age, the ability to maintain an independent lifestyle largely defines a person's quality of life. As such, it's

not enough to merely extend life without a sufficiently long healthspan to accompany it. Our goals should therefore be to bring lifespan and healthspan as close together as possible.

The idea of extending healthspan is important because it challenges the idea that age-associated diseases are inevitable and can't be mitigated or ablated.

## Importance of muscle

One major health challenge in the aging population is the decline in muscle mass, strength and function (otherwise known as sarcopenia), which can lead to functional impairment, loss of autonomy, metabolic disease and a greater risk of falls and fractures.

Alongside its role in posture and locomotion, muscle is a major contributor to resting metabolism, serving as an important reservoir of glucose (sugar) and lipids (fats). It also represents an important "buffer" of amino acids during periods of catabolic stress, such as that seen in critical illness. Markers of muscle health on admission to intensive care units are predictive of important outcomes like the number of ventilator-free days and mortality, and being older compounds this risk.

Beginning at around the fifth decade of life, muscle mass is lost at a rate of about 1% per year, and strength at about three per cent per year. These reductions in mass and strength are typically interspersed with peri-

ods of muscle disuse (hospitalisation and/or illness, for example) that accelerate losses in muscle mass and strength.

Even a relative reduction in walking activity (measured by a decline in daily step count) for as little as two or three weeks can bring about negative changes in body composition, reduced muscle strength and quality, anabolic resistance (an impaired ability to use dietary protein for muscle building), and disrupted blood glucose control in older people.

Given the fundamental role of muscle tissue in metabolic and general health, the maintenance of adequate muscle mass and quality has particular relevance for extending healthspan.

## Maintaining muscle health

Skeletal muscle tissue is highly plastic; it remodels in accordance with the physical stresses placed upon it. It grows (termed "hypertrophy") in response to the application of external loads and is rapidly lost (termed "atrophy") when these loads are withdrawn – if you've ever had your arm or leg in a cast, you know what I mean. The good news is that we can leverage the plasticity of muscle tissue to our advantage.

In kinesiology professor Stuart Phillips's research group at McMaster University, we study the impact of exercise and nutrition on human skeletal muscle health, with a particular interest in aging.

The lab's work has shown that

resistance exercise (strength training), even when performed sporadically and with lighter loads, can be an effective strategy to offset muscle losses during periods of reduced activity and disuse in older people. What's more, this type of training can enhance the sensitivity of muscle tissue to dietary protein and help overcome anabolic resistance. It can also make your muscle more ready to take up glucose and reduce your risk of diseases like Type 2 diabetes.

Research now indicates that older people require more dietary protein (the source of "building blocks" for muscle) than the established guidelines suggest. Recent work from our lab has shown that higher-quality protein sources can improve muscle growth in older people. The optimal strategy appears to be consuming 1.2 – 1.6 grams per kg of body weight of protein daily (50% -100% greater than what is currently recommended), from a mixture of animal (eg, meat, fish, dairy) and plant-based (eg, legumes) sources.

No matter what age you start, you can build the metabolic equivalent of a retirement savings plan by repeatedly engaging in physical exercise and consuming adequate high-quality protein. In doing so, you can effectively close the gap between healthspan and lifespan, maintain independence and maximise quality of life in older age. (Courtesy: *Scrollin*)

## Pollution and its deadly impact on heart health

By: Dr. Pankaj Ranjan

Air pollution is a pressing global issue which poses a significant threat to cardiovascular health. Beyond its well-documented effects on the lungs, pollution is now recognized as a major contributor to heart disease. The link between air quality and heart health is especially concerning in North India, where pollution levels have dramatically exceeded safe limits.

## How Pollution Affects the Heart

Airborne pollutants, such as particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, and carbon monoxide, enter the bloodstream through the lungs. Once in the bloodstream, these particles can cause inflammation in blood vessels, increase oxidative stress, and lead to the formation of plaques in arteries. Over time, these changes heighten the risk of heart attacks, arrhythmias, and heart failure. Pollution also affects the heart indirectly by increasing blood pressure, a key risk factor for heart disease.

## Growing Threat of Pollution to Heart

## Health

Across North India, pollution levels often spike during winter, due to stubble burning, vehicular emissions, industrial activities, and weather patterns. Cities such as Delhi frequently record Air Quality Index (AQI) levels in the "severe" category, where extended exposure poses serious health risks. Hospitals nationwide have observed a significant rise in cardiovascular emergencies during high-pollution periods. Vulnerable populations, including the elderly and those with heart disease, face heightened risks as pollution continues to exacerbate cardiovascular strain.

## Global Research and Implications

Studies worldwide have underscored the connection between long-term exposure to pollution and cardiovascular mortality. The World Health Organization (WHO) attributes approximately 20% of heart disease deaths to poor air quality. In India, this impact is magnified due to the high population density and widespread exposure to pollution.

The risks extend beyond long-term ex-

posure; even short-term spikes in pollution levels have been shown to trigger acute cardiovascular events. For instance, studies indicate a rise in heart attack cases following days of elevated pollution, highlighting the urgent need for protective measures.

## Safeguarding Your Heart Against Pollution

To protect heart health amidst rising pollution, individuals can monitor air quality, use air purifiers, maintain a heart-healthy lifestyle with a balanced diet and regular exercise, and consult healthcare providers for tailored advice, especially if managing pre-existing heart conditions.

The connection between pollution and heart disease underscores the urgent need for policy changes and public awareness. Addressing air quality issues is not just an environmental necessity but a critical step in safeguarding public health. By reducing pollution levels and adopting protective measures, we can mitigate its impact on heart health and improve the quality of life for millions. (The author is the Head of Department & Senior Consultant, Cardiology, Yatharth Hospital, Greater Noida)



# Israeli strikes across Gaza kill 20 as Vatican envoy visits Christians in territory

*Yesterday children have been bombed... This is cruelty, this is not war: Pope Francis*

**DEIR AL-BALAH (GAZA STRIP), Dec 22:** Israeli strikes across the Gaza Strip overnight and into Sunday killed at least 20 people, including five children, Palestinian medical officials said.

Israeli authorities meanwhile allowed Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the leader of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, to enter Gaza and celebrate a pre-Christmas Mass with members of the territory's small Christian community.

A strike on a school housing displaced people in Gaza City killed at least eight people, including three children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The Civil Defense, first responders affiliated with the Hamas-run government, had earlier said four children were among those killed.

The Israeli military said it carried out a precise strike on Hamas militants sheltering there.

A strike on a home in the central city of Deir al-Balah late Saturday killed at least eight people, including three women and two children, according to Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, which received the bodies. A man and his wife were killed in a strike in the southern city of Khan Younis on Sunday,



just after midnight, according to the nearby Nasser Hospital. A strike on a car in Gaza City killed two people, according to the Health Ministry.

There was no immediate comment from the military on those strikes.

Israel has continued to carry out daily strikes in Gaza more than 14 months into the war with Hamas. It says it only targets militants, accusing them of hiding among civilians, but the bombings frequently kill women and children.

Dozens of worshippers gathered in the Holy Family Church in Gaza City as Pizzaballa and other clergy celebrated Mass. A Christ-

mas tree was decorated with golden ornaments and twinkling white lights, and altar boys wearing red and white robes held candles.

"For Christmas, we celebrate the light and we are wondering where the light is. This is one of the places where the light is," Pizzaballa said.

The buzz of Israeli drones circling overhead, a sound that has grown ubiquitous across Gaza during the war, could be heard throughout the Mass.

The rare visit to Gaza by the Latin Patriarch came a day after Pope Francis had again criticized Israel's actions in Gaza. Francis

said Saturday that his envoy had been unable to enter the territory because of Israeli bombing.

"Yesterday children have been bombed. This is cruelty, this is not war," Francis said during his annual Christmas greetings at the Vatican.

The pope recently called for an investigation to determine if Israel's actions in Gaza constitute genocide, a conclusion later reached by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The International Court of Justice is investigating genocide allegations brought against Israel by South Africa.

Israel, which was founded as a refuge for Jews after the Nazi Holocaust, adamantly rejects such allegations. It says it has made great efforts to spare civilians and is only at war with Hamas, which it accuses of genocidal violence in the attack that ignited the war.

Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel in a surprise attack on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250. Around 100 hostages are still in Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead.

Israel's subsequent bombard-

ment and ground invasion have killed over 45,000 people in Gaza, more than half of them women and children, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between fighters and civilians in its count.

The offensive has caused widespread destruction and displaced some 90% of Gaza's 2.3 million people, often multiple times. Hundreds of thousands are packed into squalid tent camps along the coast as the cold, wet winter sets in.

Israel has been carrying out a major operation in northern Gaza since early October, battling Hamas in the most isolated and heavily damaged part of the territory. Tens of thousands have fled as the military has ordered a complete evacuation and allowed almost no humanitarian aid to enter.

The Israeli military body overseeing civilian affairs in Gaza, known as COGAT, said it had facilitated the evacuation of over 100 patients, caregivers and others from the Kamal Adwan Hospital and Al-Awda Hospital in the far north, which have struggled to function. COGAT said it had also facilitated the delivery of 5,000 liters of fuel and food packages to the hospitals. (AP)

## German police say 4 women, boy were killed in Christmas market attack

**MAGDEBURG (GERMANY), Dec 22:** More details emerged Sunday about those killed when a man drove a car at speed through a Christmas market in Germany, while mourners continued to place flowers and other tributes at the site of the attack.

Police in Magdeburg, the central city where the attack took place on Friday evening, said that the victims were four women ranging in age from 45 to 75, as well as a 9-year-old boy they had spoken of a day earlier.

Authorities said 200 people were injured, including 41 in serious condition. They were being treated in multiple hospitals in Magdeburg, which is about 130 kilometers (80 miles) west of Berlin, and beyond.

Authorities have identified the suspect in the Magdeburg attack as a Saudi doctor who arrived in Germany in 2006 and had received permanent residency.

The suspect was on Saturday evening brought before a judge, who behind closed doors ordered that he be kept in custody pending a possible indictment.

Police haven't publicly named the suspect, but several German news outlets identified him as Taleb A., withholding his last name in line with privacy laws, and reported that he was a specialist in psychiatry and psychotherapy.

Describing himself as a former



Muslim, the suspect appears to have been an active user of the social media platform X, sharing dozens of tweets and retweets daily focusing on anti-Islam themes, criticizing the religion and congratulating Muslims who had left the faith.

He also accused German authorities of failing to do enough to combat what he referred to as the "Islamification of Europe."

The horror triggered by yet another act of mass violence in Germany make it likely that migration will remain a key issue as German heads toward an early election on Feb 23.

The far-right Alternative for Germany party had already been polling strongly amid a societal backlash against the large numbers of refugees and migrants who have arrived in Germany over the past decade.

Right-wing figures from across Europe have criticized German authorities for having allowed high levels of migration in the past and for what they see as security failures now.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who is known for a strong anti-migration position going back years, used the attack in Germany to lash out at the European Union's migration policies.

At an annual press conference in Budapest on Saturday, Orban insisted that "there is no doubt that there is a link between the changed world in Western Europe, the migration that flows there, especially illegal migration and terrorist acts."

Orban vowed to "fight back" against the EU migration policies "because Brussels wants Magdeburg to happen to Hungary, too." (AP)

## Shadow minister Priti Patel wants China on UK's national security risk list

**LONDON, Dec 22:** Britain's shadow foreign secretary Priti Patel on Sunday called for China to be placed high up on the list of countries that pose a national security risk to the UK.

The 52-year-old Indian-origin frontline member of the Opposition Conservative Party led by Kemi Badenoch pointed with concern to the recent scandal engulfing an alleged Chinese spy gaining access to Buckingham Palace circles through Prince Andrew – the younger brother of King Charles III.

She attacked the Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer and his Cabinet for prioritising trade ties with China over national security.

"It's clearly complicated legislation, but China should always be up there," Priti Patel told 'The Sunday Times' in an interview when asked if China should be placed on a proposed Foreign In-

fluence Registration Scheme. The list is designed to compel all those working for overseas powers to declare their lobbying to avert any security risks.

"We're dealing with an extraordinary regime that for over a decade, quite frankly, has had all sorts of incursions in our country through national security, intellectual property, right down to cyber activity and misinformation. During the COVID period, misinformation, disinformation, were absolutely significant. And then, of course, spies," she said.

The former home secretary said she remained "sceptical" of the Chinese video-sharing platform TikTok and would want to consider joining the UK in imposing a ban on it in Britain.

Patel also expressed concerns over a new so-called "super embassy" being planned by China

at a site purchased near the Tower of London in 2018. While the proposal was rejected by the local Tower Hamlets Council in 2022 following objections from police and residents, the application has now been escalated for review by UK Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner.

"It fills me with absolute horror that Angela Rayner is in charge of making the decision. I think the country should be pretty worried about it too," Patel told 'The Sunday Times'.

"I'm just beyond concerned in terms of the direction of travel that Labour is choosing with China for a range of reasons, Hong Kong being one of them. Don't forget Starmer met President Xi Jinping just hours before 45 pro-democracy activists were arrested and put in prison in Hong Kong," she said, of Starmer's meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Brazil last month. (AP)

## China says US 'playing with fire'

**BEIJING, Dec 22:** The Chinese government protested Sunday the latest American announcements of military sales and assistance to Taiwan, warning the United States that it is "playing with fire".

US President Joe Biden authorised Saturday the provision of up to USD 571 million in Defense Department material and services and in military education and training for Taiwan. Separately, the Defence Department said Friday that USD 295 million in military sales had been approved.

A Chinese Foreign Ministry statement urged the US to stop arming Taiwan and stop what it called "dangerous moves that undermine peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait." Taiwan is a democratic island of 23 million people that the Chinese government claims as its territory and says must come under its control. US military sales and assistance aim to help Taiwan defend itself and deter China from launching an attack.

The USD 571 million in military assistance comes on top of Biden's authorisation of USD 567 million for the same purposes in late September. The military sales include USD 265 million for about 300 tactical radio systems and USD 30 million for 16 gun mounts. Taiwan's Foreign Ministry welcomed the approval of the two sales, saying in a social media post on X that it reaffirmed the U.S. government's "commitment to our defence." (AP)

## Rocket from Yemen strikes Tel Aviv

**TEL AVIV, Dec 22:** A rocket fired from Yemen hit an area of Tel Aviv overnight, leaving 16 people injured by shattered glass, the Israeli military said on Saturday, days after Israeli airstrikes hit Houthi rebels who have been launching missiles in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza.

Another 14 people had minor injuries as they rushed to shelters when air raid sirens sounded before dawn, the military said.

The Houthis in a statement on Telegram said they had aimed a hypersonic ballistic missile at a military target that they did not identify. Israel's military said it was investigating, adding that "we emphasize that aerial defence is not hermetic".

"A flash of light, a blow and we fell to the ground. Big mess, broken glasses all over the place," said Bar Katz, a resident of a damaged building. The Houthis' media office later reported airstrikes on Yemen's Houthi-held capital, Sanaa. US forces conducted airstrikes against a missile-storage facility and a command facility operated by the Houthis, the US Central Command said in a statement on X.

The attack on Tel Aviv came after Israeli airstrikes on Sanaa and the port city of Hodeida killed at least nine people on Thursday. The strikes came hours after a missile from Yemen hit a school building in central Israel. The Houthis also claimed a drone strike targeting an unspecified military target in central Israel that day.

Israel's military says the Iran-backed Houthis have launched more than 200 missiles and drones during the 14-month Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. The Houthis have also attacked shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden and say they will not stop until there is a ceasefire in Gaza. The Israeli strikes on Thursday caused "considerable damage" to the Houthi-controlled Red Sea ports, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said. The Hodeida port has been key for food shipments into Yemen in its decade-long civil war.

Mourners in Gaza held funerals for 19 Palestinians -- 12 of them children -- killed in Israeli strikes on Friday and overnight.

One strike hit a residential building in the built-up Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza, killing at



least seven, including five children and one woman, and injuring 16 others, health officials said.

In Gaza City, a strike on a house killed 12, including seven children and two women, according to Al-Ahli Hospital where the bodies were taken. One man cradled a tiny shroud-wrapped body as mourners gathered.

Later on Saturday, al-Awda Hospital said an airstrike hit a house in Nuseirat and killed four people including two children, with 14 other people wounded. Israel's military said it was checking the report.

And Saturday night, large explosions could be seen on the Gaza skyline. Five bodies arrived soon afterward at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al-Balah.

More than 45,200 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza since October 2023, when a Hamas attack in Israel killed about 1,200 people and triggered the war. Gaza's Health Ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants but has said more than half of the fatalities are women and children.

Israel faces heavy international criticism over the unprecedented levels of civilian deaths in Gaza. It says it only targets militants and blames Hamas for civilian deaths because its fighters operate in residential areas. The director of Kamal Adwan Hospital in Beit Lahya in largely isolated northern Gaza said in an online message late on Saturday that Israel's military had told the facility to evacuate.

Dr Husam Abu Safiyeh asserted that the intensive care unit, maternity ward and other departments were being targeted, and said evacuating would mean transferring 66 patients.

This is the 20th international honour given to PM Modi by a country, officials said.

The order is awarded to the Heads of State and foreign Sovereigns and to members of foreign royal families in sign of friendship.

It has been previously awarded to foreign leaders like Bill Clinton, Prince Charles and George Bush.

Modi reached Kuwait on Saturday for a two-day visit. His visit is the first by an Indian Prime Minister to the Gulf nation in 43 years.

He received a ceremonial welcome and Guard of Honour at the Bayan Palace.

Modi had earlier received honours from Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain.

In November, Guyana and Dominica conferred their top awards on Prime Minister Modi for his contributions during the COVID-19 pandemic and his exceptional contributions to the global community and efforts in strengthening bilateral ties with the two Caribbean nations.

In the same month, Nigeria conferred its national award - the Grand Commander of the Order of the Niger - on Prime Minister Modi for his statesmanship and stellar contribution to fostering bilateral ties, making him the second foreign dignitary to receive the distinction. (PTI)

## Two US Navy pilots shot down over Red Sea in apparent 'friendly fire' incident, US military says

**DUBAI, Dec 22:** Two US Navy pilots were shot down Sunday over the Red Sea in an apparent "friendly fire" incident, the US military said, marking the most serious incident to threaten troops in over a year of America targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels. Both pilots were recovered alive, with one suffering minor injuries, but the incident underlines just how dangerous the Red Sea corridor has become over the ongoing attacks on shipping by the Iranian-backed Houthis despite US and European military coalitions patrolling the area.

The US military had conducted airstrikes targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels at the time, though the US military's Central Command did not elaborate on what their mission was and did not immediately respond to questions from The Associated Press. The F/A-18 shot down had just flown off the deck of the USS Harry S Truman aircraft carrier, Central Command said. On Dec 15, Central Command acknowledged the Truman had entered

the Mideast, but hadn't specified that the carrier and its battle group was in the Red Sea.

"The guided missile cruiser USS Gettysburg, which is part of the USS Harry S Truman Carrier Strike Group, mistakenly fired on and hit the F/A-18," Central Command said in a statement.

It wasn't immediately clear how the Gettysburg could mistake an F/A-18 for an enemy aircraft or missile, particularly as ships in a battle group remain linked by both radar and radio communication. However, Central Command said that warships and aircraft earlier shot down multiple Houthi drones and an anti-ship cruise missile launched by the rebels.

Since the Truman's arrival, the US has stepped up its airstrikes targeting the Houthis and their missile fire into the Red Sea and the surrounding area. However, the presence of an American warship group may spark renewed attacks from the rebels, like what the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower saw last year. (AP)

## Stampedes in Nigeria claim 32

**ABUJA, Dec 22:** The death toll from stampedes during two Christmas charity events in Nigeria has increased from 13 to 32, police said Sunday. The victims, including at least four children, collapsed during crowd surges as people grew desperate for food items while the country grapples with the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation.

The dead included 22 people in southeastern Anambra state's Okija town, where a philanthropist on Saturday organised a food distribution, local police spokesman Tochukwu Ikenga said. Ten others died in the capital, Abuja, during a church-organised similar charity event.

Police said they were investigating the two incidents, only days after another stampede in which several children were killed.

Africa's most populous country is seeing a growing trend by local organisations, churches and individuals to organise charity events



ahead of Christmas to ease economic hardship caused by a cost-of-living crisis.

Witnesses of the Abuja stampede told The Associated Press there was a crowd surge at one of the church gates, as dozens tried to enter the premises at around 4 am, hours before gift items were to be shared.

Some of them, including older people, waited overnight to get food, said Loveth Inyang, who rescued one baby from the crush.

The stampedes prompted growing calls for authorities to enforce safety measures at such events. Nigerian police also mandated that organisers obtain prior permission. (AP)

## 38 dead, over 100 missing in Congo after ferry capsizes in Busira river

**KINSHASA, Dec 22:** Thirty-eight people are confirmed dead, and over 100 remain missing in Congo after an overloaded ferry -- full of people returning home for Christmas -- capsized in the river Busira late on Friday night, according to local officials and eyewitnesses. The boat sank less than four days after another one in the northeast of the country capsized, killing 25.

Twenty people are confirmed to have been rescued so far. The boat was travelling in the northeast of the Congo as part of a convoy of other vessels, and the passengers were primarily merchants returning home for Christmas, said Joseph Joseph Kangolingoli, the mayor of Ingende, the last town before the site of the accident.

According to Ndolo Kaddy, a resident of Ingende, the ferry contained "more than 400 people because it made two ports, Ingende and Loolo, on the way to Boende, so there is reason to believe that there were more deaths".

Congolese officials have often warned against overloading and vowed to punish those violating safety measures for water transportation. However, in remote areas where most passengers come from, many cannot afford public transport for the few available roads.

At least 78 people drowned in October when an overloaded boat sank in the country's east while 80 lost their lives in a similar accident near Kinshasa in June.

The latest accident prompted anger at the government for not equipping the convoy with flotation devices. Nesty Bonina, a member of local government and a prominent figure in the town of Mbandaka, the capital of the Equateur province where the ferry sank, said he condemned the authorities for not properly handling the recent capsizings. "How can a ship navigate at night under the watchful eye of river service agents? And now we are recording over a hundred deaths," lamented Mr Bonina. (AP)



# Amit Shah visits rehabilitated Bru tribal village in Tripura

Bru tribals were rehabilitated following a quadripartite agreement signed on Jan 16, 2020

**BURHA PARA (TRIPURA), Dec 22:** "I am more happy than you. Prime Minister Modi ji is also very happy that we could rehabilitate you after 40 years," Union Home Minister Amit Shah told Bru tribal community members in this remote village on Sunday.

Shah said the central government, in association with the Tripura government, has been doing its best to rehabilitate the displaced Bru (Reang) families so that they can live with dignity in their homes.

He said he would go back with immense happiness that the Modi government has been able to successfully rehabilitate all the displaced Bru people in Tripura.

"We have made available 25 types of livelihood opportunities for you. These include animal husbandry, dairy, honeybee keeping and millet farming," he told the settlers.

Besides interacting with the villagers, the home minister visited several homes and enquired about



people's problems and the government benefits they were getting.

When a few residents told him that they had not yet received their Ayushman Bharat health cards, he assured them that all of them would get them within two days and instructed the district magistrate to ensure that.

Bru migrants from three districts of Mizoram -- Mamit, Lunglei and Kolasib -- came to North Tripura district in 1997, 1998 and 2009 due to serious ethnic vio-

lence between Bru and Mizo communities in Mizoram.

Uttam Kumar Reang told Shah that before the central government took steps for their rehabilitation, the Bru refugees were living in very pathetic conditions.

"Earlier we were living in jhuggis, but now we have concrete houses. We now have Aadhaar and voter cards. We have cast our votes in the past," Reang said.

The Bru tribals were rehabilitated following a quadripartite

agreement signed on January 16, 2020.

The pact was signed between the governments of India, Tripura and Mizoram, and representatives of Bru organisations for the permanent rehabilitation of Bru migrants in Tripura.

While about 70 per cent of the Bru (Reang) tribals are Hindu, the remaining are Christians.

A total of 12 locations were identified in Tripura's North Tripura, Dhalai, Gomati and South Tripura districts for establishing resettlement colonies of Bru tribals. While nine of these are on forest land, three are on government land.

Settlement works are going on in these 12 identified locations, officials said.

As part of the agreement, 754 acres of land has been made available to resettle these families.

The final figure of families for rehabilitation under the agreement stands at 6,935 with a population of 37,584, the officials said.

Common development work

like power lines, brick soling of internal roads, installation of deep tube wells for providing drinking water, building power infrastructure, connectivity to households, installation of solar street lights, opening of new fair price shops, anganwadi centres, schools and health sub-centres is almost complete in 11 locations.

The common developmental work in the last approved resettlement colony, Kala Lawgang in South Tripura district, is going on and is likely to be completed by the end of this financial year, according to the officials.

Overall, ₹ 821.98 crore is being spent to resettle these families in the 12 colonies, an official said.

Of the total amount, ₹ 793.65 crore is being borne by the Union home ministry and ₹ 28.34 crore by the state government for common development works.

Till date, the home ministry has released ₹ 693.13 crore, of which ₹ 406.42 crore went directly to the beneficiaries under the direct benefit transfer. (PTI)

## Shah lays foundation for Central Detective Training Institute in Tripura



**AMBASSA (TRIPURA), Dec 22:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday inaugurated and laid the foundation for several development projects worth ₹ 668 crore, including a Central Detective Training Institute (CDTI), in Tripura.

While addressing a programme at Ambassa in Dhalai district, he said the objective behind Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) setting up CDTI in Tripura was to strengthen security in the northeastern region.

"The Modi government restored peace in Tripura with the signing of three agreements with rebel groups and one with the Bru Reang community. Tripura is now moving forward on the path of development," he said.

During the 69th plenary session of the North Eastern Council (NEC) held in Shillong, a recommendation was made to establish an academic research centre in collaboration with educational institutions to study the unique security challenges of the northeastern region, an official release said.

Tripura allocated 9.57 acres of land in Jirania sub-division of West Tripura district for the institute. The MHA has approved ₹ 120

crore for infrastructure building. The digital survey of the allocated plot has already been done, it said.

"The CDTI (in Tripura) will train over 6,000 personnel annually from the northeastern states and central armed police forces (CAPFs). The institute will be equipped with state-of-the-art facilities such as advanced classrooms, simulation labs, IT data centres, and practical training areas, which will provide police personnel with modern skills," the release said.

It said the institute will provide high-level training and research facilities on internal and national security issues in the Northeast.

The institute will also have a dedicated academic research centre, which, in collaboration with academic institutions, will study key security challenges such as counter-terrorism measures, border management, human trafficking, drug trafficking, illegal migration, and arms smuggling.

"The CDTI being established in Agartala will not only enhance the capacity of police forces but also promote international cooperation to effectively address cross-border security challenges," it added. (PTI)

## Arunachal committed to support GST reforms for economic growth: Dy CM



**ITANAGAR, Dec 22:** Arunachal Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein stated that the government is committed to support GST reforms for fostering economic growth and ease of compliance for all stakeholders in the state.

Speaking at the 55th GST Council meeting at Jaisalmer in Rajasthan on Saturday, Mein, who also holds the finance portfolio, said that the state government remained dedicated to support reforms for simplifying GST, an official communique said here on Sunday.

"Arunachal Pradesh remains dedicated to supporting reforms that simplify the GST framework, ensure fairness, and cater to the unique needs of our state. These efforts align with our vision to promote ease of doing business and accelerate development," he said.

The meeting chaired by finance and corporate affairs minister Nirjala Sitharaman, covered a wide range of topics aimed at streamlining the GST framework and ensuring it is more inclusive and effective.

The discussion during the meeting centred on key areas aimed at enhancing the GST framework to drive economic growth and improve taxpayer support.

Proposed amendments to strengthen the legal structure of GST were highlighted, alongside efforts to simplify GST rate structures for goods and services, making compliance easier and fostering economic activities.

Enhancing the grievance redressal mechanism was also emphasised in the meeting to provide better support to taxpayers.

The agenda included expanding exemptions in critical sectors such as health and life insurance and research carried out for wider public good, advancing procedural rules for GST Appellate Tribunals (GSTAT) to streamline dispute resolution, and ensuring timely and fair settlements of IGST revenues to states for greater fiscal stability, the communique said.

Mein expressed support for the recommendations and updates presented during the meeting, including the minutes of the previous GST Council meeting. (PTI)

## 99% Tripura villages now have banking access: Tripura CM

**HT Correspondent AGARTALA, Dec 22:** Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha recently said that over 99% of villages in the state have banking access within a five-kilometer radius, and a total of 10 lakh 83 thousand bank accounts have already been opened under the PM-Jan Dhan Yojana.

Saha said this while addressing the North East Bankers Conclave in the presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Union minister of DoNER Jyotiraditya Scindia, Union MoS Sukanta Majumder, and Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu.

"It is a privilege to address this platform that underscores the pivotal role of financial institutions in catalyzing economic transformation. Over 99% of our villages in Tripura have banking access within a five-kilometer radius. A total of 10 lakh 83 thousand bank accounts have already been opened under the PM-Jan Dhan Yojana, with deposits of ₹ 617 crore. The average deposit in PM-Jan Dhan accounts is ₹ 5,702 per account, against the national average of ₹ 4,357. The state government is trying to achieve 100% financial inclusion through flagship schemes like PM Suraksha Bima Yojana, PM Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, Atal Yojana, Mudra Yojana, and Sukanya Samridhi Yojana," he said.

Saha added that, as per the National Strategy for Financial Inclu-



sion guidelines, every village in the state has been provided with a banking touchpoint or outlet.

"Every district and block has ATM facilities. The State Level Banking Committee of Tripura has received the Award of Excellence since the financial year 2021-22 under the Atal Pension Yojana scheme. In our state, several financial literacy centers are running with the objective of scaling up to cover all 58 blocks. A total of 2,800 business correspondents are playing an important role in increasing financial inclusion in the state by facilitating banking services at very low costs. Banks have made commendable efforts in priority sectors by lending to agriculture loans and MSME credits, which have seen notable growth," said Saha.

He also mentioned that all banks and micro-financial institutions are participating in providing Mudra loans to unemployed youths in the state.

"Credit-Deposit Ratio is the most important criterion for the economic development of the state. The state government has set a target under Lakshya 2047 to increase the CD ratio to 80%," he added.

Earlier in the day, Saha attended the 72nd Plenary Session of the North Eastern Council and the North East Space Application Centre Society meeting chaired by Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Union minister of DoNER Jyotiraditya Scindia, and Union MoS Sukanta Majumder. In the meeting, chief ministers and Governors of all the northeastern states were present.

## Mizoram govt collects over ₹ 8 cr from stamp, land registration fees

**AIZAWL, Dec 22:** The Mizoram government has mopped up revenue of over ₹ 8 crore from stamp duties and land registration fees in the first eight months of the current fiscal, an official said.

During a meeting chaired by Chief Minister Lalduhoma on Thursday to review the initiatives of Land Revenue and Settlement and Food, Civil Supplies and Consumers Affairs (FCS&CA) departments, revenue secretary Vanlalawmia said that a total of ₹ 8.58 crore was collected from stamp duties and land registration fees till November in the current fis-



cal. In February, the state assembly passed the

Indian Stamp (Mizoram Amendment) Bill, 2024, which seeks to hike stamp duty from 1 per cent to 3 per cent of the property.

The stamp duty is levied for the purchase of land or house plots, bank mortgages and gifts, according to land revenue and settlement minister B Lalchhanzova.

Vanlalawmia said the government is also exploring the feasibility of setting up a revenue court in the state.

Apart from the Aizawl Municipal Corporation (AMC) area, an online tax payment system will be introduced in all the districts from

the next fiscal, he said.

The online tax payment system was introduced in the AMC area in 2022.

According to the senior official, the revenue department is preparing a Record of Rights (RoR), a legal document containing all necessary information about a land parcel, including ownership, to substitute the Land Settlement Certificate (LSC).

He said that 3,59,331 RoRs have been computerised and 1,155 digitally signed property cards, as well as 94,154 land parcel identification numbers, have been issued so far. (PTI)

## Arunachal's double drama: Political triumphs and trafficking turmoil in 2024

Protests against the proposed 12,500 MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) gained momentum

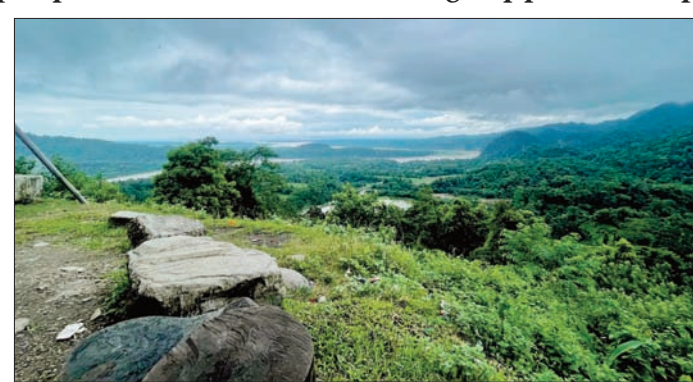
**ITANAGAR, Dec 22:** Arunachal Pradesh's political landscape underwent a major shift in 2024 as the BJP secured a third consecutive term, winning 46 out of 60 assembly seats in the simultaneous Lok Sabha and state elections. In addition to political developments, the state faced a dark chapter with disturbing revelations of widespread sex trafficking involving minors.

The victory included 10 uncontested wins, attributed to the party's focus on development under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. Among its allies, the NPP retained five assembly seats, the NCP won three, and the People's Party of Arunachal (PPA) claimed two. Three independents were also elected.

The Congress suffered a devastating blow, winning just one of the 19 seats it contested.

While Chief Minister Pema Khandu credited the BJP's success to development initiatives under the NDA government, Congress state president Nabam Tuki acknowledged the defeat, saying the party will continue to fight for the rights of the people.

In the Lok Sabha elections, the



BJP secured both parliamentary

seats. Besides politics, the state faced a dark chapter in 2024 with revelations of widespread sex trafficking involving minors. A major case surfaced in August when survivors bravely came forward to expose the exploitation. Police arrested nine people who allegedly operated the racket for years.

The Arunachal Pradesh State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (APSCPCR) intervened, recommending stringent action, including dismissing three government employees, among them a police officer, for their involvement.

Key suspects, Chaya Dulom, a health department worker, and her husband David Dulom, a water resources department surveyor, were accused of coercing young girls into the sex trade.

In the same month, an interstate trafficking ring was busted at Ziro in Lower Subansiri district, rescuing four victims, including two minors.

In May, police uncovered another trafficking network involving five minor girls from Dhemajai, Assam. This led to the arrest of 22 people, including traffickers and pimps.

## Joint operation leads to arms and ammunitions recovery in Manipur



**HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Dec 22:** The Indian Army, Assam Rifles, in coordination with Manipur Police and other security forces, recovered 25 weapons, ammunition and other war-like stores from the hill and valley regions in the districts of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi and Bishnupur districts of Manipur on Sunday.

Acting on specific information regarding presence of arms and ammunition in Nepali Khutti, Laimaton Thangbuh village in Kangpokpi district, Assam Rifles and Manipur Police recovered one .303 Sniper (Modified), one .22 Rifle, two Single Barrel Rifle, one 9mm Pistol, one IED, 100 gm commercial explosive, two Tube Launchers, and other war-like stores on Dec 19.

On 18-19 Dec 2024, one Machine Gun, two INSAS Rifles, two Self-Loading Rifles, one .32 Pistol, one 2-inch Mortar, one 12-bore Single Barrel Gun, one Heavy Calibre Launcher and two Pompi Guns, ammunition and war like stores from the fringe areas of Kangpokpi and Imphal East districts, by Indian Army and Manipur

Police.

In Churachandpur district, Indian Army and Manipur Police established a Joint Mobile Vehicle Check Post established in the Torbung Bazar on Dec 20 and apprehended a suspected miscreant who was fleeing with an unregistered .32 mm pistol.

On Dec 21 in general area Wathalambi Indian Army, Assam Rifles and Manipur Police recovered two 7.62mm modified sniper rifles, one 7.62mm SLR rifle, two single-barrel rifles, one 51mm mortar, and one modified grenade launcher, four IEDs, and grenades by Army, Assam Rifles and Manipur Police also apprehended two individuals and recovered a Carbine Machine Gun in another operation.

The recovered items have been handed over to Manipur Police. The successful recovery of these warlike stores highlights the seamless cooperation between the Indian Army, Assam Rifles and other law enforcement agencies, demonstrating their commitment to ensuring the security and safety of the region.

## TPCC to organise Ambedkar Samman March on Dec 24: Sudip Roy Barman

**AGARTALA, Dec 22:** The Tripura Pradesh Congress Committee (TPCC) will hold a 'Baba Saheb Ambedkar Samman March' on December 24 in protest against Union Home Minister Amit Shah's statement in Parliament on Ambedkar, a senior party leader on Sunday. Congress MLA Sudip Roy Barman told a press conference here that the party will organise the march in all district headquarters to condemn the remark of Shah on Ambedkar.

"We will organise the march in all district headquarters on December 24 to condemn the remark and also to demand an unconditional apology from the Union Home Minister for his remark. Party leaders and workers will join the march and garland the statue of the main architect of our constitution", he said.

"The Union Home minister's remark on Baba Saheb Ambedkar in Parliament is not a slip of the tongue as they are trying to highlight. It is a calculative remark which exposes the party (BJP) mindset about the father of the constitution", Roy Barman said.

He claimed that Shah has not expressed any repentance for the remark on Baba Saheb Ambedkar, who is the main architect of the constitution.

Roy Barman alleged the BJP has wrongly dragged the Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi by lodging an FIR to downplay the real issue from the eyes of the people. (PTI)

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"We will organise the march in all district headquarters on December 24 to condemn the remark and also to demand an unconditional apology from the Union Home Minister for his remark. Party leaders and workers will join the march and garland the statue of the main architect of our constitution", he said.

"The Union Home minister's remark on Baba Saheb Ambedkar in Parliament is not a slip of the tongue as they are trying to highlight. It is a calculative remark which exposes the party (BJP) mindset about the father of the constitution", Roy Barman said.

He claimed that Shah has not expressed any repentance for the remark on Baba Saheb Ambedkar, who is the main architect of the constitution.

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## 'BJP MPs did not mention Indira herself voted to remove many provisions of 42<sup>nd</sup> Amendment'



**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his colleagues mounted a "furious attack" on Indira Gandhi for the 42nd Amendment but they did not mention that she, along with other Congress MPs, voted in favour of the 44th Amendment which removed a number of provisions introduced through the 42nd Amendment, Congress MP Jairam Ramesh said on Sunday.

Ramesh pointed out that the PM and his colleagues also did not mention the fact that many of the provisions of the 42nd Amendment have been retained ever since it was enacted almost half a century ago.

"During the discussion on the Constitution, the PM and his colleagues mounted a furious attack on Indira Gandhi for the 42nd Amendment that was passed by Parliament in December 1976," he said in a post on X.

"What they did not mention was that Indira Gandhi herself, along with other Congress MPs, then voted in favour of the 44th Amendment in December 1978, when Morarji Desai was PM," he said.

The words "socialist" and "secular" were inserted into the Preamble to the Constitution under the 42nd constitutional amendment moved by the Indira Gandhi government in 1976.

The amendment changed the description of India in the Preamble from a "sovereign, democratic republic" to a "sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic".

Ramesh said the 44th Amendment removed a number of provisions introduced

through the 42nd Amendment.

"The PM and his colleagues also did not mention the fact that many of the provisions of the 42nd Amendment have been retained ever since it was enacted almost half a century ago," the Congress leader said.

Ramesh pointed out that the provisions of the 42nd Amendment include the words 'socialist' and 'secular' in the Preamble that have been recently held by the Supreme Court to be part of the basic structure of the Constitution.

They include Article 39-A that provides for equal justice and free legal aid and Article 43-A that provides for participation of workers in management of industries, Ramesh said.

The provisions retained also include Article 48-A that provides for protection and safeguarding of forests and wildlife, he said. They also include Article 51-A that lists 11 fundamental duties of citizens and Articles 323-A and 323-B that provide for administrative and other tribunals, he said.

Inclusion of education, population planning, environment, and forests in the Seventh Schedule, i.e., the Concurrent list that gives responsibility to both the Union and state governments was also retained, Ramesh said.

The Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha held a two-day debate on the "Glorious Journey of 75 Years of the Constitution of India" earlier this month that saw acrimonious exchanges between the treasury and opposition benches. (PTI)

## Punjab civic polls: AAP wins Patiala, largest party in Ludhiana, Jalandhar



**CHANDIGARH, Dec 22:** Punjab's ruling party AAP won the municipal elections in Patiala and but fell short of a majority in the Ludhiana and Jalandhar municipal corporations even though it emerged as the largest parties in the two civic bodies.

In Amritsar and Phagwara, the Congress turned out to be the largest party as per municipal corporation results.

Elections to five municipal corporations (MC) -- Ludhiana, Jalandhar, Patiala, Amritsar and Phagwara -- and 44 municipal councils and nagar panchayats in Punjab took place on Saturday.

The AAP is set to elect its mayor in Patiala, which is the stronghold of former chief minister Amarinder Singh.

The ruling party won 43 out of the total 53 wards which went to the polls in Patiala in a resounding victory. The Congress and the BJP won four wards each and the Shiromani Akali Dal secured two wards.

In Ludhiana MC which has 95 wards, the AAP won 41 wards while the Congress secured 30 wards. The BJP won 19, Independents three and SAD two wards.

It was a setback for the AAP in Ludhiana as the wives of two of its sitting MLAs -- Ashok Prashar and Gurpreet Gogi -- lost the municipal corporation poll.

Senior Congress leader and former minister Bharat Bhushan Ashu's wife also lost in the Ludhiana civic body poll.

In Jalandhar, the AAP emerged as the largest party and won 38 wards out of total 85 wards while the Congress, the BJP, the BSP and Independents won 25, 19, one and two wards respectively.

In Phagwara and Amritsar, the Congress performed well and emerged the largest party in the municipal corporations. Out of total 85 wards in Amritsar MC, the Congress won 40 wards while the AAP secured 24 wards. The BJP registered victory in nine, SAD in 4 and Independents won 8 wards.

In Phagwara, though no political party was able to cross the half-way mark in the 50-ward corporation, the Congress emerged the largest party by securing victory in 22 wards. The AAP won 12 wards while the BJP won four wards, SAD ended up with three wards and the BSP won three wards.

On Saturday, AAP's Punjab president Aman Arora said that his party created history in the local body elections, securing over 50 per cent of the 977 wards of the municipal corporations and municipal councils and nagar panchayats. (PTI)

## Uddhav, Raj Thackeray come together for family wedding



**MUMBAI, Dec 22:** Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray and his cousin Raj Thackeray, who heads the MNS, came together at the wedding of the latter's nephew in Mumbai on Sunday.

The politically estranged cousins were seen standing together along with other relatives at the wedding of Yash Deshpande, the son of Raj Thackeray's elder sister Jaywanti Deshpande, who is close to Uddhav's wife Rashmi Thackeray.

Raj Thackeray and former Maharashtra CM Uddhav Thackeray were accompanied by their family members at the function held in Dadar.

Smita Thackeray, the former wife of Uddhav Thackeray's elder brother Jaidev Thackeray, was also

seen at the event.

Last week, Raj Thackeray attended the wedding of the son of Rashmi Thackeray's brother Shridhar Patankar.

But the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) chief had left before Uddhav Thackeray arrived.

Notably, the Shiv Sena (UBT) chief and his wife had been introduced to each other through Jaywanti Deshpande.

Raj Thackeray quit the Shiv Sena (then undivided) in 2005 and floated his own party the next year.

In the last month's polls to the 288-member Maharashtra assembly, the Shiv Sena (UBT), which is part of the opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), won 20 seats, while the MNS drew a blank. (PTI)

## 'BJP physically manhandled Gandhi'

# Simultaneous poll bills unlikely to be passed in Parliament: Digvijaya

**AGAR MALWA (MP), Dec 22:** Congress Rajya Sabha member Digvijaya Singh has said he is doubtful that the 'one nation, one election' bills will be passed in Parliament.

Talking to reporters in Madhya Pradesh's Agar Malwa district on Saturday night, Singh also denied the allegations against Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi of "pushing and shoving" BJP MPs on Parliament premises on Thursday.

The two 'one nation, one election' (ONOE) bills, including one requiring an amendment in the Constitution, lay down the mechanism to hold simultaneous elections and were introduced in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday after a fiery debate.

The Lok Sabha on Friday referred the two bills on simultaneous polls to a joint committee of Parliament (JPC).

To a question on the ONOE bills, Digvijaya Singh said, "The JPC has been constituted and I don't think that it will be passed."

On Thursday, an FIR was registered against Rahul Gandhi at Parliament Street police station following the BJP's



complaint, accusing him of physical assault and incitement after MPs Pratap Chandra Sarangi and Mukesh Rajput were injured.

The Congress has strongly rejected the claim, alleging that BJP MPs pushed Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge and "physically manhandled" Gandhi.

Asked about the accusations against Gandhi of "pushing and shoving" the BJP

MPs, Singh termed them as completely false. "This is absolutely wrong. There was pushing and shoving between BJP leaders," the former state chief minister claimed.

"One BJP MP fell on another. Both were injured. The one who fell said that Rahul Gandhi was standing in front of him. If he was standing in front, could he have pushed him?" he asked.

## CPI (M) politburo member's remarks on Rahul, Priyanka's poll victories spark row

**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Dec 22:** CPI (M) Politburo member A Vijayaraghavan's recent controversial remarks regarding the Lok Sabha victories of Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra from the Wayanad constituency have drawn sharp criticism from Congress and Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) leaders on Sunday.

Congress leaders accused the senior CPI (M) leader of making the comments to "please" the Sangh Parivar, while their United Democratic Front (UDF) ally, the IUML, alleged that he was attempting to provoke majority communalism in society.

During a party event in Wayanad on Saturday, Vijayaraghavan reportedly claimed that Rahul Gandhi secured victory in the high-range segment twice with the support of communal forces and that extremist elements were present at Priyanka Gandhi's campaign rallies.

AICC General Secretary K C Venugopal strongly criticised Vijayaraghavan, accusing him of using "communal" language that even the Sangh Parivar might hesitate to employ against Rahul Gandhi. Venugopal also questioned whether the CPI (M) shared the same opinion.

"How can someone holding the position of a Politburo member of the CPI (M) speak in

such a communal manner?" Venugopal asked. "This is part of a deal to please the BJP. This is not just a CPI (M) statement—it is a BJP quotation aimed at crucifying Rahul Gandhi," he alleged.

Leader of Opposition V D Saheesan echoed similar sentiments, charging the CPI (M) with pushing the same communal agenda propagated by the Sangh Parivar. "Post-Parliamentary elections, the CPI (M) is engaged in majority appeasement. This is an effort to gain favour with the Sangh Parivar and escape scrutiny from central agencies," Saheesan told reporters in Kochi.

He further alleged that only Vijayaraghavan would claim Priyanka Gandhi won the Wayanad Lok Sabha seat by over four lakh votes with the support of terrorists.

IUML leaders P K Kunhalikutty and K M Shaji also condemned Vijayaraghavan's statements, describing them as "cruel" and "baseless".

"Claiming that Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi's victories were due to minority communalism is an attempt to stoke majority communalism," Kunhalikutty said, adding, "This mirrors the BJP's political tactics across India. The CPI (M) is experimenting with the same approach in Kerala." (PTI)

## NC rules out joining BJP-led NDA

**SRINAGAR, Dec 22:** The National Conference on Sunday ruled out joining the BJP-led NDA and dismissed as baseless a media report in this regard. This news being peddled by certain so-called journalists is nothing but a blatant lie, driven by malicious intent to mislead the people of Jammu and Kashmir, National Conference chief spokesperson Tanvir Sadiq said.

He was reacting to a report published in a newspaper that claimed Jammu and Kashmir's ruling party might be preparing grounds for a return to the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in exchange for the Union Territory's statehood.

"It is disgraceful and irresponsible for anyone to spread such baseless rumours... Let me challenge the individual behind this fabrication: name the so-called 'top BJP leadership' that Omar Abdullah alleged to have met, or immediately retract

your claim and issue a public apology," he said in a post on X. Sadiq also said Abdullah's meeting with Union Home Minister Amit Shah in Delhi was held in full public view.

"For the record, his meeting with the home minister in North Block was in full view of the media. If this so-called journalist claims otherwise, let him substantiate his allegations with evidence or admit to his lies. We will not allow such deceitful tactics to go unchallenged," he said.

Sadiq also threatened legal action against the publication if the report was not withdrawn.

"If this fabricated story is not retracted immediately, accompanied by a public apology, we reserve the right to take legal action against those responsible for tarnishing our image and misleading the public. Let this be a warning: such dishonest journalism will not be tolerated," the National Conference spokesperson added. (PTI)

## Will SC conduct further inquiry, asks Surjewala after Pegasus spyware case verdict in US

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** Congress general secretary Randeep Surjewala on Sunday claimed that the Pegasus spyware case verdict in the US proved how 300 WhatsApp numbers of Indians were targeted and asked if the Supreme Court would now conduct a further inquiry in view of the judgment.

Surjewala shared a media report which said that, for the first time, a court in the US had held Israel's NSO Group liable for its intrusive spyware Pegasus.

"The Pegasus spyware case verdict proves how 300 WhatsApp numbers of Indians were targeted in the illegal spyware racket," Surjewala said in a post on X.

He said it was time for the Narendra Modi government to answer who the 300 names targeted were.

"Who are the two Union ministers? Who are the three opposition leaders? Who is the constitutional authority? Who are the journalists? Who are the business persons? What information was retrieved by the BJP government



and agencies? How was it used - misused and to what consequence?" the Congress leader asked.

He also questioned if appropriate criminal cases would now be lodged against the political executive or

officers in the present government and the company owning NSO. "Will the Supreme Court take note of the judgment of the US court in Meta v/s NSO? Will the Supreme Court proceed to make public the report of the Committee of Technical Experts on Pegasus Spyware, submitted to it in 2021-22?" Surjewala said.

Questioning if the Supreme Court would now conduct a further inquiry in view of the judgment affirming the targeting of 1,400 WhatsApp numbers, including 300 from India, he asked, "Will the Supreme Court now ask Meta to submit to itself the 300 names to meet the ends of justice in the Pegasus case?"

"Shouldn't Facebook (now Meta) now have responsibility to release the names of 300 Indians targeted by Pegasus, considering WhatsApp and Facebook have the biggest subscriber base in India and they have 'duty of care and disclosure' to its clients in India?" the Congress leader asked. (PTI)

## Democracy being 'murdered' by using its own tools: Yogendra Yadav

**LATUR, Dec 22:** Activist Yogendra Yadav on Sunday raised concerns over what he called "immense" challenge to democracy globally and said it is being "murdered" by its own tools.

He also targeted the media saying it no longer amplifies the voice of the common man.

Delivering a lecture on 'Challenges and the Future of Indian Democracy' in Maharashtra's Latur, Yadav said democracy can be saved through "street protests", "public movements" and "cultural battles".

He said the progressive intellectual wealth of nationalism, self-respect, and cultural traditions has been willingly handed over to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. "Those who did not shed a drop of

blood for the country's freedom are today parading as custodians of nationalism," he added.

Yadav, who was the national convener of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's foot march 'Bharat Jodo Yatra', said that "we may have lost the 'Save Democracy' match, but are confident of winning the series".

Expressing concerns over the "immense" challenges that democracy faces globally, he said, "Democracy is being murdered in broad daylight using its own tools."

Yadav was also honoured with the 'Adv Manoharrao Gonnare Memorial National Award', which recognises activists working at the national level.

He lamented the "collective inaction" to preserve democracy's

Notably, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat recently expressed concern over the resurgence of several temple-mosque disputes and said certain individuals, after the construction of Ayodhya Ram temple, seem to believe they can become leaders of Hindus by raking up such issues.

To a question on Bhagwat's statement, Digvijaya Singh said, "If we talk about such persons who wanted to become leaders by talking about Hindu-Muslim issues then the biggest proof in front of them is Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Why he doesn't make him (Modi) understand?"

Bhagwat is only delivering statements but "why he keeps silent when excesses are committed against Muslims," the Congress leader claimed.

To another question, Singh said such statements of Bhagwat are positive, but he should stop the organisations associated with Sangh.

"Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal are their organisations (associated with Sangh). Why doesn't he stop them?" the Congress leader asked. (PTI)

## Puvanchali debate: Kejriwal trying to create misunderstanding, alleges BJP



**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** The BJP on Sunday accused AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal of trying to create a misunderstanding by linking Puvanchali people with Rohingyas and Bangladeshis, and called on the natives of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh living in Delhi to give a befitting reply to his party in the upcoming assembly elections.

This comes a day after Kejriwal claimed BJP president J P Nadda called Puvanchali Rohingyas and Bangladeshis and "admitted" that their names were being deleted from the electoral rolls in Delhi ahead of the assembly polls due in February.

Addressing a press conference at the BJP headquarters here on Sunday, party leader and Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary said, "For the last several days, a big leader of Delhi has been repeatedly trying to create confusion. Delhi is facing problems related to water, drainage and road but the former chief minister is not saying anything about them."

"During the Covid pandemic, the then Delhi chief minister said that people from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh living in the city should return (to their homes). He didn't even provide any treatment facilities to them due to which they had

to return to Bihar and Uttar Pradesh," he said.

Today these people are trying to spread misunderstanding on the Puvanchali issue, Choudhary said, alluding to Kejriwal.

"Attempts are being made to link them (Puvanchali) with Rohingyas and Bangladeshis. Hence, I urge the people from Puvanchali to reply to those ruling Delhi in the 2025 assembly elections," he said.

The BJP leader also targeted Kejriwal for announcing an Ambedkar scholarship scheme to provide free foreign education to Delhi's Dalit students and asked him why he waited so long to introduce it.

He further said that Kejriwal making the announcement about the registration of beneficiaries for the Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojana instead of Chief Minister Atishi is an "insult to women".

Choudhary said India has been making continuous progress under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the people of Delhi know clearly who is working for their welfare and who is not.

"Members of the INDI alliance neither care about the development of Delhi nor the education and employment of its people," he charged. (PTI)



# Doorstep registration for women, elderly welfare schemes to begin on Monday: Kejriwal

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal announced that registration for the Delhi government scheme under which women will be provided a monthly assistance will begin on Monday. He also said registration for the Sanjeevani Yojana which will provide free treatment to people above 60 years of age will also begin along with it.

In its 2024-25 budget, the Delhi government had announced the Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojana scheme to provide ₹ 1,000 per month to all women aged above 18. However, Kejriwal recently announced that the amount would be raised to ₹ 2,100 if his party returns to power in the assembly elections, slated for February next year.

Reacting to the announcement made on Sunday, the Delhi unit of the BJP said Kejriwal was "selling false dreams" as the AAP had made similar promises ahead of the Lok Sabha polls in Delhi and assembly elections in Punjab but has not delivered them.

Addressing a press conference, Kejriwal said, "The registration for the scheme will start tomorrow, and women don't have to go anywhere for registration. Our volunteers will come to your home and complete the registration."

"There are many daughters



whose college education is interrupted after class 12 due to financial constraints. With this ₹ 2,100, they will be able to continue their studies and also help them pursue higher education," he added.

The beneficiaries will need to show their voter identity cards, and all eligible women voters in Delhi will receive the benefits, he said.

"You don't need to stand in any queues or waste your time. We will come to your doorstep. Across every area of Delhi, AAP has created thousands of teams. These teams will come to your home and will do registration of all the women of the house and give them a registration card (Kejriwal Kavach Card)," an official statement said.

Kejriwal also announced that

registration for the Sanjeevani Yojana will start on Monday, and elderly people will be registered at their homes by AAP volunteers.

Earlier, the AAP supremo announced that the Sanjeevani Yojana would be launched to provide free treatment to people aged above 60 years after his party returns to power in Delhi.

Delhi Chief Minister Atishi said on X, "I believe that around 35 to 40 lakh women may benefit from the 'Mahila Samman Yojana.' Similarly, I estimate that around 10 to 15 lakh senior citizens could benefit from the 'Sanjeevani Yojana.' This is a big step, and I encourage everyone to take full advantage of these schemes."

On Monday, Kejriwal, party leader Manish Sisodia, and CM

Atishi will go to different areas of Delhi and fill the registration forms of the people, the party statement added.

"The launch of the 'Kejriwal Kavach Card' is a guarantee of self-respect for every mother, sister, and daughter, care of the elderly, and a secure future for every family," Sisodia said in a post on X.

Our volunteers will go door-to-door to ensure that the benefits of these schemes reach every person, he added.

In the run for the upcoming Delhi elections, AAP is vying for a third consecutive term, having won 62 out of 70 seats in the last election.

The Delhi BJP hit out at the AAP, alleging that this was another attempt by the BJP to "cheat" the women in Delhi.

In a post on X, the party said, "Arvind Kejriwal is the biggest fraud in the world and his job is to sell false dreams! A case of fraud should be filed against him!"

"Before the elections in Punjab, he said that he will give 1000 rupees to women, but after the elections, he has not given even a single rupee till date. Then before the Lok Sabha elections in Delhi, he said he will give 1000 rupees, but has not given it till date," the BJP said. (PTI)

## Arrangements made for insect-free Maha Kumbh

**MAHAKUMBH NAGAR (UP), Dec 22:** The Uttar Pradesh health department has made special arrangements to provide an insect-free experience during the Maha Kumbh.

Officials on Sunday said an innovative system had been introduced that would deploy automatic mist blowers in the Maha Kumbh area.

These blowers are capable of eradicating mosquitoes and flies within 30 minutes of receiving a call. The system ensures a swift response and a hygienic environment for all attendees, they said.

Significant efforts are being made to maintain a clean and insect-free environment in the akharas and the expansive tent city, they added.

A total of 110 state-of-the-art mist blowers and 107 mini foggers are being deployed across the site.

These devices are expected to enhance the devotees' overall experience and ensure a healthy environment throughout the grand gathering, the officials said.

According to Dr VP Singh, nodal joint director (vector control) for the Maha Kumbh, insecticide spraying would be carried out across the entire venue to ensure hygiene.

To further enhance convenience, 62 pulse foggers have been procured, he said.

In addition, 78 special officers will be deployed to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the seers and the pilgrims.

Malaria inspectors will be stationed throughout the fairground to address any concern. These inspectors will visit each akhara, interact with the seers and promptly resolve issues related to mosquitoes and flies.

Dr Anand Kumar Singh, assistant nodal officer for vector control, said 78 special officers were being deployed as part of these efforts.

To ensure a smooth experience for the pilgrims, 45 malaria inspectors are planned for deployment, along with 28 assistant malaria inspectors who will look after the wellbeing of both the seers and the devotees.

Additionally, five district malaria officers will be stationed separately to address any challenge and maintain uninterrupted services.

The Maha Kumbh will commence on January 13 on the occasion of Paus Purnima and conclude on February 26 on Mahashivratri. (PTI)

## Tigress which strayed from Similipal Reserve spotted in West Bengal's Purulia

**KOLKATA/BHUBANESWAR, Dec 22:** Forest personnel are monitoring the movement of a tigress which strayed from Odisha's Similipal Reserve Forest and is currently in West Bengal's Purulia district, an official said on Sunday.

The three-year-old tigress brought from Maharashtra to Similipal Reserve Forest is fitted with a radio collar and is currently located in the Bandwan area of Purulia district, West Bengal's Chief Wildlife Warden Debal Roy told PTL.

It earlier crossed over to West Bengal from neighbouring Jharkhand and roamed around in Jhargram and Paschim Medinipur district, all parts of the forested 'Jangalmahal' belt.

Asked about reports that another tigress from Similipal which had escaped around the same time and roamed around the forested corridor of three neighbouring states has already headed back to her old habitat, Roy said "We don't have information about two tigresses escaping from Similipal and having strayed into West Bengal."

"Whether you call her Zeenat or Jamuna, we have information about one tigress leaving Similipal, entering Jharkhand and now hav-

ing crossed over to our state for the past three days. Our men are keeping a constant vigil on her movement," he said.

He said forest personnel from Odisha are also working with their Bengal counterparts in monitoring the movement of the big cat which has so far not shown any signs of aggression.

The tigress had covered not less than 50 km after straying from Similipal in Odisha but such behaviour is normal for tigers who wander several kilometres in search of a new territory, another forest official said.

"Probably the forest belt of neighbouring states, having similar habitat, became a corridor for her and she is trying to set up a new territory. We are at work to drive her away to Similipal through the same route or if she is captured, release her back into the reserve forest in Odisha. We are hopeful there is no man-animal conflict," the senior state forest official said.

"The prey base is low in the areas where it is presently located. So, we hope she turns back to the reserve since there is more prey there," he said.

Meanwhile, the authorities of the Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR)

## Mohali building collapse: Body of man found, death toll climbs to two

**CHANDIGARH, Dec 22:** The death toll in the Mohali building collapse climbed to two with the body of a 29-year-old man recovered from under the rubble on Sunday, even as a preliminary probe suggested that digging in an adjacent plot led to the incident.

The multi-storey building collapsed on Saturday evening in Sohana village of Punjab's Mohali district, with at least five people trapped under its rubble. Rescue efforts continued overnight to find possible survivors. Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Mohali, Damandeep Kaur said one male body was recovered during the ongoing rescue operation.

He was identified as Abhishek Dhanwal from Ambala.

Earlier in the day, Abhishek's father told reporters at the site that his son, who used to visit a gym in the building, was missing and his phone was not reachable.

Abhishek worked in the IT sector and used to live in a nearby area, his father said. Earlier, a 20-year-old woman died in the incident on Saturday evening. The woman hailing from Himachal Pradesh, died after she was pulled out of the debris of the building. She was rescued from the rubble in a critical condition and was rushed to a hospital, but she succumbed to injuries. Police have booked two building owners in the incident. Viraj S Tidke, officiating deputy commissioner, said on Sunday that, "A three-storey building



collapsed yesterday...the rescue operation continued overnight. So far, two bodies have been recovered."

The building also had a basement. Several excavators have been pressed into service as part of the rescue operation.

National Disaster Response Team (NDRF), Army, state rescue teams have been working since Saturday evening to address the crisis. Medical teams, along with an ambulance, have also been deployed at the site since Saturday evening.

As the operation continued at the site, required equipment and machinery have been made available to the rescuers, in addition to those brought by the NDRF and Army. Preliminary information suggests that the building, which also had a gym, collapsed due to digging in an adjacent plot.

Mohali Senior Superintendent of Police Deepak Pareek told reporters at the site on Sunday that as per pre-

liminary investigations the owner of the building, which collapsed, had a plot of land adjacent to it on which digging work to construct a basement was on.

"However, no permission was taken and no concerned agency was informed about the unauthorised digging," Pareek said.

Leader of Opposition in Punjab Assembly Partap Singh Bajwa slammed the Mohali district administration over the incident.

Bajwa, a senior Congress leader, who visited the site, told reporters that he has learnt that some structures have been built in the area in flagrant violation of rules.

"Accountability should be fixed in the matter. As head of district administration, personally, I hold the Deputy Commissioner responsible."

"...After a few months another building will collapse and this will continue, so accountability has to be fixed," Bajwa said. (PTI)

## Jewellery store salesman shot dead

**THANE, Dec 22:** A 25-year-old jewellery store salesman was killed after two unidentified persons fired at him and his employer in Shahapur in Maharashtra's Thane district, a police official said on Sunday.

The incident took place at 10:30pm on Saturday when deceased Dineshkumar Manaram Chaudhary, his employer and one more person had called it a day and were waiting outside Mahalaxmi Jewellers in Gothehar area, the official said.

"Two motorcycle-borne persons fired some rounds, which hit Chaudhary, who succumbed to his wounds some time later at a hospital in Thane. He passed away in the early hours of Sunday. They stole a bag Chaudhary was carrying."

## Punjab Police busts drugs smuggling module

**CHANDIGARH, Dec 22:** The Punjab Police have busted a trans-border narco-smuggling module with the arrest of two individuals and the recovery of 10 kg of heroin in Amritsar district, an official said on Sunday.

Director General of Police Gaurav Yadav stated that the arrested individuals were in contact with Pakistan-based smugglers.

"In a major breakthrough, Amritsar Commissionerate Police busts trans-border narco-smuggling module and apprehends two persons--Sukhdev Singh & Avtar Singh -- linked to #Pak-based smugglers and recovers 10 Kg Heroin," Yadav said in a post on X.

"Preliminary investigations reveal that the arrested individuals were in contact with Pakistan-based smugglers and in 2015, two Pakistan nationals crossed the border with 19.5 kg of heroin, and they, along with the arrested individuals, were apprehended with 2.5 kg of heroin, ₹ 65 lakh in drug money, one pistol, and one rifle," he said. (PTI)

## 10 arrested for running illegal betting syndicate on Big Bash League matches

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** Delhi Police has arrested 10 people for operating an illegal betting syndicate on the ongoing Big Bash T20 League in Australia, an official said on Sunday.

The syndicate was operating from an apartment in Karol Bagh, they said.

The accused were identified as Raju Vaishnav, Jagrat Saihni, Parves Kumar -- all residents of Delhi -- along with Yogesh Taneja, Tarun Khanna, Harvinder Deol from Agra in Uttar Pradesh and Manish Jain, Kushal and Gautam Das, all natives of Rajasthan, they added.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime) Sanjay Kumar Sain said they received information about the syndicate led by Raju and his associates operating from Joshi Road in Karol Bagh.

Based on a tip-off, a raid was conducted around 11.30 am on Saturday at a flat on Joshi Road, he

said. The flat had three bedrooms and 10 people, including Raju, and they were found placing bets on laptops and mobile phones during a live match, he added.

Preliminary investigation revealed that the group was betting the seventh T20 match of the Big Bash League 2024-25 between Hobart Hurricanes and Perth Scorchers, which started at 10.30 am, police said.

During interrogation they revealed that the syndicate operated both online and offline. For online betting, Jagrat had purchased a master ID from a betting website, the officer said.

The DCP said said that the group accepted offline bets by recording them on notepads.

He said that the flat was rented by Raju in his name for ₹ 45,000 per month. (PTI)

## 175 people identified in Delhi in verification drive against illegal Bangladeshis

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** Delhi Police claimed to have identified 175 people during their verification drive against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in the national capital, officials said on Sunday.

The 12-hour verification drive began at 6 pm on Saturday in outer Delhi area, the officials said.

"Police have intensified their efforts to identify and detain individuals residing without valid documentation. As part of the ongoing operations, 175 individuals have been identified as suspected illegal Bangladeshi immigrants during extensive verification drives in outer Delhi," a senior police officer said.

The city police launched a drive for the identification of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants residing in Delhi on December 11, a day after the LG Secretariat ordered a crackdown on such persons.

"Concerned about the growing number of undocumented immigrants, the Outer District Police has launched a series of targeted operations

and joint checks in various areas under its jurisdiction," the police officer said.

He further added that special teams, including personnel from local police stations, district foreigner cells, and specialised units, have been deployed to conduct door-to-door checks and gather intelligence on suspected illegal immigrants. Police said that the operations involved thorough scrutiny of documents and detailed interrogations of the identified individuals.

"Verification efforts extended beyond the district, with teams dispatched to the native places of these individuals in coordination with local police in their respective areas to authenticate their identities," he added.

Police said that the verification drives are part of a broader initiative to identify and repatriate individuals living in the national capital without valid legal documents.

On December 13, the Delhi Police said they had apprehended two illegal Bangladeshi immi-

grants and identified over 1,000 others.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (Southeast) Ravi Kumar Singh had said that the teams had identified more than 1,000 people during their drive and apprehended two men from Kalindi Kunj and Hazrat Nizamuddin areas.

The police said that these individuals were staying in the national capital without any valid documentation.

Both the accused, identified as Abdul Ahad (22) and Mohammad Azizul (32), were apprehended by the Hazrat Nizamuddin Police Station team on December 10 and 12, respectively.

During interrogation, Ahad, hailing from Bangladesh's Sylhet, revealed that he had entered Delhi on December 6 with the help of a Bangladeshi agent in search of work.

Azizul, a resident of Dhaka, had admitted to crossing the Benapole border in 2004 through West Bengal and had been living in India ever since. (PTI)

## West Bengal, Bihar most impacted by arsenic contamination: Centre tells NGT

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** West Bengal and Bihar are impacted the most by arsenic contamination of groundwater, the Centre has informed the National Green Tribunal (NGT).

The tribunal is hearing the issue of rice being susceptible to arsenic contamination because it absorbs more of the toxic semi-metallic element from water and soil. Earlier, it sought a reply from the Centre on it.

In an order dated December 16, a bench of NGT Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava and expert member A Senthil Vel noted that the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare had filed its reply after seeking inputs from the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). "States of West Bengal and Bihar are reported to be most affected by arsenic contamination of groundwater irrigation by contaminated groundwater is the major route for arsenic entry into agricultural soil which ultimately leads to its entry into the food chain," the Centre said in its reply.

There can be a "significant build-up" of the toxic element in rice as it is a water-intensive crop, the reply stated. "Transport of arsenic-contaminated rice grain grown in arsenic-endemic areas to non-endemic sites and consequent dietary intakes will also spread arsenic exposure in the non-endemic population," it noted.

The tribunal noted that, according to the general, the distribution of arsenic content in plant parts primarily followed the order of roots, stems and leaves.

"The edible parts of leafy (spinach, fenugreek etc.) and underground vegetables (beet, radish etc.) contained much higher arsenic as compared to vegetables with fruit as edible part (brinjal, beans, ladies' finger, tomato etc.). In general, fruit/grain of plants showed less accumulation of arsenic compared to root, stem and leaf," it noted.

The reply also suggested various remedial measures to minimise the effect of arsenic in the soil-plant system. These include replacing water-intensive rice varieties with other less water-intensive crops and relatively arsenic-tolerant rice varieties, growing non-edible and leguminous crops during the dry season in the hotspot areas, application of biochar (modified charcoal produced from burning biomass sources), and increased use of green manures and application of silicate fertilizers.

The reply also suggested other remedial measures, such as storing arsenic-contaminated groundwater in ponds and subsequent dilution with rainwater along with conjunctive use of ground and surface water to dilute the arsenic content. (PTI)

## Jharkhand registers 0.05 pc forest growth between 2021 and 2023: Report

**RANCHI, Dec 22:** Jharkhand has seen a modest increase of 44.64 sq km in its forest cover between 2021 and 2023, representing just a 0.05 per cent growth of its total 79,716 sq km area, according to the India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2023, released by the Centre.

Union Minister for Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, Bhupendra Yadav, launched the report at the Forest Research Institute in Dehradun on Saturday.

The report highlights a nationwide increase of 1,445 sq km in total forest and tree cover since 2021.

In Jharkhand, the forest cover grew from 23,721.14 sq km in 2021 to 23,765.78 sq km in 2023,



now covering 29.81 per cent of the state's total geographical area.

When compared to neighbouring states, Jharkhand's growth is modest. West Bengal showed only a 0.46 sq km increase, while

Chhattisgarh (95.15 sq km), Odisha (277.61 sq km), and Bihar (151.66 sq km) saw better progress.

However, the report indicates some positive developments in

Jharkhand, with very dense forest (VDF) areas increasing by 34.3 sq km. On the other hand, moderately dense forest (MDF) areas have decreased by 47.92 sq km. Open forest areas saw a rise of 58.26 sq km since 2021.

The total forest cover in Jharkhand now stands at 23,765.78 sq km, which includes 2,635.35 sq km of very dense forest, 9,640.99 sq km of moderately dense forest, and 11,489.44 sq km of open forest, the report said.

Nationally, the country's forest and tree cover has reached 827,357 sq km, which is 25.17 per cent of the total geographical area. This includes 715,343 sq km (21.76 per cent) of forest cover and 112,014 sq km (3.41 per cent) of tree cover, it said. (PTI)



# Allu Arjun urges fans to express feelings responsibly both online, offline

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** Telugu cinema star Allu Arjun on Sunday appealed to his fans to not resort to any kind of abusive language or behaviour, both online and offline, amid fresh allegations against him in the Sandhya Theatre stampede case.

A 35-year-old woman died and her eight-year-old son was injured on December 4 during a stampede-like situation at the cinema hall in Hyderabad when thousands of fans jostled to have a glimpse of the actor at the premiere of his recent release "Pushpa 2: The Rule".

Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy on Saturday alleged that Arjun visited the theatre during the film's screening despite police permission being denied, a charge that the actor denied.

On Sunday, Arjun shared a word of caution for his fans on social media.

"I appeal to all my fans to express their feelings responsibly, as always and not resort to any kind of abusive language or behaviour both online and offline," he said in a statement posted on X.

"Misrepresenting as my fans with fake IDs and fake profiles, if someone indulges in abusive posts, strong action will be taken against them. I request the fans not to engage with such posts," the actor further said in the post.

Hours after Reddy slammed Arjun, the National Award winner refuted the allegations saying, it was not true, and in fact, the police were clearing the way for him and he reached the venue under their directions.

He, without referring to anyone, also dismissed the accusations that he held a roadshow waving to the crowd.

The eight-year-old boy, who is undergoing treat-

ment at a private super-specialty hospital in Hyderabad after getting injured in the stampede, is maintaining his vital parameters well on his own without any external support of oxygen or intropes, as reported on Saturday.

Following the incident on December 4, the city police registered a case against Arjun, his security team, and the theatre management under different sections of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) at the Chikkadpally police station based on the complaint lodged by the deceased woman's family.

The actor was arrested by the city police in connection with the death of the woman on December 13. The Telangana High Court granted him a four-week interim bail on the same day and Arjun was released from a prison here on December 14 morning. (PTI)



## Diljit Dosanjh denies blocking AP Dhillon on social media

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** Punjabi music star Diljit Dosanjh says he can have issues with the government but not with fellow artists as he denied AP Dhillon's allegations that he had blocked the singer on social media.

His comments come after Dhillon urged the "Hass Hass" singer to unblock him on social media at his Chandigarh show on Saturday during which he addressed Dosanjh's "best of luck" wish at his previous concert. Dosanjh, whose singing credits also include "GOAT" and "5 Taara", shared a screenshot of Dhillon's profile on his Instagram Story on Saturday night, saying he never blocked the singer.

"I never blocked you. My issues can be with the government but not with artists," read the caption of his post.

According to the Dosanjh's Story, he hasn't blocked Dhillon, but he also doesn't follow him on Instagram.

At his Indore concert, held on December 8, Dosanjh sent his best wishes to Dhillon and Punjabi singer Karan Aujla.

"Two of my brothers, Karan Aujla and AP Dhillon, have started their tours, best of luck to them, too," he had said.

In his response to Dosanjh, Dhillon on Saturday said: "I just want to say one small thing, brother. First unblock me on Instagram and then talk to me. I don't want to talk about what marketing is happening but first unblock me. I've been working for three years. Have you ever seen me in any controversy?" Dhillon, known for songs such as "Brown Munde", "Insane" and "Summer High", is currently in India for his "The Brownprint" tour. The Canada-based singer rose to fame after his song became a viral track back in 2020. (PTI)



## Filmmaker Srijit Mukherjee not to make any more series on Ray's fictional character 'Feluda'

**KOLKATA, Dec 22:** Bengali filmmaker Srijit Mukherjee said his OTT series on Satyajit Ray's fictional detective 'Feluda' will be his final work on the character. As already announced, 'Bhuswargo Bhoyonkawr', where the ace sleuth solves a murder mystery in Kashmir, will be my last Feluda," Mukherjee told PTI on Saturday.

"It has been an incredible journey of five years which started with 'Chinnomawstar Obhishap' in 2019 as the caravan rolled across Kathmandu and Darjeeling before stopping at Kashmir," he announced in a social media post on December 19. The director told PTI, "Since I did not have the permission to adapt any fictional work on Feluda for the big screen, I feel the OTT budget will not permit me to shoot on the scale I want, taking viewers along with Feluda across the country to solve inter-state crimes and also faithfully recreate the period look of the 70s-80s in any web series."

At a special screening of 'Feludar Goyendagiri: Bhuswargo Bhoyonkawr' at a single screen on Thursday night before its streaming on OTT, Mukherjee told lead actor Tota Roy Choudhury, "As I said, without getting the rights to adapt Feluda works for the big screen, it will not be possible for us from the financial point of view to take up another Feluda work for the OTT platform with the background, locales, and settings to my satisfaction. (PTI)

**Omar Abdullah underlines importance of using south Indian cinema to promote J-K's natural beauty**

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** Chief Minister Omar Abdullah has stressed the importance of using south Indian cinema to promote the natural beauty of Jammu and Kashmir as part of a broader strategy to boost tourism in the region.

The chief minister also expressed a desire to engage more with filmmakers from the south Indian industry, which he believes has been overlooked so far.

"The places we should be focusing on where the money is there, the budgets are big are actually the south Indian film industry. That, for reasons of arrogance or ignorance, we have consciously ignored up until now. So they are the ones with movie budgets of ₹ 300-400 crore," Abdullah told PTI during a recent interview.

The chief minister observed the tourism sector would benefit greatly if films depicted the scenic beauty of Jammu and Kashmir, as he highlighted the historical connection with Bollywood that, he said, had played an important role in establishing the valley as a favourite honeymoon destination for generations of Indians.

This strategy, according to Abdullah, would serve a dual purpose -- it would not only display the scenic beauty of the region in south Indian films but also promote Kashmir as an attractive travel destination among tourists from south India who had not traditionally viewed the valley as a vacation spot.

While there is no precise estimate of the south Indian film industry's size, a 2022 report by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) valued it at approximately ₹ 74,900 crore.

The report, titled "Regional is the New National - Way Forward for the South India Media and Entertainment Industry", showed that the south Indian film industry accounted for 35 per cent of the total media and entertainment market share, maintaining its relevance despite rapid technological advancements.

According to media consultancy firm Omax Media, Tollywood - the Telugu-language film industry - brought in around USD 212 million last year, surpassing Bollywood's earnings of USD 197 million. Abdullah mentioned the possibilities of marketing Jammu and Kashmir as a prime filming location for films and video albums. These have more time for shoot preparation but can easily boast high budgets. (PTI)

## You don't have to win awards to get your basic right as an artist: Kani Kusruiti

**MUMBAI, Dec 22:** Actor Kani Kusruiti, who stars in two of this year's most acclaimed movies "All We Imagine As Light" and "Girls Will Be Girls", says she has had a more professional work experience up north than in her native state Kerala.

Kusruiti has been straddling both Malayalam and Hindi language industries for some time now. She was named the best actress at the Kerala State Film Awards for the 2020 film "Biriyaani". In the Hindi belt, the actor is known for her work in Hindi web series "Maharani" and "Poacher".

While the state honour brought her respect, Kusruiti said recognition should not come to an artiste only after they win awards.

"When I won the Kerala state award in 2020 that had an impact... Kerala still is struggling with having proper contracts and a working culture of professionalism. We still lack a lot in these areas.

"Winning that award has given me a certain kind of respect, but that should be given otherwise too to any artist. You don't have to win an award to get your basic human right or basic right as an artist," she told PTI in an interview.

The actor, also known for Malayalam films "Kerala Cafe" and "Cocktail" and Hindi web series "Ok Computer" and "Killer Soup", said she always had an "extremely professional experience" in Mumbai.

"I was treated right, like they're treating mostly everyone equally at

least compared to the Malayalam industry. I felt here they are more professional in how they approach you. So, that's the difference I noticed back then," she added.

While work opportunities across various industries frequently come up, Kusruiti said she isn't someone who likes to work continuously.

"I ideally want to take a break, that's how I am. I'm like, 'I have to take a break and then I have to go do a workshop and then maybe I can (act).'" "But sometimes you don't have the privilege. This is your bread and butter and you have to continue practising. But ideally for me, one or two films in two years, then I take a break and then do it (work). That's how I like it," she said.

In "Girls Will Be Girls", directed by Shuchi Talati, Kusruiti plays Anila, a woman whose unfulfilled coming-of-age experience is interlinked with the rebellious awakening of her 16-year-old daughter Mira, played by Preeti Panigrahi.

The Hindi film, set against the backdrop of the 1990s Dehradun, is streaming on Prime Video. It also stars Kesav Binoy Kiron and Jitin Gulati.

It's a privilege to be an actor, added Kusruiti.

"Even the people that you don't understand in life, you get to understand them (through acting). How they think, what is right and wrong, do they have regrets, do they have guilt, how they love, emote and think. You can be in someone's body and mind, that's a privilege

when you play people who you already know, so that kind of surprise is less," she said.

The actor said she initially had a tough time understanding her character. "I was struggling to understand this person because I haven't come across such a mother. Then I talked to Shuchi. I felt she is a great director, she was open minded. "She paid attention to all my doubts and questions, for some she had answers, for some she and I discovered the answers while we were talking." Panigrahi and Kiron, the two emerging talents of "Girls Will Be Girls", were all praise for the film's team.

"What took me by surprise was self acceptance because as a woman, I have grown up with a lot of insecurities, maybe around how I look. But in the film, I have done things which I never did even in private. It gave me the space to be vulnerable... It was a joy to have this as my first film," Panigrahi said.

There's a lot of unlearning that happens when an upcoming actor steps on their first film set, said Kiron.

"Shuchi ma'am trusted me with the character so much that she was ready to make changes in what she had written. To get that trust was a big confidence booster for me," he added.

"Girls Will Be Girls" is an Indo-French co-production, a collaboration of Pushing Buttons Studios, Blink Digital, Crawling Angel Films and Dolce Vita Films. (PTI)





# Atletico Madrid stun Barcelona in stoppage time to snatch La Liga lead



**MADRID, Dec 22:** Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone ran down the touchline in joy while Barcelona players sunk to the turf in dismay. Super sub Alexander Sorloth struck again deep in stoppage time to hand Atletico a 2-1 comeback win at Barcelona and ensure Atletico will spend La Liga's short winter break on top of the table.

Atletico's 12th straight win in

all competitions lifted it three points above Barcelona.

Barcelona has only two wins in its last nine games and could find itself third on Sunday if Real Madrid beats Sevilla.

Simeone, coaching Atletico since 2011, celebrated winning at Barcelona for the first time.

"We finally did it," Atletico goalkeeper Jan Oblak said. "We are playing well, we started poorly

but we knew our chances would come. And in the last minute Sorloth came through. Thanks to him we finally won here. He is the striker we needed." It was a much more impressive performance from Barcelona, which dominated for long periods and took a deserved lead in the 30th minute.

Pedri started and ended the move, playing a one-two with Gavi, and firing an angled shot

into the bottom right corner.

Raphinha almost doubled Barcelona's lead in stunning fashion in the 57th when he lobbed the goalkeeper but the ball came off the crossbar. Robert Lewandowski got to the rebound but sent it onto the head of Axel Witsel, who needed treatment.

Barcelona was made to rue its missed opportunities when Atletico levelled just three min-

utes later, partly thanks to a defensive blunder.

Barcelona midfielder Marc Casadó tried to clear Julián Álvarez's cross but passed it straight to Rodrigo De Paul, who fired into the bottom right corner. Casadó put his hands to his head and dropped to his knees in dismay. Worse was to come for Barcelona as, in the sixth minute of stoppage time, Nahuel Molina made a fantastic run to latch onto a through ball and cross in for Sorloth to fire into the back of the net. It was Sorloth's eighth goal of the season, five of them after he's come off the bench.

Athletic Bilbao came from behind to beat Osasuna 2-1 and extend its unbeaten run to 14 matches and remain just five points behind Atletico.

Gorka Guruzeta and Alex Berenguer sealed the comeback win for fourth-placed Bilbao after Lucas Torro gave Osasuna a 25th-minute lead at El Sadar.

Guruzeta headed Bilbao level in the 31st and Berenguer struck the winner in the 74th.

Mallorca won at Getafe 1-0 and moved up to fifth. Cyle Larin's 53rd-minute penalty settled the game at Estadio Coliseum to move Mallorca to within 11 points of the top. The Canada international scored for the third time in his last two games after being brought down in the area by Juan Berrocal.

From the spot, Larin fired low and left to beat Getafe goalkeeper David Soria. (AP)

## Man City crisis deepens after another loss and Arsenal closes gap on Liverpool

**MANCHESTER, Dec 22:** Manchester City's stunning slump deepened after losing to Aston Villa 2-1 in the Premier League.

Goals from Jhon Duran and Morgan Rogers at Villa Park consigned the four-time defending champion to a ninth defeat in 12 games in a season that is unraveling. Pep Guardiola's team has won just once during that run.

"We don't have a defense for the results. They are not good," Guardiola said.

Third-placed Arsenal closed the gap on league leader Liverpool to three points with a 5-1 win at Crystal Palace, but has played two games more.

City dropped to sixth in the standings, nine points below Liverpool, and has played two games more.

"It's about what I can do with my people to get the results back and continue," Guardiola said. "If there is a moment that I cannot overthink, it is right now. Try to be simple, stick to my principles and give certainty to the team."

After winning six titles in seven years and an unprecedented four in a row, City's remarkable fall shows little sign of stopping. Guardiola admitted last week he had not been good enough to turn his team's form around.

City was without a win in any of its last eight away games in all competitions. While it looks unlikely to win a fifth straight title, a place in the top four and Champions League qualification could also be in jeopardy after fourth-placed Nottingham Forest won at Brentford 2-0 to move four points clear of City.

Only once under Guardiola has City managed to win the title when losing six times in the league. That was in 2021, when it lost two of its last three games, having already been confirmed as the champion.

City lost nine times when Liverpool won the title in 2020, but its sixth defeat didn't come until February. Guardiola also lost six times in his first season in English

soccer in 2016-17 and City finished third.

The latest defeat could have been even more emphatic from a dominant Villa, which moved up to fifth. Duran scored his sixth goal in as many starts in the 16th minute from Rogers' assist. Duran had a goal disallowed for offside in the second half and Rogers hit the post before doubling Villa's lead in the 65th.

Phil Foden pulled a goal back for City in stoppage time, but it wasn't enough to spark a late comeback.

"We have to stay positive, even though it's difficult, and we have to keep working hard," City striker Erling Haaland said.

It's five goals in a week for Gabriel Jesus against Crystal Palace. After scoring a hat trick in Arsenal's 3-2 comeback win against Palace in the English League Cup quarterfinals on Wednesday, the Brazil striker hit another two goals when the teams met again on Saturday.

Going into Wednesday's game, Jesus had only scored once for Arsenal since the end of January.

Jesus struck twice in a frantic start at Selhurst Park. He opened the scoring in the sixth, with Ismaila Sarr leveling five minutes later. Jesus restored Arsenal's lead in the 14th and was denied back-to-back hat tricks when hitting the post and then having another close range effort saved by Palace goalkeeper Dean Henderson.

Kai Havertz, Gabriel Martinelli and Declan Rice also scored for Arsenal. If City's demise is a surprise story of the season, so is Forest's rise.

After battling relegation for much of last term, Forest is in contention to qualify for the Champions League and possibly more. Facing a Brentford team that was unbeaten at home, goals from Ola Aina and Anthony Elanga secured another statement win on the road for Nuno Espirito Santo's side, having already won at Anfield and Old Trafford this year. (AP)

## Senior National C'ships: Defending champion Kharb among top six women's singles seeds to bow out

**BENGALURU, Dec 22:** Defending champion Anmol Kharb along with five other seeded women's singles players bowed out of the Senior National Badminton Championships after suffering defeats at the pre-quarterfinals here on Sunday. Anmol, who recently reached the finals of the Guwahati Masters Super 100 tournament, lost 12-21 15-21 to 12th seed Shriyanshi Valishetty, while 16th seed Tasnim Mir packed-off top seed Aakarshi Kashyap 21-19, 21-17 in an

other match.

On the other courts, 15th seed Shreya Lele continued her impressive run as she came from a game down to beat former champion and second seed Anupama Upadhyaya 13-21, 21-18, 21-14 in a thrilling match.

Devika Sihag, seeded 13th, kept her composure to beat fourth seed and last edition runners-up Tanvi Sharma 21-19, 21-18, while unseeded Rujula Ramu accounted for fifth seed Mansi Singh 21-

19, 20-22, 21-13 and 14th seed Sakshi Phogat ended the campaign of sixth seed Aditya Rao 21-18, 21-19.

Seventh seed Isharani Baruah, who got the better of the promising Rakshitha Sree S 23-21, 21-19 is now the highest seed left among the last eight and will take on Tasnim Mir in the quarter-finals.

Former world junior championships bronze medalist and second seed Ayush Shetty was the highest ranked men's singles player to be knocked out of the

championships as he went down 15-21, 21-11, 5-21 against 14th seed Alap Mishra. National Games gold medallist M Tharun was no match to former champion Mithun Manjunath's guile as he went down 18-21, 12-21 in another match. Upsets were galore in the doubles events as well with women's doubles top seeds Rutaparna and Swetaparna Panda going down 16-21, 16-21 to junior national champions Tanoo Chandra and Lalrempuii. (PTI)

## Tiger Woods and son Charlie share the lead at PNC Championship

**ORLANDO, Dec 22:** Tiger Woods and 15-year-old son Charlie ran off five straight birdies on the back nine for a 13-under 59 in the scramble format, giving them a share of the lead in the PNC Championship in Woods' first competition since back surgery in September.

Woods said he scheduled that surgery — the sixth in his lower back in the last 10 years — to be sure he recovered in time to play with his son for the fifth straight year. This is the first time they have shared the lead after the opening round, joined by the last two champions Bernhard Langer and son Jason, and Vijay Singh and son Qass.

Woods hit an array of good shots, including a wedge to inches on the short par-4 seventh, but otherwise downplayed his game by suggesting he still had a lot of rust. This was more about spending 36 holes on a brisk day at the Ritz-Carlton Club Orlando with his son, a sophomore at Benjamin School in North Palm Beach.

His daughter, Sam, caddied for her father for the second straight year. Their mother, Elin, was among those in the gallery in a tournament that is all about family. "We're trying to pull off each and every shot for each other, and to ham-and-egg," Woods said. "And I think we did that great pretty much the entire day. We picked each other up, which was great. And Charlie made pretty much most of the putts today."

It helped playing in the same group with former British Open champion Justin Leonard and his son, Luke, a senior and teammate with Charlie at Benjamin School.

Langer extended his astonishing record on the PGA Tour Championships this year by winning for an 18th consecutive season. He and his son made eight birdies in a

nine-hole stretch in the middle of the round, and they had an eagle on the 14th hole.

Singh and his son, who won this event in 2022, shot 28 on the back nine. "There's so many teams in the hunt," Langer said. "It's anybody's game that is within three or four shots of the leaders, which is most of the field."

Pdraig Harrington and son Paddy, and Tom Lehman and son Sean, were at 12-under 60. The Lehmans looked to be leading when they were around the green on the par-5 18th, but then it took them four shots to get down in the scramble format, taking bogey.

Having Team Woods in the mix is enough to get attention.

"It's great for the tournament and happy for them," Langer said. "Should be fun for the crowd tomorrow to come out and watch everybody play."

Woods hasn't competed since the British Open in July.

For Team Woods, it's a matter of not looking too far ahead. The father knows that all too well with his record-tying 82 titles on the PGA Tour. The son got a lesson in that this summer.

Charlie Woods qualified for his first U.S. Junior Amateur, making it to Oakland Hills but not staying very long. He shot rounds of 82-80 and didn't make it to match play. He also fell short in Monday qualifying for the Cognizant Classic on the PGA Tour and U.S. Open qualifying.

But he said the U.S. Junior was his biggest learning moment.

"It's about focusing on my playing," Charlie said. "I was so focused on winning and how I played that it kind of crept into how am I going to win instead of how I'm going to play the shot. And it kind of built up and that caused two very, very bad rounds of golf. But live and learn." (AP)

## Like always, Pankaj Advani rules the roost in cue sports

**MUMBAI, Dec 22:** Cue sports in India have enjoyed plenty of success in the last one year with some proven young players joining the old guards but one thing has remained a constant in the world of green baize -- the relentless domination of Pankaj Advani.

The legend of Advani continued to grow as he extended his rule in the IBSF World Billiards Championships by winning the coveted title for a 28th time.

Advani was flanked by other stars of cue sports as the likes of Kamal Chawla, Brijesh Damani, Dhruv Sitwala and Anupama Ramachandran also went on to add to the success story.



Among the rising stars were Mumbai duo Kreishh Gurbaxani and Ishpreet Chadha, who both qualified to compete in the world pro circuit next year.

While Advani was able to win the World Billiards Championship title in a row when he defeated England's Robert Hall in the final in Doha in November, he was not so lucky in the summit clash of the Asian Billiards Championships.

In the final of English Billiards, the Indian legend was beaten by compatriot Sitwala as fortunes swung from one side to another, with the latter eventually emerging the winner.

Perhaps Advani was not at his

absolute best in the competition, having survived elimination from the group stage itself when he had to fight his way back into the game against Siddharth Parikh.

However, it was Advani who remained the star of the sport not just in India but for the world as he continued to add further laurels to his decorated cap.

The win in the IBSF World Billiards Championship final was his seventh consecutive title win in the competition, which only helped Advani extend his domination further.

But much before that, Advani centered to a title win in the NSCI Baulkline 3.0 All India Snooker Open, defeating Chadha

10-3 in the final.

Advani, representing ONGC, was also the winner of the Western India Billiards and Snooker Championship in August but it was one tough game for the star player against Kamal Chawla (Railways).

The contest went on for nearly seven hours at the Khar Gymkhana's billiards hall here before Advani emerged victorious, sealing a 6-4 win.

In fact, it has been a memorable run for the Bengaluru-based Advani as far as playing in Mumbai is concerned, having won seven consecutive titles — four snooker and three billiards — in the last two years. (PTI)

## Rising star Abhay Singh on India's transition phase, personal goals & squash's Olympic debut

**NEW DELHI, Dec 22:** Retired squash icon Saurav Ghosal's legacy looms large but India possesses a pool of promising players capable of ensuring a seamless transition, said world no. 54 Abhay Singh, who aims to break into the top 30 of world rankings in 2025.

From being a young member of the Indian team at the Hangzhou Asian Games to leading the country at the recent World Team Squash Championship, the 25-year-old from Chennai has come a long way.

"The Asian Games experience has motivated me to aim higher. I hope to compete in not just one but four or five editions. When I look back, I hope to have a collection of medals, not just these two," said Abhay, who won a team gold and a mixed doubles bronze in 2023, told PTI. "The Asian Games was a significant milestone, and the next 12 months have been great. This year, I won my biggest title on the PSA Tour, achieved my

highest world ranking, became national champion, and secured the No. 1 spot on the Indian rankings. Most of the goals I set for 2024 have been achieved.

Abhay had sealed India's victory over Hong Kong, ensuring a fifth-place finish for the Indian men's team at the World Squash Team Championships.

"Finishing fifth at the World Team Championships was monumental, finishing fifth in the world is no joke. I'm entering the new year feeling positive and happy, with plans to carry this momentum forward."

The retirement of top players like Saurav Ghosal has created a massive void in Indian squash. Abhay, however, believes the future looks bright.

"I don't think there is a hole in Indian squash. You have three men in the top 50 in the world, which is great. You have a team that just finished fifth in the world, which is very young. So, there is promise.

"We can't take away anything



from what Sourav has achieved in the sport. He's a legend for a reason, and it's inspiring to have someone like that around you. I spent a couple of years with him on the Indian team and learned a lot."

On his personal goals, Abhay shared: "I used to obsess over rankings and points. I'd set specific ranking goals at the start of the year. But halfway through

this season, I realized that putting a number on paper can sometimes feel like setting a limitation.

"Going forward, the plan is to make that number smaller and smaller...I think the 30s is a good place to aim for in the next 12 months.

"My approach now is simple win every match I play and see how far that takes me. That's the

best way to keep improving."

Abhay overhauled his coaching staff after the Asian Games is now training under two new coaches — James Willstrop and David Campion — and a new physio and trainer. "Everyone taking care of me is new now. It's helped. I'm the fittest I've ever been and feeling the best I've ever felt.

"I felt like I had come to a standstill on the world tour. I didn't move up in the rankings for 14 months, so I thought it was time for a change."

Abhay also revealed that he has brought in two mental coaches. "Sports psychology is personal, and it took time to build trust. For me, it's about balancing when to relax and when to get fired up.

"For instance, during the Asian Games final, I was too relaxed, which affected my performance. Dealing with pressure, nerves, and losses are areas where my mental coaches have helped immensely." (PTI)



# Rohit should change his tactics, be more attacking batting at No 6: Ravi Shastri

MELBOURNE, Dec 22: With skipper Rohit Sharma struggling to decipher a way to score runs in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, former India coach Ravi Shastri says the stylish batter should go in with a clear mindset, change his tactics, and attack the bowlers.

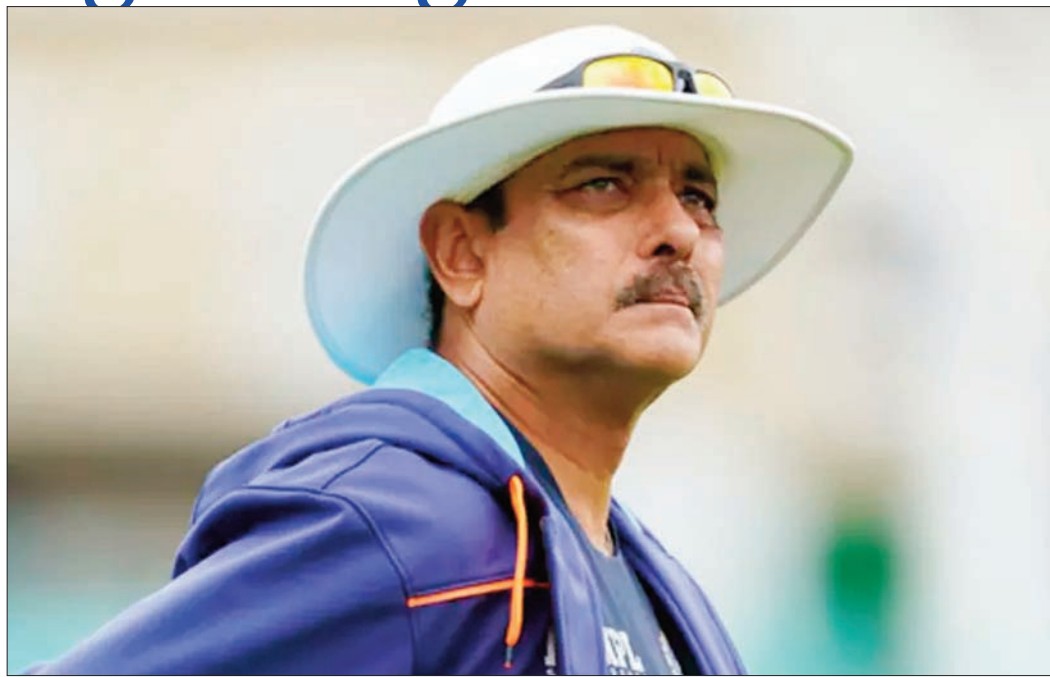
Rohit missed the opening Test Down Under to be with his family for the birth of his second child. He was expected to reclaim the opener's spot but KL Rahul's impressive 77 in India's win at Perth prompted a rejig of the batting order with Rohit moving down to No.6.

The change though has not been fruitful for Rohit as he has managed 10, 3 and 6 runs in the last three innings, while Rahul has encashed on the opportunity by notching up a fine 84 in the first innings at Brisbane in the third Test.

"I would like to see Rohit Sharma, his tactics change a bit because he can still be extremely dangerous at that number (six)," Shastri opined on ICC Review.

"I think he's got to be very clear in his mindset to go out there and take the attack to the opposition and not worry about anything else," the cricketer-turned-commentator added.

Shastri felt Rohit should shun the defensive mindset.



"The last thing you want is him to be in two minds whether to defend or attack. In his case, it should be attack. He picks up length quickly, he should take the opposition at that number.

"Because if he gets away in the first 10-15 minutes, in any way, he's not got past that 15-20 minutes, half an hour. So why don't

you play a natural game, go and take the attack to the opposition and take it from there?"

Shastri felt it's the best way for Rohit to get back into form and win games for India, adding that the best No.6 batters in the world are those who have the ability to counter-attack.

"I think that is his best way of

not just coming back into form, winning a game for India as well. Because that number is a crucial number."

"The best No.6s in the world are the guys who know how to have the ability to counter-attack. They read the situation well. Yes, if a lot of wickets have fallen, maybe for a little while. You might have to be

circumspect, but the intent has to be far sooner than later.

"Especially when you have that kind of ability and especially when you open the batting for India and you have all the shots for Australian conditions."

Rohit had made his Test debut in 2013 at No. 6 position, marking the occasion with a century.

Shastri backed Rahul to retain the opener's slot in the fourth Test following his two half-centuries so far in the five-Test series.

"I would have asked him (Rohit) to open in the last Test match (Brisbane) but then the way Rahul has batted, he was a joy to watch and the way he's batting, I believe he struck a purple patch," Shastri said.

"It could be a position he might just want to keep and enhance the way he's playing because his technique was faultless," said Shastri.

The former India captain said Rahul was currently at the top of his game and his confidence level too was very high.

"The way he left the ball, the way he allowed the ball to come onto the bat, some of his cover drives were as good as any played by anyone in world cricket at the moment. And so I think when there's that much confidence there, you know, let it be." (PTI)

# Root returns to England's ODI squad for India tour, Champions Trophy; Ahmed in T20Is



LONDON, Dec 22: Veteran batter Joe Root's return to 50-over format after more than a year headlined England's squad announcement for the ODI tour to India and the ICC Champions Trophy.

Root's previous assignment in the format was the 50-over World Cup held in India in 2023.

All-rounder and Test skipper Ben Stokes was not considered for selection as he has been recovering from a left hamstring injury sustained during the third Test against New Zealand earlier this month.

Seasoned batter Jos Buttler will lead the side, and the Lancashire man will also captain England in the T20I series against India, which precedes the ODIs.

England will play five T20Is and three ODIs during the white ball tour to India.

Leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed, who made his Test debut against India earlier this year, was included in the T20I squad.

In-form Harry Brook will get another chance to play international bilateral cricket in India after pulling out of the Test series earlier this year due to personal reasons.

England ODI squad: Jos But-

ler (Captain), Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Jacob Bethell, Harry Brook, Brydon Carse, Ben Duckett, Jamie Overton, Jamie Smith, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Joe Root, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt, Mark Wood.

England T20I squad: Jos Buttler (Captain), Rehan Ahmed, Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Jacob Bethell, Harry Brook, Brydon Carse, Ben Duckett, Jamie Overton, Jamie Smith, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt, Mark Wood.

England ODI Schedule: 1st T20I: January 22, Eden Gardens, Kolkata.

2nd T20I: January 25, MA Chidambaram Stadium, Chennai.

3rd T20I: January 28, Niranjan Shah Stadium, Rajkot.

4th T20I: January 31, MCA Stadium, Pune.

5th T20I: February 2, Wankhede Stadium, Mumbai

ODIs:

1st ODI: February 6, VCA Stadium, Nagpur.

2nd ODI: February 9, Barabati Stadium, Cuttack.

3rd ODI: February 12, Narendra Modi Stadium, Ahmedabad. (PTI)

## Block level sports meet held at Mailoo



HT Bureau

DIPHU, Dec 22: A day-long Block Level Sports Meet 2024 was organised by the Nehru Yuva Kendra, Diphu, Karbi Anglong (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, Government of India) in collaboration with the Subaltern Development Club on Sunday. The event took place at the Mailoo Hindi High School playground, Mailoo, West Karbi Anglong.

The meet was inaugurated by Shiv Narayan Chauhan, a noted social worker. Jeetendra Harijan of the Social Development Organization welcomed and introduced all the guests, referees, and umpires.

The event featured a variety of group and individual sports competitions.

The day began with the 100-meter race for boys and girls. Other events included volleyball, badminton, and long jump for boys, as well as kabaddi, tug-of-war, and a 100-meter race for girls.

The final match of kabaddi was won by ARB High School Girls' Team, led by captain Anjali Chauhan.

The tug-of-war event was won by Prayash Club, with Manisha Kumari as the captain. In the long jump competition, Jirsong Phangocho, Youraj Singh, and Rahul Phangocho secured the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd positions, respectively.

Trophies, certificates, and medals were awarded to all the winners in their respective events. The final match of Volleyball was won by Tilha Basti Sports Club led by captain Parash Gond.

The event was graced by several notable personalities, including Harkhu Chauhan Chairman of Prayash Degree College, Yograj Pathak, Kaushalya Chetry, Raju Sharma, Nagendra Thakur, Sanjit Ram (Army personnel), and former NSVs Dhanraj Harijan and Sanjit Harijan.

## Khel Maharan 2.0: LAC-level competitions conclude in Diphu



HT Bureau

DIPHU, Dec 22: The Khel Maharan 2.0 for Diphu Legislative Assembly Constituency (LAC) level organised under the department of Sports and Youth Welfare, a three-day sports extravaganza for development of sports in rural Assam, concluded here at Karbi Anglong Sports Association (KASA) stadium on Sunday.

On the concluding day, football finals for under-17 boys, under-17 girls and above 17 boys were held.

In the under-17 Boys final played between Lumbajong Member of Autonomous Council (MAC) and Langhin MAC, the former won by 1-0. Archim Hanse scored the solitary goal in the 11th minute for Lumbajong MAC. He was awarded the best player award.

In under 17 girls final played Lumbajong MAC won by 5-0 against Langphar MAC. Sari Faireim scored 4 goals and Puja Phonglosa scored 1 for their team.

In above 17 boys final played between Langhin MAC and Dhansiri MAC, the former has won by 1-0, via kick from the penalty mark in the second half.

In the 58th minute Khekheho Thaoson of Dhansiri was booked with a hand ball inside the penalty box. Bahum Basumatary of Langhin in a kick from penalty mark made no mistake and shot perfectly into the net. The Langhin were leading by 1-0. At the end of stipulated time the score was 0-1 in favour of Langhin MAC. The closing cum prize distribution ceremony was attended by Diphu MLA Bidyasing Englang; District Sports Officer, Ripil Ronghang and KASA officials.

MLA Englang along with dignitaries presented trophies and medals to the winning and runners teams. Birjon Goary of Laughing was awarded with the Best goalkeeper award. The sports meet began on December 20.

## Unstoppable Mandhana takes India to 314/9

VADODARA, Dec 22: Stylish opener Smriti Mandhana extended her purple patch with a classy 91 off 102 balls, propelling India to 314/9 in the first Women's ODI against the West Indies, here on Sunday.

Mandhana, who recorded a 50-plus score for the fifth time in as many innings, got the bulk of the runs in her 110-run stand alongside debutant Pratika Rawal (40 off 69).

The launch pad was provided by Mandhana for the middle-order to go big and that is what the likes of Harmanpreet Kaur

(34 off 23), Harleen Deol (44 off 50), Richa Ghosh (26 off 12) and Jemimah Rodrigues (31 off 19) did to take India past 300.

After dropping hard-hitting Shafali Verma, India have tried multiple batters to open alongside Mandhana and on Sunday it was the turn of Delhi cricketer Pratika, who batted at a strike rate of 57.97.

The 24-year-old was also dropped at mid-off when she was batting on three in the 10th over. Her four boundaries came on the leg-side as she employed the sweep

multiple times.

Mandhana, at the other end, entertained the crowd with her trademark shots including a cover drive and pull.

India changed gears after the arrival of fit-again skipper Harmanpreet who struck at close to 150 to give the innings a timely move on. The momentum was carried by Richa and Rodrigues who has been in top form of late.

For the West Indies, the pick of the bowlers was left-arm spinner Zaida James who took five wickets for 45 runs in eight overs. (PTI)

## ONGC Assam Asset launches 15-Day sports training program in Sivasagar



HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, Dec 22: ONGC Assam Asset, in collaboration with the All India SC/ST Employees Welfare Association ONGC (AISCSTEWAA), Nazira/Sivasagar Branch and Kudo Axom Federation organised a 15-day sports training program at Koibartta Dalani, Demow, Sivasagar on Sunday.

The event marked a significant step towards promoting sports and physical fitness in rural areas, with over 200 enthusiastic students participating in the initiative.

The program was inaugurated by Hira Singh Rana, chief general manager (Geology) and head of forward base as well as the Chairman of the ACP 2024-24. In his inaugural ad-

dress, he highlighted the role of sports in community development and youth engagement.

Dembi Ram Panging, Chairman of AISCSTEWAA ONGC, Assam Asset emphasised the importance of discipline in achieving success, a value that can be learned through sports. He expressed gratitude towards ONGC Assam Asset for their commitment to fostering talent in rural communities and facilitating opportunities for young athletes.

The ceremony also featured remarks from prominent local leaders such as P R Mili, president of the Sivasagar Sports Association, Shekharjyoti Duroi, president of the Demow Press Club, underscored the significance of collaborative efforts in promoting sports and healthy living among the youth.

The event was attended among others by Mokbul Ali, Coordinator of ACP 2024-24, Joy Chandra Mili, Jai Prakash, Gahin Basumatary, Lohitshwar Deori, Kalyan Das, Biju Puri, Nayanmoni Gogoi and Mosengfa Gogoi.

## Wasn't looking to save the follow-on that day in Brisbane: Akash Deep

MELBOURNE, Dec 22: Akash Deep and Jasprit Bumrah saved India the blushes during the Brisbane Test with a resolute 10th wicket partnership but the rookie pacer on Sunday said his focus was on wholesome contribution to the team rather than looking to "merely save the follow-on."

With the Indian batters, barring KL Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja, failing once again, the obstinate 47-run partnership between Bumrah and Akash took India past the follow-on mark during the Gabba Test, which ended in a draw.

"We come to bat lower down the order, so contributions of 20-25-30 runs are very valuable. My mindset is just to contribute. I wasn't looking to save the follow-on that day; I was just looking not to get out. My mindset was this, God willing, we were able to save the follow-on," Akash told reporters here.

Akash smashed Pat Cummins for a four to avoid the follow-on as the Indian dressing room broke into celebrations on day four. "When you save the match from such a situation, the entire team gets the confidence and our dressing room reflected just that. Everyone was having fun and enjoying."

Salvaging a draw after being on the brink of losing in Brisbane, the Indian team is now filled with confidence, feels Akash.

"If you look at it, it's 50-50, even though we were behind in the last match. But the confidence we built on the last day, we still have that confidence. So, I can say it's 50-50, and this Test match (Melbourne) is very important for both the teams." Akash did not feature in the playing XI for the first two Tests against Australia but made his way into the team for the third Test.

The 28-year-old gave a good account himself, and was unlucky to miss out on the wicket of veteran batter Steve Smith, whom he troubled no end.

The pacer, who is playing on foreign soil for the first time, revealed tips from Bumrah helped him.

"This is my first time playing in Australia. Jassi bhai keeps on telling us things about how we can go about our job; it makes our job easy."

"He told me one thing, 'Don't get too excited. Just focus on your discipline. How you go about your job in Indian conditions, repeat that here.' He told me just this."

Travis Head continues to be a thorn in India's flesh. After being dismissed for 11 in his first innings of the series, he has gone on to score 89, 140 and 152 in his next three outings. Obviously, he did not detail the plans, but hinted at a bouncer strategy against the left-hander.

"Jo plan hai wo nahi bata sakte, wo bhi tayyar ho jayenge (We can't reveal our plans, as they'll prepare accordingly)."

"As fast bowlers, we will stick to the same deliveries and maintain discipline in our bowling. We will bow from both over and around the wicket, assess the pitch and conditions, and plan accordingly."

"I think Travis Head, in particular, struggles against short balls. We won't let him settle at the crease. We'll target specific areas and hope to force him into mistakes, which will create chances for us," he stated.

Akash maintained that India will continue to find ways to strike with the new ball. "The plan is the same, because we have played three matches here and we have seen that chances are being created with the new ball. If we take wickets early with the new ball, then it's a problem for them too," he added. (PTI)

## Boxing Day Test: Fans wait for Kohli's 'Kingly' outing at MCG

MELBOURNE, Dec 22: Kohli, Kohli...the chants from 90000 fervent fans still reverberate in the ear when you step into the fabled MCG, even two years after the former Indian skipper pulled off a stunning heist against Pakistan in the T20 World Cup 2022.

Back then, Virat Kohli's unbeaten 82 off 53 balls helped India snatch a victory from the jaws of defeat, and now he is back at the G, looking for another redemption act.

Kohli made a bright beginning to the ongoing Border-Gavaskar Trophy against Australia with a second innings hundred at Perth.

But since then he has hit the snooze mode, producing just 26 runs over the next four innings across Adelaide and Brisbane Tests. However, Kohli's travails with the bat notwithstanding, his popularity off the field has not diminished one bit, a quick tour of MCG will make you understand that fact.

You will be greeted with Kohli's pictures at the ticket counter of the Australian Sports Museum. Then there are images of him kissing the Border-Gavaskar Trophy after securing the series win on these shores for the first time in the 2018-19 series, besides a team celebration picture after the third Test at the MCG, with the caption "Kohli's Conquerors."

The MCG tour guide David might have his personal favourite in star pacer Jasprit Bumrah, but repeatedly mentions Kohli in his chat while terming the upcoming Boxing Day Test as a "blockbuster."

"This is the biggest Test in Australia and what can be more exciting than the India vs Australia match. I am eagerly waiting for it," he told PTI Bhasha.

"In the first Test in Perth, Virat played a brilliant in-



nings, which he and the Indian team needed very much. He is very popular here but we hope that his bat remains silent here," he added.

But then he can't stop talking about Bumrah, the tormentor in chief of Australian batsmen.

"Bumrah is my favorite, who took nine wickets at MCG in 2018 helping India win the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. In this series too, he did excellent captaincy along with excellent bowling in Perth."

"Looking at his form, he will be a trump card for India but I hope that he does not take five wickets in an innings here again," said David.

Kohli's MCG connect is well-chronicled too. In 2011-12, Kohli came in at No. 7 making 11 runs and took two catches.

Three years later made a 169 and shared a 262-run alliance with Ajinkya Rahane, and his 54 in the second innings helped India draw the match.

In 2018, he was leading the side and made an impor-

tant 82 in the first innings and took important catches of Mitchell Marsh and Aaron Finch in the second essay.

Overall, Kohli has scored 316 runs at an average of 52.66 in three Tests on this historic ground which includes a century and two half-centuries.

The 35-year-old is 133 runs behind Sachin Tendulkar (449 in 10 matches), who has scored the most runs for India at the MCG, and 53 runs behind Rahane (369 runs in six matches).

Gujarat-born Saloni is settled in Perth, and he has come here to watch the Melbourne Test.

"For the first time, I watched a Test from the stadium in Perth and I am very happy that Virat scored a century in that match. "I am very excited about the remaining matches. It is going to be a very good match in Melbourne," she said.

"I like Virat's aggression. It is fun to watch him on the field. He also takes very good catches and his fitness is unmatched," she noted. Australian fan Crayon Matthews said his team will have to be wary of Kohli.

"I am really excited for the Melbourne Test. Virat Kohli is an amazing player. He has played so well for India for so long. "He will go down as one of the greatest that has ever played, not only in India but in the world. Australia will have to be cautious of him," said Matthews.

Historically too, MCG holds pride of place in Indian cricket history. It was here India won their first Test on Australian soil during the 1977-78 tour.

India under Bishan Singh Bedi won that match by 222 runs, aided by Sunil Gavaskar's 118 and leg-spin maestro BS Chandrasekhar's 12-wicket haul. So, can Kohli and India add one more glorious chapter here? (PTI)