



Shri Narendra Modi

Hon'ble Prime Minister



Shri Bhajanlal Sharma

Hon'ble Chief Minister, Rajasthan

A New Year Gift

Modi ji's Guarantee Getting Accomplished



LPG cylinder for
Rs. 450/-
Only

**LPG Cylinder
Subsidy Scheme
starts from 1st January, 2024**

**Registered Ujjwala beneficiaries
and women from other poor families
(BPL) will get one LPG cylinder
every month for just**

Rs. 450/-

"The state government is implementing the guarantee given by Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi. This initiative of providing the cheapest LPG cylinder to registered Ujjwala beneficiaries and other poor families in Rajasthan for just Rs. 450 from the New Year is a humble initiative towards women empowerment." - Bhajanlal Sharma, Chief Minister, Rajasthan

The current beneficiaries of Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana will continue to get the benefits of the scheme.

THE WORLD

TOP OF THE WORLD



Evariste Ndayishimiye

BURUNDI

President: Gay people should be stoned

Bujumura: Burundi's President Evariste Ndayishimiye has called on citizens to stone gay people, escalating a crackdown on sexual minorities in a country where LGBT people already face social ostracism and jail terms of up to two years if convicted of same-sex offences. "If you want to attract a curse to the country, accept homosexuality," Ndayishimiye said in a question and answer session with journalists and the public held in Burundi's east. "I even think that these people, if we find them in Burundi, it is better to lead them to a stadium and stone them. And that cannot be a sin," he said.

REUTERS

TAIWAN

China calls poll candidate peace-destroyer

Taipei: China has slammed Taiwan presidential front-runner William Lai as a "destroyer of peace" following a televised debate on Saturday in which he defended Taiwan's right to rule itself as a democracy. Chen Binhu, spokesman for China's Taiwan Affairs Office, said Lai's discourse at the debate was "full of confrontational thinking." He said Lai, who currently serves as Taiwan's vice president with the governing Democratic People's Party, is "the instigator of a potential dangerous war in the Taiwan Strait."

AP

SOUTH KOREA

Seoul records heaviest snowfall in Dec

Seoul: The South Korean capital, Seoul, received the biggest single-day snowfall recorded in December for more than 40 years on Saturday but there have been no reports of any weather-related deaths or injuries. The country's weather agency said Sunday that 12.2 centimetres of snow fell on Seoul the previous day, the heaviest since 1981. The Korea Meteorological Administration said a heavy snow advisory was issued for Seoul's entire area on Saturday before it was lifted later.

AP

PAKISTAN

Five militants killed in restive Balochistan

Karachi: Five terrorists were killed in an encounter in Pakistan's troubled Balochistan province, the army said on Sunday. During the conduct of an intelligence-based operation on the night of December 30-31, five terrorists "were sent to hell" following intense clashes between troops and the militants, according to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media wing of the army. The terrorists' hideout was also busted and a cache of arms, ammunition and explosives was recovered, it said.

PTI

SHIPPING GIANT MAERSK PAUSES RED SEA SAILINGS FOR 48 HOURS

Red Sea hots up: US says Houthi rebels killed, 3 boats sunk after ship attacked

Shot down 2 ballistic missiles fired at container ship, says US military

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BEIRUT, DECEMBER 31

THE US military said Sunday it shot down two anti-ship ballistic missiles fired toward a container ship by Yemen's Houthi rebels in the Red Sea. Hours later, four boats tried to attack the same ship, but US forces opened fire, killing several of the armed crews, the US Central Command said. No one was injured on the ship.

The Singapore-flagged MAERSK HANZHOU reported they had already been hit by a missile Saturday night in the Southern Red Sea and requested assistance, CENTCOM said in a statement. The USS GRAVELY and USS LABOON responded to the call for help, and the Denmark-owned vessel was reportedly seaworthy and no injuries were noted, the statement added. "This is the 23rd illegal attack by the Houthis on international shipping since Nov. 19," CENTCOM said.

Meanwhile, Maersk said it paused all sailing through the Red Sea for 48 hours.

In another statement, CENTCOM said the same ship issued an additional distress call about a second attack "by four Iranian-backed Houthi small boats." The attackers fired small arms weapons at the MAERSK HANZHOU, getting it within 20

meters of the vessel.

A contract-embarked security team on the ship returned fire. US helicopters from the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier and GRAVELY responded to the distress call and while issuing verbal warnings to the attackers, the small boat crews opened fire on the helicopters, the statement said. "The US Navy helicopters returned fire," sinking three of the four boats, killing the crews while the fourth boat fled the area, CENTCOM said.

The Iran-backed Houthis have claimed attacks on ships in the Red Sea that they say are either linked to Israel or heading to Israeli ports. They say their attacks aim to end Israel's offensive targeting the Gaza Strip following the attack by Hamas on October 7.

On Saturday, the top commander of US naval forces in the Middle East said Houthi rebels have shown no signs of ending their "reckless" attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea even as more nations join the international maritime mission to protect vessels in the vital waterway and trade traffic begins to pick up.

Since the Pentagon announced Operation Prosperity Guardian just over 10 days ago, 1,200 merchant ships have travelled through the Red Sea region, and none has been hit by drone or missile strikes, the US said.



Israeli soldiers play near the Israel-Gaza border in southern Israel on Sunday. Reuters

Israel intensifies attack on central Gaza; Netanyahu thanks US for weapon sale

AGENCIES
CAIRO/GAZA, DECEMBER 31

ISRAELI JETS intensified attacks on central Gaza on Sunday, residents and medics said, as battles raged through the rubble of towns and refugee camps in a war that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said would take "many more months" to end.

Netanyahu's comments on Saturday, when he said he would not resign despite opinion polls

showing his government is broadly unpopular and defended his security record despite the Oct. 7 attack, indicate there will be no easing any time soon.

Netanyahu thanked the Biden administration for its continued backing, including approval for a new emergency weapons sale, the second this month, and prevention of a U.N. Security Council resolution seeking an immediate ceasefire.

He said the "the war is at its height" and Israel would have to

retake control of Gaza's border with Egypt.

Retaking the border could also constitute a de facto reversal of Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, raising new questions over the future of the enclave. Netanyahu's comments on Saturday, when he said he would not resign despite opinion polls showing his government is broadly unpopular and defended his security record despite the Oct. 7 attack, indicate there will be no easing any time soon.



WELCOME, 2024

Fireworks over the Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge on New Year's Eve in Sydney on Sunday. Reuters

'American Idol' producer accused of sexual assault

ASSOCIATED PRESS
LOS ANGELES, DECEMBER 31

AMERICAN SINGER, dancer and actress Paula Abdul has accused former "American Idol" producer Nigel Lythgoe of sexually assaulting her in the early 2000s when she was a judge on the reality competition show, according to a new lawsuit.

The lawsuit filed Friday in Los Angeles also accuses Lythgoe of sexually assaulting Abdul after

she left "American Idol" and became a judge on Lythgoe's other competition show. Abdul's lawyer applauded the singer for speaking out publicly.

Lythgoe said that he was "shocked and saddened" to hear of the allegations made by Abdul, who he said he considered a "dear" and "entirely platonic" friend. "While Paula's history of erratic behavior is well known, I can't understand why she would file a lawsuit that she must know is untrue," Lythgoe said.

Mexico, Venezuela restart repatriation flights amid growing migration to US

ASSOCIATED PRESS
MEXICO CITY, DEC 31

MEXICO AND Venezuela announced Saturday that they have restarted repatriation flights of Venezuelan migrants in Mexico, the latest move by countries in the region to take on a flood of people travelling north to the US.

The move comes as authorities say at least 10,000 migrants a day have been arriving at the US-Mexico border, many of them asy-

lum seekers. It also comes as a migrant caravan of thousands of people from across the region — largely Venezuelans — has trekked through southern Mexico this week.

The repatriation flights are part of an agreement made between regional leaders during a summit in Mexico in October that aimed to seek solutions for migration levels that show few signs of slowing down.

Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations said the two countries

began repatriations with a flight on Friday and a second on Saturday in an effort to "strengthen their cooperation on migration issues." The statement also said the two countries plan to implement social and work programs for those repatriated to Venezuela.

"Mexico and Venezuela reiterate their commitment to address the structural causes that fuel irregular migration in the region, and to achieve a humanitarian management of such flows," the statement read.

NEW YEAR'S ADDRESS

XI: TAIWAN WILL 'SURELY BE REUNIFIED'

Chinese President Xi Jinping said China would "surely be reunified" with Taiwan during his televised New Year's address, renewing Beijing's threats to take over the self-ruled island. Taiwan split from China amid civil war in 1949.



A damaged building in Ukraine, on Sunday. Reuters

Russia pounds east Ukraine city in bid for revenge after 24 killed in Belgorod

ASSOCIATED PRESS
KYIV, DECEMBER 31

RUSSIA LAUNCHED a fresh drone assault on Ukraine on Saturday night, after promising that strikes on the Russian border city of Belgorod earlier in the day "would not go unpunished."

The Ukrainian Air Force said Sunday that it had shot down 21 of 49 drones launched by Russian forces overnight.

Twenty-eight people were wounded in an attack on the eastern city of Kharkiv, regional Gov. Oleh Synyehubov said Sunday. A central hotel, apartment buildings, kindergarten, shops and administrative buildings sustained damage, according to the regional prosecutor's office.

In the Kyiv region that surrounds the capital, a Russian drone attack caused a fire to break out at a critical infrastructure facility, officials said. The Russian attacks came after

shelling in the center of the Russian border city of Belgorod Saturday killed 24 people, including three children.

A further 108 people were wounded in the strike, regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said Sunday, making it one of the deadliest attacks on Russian soil

since the start of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine 22 months ago.

Russian authorities accused Kyiv of carrying out the attack, which took place the day after an 18-hour Russian aerial bombardment across Ukraine killed at least 41 civilians. Russia's Defense Ministry said it identified the ammunition used in the strike as Czech-made Vampire rockets and Olka missiles. "This crime will not go unpunished," the ministry said in a statement on social media.

In an emergency meeting at the UN Security Council demanded by Russia Saturday night, envoy Vasily Nebenzya accused Kyiv of a "terrorist attack."

Pakistan, Taliban plan cleric, official visits to ease tension over TTP

SAJJAD HUSSAIN
ISLAMABAD, DECEMBER 31

ASENIOR Afghan Taliban leader is expected to arrive in Islamabad early next month, while a leading Pakistani cleric is set to visit Kabul in a fresh bid to reduce bilateral tensions over the outlawed terror group TTP, media reports said on Sunday.

Pakistan has consistently called for Afghanistan's Taliban government to take decisive action against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and related militant groups operating from Afghan soil, including extraditing leaders responsible for attacks in Pakistan.

The Taliban government, however, has been hesitant to comply because of historical alliances and ideological ties.

The visits are part of efforts to reduce tensions between Kabul and Islamabad concerning the outlawed TTP, which intensified attacks against the security forces in Pakistan in the wake of the Taliban taking over Afghanistan more than two years ago.

Mullah Sherin Akhund, a senior Afghan Taliban figure and governor of Kandahar province, is expected in Islamabad early next

20 PAKISTANI KILLED IN 12 MONTHS: TALIBAN

Islamabad: Security forces in Afghanistan killed a number of Tajik and Pakistani nationals and arrested scores others involved in attacks against religious clerics, the public, and mosques, a senior Taliban official said on Sunday. Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid, Taliban's appointed defense minister said dozens of Tajiks and more than 20 Pakistanis were killed in the past 12 months "in operations by security forces."

Pakistan has consistently called for Afghanistan's Taliban government to take decisive action against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and related militant groups operating from Afghan soil, including extraditing leaders responsible for attacks in Pakistan.

The Taliban government, however, has been hesitant to comply because of historical alliances and ideological ties.

The visits are part of efforts to reduce tensions between Kabul and Islamabad concerning the outlawed TTP, which intensified attacks against the security forces in Pakistan in the wake of the Taliban taking over Afghanistan more than two years ago.

Mullah Sherin Akhund, a senior Afghan Taliban figure and governor of Kandahar province, is expected in Islamabad early next

month. The interactions of Sherin will include meetings with intelligence and Foreign Office officials in Islamabad.

Meanwhile, Maulana Fazl Rehman, a Pakistani politician who is the president of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islama Fazl (JUI-F), will interact with senior Taliban leaders in Kabul on January 3 with a delegation of religious scholars, a source told *The Express Tribune*. The strategy reportedly involves leveraging religious influence to meet Islamabad's demands.

PTI

A VERSATILE ACTOR WHO STARRED IN 'SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE' AND 'BATMAN BEGINS', HE WON OSCAR NOMINATIONS

British actor Tom Wilkinson, known for 'The Full Monty', dies at 75

ALAN YUHAS
DECEMBER 31

TOM WILKINSON, the actor who could turn a manic lawyer, a steel-foreman-turned-stripper and parts small and large into mesmerizing turns, winning Oscar nominations and plaudits for his performances in movies like *Michael Clayton* and *The Full Monty*, died on Saturday. He was 75.

A statement sent by his agent on behalf of Wilkinson's family said he died suddenly at home. It did not provide other details.

Wilkinson's range seemed to know no bounds. He earned Academy Award nominations for his work in *In the Bedroom* and *Michael Clayton* and delighted audiences in comedies like *The Full Monty* and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*.



Tom Wilkinson won Oscar nominations and critical plaudits for playing a wide range of roles in comedy and drama. AP

ences' eyes and critics' acclaim through decades of work in television and film and onstage.

"I see myself as a utility player, the one who can do everything," he told *The New York Times* in 2002. "I've always felt that actors should have a degree of anonymity about them."

To many Britons, though, *The Full Monty*, remains his most beloved performance, as one of the gruff, unemployed steelworkers in Sheffield, England, who scheme to make some money and repair their self-respect by starting a striptease act for the town.

Wilkinson played Gerald Cooper, an aging ex-foreman

who joins the cadre in part to escape the ornamental gnomes on the lawn.

But his range extended far beyond comedy, and he was nominated for the Academy Award for best actor for his performance in *In the Bedroom*, directed by Todd Field.

Opposite Spacek, Wilkinson played one half of a Maine couple struggling in the aftermath of their son's murder. Field said he was drawn to Wilkinson because of his everyman quality.

"You don't typically think that Robert Redford is going to live next door," Field told *The Times*. "But you believe that Tom Wilkinson could live next door."

That's the difference."

A few years later, Wilkinson was winning acclaim again as a high-powered lawyer who has a breakdown in *Tony Gilroy's Michael Clayton*. He was nominated for another Academy Award for his performance in that film. By then, Wilkinson had been acting for three decades, in theater, television and film.

He was born in Yorkshire, England, and his parents moved to Canada when he was 4. Their stay lasted only six years. The family returned to Britain, where Wilkinson's parents ran a Cornwall pub until his father died, drawing Wilkinson and his mother back to Yorkshire. NYT

AN EXPRESS INVESTIGATION

Happy New Year: Look where most of India's medals come from — village & town, under Rs 5-lakh annual income, farmers' families

Since the record Asian Games haul this October, *The Indian Express* tracked down all 256 medallists to plot each one's journey to the podium. Their income, place of origin, education, first break, the numbers tell a story of challenge, change — and enduring hope

MIHIR VASAVDA,
VINAYAK
MOHANARANGAN,
SHIVANI NAIK, PRATYUSH
RAJ, SHASHANK NAIR
& AMIT KAMATH
NEW DELHI, MUMBAI,
DECEMBER 31

BUSINESS AS USUAL
By UNNY
2024



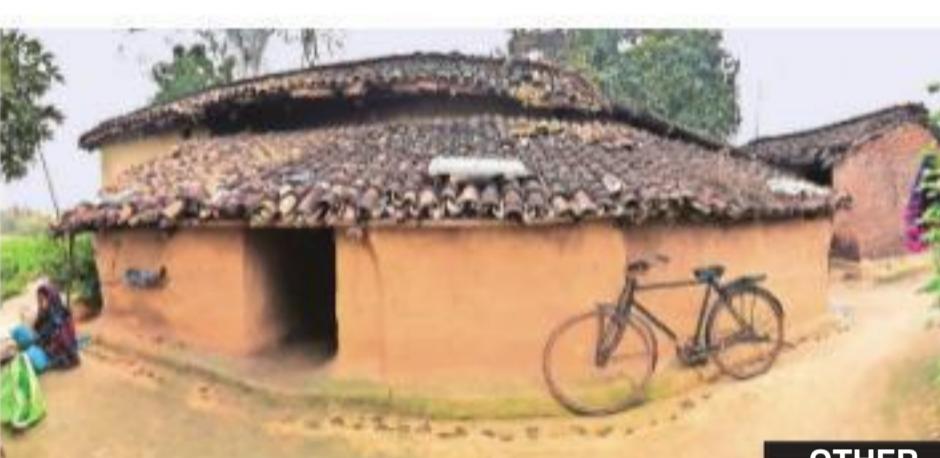
Year postcards, from today's India to tomorrow's.

For these athletes grew up in worlds apart and had it not been for sports — and their excellence — their paths would have never intersected. As they did this year, in September–October 2023 when, at the Asian Games in Hangzhou, they stepped up to the podium to get India its record 107 medals: a combined effort of 58 individuals and 49 teams.

A petrol pump station attendant in Faridabad cut corners — injured, he is out of a job now — so that his daughter could pursue her track-and-field dreams. Two states away, the family of a pistol shooter from Mandi didn't have to stretch — they own a petrol pump. In all, these athletes, and the personal and professional arc of each, tell a story (see pages 13, 14) of their belief in sports as their level playing field, flattened by the sheer dint of their talent and determination and backed up by institutional support and a rapidly reforming ecosystem (see adjacent story).

Since the Games ended, 15 reporters of *The Indian Express* tracked each one in the Asian contingent down, curated their

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



SONBHADRA TO HANGZHOU

Son of a daily wager from Sonbhadra in UP, Ram Baboo (his home above) worked under NREGS in Covid. He won a race-walking bronze.

OTHER FACES OF CHANGE
Pages 13, 14

HOW THE 256 MEDALS STACK UP

■ Male ■ Female



Family's annual income when athlete started playing	
Up to ₹50,000:	50
20% Male	24
Female	26
₹50,000-₹5 lakh:	114
45% Male	71
Female	43
More than ₹5 lakh:	92
35% Male	51
Female	41

Back story: more resources, better reach, help from unsung mentors

MIHIR VASAVDA
MUMBAI, DECEMBER 31

INDIA'S STALLY at the 2002 Asian Games was 36 medals. In 2014, that count climbed to 57. And 2023 saw the giant leap, as the century barrier was broken. What explains this three-fold surge? The answer lies in the stories of 256 Hangzhou medalists.

The Indian Express investigation

threw up a series of telling numbers. Take two: Around 65 per cent of the medalists are from families with less than Rs 5 lakh income per annum and 33 per cent were born and raised in rural India.

That they are making it to the podium underlines the significant strides in last-mile connectivity in the sporting ecosystem under which funds and technical support are reaching the athletes timely and efficiently.

From government policies, like the Target Olympic Podium

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

who ran a shop; and Abhishek Chauhan (22), who failed his class 10 examination and worked at a saree shop. All three are residents of Varanasi.

Two of the three accused, in their social media profiles, claimed they were associated with the BJP's IT cell in Varanasi. While Kunal Pandey said he was a coordinator for the BJP IT cell's Varanasi unit, Saksham Patel said he was a co-coordinator.

A senior office-bearer of the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

ISRO's New Year launch: Special space observatory, X-ray telescope

AMRITA NAYAK DUTTA

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

FOLLOWING RECENT

ATTACKS

ON SHIPS

Navy boosts Arabian Sea surveillance and security

THE INDIAN Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is set to begin the new year with the launch of its first X-ray Polarimeter Satellite (XpoSat), a space-based observatory to study X-ray polarisation

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

The Indian Express wishes its readers

A HAPPY NEW YEAR

Ph.D. Admissions Open

January 2024 Session

Enroll for your Ph.D program at one of the Top Research Facilities in India, under the guidance of the Top Researchers of the country.

Upto 100% Semester Fee Waiver for meritorious candidates (as per University norms)

20% of the seats reserved for the Part Time PhD scholars from the industry

Institutional Fellowship of
₹36,000/ Month

UGC –NET–JRF qualified /
CSIR – NET to full time Research
Scholars*

Institutional Fellowship upto
₹32,000/ Month

for merit position holders in
the entrance examination

Research grant upto
₹ 2 LPA

The meritorious full time scholars
may get this grant based on
their research credentials**

*Scholarship continuation will be subjected to satisfactory performance in each semester

**Individuals with strong academic qualifications, especially those who excel in their qualifying degree (with a preference for candidates who have earned a gold medal), are eligible for the PhD entrance examination and may secure top positions



Last date to apply:
27 January, 2024

Examination Date:
03 February, 2024

Examination Result:
10 February, 2024

Examination will be conducted
in Offline Mode

*UGC - JRF / CSIR - NET / INSPIRE / GATE) qualified candidates are exempted from written test but they have to appear in interview.



Graphic Era
deemed to be University
DEHRADUN

Apply Now: phd.geu.ac.in | www.geu.ac.in | Email: phdinfo@geu.ac.in

1800 890 6027
Bell Road, Clement Town, Dehradun, Uttarakhand



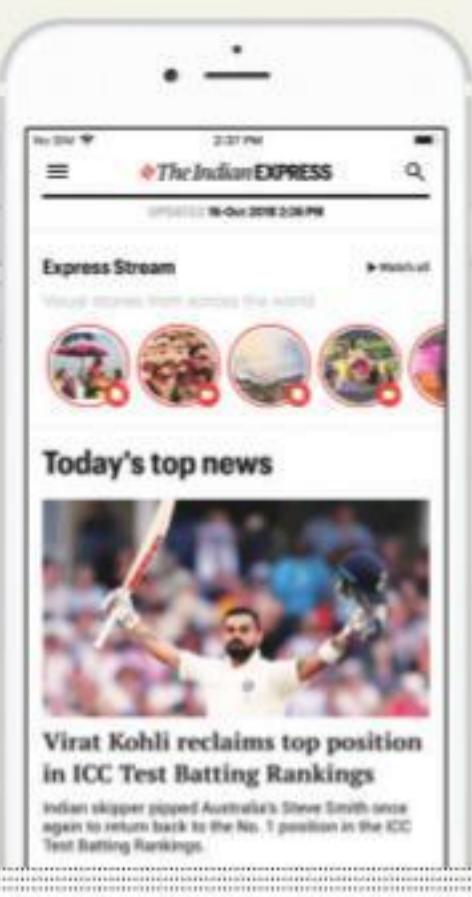
LIC
भारतीय जीवन बीमा निगम
LIFE INSURANCE CORPORATION OF INDIA
Har Pal Aapke Saath

The Year Changes, Trust Never Changes

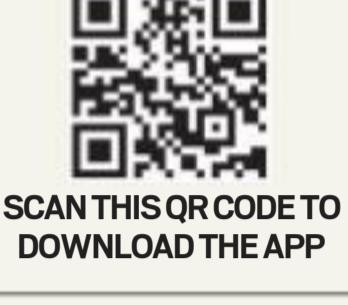
2024

Thanking you for reposing your trust in us

LIC WISHES YOU A VERY Happy New Year



DOWNLOAD APP
■ VISUAL STORIES
■ DAILY BRIEFING
■ PODCASTS
■ CUSTOMIZABLE NEWS EXPERIENCE
Indian Express ★★★★ 4.6



SCAN THIS QR CODE TO DOWNLOAD THE APP



TEN EXTREMELY USEFUL FREE WEBSITES WE TRIED IN 2023

The year 2023 saw millions of users turning to an array of innovative websites for a variety of their needs. From boosting productivity to entertainment options, these online platforms have stood out with their remarkable utility and efficiency.

FASHION



INDIA'S TOP FASHION MOMENTS

Dior in Mumbai to Alia as Gucci's 1st Indian global ambassador



UPSC SPECIALS

Scan the QR code and get the express edge' in your civil services preparation with our UPSC specials

EXPRESS AUDIO

Game Time: The top five sports moments of 2023

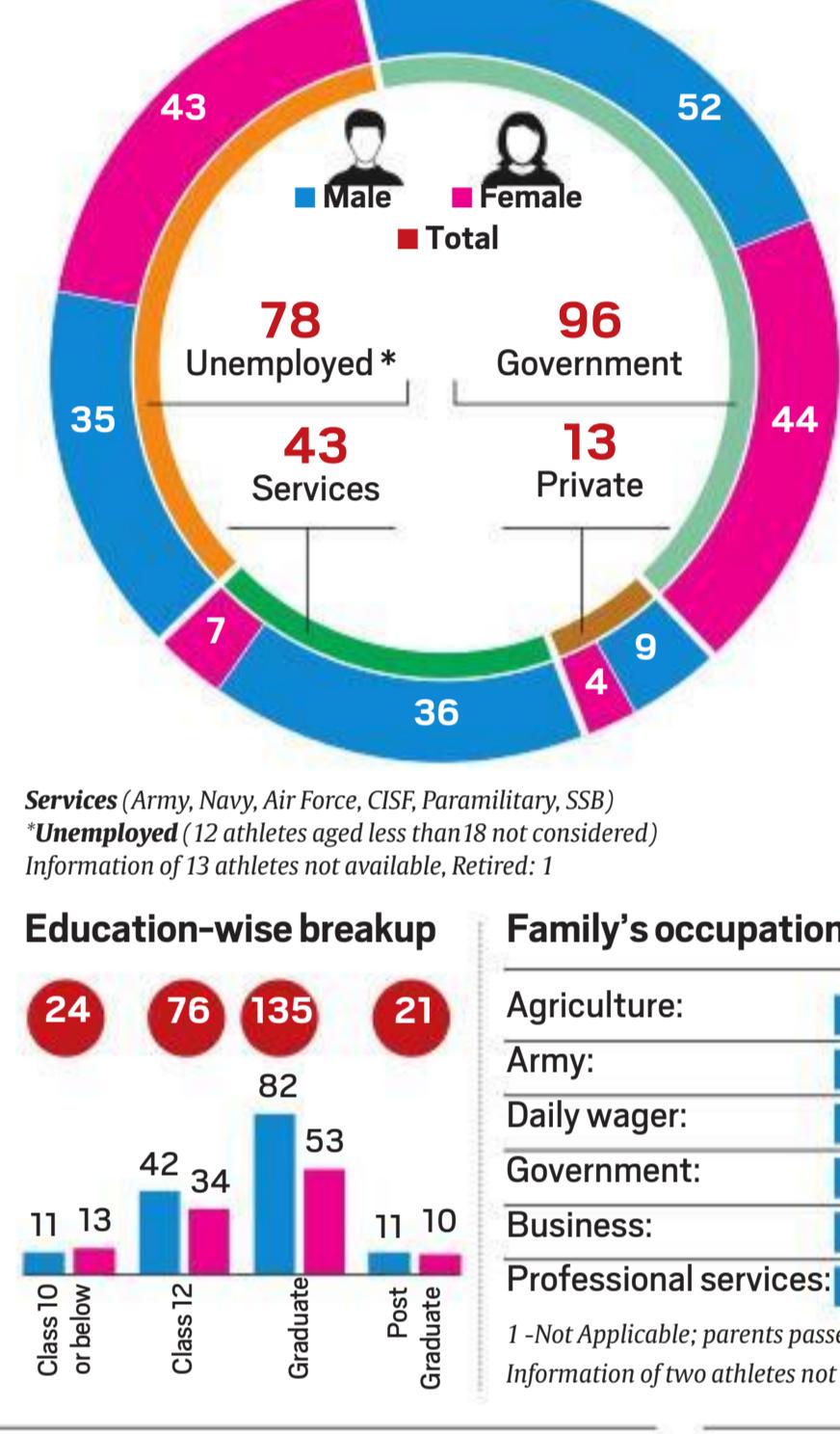
Tune in as hosts Mihir Vasavda and Amit Kamath unveil the top five sports moments selected by The Indian Express sports team – along with a surprise sixth twist.

FROM PAGE ONE

FULL REPORTS ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Look where most of India's medals come from — village & town, under Rs 5-lakh income, farm families

SECTOR-WISE TOTAL EMPLOYMENT



Where did the athletes start playing?

Academy:	98
School:	50 48
Local ground:	62 25
Home:	21 13
Army:	25 12
SAI:	20 12
College:	13 12
	5 0

Family's occupation when athlete started playing

Agriculture:	38	24	62
Army:	10	6	16
Daily wager:	21	19	40
Government:	14	21	35
Business:	27	17	44
Professional services:	34	22	56

1 - Not Applicable; parents passed away when Aman Sehrawat started playing

Information of two athletes not available

income, reflecting their rural origins. Just over a dozen have Army backgrounds and 44 medals came from those whose families had their own businesses.

■ 48 women athletes who got medals at the 2023 Asian Games were introduced to their sport at an academy. The corresponding number for men is 50.

■ A majority of these athletes were introduced to their

sport under expert tutelage. That they are from Rural and Tier 3 cities shows that basic sporting facilities and systematic coaching by experts have tapped into the interiors. Significant here is the fact that most of the early scouting and talent spotting beyond the cities was done by enterprising coaches at rudimentary private academies.

■ It might still be a struggle

but most athletes have balanced their sporting and education careers, too. Of the 232 athletes aged 20 and above, 135 were college graduates while 21 had completed their post-graduation. Ironically, parents of at least 55 of these graduate-athletes did not study beyond Class XII.

Understanding these demographics is essential as the country pitches to host the Olympics

in 2036. While the multi-billion dollar Indian Premier League (IPL) turns men with modest means into millionaires overnight, the state and Central governments are the prime movers in other sports. There's a concerted push to build new infrastructure and purse strings have been loosened to fund elite-level training.

There are concerns too – key is the absence of a safety net.

Most athletes said they had not given their post-playing career a thought. Nearly one-fourth of the medallists of employable age had no jobs. PSUs and other government-run agencies continue to remain the biggest employers, with only 13 athletes finding a job with private firms.

Speaking to The Indian Express in an Idea Exchange last October, Olympic gold medalist Abhinav Bindra had highlighted the need to design a system wherein athletes are encouraged to pursue dual careers, noting that an increase in participation numbers in sports will also lead to a simultaneous increase in dropouts.

"What we really need to focus on is the aspect of dual career in sport. If you look at all the Western countries, the developed sports nations have very few athletes who just play sport all day... We have to slowly start to go in this direction. Basic education for athletes is very important," Bindra had said.

Data shows that eight out of the 16 players each in the men and women's cricket teams paused their pursuit of an educational degree after Class 10 or 12. Cricket isn't the only sport with a high number of school dropouts. Kabaddi and chess, where the young Indian brigade is taking the world by storm, are other two sports in which athletes had to halt their academic journey after Class 10 or 12.

"XPOSat is only the world's second such mission. In 2021, NASA had launched Imaging X-ray Polarimetry Explorer (IXPE) to operate and perform X-ray polarisation measurements within the soft X-ray band, whereas XPOSat will operate within the medium X-ray band.

It will carry two payloads – POLIX (Polarimeter Instrument in X-rays) and XSPEC (X-ray Spectroscopy and Timing). According to ISRO, POLIX is expected to observe about 40 bright astronomical sources of different categories; XSPEC will study the electromagnetic spectrum generated by different matter.

X-ray polarisation serves as a crucial diagnostic tool for examining the radiation mechanism and geometry of celestial sources. The insights derived from X-ray

who had crossed all limits while molesting a BHU student..."

"Every woman across the country is seeing how BJP is playing with women's dignity and is protecting those accused of atrocities, harassment and rape. Women will not give even a single vote to the BJP in the upcoming elections. Women will be the reason for BJP's defeat... The truth of the BJP is in front of the public today. The public will give its verdict by defeating the BJP in the upcoming elections and will do justice to women," he said.

The police said the three were arrested Saturday night. "They have confessed to the crime. We have recovered mobile phones from the accused, and the motorcycle they used in the crime," Varanasi DCP (Kashi zone) Ram Sevak Gautam told The Indian Express on Sunday.

A local court Sunday evening sent the three accused to judicial custody for 14 days.

Asked if the accused were associated with the BJP IT cell, DCP Gautam said, "We asked them about the crime. It doesn't matter who is associated with whom. We are finding out if they have a criminal history and will involve the Gangsters Act too."

Questioned about the delay in arrest, he said, "Investigation and searches were on."

Targeting the ruling party, Samajwadi Party president and Leader of Opposition in the Assembly Akhilesh Yadav said in a post on X: "This is the new crop of BJP leaders, who have patronage from the senior leadership of the BJP. The so-called search for them was ongoing and they had to be finally arrested after solid evidence and the increasing anger. They are those BJP people

proached us from behind. They parked their motorcycle there and separated my friend and me."

"They shut my mouth tightly and took me to a corner, kissed me forcibly, took off my clothes and recorded photos and videos. When I shouted for help, they threatened to kill me. They left me go after 10-15 minutes. When I ran towards my hostel, I heard the sound of the motorcycle. Then, I hid at the residence of a professor, who took me to the security officials," she said.

The initial FIR was lodged against unidentified men under IPC sections 354-B (assault or use of criminal force to woman with intent to disrobe) and 506 (criminal intimidation) and under the IT Act. Days after the incident, the police said they added charges of gangrape to the FIR after the victim gave a fresh statement. IPC Sections 341 (wrongful restraint), 342 (wrongful confinement), 507 (criminal intimidation by anonymous communication), and 509 (word, gesture or act intended to insult modesty of a woman) were also added.

The Indian Express had reported that two days before the incident, another student faced a similar ordeal on the night of October 30, and the Proctor's office was informed about it. The institute's Dean had confirmed to The Indian Express that a complaint regarding the October 30 incident was received by the Proctor's office and that action was being taken.

Several members of the IIT-BHU Students' Parliament said there had been a "delay in taking action in the earlier incident". Both incidents happened at a relatively isolated spot on the campus.

AstroSat launched in 2015. "This is a great trend, in fact, an overwhelming one. We should have a regular stream of science satellites, preferably one per year," S Seetha, former ISRO scientist who led the Mangalyaan mission, told The Indian Express.

Across the world, there have been only a handful of experiments on X-ray polarisation measurements. Some of these have been balloon-based and short-duration experiments by NASA and collaborators. Indian astronomers, using AstroSat, have undertaken timing and broadband spectroscopy of X-ray sources but no polarisation studies were performed.

XPOSat is, therefore, expected to be a gamechanger in the field, as there have been only timing, spectroscopy and imaging-based studies done in this X-ray frequency band, globally.

"This is primarily due to the difficulty in developing sensitive instrumentation. In this regard, XPOSat is a beginning for India," said Seetha.

Anjali Marar works at the Raman Research Institute, Bengaluru

● IIT sexual assault: 3 held, 2 claim links to BJP IT cell

BJP media team for Kashi zone told The Indian Express: "Patel was a co-coordinator of the BJP IT cell, Varanasi unit, while Pandey was a coordinator for BJP IT cell Varanasi unit. They are not part of the new team that was formed after Diwali."

UP BJP president Bhupendra Chaudhary did not respond to calls and messages for comments. State BJP IT cell chief Kameshwar Nath Mishra did not comment on whether the accused were associated with the party's IT cell in Varanasi.

The police said the three were arrested Saturday night.

"They have confessed to the crime. We have recovered mobile phones from the accused, and the motorcycle they used in the crime," Varanasi DCP (Kashi zone) Ram Sevak Gautam told The Indian Express on Sunday.

A local court Sunday evening sent the three accused to judicial custody for 14 days.

Asked if the accused were associated with the BJP IT cell, DCP Gautam said, "We asked them about the crime. It doesn't matter who is associated with whom. We are finding out if they have a criminal history and will involve the Gangsters Act too."

Questioned about the delay in arrest, he said, "Investigation and searches were on."

Targeting the ruling party, Samajwadi Party president and Leader of Opposition in the Assembly Akhilesh Yadav said in a post on X: "This is the new crop of BJP leaders, who have patronage from the senior leadership of the BJP. The so-called search for them was ongoing and they had to be finally arrested after solid evidence and the increasing anger. They are those BJP people

● ISRO launch: Special space observatory, X-ray telescope

and its cosmic sources – celestial bodies including black holes, neutron stars and magnetars.

The PSLV-C58 rocket, with primary payload XPOSat and 10 other satellites to be deployed in low-earth orbits, is scheduled to lift off from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota at 9.10 am on Monday.

XPOSat is only the world's second such mission. In 2021, NASA had launched Imaging X-ray Polarimetry Explorer (IXPE) to operate and perform X-ray polarisation measurements within the soft X-ray band, whereas XPOSat will operate within the medium X-ray band.

It will carry two payloads – POLIX (Polarimeter Instrument in X-rays) and XSPEC (X-ray Spectroscopy and Timing). According to ISRO, POLIX is expected to observe about 40 bright astronomical sources of different categories; XSPEC will study the electromagnetic spectrum generated by different matter.

X-ray polarisation serves as a crucial diagnostic tool for examining the radiation mechanism and geometry of celestial sources.

The insights derived from X-ray

polarisation measurements on celestial objects like black holes, neutron stars and active galactic nuclei, hold the potential to significantly improve the understanding of their physics.

Built entirely by two Bengaluru-based institutes – ISRO's UR Rao Satellite Centre and Raman Research Institute – XPOSat was conceptualised in 2008 and the formal pact with the space agency was inked in 2015.

XPOSat will become the country's third space-based observatory after the recently launched solar mission Aditya-L1, and

the payload for the X-ray Polarimeter Satellite mission

AstroSat launched in 2015.

"This is a great trend, in fact, an overwhelming one. We should have a regular stream of science satellites, preferably one per year," S Seetha, former ISRO scientist who led the Mangalyaan mission, told The Indian Express.

Across the world, there have been only a handful of experiments on X-ray polarisation measurements. Some of these have been balloon-based and short-duration experiments by NASA and collaborators. Indian astronomers, using AstroSat, have undertaken timing and broadband spectroscopy of X-ray sources but no polarisation studies were performed.

XPOSat is, therefore, expected to be a gamechanger in the field, as there have been only timing, spectroscopy and imaging-based studies done in this X-ray frequency band, globally.

"This is primarily due to the difficulty in developing sensitive instrumentation. In this regard, XPOSat is a beginning for India," said Seetha.

Anjali Marar works at the Raman Research Institute, Bengaluru

Goa: Cong and AAP object to Shiva photos shown at Sunburn, seek action

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

PANAJI, DECEMBER 31

THE OPPOSITION parties in Goa – Congress and AAP – have demanded action against the organisers of the Sunburn electronic dance music (EDM) festival for allegedly hurting religious sentiments, claiming that images of Lord Shiva were flashed on LED screen and portrayed in a "derogatory" manner.

AAP Goa president Amit Palekar said: "Lord Shiva's image was used during the festival. People drinking alcohol, dancing to loud music with Shiva's photos flashing on screen in a derogatory manner."

The organisers of the EDM festival

hurt my Sanatan Dharma. An FIR should be registered against the festival organisers since the sanctity of our Sanatan Dharma has been compromised. The use of God for the purpose of an EDM festival where alcohol is served is not right."

Congress leader Vijay Bhike filed a police complaint at Mapusa police station, demanding action against the festival organisers. The complaint said: "The organisers have intentionally insulted the religious feelings of Hindus by portraying that Lord Shiva supports drinking alcohol, consumption of prohibited substances and other illicit activities

that take place during the event." On Saturday, a group of Hindu outfits led by Hindu Jan Jagruti Samiti also filed a complaint against organisers of the festival. "It has been observed that at the present Sunburn Festival, the image of Lord Shiva was flashed on the screen... and people have been drinking alcohol and dancing to loud music in an indecent manner," the complaint read. The Hindu Jan Jagruti Samiti had earlier called for a ban on the annual festival in Goa, claiming it promoted "drug culture".

A police officer said: "We have received the complaints and are looking into the case. No

DECEMBER AQI IN CITY WAS 348, HIGHEST SINCE 2018 Delhi saw more than 200 'good to moderate' air days in 2023

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

DESPITE RECORDING the most polluted December month in four years, Delhi's average air quality was the best recorded till date this year – barring 2020 – with the daily average air quality index settling at 204.

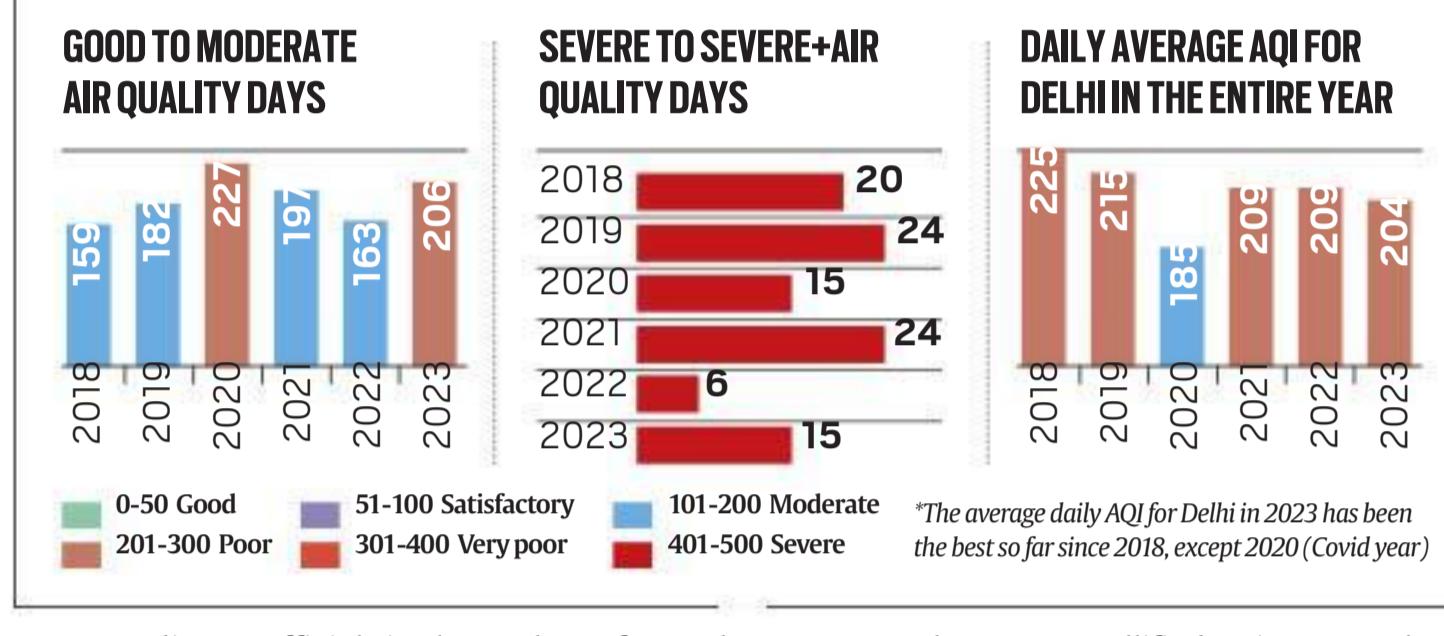
"The average daily AQI for Delhi during the entire year 2023 has been the best so far since 2018... barring 2020, which saw an exceptional AQI owing to continued spells of lockdown and low anthropogenic activities round the year (because of Covid lockdowns), the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) said in a statement.

The December AQI, however, was 348, the highest since 2018. "Barring 2020, the year 2023 witnessed four months (March, April, June and July) with best ever daily average AQI and three months (January, February and May) with second best daily average AQI during the entire period from 2018 to 2023," the statement added.

The number of days with good to moderate AQI (between 0 and 200 on the AQI scale) were 206, second only to the 227 such days seen in the Covid year (2020). "The number of days with Severe + Very poor AQI were 15 during 2023, which is also the second-best figure for the period between 2018–2023," the statement added.



A foggy Sunday morning. The number of days with Severe to Severe + AQI in Delhi were 15 during 2023, the CAQM said. Gajendra Yadav



According to officials in the Delhi Pollution Control Committee, heavy rains in July and August were behind the high number of good and satisfactory days in the city. Calm wind conditions and the dry months that followed, however, were behind the rapid deterioration in AQI

thereafter. "The year 2023 also witnessed much lower levels of episodic events like farm burnings during paddy harvesting season, bursting of crackers during religious festivals and marriages/celebrations etc. However, the benefit attributable to the same in Delhi's AQI was nullified owing to much adverse climatic, meteorological, low temperature and calm wind conditions in the region, impeding effective dispersion of the pollutants and resulting in a spike in the daily average AQI during the winter months in particular," CAQM said.

Pass percentage of Class IX, XI students in Delhi govt schools drops below pre-pandemic level'

VIDHEESA KUNTAMALLA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

THE PASS percentage of Class IX and Class XI students in Delhi government schools has dipped below pre-pandemic levels, according to data recently submitted to the Delhi Assembly in response to a question asked by Opposition leader Ramvir Singh Bidhuri.

While the pass percentage of Class IX students has seen a sharp dip from 84.72% in the academic session 2019-20 to 65.52% in 2022-23, the performance of Class XI students has also witnessed a significant decline to 73.84% in 2022-23 as compared to 99.25% in 2019-20, making this the lowest

score in the past four years.

For Class IX students, the pass percentage for the years 2019, 2020 and 2021 stood at 84.72%, 87.13% and 88.49% respectively, and for Class XI students, it ranged from 97% to 99% in the three years before a drastic drop in 2022-23.

"All students who have failed in class 9th and 11th as per...

Promotion Policy, students remain in the same class in which they failed. The department has no policy to remove failed students from the school."

Speaking to *The Indian Express*, a government school teacher, who teaches Classes VI to X, said on the condition of anonymity:

"The no-detention policy also has a role to play in the drop in pass

percentage when it comes to students of Class IX. Until Class VIII, students can't be detained, but when they come to Class IX their performance determines whether they can move to the next class. Also students from poorer backgrounds in border areas of Delhi don't show up at schools, leading to low attendance levels."

On the drop in Class XI's pass percentage, the teacher quoted above pointed out that several students from BPL backgrounds drop out after Class X to support families financially. A few Heads of Schools (HoS) have also expressed concerns about the learning gaps and the losses that happened during the pandemic era.

"A lot of relaxation was given to students in their assessments during the pandemic years. The loss of touch and practice of coming to school everyday has resulted in huge learning gaps, as a result of which the pass percentage of both classes IX and XI in government school students is lower compared to the pre-pandemic years," said Ajay Kumar Choubey, Principal of Sarvodaya Bal Vidyalaya, Rouse Avenue.

Another HoS of a school in the North West district said, "The digital gap during Covid, when students could not access classes regularly and teaching was interrupted as there was no availability of devices, could be one of the contributing factors towards the drop in pass percentages."

Ex-MP accuses attendants of installing payment apps on his phone, embezzling funds

New Delhi: A 79-year-old former Member of Parliament (MP) from Bihar has approached the Delhi Police to initiate a probe against two of his attendants for allegedly misusing his details to embezzle money from his account by installing multiple payment applications without his permission.

Police said the accused also took money from farmers who would work on the leader's piece of land on a lease basis.

Dharmesh Prasad Verma, the victim, is a Samajwadi Party leader and former MP and MLA. Police said a case has been registered in New Delhi. Verma accused the attendants of misusing his Parliament Annexe card. The men helped him maintain his accounts but later embezzled his money, he said. A case was registered in the matter on December 22 and the accused are being traced.

As per police, the accused are in their early 20s. "They have worked with the minister's family for years. Since the complainant is very old, he was dependent on others to run his business and take care of his accounts. The accused managed to get hold of all personal banking details. In a few months, they stole Rs 35 lakhs," said an officer.

The probe shows the accused used multiple applications on different phones and were connected to Verma's Parliament Annexe account. "In February, Verma found out that he had lost around Rs 18,000-Rs 20,000 as someone was using his credit cards without his permission..." added the officer.

Police found that Verma often leased parts of his farms for cultivation. He charged an amount from farmers, which was collected every week or month. ENS

Enjoy Enhanced Banking Convenience

Canara Bank A Government of India Undertaking Together We Can

2024 HAPPY NEW YEAR

FOR AN UPGRADED LIVING

Compare and Shop Solution
Dashboard Features
Apply for Loan
Open FD/RD/Tax Saver Accounts & many more...

YET ANOTHER STEP CLOSER TO CUSTOMERS...

Balance Enquiry
Mini Statement
Account Statement
FD/RD Summary & many more features...

THE BUSINESS BANKING SUPER APP

360° Dashboard
Forex Transactions
Trade Finance for LCs, BGs, etc.
Bulk Payment Option & many more...

Canara ai1 Retail
Canara WhatsApp Banking 90760 30001
Canara ai1 Corporate

www.canarabank.com | 1800 1030

Over 1 lakh people availed free treatment under Delhi Arogya Kosh scheme till October

GAYATHRI MANI
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

AS MANY AS 1.13 lakh people have availed of free health treatment being provided under the city Government's Delhi Arogya Kosh scheme, till October last year, according to government data. Some of the tests include dialysis, radiology tests, surgeries, treatment under the Farishtey scheme and many more.

Constituted in 2011, the Delhi Arogya Kosh (DAK) has five components/schemes – Financial assistance to EWS patients, Free High-End Radiological Diagnostic Test Scheme, Cashless Specified Surgeries Scheme, RTA (Road Traffic Accident) Scheme ('i.e. Farishtey Scheme') and Cashless Dialysis Scheme.

According to the data, the number of beneficiaries under the scheme is increasing substantially in comparison to 2022. In 2022-23, a total of 1,27,785 beneficiaries availed of the free treatments and tests under this DAK scheme. In 2023, it was 1,13,693 till October.

Under the Farishtey Scheme, cashless treatment is provided to medico-legal victims of road accidents, acid attacks and thermal burn injury, when the incident takes place within the jurisdiction of Delhi.

Following the treatment, the registered nursing homes/private hospitals, seek reimbursement of the costs incurred during treatment of such victims by

NOS. OF BENEFICIARIES AVAILING TESTS & TREATMENTS VIA SCHEME

Year	2022-2023	2023-2024*
Free High-end Radiological Tests Scheme	1,15,358	1,04,156
Free Specified Surgery Scheme	5,218	3,004
Financial Assistance Scheme	1,295	684
Farishtey Scheme (RTA)	3,698	3,604
Cashless Dialysis	2,216	2,245

PAYMENTS (IN ₹) TO PRIVATE HOSPITALS, VENDORS AND IMAGING CENTRES

Year	2022-2023	2023-2024*
Free High-end Radiological Tests	16 crore	13 crore
Cashless Dialysis	5.3 crore	19 crore
Financial Assistance Scheme	1,295	684
Farishtey Scheme (RTA)	4.8 crore	3.5 crore
Free Specified Surgery Scheme	2.7 crore	9.1 crore



1,13,693 beneficiaries availed free treatments till October. Archive

The data also shows that treatment provided under the Farishtey Scheme has been increasing in comparison to 2022.

Officials said the amount spent under the scheme had also increased.

Further, the government has spent approximately Rs 26 crore on the schemes provided through DAK. "Of this, payments for 2,216 patients amounting to Rs 2.08 crore had been released and payment for 1,392 patients amounting to Rs 1.46 crore is pending. All the bills have been verified and approved," said a senior health department official.

War of words between AAP & BJP over Ram Temple consecration ceremony

New Delhi: A war of words broke out between Delhi minister Saurabh Bharadwaj and the Delhi unit of the BJP over invitation to the consecration ceremony of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya on January 22.

While the AAP leader said Ram Temple belongs to the whole nation, BJP said that "people who opposed the construction of the temple four years ago are now Ram Bhakts." "Ram Temple belongs to the whole country. Who is the BJP to decide

who to invite and who to leave out? People will go whenever they want to," said Bharadwaj when asked about an invitation to the consecration ceremony.

Delhi BJP Spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor said, "Saurabh Bharadwaj's statement smacks of political frustration. We wish to remind Bharadwaj that it is not the BJP but Ram Janam Bhumi Kshetra Trust, which is inviting eminent personalities including political leaders." ENS

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TEACHER EDUCATION, GUJARAT
(A State Public University established by Government of Gujarat)

IITE is inviting applications for Chanakya Awards for Teacher Education

Categories:

- 1. Best Teacher Trainee
- 2. Best Teacher Educator
- 3. Best Teacher Education Institute

Applications are invited from 1st January 2024 to 15th March 2024

Kindly refer to the website: www.iite.ac.in for details and online application.



Ensuring Income and Security after Sixty

More than 6 Crore

Subscribers Enrolled in Atal Pension Yojana

Join APY today for secured future



"Banking the unbanked, funding the unfunded and financially securing the unsecured are the three aspects our Government is focused on. Our efforts are aimed at helping our citizens lead a life of dignity and happiness"

Shri Narendra Modi

Hon'ble Prime Minister of India



Get guaranteed lifelong pension besides two other benefits:-

1	Lifelong pension guarantee of ₹ 1000/- or ₹ 2000/- or ₹ 3000/- or ₹ 4000/- or ₹ 5000/-
2	Lifelong, equal pension to the spouse after the death of the subscriber
3	After the death of the husband/wife, the corpus accumulated till 60 years to be returned to the nominee

If your age is between 18 to 40 years, you can join Atal Pension Yojana

Join today, Pay less	Age	Pension Slab (₹)	Payable Amt. (₹)	Pension Slab (₹)	Payable Amt. (₹)
	18	1000	42 Per Month	5000	210 Per Month
	40	1000	291 Per Month	5000	1454 Per Month

Contact your nearest Post Office/ Bank or Call 1800 110 069 or visit www.pfrda.org.in

BRIEFLY

Delhi govt to extend its EV policy for three months

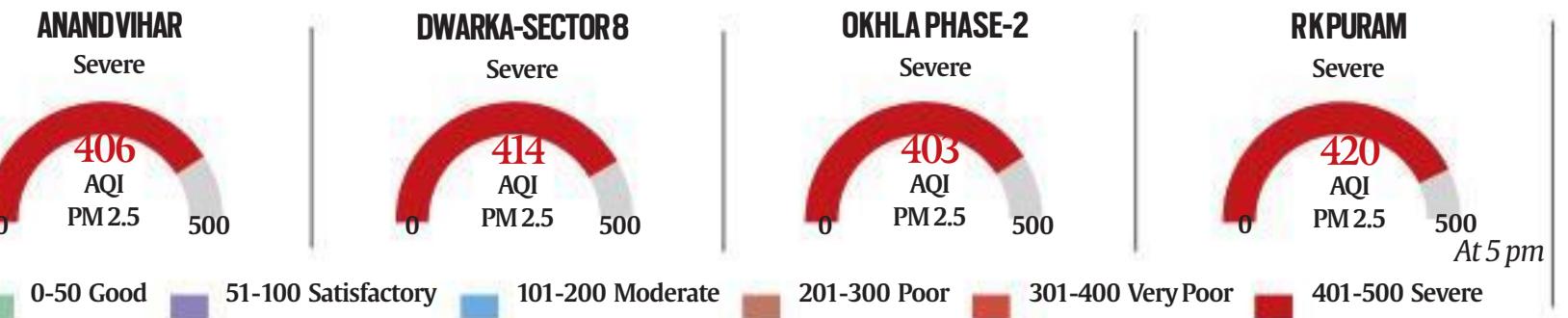
New Delhi: Delhi Transport department has decided to extend the Electric Vehicle Policy for another three months. Sources said that the subsidies under the policy will continue till the new policy is approved and notified. The policy, launched in 2020, was already on extension; the extended period expired on Sunday. The key aim behind this policy was to push EVs in Delhi and increase the EV share in total vehicle sales to 25 per cent by 2024. ENS

E-rickshaw driver's death: Kin seek relief, action on cop

New Delhi: A day after an e-rickshaw driver was killed in Mayapuri area allegedly after a car driven by a drunk police constable hit his three-wheeler, the family members demanded adequate compensation and said strict action must be taken against the accused. The family of Amit Jha (40), who was killed on Saturday, said he was the only earning member of the house and blamed negligence of the constable for his death. "My maternal uncle was the only earning person in his house. We request the government to help the family members financially and take strict action against the accused," said Ashish, the nephew of Jha. PTI

'Woman kills mother over property row'

New Delhi: A 36-year-old woman was arrested for allegedly killing her mother over a property dispute in outer Delhi's Ranholi, police said Sunday. The accused, Promila, works as a teacher and was living with her father, who had separated from her mother Beermati (65), they said. According to police, Beermati's daughter-in-law Asha found her body near the disputed plot Saturday. Later, Beermati's family informed police. "A case of murder was registered. The probe team came to know that Beermati's 70-year-old husband, an ex-serviceman and a self-styled godman, was embroiled in a property dispute with her," an official said. PTI



S K Y W A T C H
FORECAST: January 1
Mainly clear sky. Moderate to dense fog in the morning.
AQI: Very poor

MAX: 18 1.6°C below normal
MIN: 10 2.8°C above normal

NATIONAL EXECUTIVE MEETING HELD

On AAP's New Year platter: ED summons, nominations for RS

MALLICA JOSHI
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

AN ENFORCEMENT Directorate summons and three Rajya Sabha nominees – for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the New Year brings with it two key decisions.

In its third summons, the ED has asked party convener and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal to appear for questioning in relation to the Delhi excise policy case. The Delhi CM did not appear for questioning in November or December.

Party leaders said there was no clarity on whether Kejriwal will appear before ED for questioning on January 3.

Kejriwal, who had gone to Hoshiarpur in Punjab for a Vipassana meditation session and returned to Delhi Saturday, presided over AAP's national executive and national council meetings via video conferencing on Sunday. He was joined by Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann and National Organisation General Secretary Sandeep Pathak.

During the meetings, Kejriwal emphasised on expanding the party's footprint and strengthening the organisation across the country.

"The AAP is a part of the INDIA alliance in the Lok Sabha elections. We must contest well on the seats we get in seat sharing, and our entire effort would be to win all those seats. Volunteers of the



Kejriwal presided over the meeting via video conferencing on Sunday.

party from states where the AAP isn't contesting Lok Sabha elections will come and help in the places where elections are being contested," Kejriwal said. "After the Lok Sabha elections, the Haryana Assembly election is the most significant for us. The AAP intends to form the government in Haryana...There's a possibility of elections in Haryana in October-November," he added.

Kejriwal said that a lot of work had been done in Punjab over the past two years. He highlighted schemes such as free power, mohalla clinics, pilgrimages for senior citizens, and infrastructure upgrade in schools.

Hitting out at the BJP and the Congress, Kejriwal said, "These people have replaced the word manifesto with 'guarantee', a term stolen from us. They have started talking about 'Modi's guarantee'

and 'Congress's guarantee.' These people have given guarantees to the public, but none fulfilled them because their intentions are not right... our leaders who are in jail are our heroes, and we are very proud of them. If you talk about giving good education and free medical treatment, then going to jail will be necessary, and we must be prepared for it."

Meanwhile, according to party insiders, with the terms of its three Rajya Sabha MPs from Delhi – Sanjay Singh, ND Gupta and Sushil Gupta – ending soon, there is also speculation among party members regarding renomination.

"These are two key questions for the party at the moment. The CM has returned after his mediation session and a decision on both counts is expected soon. When it comes to Rajya Sabha nominees, several factors, including Sanjay Singh's arrest and subsequent judicial custody, have to be taken into account," a senior party leader said.

Sources said that the party may have to take the hard call to nominate someone else for Rajya Sabha, and a surprise announcement could be in the wings.

"Both Manish Sisodia and Vijay Nair, two important party leaders, have been in jail for several months and have been denied bail several times. In a situation like this, renominating Singh, who is in jail at present, may hurt the party," the party insider said.

AISWARYA RAJ
GURGAON, DECEMBER 31

AFTER HER father passed away in March, a 16-year-old girl took up a job as a full-time help with a family who lived in an apartment in Gurgaon's Sector 43. Her work involved doing domestic chores. Since then, she has brought in extra income for her family of six – including her mother and an elder sister who is paralysed – and is now about to quit to get married. Her younger sister, aged 13, is already "married".

The teen's work situation is not unique in Gurgaon, where several such young girls, mostly from states such as West Bengal, take up 24x7 jobs. However, three cases of physical and sexual abuse of minor domestic help that came to light this year – two as recently as this month – have shed light on the lack of a safety net and workers' rights.

The domestic workers' union has now sought a ban on 24-hour contracts. While discussions for a charter spelling out the rights of domestic workers have been ongoing, Gurgaon Deputy Commissioner Nishant Kumar Yadav said it would take another 10 days before it is ready.

Shakira (45), a West Bengal resident who works and stays in Sector 47, said many women look for such prospects for their daughters as a full-time job pays Rs 14,000 a month: "We don't do it as we have a family to look after so we send our girls who are not yet married. Sometimes, I feel it is safer sending them to the employers' houses than making them stay in the jhuggis."

CASES THIS YEAR

FEB 7: Gurgaon-based couple arrested for allegedly torturing and assaulting a 17-year-old domestic help from Jharkhand who they hired to take care of their three-year-old child.

DEC 12: A 13-year-old girl working as a domestic help in an upscale locality in Gurgaon was allegedly physically and sexually

assaulted by her employers who thrashed her, stripped her, and confined her in their house, police said.

DEC 22: A head constable with the Gurgaon Police escort guard was arrested and suspended from the force for allegedly raping a minor domestic help at his house. The 14-year-old victim was from Bengal

December and have been looking for a job," she said.

Her mother used to work at five houses and get paid Rs 20,000 a month. Her father was doing scaffolding work when a sheet fell on him and he died. "We are yet to get compensation from the contractor for the accident," she added.

In the Winter Session of Parliament, the Ministry of Labour and Employment was asked if the government had data on child labour and if any steps were taken to prevent it. Minister of State for Labour and Employment Rameswar Teli replied, "The government has taken various measures and made efforts to prevent child labour which include legislative measures, rehabilitation strategy, providing right to free education and general socio-economic development."

The minister also cited data from the National Crime Records Bureau and said there were 476, 613 and 751 cases during 2020, 2021 and 2022 respectively under the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, in the country.

Meanwhile, Maya John, convenor of Gharelu Kamgar Union, said they are yet to hear back from the Gurgaon administration on the charter. "If they don't reach out in the next three days, we will protest," she said.

She said in a city like Gurgaon, migrant labourers who are in debt and have a family to look after are pushed into accepting such prospects, adding that Article 23 of the Constitution is violated in such cases. "Girls and women enter an employer's home and become invisible to the public eye as they fully control them. Their movement is restricted, the number of hours is unquantifiable and they work below minimum wage, fostering an environment of forced labour. Moreover, data collected by government agencies regarding such labourers is conflicting," she said.

Rishi Kant of Shakti Vahini, a social services organisation in Delhi, said forced migration, dropouts especially after Covid, and unregistered placement agencies who reach villages in states like West Bengal and Jharkhand with false promises result in the employment of minors in such jobs. "Cities like Gurgaon and Noida have many similar cases because of a lack of regulation. Agencies provide many girls for domestic work and rob them of their monthly income as well. This is where the RWA should step in. When incidents of torture surface, the RWA heads should also be booked. They give permits for entry to the society to workers and they have to take accountability in such cases," he said.

Farmers oppose land acquisition for airport expansion in Jewar

DHEERAJ MISHRA
NOIDA, DECEMBER 31

FARMERS OF 14 villages in Gautam Buddha Nagar's Jewar participated in a Mahapanchayat to oppose the proposed land acquisition for the expansion of the Noida International Airport, which is in its third and fourth phases. Farmers said that the area is proposed to be developed in the later stage of the airport project, and have questioned why is the government acquiring land now.

Drawing comparison from the other acquisition of the airport, farmers pointed out that the affected families are still in trouble and unable to buy land anywhere because of high prices. "We are not opposing any kind of development. Never in history, farmers have opposed the development of society... But don't farmers have the right to bargain over their land? This is not just about our future, our entire future generations will become landless," said Ravindra Kumar Attri, one of the organisers of the Mahapanchayat.

He further said that the government is acquiring their land only to create a land bank for fu-



At the mahapanchayat on Sunday. Express

ture. "The actual work in the area for airport expansion will begin much later, probably by 2041. Then why have they begun the land acquisition process now? Because if they buy the land today, they will get it at a cheaper rate, the land prices will increase in the future and farmers will have to bear all the losses," said Attri.

Master Tejal Singh of Neemka Shahajahanpur village, who headed the panchayat held in Khwajpur village, said that the administration should talk to farmers stating a legal reason why the acquisition is being done at this stage. "We have seen what happened to those farmers who gave their lands in the acquisition

of the first and second phases. Those who were farmers for many generations are now landless. If a person has been practicing farming throughout his life, what will he do if you take his land," said Singh while addressing the public. "And if they (government) really want our land, they will have to factor in the inflation as well as circle rate of 2041 and accordingly provide compensation to us," he further said.

Additional District Magistrate Balram Singh said, "We have no information about this Mahapanchayat. If they (farmers) give any memorandum, then their grievances will be considered."

A FOGGY NEW YEAR'S EVE

A sea of people thronged the India Gate on the eve of New Year, on Sunday. Visibility in Delhi improved marginally on Sunday, with the maximum temperature settling at 15.9 degrees Celsius, five notches below the season's average, according to the IMD. Abhinav Saha

A WALK DOWN MEMORY LANE IN CHAWRI BAZAAR

A footnote in history, how courtesans once enhanced Delhi's rich culture

UPASIKA SINGHAL

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

WALKING DOWN the street from Ajmeri Gate to Jama Masjid, one can't help but imagine a time when beautiful and talented women once lived in plush apartments, behind intricately carved wooden *jharokas*. Music would pour out from these quarters, the sounds of their anklets would chime in unison, and men would often linger on the other side of the road facing the balconies in hopes of getting a glimpse of a famed *tawaif* (courtesan).

While nowadays the word is often used with negative undertones, a glimpse into the history of Chawri Bazaar is enough to make one realize how *tawaifs* were once the cornerstone of culture, dance and music.

Chawri Bazaar, or *Bazaar-e-Husn* (marketplace of beauties) as it was once called, once served as

a hub for the *tawaifs* of old.

According to Gaurav Sharma, a history researcher who has been conducting heritage walks since 2016, some *tawaifs* would be so covetous that on the occasions they ventured out of their mansions, they would use covered palanquins to avoid passersby from catching a glimpse of their famed beauty.

The *tawaifs* had to follow tough regimes to hone their art.

According to Sharma, girls often



A heritage walk at Chawri Bazaar; (R) the mosque built by Mubarak Begum. Gajendra Yadav

ranks and caught the eye of the

then British Resident David Ochterlony and later married him. After Ochterlony's death, Mubarak used her inheritance to build a mosque in her name – a privilege granted only to the nobility.

However, as the British hold

over India strengthened, so did their puritan culture and perspective. Though the British did indulge in courtesans, it was nothing as compared to the enthusiasm of their predecessors.

One of the most notable of British-era *tawaifs* was Mubarak Begum. According to William Dalrymple's *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India*, Mubarak was born in a poor Brahmin family from Pune. Over the years, she rose through the

themselves...They owned property and paid taxes," notes Singh in her paper.

According to Veena Talwar Oldenburg's *Lifestyle as Resistance*:

"Now falling under the

The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, in 1856, the British took control of Oudh (Awadh). As dissatisfaction with the East India Company intensified, the *tawaifs* actively participated in the uprising, operating discreetly. Their kothas, earlier centres of matters of philosophy and culture, now served as meeting places and shelters, hubs for rebels.

"After quelling the rebellion of 1857, the British turned their fury against the powerful elite of Lucknow. The courtesans' names were on the lists of property confiscated by British officials for proven involvement in the siege and rebellion against colonial rule in 1857," notes Oldenburg.

Despite being heavily penalised and regulated by the authorities, these women still managed to keep the light of their independence burning. They kept double ledgers, bribed policemen, or even publicly denounced the taxes asked of them. Oldenburg argues rather poignantly that the *tawaifs* continued to pursue their livelihood, in the face of increasing societal disapproval, in defiance of patriarchal values, and in the face of the imminent death of their art.

epaper.indianexpress.com

GOVT & POLITICS

PM: India brimming with confidence, we should maintain the momentum in 2024

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

SAYING "THERE is excitement and enthusiasm in the entire country", Prime Minister Narendra Modi Sunday described the Ram temple opening in Ayodhya on January 22 as a "historic moment" and urged people to share artistic creations depicting it on social media using a "common hashtag".

"This compilation," the PM said in his monthly Mann Ki Baat address, "will turn into a flow of emotions and devotion in which everyone will be immersively imbued with the ethos of Ram".

Pointing out that he himself shared some songs and bhajans on his social media accounts, he said, "During the last few days many new songs and new bhajans have been composed on Shri Ram and Ayodhya. Many people are also writing new poems... I request you to share your creations on social media with the hashtag Shri Ram Bhajan (#shriRamBhajan)".

In the radio address, his last



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at his residence in New Delhi. This photograph was one of the 23 released on narendramodi.in, capturing his memorable moments in 2023.

this year, the PM recounted some of the country's achievements, ranging from legislation to sports to space missions, and urged people to take "inspiration and pride" from these successes and "make new resolves".

"Today every corner of India is brimming with self-confidence, imbued with the spirit of a devel-

oped India; the spirit of self-reliance... we have to maintain the same spirit and momentum in 2024 as well," he said.

The PM mentioned in particular the women's reservation law, India's emergence as the 5th largest economy and the success of the G20 Summit. He also spoke about the success of

Chandrayaan-3, saying he and the entire country was proud of the scientists behind it, especially the women scientists.

Applauding the Oscars for the song Natu-Natu and the documentary 'The Elephant Whisperers', he said the world had seen "the creativity of India and understood our bonding with

the environment".

The PM said "our athletes... performed marvelously", winning 107 medals in Asian Games and 111 in Asian Para Games. "Indian players won everyone's heart with their performance in the Cricket World Cup. The victory of our women's cricket team in the Under-19 T-20 World Cup is very inspiring," he said. "Now, the Paris Olympics will be held in 2024, for which the whole country is encouraging her players," he added.

Calling it his belief that "the development of a country which does not give importance to innovation, stops", the PM said "India becoming an innovation hub is a sign that we are not going to stop".

"In 2015 we were ranked 81st in the Global Innovation Index – today our rank is 40th. This year, the number of patents filed in India was high, of which about 60% were from domestic funds. This time the highest number of Indian universities have been included in the QS Asia University Rankings. If we start making a list of these achievements, it can never be completed," he said.

Govt bans J&K outfit Tehreek-e-Hurriyat for 5 yrs under UAPA

Involved in terror, activities to separate J&K from India: Shah

MAHENDER SINGH

MANRAL

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

THE GOVERNMENT on Sunday banned the Tehreek-e-Hurriyat, Jammu and Kashmir (TeH), a separatist outfit founded by the late Syed Ali Shah Geelani in 2004, for five years under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.

Announcing the decision,

Union Home Minister Amit Shah said in a post on X: "The Tehreek-e-Hurriyat, JK (TeH) has been declared an 'Unlawful Association' under UAPA. The outfit is involved in forbidden activities to separate J&K from India and establish Islamic rule. The group is found spreading anti-India propaganda and continuing terror activities to fuel secessionism in J&K."

He said that under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's zero-tolerance policy against terrorism, "any individual or organisation found involved in anti-India activities will be thwarted forthwith".

The TeH was formed by separatist patriarch Geelani after he parted ways with the Jamiat-e-Islami in 2004. This caused a split in Jamiat as many of its leaders sided with Geelani and joined his new separatist outfit.

"The TeH members are paying tributes to terrorists who were killed in encounters with security forces and its members have been involved in supporting terrorist activities with an intent to create a reign of terror in the country, thereby endangering the security

leadership in jail, the TeH was in virtual disarray and had been running without a clear leader.

"The Central government is firmly of the opinion that having regard to the activities of the TeH, it is necessary to declare it, as an 'unlawful association' with immediate effect under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 for a period of five years from the date of its publication in the Official Gazette," it said.

Incidentally, the government banned TeH days after similar action on the Masarat Alam faction of the Jammu and Kashmir Muslim League.

In an FIR filed on May 30, 2017, the NIA had alleged that Kashmiri separatists were receiving funds from Pakistan, including from Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) co-founder Hafiz Saeed and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen chief Syed Salahuddin, to foment trouble in the Valley. Around 13 people were charged with the agency.

"Masarat Alam, the so-called poster boy of stone pelters and violent agitations in Kashmir Valley, during his custodial interrogation, revealed that Pakistan-based agents route funds through various sources, including Pakistan and its proxy organisations, for perpetrating unlawful activities, including supporting terrorist activities and sustained stone-pelting on security forces in J&K".

"The TeH members are paying tributes to terrorists who were killed in encounters with security forces and its members have been involved in supporting terrorist activities with an intent to create a reign of terror in the country, thereby endangering the security

WITH INPUTS FROM
ENS, SRINAGAR

Akhilesh walks a tightrope, says will go to Ram Temple whenever God wants me to'

ASAD REHMAN

LUCKNOW, DECEMBER 30

WHILE THE BJP is going all out for the 'Pran Pratishta' or consecration ceremony of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, scheduled for January 22, the Samajwadi Party (SP) is treating carefully on the issue. The reason for this, party leaders say, is that the Opposition party knows it cannot portray itself to be on either side – against the temple, or for it.

SP MP Dimple Yadav, party chief Akhilesh Yadav's wife, on Tuesday said she would attend the Ram Temple consecration ceremony if invited. On the other hand, Akhilesh on Thursday gave a vague answer on whether he will attend the ceremony. He said that he will go to the Temple "whenever God wants me to". Meanwhile, the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust has not made it clear whether the former UP chief minister will be invited for the event.

"Aur hamare purvaj aur hum logon ke samaj mein ye mana jaata... kijab bhagwan bulate hain, tabhi darshan paate hain aap (Our ancestors and the people from the community believe that when the Lord calls us, only then can we go and worship)," the SP chief had said on Thursday at a press briefing in Lucknow.

SP insiders say the party's stand is still ambiguous because the situation is a Catch-22 for the SP. Knowing that it depends substantially on Muslim vote in the state – something that was evident in the 2022 state Assembly polls too – the SP does not want to irk the minority community.



Workers clean carved stones at Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas 'karyashala' in Ayodhya on Sunday. PTI

The SP also does not want to turn its back on the Temple event, knowing that a large section of UP's population is celebrating the historic event.

"We know what we are, but we have to keep in mind that to win elections we need votes from all communities, and hence, we will continue to tread a balanced line. We are not against it, but we won't celebrate it like the BJP will," said an SP leader.

The SP has also faced repeated attacks from the BJP over the Ram Temple issue in the last few years. The BJP has accused the SP of being allegedly "anti-Hindu", and demanded its apology over police firing on karsevaks in Ayodhya in 1990 during the then Mulayam Singh Yadav government.

In the run-up to the 2022 UP elections, top BJP leaders, including Union Home Minister Amit Shah, party national president J

P Nadda and CM Yogi Adityanath, made references to the incident in their campaign speeches. In 2022, while the BJP won 255 of the 403 Assembly seats, the SP secured 111 seats to become the principal Opposition.

In November 2017, SP founder Mulayam Singh Yadav had justified his order to open fire on karsevaks marching towards Ayodhya in 1990, saying if even more people were required to be killed for the country's unity and integrity, the security forces would have done it. Akhilesh on the other hand has been mostly evasive on the incident.

SP national spokesperson Faraz Uddin Kidwai on Saturday said, "Lord Ram is equally everyone's. The BJP has no monopoly over a God. When Lord Ram calls us, we will go. After January 22, the Ram bhakts within the party will go and do darshan."

CAPFs plant 3.55 crore saplings in 2 yrs; MHA wants to geotag them

MAHENDER SINGH

MANRAL

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

THE UNION Ministry of Home Affairs has tasked personnel of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs), including Assam Rifles and the NSG, to geotag all the saplings they planted as part of a tree planting drive that started in 2020 in their campuses and neighbourhoods across the country.

They have been asked to upload details regarding the saplings on the Government Land Information System (GLIS) portal.

An MHA official said that from 2020 to 2022, over 3.55 crore saplings were planted by personnel of the CRPF, BSF, Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), CISF, Assam Rifles and NSG – which together comprise the Central Armed Police Forces.

On December 26, the BSF – a

nodal agency for this initiative – said in a communication to all the CAPFs that the saplings must be numbered, and that this should be "based on force name, year of plantation/LG headquarter/DIG HQ/number".

"Chief Nodal Officers, BSF, have requested to upload the details of plantation done on government land information system (GLIS) portal within two to three days. Therefore, numbering of saplings planted by CRPF during Plantation Drive 2020 to 2023 may please be done immediately as per the mechanism decided by the MHA. Further, details of plantation done may also be uploaded on GLIS portal immediately and a fortnightly ATR on all the directions may please be forwarded on 2 and 17 of every month," the communication said.

According to the ministry's annual report for 2022-23, CAPFs have been undertaking plantation drives in their campuses and neighbourhoods.

UP Chief Secy gets extension, Pant gets top post in Rajasthan

JATIN ANAND

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

THE UNION Government has extended the term of Uttar Pradesh Chief Secretary Durga Shankar Mishra for the third time and appointed Union Health Secretary Sudhanshu Pant as the Chief Secretary of Rajasthan, one of the three states where the BJP won a resounding victory in the recent Assembly polls.

The decisions were taken at a meeting of the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) on Saturday evening, just days after the Conference of Chief Secretaries was held in Delhi, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Mishra, a 1984-batch UP cadre IAS officer, was due to retire Dec 31; his tenure has been extended for a period of six months until June 2024.

Meanwhile, the Rajasthan Government gave him additional charge of the State Mines and Minerals Ltd.

ZANZIBAR RUN

MODEL MILIND Soman participated in the 120-km Indian-Tanzania Friendship Run organised by the High Commission of India in Tanzania and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Arts, Tanzania. On December 30, Soman, 58, joined over 4,000 runners of Tanzanian and Indian communities. The event was significant as the status of the relations between India and Tanzania have now been elevated to 'strategic partnership'. Also, Zanzibar has the first offshore campus of IIT Madras.

NEW RESPONSIBILITIES

WITH THE government inclined to extend tenures of top officers it trusts, more senior Intelligence Bureau officers are getting top posts in the Central Armed Police Forces. Last week, two special directors of the IB – Anish Dayal and Rahul Rasgotra – were appointed chiefs of CRPF and ITBP, respectively. Dayal will retire if incumbent IB chief Tapan Deka is given an extension beyond June.

BJP in 2024: Party heads into LS election year, primed for continuity – and change

VIKAS PATHAK

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

AFTER A year marked by mostly ups than downs, the BJP is preparing for both continuity and change in 2024. Given the pattern of candidate and CM picks in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan, party leaders are expecting a "new-look BJP" in the coming year when it will attempt returning to power nationally for the third straight term.

"We will have to see who are the ones denied a Lok Sabha ticket and if there is any Chief Minister who is asked to contest the Lok Sabha polls. Many sitting MPs may lose their tickets, some Union ministers also may lose their tickets, and the sword of a new role will dangle over the head of any CM who is asked to contest the Lok Sabha polls," said a BJP leader.

After the recent Assembly election victories, the party is confident of returning to power nationally for the third straight



BJP chief J P Nadda with UP CM Yogi Adityanath in Lucknow on Sunday. Nadda's term has been extended until June. ANI

term. According to a BJP insider, if the BJP wins, one will have to watch out for the new Council of Ministers closely as some old faces may be eased out and new ones may be given ministries.

Some leaders believe an organisational overhaul may also be on the cards. BJP president J P Nadda's term has been extended till June 2024. While some speculated that leaders with organi-

Rajasthan. All the names doing the rounds were not chosen. A complete dark horse cannot be ruled out in today's BJP."

Once the Lok Sabha elections are done and dusted with, the BJP will have three Assembly elections to prepare for. State elections are due in Maharashtra, Haryana, and Jharkhand in 2024. There is also the election to the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir that the Supreme Court has instructed to be held by September.

Party insiders said there were likely to be surprises in the states where elections would be held. In Haryana, Manohar Lal Khattar's fate will hang in the balance if the party deploys the collective leadership pitch. This is a possibility as Haryana may not be an easy win in light of the farmers' agitation of 2020-21. Jats were at the forefront of the protests there and the Congress has Bhupinder Singh Hooda, a Jat, as its most prominent face.

FULL REPORT
www.indianexpress.com

MANOJ CG

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

NEVER BEFORE had the grand old party of Indian politics been in the Opposition at the national level for such a long time. It had also never seen such an electoral low in the Hindi belt – or, in other words, never been out of sync with the public mood in the heartland so dramatically.

As the Congress continues to hunt for that elusive winning strategy, the party as also the larger Opposition are confronted with multiple challenges. Will the 2024 Lok Sabha elections be any different? Will Rahul Gandhi's Yatra 2.0 make a difference? Will the arithmetic of INDIA bloc's seat-sharing trump Narendra Modi and the BJP's calculations in the upcoming polls?

Seat-sharing is the least of the challenges INDIA bloc faces. The Congress is taking heart from the fact that the party has retained a healthy vote share even in Madhya Pradesh,

Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh – where it lost to the BJP in the recent Assembly polls – but its challenge in the last few years has been to find a formula for a 5-6% top-up in vote share that could enable it to surpass the BJP.

The biggest challenge that the Congress faces is its inability to come up with a refreshing narrative to counter the BJP. A large section of the party believes that merely positioning itself as a countervailing force to

the BJP without a solid alternative governance framework was a recipe for failure.

"We have to answer this question. Why should someone vote for the Congress? What are your new set of ideas, who are your new people, how are you going to reach out to the people in a changed manner," a party leader said. In 2019, the Congress believed its manifesto promise NYAY – the assurance to make an annual cash transfer of Rs

72,000 to the poorest 20% families – would be a game changer. It came a cropper.

Over the last five years, the Congress's two new electoral prescriptions have been welfare sops (called guarantees) and the pitch for a caste census. "Caste census was a fresh idea. Whether it worked or not was a different thing. On the economic front, what is it that we presented? On competitive welfare, it is now clear that the party in power is better at delivery. It is like competitive Hindutva... we can never be better than them. So the question is, what new can we offer," said the leader.

Now, Rahul is set to embark on the Bharat Nyay Yatra whose focus would be on livelihood issues like unemployment and price rise. "But can we simply keep repeating that the government has failed on the job front. The question is, what is our roadmap for creation of jobs. Do we have a plan... we better have," another leader said.

FULL REPORT ON
www.indianexpress.com

Used office Items for sale :
Used office items are identified for sale on "as is where basis" Items can be inspected at 20 Community Centre, New Friends Colony, New Delhi-110065 between 10 AM to 3 PM. 25% of the bid value by way of DD as EMD to be submitted along with the sealed quotation, For further information please call Mr. Varun Mehra at 09899729429.

Notice Inviting Offer
Sale of Naphtha from Rajahmundry Asset, Andhra Pradesh
ONGC Ltd. invites offers from interested buyers for purchase of Naphtha from Tatipaka Refinery, Rajahmundry Asset, Andhra Pradesh for 2850 MT/ month for a period of 2 years.
For more information, interested parties are requested to download Tender Document and Term sheet from:
<https://eps.buyjunction.in/gasbidding>
Contact: ongcgasbidding@injunction.in
e-Bidding Partner - Injunction services ltd.

"IMPORTANT"
Whilst care is taken prior to acceptance or advertising copy, it is not possible to verify its contents. The Indian Express (P) Limited cannot be held responsible for such contents, nor for any loss or damage incurred as a result of transactions with companies, associations or individuals advertising in its newspapers or Publications. We therefore recommend that readers make necessary inquiries before sending any monies or entering into any agreements with advertisers or otherwise acting on an advertisement in any manner whatsoever.

Police bust rave party in Thane, detain 95, seize LSD & Ecstasy

VIJAY KUMARYADAV
MUMBAI, DECEMBER 31

JUST A day before New Year, the Thane police on Sunday morning raided a rave party in Gaumukh area and detained 95 people, including five women, who were allegedly consuming drugs at the party, said officials.

According to police, they seized drugs like LSD, charas, Ecstasy pills and marijuana from the party in small quantities. Two organisers have been arrested, Ashutosh Dumbre, who took charge as Thane police commissioner on December 21, confirmed the development to *The Indian Express*.

Acting on a tipoff, the Crime Branch unit of the Thane police raided an open place, a reclaimed marshy land, near a creek in Gaumukh area under the jurisdiction of Kasarvadavali police station early Sunday.

People aged from 19 to mid-20s were allegedly found consuming drugs and alcohol at the party. Police have seized 200 gm of marijuana, 70 gm of charas, 0.40 gm of LSD, and some Ecstasy pills. "We have detained 90 men and five women, and sent them to civil hospital for medical examination. Action will be taken against them," said Punjabrao Ugale, Additional Commissioner of Police, Crime.

Confirming the registration of the FIR at Sola High Court Police Station against Modi and Mathew, Assistant Commissioner of Police H M Kansagara said, "Yes, we have registered an FIR in the case on the basis of the allegations leveled by the woman. An investigation will follow".

According to Sola High Court police, the duo has been charged with rape, criminal force to outrage a woman's modesty, and criminal intimidation under the provisions of the Indian Penal Code. The complainant, who was employed as a flight attendant sought directions from the magistrate's court for immediate lodging of an FIR and action against police officers for inaction when she approached them first.

In October, however, the chief judicial magistrate court rejected the woman's plea following which she moved the HC.

Later, on December 22, the HC set aside the magistrate's court order and ordered an investigation in the case under the provisions of Section 156 (3) of the Criminal Procedure Code.

A case was registered in connection with the December 29 incident, said police.

SC Collegium recommends Jharkhand HC judge's transfer

New Delhi: THE SUPREME Court Collegium headed by Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud has recommended to the Centre the transfer of Justice Shree Chandrashekhar from Jharkhand High Court to Rajasthan High Court.

The Collegium, also comprising Justices Sanjiv Khanna, B R Gavai, Surya Kant and Aniruddha Bose, took the decision at a meeting held on December 29.

The Collegium said that through a communication dated December 29, Justice Chandrashekhar, senior-most judge of the Jharkhand High Court, requested for his transfer.

"Acceding to his request, the Collegium resolves to recommend that Mr Justice Shree Chandrashekhar be transferred to the Rajasthan High Court," the Collegium said. PTI

Cops: College principal attacked over witchcraft

Sidhi (MP): Police have launched a probe after the principal of a government college claimed that he was attacked by four persons on a false accusation of his involvement in witchcraft in Sidhi district of Madhya Pradesh.

A case was registered in connection with the December 29 incident, said police.

PTI

After HC order, FIR against Cadila CMD for rape of Bulgarian woman

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
AHMEDABAD, DECEMBER 31

THE AHMEDABAD city police Sunday registered an FIR of rape and criminal intimidation against Cadila Pharmaceuticals Chairman and Managing Director (CMD) Rajiv Modi and employee Jhonson Mathew based on a complaint by a Bulgarian woman.

The police action has come following a recent Gujarat High Court order setting aside a magistrate court order that had rejected her complaint.

Confirming the registration of the FIR at Sola High Court Police Station against Modi and Mathew, Assistant Commissioner of Police H M Kansagara said, "Yes,

we have registered an FIR in the case on the basis of the allegations leveled by the woman. An investigation will follow".

According to Sola High Court police, the duo has been charged with rape, criminal force to outrage a woman's modesty, and criminal intimidation under the provisions of the Indian Penal Code. The complainant, who was employed as a flight attendant

Rajasthan man murders parents, sister, surrenders

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
JAIPUR, DECEMBER 31

A "MENTALLY unstable" man allegedly killed his parents and sister with an axe in Rajasthan's Nagaur district, while they were asleep, police said.

Police said that the 20-year-old accused remained in the house with the dead throughout the night after committing the crime on Saturday. On Sunday morning, he "nonchalantly" went to the police station and reported the triple homicide.

"Dilip Singh (45), a resident of Padukan town, his wife Rajesh

Kanwar (40) and daughter Priyanka (15) were attacked and killed by Mohit (with an axe on Saturday night)," said Padukan SHO Manendra Singh on Sunday, adding that after a preliminary probe, it is suspected that due to a family feud, the couple's son Mohit carried out the murders.

"Prima facie, it appears the youth is mentally unstable. Police, however, are still quizzing him to ascertain the actual cause. He surrendered before the police. His cellphone showed that he seemed to have searched on the Internet about committing suicide. All possible angles are being probed,"

Nagar SP Narayan Togas said.

DAY TODAY

BY PETER VIDAL

ARIES (Mar 21 - Apr 20)

You have been through a great deal, but you still can't tell where you're really heading. Give yourself another week or so if you wish to wait until life has calmed down. Expect major changes at work very soon, perhaps because people around you are inconsistent.

TAURUS (Apr 21 - May 21)

Remember all those times when you have longed to treat yourself, but have been unable to for one reason or another. Your stars are once again perfectly placed, and over the next forty-eight hours you may indulge your every whim, responsibilities permitting.

GEMINI (May 22 - June 21)

Other people are making demands which you may feel unwilling or unable to fulfil. You might imagine that you have been swamped by the need for urgent decisions. Over the next few days you may realise that spending or investment plans should be completely revised and revalued.

CANCER (June 22 - July 23)

A remarkable change will begin to take place over the next few days. Close partnerships are bound to be the vital factor, but the focus may be either at work, at home or even in affairs of the heart. You'll be reassessing your closest relationships, looking anew at needs.

LEO (July 24 - Aug 23)

An approaching metaphorical collision between the Sun and the Moon may leave you feeling considerably the worse for wear. You may, if you wish, burn the candle at both ends and push yourself to the limit, but you must accept the consequences.

VIRGO (Aug 24 - Sep 23)

The coming days will be quite important in a number of respects. Remember everything I have said over the past weeks and months about the need to be more spontaneous, creative and passionate. It is time to stand up for yourself and stop other people putting you down.

LIBRA (Sep 24 - Oct 23)

The stars are in a challenging but friendly mood, and you may start the day in an impetuous frame of mind, determined to do what suits you whether others like it or not. It may be four or five days, or longer, before your clarity of vision is restored.

SCORPIO (Oct 24 - Nov 23)

Others may be complaining about the state of their fortunes and the general condition of the world. However, I don't think you have any time to indulge in that favourite complaint, grumbling. You're the person who can point out to other people just how positive the times really are.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov 24 - Dec 22)

This is unlikely to be an easy time, but you may still have it easier than most. You may not be surprised to hear that the main area of danger is financial but, if you move cautiously, great profit is to be had. It's all a matter of careful timing.

CAPRICORN (Dec 23 - Jan 20)

A mischievous planetary alignment may throw you completely off course. However, even if you do suffer a setback, once you pick yourself up you will realise that you have gained a great deal in terms of maturity and experience. Even a failure will tell you where your limits lie.

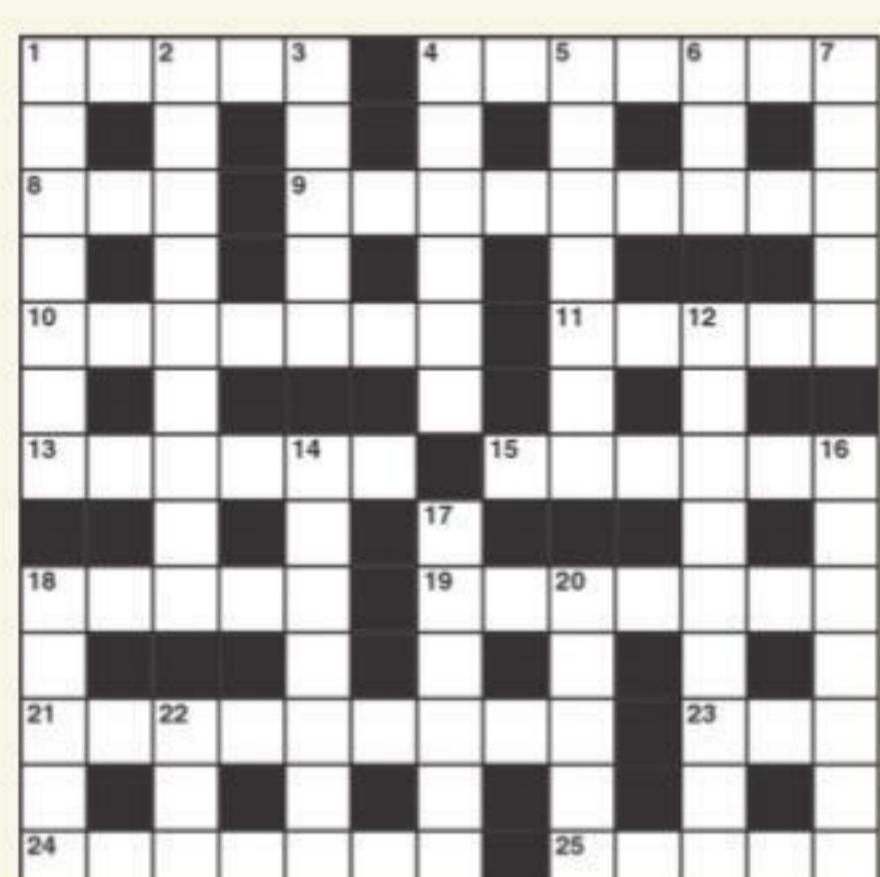
AQUARIUS (Jan 21 - Feb 19)

You are in the happy position of being subject to only slight problems at a time when some people are being completely hammered. You may have one or two vague suspicions, but there's nothing to worry about. However, if you do need reassurance, then be sure to ask for it.

PISCES (Feb 20 - Mar 20)

Time is a most precious commodity. It's not that you have too much of it, or little, but that you have to decide how to use it wisely. Don't be concerned by what other people are doing, but set your own schedule. Every minute and every hour is there for your benefit.

CROSSWORD 5249



ACROSS

- 1 Many a girl is kind (5)
- 4 Mistaken, ran out when jeered at (7)
- 8 A ship that carries goods ashore (3)
- 9 Lack of will (9)
- 10 Some medicine appears to act on wise men (7)
- 11 Leave your bed clothes (3-2)
- 13 Harebrained feline put in a pen (6)
- 15 It will be plain to a Russian (6)
- 18 Night flier on the staff (5)
- 19 Attracted by a duller composition (7)
- 21 They ignore national customs (9)
- 23 Bloodless end to Taiwan (3)
- 24 Chosen or chooser (7)
- 25 Weeds are found in the back-street (5)

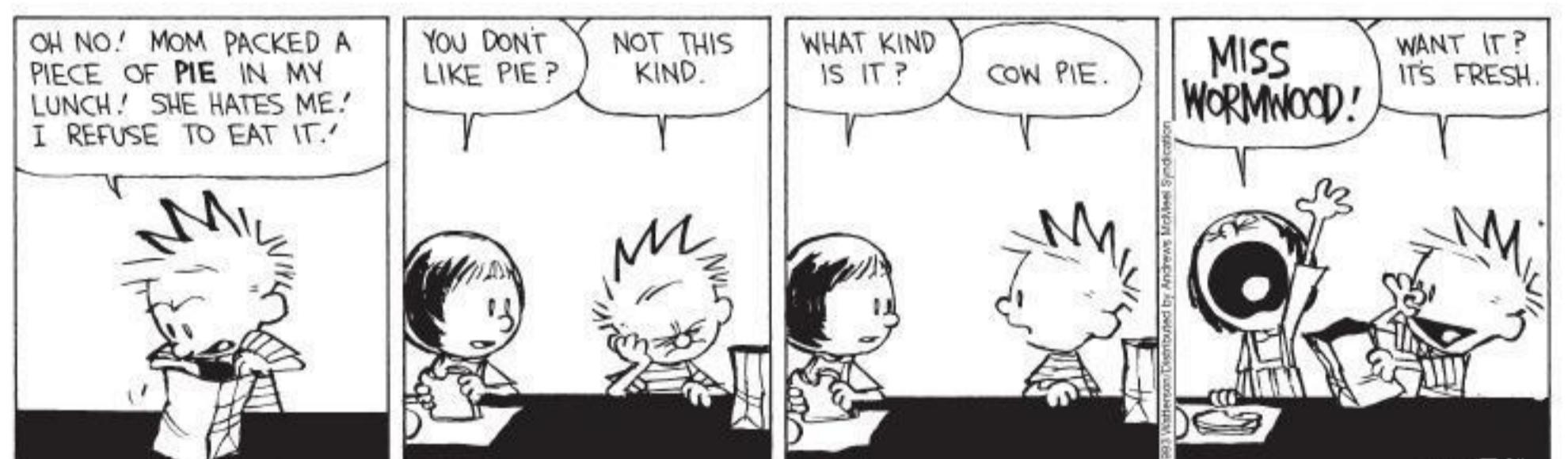
- 1 Arrange cards A-Z for Hungarian dance music (7)
- 2 One who helps Satanists out (9)
- 3 Kind of music popular with children? (5)
- 4 Made of iron, this strange object of worship (6)
- 5 A new song hit right away (2,5)
- 6 Leaves the last of the team out (3)
- 7 Cut the cackle and use the tea towel (3,2)
- 12 Upper class leading artist (3,6)
- 14 Thing to put out at the end of today (7)
- 16 Sending out terminations (7)
- 17 The poet's always under the car of course (6)
- 18 Cook beats a mixture (5)
- 20 He composed the last letter in the catalogue (5)
- 22 Put Sue into employment (3)

Solutions Crossword 5248 Across: 1 Prevalence, 8 Oscar, 9 Stretch, 10 Tension, 11 Upper, 12 Foyers, 14 Settle, 17 Libra, 19 Inherit, 21 Cushion, 22 Again, 23 Limitation Down: 2 Rockery, 3 Virus, 4 Losing, 5 Nurture, 6 Estop, 7 Charleston, 8 Out of place, 13 Realism, 15 Tomato, 16 Linnet, 18 Basil, 20 Heart

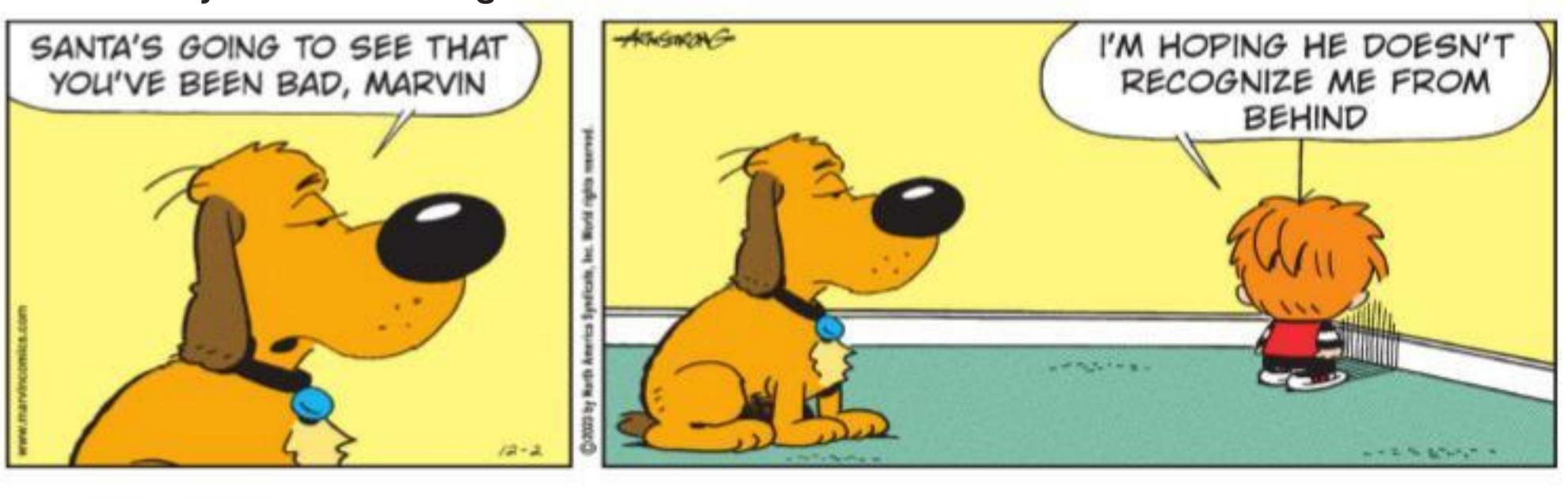
OVER THE HEDGE by Michael Fry & T Lewis



CALVIN & HOBBES by Bill Watterson



MARVIN by Tom Armstrong



JUMBLED WORDS

Given below are four jumbled words. Solve the jumbles to make proper words and move them to the respective squares below. Select the letters in the shaded squares and jumble them to get the answer for the given quiz.

To live well, to show a good activity - Thomas Aquinas (4,8)

FTAOO

EIPCDT

SVIIT

AEOGVY

SOLUTION: AFOTT, VISIT, DEPICT, VOYAGE - To live well to show a good activity - Thomas Aquinas

SUDOKU 5428

Difficulty Level 2s
Instructions
To solve a Sudoku puzzle, every digit from 1 to 9 must appear in each of the nine vertical columns, in each of the nine horizontal rows and in each of the nine boxes.

7								8
6		7	1	8				5
4		3	9	1				
	7		2		5			
6		4	7					8
	1		5	6				
	1	6	2	4				4
3	9	8	1		6			
8							7	

Difficulty Level
1s = Very easy; 2s = Easy;
3s = Medium; 4s = Hard;
5s = Very Hard;
6s = Genius

SOLUTION SUDOKU 5427

1	9	6	8	4	7	2	5	3
5	7	8	9	2	3	4	1	6
2	3	4	5	6	1	8	7	9
6	5	9	2	3	8	1	4	7
7	1	2	4	5	9	3	6	8
8	4	3	7	1	6	5	9	2

After 'soft release', Gujarat now closer to sending captive-bred wolves into the wild

GOPAL KATESHIYA
RAJKOT, DECEMBER 31

At a "soft-release" facility, set up in Gujarat's Banaskantha district for wolves bred in captivity to adapt to conditions in the wild, forest officials happily noted that the few hares that had previously been seen in the four-hectare enclosure could no longer be found, and that feathers and other remains of birds were scattered in the area.

According to the officials, this shows that the wolves have gotten into the habit of actively hunting and also separating feathers from the meat of the birds they catch — important skills for them to pick up before they can be fully released into the wild.

The project, undertaken by Gujarat's Forest Department, to introduce wolves bred in captivity into the wild is the first of its kind outside the US, officials said. It is aimed at restocking the population of wolves in the wild, where they can perform their role as biocontrol agents that keep the population of wild herbivores, like



Wolves in the soft-release facility in a Gujarat forest area. Express

The project got going in August when four male wolves were brought from the Sakkarbaug centre to the Nada Bet facility. Later, two of the male wolves were sent back, and in their place, three females were brought in. This was because officials felt that an all-male group may not form a stable pack by themselves.

Minister Bera said that out of the 80 wolves that were at the Sakkarbaug breeding centre, 16 had been moved to different facilities in the state to train them to be released into the wild. Apart from the facility at Nada Bet, the other wolves are in facilities located in the Gir forest in the Saurashtra region.

THREE ARRESTED
Dalit woman pushed into hot oil cauldron for protesting harassment bid

AMIT SHARMA
MEERUT, DECEMBER 31

AN 18-YEAR-OLD Dalit woman was allegedly pushed into a cauldron of hot oil by the owner of an oil mill and two of his aides after she protested a "sexual harassment bid" by them in Baghpat on Wednesday evening, police said.

The woman was rushed to a hospital in New Delhi with burn injuries on half of her body, legs and arms, said police. Police said all the three accused have been arrested. The area police station in charge told *The Indian Express*, "We have arrested the oil mill owner and his two associates under IPC Section 307 (attempt to murder) and the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act provisions, based on a complaint filed by the woman's brother on Wednesday night."

In his police complaint, the woman's brother said they had been working as labourers at the oil mill for the past four months.

"My sister was working at the mill on the evening of December 27 when the mill owner and his two associates tried to molest her. When she resisted, they first hurled casteist abuses at her and then pushed her into the hot oil cauldron on the premises and fled the scene," the brother alleged.

Baghpat DSP Vijay Chaudhary said, "We have arrested the three accused... We have been told that the condition of the victim is stable..."

Firefighters douse fire at the factory in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar district on Sunday. PTI

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, DECEMBER 31

AT LEAST six persons died after a massive fire broke out at a gloves-manufacturing factory in Maharashtra's Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar district, formerly Aurangabad, early Sunday.

According to fire brigade officials, the fire broke out at around 2:20 am at the Sunshine Enterprises factory located in Waluj MIDC area.

"Around 15 workers were

sleeping inside when the fire broke out. So far, we have recovered the bodies of six workers. Other workers managed to escape but the six were trapped..." a fire brigade official told *The Indian Express*.

"We are conducting an investigation to find out the exact cause of the fire," the fire brigade official added.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena leader and district Guardian Minister Sandipan Bhumre visited the site. "Six persons have

died. Seven other workers, who were inside the factory, have sustained minor injuries. They escaped by jumping out of the factory. An investigation will be conducted into the matter," Bhumre said.

"It was around 1:30 am. We all were asleep. Suddenly we sensed smoke and fire and we all woke up. Some of us managed to jump out of the premises and save ourselves. But a few others could not come out," one of the workers who survived told mediapersons.

Odisha govt to spend Rs 360 cr on promotion of popular schemes, Puri temple project

SUJIT BISOYI
BHUBANESWAR, DEC 31

MONTHS BEFORE the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in 2024, the Odisha government has announced that it will spend around Rs 360 crore to popularise its schemes at the grassroots level and take up promotional activities ahead of the opening of the Shree Mandir Parikrama project around Puri Jagannath Temple scheduled on January 17.

According to Odisha panchayati raj minister Pradip Amat, a series of promotional activities will be taken up at every Panchayat ahead of the opening of the Parikrama project, planned days before the consecration ceremony of Ayodhya Ram Mandir.

"A fortnight-long campaign will be launched with an aim for the promotion, preservation, and protection of Jagannath culture and to enlighten the future generation about the essence of the culture," said Chief Secretary Pradeep Kumar Jena, adding that a special plan for the panchayat development will also be approved in the meeting.

वर्ष नया संकल्प दही सेवा-समर्पण सर्वोपरि

नंबर एक, सेवा अनेक



पुलिस



फायर



मेडिकल



आपदा/दुर्घटना

किसी भी आपात स्थिति में फोन उठाएं 112मिलाएं

@112UttarPradesh

/112UttarPradesh

+91-7570000100

112uttarpradesh

+91-7233000100

43 Khalistan supporters identified in violence at Indian Missions: NIA

Crackdown on terror network: 625 held, 68 FIRs in 2023

MAHENDER SINGH
MANRAL
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

THE NATIONAL Investigation Agency (NIA) has identified 43 Khalistan supporters, allegedly involved in violence at the Indian High Commission in London during a protest on March 19 and also who allegedly targeted the Indian Consulate in San Francisco on July 2.

Phase three of the wolves' preparation involves the hunting of mammals like small wild boars and nilgai, as well as reptiles like monitor lizards. "We are waiting for a green signal from the project steering committee, headed by principal chief conservator of forests (wildlife) and the chief wildlife warden of Gujarat, to start this crucial phase," the official said.

The project is part of the forest department's ambitious plan to restore the ecological balance in the grasslands and parts of revenue areas where the population of wild boars, nilgai, and other such herbivores has been growing unchecked, leading to damage of standing crops of farmers.

According to the NIA, the attacks on the High Commissions of India in Ottawa and London, as well as on the Consulate General of India, San Francisco, US, also remained the focus of the NIA actions on offences against Indian interests abroad through the year, which witnessed more than 50 raids and searches as part of the agency's efforts to unravel the conspiracy behind the attacks on Indian Missions abroad.

"The attacks involved criminal trespass, vandalism, damage to public property, and attempts to cause hurt to Indian officials and damage the Consulate building through acts of arson. NIA has used several innovative methods of investigation, including crowd sourcing of information while investigating the larger conspiracy of attacks on Indian Missions, which resulted in identification of 43 suspects.

"NIA registered a total of 68 cases in 2023, covering a wide spectrum of terror-related incidents. These encompass 18 jihad terror cases in multiple states, three cases from Jammu and Kashmir, 12 of LWE, seven cases involving terrorist and organised criminal activity in Punjab, five cases of the Northeast, and two cases related to Fake Indian Currency

The NIA has stepped up its investigation in these cases in recent months and examined more than 80 persons in India suspected to be part of the conspiracy of the attacks," an NIA spokesperson said.

Sharing details of their overall conviction rate, the spokesperson said the agency has maintained a robust overall conviction rate of 94.70 per cent, underscoring the efficacy of its investigational and prosecutive expertise, effectiveness and prowess. Last year, the overall conviction rate was 94.39 per cent.

"The NIA had this year arrested 625 persons as compared to 490 in 2022 — nearly 28 per cent increase. Among 625, 65 were arrested in ISIS cases, 114 for jihad terror cases, 45 in human trafficking cases, 28 for terrorist and organised criminal activity and 76 in Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) cases," the spokesperson said.

"NIA registered a total of 68 cases in 2023, covering a wide spectrum of terror-related incidents. These encompass 18 jihad terror cases in multiple states, three cases from Jammu and Kashmir, 12 of LWE, seven cases involving terrorist and organised criminal activity in Punjab, five cases of the Northeast, and two cases related to Fake Indian Currency

Goa cop: Avoid morning walks on New Year to avoid accidents

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
PANAJI, DECEMBER 31

Chhattisgarh comes at a time when both Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sa said strong action would be taken against Maoists.

Earlier this month, Shah, while addressing the 59th Raising Day ceremony of BSF in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand, on December 1, had said: "I reviewed our fight against Left Wing Extremism (LWE) and want to tell the people of my country with joy that we are on the edge of completely eliminating the LWE."

Shah said LWE is shrinking and now CRPF, BSF and ITBP are ready to give a final blow to it with new courage and enthusiasm. The last four strongholds of Maoists in Bastar region are in north Kanker, Abujhmad, an un-surveyed land larger than size of Goa, south Bijapur area, which shares its border with Sukma and Bijapur districts.

It is learnt that security forces are making new police camps deep inside the forests of south Bastar region, stepping inside the forests slowly surrounding the last four Maoist strongholds. Sources in the security establishment said an uptick in Maoist violence may be seen from the second week of January with Maoists trying to stop security forces from building police camps in remote areas.

Members of the banned Communist Party of India (CPI) Maoists have their own Army known as People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA). Their strongest PLGA Battalion is believed to be in deep forests of Sukma district headed by their leader Hidma, infamous for being

involved in deadly Maoist attacks for over a decade.

In 2022, Maoists had killed 10 security personnel, with 32 Maoists also getting killed. This year, however, 25 security personnel, 32 civilians and 23 Maoists have been killed to date. The civilians include seven workers of the ruling BJP.

Heavy Maoist violence was reported this year from Sukma, Dantewada, Bijapur and Narayanpur among which Sukma and Bijapur are considered to be war zones.

The action of increasing the number of security personnel in

involved in deadly Maoist attacks for over a decade.

A SENIOR officer of Goa Police has appealed to people, especially senior citizens, to avoid morning walk on Monday due to the possibility of accidents on account of rash driving by New Year party revellers.

DSP Salim Shaikh, sub-divisional police officer (Vasco), said,

"...There are chances of rash and negligent driving due to the possibility of people consuming alcohol in view of New Year celebrations. Police will be deployed on beaches and roads. We are geared up, and I warn motorists that they will face strict action if found driving under the influence of alcohol. Action shall be taken under provisions of the Motor Vehicles Act."

"We request locals to avoid morning walk on the road on January 1 since there could be some, who may be drunk or half-asleep while driving since many of them party all night. We appeal to people to strictly use footpaths... for a walk..." he said.



उत्तर प्रदेश पुलिस





The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

HAPPY NEW YEAR

In a year of this versus that, there are shared stakes in a life together built by diverse communities. That's a thought to hold on to

SPEAKING IN AYODHYA Saturday, only days ahead of the inauguration of the Ram Mandir on January 22, as he unveiled an airport, a redeveloped railway station and several projects, Prime Minister Narendra Modi projected a point of grand convergence. In "New Ayodhya," he said, with the coming of the temple after a wait of "550" years, *virasat* (heritage) combines with *vikas* (development), *ad-hunrikta* (modernity) with *parampara* (tradition), where "Viksit Bharat (Developed India)" gets "Navya Urja (new energy)", drawing upon both the "aastha" or faith of the pilgrim and Digital India's synergies. From now on, Ayodhya *nagri* would be "sakshi", it would bear witness to this "saanjhi taakat" or pooling of strengths in 21st century India. In his speech, the PM, as is now his wont, drew a wide arc that sought to encompass the ancient and modern, the infrastructure upgrade and the targeted welfare scheme, temple and the nation – while, in the year of the parliamentary election, situating his government's fulfilment of "Modi's guarantees" as the anchor or centrepiece. Laid out in Ayodhya, then, is the contest and the Opposition's formidable challenge in the new year.

The tables have turned since the BJP first rose politically, riding the Ram temple movement. At that time, it was the challenger – taking on a consensus that had gathered and congealed around Congress dominance. Now, the BJP is the establishment, in the Centre and in UP, as the temple is readied for consecration, and the onus of framing the counter is on non-BJP parties. That challenge will have to take into account that, from 1990 to 2024, the BJP has both honed and hardened its core message and added layers to its appeal. It has not remained on its side of the political fence either. Mandir has not just collided with Mandal, but also co-opted it. PM Modi has used the category of the "labharthi" or beneficiary to reconstitute citizenship, bringing under it the farmer, the poor, the youth and the women, calling them the four biggest castes. The question in 2024 is this: Can the Opposition counter the BJP's imagined citizenship by a re-invocation of Mandal, by pointing to the unfulfilled agenda of social justice? The question is also this: While the unfulfilled social justice agenda may well be a strong counter-strategy, in as much as it points to the inequalities and exclusions that are sought to be papered over in the dominant worldview, is the Congress, or INDIA, a credible vehicle of that vision, and does it have the capacity?

Of course, in this year of political polarisation and contest, there will also be other calmer and liquid spaces, a multiplicity and overlapping of identities, a new articulation of the woman's voice, a middle ground waiting to be acknowledged and claimed in a nation that is predominantly young. Technology will harden some divides, but it will soften others. No matter what happens in the 2024 parliamentary election, no matter who wins or loses, there are shared stakes in a life together built by diverse peoples and communities. These constitute the life of a nation as well. And so when the battle of ideas and ideologies seems to skid and career noisily, that's a thought worth holding on to. Happy New Year.

THE HOTTEST YEAR

With temperatures at all-time high in 2023, 2024 will be pivotal in reducing emissions without compromising on development

At COP 21 in Paris eight years ago, countries agreed to "hold global temperature increase to well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial efforts and strive to limit it to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels". The increasing frequency of extreme weather events after the Paris Pact led to an unwritten concord on the 1.5 degrees Celsius limit as the defence line against climate change. In 2023, the world came perilously close to this threshold. On average, till November, global temperatures rose by 1.46 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Every month since June was the hottest such month on record, and in November, two days were even warmer than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The World Meteorological Organisation's (WMO) provisional State of the Global Climate Report confirms that 2023 is the warmest year on record. The WMO has forecast that the planet will get hotter in 2024. "The warming El Niño event, which emerged during the Northern Hemisphere spring of 2023 and developed rapidly during summer, is likely to further fuel the heat in 2024 because El Niño typically has the greatest impact on global temperatures after it peaks," the report says.

The jury is out on whether climate change has reached a point of no return. But what is clear is that the next seven years will be pivotal in reducing emissions. On the positive side, the International Energy Agency predicts that more than 35 per cent of the world's electricity will be generated from renewables in 2025. The biggest challenge, however, is generating electricity when the sun isn't shining or the wind is not blowing. Experts agree on the need for technologies that can cost-optimally store RE anywhere from half a day to a week, even months. At the COP21 in Glasgow, two years ago, countries agreed to set up a Long Duration Energy Storage (LDES) Council to facilitate the commercialisation of technologies – many of them are at the pilot stage – that can stock up RE. However, a market for such solutions is still in the works and most LDES solutions are not cost competitive yet.

Scientists agree that along with reducing GHG emissions, the imperative for policy-makers should be to build people's resilience against inclement weather. Such measures could include building sea walls, improving weather alert systems, overhauling urban drainage systems, installing irrigation systems to combat water scarcity or making crop choices suited to the changed climate. As the planet gets hotter, the challenge will be to address vulnerabilities without compromising on people's developmental needs and lifting large sections out of poverty.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



PRATAP BHAU MEHTA

The fateful year

Hopefully, democracies can engage in an act of retrieval:
Redeem the future instead of being stuck in the past

2024 may be politically one of the most fateful years for the planet in recent memory. Elections will be held in most of the world's major democracies: India, United States, Indonesia, South Africa, Bangladesh, Taiwan and Britain, to name a few. At one level, this is just a coincidental alignment of electoral cycles. But the idea of close to two billion voters consciously shaping their future is an exhilarating one. There is also a bit of foreboding, about whether this marvellous act of political agency will measure up to the problems that confront the world.

The case for foreboding about these elections is strong. None of them is going to be an ordinary exercise in casting the vote. None of the predicted outcomes looks rosy. Democracy in the US is extremely polarised. The range of possible trajectories for American democracy is wide, most of them not palatable. Donald Trump's candidacy could induce a constitutional crisis even before the election. A close and highly polarised election could make it difficult for America to take the critical decisions necessary for its own domestic stability and for the global order. The election results may not be accepted as legitimate.

The choices on offer are generating less enthusiasm. Joe Biden is running on a nominally strong economy, a renewed emphasis on industrial policy and a green transition. And yet this record is not strong enough to convince voters that Bidenomics has cracked the long-term cost of living problems in housing and healthcare, elitism and inequality. Support for the war in Ukraine is eroding and the war in Gaza has damaged Biden's credibility both domestically and abroad. Whether a second Trump presidency can actually address the economic resentments that are fuelling his rise to power is an open question. It is more likely to erode what remains of institutional quality in the US; it will also likely use the culture wars to deepen an authoritarian turn and consolidate xenophobic nationalism.

In India the outcome looks more certain. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is, at the moment, most likely to return to office, giving India the advantages of stability and continuity. Some of the deep structural problems of the economy, particularly the transition to

high quality high productivity jobs, will remain. But there is arguably enough momentum to sustain six per cent growth on the lower bound for a while. This could give India leverage in the global order. And state capacity will continue to expand.

The Opposition is still not able to project itself as a governing coalition, or tap into the aspirational space Modi is occupying. But we should not be under any illusion that the return of the BJP will be the deeper and more irrevocable consolidation of both communalism and authoritarianism. This is not in the future: It is the record on which the BJP is running. You just have to look at the erosion of checks and balances, the new spate of legislation that empowers government over citizens to an unprecedented degree, the institutionalisation of a discourse of violence, and the assertion of majoritarianism with impunity. Yes, this is not all there is to the BJP, as supporters would argue. But it is too monumental a consequence of its possible victory to brush aside as one of those small imperfections we can live with. So we may end up in a paradox: It could both be true that India's power grows, even as it slides into authoritarianism. The stability of electoral outcomes will disguise a deeper constitutional change.

Although Joko Widodo is still a powerful political force in Indonesia, the country will be facing its first post-Joko election. South Africa is also looking at a critical election: A country that is looking at a severe economic and governance crisis may be edging towards an era that finally signals the end of the overwhelming dominance of the African National Congress. The outcome of the elections in Taiwan could potentially be a factor in how the Chinese define their relationship to Taiwan and redefine geopolitics.

These elections will result in significant changes one way or the other; in some cases, democracy itself might hang in the balance. But the deeper worry about this year is the deep mismatch between the demands of domestic legitimacy and what the planet requires for its future. Even questions of the material conditions of existence can be framed through identity, history and memory. Nationalism is the theodicy of the moment.

now dominated by arguments over membership, historical memory, restoration of the past and searching for ethnic enemies. Recent history has given the lie to any claims that politics is not ideological. But it is an ideology that operates in a psychological register. Citizens need to feel good about their societies, and need to be made part of a larger cause. A combination of instant pride and fear are irresistible emotions in politics. Even questions of the material conditions of existence can be framed through identity, history and memory. Nationalism is the theodicy of the moment. Lack of nationalism provides an explanation for so many things: Deindustrialisation to lack of civic amenities to anxieties over culture.

Modern democracies rely on the nation-state form, in which questions of membership, identity and collective pride become inescapable. But so many of the world's pressing problems cannot be solved by a return to the collective narcissism of nationalism. We may not get World War III, but the prospect of far-reaching wars has increased to an unprecedented degree: Russia upended the global order with its claims on Ukraine. Ethnic cleansing seems to be again acceptable: from Nagorno Karabakh to Gaza. Sino-US tensions are still not in a zone where we can be complacent about how they could disrupt the surface calm in world politics. The profound changes in technology and reorientation of economic models across the world requires new global coordination. The world did quite poorly during the last pandemic on global cooperation. And in 2023 it did briefly cross the two-degree centigrade mark for global warming. It is the first time that shipping has been disrupted in the Panama Canal due to drought and the Suez Canal due to war.

The choices voters will face are not easy. None of them are showing a clear pathway of how we prevent ourselves from sleepwalking through multiple crises. We hope that democracies can, once again, engage in a monumental act of retrieval: Redeem the future instead of being stuck in the past. Happy New Year.

The writer is contributing editor,
The Indian Express



MADAN SABNAVIS

ON THE CUSP OF TAKE-OFF

For the economy, a year of sustaining momentum, fulfilling possibilities

2024 WILL BE a critical year for India. The national elections will be held in April-May. Its results will be closely watched as the outcome will influence the policy framework. 2024 could also be the third year in a row that the country emerges as the fastest-growing large economy in the world. Expectations are high. What do we need to watch out for?

First, the trajectory of interest rates. In India, this issue has been raised, though a bit prematurely, with one member of the monetary policy committee opining that it's time to lower rates. The question is: When and to what extent? Going by the RBI's forecasts, inflation would be around 5 per cent till the first quarter of 2024-25. This would make it hard to lower rates. Perhaps space will open up when inflation falls to less than 5 per cent, which as per the RBI's forecasts is likely in the second quarter after the new government is sworn in. However, the average repo rate over the past decade has been around 6-6.5 per cent. The reduction to 4 per cent was due to abnormal circumstances, and hence easing rates now will simply mean going back to trend. Further, with the inflation rate likely to be around 5 per cent, maintaining a real repo rate of 1 per cent will mean that there can be at most 50 bps cuts in the policy rate.

Second, the Union budget tabled on February 1 will be a vote on account. Hence, no significant decision can be taken. Of inter-

est would be the route taken once the new government is in place. The growth projection will be the first number that will be tracked, followed by the fiscal deficit. A deficit of 5.9 per cent is still very high compared to the goal of 3 per cent, which has been a mirage even in the best of times. A 4.5 per cent target is a compromise at best for 2025-26. Also keenly tracked will be the quality of expenditure. The question is whether the capex momentum sustains.

Third, the monsoon will also be critical. More so, when there is a constant lament from corporates that while urban demand is up, the same cannot be said for rural demand. While agriculture employs a sizeable labour force but accounts for a lower share of value-added, there are linkages between the farm and the non-farm sector. If the kharif harvest is better than that in 2023, it will be good news for the industry as well as GDP growth. The two-wheeler, FMCG and tractor industries would in particular be tracking the progress of the rains.

Fourth, considering the performance of the economy so far, forecasts for 2023-24 have been revised upwards. While there is a tendency to underestimate projections, to begin with, considering that the global economic situation has improved and with the shocks of the war being absorbed by nations, there is no reason for growth to be dramatically lower. Sustaining the current growth momentum

will be good news, but crossing the 7 per cent level will be a psychological boost.

Fifth, pertains to private investment. So far while the government has been seeing green shoots, CEOs have only been talking of making investments. The investment rate appears to be stagnant going by the fundraising pattern. Further, investments have been in a narrow band of industries like aviation and hospitality in the services space and infrastructure-related industries like steel and cement in the manufacturing segment. People have been talking for years now about higher government capex crowding in private capex. But there has not been much to show.

Sixth, the performance of the corporate sector is hard to predict. Last year, firms' sales grew due to pent-up demand. But profits came under pressure as input costs rose sharply. This year, the trend so far shows that while firm sales have gone down, profits have risen with input prices cooling. On a conservative basis, one can assume that both variables will be stable next year. This will have implications for the stock market.

Considering that the economy is said to be on the cusp of a takeoff, it will surely be an interesting year to watch.

The writer is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda and author of Corporate Quirks: The darker side of the sun. Views are personal



JANUARY 1, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

VAJPAYEE ON IT RAID

THE BHARATIYA JANATA Party president, AB Vajpayee, charged the Income Tax authorities with "dereliction of duty" in hushing up the raid at Hotel Ashok under threat from the Prades Congress (I) chief, K H Patil. He said the tax officials should have exposed the source of the hush money carried in suitcases by the contact men of Patil. He did not understand why officials withdrew from the scene when they found some higher-ups were interested in hushing up the matter.

NEW EMIGRATION ACT

THE EMIGRATION ACT, 1983 to regulate the emigration of skilled and unskilled workers

has come into force. No recruiting agent can carry on the business of recruiting of Indian workers for foreign employment without obtaining registration from the Government of India. A person recruiting immediately before the announcement of the Act, may carry on such business without a certificate, for 30 days from the commencement of the Act.

NCP IN TROUBLE

THE NEPALESE POLICE swooped down on the top leaders of the banned Nepali Congress Party and prevented them from holding a public meeting to observe the "national reconciliation" day. Police took away the top leaders of the party, Ganesh Singh, Mangla Devi, Krishna Prasad Bhattacharjee and Girija Prasad

Koirala. The NCP observes December 31 as such to mark the day in 1976 when the former Nepalese prime minister, the late BP Koirala, returned to Nepal from self-exile in India.

RINGING IN 1984

IT WAS SONG, dance and cheers all around as the night slipped into the new year – for those who could afford it. Crowds milled around in Connaught Place area at midnight. At the stroke of 7 pm, when liquor shops pulled down the shutters, crowds were still thronging the shops. There was laughter and life in Connaught Place. Restaurants and snack bars were crammed, and the roads were lively with tourists parading around in masks and colourful caps.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Ram Rajya & Begumpura

As a temple comes up in Ayodhya, two visions of utopia — Gandhi's kingdom of god and Ravidas's land without sorrow — will be a guide



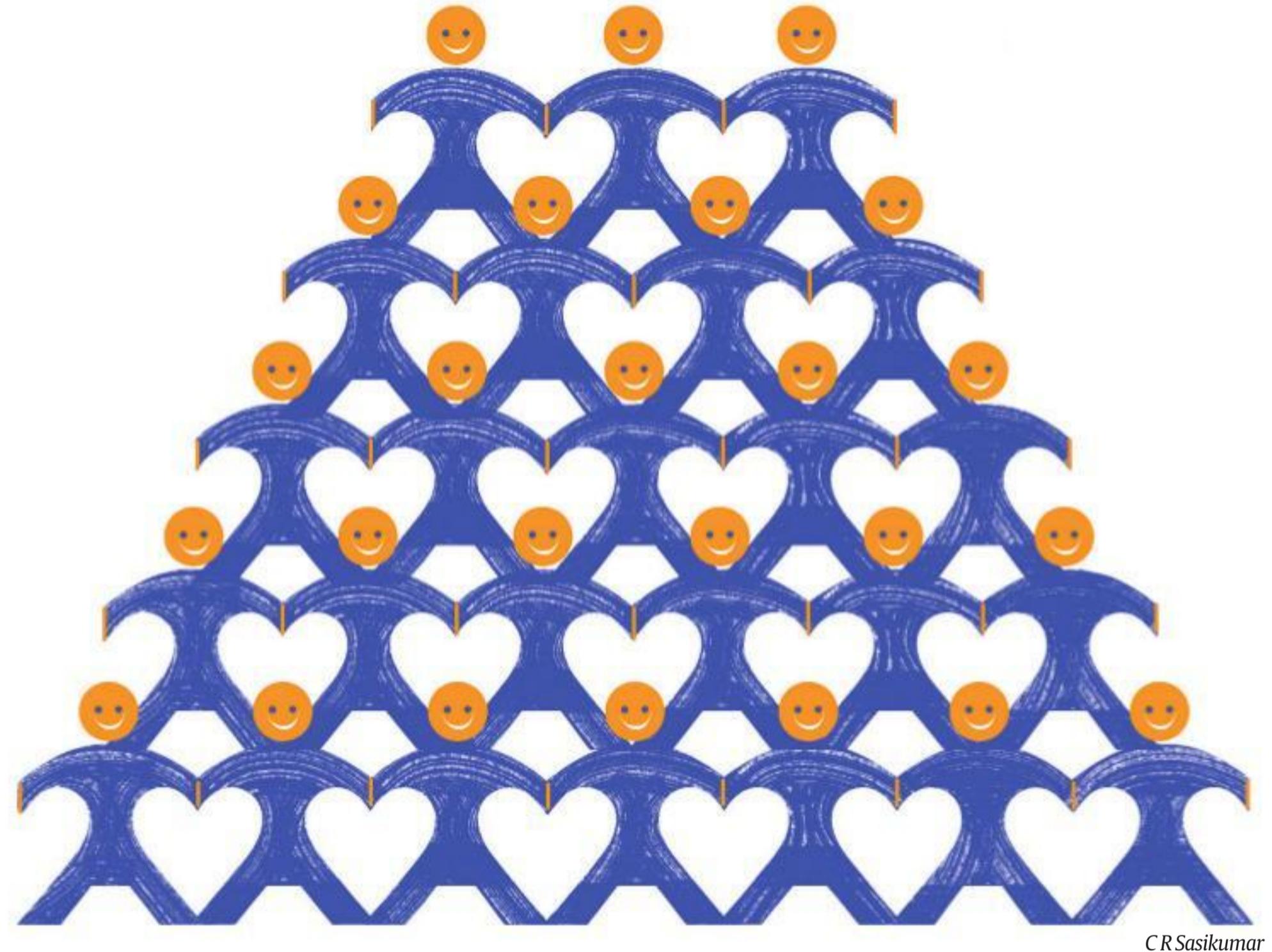
ADITI NARAYANI PASWAN

IN INDIA'S JOURNEY towards reclaiming its historical roots and becoming Bharat, we will witness, in three weeks, a historical event which seeks to reinstate its glory. The consecration of Lord Ram's temple would not be a hollow action, as with his homecoming we are also seeing the dawn of Ram Rajya — an era of good governance, inclusive participation, and equal opportunity. For Bharat, the ideal state is no mere utopia, as it is for the West. These lands have already witnessed one in the past, which left in all of us the social and cultural yearning to reach back to the days when Bharat was known as "sone ki chidiya".

Ayodhya, which was relegated to myth, will once again become a part of our national history and consciousness. It was always present in the mindscape of the majority of Indians for centuries. The shaligram (fossilised stone or ammonite) from the Gandaki river in Nepal will not just be a totem or symbol for Ram, but will also be emblematic of the journey that Bharat has undertaken to unshackle itself from invaders, imperialists and impoverishment and move towards abundance, assimilation, and assertion. It may very well be termed as a political move, but it resonates beyond politics — it's the reassertion of the faith of a billion-plus people. It helps reclaim our value-driven ancient knowledge system, the very fabric of a pluralistic society which allowed this multi-sectarian nation to flourish. Ram embodies the pluralism and diversity of our land, Bharat, in his character, which goes beyond communal understanding.

As a Dalit, I also see the recreation of Ram Rajya as an attempt to seek Begumpura, a land with no sorrow. This is a Ravidasiya concept — the regal realm with the sorrowless name; they call it Begumpura, a place with no pain. We usher in 2024 with the hope that poet-saint Ravidas's Begumpura will be reality as we enter Ram Rajya. This will also be an effort to reclaim traditions and narratives from the margins. By naming the Ayodhya Dham Airport after Maharishi Valmiki, the Modi government is attempting to make the utopia of Begumpura a reality, wherein individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly the Dalit community, can assert their authority with dignity over spaces traditionally associated with the upper echelons of society.

Our ancient knowledge system was a treasure to world civilisations; there were many philosophical, spiritual, and religious schools that developed in this Subcontinent. Though different schools and societies had their own different purpose, they shared a similar vision of shaping society through the spiritual and cultural awakening of the masses, leading them to a just reality.



CR Sasikumar

Women, historically, enjoyed the same status as men in the land of "Ardhanarishvara". With the emergence of the discourse around Lord Ram, we hope to see more conversation about Sita, and the resurgence of Indian thought traditions which are women-centric. As the women of the new era, we want participation in all aspects of society, sharing the responsibility of nation building with our male counterparts, while ensuring our safety in public, private and digital space. It should be remembered that this land was never just of Lord Ram, but of Sita-Ram and Radha-Krishna. It is the land of the Panchakanya. In the examples of Gargi Vachaknavi, Maitreyi and Lopamudra can be seen the women-centric aspects of the Indian thought tradition and civilisation. In modern times, from Indira Gandhi to Sushma Swaraj, and from Mayawati to President Droupadi Murmu, women leaders have broken through male hegemony.

With greater emphasis on financial inclusion and skill development for women, the Modi government has ensured that in the coming decades, Bharat will see the resurgence of *nari shakti*. With women's reservation in Parliament and state assemblies, (*Nari Vandana Adhiniyam*) on the horizon, we hope the 2024 elections will see the irreversible movement of women to the forefront, with both power and position. The Modi government has also redefined the concept of the welfare state by making dignity and parity its core values. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi's guarantees, the poor, the youth, women, and farmers — the margins of the nation — are lead-

As a Dalit, I also see the recreation of Ram Rajya as an attempt to seek Begumpura, a land with no sorrow. We usher in 2024 with the hope that Ravidas's Begumpura will be reality as we enter Ram Rajya. By naming the Ayodhya Dham Airport after Maharishi Valmiki, the Modi government is attempting to make the utopia of Begumpura a reality, wherein individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly the Dalit community, can assert their authority with dignity over spaces traditionally associated with the upper echelons of society.

ing the march to dignity and towards "samajik samrasta", inclusive coexistence.

The homecoming of Lord Ram must also see the end of the injustice of the last few centuries, brought upon us by caste and colonialism. We must decolonise and decaste our consciousness by rejecting the historical marginalisation of communities and peoples. The foundation of our great civilisation was always made of equality, inclusivity, and the striving for a just society. Ram Rajya is the embodiment of good governance, inclusive growth, equal opportunity, and sovereignty — it is not just a "rules-based" order, but also one that is based on shared values and ethics. The Bharat of today has shown that it does not just stand for its own rights, but the rights of everyone — from the abrogation of Article 370, which brought parity of rights and responsibility to Kashmiris and helming G20, where we saw the inclusion of the African Union and the transformation of an elitist global event into a local *utsav* (event) with *janbhagidari* (people's participation) at its core.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, "By 'Ram Rajya', I do not mean Hindu Raj, I mean by 'Ram Rajya' Divine Raj, the kingdom of god. For me, Ram and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other god but the one god of truth and righteousness."

We hope that 2024 will emerge as a year of inclusivity and justice marked by interfaith dialogue and spiritual unity.

The writer is assistant professor, Department of Sociology, Lakshmi Bai College, University of Delhi

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"We do not need to wait to find out what robots can do when we already know what it is to be human, and that the power for good and evil resides in the choices we make, not the machines we build."

— THE GUARDIAN

A Good New Year to you

As we enter election year, we need to tell ourselves that our voting preference is not what makes us human — it's our being good that matters



IN GOOD FAITH

NANDITESH NILAY

HAPPY NEW YEAR, of course. That's how all of us will greet each other, but let me amend it a little: I wish you a Good New Year. Why good with the new? Because we need to spell out good and goodness — let's be good to ourselves and to each other. Goodness, not newness, is happiness. Wishing each other "Good New Year" means I may have a role in your new year, too. Just saying "Happy New Year" means it's not my job to ensure your happy new year, it's your job and yours alone.

That's why "Good New Year" acknowledges that our wish endures after January 2, it gives us a stake in the rest of the year. Even when we are back at work, amid our biases, errors, egos, insecurities, vanities, resentments and all the other things that make up daily life — all those things that are reinforced by the algorithm that rules our phones, and in the process, our lives.

So how can we be good in the New Year? No moral science lecture will help. Bertrand Russell was of the view that goodness comes with happiness, but more importantly, with knowledge. A year which can enhance goodness is one in which we work a little harder to understand ourselves and those who are not like us, to tell ourselves that kindness is being human.

In an essay in *Young India*, Mahatma Gandhi had linked being good with a common declaration of independence by "whole villages, whole cities even." He underscored the importance of independence, not just as a passive liberation from control, but as an instrument to foster the spirit of togetherness and mutual trust that secures an individual's dreams.

We saw some of that during the Covid-19 pandemic when women and men, unsung and unheard, risked their lives as frontline workers, and later, ensured that a billion-plus people were vaccinated so that the nation could emerge from the darkness. For those weeks, we were a good nation. It can be seen in how we decided that the first to be vaccinated would be senior citizens and those who were most vulnerable, not those who could pay. It was in how we sent vaccines to those countries who didn't have access to them. This was what Plato called a good life that

requires not just knowledge but also harmony between the three parts of the soul: Reason, spirit and appetite.

A good new year, therefore, will need that same symphony across all the lines that divide us, of caste, class and religion. A good new year asks us to protect the happiness of all. Will the poor and the disenfranchised be a part of our year? And those who haven't had the gifts we got, thanks to the accident of our birth, be part of our year? What about students who failed their exams in 2023 or exhausted their chances, executives who missed a promotion or got laid off, families that saw discord and divide within? What about those on the bottom limb of the K in what economists call our K-shaped recovery? Families who have defaulted on their loans, Zomato and Amazon delivery boys and girls who wait for us to order so that they can feed their families? Will a "Happy New Year" be all that we have for them?

This is where being good matters. It forces us to look beyond our inner orbit. Our loved ones will be safe, they can take us for granted as a good new year means we look at those beyond them. To do this, our first step will be to deepen our sense of compassion.

It's not going to be easy as we enter the election year, as we will all be defined and valued by whom we vote for. We will be targeted with messages that are meant to divide. We need to tell ourselves that our voting preference is not what makes us human — it's our being good, our being kind that matters. And that, being good, like being a parent or a citizen, can never be the exclusive preserve of one party. This is a truth we need to underline.

In an age of me, myself and I, in an age of profit and numbers, where every action and interaction is based on outcome, being good is a challenge. Especially when we have sophisticated tools to mask ourselves, be it ChatGPT or Gemini or Instagram filters. Even we are not sure of who we are. The most authentic version of ourselves is the one we see in the mirror when no one's looking, the values that lie deep within, that characterise our relationship with other persons.

So let's put being good at the top of our lists. We need our children to be good and then competent and successful. We need leaders who are good and then astute. We need good students, good teachers, good doctors, good engineers, good lawyers, good judges, good politicians, good journalists — the list goes on and on. In short, we need those who blend the spirit of duty, compassion and reason. So I wish you a Good New Year.

The writer is the author of Being Good, Aaiye, Insaan Banaen & Ethnikos. He teaches and trains courses on ethics, values and behaviour

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WHAT FARMERS NEED

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The PM-Kisan model' (IE, December 30). The number of small farmers registered under PM-Kisan gives us an idea of the rural poor whose livelihood depends on agriculture. These farmers, along with landless labourers, form the backbone of the farm sector but their small landholding is not enough to provide them remunerative and gainful employment. They remain engulfed in the vicious cycle of subsistence farming and disguised unemployment. MSP support from the government is not enough for them to generate surplus income. Direct income support and food security schemes together may incentivise them to work in the unexplored, innovative, productive and diversified ideas of agriculture.

Arvind Waze, Mumbai

NO HALF MEASURES

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Order at sea' (IE, December 30). Expecting actors like Iran or Israel to show moderation to protect international marine traffic while prosecuting their strategic interests appears rather impractical. India does not have that kind of influence in this part of the world. The only way the Houthi can be dissuaded is by making the cost of their actions high. If India wants to be a naval power in the Indian Ocean region, it must not indulge in half measures.

There is a need to actively co-operate in the US-led efforts to provide maritime security against lawlessness. The Indian Navy too could do with some actual combat experience.

Shubhada H, via email

TIME IS RUNNING OUT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A patchy cli-

mate report' (IE, December 30). It has taken almost 30 years of climate talks for COP to call on nations to transition "away from fossil fuels" to be able to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. The resolution passed in Dubai, a climate summit that was hosted by an oil giant and attended by at least 2,456 oil lobbyists — the UAE Consensus — while better than feared, is much less than what is needed at this critical hour. The "agreement" also remains vulnerable to the vagaries of international diplomacy — as is the case often with COP resolutions. In the absence of binding pledges, it is not improbable that nations would backtrack on their green commitments. The imperatives of growth and the unwillingness to share the collective responsibility of mitigation action continue to undermine the future of the planet. COP28, just like many other climate summits, split hairs on the semantics associated with climate change even though time is running out.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

MATTER OF SECURITY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Shutting out debate in talking shop' (IE, December 31). It is incorrectly believed by many that Parliament has one job alone: To pass legislation. Passing bills in the temple of democracy without any debate and discussion is a matter of concern. The Winter Session of Parliament was proceeding smoothly until December 13, when a grave breach of security occurred with two unauthorised men carrying gas canisters into the premises. This security lapse laid out questions that should be addressed and served as an alarm for the security conditions in Parliament. An attack on this body is symbolic of an attack on the security of the whole nation.

Nidhi Dwivedi, Jammu



PADMAPRIYA JANAKIRAMAN

THE 2018 #METOO movement in India was a watershed moment highlighting sexual harassment in the workplace. The film industry, which regularly buried these issues in the garb of controversy, was finally compelled to respond. For close to a year, the movement was discussed in homes and dinner parties. Debates ensued on what constituted harassment and how women are much more likely to be victims because they, more often than men, lack power, and therefore are more vulnerable. The measurable impact of the movement in the Indian film industry was twofold — the first was the recognition of the need to implement the PoSH Act and the second was the acknowledgement of the need to create an inclusive workplace for women, both behind and in front of the camera. Five years on, it's time for a reality check.

The 2023 O Womaniya report on the status of women in the Indian film industry finds that corporate policies on proactive recruitment of women in leadership positions and implementation of anti-sexual harassment policies have reduced by 4 per cent each from 2022 to 2023. Despite the Kerala High Court's pathbreaking 2022 ruling underscoring the urgent need and manner of implementing Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in Malayalam cinema, and the surprise visit of the Women's Commission chairperson to a Malayalam movie set to check the ICC constitution on film sets, the implementation of the PoSH act remains a distant dream.

Trade bodies like the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA) in Kerala

Woman as storyteller

Films for, by and about women — that's the cure for cinema's gender problem

dismantled their ICC when key women members resigned after the leadership failed to take action against actor-producer Vijay Babu who has been accused of rape. The implementation of the PoSH Act across other regional film industries is no different. In trade associations where ICC has been implemented, there are no reports of any sexual harassment. This is more a reflection of the punitive results for women who speak up, usually by being denied work. Members of the Women in Cinema Collective, one of the first collectives of female artists in the Indian film industry, and other women from the #MeToo movement have been similarly marginalised in their workspaces.

According to the O Womaniya report, women's presence in workplaces saw a marginal positive change. In Hindi, it remains the same at 17 per cent compared to 2022, but Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Kannada saw an increase of 3-4 per cent. This marginal rise is driven by content commissioned for streaming films/series and not theatrical productions. Content of cinema remains clearly gender inequitable with the number of films/series passing the Bechdel test (gender equity test in fictional works where at least two female characters converse about something other than a man) reducing from 55 per cent in 2021 to 47 per cent in 2022. About 12 per cent fewer theatrical films and 6 per cent fewer streaming films have passed the Bechdel test in 2022 compared to 2021. The study also mentioned that the portrayal of women's lives became less complex, gender stereotypes were reinforced and diversity suffered.

The role of central and state governments in correcting the extremely skewed gender balance in the film industry has been dismal. Barring a few amendments made to the PoSH Act, little has been done. The deafening silence of the central government to the relentless protests of our champion women wrestlers over the past year is indicative of its commitment to addressing workplace harassment in unstructured workplaces.

In the last couple of years, at least 17 state governments have come up with film policies that are innovative on many fronts. But none of them include measures to promote gender equity or safety in the workplace. The Hema Committee report, the only such fact-finding study, set up in 2017, to study issues of women in Malayalam cinema by the Kerala Government, has not been acted upon. Worse, its findings have been kept out of the public domain despite severe criticism. Why is gender diversity on screen important? Multiple studies show that violence against women is a repercussion of rigid adherence to gender roles. The lethargy in the film industry towards ensuring gender safety and inclusion, relegation of women-forward content to streaming platforms only and the return of regressive alpha-male cinema as the industry staple are genuinely concerning. Films tell stories that help us understand our world. When they don't reflect real demographics, they give us an inaccurate picture. This creates a culture-wide tendency to comfortably dismiss women's relevance.

This trend has economic repercussions too. In a market that is dominated by youth

and women, regressive movies can only go so far. The sheer lack of variety in onscreen offerings — movies mostly made by men, populated with men, and sold to men — makes the industry vulnerable to a superhero slump at the box office. We have been there before.

It's time we stop ignoring the appetite for stories that embrace and empower women and challenge traditional narrative conventions. These movies may not make a billion bucks but they do make money. And that matters because the more we make diverse women-centred content, the higher the chance of these movies graduating from being superhits to blockbusters, redefining our understanding of a "mass movie". *Barbie*, *The Woman King*, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* and *Wonder Woman* did not become blockbusters overnight. They have been preceded by many mid-budget films like *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Mean Girls* which were not the stereotypical romantic films but made money at the box office.

The solution lies in investing in women storytellers, providing women with more leadership opportunities and holding the industry/governments accountable for making systemic changes in the film industry. On their part, female filmmakers too need to join forces and bet on the sizable spending power of women audiences by making stories that unapologetically lean into the feminine aesthetic and appeal to women at the box office.

The writer is an actor, public policy researcher and founding member of the Women in Cinema Collective



SOME IDLING SOKOL CRUDE TANKERS COULD HEAD TO CHINA INSTEAD

Russian oil imports hit 11-month low in Dec as Sokol cargoes dry up

SUKALP SHARMA

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

INDIA'S RUSSIAN oil imports declined to an 11-month low in December as the country was unable to take delivery of any cargo of the Sokol grade crude, even as the import volumes of the Urals crude—the mainstay of India's oil imports from Russia—remained robust in the last month of 2023, shows an analysis of latest shipping data provided by commodity market analytics firm Kpler.

India's import of the Sokol crude, which is produced in Russia's Far East region, ran into problems related to Western sanctions and payments over the past month or so. The Indian Express has learnt. As a result, six oil tankers carrying Sokol crude for government-owned Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) were idling close to the Indian waters for weeks, unable to discharge the oil at their destination ports—Vadinar and Paradip, as per ship tracking data. Two of the six tankers are now showing Chinese ports as their destinations, indicating that these cargoes could finally be consumed by Chinese refiners instead.

Indian refiners cumulatively imported 1.48 million barrels per day (million bpd) of Russian



Indian refiners cumulatively imported 1.48 million bpd of Russian oil in December. File

oil in December, down 11.6 per cent from the volumes delivered in November, as per Kpler data. December import volumes were the lowest since January 2023, when India's Russian oil imports stood at 1.41 million bpd. In December, oil imports from Russia accounted for 32.9 per cent of India's total oil imports of 4.51 million bpd, followed by Iraq (22 per cent) and Saudi Arabia (15.6 per cent).

Sokol crude cargoes for India appear to be grappling with a dual problem. At least one of the idling tankers—NS Century—was sanctioned by the United States (US) for dealing in Russian oil above the Group of Seven's (G7) price cap of \$60 per

buying is roughly the same as it was before, around 11–11.5 million bpd. The big change this month was the absolute absence of Sokol imports. Indian refineries bought an average of 140,000 bpd of Sokol this year...December 2023 marks the first and only month in 2023 that India didn't buy (any Sokol crude)."

"The assimilation of Sokol-laden tankers around India will most probably see a sudden resolution over the upcoming days. Of the six tankers that were idling around India's coast, two have started to indicate Chinese final destinations. As the UAE banking delays of the Sakhalin-I project operator continue, effectively being unable to fully relocate the trading of Sokol cargoes into the relatively calm waters of the Dubai trading world, China might appear as

barrel. According to sources, the tanker was sanctioned while it was already on its way to the Vadinar port. The other major problem that has emerged is in the payment mechanism for Sokol crude.

According to trade sources, Sakhalin-1 LLC—an arm of Russian oil major Rosneft—which supplies Sokol crude to IOC, has not been able to secure an account in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in order to accept payments in dirhams.

Given that not all Indian banks are being able to process payments in dollars for Russian crude, particularly in cases where it might be difficult to prove that the oil was bought at a price compliant with the G7 price cap, India's public sector refiners are now opting to pay in UAE dirhams for such cargoes.

"The assimilation of Sokol-laden tankers around India will most probably see a sudden resolution over the upcoming days. Of the six tankers that were idling around India's coast, two have started to indicate Chinese final destinations. As the UAE banking delays of the Sakhalin-I project operator continue, effectively being unable to fully relocate the trading of Sokol cargoes into the relatively calm waters of the Dubai trading world, China might appear as

the final solution for some cargoes," Katona said.

But it might be too early to "write off" India's appetite for the Far East Russian crude grade, Katona said, as three tankers were recently booked to transport Sokol crude, and all three "indicate India as their final destination". As per ship tracking data, two of the tankers are expected to unload Sokol crude at the Paradip port, and one at the Vadinar port.

In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, as Western sanctions on Russia altered global crude oil flows, India and China emerged as the biggest buyers of Russian crude, accounting for most of Moscow's oil exports.

Prior to the war in Ukraine, Russia was a marginal player in India's oil imports. However, as the West began shunning Russian oil following Moscow's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia started offering deep discounts on its oil to willing buyers.

Indian refiners started lapping up the discounted barrels, catapulting Russia to the top spot on the list of India's oil suppliers, displacing traditional heavyweights like Iraq and Saudi Arabia. India is the world's third-largest consumer of crude oil and depends on imports to meet over 85 per cent of its requirement.

NSE's investor base grows to 8.5 cr in '23; Maharashtra tops, followed by Uttar Pradesh

GEORGE MATHEW
MUMBAI, JANUARY 31

THE INVESTOR base of the National Stock Exchange (NSE) increased by 22 per cent from 7 crore to 8.54 crore during the calendar year 2023, underscoring the growing retail investor participation in the stock market.

While Maharashtra is in the top position with 1.49 crore investors, Uttar Pradesh is at the second position in terms of total registered investors with 90 lakh investors as on December 29, 2023, NSE said in a study. They are followed by Gujarat with 77 lakh investors and West Bengal 48 lakh investors.

According to the NSE, 99.85 per cent of India's postal PIN codes were covered in terms of investor registrations. As many as 161.4 lakh new investors were added in 2023. The benchmark Nifty index touched 20,000 on September 11, 2023 and 21,000 on December 8, 2023. Nifty index returned 20 per cent returns in 2023 and closed at 21,731 in 2023. India's market capitalisation crossed \$4 trillion in December 2023.

Market capitalisation on of NSE EMERGE listed companies (SMEs) crossed Rs 1,00,000 crore mark for the first time since platform's inception in 2012.

Ashishkumar Chauhan, managing director and Chief Executive Officer, NSE, said, "Investors should deal only with registered intermediaries and never invest in unregulated products.

STATE-WISE REGISTERED INVESTORS (in lakh)

State	Dec 2023	Dec 2022	Change	New investors in 2023
Maharashtra	149.3	127.2	17.4%	22.4
Uttar Pradesh	90.1	66.9	34.7%	23.8
Gujarat	77.1	65.4	17.9%	11.8
West Bengal	48.0	38.3	25.2%	10.0
Karnataka	47.9	40.3	19.0%	7.6
Rajasthan	47.8	37.8	26.4%	10.2
Tamil Nadu	47.6	39.4	20.9%	8.4
Madhya Pradesh	40.5	31.3	29.6%	9.3
Andhra Pradesh	39.8	34.3	16.0%	4.3
Delhi	39.6	33.2	19.4%	6.4
TOTAL	854.1	694.1	23.0%	161.4

INDIVIDUAL INVESTORS WHO TRADED AT LEAST ONCE (in lakh)

	CY23	CY22	Change
CM segment	271.9	268.9	1.1%
Equity derivatives	84.7	63.9	32.6%
Currency derivatives	4.4	4.4	0.1%

NET FLOWS (in ₹Cr)

	CY23	CY22
FII	1,71,107	1,84,650
DII	1,21,439	2,76,699

Investment through stock market is meant for long-term wealth creation." Chauhan said an unpleasant experience can dishearten even the most resilient investors, making it crucial to tread with caution if an investor is new to stock market or not an expert.

"Avoid the pitfalls of high-risk derivatives or frequent trading in stock market. Be a committed participant in India's growth story, and pave the way for a brighter future. Long term investments usually yield better results based on past experiences," he said.

Centre appoints Arvind Panagariya as Chairman of 16th Finance Commission

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

THE CENTRAL government on Sunday appointed former NITI Aayog Vice Chairman Arvind Panagariya as the Chairman of the 16th Finance Commission. As per a notification issued by the Ministry of Finance's Department of Economic Affairs, Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer Ritvik Ranjanam Pandey will be the secretary to the Commission. The members of the Commission will be notified separately, said the notification issued on Sunday.

"The Chairman and other members of the Commission shall hold office from the date on which they respectively assume office up to the date of submission of Report or 31st day of October, 2025, whichever is earlier," reads the notification.

According to the notification, "The Commission shall make recommendations as to the following matters, namely:—(i) The distribution between the Union and the States of the net proceeds of taxes which are to be, or may be, divided between them under Chapter I, Part XII of the Constitution and the allocation between the States of the respective shares of such proceeds..."



Arvind Panagariya served as India's G20 Sherpa in 2017. In 2023, he was appointed chancellor of Nalanda University. File

It shall also make recommendations on the "principles which should govern the grants-in-aid of the revenues of the Consolidated Fund of India and the sums to be paid to the States by way of grants-in-aid of their revenues under article 275 of the Constitution for the purposes other than those specified in the provisos to clause (1) of that article; and (iii) the measures needed to augment the Consolidated Fund of State to supplement the resources of the Panchayats and Municipalities in the State on the basis of the recommendations made by the Finance Commission of the State."

"The Commission shall make its report available by 31st day of October, 2025 covering a period of five years commencing on the 1st day of April, 2026," it said.

Last month, the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi had approved the Terms of Reference for the Sixteenth Finance Commission.

As per the Terms of Reference, "The Finance Commission shall make recommendations as to the following matters, namely: The distribution between the Union and the States of the net proceeds of taxes which are to be, or may be, divided between them under

recommendations thereon," the notification said.

The Commission shall make its report available by 31st day of October, 2025 covering a period of five years commencing on the 1st day of April, 2026," it said.

Last month, the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi had approved the Terms of Reference for the Sixteenth Finance Commission.

As per the Terms of Reference, "The Finance Commission shall make recommendations as to the following matters, namely: The distribution between the Union and the States of the net proceeds of taxes which are to be, or may be, divided between them under

Chapter I, Part XII of the Constitution and the allocation between the States of the respective shares of such proceeds..."

It shall also make recommendations on the "principles which should govern the grants-in-aid of the revenues of the Consolidated Fund of India and the sums to be paid to the States by way of grants-in-aid of their revenues under article 275 of the Constitution for the purposes other than those specified in the provisos to clause (1) of that article," according to an official statement issued after the Union Cabinet meeting on November 29.

The Finance Commission is constituted under article 280 of the Constitution of India.

Panagariya, is professor of Economics and the Jagdish Bhagwati Professor of Indian Political Economy at Columbia University. He was first vice-chairman of NITI Aayog from January 2015 to August 2017 and served as India's G20 Sherpa in 2017. In April 2023, he was appointed chancellor of Nalanda University.

Days before Panagariya's term as the NITI Aayog vice-chairman came to an end on August 31, 2017, the Prime Minister appreciated his contribution in shaping NITI Aayog, and described him as his "great friend".

FULL REPORT
www.indianexpress.com

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

THE FINANCE ministry has sought expenditure proposals for the second and final batch of Supplementary Demands for Grants from various ministries and departments ahead of the Budget session likely to commence in the last week of January.

This would be the last session of the 17th Lok Sabha before the general elections and the government would seek expenditure approvals of Parliament for four months till July 2024 through a vote on account.

The second batch of Supplementary Demands for Grants for 2023-24 is proposed

to be placed before Parliament in the ensuing Budget session,

the finance ministry said in an office memorandum. The cases that would be eligible to be incorporated under such demands include those where advances

from the Contingency Fund have been granted.

Besides, payments against court decree would be included

as well as cases where the finance ministry has specifically advised moving the sup-



The ministries are required to submit their supplementary proposals by January 8. File

plementary grants in the winter session, it said.

"While processing proposals for supplementary grants, the grant controlling authority must invariably identify savings within the grant so that the in-fructuous or inflated supplementary demands are weeded out and the eventuality of surrender after obtaining the supplementary grant is avoided," it said. According to the memorandum dated December 29, the ministries are required to submit their supplementary proposals by January 8. The interim Budget 2024-25 is likely to be presented on February 1. The Budget approval process has been streamlined by the Government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi for better utilisation of funds.

In December. Going forward, FPI flows are expected to be robust.

However, their allocation is likely to be selective, said Kislay Upadhyay - smallcase Manager and founder of Fidel Folio.

Anticipating a continued decrease in the US interest rates throughout 2024, it is likely that FPIs are likely to increase their purchases, especially in the early months of the New Year in the run-up to the general elections.

The year 2023 has witnessed massive investment by FPIs, thanks to the sharp uptick in inflows of Rs 66,134 crore in

December. Going forward, FPI flows are expected to be robust.

However, their allocation is likely to be selective, said Kislay Upadhyay - smallcase Manager and founder of Fidel Folio.

Anticipating a continued decrease in the US interest rates throughout 2024, it is likely that FPIs are likely to increase their purchases, especially in the early months of the New Year in the run-up to the general elections.

The year 2023 has witnessed massive investment by FPIs, thanks to the sharp uptick in inflows of Rs 66,134 crore in

December. Going forward, FPI flows are expected to be robust.

However, their allocation is likely to be selective, said Kislay Upadhyay - smallcase Manager and founder of Fidel Folio.

Anticipating a continued decrease in the US interest rates throughout 2024, it is likely that FPIs are likely to increase their purchases, especially in the early months of the New Year in the run-up to the general elections.

The year 2023 has witnessed massive investment by FPIs, thanks to the sharp uptick in inflows of Rs 66,134 crore in

December. Going forward, FPI flows are expected to be robust.

However, their allocation is likely to be selective, said Kislay Upadhyay - smallcase Manager and founder of F

On the Moon, and exploring new frontiers

While Indian science's biggest achievement in 2023 was the Moon landing, it pushed boundaries on both Earth and in the sky, with forays in the Arctic and the Antarctic and new partnerships in space. For the coming year, several ISRO launches are scheduled, beginning January 1. Closer home, initiatives like the National Research Foundation, the National Quantum Mission, and LIGO-India hold promise for the future.



AMITABH SINHA

LOOKING AT 2024

ELECTION YEAR

SCIENCE

WHILE THE Moon landing was quite clearly the crowning glory for Indian science in 2023, the year also marked a definite shift in gears for India's space programme. From an agency with advanced capabilities in launching and placing satellites in orbits, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) took important steps towards becoming a full-fledged planetary exploration body.

This was one of the most productive years for ISRO, which carried out seven successful missions, including the two high-profile ones — Chandrayaan-3 and Aditya-L1, India's first mission to the Sun. The year ended the relatively lean streak for the space agency in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, which seemed to have badly disrupted its schedule, affecting even the human spaceflight mission, Gaganyaan, originally planned for 2022. With several preparatory tests still remaining, Gaganyaan is now scheduled for 2025.

In the meanwhile, ISRO unveiled an impressive list of milestones it aims to achieve in the next few years — sending an astronaut to the International Space Station in a joint effort with NASA in 2024; Chandrayaan-4, a sample return mission from the Moon, in the next four years; space station Bharatiya Antarksha Station by 2028; and landing a human being on the Moon by 2040.

This is in addition to routine launches, astronomy missions, and exploratory missions to Sun, Mars and Venus.

Chandrayaan-3

Several of these plans were firmed up only after the successful moon landing of Chandrayaan-3 in August. The fact that the United States and the then Soviet Union had made Moon landings a fairly routine event in the 1960s and 1970s does in no way diminish the enormity of India's feat. Five decades later, there are still only two more countries to have gone to the Moon — China and India.

Chandrayaan-3 was sweeter because India's first attempt, Chandrayaan-2 in 2019, had met with heartbreak in the last few seconds of its descent on the Moon's surface. This time, ISRO managed a perfect landing.

Once on the Moon, Chandrayaan-3 performed previously unannounced manoeuvres that demonstrated ISRO's capabilities, and intention, to undertake more advanced

missions. The biggest surprise was the 'hop' experiment. Towards the end of the lunar day, the entire Chandrayaan-3 lander, along with the instruments it contained, made a jump on the Moon's surface, lifting itself about 40 cm above the ground and landing 30-40 cm away. This demonstrated ISRO's capability to get the lander to lift off the Moon's surface — a key test for sample return missions or manned missions, when the spacecraft has to return to Earth. Not unexpectedly, ISRO, a few weeks later, said Chandrayaan-4 would indeed be a sample return mission.

New partnerships

The growing capabilities of ISRO also resulted in more international partnerships. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the United States in June this year, India joined the US-led Artemis Accords for planetary exploration. The Artemis Accords are a set of principles that countries agree to adhere to in their quest for peaceful and cooperative exploration of the Moon and other planets. India's decision to join the Artemis Accords brings the space programmes of the two countries closer than ever.

Another demonstration of the new close partnership was the agreement between ISRO and NASA to send a joint mission to the International Space Station, the permanent laboratory in space about 400 km above the earth's surface, in 2024. This would mean that India's astronauts would get into space much earlier than the Gaganyaan mission of 2025.

Later in the year, India and the US also set up a working group for commercial space collaboration, which is expected to boost the private space industry in the country. The two countries announced their intention to work together on planetary defence too.

National Research Foundation

While ISRO was breaking new grounds in space exploration, the government made an important intervention to expand the scale and quality of scientific research in the country. Delivering on a promise it made five years ago, the government approved the National Research Foundation (NRF), to fund, promote and mentor research activities.

Modelled on the National Science Foundation in the United States, the NRF would ensure research funding of Rs 50,000 crore over the next five years. However, the biggest promise of NRF is in its mandate to develop research capacities in universities and colleges.

"For some reason, there has been an artificial separation between research and higher education in the country. There are research institutions and there are colleges and universities where very little research is carried out. One of the objectives of NRF would be to build research capacities in our universities. The union of education and research must be restored," said Spenta Wadia, founding director of Bengaluru-based International Centre for Theoretical Sciences, a centre of Tata Institute of Fundamental Research.

The NRF would promote research not just in the natural sciences and engineering, but

scale and quality of scientific research in the country. Delivering on a promise it made five years ago, the government approved the National Research Foundation (NRF), to fund, promote and mentor research activities.

Modelled on the National Science Foundation in the United States, the NRF would ensure research funding of Rs 50,000 crore over the next five years. However, the biggest promise of NRF is in its mandate to develop research capacities in universities and colleges.

"For some reason, there has been an artificial separation between research and higher education in the country. There are research institutions and there are colleges and universities where very little research is carried out. One of the objectives of NRF would be to build research capacities in our universities. The union of education and research must be restored," said Spenta Wadia, founding director of Bengaluru-based International Centre for Theoretical Sciences, a centre of Tata Institute of Fundamental Research.

The NRF would promote research not just in the natural sciences and engineering, but



Illustration: Suvajit Dey

also in social sciences, arts and humanities, with one of the primary aims being finding solutions to the big problems facing Indian society.

New initiatives

The year saw India taking important decisions towards developing indigenous capabilities in frontier areas of scientific research. In April, it launched a Rs 6,000-crore National Quantum Mission, aimed at building

a 1,000-qubit quantum computer over the next eight years. Quantum computers are not just superfast, they utilise the quantum mechanical properties of matter at a tiny scale, allowing them to perform tasks that would be impossible, or impractical, for conventional computers.

The launch of the National Quantum Mission allows India to join a global technology development race when it is still in its nascent stages. India has often been a late-

entrant in such matters, like in the development of supercomputers, and then has a lot of catching up to do. It also misses out on the spin-off benefits of technology development.

Another similar decision was the approval of the LIGO-India project to build a gravitational wave observatory in Maharashtra. The project had received an in-principle approval seven years earlier, but it was only in April that the final nod came. LIGO-India would be the third arm of two similar observatories in the United States which made the first discovery of gravitational waves in 2015, a feat that won the Nobel Prize in Physics two years later. Gravitational wave research is another field where there are very few players and facilities right now, and India has the opportunity to take the lead.

Towards the end of the year, India announced its decision to set up a new research station in Antarctica, to replace the ageing Maitri station. The new station, Maitri-II, will be located just a few kilometres away from the existing one, which has been operational since 1989. India has another operational station in Antarctica, called Bharati. These stations are centres of India's growing research footprint in Antarctica, which offers pristine environments for carrying out studies in a variety of scientific fields.

The Maitri-II announcement came close on the heels of the decision to send the first winter expedition to the Arctic region. Like in Antarctica, India has a science base in the Arctic as well, but it was not operational in winter. From this year, the Arctic base would be manned throughout the year.

Meanwhile, the government instituted new national awards for scientists, called Rashtriya Vigyan Puraskar. The new awards followed last year's decision to scrap all awards, including the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prizes, India's top science prize. The Bhatnagar Prizes have been restored in the new system of awards. The Rashtriya Vigyan Puraskar would have three other awards — one for lifetime achievement, another for scientists of any age (Bhatnagar is meant only for scientists below 45 years), and the third to recognise team or collaborative effort.

In the new year

There are a series of high-profile launches scheduled in 2024, starting with the New Year day itself. The XPoSat, or the X-Ray Polarimeter Satellite, slated for launch on January 1, is the world's second of its kind mission, meant for studying the universe using x-ray polarimetry measurements. NASA had sent a similar satellite, Imaging X-ray Polarimetry Explorer, or IXPE, in 2021.

This would be India's second consecutive astronomy mission after Aditya-L1. These two satellites will observe the universe instead of the Earth, which most satellites do.

The much-awaited NASA-ISRO Satellite Aperture Radar (NISAR) mission is scheduled for the first quarter of next year. Later, a test flight of Gaganyaan, without the astronauts, is scheduled.

Elsewhere, the impacts of NRF would begin to be apparent. Despite having a large pool of science and engineering graduates, a fairly large network of laboratories and research institutions, and active involvement in premium scientific research, India lags behind several countries on a variety of research indicators.

India spends just 0.65% of its GDP on scientific research, far below the global average of 1.79%. Women comprise only 18% of total scientific researchers in India, while globally this number is 33%. The number of researchers per million population in India, 262, is significantly lower than even developing countries like Brazil (888), South Africa (484) or Mexico (349). The performance of the NRF would be judged on its ability to improve these indicators.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

Donkey route to Europe: how Indians visit many nations for a 'travel history'

DIVYAA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 31

LAST YEAR, Serbia had to change its visa rules under pressure from the European Union. This was because the Balkan nation was being used by many, including Indians, as an illegal transit point to Europe.

Belgrade's visa-free regime for Indians — along with nationals from Turkey, Tunisia, Cuba and Burundi — was being exploited to get into the bordering Austria, Hungary and Romania, and ultimately to Italy and France. Reason: those travelling to EU countries from Serbia don't require a visa. In October 2022, Serbia withdrew visa-free arrivals for the above-mentioned countries.

Creating a 'travel history'

The transit phenomenon came to light after European authorities recorded more than 1.3 lakh illegal immigrants in the first 10 months of 2022, many of whom were nationals of the countries allowed visa-free arrivals by Serbia.

In the case of Indians, to show a "considerable travel history" on their passports, the migrants (mostly men of 25–40 years of age, many from Punjab) were asked by their agents to enter Serbia after visiting destinations such as Nepal, Dubai, and Armenia, so that they came across as genuine tourists to the immigration authorities, people in the know of the matter said.

The recent case of a flight carrying 303 Indian nationals being grounded in France, ahead of its departure for Nicaragua, seems to bring to light a similar pattern.

Harsh journey

In most such cases, on arrival in the transit country, the migrants are connected by agents to the so-called 'donkers', or people smugglers, who help them enter their final destination illegally. The donkers charge exorbitant payments for such services. To evade border authorities, many migrants are transported in the harshest conditions, not just without food and water, but even gasping for breath, hidden in cramped containers and delivery vehicles.

One such case had come to light in 2021 — of a young man from Punjab who wanted to go to Italy, and was suggested the transit route of Dubai-Serbia-Romania-Hungary, through which he would have entered Italy in about six months. He was transported to the Hungarian border from Romania in a delivery truck, tucked in a small box. However, he returned to India ultimately, as he could never reach Italy and was forced to continue working on a farm in Hungary.

A 2009 report by the United Nations

Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) on Smuggling of Migrants from India to Europe highlights several cases of migrants drowning in unsafe vessels, suffocating to death in trucks and ships, or being victimised by smuggling gangs.

One of the biggest such tragedies was reported in 1996, when 283 migrants, most from Punjab, died when their overcrowded boat capsized in the Mediterranean, near Malta, on their way to Italy.

Those who reach their destination often

find themselves locked in cycles of exploitation and abuse, which tend to go unreported because of the person's fear of arrest and deportation.

Destination Europe

Out of the records of immigration-related offences examined at the Delhi airport in 2005, 2006, and 2007, almost 47% were related to destination countries in Europe. Of this, about 27% were related to the UK. Most cases of irregular migration to the UK were via France, after landing there with a direct visa, or reaching France through an irregular donkey route.

When going to the US

For those headed to the US, the first step in the most popular donkey route from India is to reach a Latin American country. Countries like Ecuador, Bolivia, and Guyana have visas on arrival for Indian citizens. Some other countries, including Brazil and Venezuela, give tourist visas to Indians easily. Nowadays, many first go to Europe, and from there, directly to Mexico.

Definite numbers not available

A sizable number of Indians are believed to be stranded in Spain, where they entered illegally, and are seeking general amnesty.

Indian detainees have also been reported in Ukraine, Turkey, Slovakia, Malaysia, Romania and Poland, presumably headed to Western European countries. Many of these countries have approached the Indian government from time to time, to confirm the migrants' antecedents for deportation.

In the recent Winter Session, MoS External Affairs, V Muraleedharan, stated in Parliament that many foreign countries do not provide information about illegal migrants on their soil, except when they have to be deported. As such, Indian Missions and Posts do not have reliable data on the number of Indians staying or working illegally in foreign countries.

Apart from Punjab, irregular migration is also being reported in high numbers from Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir.

LONGER VERSION

indianexpress.com/explained

**YOUR GO-TO INSTITUTE FOR
GENERAL STUDIES PREPARATION**

Prelims cum Mains

General Studies Comprehensive Programme

10 Months

FEBRUARY 2024

Prelims cum Mains

General Studies Fledgling Comprehensive Programme

2 Years

JANUARY 2024

Options

Optional Subjects Course

5 Months

JUNE 2024

080-6220-6330 www.vajiramandravali.com



2023 IN QUOTES



From G20 becoming a people's presidency, Article 370, collaborative space research, paddy straw creating wealth to how ideas are the future currency, here's a glimpse into conversations that shaped the narrative of the country



"Reservation is a runway... If you won't take off, how will another flight take off?"
MILIND KAMBLE
FOUNDER CHAIRMAN, DALIT INDIAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY, AND CHAIRMAN, BOARD OF GOVERNORS, IIM-JAMMU
JANUARY 16



"Curriculum is getting tougher... because you want to filter out those who can't negotiate it"
MADHAV CHAVAN
CO-FOUNDER, PRATHAM EDUCATION FOUNDATION
JANUARY 23



"If Vajpayee had the majority like Modi, he would have definitely tried to end Article 370"
SUSHIL KUMAR MODI
SENIOR BJP LEADER, RAJYA SABHA MEMBER
FEBRUARY 13



"There is a fundamental shift in the Hindu-Bengali voter pattern towards the BJP"
PRADYOT DEBBARMA
CHIEF TIPRA MOTHIA
MARCH 6



"We have tried to make G20 not a government's presidency but a people's presidency"
AMITABH KANT
G20 SHERPA OF INDIA
MARCH 13



"Raj Bhavan is meant to be a neutral centre... Nothing prevents it from being accessible... Raj Bhavan should be *jan bhavan*"
CV ANANDA BOSE
GOVERNOR OF WEST BENGAL
MARCH 27



"People who want to support Congress are scared. But we aren't scared, we will fight for truth"
MALLIKARJUN KHARGE
NATIONAL PRESIDENT-INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS, LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION IN THE RAJYA SABHA
APRIL 17



"BJP sees AAP as its challenger nationally; only Kejriwal can take on PM Modi"
RAGHAV CHADHA
RAJYA SABHA MP FROM PUNJAB, AAM Aadmi Party
APRIL 24



"When women raise their voices, they are targeted first... They ask, how did we get so courageous"
VINESH PHOGAT
WRESTLER, TWO-TIME WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP MEDALLIST
MAY 1



"We are not a hard state. We are tough only with criminals. We want good governance"
KESHAV PRASAD MAURYA
UTTAR PRADESH DEPUTY CHIEF MINISTER
MAY 29



"Lesson from Russia-Ukraine war... India must always be prepared for conventional conflict"
Lt GEN AJAI KUMAR SINGH
GENERAL OFFICER COMMANDING-IN-CHIEF, SOUTHERN COMMAND
JUNE 12



"Idealism in politics is good, but if you're kicked out, who cares?"
DEVENDRA FADNAVIS
MAHARASHTRA DEPUTY CM
JULY 2



"You call yourself the fittest team in the world... then how do you break down so soon?"
SUNIL GAVASKAR
FORMER INDIAN CRICKETER
JULY 17



"This is India's time. There is assurance that this journey is likely to not falter"
NILESH SHAH
MANAGING DIRECTOR, KOTAK MAHINDRA AMC
JULY 31



"The CM of Manipur has failed to become the CM of all the tribes of Manipur"
ADHIR RANJAN CHOWDHURY
CONGRESS LEADER AND MP
AUGUST 14



"Now that Modiji has delivered and declared our comeback, India isn't unsure either"
GAJENDRA SINGH SHEKHWAT
UNION MINISTER OF JAL SHAKTI
AUGUST 21



"We really like each other and need each other. The world needs us to like each other and work together"
ERIC GARCETTI
US AMBASSADOR TO INDIA
AUGUST 28



"Space functioned under a veil of secrecy... Now there is synergy between academia, research, industry and startups"
JITENDRA SINGH
MOS (INDEPENDENT) FOR SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY
SEPTEMBER 25



"Caste census has overpowered kamandal politics. This is now a national issue"
RAJIV RANJAN SINGH
NATIONAL PRESIDENT, JANATA DAL (UNITED)
OCTOBER 9



"Winning world medals in distance-running is not easy, but with right thinking and training, it's possible"
PARUL CHAUDHARY AND AVINASH SABLE
INDIAN ATHLETES, ASIAN GAMES MEDALLISTS
OCTOBER 16



"A sustainable solution for stubble is to create a market for paddy straw, convert waste to wealth"
RAMESH CHAND
MEMBER, NITI AAYOG
NOVEMBER 14



"We have become more focused on procedure than actually seeking the truth"
V RAMASUBRAMANIAN
FORMER SUPREME COURT JUDGE
NOVEMBER 27



"I have a strong desire to compete in a big international event in India"
NEERAJ CHOPRA
OLYMPIC AND WORLD CHAMPION IN JAVELIN
DECEMBER 4



"To turn back on democracy, when ideas are future currency, is just the most blind thing to do"
RAGHURAM RAJAN
FORMER RBI GOVERNOR
DECEMBER 18

AN EXPRESS INVESTIGATION

For the last couple of months, 15 reporters gathered data about all of India's Asian Games medallists in Hangzhou. The analysis provided a few clear-cut trends and some fascinating journeys of athletes that highlight them. Here's what the numbers say about the Indian sporting scene.

METROS ACCOUNT ONLY FOR FEW



OF THE big metros, Chennai-borns contributed most medallists (13). Next was Delhi with 11, and Mumbai had 8. Kolkata 7. Hyderabad (4), Bengaluru (2), Ahmedabad (1) had disappointing numbers

60.9% of athletes (156) whose highest education qualification is either graduation or post-graduation.

96 number of athletes have government jobs. A total of 78, aged 18 and above, are not employed.

24.2% of athletes (62) whose family's primary occupation when they started playing was farming.



91% of hockey players (33 out of 36) in the men's and women's teams who come from small towns and rural areas, confirming the trend that big cities no longer produce international players.

88 athletes are aged under 23, underlining them as long-term prospects.

62% of athletes out of the 50 belonging to the lowest economic slab (<50,000 per annum) who are part of the cricket, hockey and kabaddi teams. It indicates team sport is perhaps still the best route for those who are not well off. There are no athletes from shooting, badminton, squash, equestrian in this category, signifying the investment typically required for equipment in these disciplines.

SHOOTING, HIGH-END SPORT
73.3% of the shooting medallists come from families belonging to the economic slab of more than Rs 5 LPA while no one is from the lowest bracket, showing the kind of economic footing needed to go up the ranks in shooting. 10 out of the 30 parents are in business while 8 parents are in government service.

VINAYAK MOHANARANGAN
OUT OF 36 medal winners across the men's team (gold) and women's team (bronze), 20 athletes are from rural areas. While 13 out of 18 medalists come from the Haryana-Punjab region, the women's team is a bit more spread out. Fifty per cent of the female hockey players come from families with income around Rs 50,000 or below and all of them had parents who have completed Class XII at best.

One of hockey's standout features is access to infrastructure in rural areas.

TREND
Access to infra, a game-changer

Sundergarh in Odisha and Simdega in Jharkhand are both examples of how remote locales have astroturf training facilities. While Sundergarh has been promised a turf in each block, given Odisha's long-standing commitment towards improving hockey, Simdega got its solitary facility in 2015, which coincided with the likes of Salima Tete and Sangita Kumari's rise.

Sangita and Salima, both hailing from tribal villages even farther inward from Simdega, both availed the use of the hockey training centre run by coach Pratima Barwa. The centre has a hostel and school adjacent

ANDREW AMSAN

THE VILLAGE of Bahaura Bhairawa, 98 kilometres south of Varanasi, is so small and remote that it does not even seem to show up on most maps. It has two temples, a school and a post office, and last October, it found a hero too, Ram Baboo, the joint bronze medallist in 35km-walk at the Asian Games.

The long walk from his village, tucked in the bowels of the sprawling Sonbhadra District, the second largest state of Uttar Pradesh, to Hangzhou in China, where he made his nation proud, was arduous and a path he had not imagined. From early teenage, he dreamt of

TREND
Back of the beyond not a barrier.
83 Number of athletes who come from rural areas

being an athlete—a marathoner, before his knees began to creak—after seeing pictures of Olympians in a Class VII textbook. But it was an impossible dream—his village had little infrastructure, his parents had little money, his father was a manual labourer, and he belonged to the tribal Kol community, and hence climbing up the social ladder was difficult.

Baboo calls those days, "mushkil samay (difficult times)." "I never had a good diet because I couldn't afford it. My family doesn't have the resources. We don't even have



When he was 17, Ram Baboo moved to Varanasi from his village to chase his dream to be an Olympian.

a water pump in our house. We have to walk a kilometre to fetch water," Baboo recollects to this newspaper.

But Baboo was so determined to make his life and career as an athlete (as a marathoner first) that he travelled to

Varanasi when he was just 17 so that he could afford access to train in a stadium. There he met Chandrabahan Yadav, his first

coach. But to make ends meet, he doubled up as a waiter in a nearby hotel. With the measly sum he saved from the odd jobs, he bought his first pair of sports shoes.

Two years later, in 2019, he left Varanasi. But he managed to get himself enrolled at the Sports Authority of India centre in Bhopal. But the centre shut during the pandemic and he returned home. The freezing of the stipend meant he had to join his father in constructing roads under MGNREGA scheme. He would ask his friends to shoot videos of his struggles on the field so that he would always remain motivated.

Once the pandemic subsided, he resumed chasing his dream. He went to Bhopal again and in the first tournament post lockdown, the National Race Walk Championship, he clinched silver in 50km walk. It helped him enter the Army Sports Institute in Pune with the help of coach Basant Rana.

Thereafter his career soared. He shattered the 35 km national record in the 2022 National Games in Ahmedabad, rewrote the mark at a meet in Slovakia, and topping it all, won bronze in the continental event. The plaudits earned him fame, rewards and recognition. He was promoted to a havildar in the Army, industrialist Anand Mahindra offered the family a tractor or a pickup of their choice, and he is building a pucca house. But the walk from Bahaura Bhairawa Gandhi to Hangzhou was long and arduous.



Hyderabad

TILAK VARMA Gold, Cricket

Petrol pump attendant raises a champion

NAMIT KUMAR

DEEP INTO the interiors of Jawan village—in Ballabhgarh, Faridabad—Jagbir Lamba stands on the under-construction first floor of his house, beaming with pride. The reason: the first floor is a gift from his daughter, Priti, who won the 3000m steeplechase bronze medal at this year's Asian Games.

Part-owner of some farmland, and employee at a nearby petrol pump, Jagbir's family neither had the money nor the cultural exposure to raise a top-level international athlete. He loved playing Kho Kho but his family situation did not allow any sporting

TREND
Sporting culture at home may help an athlete excel but others too are not at a disadvantage



148 Numbers of medallists with no one in the family into sports. Close to one-third of them are from rural areas. Out of them 66 are women.



ambitions. So, when his daughter was winning age-group state meets by 13, there was no looking back.

"The entire family got together to work towards the same goal. Even if it made things hard, we saved, controlled our expenses," Jagbir tells The Indian Express. "When the child is as talented as her, it makes everything easier."

Jagbir doesn't spin their financial situation as a hard-luck tale. Money aside, a lack of awareness also held them back.



Priti's father, Jagbir Lamba, a petrol pump attendant, wasn't aware how to raise an athlete. Gajendra Yadav

Ballabhgarh
PRITI LAMBHA,
Bronze, Steeplechase

"It's hard for a medium (middle-class) family. Even if we arrange the money, where do we spend it? We have never had protein shakes or juice. When Priti was younger, I used to mash almonds and make her a drink to give her energy," he says.

That is where he gives the credit for Priti's career to a local coach, the now deceased Roshan Lal Malik, who helped with diet plans, exercise and training, also advising on what equipment to buy.

Her family and a local coach were pivotal. No big academies or government authorities were involved in the building of the early years of her career.

Jagbir believes sports can be a realistic professional avenue for many young people with rural upbringings.

"The closest stadium is 25km away from us. If we can't make the daily journey, we have to resort to local jugaad... Bring facilities into the heart of villages and see how talent is unearthed."

In an interview with The Indian Express back in May, Priti said that her goal for the year is to win an Asiad medal, knowing how much it means to her father. Seven months later, medal in tow, Jagbir says: "Honestly, the tears couldn't stop for four days (after she won). Our sacrifices were worth it."

When Jagbir was expecting Harmilan, she had to appear for trials for her job at the Punjab State Electricity Board. A few months later she was mother to a daughter who would go one-up on her and bag two medals at the Asiad.

Family tradition
Meanwhile, for double silver medalist Harmilan Kaur Bains, 25, the scene was contrastingly different, reports Nihal Koshie.

When Harmilan was in Class V, her parents had given her a life goal—to win an Asian Games medal. Running was in her blood. Her mother Madhuri Singh won a silver in the 800 metres at the 2002 Busan Asian Games, her father Amadeep is a South Asian Games medalist in the 1500 metres. Harmilan began playing lawn tennis during a time when Sania Mirza was a household name but after four months, her parents asked her to drop out because there was no coach in Hoshiarpur.

"There was immense pressure on me because both my parents were athletes. There were advantages too but my parents were controlling my training schedule, workouts. For example, my coach had fixed a training schedule but my parents also had theirs for me," Harmilan said. Her father would often turn up at races and shout out instructions during the last lap. Her mother realising that Harmilan had a mind of her own wasn't as pushy.

When Harmilan won gold in both the 800 metres and the 1500 metres at the Khelo India University Games in 2020, she had told her father not to travel to Bhubaneswar because she wanted peace of mind before the races.

"From 5th standard, my parents started to tell me 'Milan do win a medal at Asian Games'. I was thinking at that time what if I aim to win an Olympic medal. They wanted one medal. I got two of them," Harmilan said.

When Madhuri was expecting Harmilan, she had to appear for trials for her job at the Punjab State Electricity Board. A few months later she was mother to a daughter who would go one-up on her and bag two medals at the Asiad.

VENKATA KRISHNA B
IN MANY ways, Tilak Varma epitomises the Indian cricket teams that clinched gold at the Asian Games. Like most batsmen, he too comes from a metro city. Like most of his teammates, hails from a humble background where spending on sports was beyond their parents' reach. Education is considered the gold dust.

But as luck would have it, his talent would be spotted by an academy coach Salam Bayash, who would take care of all his cricketing expenses.

The presence of a huge financial package, allowed him to pursue the sport with total focus, with the studies taking a back seat.

With plenty of cricket to play across formats, it is a fair reflection of their growing-up years. Unlike some in the previous era or like their senior teammates, who managed to graduate, they don't have that luxury now.

Coming from a state unit that is tangled

in plenty of troubles, the road was not the easiest for Varma. That he has managed to overcome all these hurdles means, he is already being looked up to by a couple of junior cricketers

from Hyderabad, who are part of the U19 World Cup team. From Washington Sundar, Ravi Bishnoi, Yashasvi Jaiswal – who like Varma were part of the U-19 team and made it to the senior level in no time are yet to become graduates.

Their parents, most from modest backgrounds, instead of forcing them to take up studies as a priority, let them follow their passion. It is the same with the women's team where even daily wagers, too, encouraged their daughters to take up the sport, fully aware financial gain may not be secure.

The presence of good pay cheques in domestic cricket, and the IPL and WPL, means players are no longer worried about employment and instead doing everything they can on the field to yield good returns. It's an incentive and a potential pitfall.

How an astroturf and hostel changed lives

VINAYAK MOHANARANGAN

OUT OF 36 medal winners across the men's team (gold) and women's team (bronze), 20 athletes are from rural areas. While 13 out of 18 medalists come from the Haryana-Punjab region, the women's team is a bit more spread out. Fifty per cent of the female hockey players come from families with income around Rs 50,000 or below and all of them had parents who have completed Class XII at best.

One of hockey's standout features is access to infrastructure in rural areas.

TREND
Access to infra, a game-changer

Sundergarh in Odisha and Simdega in Jharkhand are both examples of how remote locales have astroturf training facilities. While Sundergarh has been promised a turf in each block, given Odisha's long-standing commitment towards improving hockey, Simdega got its solitary facility in 2015, which coincided with the likes of Salima Tete and Sangita Kumari's rise.

Sangita and Salima, both hailing from tribal villages even farther inward from Simdega, both availed the use of the hockey training centre run by coach Pratima Barwa. The centre has a hostel and school adjacent



Sangita's parents Ranjith and Lakmani supported their daughter's sporting aspirations for a better life.

and houses 25 girls at all times who train for hockey while completing their education. Salima's father Sulakshan Tete and Sangita's father Ranjith Manji both recall how they had very little get by when their daughters started playing hockey. Hockey was seen as a means to improve their daughters' livelihood and a job once they finished school.

"Jab tak woh ek step aage badhne rahi, hum bhoolte gaye." With every step she has taken forward, we keep forgetting the difficulties we faced in the past, said Ranjith. "Around 10 years back, we had very little with us. But as our daughter has gone forward in her career, our situation is much better now," added Sulakshan.

Sangita and Salima, both hailing from tribal villages even farther inward from Simdega, both availed the use of the hockey training centre run by coach Pratima Barwa. The centre has a hostel and school adjacent

pated in the sport before they joined the army. Most of them come from farming families with no real link to any sport, much less a niche sport like rowing.

At the Hangzhou Asian Games, the 27-year-old Arvind combined with Arjun Lal Jat to bring home a silver medal in the lightweight double sculls event.

"I joined the army in 2016, following in my elder brother's footsteps. Back then, I had never heard of the sport, let alone try it back home. When I enlisted in the army, a coach noticed my height and asked me to try out for the rowing team. Since then, I have been a rower," recollects the six-foot-one-tall Arvind who hails from the Khabra village of Uttar Pradesh's Bulandshahr district.

Just like the 27-year-old Arvind, who is currently a Subedar, all the other 16 rowers who returned from Hangzhou with a medal had never participated in the sport before they joined the army. Most of them come from farming families with no real link to any sport, much less a niche sport like rowing.

Besides the five medals (two silvers, three bronze and a couple of fourth-place finishes) that India won in rowing, two other Indian medallists from the Hangzhou 2023 contingent were also introduced to their discipline in the army: Avinash Sable, who claimed a men's 3,000m steeplechase gold and a men's 5,000m silver and Gulveer Singh, who won a bronze in the men's 10,000metre race.

Simdega
SANGITA KUMARI
Bronze, Hockey

"I joined the army in 2016, following in my elder brother's footsteps. Back then, I had never heard of the sport, let alone try it back home. When I enlisted in the army, a coach noticed my height and asked me to try out for the rowing team. Since then, I have been a rower," recollects the six-foot-one-tall Arvind who hails from the Khabra village of Uttar Pradesh's Bulandshahr district.

Just like the 27-year-old Arvind, who is currently a Subedar, all the other 16 rowers who returned from Hangzhou with a medal had never participated in the sport before they joined the army. Most of them come from farming families with no real link to any sport, much less a niche sport like rowing.

Besides the five medals (two silvers, three bronze and a couple of fourth-place finishes) that India won in rowing, two other Indian medallists from the Hangzhou 2023 contingent were also introduced to their discipline in the army: Avinash Sable, who claimed a men's 3,000m steeplechase gold and a men's 5,000m silver and Gulveer Singh, who won a bronze in the men's 10,000metre race.

Bulandshahr
ARVIND SINGH
Silver, Rowing

Until they joined Army, sports was not on the minds of these winners

AMIT KAMATH

BEFORE HE enlisted in the Indian army in 2016, Arvind Singh had never heard of the sport of rowing.

At the Hangzhou Asian Games

AN EXPRESS INVESTIGATION

Painful shift to new home brought joy

PRATYUSH RAJ

NOTHING COVERS India better than the monsoon and the railways. Sporting academies would perhaps come next—not modern or state-of-the-art as those in urban centres or state-run, but those enough to ignite the fire and shape the early days of an athlete. Like the canoeing and kayaking academies in Roorkee, an industrial town founded by the British to produce spare parts for ships, on the banks of Ganges Canal in the 19th century, 30km from Haridwar. It's where Arjun Singh, the Asian Games medallist in men's double canoe 1000m, first fell in love with the sport.

He reached Roorkee when he was six, after his father threw his mother, brother and him out of their house in Bagpat's Dhikoli village. The mother packed their bags to Roorkee, where her brother, who worked with the Indian Army, lived. She found a job at a medicine factory with an income of Rs 8,000 a month.

Life was difficult, recalls Arjun: "We live in a rented house. It was very difficult with her meagre income. My mother suffered a lot. But she did everything for both of us (he and his brother who works in UP Police)." Roorkee is a sporting backwater, the only claim to fame being the birthplace of India's wicket-keeper batsman Rishabh Pant. Except for canoeing that is.

Arjun's uncle Ajit Singh was a canoeist and he enrolled his nephew into an academy when he was only ten. "It was scary, with all the equipment, to make the balance, but my uncle encouraged me a lot. He kept pushing me, and at the age of 14, I won a medal in the



Moving to Roorkee with his mother, Arjun got into a water sport academy.

junior category at Rudrapur, where coach sir (Mayank Thakur) saw me," he says.

Thakur, a coach in Bhopal, had heard about Arjun from one of his students, who runs a club in Roorkee. "So I went to Rudrapur just to see whether the hype is real or not," says Maynak.

It was worth the trip, and Thakur took Arjun under his wings and helped him get into the SAI centre in Bhopal.

TREND

Specialised training in remote areas

98 Number of athletes who had access to academies to take their first step

In three years, he made rapid strides to break into the national side, and eventually win a medal at the Asian Games. The medal has changed Arjun's life. "She has stopped working. Things are improving, and we want her to have a good and peaceful life now. She has suffered a lot," he says. The shift to Roorkee might feel less painful for his family now.

Once a mason in Beed, now a Golden steeplechaser

NIHAL KOSHIE

AVINASH SABLE, 29, worked as a mason in drought-prone Mandwa, a village in Beed district, after an academy in Aurangabad weeded him out as coaches there didn't think he had a future as a distance runner. The 12-year-old was spotted by scouts of a state-government scheme but his career had hit a roadblock. Once he finished school, Sable worked for just Rs 100 a day and seemed destined to spend the rest of his life in Mandwa.

His fortunes changed when he appeared for an army recruitment drive. His younger brother Yogesh says it was a taunt about him

being on the heavier side that made Sable take up running during his off-duty hours. By then he has been posted in places with extreme weather; freezing cold Saichen and border town of Lalgarh Jattan, where the temperatures touch nearly 50 degree Celsius.

He participated in a cross-country race organised by the army in Hyderabad. Though he was overweight for a runner, army coach Amrishi Kumar took him under his wing. Within two years of being added to the army

TREND

Poverty to podium

50 Number of athletes who come from families with annual income less than Rs 50,000

Mandwa

AVINASH SABLE
Gold, Steeplechase
Silver, 5000m

running programme, Sable broke the 3000-metre national record twice. "I kept him away from oily food. He hadn't joined the army as a sportsperson but he proved he had the talent by finishing in the top-12 despite being overweight. That in itself was an indicator that he had potential," Kumar said about how the army gave Sable a stepping stone to success. Sable joined the elite training group at the Army Sports Institute in Pune, which became his second home.

Sable is a naib subedar with the Mahar regiment in the army.



Sable: India's truly international star.

Nadal's comeback could add intrigue to a sport slowly moving into future

NAMIT KUMAR

DECEMBER 31

PERHAPS THE most startling of Rafael Nadal's achievements – even more so than the ridiculous haul of 14 French Open titles – was the 912 consecutive weeks he spent in the top 10 of the world rankings. Second-best on that list in men's tennis is Jimmy Connors, with 788.

Nadal played his first competitive match in nearly a year at the Brisbane International on Sunday, losing his first-round doubles tie in straight sets. The singles tournament will start in the coming week, where his first opponent is 2020 US Open champion Dominic Thiem. His participation in Brisbane is a tune up for the Australian Open, in what could be his final trip down under as a competitor.

The Spaniard has been in this position so many times before that crippling injury woes are as much his trademark as his lasso-like spinning forehand. Particularly in the later stages of his career, he has had to start and restart, without any momentum, on demand, relentlessly.

That is precisely what makes his 18-year-long run (2005-2023) among the top 10 athletes of a brutally physical, relentless sport one of his great achievements. Despite the constant injury trouble, Nadal was able to keep himself just fit enough to reach the latter stages of the Majors and win them, and dominate the clay season, for over a decade.

That is also precisely what makes his attempts at another comeback even more daunting. Following a hip flexor injury at the 2023 Australian Open, Nadal is yet to step on court for a competitive singles match, a period where his ranking plummeted to World No. 670. Since 2021 alone, Nadal's medical history will make most hospitals purr. The chronic foot injury that he has suffered since 2005 flared up, causing him to get surgery, and later to play with pain-numbing injections en route to another French Open title. Outside of that, he has contended with a broken rib, a torn abdominal muscle, back trouble, and a hip flexor problem.

With one year out, uncertainty surrounds his return. He has not set a date for the end – on different occasions he has said he may not even last half the year, and may even play in 2025. But what has been consistent in his messaging has been his tempering of expectation. "I expect from myself not to expect any-



Rafael Nadal had been injured and out of competition for the last year. Reuters

thing. This is the truth. To have the ability not to demand myself what I have demanded myself throughout my career. I believe I'm in a different moment, in a different situation and in an unexplored terrain," he said in a video he posted on social media earlier this month.

However, the most clear-cut insight into his psyche was given by his long-time rival. "He's not a kind of a player who will come back to the tour just to play, let's say, on a medium level, play a few matches," Novak Djokovic said during an exhibition in Riyadh last week. "He wants to win titles, he wants to be the best. I'm sure his training and preparation is done with an intention to win a Grand Slam."

There remains little doubt that Nadal will restart in 2024 hoping to script another fairytale, especially at his favourite hunting ground in Paris in the summer. But he will not only have to do so after circumstances he has never faced before, but also at a time when the sport has shown its first signs of moving on from him, of forging rivalries of the future as opposed to obsessing over rivalries of the past.

The GOAT debate – now feeling more like a marketing gimmick and less about genuine sporting intrigue – is well and truly settled after Djokovic spent another year breaking more records in Nadal's absence, asserting his supremacy over the sport. At the same time, a

fresh talent was busy announcing himself on the big stage.

With his neat blend of daring and attacking play, wild athleticism, and personal charisma, Carlos Alcaraz, the 20-year-old World No. 2 from Spain, created a level of excitement among tennis fans that few prodigies have in the past, lifting him into stardom before his career even took off at the big stage. But he made sure that discrepancy did not last long.

His come-from-behind win over Djokovic at the Wimbledon final was by far the tennis event of the year, followed by the other editions of the duo's trilogy of epic contests. It not only elevated his status as a contender, but also lit the fire under Djokovic to stay competitive and keep going. With young challengers like Alcaraz, and also World No. 4 Janilnik Sinner, the Serb, alongside the sport at large, can move forward rather than look backward.

The screenplay of men's tennis in 2023 was about Djokovic taking sole occupation of the throne, and Alcaraz announcing his intentions as his potential equal. If Nadal returns to his best, the screenplay in 2024 could be about his attempts to reclaim the throne.

To do so he will have to scale a peak even he has yet to, at a time when the tour is a lot more competitive than it was during his previous comeback. Despite the uncertainty, though, the prospect remains mouthwatering.

Fulham fight back to beat Arsenal 2-1

ASSOCIATED PRESS

LONDON, DECEMBER 31

ARSENAL FELL to a second straight loss with a 2-1 defeat at Fulham on Sunday, missing out on a chance to end the year atop the Premier League table.

Bukayo Saka gave Arsenal the lead after just five minutes, but the visitors were toothless after that as Raul Jimenez equalized in the first half and Bobby De Cordova-Reid poked in the winner in the 59th. Arsenal topped the standings at Christmas but enters 2024 in fourth place after this defeat followed its first home loss of the season against West Ham United on Thursday. A win at Fulham would have lifted Mikel Arteta's team provisionally above leader Liverpool in a tightly packed top four.

But, the Gunners have won just one of their last five league games and this was perhaps the most listless performance in that stretch. Arteta will have to ponder whether to look for attacking reinforcements in the January transfer window after his team struggled to create quality chances after its early goal – even after switching to a back three with two strikers up front for the last 20 minutes.

Gabriel Martinelli did the hard work for the opener, running with the ball from within his half before cutting into the area and curling a low show toward the far post that Bernd Leno could only divert into the path of Saka, who just had to stick his foot out to turn in the rebound. But, Fulham responded well and had already missed a couple of decent chances to score by the time Jimenez met a low cross from Tom Cairney and beat David Raya with a first-time effort in the 29th. It was Jimenez's fourth goal in his last four league games – equaling his tally from the previous 50.

Fulham continued to look dangerous when going forward De Cordova-Reid put the hosts ahead after Arsenal failed to clear a corner and the ball fell to the winger to poke home from close range. Saka had a chance to equalize in the 63rd when the ball fell to him in the area but he volleyed well high. Arsenal didn't have an effort on target in the second half until a scuffed cross from Saka in injury time fell harmlessly to Leno.

Instead, Fulham came closer to a third as Raya had to stop a shot from Cairney in the 71st and Andreas Pereira smashed a free kick against the crossbar in the 87th.

Stimac: We are outsiders in group, goal is to enter 3rd round of WC Qualifiers

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

DECEMBER 31

THE INDIAN football team is entering the upcoming Asian Cup as "rank outsiders" and its main goal is to go through to the third round of the 2026 World Cup Qualifiers, head coach Igor Stimac said on Sunday.

Stimac was making his assessment based on the level of competition they are expected to face in a tough group comprising continental heavyweights Australia and the physically intimidating Uzbekistan.

India are drawn in Group B with World Cup regulars Australia, strong central Asian side Uzbekistan and tricky Syria – all above Stimac's team in the FIFA rankings -- in the group stage of the Asian Cup.

"Obviously, we are rank outsiders in our group. Uzbekistan is one of the darkhorses and a fantastic team, their players' physicality could cause problems.

"Australia are playing at the highest level of football and we all know what they are capable of.. they are regular at World Cups and will mostly clear the group stage there," Stimac said. India landed in Qatar's capital on Saturday for the tournament.

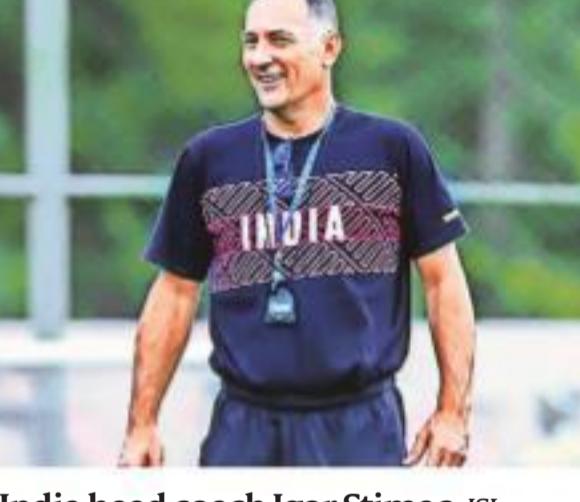
And how does he plan to approach the matches? "This group is much stronger than the last Asian Cup. The most important thing for us is to have a good performance and ensure that we remain stable and in shape while playing. I am not putting any pressure on players about results.

"We need to find stability, we will try to play fearless football notwithstanding the teams we play against. I don't mind the final results. Our final goal is to qualify for the third round of World Cup qualifiers." While this will be India's fifth appearance in the AFC Asian Cup, the Blue Tigers have never made it past the group stage after finishing runners-up in 1964, which was played in a round-robin format.

India will begin their campaign against Australia on January 13 followed by matches against Uzbekistan on January 18 and Syria on January 23.

The team will play a warm-up game on January 7 to see where it stands in terms of preparation before the big test.

"Keeping in mind that all the other teams



India head coach Igor Stimac. ISL

are in Dubai for three weeks already, we are trying to settle down to the climatic conditions and adjust in a proper way in the short time given to us." Injuries to some key players, such as Jeakson Singh, Glan Martins and Anwar Ali, have disturbed Stimac's plans just before he was to pick his final squad of 26.

"Things changed dramatically for us with injuries in recent times. Anwar Ali, Ashique Kurunjiyan, Glan Martins and Jeakson Singh...we are going to miss them a lot.

"It is not easy to replace Anwar as he is one of the best defenders in Asia. Jeakson was providing us stability in the build-up phase.

"But we don't have time to think about those who are not with us. We will try to maximise the performance of those players who are with us here," Stimac said.

Strong and well-built players like Anwar would have proven handy against teams such as Uzbekistan.

"It is not just about physicality, we also lost passing quality and passing ability with these three players," said Stimac.

The 1998 World Cup semifinalist with Croatia added, "I was very happy to see Sahal (Abdul Samad) settle down at Mohun Bagan and Sandesh Jhingan is doing well at Goa. Now we all know how much Bengaluru FC have lost with the departure of Jhingan and how much Goa has benefited." But international football is a different ball game altogether, admitted Stimac.

"Pace of ISL is far below the pace of international football. So, when players arrive in national team camps we focus on sharpness, compactness and keeping stability and shape."

Bareilly girl takes up Malaysian sport, wins medal, gets Army job

PRATYUSH RAJ

AT THE age of 14, Khushbu saw a few boys playing sepaktakraw – a popular sport in Malaysia – at Bareilly's Major Dhyanchand Stadium SAI centre. At first, she thought the sport was a different version of volleyball. She would ask her father, Gopal, a home guard by profession who was posted at the stadium, about the sport.

"There is a sports hostel at the stadium, and only boys from the north east region used to play the sport. My father asked one of the athletes about the game and then explained it to me," Khushbu tells *The Indian Express*.

Khushbu was left awestruck by the game and insisted to her father that she wanted to play the sport.

"The coach told my father that they would need three more girls, so he started a coaching programme for the girls. I brought three of my friends from school. All of us were in athletics, and the game is so unique that they also wanted to give it a shot," she says.

Cut to the present, Khushbu was part of the team that won India's first-ever medal in women's sepaktakraw at the Asian Games.

Besides financial issues, the family also faced unrelenting interference from pesky neighbours and snoopy relatives.

"Although my family was very supportive, there were a few neighbours who had issues with me wearing shorts. 'Apki ladki ladkon ke saath khelte hai, chhote kapde pehente hai' (your daughter plays with boys, she wears short skirts)."

My family was exposed to such scornful comments from society that anyone would get mentally scarred. But my grandmother was differently built. She was a strong character," says Khushbu.

"After hearing all these taunts, my grandmother took me to the nearest salon and asked the barber to give me a boy cut. When we returned home she shouted before entering our house, 'Dikh rahi ye ladki ki tarah ab, khabardar ab kisi ne kuch kaha toh' (She is looking like a boy now and I dare anyone to say anything to



Khushbu started playing sepaktakraw at the age of 14.

her from now onwards). I have kept short hari hairstyle since that time," laughs the 27-year-old medalist.

Khushbu's grandmother had one dream that she wanted to see her in an Indian Army uniform, but unfortunately, she couldn't as she passed away when Khushbu was completing her Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) training.

"She wanted to see me in my Indian Army dress. I was actually training at the time she passed away. Whatever I have achieved in my life, it all because of her dedication and support," she says.

Khushbu wants more girls from Bareilly to take up the sport, and she believes that there will be more like her from the city who will represent India.

"The kind of reception I received after coming was historic. At Bareilly, the roads are jammed because of politicians. It was a welcome change. Right from the stadium to the house, thousands came to welcome me. It was overwhelming," she says.