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Chhattisgarh

the 'Nanihaal' of
Shri Ram and the land of Mata Shabri
extends warm wishes for
"Shri Ramlala Praan Pratishtha"
in Ayodhya

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bears witness to
the sacred bond of
Mata Shabari and Shri Ram

Chhattisgarh
Government,
under the leadership of
Shri Vishnu Deo Sai
is committed to
preserve and cherish
the memories of
Shri Ram's
time in Chhattisgarh



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Hon'ble Prime Minister, India

Shri Vishnu Deo Sai
Hon'ble Chief Minister, Chhattisgarh

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TOP OF THE WORLD



Imran Khan. File

PAKISTAN
Imran warns of more instability if polls aren't fair

Islamabad: Pakistan's jailed former prime minister Imran Khan has sought a level playing field for his party in the run-up to the February 8 general elections, saying a lack of fairness in conducting polls would lead to further "instability and uncertainty". The remarks by Khan, 71, the founder of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, came during an informal media interaction at the Adiala Jail on Saturday. Internet users faced major interruptions during the virtual event. He claimed that the PTI is facing obstacles in conducting its election campaign, with restrictions preventing the party from holding public gatherings. **PTI**

UGANDA

President hails Indian diaspora's contributions

Kampala: Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has hailed the contributions of the South Asian community, especially the Indian diaspora, to the country's economy despite their struggles following their mass expulsion in 1972. Museveni, who hosted the 19th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Kampala from January 15-20, spoke about the mistakes committed by former military ruler Idi Amin who forced Asians, a majority of them Indians, settled in Uganda to leave the country. "NAM countries also make mistakes like in Uganda. Then we had a man called Idi Amin," he said. **PTI**

PHILIPPINES

Marcos draws ire as official copter taken for conert

Cairo: Egypt will not allow any threat to Somalia or its security, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said Sunday, according to a statement from the presidency, after Ethiopia said it would consider recognising an independence claim by Somaliland. Trying to "jump on a piece of land" to try to control it is something that no-one will agree to, Sisi said at a news conference with Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in Cairo. Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991 but it has not won recognition from any country. **REUTERS**

MEXICO

Govt palace set on fire after police kill man

Mexico City: Residents of a Mexican town set fire to the municipal palace overnight on Friday in a violent protest after local police shot a young man in the neck, according to his relatives, after he did not stop his car at a checkpoint. Police shot dead 27-year-old Brandon Arellano, the son of a local teacher, as he arrived outside his grandmother's house. **REUTERS**

NO INDICATION NETANYAHU'S POSITION UNDER IMMINENT THREAT

Thousands in Tel Aviv call for regime change as Gaza war toll hits 25,000

Protesters say govt mishandling nation's security, call for fresh polls

REUTERS

TEL AVIV, RAFAH, JANUARY 21

THOUSANDS of Israelis gathered in Tel Aviv on Saturday to protest against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, accusing the veteran leader of mishandling the nation's security and calling for a fresh election.

Anti-government protests that shook the nation for much of 2023 ceased after the attacks by Hamas in southern Israel on October 7. Political rifts were set aside as Israelis rallied behind the military and the families of those killed or taken hostage.

The toll of Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip since war broke out between Israel and Hamas in October has passed 25,000, Gaza health officials said, while Israeli attacks and street battles raged across the Hamas-run enclave on Sunday.

Israeli forces and Hamas fighters clashed in several places, from Jabalia in the north to Khan Younis in the south, the focus of recent Israeli operations.



Protesters in Tel Aviv on Saturday. Israel continues to carry out airstrikes in Gaza including areas where civilians take refuge. Reuters

But with the devastating war in Gaza in its fourth month and opinion polls showing lagging support for Netanyahu, calls for leadership changes are growing stronger, though there is no indication that his position is under any imminent threat. This was reflected in Saturday night's turnout in a Tel Aviv square where many of 2023's protests took place.

While the crowd was much

smaller than those seen last year, it still comprised several thousand people, with many banging on drums, yelling their dismay and waving Israeli flags. Israel continues to carry out airstrikes throughout the besieged territory, including areas in the south where it told civilians to seek refuge.

As of Sunday, total of 25,105 Palestinians - many of them women and children - have

been killed and 62,681 have been wounded in Israeli strikes since October 7, the ministry said in a statement.

In the southern area of Khan Younis, where Israel says it has expanded its operations against Hamas, witnesses said tanks shelled areas around Nasser Hospital overnight, describing the bombardment as the most intense in many days.



PRO-IMMIGRATION PROTEST IN PARIS

People protest France's controversial immigration law in Paris on Sunday. The Constitutional Council is reviewing next week the law, to check if it is in line with the Constitution. Reuters

AMBULANCE FLIGHT TOOK OFF FROM PATTAYA

2 killed as Russian plane flying via India crashes in Afghanistan

REUTERS

ISLAMABAD, JANUARY 21

RUSSIA'S AVIATION watchdog said on Sunday four people survived the crash of a charter plane bound for Moscow in northern Afghanistan, citing the Russian embassy there, and it said the condition of two other passengers on board was not yet clear.

Two Taliban provincial officials said four survivors were now with Taliban administration officials who had reached the remote, mountainous site of the crash. They said that two other passengers had died.

The Taliban administration's

top spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said the pilot of the plane was among four who had survived. "The investigative team of the Islamic Emirate continues its efforts to search for and provide assistance to the remaining individuals," he said in a statement.

The Russian-registered plane with six people on board disappeared from radar screens over Afghanistan a day earlier, Russian aviation authority Rosaviatsia said Sunday, after Afghan police said they received reports of a crash.

The plane was a charter ambulance flight travelling from Thailand's Utapao Airport in Pattaya to Moscow via India and Uzbekistan.

Israel clears plan for Norway to hold Gaza's frozen tax funds

REUTERS

JERUSALEM, JANUARY 21

ISRAEL'S CABINET approved a plan for frozen tax funds earmarked for the Hamas-run Gaza Strip to be held by Norway instead of transferred to the Palestinian Authority (PA), officials said on Sunday.

Under interim peace accords reached in the 1990s, Israel's finance ministry collects tax on behalf of the Palestinians and makes monthly transfers to the Western-backed PA.

But there have been constant wrangles over the arrangement, including Israel's demand that the funds do not reach Hamas.

The Palestine Liberation Organisation said on Sunday it wanted the money in full and would not accept conditions that prevent it from paying its staff, including in Gaza. "Any deductions from our financial rights or any conditions imposed by Israel that prevent the PA from paying our people in the Gaza Strip are rejected by us," PLO said on X.



The fire after suspected Ukraine strike at a Baltic Sea terminal in Russia's Ust-Luga on Sunday. AP

Ukraine strikes kill 25 in Donetsk, cause blaze in Baltic Sea terminal: Officials

Russia captures Kharkiv village, Kyiv calls it 'temporary phenomenon'

ASSOCIATED PRESS

KYIV, JANUARY 21

AT LEAST 25 people were killed Sunday by shelling at a market on the outskirts of the city of Donetsk in Russian-occupied Ukraine, local officials reported.

A further 20 people were injured in the strike on the suburb of Tekstilshchik, including two children, said Denis Pushilin, head of the Russian-installed authorities in Donetsk. He said that the shells had been fired by the Ukrainian military. Kyiv has not commented on the event and the claims could not be independently verified by AP.

Pushilin said that the area had been hit by 155 mm caliber and 152 mm caliber artillery, and that the shells had been fired from the direction of Kurakhove and Krasnohorivka to the west. He also confirmed that emergency services continued to work at the scene.

Also Sunday, fire broke out at a chemical transport terminal at Russia's Ust-Luga port following two explosions, regional officials said. Local media reported that the port had been attacked by

Ukrainian drones, causing a gas tank to explode.

The blaze was at a site run by Russia's second-largest natural gas producer, Novatek, 165 kilometers southwest of St. Petersburg. In a press statement to Russian media outlet RBC, the company said that the fire was the result of an "external influence." It also said that it had paused operations at the port.

Yuri Zapalatsky, the head of Russia's Kingisepp district, where the port is based, said in a statement that there were no casualties, but that the area had been placed on high alert.

The Russian Ministry of Defense said that four Ukrainian drones had been downed in Russia's Smolensk region, and that two more had been shot down in the Oryol and Tula regions.

In the fighting on the front line, Russia's Ministry of Defense announced Sunday that Moscow's forces had taken control of the village of Krokhumalne in Ukraine's Kharkiv region. Ukrainian forces confirmed that the settlement had been occupied, but described its capture as a "temporary phenomenon."

Putin willing to visit Pyongyang at an early date, says North Korea

REUTERS

SEOUL, JANUARY 21

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT Vladimir Putin expressed his willingness to visit Pyongyang soon when he met with North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui in Russia last week, North Korea's KCNA news agency reported Sunday.

Putin also thanked North Korean leader Kim Jong Un for his invitation to visit, KCNA said, citing North Korea's foreign minister's assistant office.

It would be the Russian leader's first trip to North Korea in more than two decades.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday that Russia hoped a Putin visit to North Korea, at Kim's invitation, would take place "in the foreseeable future", but he said no date had yet been agreed.

KCNA's Korean-language report on Sunday suggested Putin



Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un in Russia in September. File

intended to visit soon, but its later English report said he was "willing" to do so at an early date.

During Choe's visit, Russia thanked North Korea for its support and solidarity in its Ukraine military operation, KCNA said.

Moscow and Pyongyang also expressed serious concern over provocative acts by the United States and its allies against North Korea's sovereign rights, while agreeing to cooperate in dealing with the regional situation, the report said.

RARE EARTHS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR GREEN TECHNOLOGY LIKE ELECTRIC VEHICLES AND WIND TURBINES

Your junk drawer could be a large source of rare earth minerals

HIROKO TABUCHI

JANUARY 21

A VAST and largely overlooked source of rare earth metals, materials critical for clean energy, could be in our homes, sitting in the back of our cabinets and junk drawers.

A new study from researchers in China and the Netherlands estimates that reusing or recycling rare earth metals from old cell-phones, hard drives, electric motors and turbines could meet as much as 40 percent of the demand for the metals in the United States, China and Europe by 2050. Rare earths are essential for

green technology, like electric vehicles and wind turbines, which have a critical role in moving the world away from burning fossil fuels. They're also used in industries like aircraft, missile and satellite manufacturing.

Reusing and recycling rare earths can cut down on the need for mining, which can pollute soil and water with toxic heavy metals like arsenic. Rare earth mining operations have also become embroiled in local conflicts and human rights violations.

Being able to tap already-mined rare earths would be another advantage of switching to renewable energy from burning



Being able to tap already-mined rare earths would be another advantage of switching to renewable energy. NYT

fossil fuels, which drives global warming, said Peng Wang, a researcher at the Institute of Urban Environment at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and lead author of the study, which was published this month in *Nature Geoscience*.

"Unlike fossil fuels, which are 'burnt out' and permanently lost once consumed," he wrote, rare earths "can be 'recovered' as alternative supply."

The idea of reusing or recycling rare earths isn't new. In the 1980s, Japanese researchers coined the term urban mining to describe collecting rare metals from discarded appliances and electronic devices,

rather than from the earth.

Common metals like iron, copper and aluminum are already widely recycled. But only about 1 percent of rare earths in old products are reused or recycled, researchers estimate. The world instead relies on mining for its supply of rare earths, about 70 percent of which comes from China, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

For the latest study, researchers used modeling to forecast how reusing and recycling rare earths could change that. The scientists found that the United States, the European Union and Japan could eventually accumu-

late rare-earth stockpiles in their old electronics and other products that far exceed what they would find mining the earth.

Based on their modeling, the researchers predicted that, globally, reuse and recycling could reduce the need to mine neodymium, a rare earth element used in wind turbines, by 60 percent in 2050 compared to a business-as-normal base line. But some big challenges remain.

Rare earths are often combined with other metals, so extracting them can be difficult. Some rare-earth recycling methods require hazardous chemicals and lots of energy. **NYT**



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Construction of **new, grand** and **divine Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple**
Gift of development projects worth **thousands of crores rupees** to **Shri Ayodhya Dham**



SECURITY HIGH AS GUESTS STREAM IN FOR TEMPLE TOWN'S BIG DAY

Ayodhya wears festive look, stage set for Ram temple consecration ceremony today

PM to join Pran Pratishtha rituals for new Ram Lalla idol, will address the public later

MAULSHREE SETH
AYODHYA, JANUARY 21

DIYAS WERE lit, flowers from different parts of the country adorned columns, walls inside and outside the new Ram temple, around 8,000 chairs awaited special invitees, dignitaries and celebrities, and the old idol of Ram Lalla Virajman was brought to the sanctum sanctorum as rituals continued all of Sunday, setting the stage for the Pran Pratishtha, the consecration ceremony, of the new idol in the new temple in Ayodhya Monday.
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

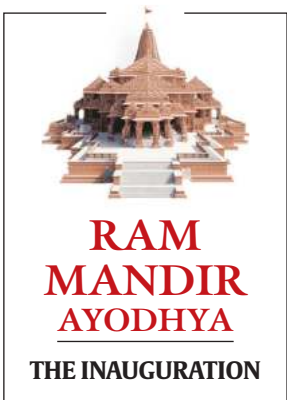


DECKED UP: The Ram Temple on the eve of its consecration, in Ayodhya on Sunday. Vishal Srivastav

Unique civilisational journey with your each step in Ayodhya: Murmu to PM

DIVYAA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 21

PRESIDENT DROUPADI Murmu, in a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the eve of his departure to Ayodhya for the consecration ceremony, said Sunday she can "only contemplate the unique civilisational journey that will be accomplished with each step taken by you in the hallowed precincts".
She said Lord Ram's "focus on



**RAM
MANDIR
AYODHYA**
THE INAUGURATION

justice and welfare of the people" is "reflected in the governance outlook of our country" and "we all are fortunate to witness the commencement of a new cycle in the resurgence of our nation".

Conveying her "heartfelt wishes" to the Prime Minister, the President described the "nationwide celebratory atmosphere around the inauguration" of the Ram temple as "an uninhibited expression of the eternal soul of India".
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

AIIMS ROLLS BACK ORDER, OPD OPEN

1822-2024: THE RAM MANDIR JOURNEY
PAGES 10, 14, 20

Sukhu declares holiday, Soren half day today

SAURABH PARASHAR & ABHISHEK ANGAD
CHANDIGARH, RANCHI, JAN 21

THE CONGRESS is skipping the Ram Mandir idol consecration ceremony in Ayodhya but two of the three states where it is in power have declared holidays — one for the entire day and the other partial — on Monday to mark the occasion.

Saying that "Ram does not belong to just one party" but to the entire nation, Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu on Sunday declared a full-day holiday in the state. Jharkhand, where the Congress is the junior ally in the ruling coalition led by Hemant Soren's Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), announced "all the offices
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Temple of a billion hopes



**Amul
Welcome it**

Close to deadline, Bilkis convicts reach Godhra jail

ADITI RAJA
VADODARA, JANUARY 21


ELEVEN CONVICTS in the Bilkis Bano case surrendered before the Godhra jail authorities late Sunday night, in line with the stipulated two-week deadline set by the Supreme Court on January 8. The court had annulled the remission and premature release granted to the convicts by the Gujarat government on August 15, 2022.



The convicts arrive at Godhra jail on Sunday. Bhupendra Rana

The 11 convicts — Radheshyam Shah, Jaswant Nani,
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

BUSINESS AS USUAL
By UNNY



Gently... The deity is a child.



IDEA EXCHANGE

'One of the jobs of a president of a university is to hold the centre, so that all voices are heard'

CAROL FOLT
PRESIDENT, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
PAGE 21

GOVT & POLITICS

81% RESPONSES TO 1-POLL PANEL IN FAVOUR: GOVT **PAGE 15**

Assam Congress chief injured as Rahul yatra convoy is 'attacked'



Protesters wielding BJP flags in Sonitpur, Assam. Sukrita Baruah

SUKRITA BARUAH
SONITPUR, JANUARY 21

A CROWD wielding BJP flags attempted to attack vehicles involved in the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra as the convoy moved through Assam's Sonitpur district on Sunday. State Congress chief Bhupen Borah suffered injuries to his face while confronting the crowd.

Rahul Gandhi, who was travelling on a bus which was also approached by the crowd, said later during a rally in Nagaon
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Tax sops for low income slabs, higher capex likely in Budget

AANCHAL MAGAZINE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 21

UNION FINANCE Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the upcoming Interim Budget is unlikely to have any "spectacular announcement", but small tax relief measures and a fillip to welfare spending is likely, according to officials.

Tweaks in certain income tax rates, especially for those at the bottom of the taxpayer pyramid, are expected in the Interim Budget for 2024-25 to be announced on February 1. A hike in standard deduction along with a higher exemption limit to incentivise taxpayers to shift to the new income tax regime are likely. Officials said the tax
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Meet the Drone Didis of Punjab — rural women set for career as drone pilots

**PAGE 1
ANCHOR**

DIVYA GOYAL GOPAL
LUDHIANA, JANUARY 21

"BINA AADMI ton uddan vaali vastu (an object that flies unmanned)," is all that Kiranpal Kaur (34) knew about drones until just a few months ago. Now a trained drone pilot, Kiranpal, from Sekha village in Punjab's Barnala district, describes the feeling when she suc-



During a training session in Manesar, Haryana. Express

cessfully flew a drone for the first time as like having "a little part of the world, which I owned and controlled, in my hands".

"I have never travelled in a plane, but it felt like I was flying one. It gave me confidence that I could achieve anything. It was all in my hands," said Kiranpal, who studied until class 10.

Soon, she will be taking her drone and travelling across her district in an e-vehicle to spray fertilisers and pesticides in agricultural fields under the NAMO Drone Didi Scheme launched by
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

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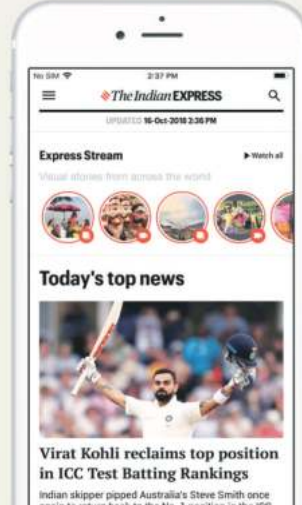
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SRIRAM RAGHAVAN BREAKS DOWN MERRY CHRISTMAS: KATRINA KAIF, TEDDY BEAR, MURDER AND ALTERNATE CLIMAX WHICH CHANGED WEEK BEFORE FILMING

Sriram Raghavan dissects Merry Christmas: The plot, the twists, the cast and the murder. Sriram Raghavan talks about how he wrote Merry Christmas based on the French novel Le Monte-charge (Bird in a Cage)

TECH



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Our comparison will make it easy to choose next big smartphone



UPSC

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EXPRESS AUDIO

Game Time: The bizarre case of Ishan Kishan's exclusion from team

Ishan Kishan had expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of breaks amid hectic cricketing schedule. However, when he finally secured some time off, he chose to appear on 'Kaun Banega Crorepati'

President writes to PM

"As you prepare yourself to go for the Pran Pratishtha of Prabhu Shri Ram's murti at the new temple built in His birthplace, Ayodhya Dham, I can only contemplate the unique civilisational journey that will be accomplished with each step taken by you in the hallowed precincts," the President said in her letter.

Responding, the PM, in a post in Hindi on X, said, "Thank you very much for your good wishes on the auspicious occasion of Ram Lalla's Pran Pratishtha in Ayodhya Dham. I am confident that this historic moment will further enrich Indian heritage and culture and take our development journey to new heights."

The President, while mentioning the "11-day rigorous Anushtthan" that the Prime Minister has undertaken for the ceremony, said it is "not only a sacred ritual but also a supreme spiritual act of sacrifice and submission to Prabhu Shri Ram".

She extolled the universal values that Lord Ram represents, such as courage, compassion and constant focus on duty, and how these "will be taken closer to the people through this magnificent temple".

"Prabhu Shri Ram signifies the best aspects of our cultural and spiritual heritage," she said. "Above all, He represents the good which is in constant battle with evil. His life and principles have influenced many episodes of our history and inspired nation builders. Mahatma Gandhi Ji derived strength from Ramanama till his last breath."

The President also mentioned Lord Ram's message of "treating everyone with love and dignity, irrespective of their social back-

ground", and how it "also appealed to the intellect of path-breaking thinkers".

"His focus on justice and welfare of the people, too, is reflected in the governance outlook of our country. In fact, as an illustration of this, you recently released the first installment of various benefits to the people of vulnerable tribal communities under the PM-JANMAN initiative," she wrote to the Prime Minister.

"It was heartening to see you invoke Mata Shabari in your address on that occasion as well. Indeed, she would be doubly happy to see Prabhu Shri Ram's temple as well as the welfare of the people," the President said, signing off with "Siyavar Ramachandra Ki Jai!"

On January 12, President Murmu received the invitation for the consecration ceremony. She expressed immense joy on receiving the invitation and said that she will soon decide the time to come and visit Ayodhya, the VHP said in a statement.

Earlier, Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray had demanded that President Murmu be asked to perform the January 22 consecration ceremony as it was a matter of "national pride" and pertained to the "country's self-respect".

He also wrote to the President, inviting her to participate in an aarti at Kalam temple in Nashik on the day of the consecration ceremony in Ayodhya.

On Monday evening, President Murmu is scheduled to present the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar to 19 children for their exceptional achievements, an official statement said.

FROM PAGE ONE FULL REPORTS ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Ram temple consecration today

The temple town wore a festive look as guests streamed in, ahead of the consecration ceremony that will start shortly after noon Monday. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who will take part in the ceremony, is expected to reach Ayodhya at 10:45 am and will be at the Ram Janmabhoomi temple site at 10:55 am.

Officials said the Prime Minister's schedule has been fixed. He will participate in the consecration ceremony from 12:05 pm to 12:55 pm and then leave for a public function where he will address a gathering between 1 pm and 2 pm.

Modi's visit is scheduled to end with a darshan at Kuber Tila around 2 pm. An ancient Shiva temple on Kuber Tila has undergone renovation and a huge statue of Jatayu has also been installed there. Sources said Modi will offer prayers at the Shiva

temple and unveil the Jatayu statue.

A major part of rituals or "Adhivas", which began January 16, ended Sunday. The day's rituals began with "Madhvadhivas" during which the 51-inch new idol of Ram Lalla was covered with honey. The idol was then bathed with medicated water from 114 kalash (urns) as part of the "Snapan" ritual.

The old idol or "Utsav" murti was placed in a palki decorated with flowers and taken for a tour of the new temple before being taken inside.

As the rituals continued late evening Sunday, the priests said the eyes of the new idol, closed with a blindfold on January 16, will be opened after it is bathed with water from 114 kalash as part of the ritual. After the blindfold is removed, the idol will be shown a mirror to "absorb energy,

created through chanting of mantras and rituals over the last 6 days". Ghee and honey, kept in a silver bowl, will be applied on the eyes of the idol with a gold stick. Along with the new idol, the old idol will also be placed inside the garbha griha and also bathed.

The rituals of "Adhivas" ended with "Shayandhivas" – it means that the idol has been symbolically put to "sleep" after 6 days of rituals.

Officials associated with the rituals said quilts from Jaipur and a sheesham carved bed had come for the Sunday ceremony. While the bed was kept at the feet of the idol, the idol was covered with quilts.

On Monday, priests will reach the temple around 8.30 am to start the remaining rituals. The havan will continue even after the completion of the consecration ceremony.

Tax sops for low income slabs, higher capex likely

department is also looking at increasing the efficiency of revenue collection through additional transactions under the ambit of Tax Deducted at Source (TDS) and 360-degree profiling of taxpayers – measures that have yielded good results in the initial phase over the last few years.

In the past too, interim budgets, also called a vote-on-account, did not entail any major changes. Ahead of the Lok Sabha elections in 2019, then Finance Minister Piyush Goyal had proposed a hike in standard deduction and the threshold for tax deducted at source (TDS), along with sops to farmers and pension cover for unorganised sector workers. Five years earlier in 2014, the Interim Budget by then Finance Minister P Chidambaram had announced a cut in excise duties for small cars, motorcycles, scooters and SUVs besides large and mid-segment cars, and tax relief for mobile handsets.

EXPLAINED

Vote-on-account

A BUDGET ahead of LS elections is always a vote-on-account – essentially to seek Parliament approval for expenditure in the first few months of the fiscal. Hence, the government of day avoids big policy announcements, though minor tax changes or normal increase in spending is par for the course.

than previous years. The Centre had raised the budget estimate for capex to Rs 10 lakh crore for 2023-24 from Rs 728 lakh crore in 2022-23 and Rs 5.92 lakh crore in 2021-22.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is likely to see an enhanced budgetary allocation after seeing a 49 per cent reduction (from revised estimate of FY23) in the initial budget estimate of Rs 60,000 crore for FY24. The government had said it was a demand-driven scheme, and more funds would be allocated as and when needed. This has been subsequently reflected with an extra allocation of funds of Rs 16,143 crore for the MGNREGS in the first supplementary demands for grants presented in Parliament in December 2023.

The Budget session of Parliament, the last of the 17th Lok Sabha, will be held between January 31 and February 9. The Interim Budget will be presented by Sitharaman on February 1. The Lok Sabha elections are expected to be held around April-May, following which the elected government is likely to present the full Budget in July.

The government presents a vote-on-account in Parliament to seek approval for meeting expenditure for the first four-five months of the financial year beginning April to pay salaries and meet expenses for ongoing programmes in various sectors with no changes in the taxation structure, until a new government takes over and presents a full Budget that is revised for the full financial year.

Assam Cong chief injured as Rahul convoy 'attacked'

district's Kaliabor: "20-25 BJP workers came in front of my bus with flags. When I came out of the bus, they ran away. What do they think, that the Congress party is scared of BJP and RSS workers?... Whichever posters of ours they want to tear, they can tear. No matter how many placards they tear, it won't make any difference to us."

When Rahul's bus passed through the area in Sonitpur's Jamugurihat where the men wielding flags had gathered, they approached the bus chanting "Modi, Modi". Rahul could be seen stepping out of the bus when it reached the crowd, and later blowing kisses at them as his bus left the site.

A video of the incident showed Bhupen Borah approaching the crowd, and a man hitting him with his head. Hemanta Koch, a Congress worker, was also injured.

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh took to X and said his vehicle was among those targeted, and alleged that Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma was responsible for the incident. Subsequently, Sarma directed the Assam Police to register a case and look into the allegations.

The men wielding flags had gathered at an area in Jamugurihat before the yatra's convoy passed through. As the first vehicle of the convoy approached, some of them tried to pull out a Congress worker who was in it. When a journalist present at the site attempted to capture what was happening, the crowd snatched his GoPro cameras, which he did not get back. Further down the convoy, other vehicles were also allegedly targeted.

AICC communications coordinator for Assam, Mahima Singh, who was in the same vehicle as

Jairam Ramesh, said, "They rattled our windows and tore down the stickers on the car."

Moving through Jamugurihat on Sunday afternoon, the yatra culminated for the day with a massive rally in Kaliabor.

At the rally, Congress leaders lashed out against the BJP. "We are not scared of anyone – neither (Prime Minister) Narendra Modi nor the Chief Minister. But BJP leaders should explain why today, Assam's youth don't get jobs here," Rahul told the gathering.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge hit out at CM Sarma. "The previous yatra had travelled from Kanyakumari to Kashmir. During that time, there was no violence, no one tried to intimidate anyone even though there were several BJP-ruled states on the way... Why is it happening in Assam? It is because he (Sarma) is Modi ji's chela (disciple)," Kharge said at the rally.

Later in the evening, Rahul was met with chants of "Rahul Gandhi Go Back" at an eatery in Nagaon.

The yatra faced another obstacle when the management committee of Batadrava Than – the birthplace of revered Vaishnavite reformer-saint Srimanta Sankardeva, where Rahul was scheduled to visit Monday morning – wrote to the Congress MLA from Batadrava, saying Rahul should visit the site only after 3 pm, and not in the morning.

The president of the Batadrava Than management committee, in his letter, said thousands of people were expected to gather at the Than on Monday (January 22) morning because of the consecration ceremony of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya that is set to take place at the same time.

Earlier that day, CM Sarma had also said at a press conference in Guwahati that Rahul should visit

Batadrava Than only after the programme in Ayodhya is over, and not in the morning.

"It shouldn't be like there is a competition between Ram Mandir and Batadrava... That is not good for Assam. So, we request that we would like it if he goes to Batadrava Sattrra after the Ram Mandir programme is done... There is no competition, and he should not come and create the image of that competition," he had said.

He also said the Congress should avoid travelling through parts of Morigaon – a minority-dominated district where the yatra is scheduled to pass through Monday – saying that these are "sensitive areas".

"These are sensitive areas. So they should be avoided. But I will not ask them to avoid, because then they will say that I am trying to stop them. Police will be deployed to ensure that there is no conflict or clashes," the CM said.

He had also said that directions have been issued for adequate deployment of police and paramilitary forces in all "sensitive areas" on Monday, and said that he requested people of the state to "maintain their own sensitivity", advising people to observe the day in their own homes and religious places.

In addition, he announced that the state government issued instructions for all meat and fish shops in the state to remain closed till 4 pm on Monday, and for eateries to not serve non-vegetarian food till 2 pm.

"If someone wants to eat in their homes during the day, they can buy today itself. But I think it's best to maintain a fast during 'pran pratishtha'. If the Prime Minister has fasted for 11 days, surely we can maintain a fast for part of a day," he said.

CORRECTIONS

21.01.24, PAGE 13

Mr P Chidambaram writes: In the column 'The Dazzle of Affluent India', published on January 21, 2024, the figure mentioned against 'Median income' is wrong. The references to median income may be ignored. The error is deeply regretted.



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Bilkis convicts surrender

Govind Nai, Kesar Vohania, Baka Vohania, Raju Soni, Ramesh Chandana, Shailesh Bhatt, Bipin Joshi, Pradip Modhiya, and Mitesh Bhatt – arrived from Singwad in Dahod district to the Godhra sub-jail in Panchmahal district shortly before midnight, in two separate vehicles. Most of the convicts arrived in a 10-seater multi-utility vehicle that was led by an SUV – the two cars made their way into the jail premises within minutes of each other. Officials of the district police confirmed that they had "tracked and escorted" all 11 accused into the jail premises.

In anticipation of the surrender, the Panchmahal district police had deployed several units of personnel on bandobast outside the Godhra sub-jail since late evening on Sunday. Authorities of Godhra sub-jail confirmed that the 11 convicts had surrendered at 11:45 pm on Sunday.

This comes two days after the Supreme Court dismissed their petitions seeking more time to surrender. The convicts had cited various reasons such as ill-health

of ageing parents, a wedding in the family, and crop harvest, among others.

On January 8, the top court had quashed the Gujarat government decision to grant remission to the 11 convicts, who had been sentenced to life term for raping Bano and killing her family members during the 2002 Gujarat riots. The court had said the Gujarat government "usurped" the power of the Maharashtra government and lacked competence and jurisdiction in the matter.

The Gujarat government had released the convicts on August 15, 2022 as per its 1992 remission policy, based on a May 2022 Supreme Court order in a petition filed by one of the convicts, Radheshyam Shah. Bano had challenged the state government's decision before the apex court.

Bano was 21 years old and five months pregnant when she was raped while fleeing with her family from Randhikpur in the aftermath of 2002 Sabarmati train carnage. In the incident, 14 members of her family, including her three-year-old daughter, were killed.

Meet Punjab's Drone Didis – rural women set for career as drone pilots

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in November last year.

The scheme was launched after Modi, during his Independence Day speech, had announced a plan to train at least 15,000 'Drone Didis' across the country, ushering a tech revolution in agriculture by spraying fields using drones. The scheme aims to reduce labour costs, as well as save time and water, apart from empowering women in rural areas.

Modi had announced that the goal was to create at least two crore Lakhpati Didis (rural women earning in lakhs) in the country through self-help groups (SHGs). Kiranpal is among the first batch of 300 women to have been trained by the Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Limited (IFFCO), the largest manufacturer of chemical fertilisers in the country. The cooperative will also be providing drones and e-vehicles to the trained women pilots free of cost.

For Kiranpal, the journey was not easy. Her husband is a construction worker who earns

around Rs 500-700 a day, and she herself had been earning around Rs 3,000 a month from selling homemade pickles through a self-help group.

Nearly a month ago, she left her quaint village for the training centre in Gurgaon's Manesar, along with her three-month-old child.

"When we reached the training centre, I realised everything was in English, including theory classes and the notes they had provided. I am only a 10th pass, and it was almost 18 years since then that I was touching books again," she said.

She also said that back in her village, questions were raised about whether she would have to compromise on her motherly duties. However, she said that once she got back from training, having become a drone pilot, there was a massive sense of pride.

"Before practically handling a drone, we first had to clear theory. Our trainers were extremely co-operative, and they helped us in translating the notes in Hindi and Punjabi. Once I cleared the theory

exam, there was no looking back. Now, when we have returned after successful training and a certificate in hand, everyone is feeling proud that the word 'pilot' has been attached to my name," she said.

Women from various different backgrounds and educational qualifications, from those who stopped at class 10 to those who have postgraduate degrees, applied to be trained as drone pilots. They were contacted by a network of organisations working in the agricultural sector at village-level, including GT Bharat, Farmer Producers Organisation (FPO) and others, who further connected them to IFFCO.

Their selection process included interviews, in which they were tested for basic knowledge regarding farming.

Among the first to be selected from Punjab was Jaswinder Kaur Dhaliwal (46) from Rattian village of Moga district, who has studied up to class 12 and is involved with at least 15 women's self-help groups in her village.

"Before training, I had only seen drones clicking pictures and recording videos during Punjabi weddings," Jaswinder said.

She said that after clearing theory, the trainers showed them how to pilot a drone on computers, before eventually giving them control of an actual drone.

"A drone takes just around seven minutes to spray one acre. There are three zones – red, yellow, and green – to look out for when flying drones, and we cannot fly in the red zones. There is a tank fitted on the drone, which we fill with 10 litres of water and one litre of fertiliser or pesticide," she explained.

The scheme also caught the interest of women such as Zeenat Sharma (37), a postgraduate in microbiology and a former teacher from Nagraon in Himachal Pradesh's Mandi.

"What amazed and inspired me was the determination of rural women from Punjab for whom trainers first translated entire lectures into Hindi and then they would further translate them to Punjabi," she said.