



SHOULDER TO SHOULDER

Women personnel of the BSF camel contingent at the Republic Day parade in New Delhi on Friday. *Praveen Khanna*

RELATED REPORTS, PAGES 4, 6

THE WORLD



ICJ TELLS ISRAEL TO PREVENT GENOCIDE IN GAZA, BUT DOES NOT CALL FOR TRUCE

U.S. NSA TO MEET CHINA TOP DIPLOMAT AS BOTH COUNTRIES SEEK BETTER TIES

PAGE 10

REPUBLIC DAY VISIT: LEADERS HOLD TALKS

Air and space to AI and sea: India, France adopt new roadmap of defence production

Modi and Macron discuss Gaza, terror and aid; Red Sea and disruptions

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

INDIA AND France Friday adopted a Roadmap on Defence Industrial Cooperation as Prime Minister Narendra Modi held talks with visiting French President and Republic Day chief guest Emmanuel Macron Thursday and Friday.

The roadmap, said Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra, underlined that it will identify opportunities in co-design, co-development and co-production in

President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron during the Republic Day parade in New Delhi on Friday. *Praveen Khanna*

the defence industrial sector and it will cover a range of domains: air and space technology, maritime tech, underwater domain awareness, land warfare, robotics, artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles and cyber defence.

Defence and security form one of the key pillars of the strategic partnership between India and France established on January 26, 1998. This year's Republic Day celebrations also cap the 25th anniversary celebrations of the strategic partnership

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Window to conclude India-UK FTA by end of March closing fast, officials in a huddle

RAVI DUTTA MISHRA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

THE WINDOW to conclude talks with the United Kingdom on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) before the end of this financial year or March 31 is fast closing, and top government officials from both sides are making a final push to wrap up pending issues.

A delegation from the UK arrived in India on January 22. "There have been several issues, but most chapters have been closed in the last three months. Over 90 per cent of the deal is one, only a handful of articles in a few chapters are remaining. It is a small basket," a senior government official told *The Indian Express*.

"For us, (India) the Model

Code of Conduct will be the cut-off date. Our UK counterpart understands this and that is the reason their officials are here and meetings are ongoing with the highest level of the government across ministries – commerce, finance and external affairs," the official said.

The MCC will come into effect the day the Lok Sabha poll schedule is announced. Elections need to be held before June 16 when the term of the 17th Lok Sabha ends. The MCC contains general precepts for model behaviour during elections, with an entire chapter on what the party in power can and cannot do.

The India-UK FTA was originally slated to be signed by the Diwali of 2022, a deadline that was announced earlier by the UK

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Uttarakhand Assembly will hold special session on Feb 5 to pass Uniform Civil Code

BJP-ruled Gujarat, Assam plan similar Bill; three states may have UCC in place before Lok Sabha polls are held

LIZ MATHEW
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

THE UTTARAKHAND Assembly has been convened for a special one-day session on February 5 to discuss and pass the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill.

Sources said a five-member committee, led by former Supreme Court judge Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai and set up by the state in May 2022, is expected to hand over its report to the government on February 2 or February 3.

The report is learnt to have placed emphasis on gender equality and equal rights for daughters in ancestral properties. It does not, however, suggest

Last year, CM Pushkar Dhami said the UCC would be implemented soon

raising the marriageable age of women to 21 years. It has recommended retaining the marriageable age for women at 18 years.

Sources also said once the Uttarakhand Legislative Assembly passes the UCC, two other BJP ruled states – Gujarat and Assam – will also introduce a UCC bill which is more or less the same as Uttarakhand's, in their Legislative Assembly. If everything goes as per plan, three

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

EXPLAINED
E From states to Centre

THE BJP's political strategy is to ensure states ruled by the party first implement the Uniform Civil Code, with the focus largely on gender equality and equal rights for daughters in ancestral property, keeping out the more contentious issues. This will face less resistance, it hopes, setting the stage for a national law.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

PAGE 1
ANCHOR

Chambers, carvings, decorations: ASI describes temple that was

survey of the mosque complex – it's in four volumes – the ASI, tasked by the Varanasi district court to ascertain whether the mosque was "constructed over a pre-existing structure of a Hindu temple", has concluded just that, and describes a temple that existed before it "appears to have been destroyed in the 17th century, during the reign of Aurangzeb and part of it... modified and reused in the existing structure".

Hindu litigants have claimed that the Gyanvapi mosque was built on the site of the earlier Kashi Vishwanath temple after its

In a report on its scientific



A Hindu temple existed at the site of the Gyanvapi mosque, the ASI has said in its survey report. EXPLAINED, PAGE 7

and available evidence it can be concluded that it had at least one chamber to the north, south, east and west respectively," it stated.

"Remains of three chambers to the north, south and west can still be seen but the remains of the chamber to the east and any further extension of it cannot be ascertained physically as the area to the east is covered under (a) solid functional platform with stone flooring," it stated.

"Entrance to the central chamber of the temple was from (the) west which has been blocked by stone masonry. Its western chamber was also con-

nected with north and south chambers through a corridor accessible from its north and south entrances respectively."

"Main entrance to the central chamber was tastefully decorated with carvings of animals and birds and an ornamental torana. Figure carved on the lalatabimba has been chopped off and most of it is covered with stones, bricks and mortar which is used to block the entrance. Remains of a bird figure carved on the door sill, and part of which survived at the northern side, appears to be of a cock," it stated.

Concluding that the western

wall of the Gyanvapi mosque was the "remaining part of a pre-existing Hindu temple", the ASI said, "Art and architecture of any building not only indicates its date but also its nature, Karna-ratha and prati-ratha of central chamber visible on either side of western chamber, a large decorated entrance gateway on the eastern wall of the western chamber, a smaller entrance and destroyed image on lalatabimba, birds and animals carved for decoration suggest that the western wall is remaining part of a pre-existing Hindu temple."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

RENU DEVI MAY RETURN AS DEPUTY CM

NDA govt on the cards again in Bihar: Nitish all set to go with BJP

He is likely to resign and then stake fresh claim to form govt with BJP on Sunday

SANTOSH SINGH & LIZ MATHEW
PATNA, NEW DELHI, JAN 26

WITH THE BJP dropping clear hints of being open to tying up with the Janata Dal (United) again, Nitish Kumar looks set to return as Chief Minister with the head of an NDA government in Bihar. Nitish may have two Deputy CMs from the BJP, on similar lines as the post-2020 Assembly polls formula.

Nitish is most likely to tender his resignation and then stake a fresh claim to form the government with the NDA on Sunday. The BJP and JD(U) are likely to hold party meetings and then convene a meeting of the alliance to choose Nitish as its leader.

Sources said that the BJP



Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, his deputy Tejashwi Yadav at a Republic Day event in Patna, Friday. PTI

WHY NITISH DUMPED BJP IN 2022, WHY HE MAY PATCH UP PAGE 5

would choose an Extremely Backward Class (EBC) leader for one of the Deputy CM posts, and that is likely to be Renu Devi. The Nonia leader was one of the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

BUSINESS AS USUAL
BY UNNY

Can recycle an old suitable cartoon.

Calcutta HC judge accuses colleague of 'acting for political party', SC sitting today

I am going to be a father in March: Punjab CM Mann in R-Day speech



At the Republic Day event in Ludhiana. X/BhagwantMann

DIVYA GOYAL
LUDHIANA, JANUARY 26

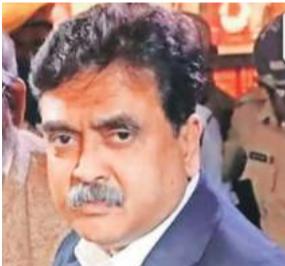
TAKING THE audience by surprise during his Republic Day address in Ludhiana, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann announced Friday that he and his wife were expecting a baby in March.

He said his wife, Dr Gurpreet Kaur, was seven months pregnant.

Urging people not to get sex determination tests done, Mann said: "I am also expecting a bundle of joy in my home coming March. My wife is seven months pregnant. We have consciously chosen not to discover the gender and won't do so in the future either. I urge everyone to avoid such practices. Let us refrain from discriminating between boys and girls; instead, let's wish for a healthy baby. Given the opportunity, there's nothing that girls cannot achieve."

He said it was a matter of immense pride that the Pran Pratishtha of the Ram idol had taken place in Ayodhya, adding that everyone should go there to pay their obeisance.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



Calcutta High Court's Justice Abhijit Gangopadhyay

When contacted, Justice Sen declined to comment.

Justice Gangopadhyay had Wednesday ordered a CBI probe into alleged irregularities in admission of MBBS candidates in state-run medical colleges and hospitals. However, the state government moved the division bench comprising himself and the four most senior judges of the court – Justices Sanjiv Khanna, B R Gavai, Surya Kant and Aniruddha Bose – after taking suo motu cognisance of the developments on Friday.

On Thursday, a single-judge bench of Justice Abhijit Gangopadhyay of the Calcutta High Court had directed that a CBI investigation ordered into alleged irregularities in MBBS admissions in the state will continue, despite an order of the division bench to the contrary.

In the written order, he levelled accusations against a fellow judge, Justice Soumen Sen.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



TMC GOVT NOT PERMITTING BHARAT JODO YATRA RALLIES IN BENGAL: ADHIR PAGE 5

EXPRESS NETWORK

DOWNLOAD APP

- VISUAL STORIES
- DAILY BRIEFING
- PODCASTS
- CUSTOMIZABLE NEWS EXPERIENCE

Indian Express ★★★★ 4.6

SCAN THIS QR CODE TO DOWNLOAD THE APP

**SHEKHAR KAPUR OPENS UP ABOUT BEING 'ANGRY' WHILE MAKING 'BANDIT QUEEN', REVEALS HE WOULD PUKE WHILE SHOOTING GANG-RAPE SCENE**

Filmmaker Shekhar Kapur dissects his National Award-winning film Bandit Queen (1994). It has been thirty years since the movie first released in cinemas and shocked audiences.

TECH**ONEPLUS 12 VS SAMSUNG GALAXY S24+**

OnePlus has the best of hardware; Samsung shines with its software

**UPSC**

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

EXPRESS AUDIO**Ram Temple's journey, Bharat Jodo Assam leg, Mumbai demolitions**

Two century long history of Ayodhya Ram Temple movement, Assam leg of Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra led by Cong leader Rahul Gandhi, and BMC's demolitions of nearly a dozen structures in Muslim-dominated Haidary Chowk area of Mumbai's Mira Road

CHHATTISGARH**2 ex-ministers among eight Cong MLAs named in FIRs in coal levy, liquor scam cases**

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
RAIPUR, JANUARY 26

CHHATTISGARH'S ANTI-Corruption Bureau (ACB) has, on the basis of complaints filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED), registered two separate FIRs — one in the coal levy case and another in the liquor scam case. Eight MLAs, including two ministers of the previous Congress government, were named in the FIRs along with several other government officials and Congress leaders.

Former Chhattisgarh minister Amarjeet Bhagat was named for the first time in the coal levy case as an accused, and former minister Kawasi Lakhma was booked in the liquor scam case. Six other Congress MLAs — Devendra Singh Yadav, Chandradev Prasad Rai, Brishpat Singh, Gulab Kamro, U D Minj and Shishpal Sori — were named in the coal levy case FIR.

"Earlier (during Congress government in the state), the ED had submitted an application under section 66 of the PMLA (Prevention of Money Laundering Act) to the state of Chhattisgarh. Acting upon the same, the police has now registered an FIR," said Saurabh Kumar Pande, the special public prosecutor for ED in Raipur.

Former CM and Congress leader Bhupesh Baghel said Minji's name had not come up in any ED probe before and claimed that it was only added in the FIR because he contested against Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Saini.

SC, ST and OBC students' registry in higher education rose by 18.1% in 5 yrs: Survey

R RADHIKA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

ACCORDING TO a latest all-India survey on higher education, the proportion of students from marginalised communities — scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, and other backward castes — has climbed higher than the national average over the past five years.

Between 2017-18 and 2021-22, the overall growth in number of students from marginalised communities enrolled in higher educational institutes was 18.1% whereas for SC category it was 25.43%, the Ministry of Education report shows.

The highest increase was seen in the number of ST students, a growth of 41.6% whereas the OBC student enrolment rose by 27.3%. Since 2014-15, there has been 80.1% increase in female ST students' enrolment with an addition of 7.5 lakh.

FULL REPORT ON
www.indianexpress.com

Air and space to AI and sea: India, France adopt new roadmap of defence production

forged during then French President Jacques Chirac's visit, also as Chief Guest for the Republic Day celebrations.

"The whole idea... building the defence supply chains between two countries so that they can not only fulfil the defence needs in India but also can be a useful contributor for the security partnership with other countries," said Kwatra. "The focus of conversation is on defence production."

He said the two sides agreed on a roadmap on space and a pact between Tata and Airbus on making H-125 single-engine helicopters.

Both agreed on coopera-

tion in healthcare, which would include education, training and research, and the use of AI in healthcare. The year, 2026, was declared as the year of India-France innovation with the two sides announcing a Young Professionals scheme for people between 18 to 35 years of age.

Kwatra said an MoU was sealed between New Space India Ltd and France's Arianespace for cooperation in satellite launches.

He said that cooperation in space will involve space situational awareness, collision avoidance, earth monitoring, communications and broadcasting, and

FROM PAGE ONE ■ FULL REPORTS ON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM
NDA govt on the cards again in Bihar

Deputy CMs after the 2020 polls — becoming Bihar's first woman to hold the post — till Nitish switched sides in August 2022 to the RJD-Congress alliance.

BJP insiders said that as of now there is no unanimity over the choice of the second Deputy CM.

Among the leaders being considered are Sushil Kumar Modi, who has served a long stint as Nitish's Deputy CM in the past and is currently a Rajya Sabha MP; current Leader of the Opposition Vijay Kumar Sinha; and Union Minister of State, Home Affairs, Nitin Gadkari.

"The BJP is mulling over a combination of OBC-EBC or EBC-upper caste. While Renu Devi looks the obvious choice for an EBC face, the party has not yet finalised its second deputy CM," a BJP leader said.

Sushil Modi and Sinha told *The Indian Express* that they would go with whatever decision the BJP's central leadership takes in the interest of the party. "In politics, no gate shuts permanently," Sushil Modi, who Thursday said he had no idea regarding Nitish's plans, said. Sinha said: "We have collective leadership and we will go by what our top leaders decide."

Asked if he was ready to accept Nitish as Bihar CM again,

Union minister Giriraj Singh, a volatile BJP leader who Thursday ruled out the possibility, said: "I am a simple worker of the party."

The JD(U)'s 45 MLAs and the BJP's 78, along with the support of one independent legislator, together make up 124 MLAs, more than the simple majority of 122 in the Bihar Assembly. However, as per sources, the JD(U)'s current partner RJD may not let Nitish have an easy walk. With 79 of its own MLAs, plus the Congress and three Left parties, the RJD can count on 114 MLAs — just 8 short of a majority. Sources said the RJD might reach out to some JD(U) MLAs to stop Nitish from forming the government with the BJP.

Hindustani Awami Morcha (Secular) patron and former CM Jitendra Singh Manjhi, who has 4 MLAs, denied that he was among NDIA members in touch with the RJD. "I am very much with the NDA. I welcome Nitish Kumar," Manjhi, whose ties with Nitish have been bitter since the JD(U) leader appointed and then summarily removed him as CM in nine months in 2014, said.

RJD national spokesperson and Rajya Sabha MP Manoj Kumar Jha, however, strongly dismissed the possibility of his party trying to wean away MLAs to form the government. "We do not engage in such things. But we also want Nitish Kumar to clarify things. There is an atmosphere of uncertainty among the people as well," he said.

JD(U) spokesperson Neeraj Kumar said to this: "There is no confusion in state politics. Nitish Kumar is very much at the helm of affairs."

Sources in the BJP said while the details had been finalised between Nitish and the party's top central leadership, the ground had been laid by a survey conducted by it in Bihar for the Lok Sabha polls. The survey didn't paint a very rosy picture for the BJP, indicating that the NDA tally in the state would be below 25 this time. In 2019, when the JD(U) was a part of it, the NDA had won 39 of Bihar's 40 Lok Sabha seats.

While that survey was done before the consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, the BJP's calculation was that even with the boost provided by this, it might add 7-8 seats at best in case the JD(U), RJD and Congress fought together. The BJP's target for this Lok Sabha election is bettering its 2019 tally, and it has been clear that this means mopping up as many seats as possible in states where it did well, as the South may see a slide

in its numbers.

A source said that the final nitty-gritty was wrapped up in discussions "between the top leaders of the BJP — Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and party chief JP Nadda — and Nitish". Another leader admitted that while the BJP state unit had reservations about Nitish heading their alliance again, the JD(U) supremo was unlikely to have considered any proposal that did not include him returning as CM.

"But the BJP was clear that it would have two deputy CMs," the leader said, adding that in the party, everyone bows to the eventual decision of the top leadership.

In another sign of the fast-unravelling situation in Bihar, Nitish attended the customary high tea organised on Republic Day by the Governor, with his Deputy CM Tejashwi Yadav absent.

AJD(U) minister occupied the chair next to Nitish which was kept for Tejashwi, after removing his name plate. To the beleaguered Opposition INDIA alliance, which first came together under Patna with Nitish's blessings, JD(U) Bihar president Umesh Kushwaha had a message: "Though we are still with the INDIA bloc, it should introspect why things are going wrong."

Chambers, carvings, decorations: ASI describes temple that was

On the pillars in the mosque complex, the report stated: "From the minute study of these pillars, it is found that pillars with (a) square section having lotus medallion in the centre and flower bud chains on the corners, were part of the pre-existing Hindu temple. These pillars and pilasters are reused in the existing structure after removing vyalas figures and converting that space in floral design. The observation is supported by two similar pilasters on the northern and southern wall of the western chamber in their original place. This similarity is established on the basis of scientific study, art and design."

The first volume of the ASI re-

port is divided into three main categories: Introduction, Structures, Summary. Under Introduction, it has the subheads — Court directive and Compliance, Constraints, Location, Settlement Plot number 9130, and Study Area. Under Structures, it has the subheads — Cellars, Existing Structure, Pillars and Pilasters, Western Wall, Inscriptions, Mason's Marks, Measurements. Under Summary, it has the subheads — Reply to Observations of the Court, Brief Findings of the Survey. The first volume comprises 137 pages.

The second is on Scientific Studies and has these subheads: Cleaning Operations and Finds, Scientific Investigations/Survey, X-

Ray Fluorescence Report, Ground Penetration Radar Survey, Condition Report, Field Laboratory and Relative Humidity and Temperature. It has 196 pages. The third volume has Objects as the main heading and the following subheads: Artefacts, Retrieved Objects, Architectural Members. The third volume has 227 pages. The fourth volume contains illustrations, with subheads Images and Figures. It has 238 pages.

The survey was undertaken by a team led by ASI Additional Director-General Alok Tripathi.

During the study, objects like inscriptions, sculptures, coins, pottery, architectural fragments and objects of terracotta, stone, metal

and glass were examined and analysed. According to the report, objects that required first-aid treatment were treated at the site. It stated that "archaeologists, epigraphists, chemists, engineers, surveyors, photographers, and other officials of the ASI and scientists of the National Geophysical Research Institute (NGRI), Hyderabad carried out investigations and collected data" which were "systematically analysed".

Scientific studies were conducted in a 2150-sqm area, fenced by a steel grill around the existing structure, the report said, adding that the "survey team established a reference point and prepared a plan of the entire complex".

Since 2022, Justice Gangopadhyay has ordered CBI probes into teacher recruitment scams and alleged irregularities in the recruitment process in the state. The investigations led to the arrest of former TMC minister Partha Chatterjee, senior officials, and recovery and seizure of movable and immovable property worth over Rs 100 crore.

On September 20, 2022, he gave an interview to a Bengali television news channel where he criticised the state government and the Trinamool Congress.

The matter subsequently reached the Supreme Court, which asked the Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court to reassign cases in school jobs scam from Justice Gangopadhyay to another judge.

The SC also observed that judges cannot give interviews on pending cases.

Justice Gangopadhyay's order from Thursday further

Window to conclude India-UK FTA closing fast, officials in a huddle

side and then affirmed by the Indian government in the September of that year. Following that, no formal timeline was announced by either side for the conclusion of the deal.

While the UK has asked India to reduce the duty on cars and whisky among other items, India has sought better access for its service sector workforce in the UK. While the average tariff on goods imported from India into the UK is 4.2 per cent, the average tariff in India on goods imported from the UK is 14.6 per cent; so it is expected the cut in duty by India would be of a greater extent.

Negotiations on cars and whisky have been contentious as the Indian industry has been seeking greater access into the UK market. Indian whisky manufacturers have said the UK should ease its three year maturation rule,

which acts as a barrier, and New Delhi is also seeking duty concessions in the auto sector, particularly in the EV segment.

The FTA with the UK would be the first full fledged deal with a western country that would see deeper economic integration with a major global service sector leader. It is also seen as crucial since it will serve as a template for trade deals with larger western trade partners such as the European Union and European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

Economic integration with the western countries via FTA assumes significance as the global supply chain is undergoing a reset after Covid-19 and multinational firms globally are adopting a China plus one policy. Multilateral trade agreements such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity are also looking to sign a bilateral investment treaty (BIT) alongside the FTA that could improve UK's investments into India. To resolve investor-state disputes under the new BIT faster, India is expected to move away from its 2016 model BIT approach that stressed on exhaustion of local remedies. In FY2023, India's merchandise exports to the UK were valued at \$1141 billion while imports stood at \$8.96 billion.

India's labour-intensive sec-

tors are expected to see gains from the India-UK FTA, especially the textile sector. Indian textile exports face tariffs as high as 10% in the UK and a trade deal could put India on par with competition such as Bangladesh (which get LDC benefits), and revive textile exports. Meanwhile a greater integration in the services sector with the UK could help greater job creation in the fast growing industry.

India and the UK are also looking to sign a bilateral investment treaty (BIT) alongside the FTA that could improve UK's investments into India. To resolve investor-state disputes under the new BIT faster, India is expected to move away from its 2016 model BIT approach that stressed on exhaustion of local remedies. In FY2023, India's merchandise exports to the UK were valued at \$1141 billion while imports stood at \$8.96 billion.

Commenting on the non-inclusion of Punjab's tableau for the Republic Day parade in New Delhi, and showcased in Ludhiana Friday, Mann said,

"Those who deliberately kept Punjab's tableau out of the parade must say what is wrong in them."

The Union government, he said, had insulted martyrs including Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev, Lala Lajpat Rai, Udham Singh, Kartar Singh Sarabha, Mai Bhago and others by rejecting the tableau of the state.

Commenting on the non-inclusion of Punjab's tableau for the Republic Day parade in New Delhi, and showcased in Ludhiana Friday, Mann said,

"Those who deliberately kept Punjab's tableau out of the parade must say what is wrong in them."

The Union government, he said,

had insulted martyrs including

Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev, Lala Lajpat Rai, Udham Singh, Kartar Singh Sarabha, Mai Bhago and others by rejecting the tableau of the state.

Commenting on the non-inclusion of Punjab's tableau for the Republic Day parade in New Delhi, and showcased in Ludhiana Friday, Mann said,

"Those who deliberately kept Punjab's tableau out of the parade must say what is wrong in them."

The Union government, he said,

had insulted martyrs including

Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev, Lala Lajpat Rai, Udham Singh, Kartar Singh Sarabha, Mai Bhago and others by rejecting the tableau of the state.

Commenting on the non-inclusion of Punjab's tableau for the Republic Day parade in New Delhi, and showcased in Ludhiana Friday, Mann said,

"Those who deliberately kept Punjab's tableau out of the parade must say what is wrong in them."

The Union government, he said,

had insulted martyrs including

Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev, Lala Lajpat Rai, Udham Singh, Kartar Singh Sarabha, Mai Bhago and others by rejecting the tableau of the state.

Commenting on the non-inclusion of Punjab's tableau for the Republic Day parade in New Delhi, and showcased in Ludhiana Friday, Mann said,

"Those who deliberately kept Punjab's tableau out of the parade must say what is wrong in them."

The Union government, he said,

had insulted martyrs including

Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Sukhdev, Lala Lajpat Rai, Udham Singh, Kartar Singh Sarabha, Mai Bhago and others by rejecting the tableau of the state.

Gr Noida, Haryana farmers hold tractor march, reiterate MSP, loan waiver demands

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NOIDA, JANUARY 26

HUNDREDS OF farmers took out a tractor parade on Republic Day in Gautam Buddha Nagar and Haryana to raise various demands including minimum support price (MSP) for their crops, withdrawal of cases against farmers during the 2020-21 agitation, loan waivers, and monthly pension.

Incidentally, the parade comes exactly three years after January 26, 2021, when violence broke out as thousands of farmers had clashed with police in Delhi. One farmer was killed.

On Friday, tractor parades were held in several districts of Uttar Pradesh besides other states after the official function. In neighbouring Haryana, parades were held in Jind, Hisar, Bhiwani, Dadri, Rohtak and Kaithal.

"On this 74th anniversary of the People of India having given to themselves the Constitution..., we solemnly resolve to struggle to defend our right to a dignified life and livelihood as guaranteed by the Constitution and which is threatened today by the brazen and shameless pro-corporate farm policies of the BJP-controlled union government," said farmer organisation Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) in a statement.

"We pledge to resist corporate attempt to control and sell costly inputs, including electricity and machinery; to change the crop-

ping pattern to suit their markets; to wind up farm subsidies and assured pricing and procurement of crops; to control food storage and thereby control food supply for profiteering; to take over food processing and food markets; to undermine PDS security for the poor, and to take over and commercialise farm land, forest and water resources," it added.

SKM, an umbrella organisation of farmer unions, had urged farmers and associated unions to take out a tractor parade over several long-pending demands.

"There were around 300 tractors in our parade today, from Chilla border to Pari Chowk. The protest went on for around three hours. We raised our demands peacefully and this was our message to the government: This is just a rehearsal; actual show will take place in Delhi if the demands are not accepted..." said Pawan Khatana, the Western UP Chief of Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), who led the parade on behalf of SKM.

He said farmers have resolved to hold Bharat Bandh on February 16 and a kisan maha-panchayat on March 14 in Delhi. In Hisar, Paggdi Sambhal Jatta Kisan Sangharsh Samiti president Mandip Nathwan said: "Farmers sat on an indefinite dharna to demand the release of crop insurance claims. They are also upset that the compensation for their cotton crop hit by pink bollworm has not been released yet," he added.



Farmers take out a tractor march in Jind, Friday. Express

'PLASTIC MATERIAL ON GROUND FLOOR MAY HAVE CAUSED FIRE'

9-month-old among 4 killed in blaze at Shahdara building; owner detained

ARNABJIT SUR
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

TWO MOTHERS and their children, including an infant, died after a fire broke out in a four-storey building in Shahdara's Mansarovar Park Friday evening.

DCP (Shahdara) Surendra Choudhary said they received a PCR call at 5.22 pm that some residents were trapped in a blaze in a building in Ram Nagar. Police rushed to the spot and, with the help of passersby, three trapped persons were pulled out. After the Delhi Fire Services (DFS) personnel arrived, three more persons were rescued.

"They were rushed to GTB hospital where four people were declared dead," said an officer.

Police said the deceased were identified as Rachna (28), her nine-month-old daughter Ruhi; Gauri Soni (40) and her son Pratham Soni (17). They died of asphyxiation after smoke spread across the building; they sustained burn injuries as well. The injured were identified as Radhika (16), who



Screen grabs from a video of the spot. Police received a PCR call at 5.22 pm that some residents were trapped in a blaze in a building in Ram Nagar. Two people sustained burn injuries. Credit: ANI video

sustained burn injuries on her leg and hand; and Prabhawati (70), who had a burn injury on her leg.

Rachna had adopted Ruhi around three months ago; they lived on the second floor. Gauri and her son, a class 12 student,

lived on the third floor.

Police said the owner has been detained and a case is in the process of being lodged.

At GTB Hospital, Yogesh Soni, Pratham's uncle, told *The Indian Express*, "We received information about the fire at around 5 pm... my brother Ashutosh was not at home and had gone to office... Gauri and Pratham's bodies were found on the stairs... the fire spread from the ground floor which is a godown for wipers."

DFS Chief Atul Garg also said wipers, rubber and a cutting machine on the ground floor sparked the blaze.

Police sources also claimed someone may have tossed an unextinguished beedi inside the parking lot, which could have led to the incident.

A fire official involved in the rescue operation said, "The building does not have ventilation and lacked enough windows... Separate families lived on different floors... when the fire broke out, most of them tried to run to the terrace but they got asphyxiated and fell unconscious on the stairs, from where their bodies were recovered."

The building comprises a ground floor plus four floors and has a single staircase. While the owner stays on the first floor, the others have been rented out.

A senior police officer said that the prima facie reason behind the fire seems to be a short circuit due to which the plastic material stacked on the ground floor, in the parking area, caught fire and the smoke eventually

Cop's son pushed into Munak Canal: One arrested, body yet to be found

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

DAYS AFTER the son of an Assistant Commissioner of Police was allegedly pushed into the Munak Canal by two men, police have arrested one of them.

The victim, Lakshay Chauhan (24), a lawyer at Tis Hazari Court, went with two of his friends to attend a wedding in Rohtak on January 22. He then went missing.

DCP (Outer North) Ravi Kumar said, "Abhishek, an advocate, has been arrested. He disclosed that on January 22 afternoon, the other accused contacted him and asked him to attend a wedding with him in Sonepat." The co-accused claimed Lakshay had taken a loan from him; when he asked for his money back, Lakshay allegedly misbehaved. "The duo decided to throw Lakshay into the Munak Canal in Haryana," said the DCP.

On the day of the wedding, Lakshay met Abhishek at Mukarba Chowk in his Ford EcoSport; the other man joined later. Said the DCP, "On their way back, they stopped the car at Panipat, near the canal, to attend nature's call. That's when the accused pushed Lakshay and fled."

Lakshay's father, ACP (Operations), had filed a missing complaint at Samaypur Badli police station on January 23. With Abhishek's arrest, charges of murder and causing disappearance of evidence have been added to the case. The co-accused remains on the run. Meanwhile, efforts are still on to trace Lakshay's body.

Business Blasters in colleges; focus on key sectors likely in Delhi budget

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

THE DELHI government is likely to allocate funds for implementation of entrepreneurship programmes in colleges – on the lines of its Business Blasters initiative for schools – during this year's Budget session scheduled from February 15 to 20.

As part of the programme, students of Class 11 and 12 are given "seed money" to start their business. "It is being considered

to start this programme for final-year and pre-final-year students in colleges, aiming to enable them to start their businesses after leaving college, thereby increasing employment opportunities. With this goal in mind, the (Arvind) Kejriwal government may allocate funds for entrepreneurship programmes in this year's Budget," said the Delhi government in a statement.

The proposed Budget has received Cabinet approval and the file has now been sent to the L-G for his nod. Notably, this will be the first time Finance Minister Atishi will present the Budget.

Education, health, electricity, water, roads, and infrastructure will continue to be the government's priority, said officials. "Water, roads, urban development, and various developmental projects: These aspects have been identified as top priorities for the forthcoming fiscal year, reflecting the government's proactive approach towards addressing the diverse needs of the city and its residents," said the official.

A great nation One grand celebration

Enjoy the many colours, flavours and rhythms of India at Bharat Parv.
Venue: Red Fort, Delhi
Date: Till 31st January 2024, 12 noon - 9 pm
Entry free. Please carry your identity proof.

BHARAT 20 PARV 24

23rd - 31st January 2024

Republic Day Parade Tableaux | Folk Dance | Crafts Bazaar | Armed Forces Bands
Studio Kitchen | Multi-cuisine Food Court | Cultural and Musical Programs

Defamation case against Sirsa: Delhi HC refuses to stay proceedings

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

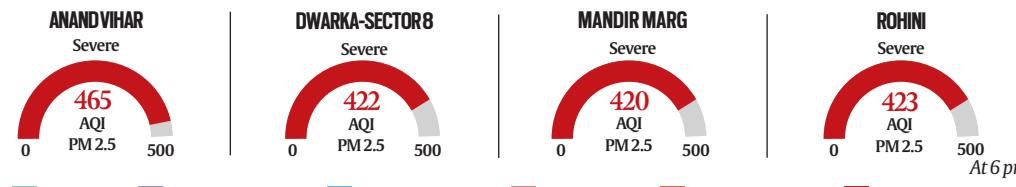
THE DELHI HC refused to stay trial court proceedings against BJP leader Manjinder Singh Sirsa in a criminal defamation case filed by former Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DS-GMC) President Manjinder Singh GK.

Summons were issued to Sirsa, Harmeet Singh Kalka and Jagdeep Singh Kahlon in June 2023 by a magisterial court for allegedly making defamatory statements against Manjinder Singh (complainant). Thereafter, Sirsa and others moved a revision plea before the sessions court, which was dismissed on November 29, 2023. Sirsa moved the HC against this order.

A single judge bench of Justice Swaran Kanta Sharma, in its January 24 order, in its prima facie opinion found that the sessions court had "examined in detail the issue of registration of FIR in relation to letter dated 04.04.2016 and simultaneous proceedings in the present complaint case for commission of offence of defamation."

The HC said that "at this stage", it does not find "any reasons to stay the proceedings in the present complaint case".





SKY WATCH
FORECAST: January 27
 Partly cloudy sky. Moderate fog in the morning.
AQI: Very poor
MAX: 20 | **MIN: 5**
 2.1°C below normal | 3.4°C below normal

REPUBLIC DAY CELEBRATIONS

First-timers, special invitees catch parade in action

UPASIKA SINGHAL &
VIDHEEsha KUNTAMALLA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

A TEACHER from Karnataka escorting her students, a group of school friends catching up after a long time, and an Army officer from Bihar posted in Delhi: Among a sea of people gathered to witness the R-Day parade at Kartavya Path were several first-timers.

Standing at the entrance of the venue with a group of students was Pallavi Nadkarni, a teacher at Jain Heritage School in Karnataka's Belgaum. "It was very difficult to get tickets but we wanted to witness the parade," Nadkarni said. "Children are excited to see PM Narendra Modi and are also keen about the various tableaux. This is the best opportunity for children to learn the importance of women empowerment," Nadkarni added, alluding to women-centric tableaux.

Another first timer was Deepak Kumar, 29, an army officer from Bihar. "I fortunately could make it this time as I am currently posted in Delhi," he said.

For Praveen Das, Vipul John, Mahesh Sankarasubban and Pratap Abraham Varghese, the parade was a good excuse for four childhood friends to come together in one city. "We have been friends for 27 years and meet once a year; this time, we thought we would catch the parade as well," said Sankarasubban, who works as a Supreme Court advocate. "I remember watching the parade on Doordarshan and there is so much nostalgia attached to it," said Vipul John, who runs a rubber plant business in Kerala.

Anup Kumar who is from Gaya said, "I got a temporary posting in Delhi and thought to make the most of it." An engineer from ISRO, who did not wish to be named, said, "I was particularly thrilled to see the fighter jets."

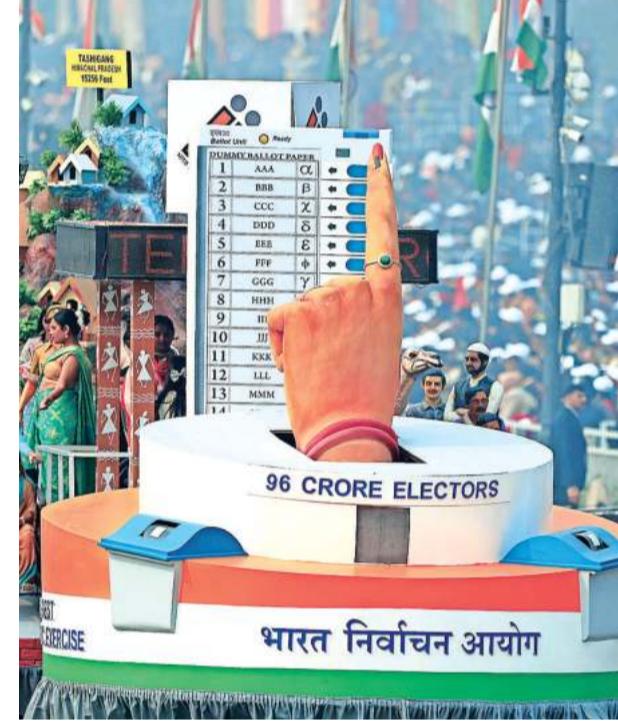
The special invitees
 Minu Motu Langpu (40) watched in awe as all-women contingents marched in perfect harmony during the parade. "Women have become so strong and they can achieve so much today," said the sarpanch from Kra Daadi district in Arunachal Pradesh.

Langpu was among the panches and sarpanches of villages in border areas invited as special guests for the parade under the Centre's Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP). Langpu Tame (45), also from Kra Daadi district, said, "I was thrilled to watch the bike formations..."

Also among the invitees were nearly 800 guests from different tribal communities across the country.

Among them was 27-year-old Seema Devi from Pithoragarh district in Uttarakhand. Devi, who makes shawls and pashminas, said, "...Modi ji has invited us today to be a part of the Republic Day celebrations. This is my second time in Delhi and we arrived January 22... we were delighted to be a part of this unique experience of witnessing so much culture on one platform."

27-year-old Manganta Jo, who came from Arunachal Pradesh's Seppa town, the headquarters of the East Kameng district, said, "We have come to Delhi for the first time with the help of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police... as special guests invited to see the celebrations. It has been a great honour to be a part of this... We got here on January 24 and toured the city; we will be returning to our home-town the day after tomorrow."



(Clockwise from top) Scenes from the parade; the Election Commission of India (ECI) tableau on display; the Delhi Police all-women pipe band; BSF women riders perform stunts. Praveen Khanna

'Very polluted but so many places to see': Tribal students after *Dilli darshan*

ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

FOR YALINI, a class X student from Namakkal in Tamil Nadu, who travelled out of her home state for the first time this week and arrived in Delhi for the Republic Day parade in the midst of a freezing Delhi winter, the city was terribly cold.

"But the parade was wonderful, and we were very excited to see the Prime Minister. We also saw the Qutub Minar on this visit," said Yalini, a student of the Eklavya Model Residential School in Sengarai, Namakkal, who is from the Kolli Hills area of the Eastern Ghats.

Yalini, who intends to become a police officer, was among the tribal students — 331 boys and 258 girls — of class IX and X from 24 states, recipients of



The children were recipients of scholarships from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Anil Sharma

scholarships from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, who attended the Republic Day parade.

For most students, who were invited to an evening at the residence of Minister for Tribal Affairs Arjun Munda on Friday, this was their first time in the na-

tional capital. D Devapriya, a class X student of the Eklavya Model Residential School in Salem, said, "This was my first opportunity to watch the parade. I enjoyed watching stunts on the bikes."

Addressing the students and the teachers who accompanied

them in a speech in Hindi, the minister spoke on how their success and education was connected to the progress of the country.

Both Yalini and Devapriya said they arrived by train earlier this week and are set to leave on Saturday. "My Hindi is not that good. But on this visit, I got to interact with students from other states. Delhi is very different from what I imagined — it is very

polluted, but there are many places to see. We went to the Qutub Minar and Humayun's Tomb," said Kidlena Bhutia, a class X student from Sikkim.

Mohammad Anwar, a student from Drass in Ladakh, found that Delhi skies are not as clear as the one he is used to back home.

"This is my first time here. I really like the city, but it is very polluted. It looks like it is mostly dark and foggy all the time," he said.

Macron visits Nizamuddin Dargah in city

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

FRENCH PRESIDENT Emmanuel Macron visited Dargah Nizamuddin Friday evening, officials said. Macron was the chief guest at the 75th Republic Day celebrations.

He reached the almost 700-year-old shrine at 9.45 pm and remained there for more than half an hour, they said.

Earlier, President Droupadi Murmu received Macron at Rashtrapati Bhavan and hosted a banquet in his honour. Welcoming President Macron,

she said the leaders of the two countries, being guests of honour in each other's successive National Day parade and celebrations, is a historic moment and "a symbol of the depth of our friendship and the strength of our partnership".

L-G recalls G20, key infra projects in city

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

CITING EXAMPLES ranging from hosting the G20 Summit to infrastructure projects of national importance, L-G VK Saxena, in his Republic Day address Friday, said both the Central and Delhi governments were making sustained efforts to develop the capital into a world-class and inclusive city.

Saxena greeted people on the occasion and paid tribute to the founders of the Constitution and security personnel who laid down their lives to protect the country.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal also extended greetings to citizens. In a post on X, he said, "Best wishes to all the countries on the 75th Republic Day. Let us all together take an oath to protect our Constitution and strengthen our great democracy."

Highlighting various achievements over the last year, Saxena said: "2023 was a very important year for our country as well as the national capital. This year, for the first time, India hosted the respected G20 Summit..."

Over the last year, he said, several significant infrastructural projects had been executed to transform the face of Delhi; these included two world-class auditoriums — the Bharat Mandapam and Yashobhoomi — which had been inaugurated.

He added that the RRTS between Meerut and Delhi had begun operations and work was in progress on the Delhi-Alwar and Delhi-Panipat corridors of the project. "Delhi has modernised its public transport system. I am proud to inform you that by 2015, 85% of the public transport buses will be electric in Delhi. That is a big achievement on the global level," he said.

EXERCISE CARRIED OUT TO AVERT BIRD STRIKE DURING FLY-PAST

How efficient was tossing meat to kites on R-Day? Forest dept to analyse

ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

HAVING TOSSED meat for six consecutive days to lure black kites away from the Republic Day fly-past, the Forest Department will conduct an analysis of the extent to which the process worked, along with considering possible long-term mitigation measures against bird strikes, according to officials.

In a process that began January 21 and ended Friday, meat was tossed every day be-

tween 11.30 am and 12.30 pm from 13 open spaces in the vicinity of the Kartavya Path. "These locations were within 5 km of the Kartavya Path... These included the cemetery at ITO, the Air Force Golf Course, the premises of the National Rail Museum, and the Maulana Azad Medical College," said Abhinav Kumar, wildlife officer in the city's Forest Department.

This is the second consecutive year that meat is being tossed in a joint exercise by the Forest Department and the Indian Air Force (IAF) in a bid to keep black

kites away from the flight path during the fly-past.

Last year, the exercise was carried out from 11 locations but the activity was spread out over three weeks. "This year, we did continuous feeding for nearly a week. Some new sites were also added this year. An analysis will be done to see how effective it was," Kumar said.

Two control sites were also earmarked — the Ghazipur landfill and an open ground on Barakhamba Road — locations where black kites already have access to food or are being fed. "The



Meat was tossed to the birds from 13 locations. Express

control sites are where the density of kites is usually on the higher side because food is available. Birds were counted at the control sites, but meat was not tossed, with the intention of determining what the density of kites is when meat is not tossed. Based on that, you can calculate the surge that is seen when you artificially toss meat," Kumar said.

Fifteen teams were formed this time, and each had five to six people — a representative of the Forest Department and IAF each, a researcher from the Forest Department, and one or two vol-

unteers from colleges. Birds were counted at the location thrice — before the exercise began, during the meat-tossing, and after. No external experts were part of the process this year, while experts from the Wildlife Institute of India were involved in the exercise last year.

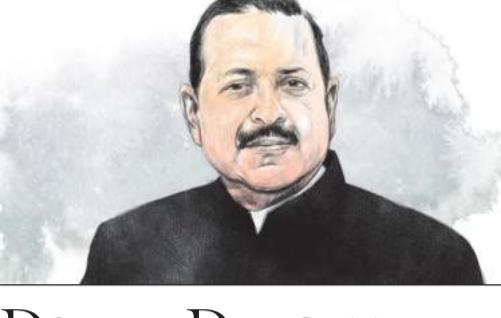
"We are hoping to look for long-term mitigation measures, of how we can lure the kites away permanently, as much as possible, from this area. We want to conduct more research into their habits, nesting sites, population density and feeding patterns," he added.

Sunit Dookia, wildlife biologist and assistant professor at Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, who was part of a committee involved in the exercise last year, said, "This is a temporary solution where we are just trying to engage some birds... This could signal to other birds as well that food is available." He further said, "Delhi is unique because of the high numbers of these kites, and this is because of the garbage problem and the open disposal of meat... they need to address the garbage problem."

GOVT & POLITICS



DELHI CONFIDENTIAL



DOUBLE DELIGHT

WHEN THE ISRO tableau depicting the successful Chandrayaan-3 mission rolled down Kartavya Path, several people stood up to clap, including ministers Mansukh Mandaviya, Smriti Irani and Science and Space Minister Jitendra Singh. Irani turned back to shake hands with Singh and congratulate him. Smiling, the minister expressed his gratitude for the wishes. The ISRO tableau was followed by another successful mission close to Singh's heart — the purple revolution of lavender cultivation in J&K from where he hails. Singh later described the two tableaux as a "rare double treat".

FOR THE EC

SINCE EARLIER this month, searching any poll-related keyword on Google leads to an information panel from the Election Commission before the other links appear on screen. This, it is learnt, is a part of Google's efforts to make helpful and authentic information available to people ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. It was rolled out in 2019 as well. Social media platforms Instagram and Facebook on Thursday also promoted the National Voters' Day "pro bono", an EC source said. On logging into the two sites, users were greeted with "It's National Voters' Day!" and a link to the EC's national voter service portal, the source said.

France raises issue of notice to journalist; India has shared its position, says Kwattra

ENS & PTI

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

FRANCE HAS raised the issue of Indian authorities serving a notice to New Delhi-based French journalist Vanessa Dougnac, allegedly over violation of certain rules. The matter was taken up with New Delhi during the visit of French President Emmanuel Macron, the Chief Guest for India's 75th Republic Day celebrations, officials said.

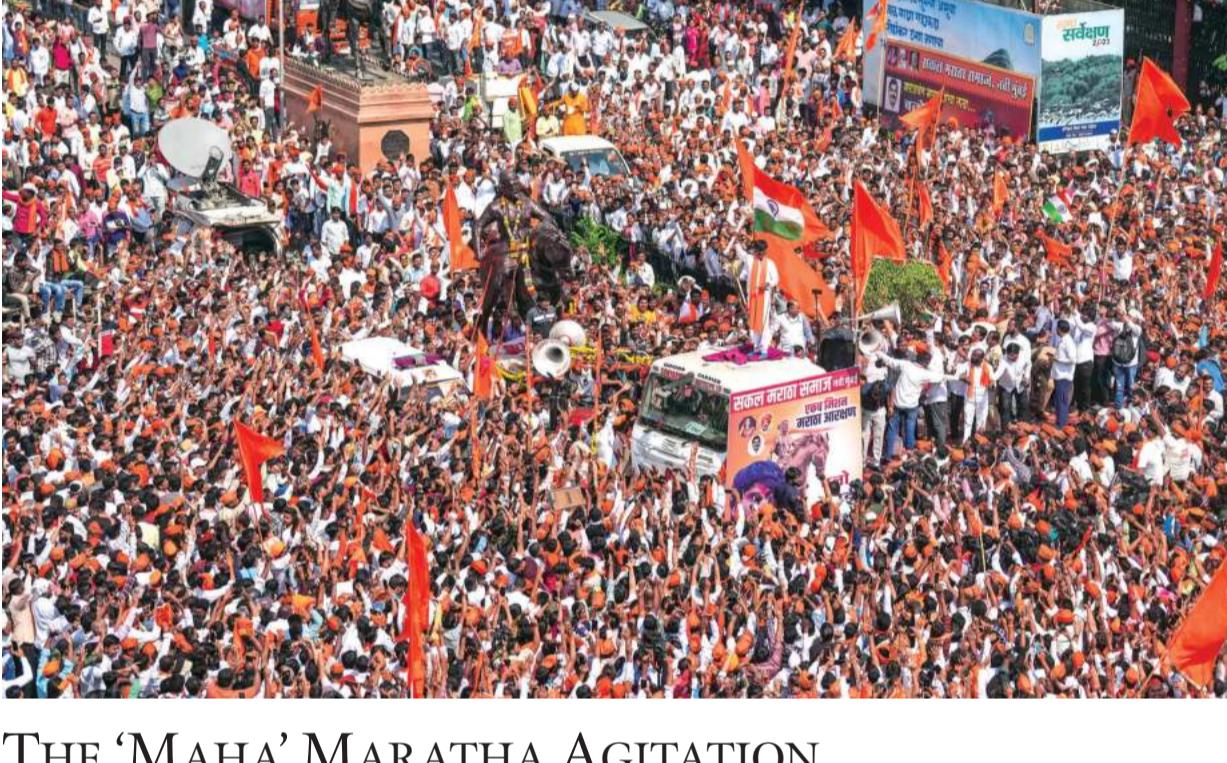
India conveyed to the French side that the issue is about "compliance with the rules and regulations of the country", indicating that it is not related to her journalism. "This has been brought to our attention by the French side both prior to the visit (of President Macron) and during the visit," Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwattra said at a media briefing. He said the matter is handled by the relevant government department.

The Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) that operates under the Union Home Ministry issued a notice to Dougnac, asking her to explain why her Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card should not be withdrawn. Kwattra said the frame of reference to look at the matter is "compliance with the rules and regulations of the country". "I do not think this has got anything else to do with other aspects of jour-

nalism etc. The principal issue is whether the person is compliant with the rules and regulations of the state under which they come," he said, adding that the Indian side shared its position on the matter with the French side and it appreciated the "frame of reference in which we are looking at this".

Dougnac has been based in New Delhi since 2001 and works for French newspaper La Croix. It is learnt that the notice was issued to her on January 18 and she has been given 15 days time to respond to it. Dougnac confirmed receiving the notice. She said, "I deny all allegations and imputations made therein against me and my conduct. India is my home... and I have never engaged in any acts that are in any manner prejudicial to Indian interests as is being alleged."

A group of foreign correspondents based in India expressed concern on the matter. "She has cooperated with the relevant authorities in an effort to remove any misunderstanding. While foreign correspondents have grappled with increased visa curbs in recent years, our colleagues with OCI status have faced particular difficulty from new and often opaque administrative burdens, hampering their ability to work as journalists.. We request the Indian authorities to facilitate the vital work of a free press in line with India's democratic traditions," it said.



THE 'MAHA' MARATHA AGITATION

Maratha activist Manoj Jarange Patil and his supporters during their march for reservation, in Navi Mumbai on Friday. Later in the day, Mumbai police officers met Jarange in connection with his proposed stir in the metropolis. Jarange and thousands of supporters have warned to march to Azad Maidan for a sit-down agitation from Saturday if their demands are not met. PTI

Low turnout in Opp-ruled states, Centre extends Viksit Bharat Yatra

HARIKISHAN SHARMA

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

AMID LOW turnout in Opposition ruled states, the Centre has extended the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra (VBSY) till all the village panchayats and urban local bodies are covered, said sources.

The VBSY, a nation-wide campaign launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on November 15, 2023, to achieve saturation under the government schemes, was scheduled to end on January 26, 2024.

However, it will now continue till all the village panchayats and urban bodies are covered.

The source said all the Prabhari (in-charge) officers at state and district level have been informed about the decision. Of the 2,50,362 events planned during the VBSY, 2,44,652 have been completed till January 22, registering an achievement of 97.72%.

According to sources, turnout of people in the VBSY events has been higher in BJP-ruled states, while it has been low in the states ruled by non-BJP parties such as Congress, DMK and TMC. The average attendance per

gram panchayat was recorded at 2 per cent of the average population of the panchayat in Kerala on January 22.

The figure stood at just 5% in Odisha, 6% in Karnataka and Punjab, 7% in Bihar, and 8% in Telangana and Tamil Nadu on the same day. However, the BJP-ruled states saw a higher average attendance. The average attendance per gram panchayat stood at 33% in Haryana, 35% in Gujarat, 38% in UP, 47% in Madhya Pradesh, and 68% in Rajasthan (all ruled by the BJP). Assam is the only exception at 5%.

Govt is using emotional issues to divert attention, hide truth: Kharge

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

CONGRESS CHIEF Mallikarjun Kharge on Friday accused the BJP government of "encroaching" upon and "eroding" the fundamental and basic rights guaranteed by the Constitution to every Indian and alleged that the government is using emotional issues to divert attention and hide this truth from the people.

Kharge, in his Republic Day message, noted 2024 is an important year for India as it will decide whether it will be able to save the only exception at 5%.



Mallikarjun Kharge

values of the Constitution and democracy or go back to the age where not all people are equal."

"The Constitution ensured fundamental rights, social justice, and political rights to every citizen. Today, these pillars are under attack from the government itself. Our Constitution's founding fathers — Pandit Nehru, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Sardar Patel, Babu Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad

— and other giants of the

Constituent Assembly would not have imagined the Constitution would face such challenges..."

"...We, the people of India, gave this Constitution to ourselves included dalits, tribals, women, farmers, and labourers. Today, they are facing assault by the government which is using emotional issues to divert attention and hide the truth from citizens," he said, adding, "The year 2024 is a very important year for India. This year will decide whether we will be able to save the values of the Constitution and democracy or go back to the age where not all people are equal."

"The Constitution ensured fundamental rights, social justice, and political rights to every citizen. Today, these pillars are under attack from the government itself. Our Constitution's founding fathers — Pandit Nehru, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Sardar Patel, Babu Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad

— and other giants of the

Akhilesh: It's Cong duty to hold smaller parties in INDIA bloc together

SANTOSH SINGH

PATNA, JANUARY 26

WHEN BIHAR Chief Minister Nitish Kumar deserted the BJP in August 2022, he accused the BJP of trying to "split and finish" off his party Janata Dal (United). He changed sides and formed the government with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Congress, and gave the impression that a socialist leader should carry forward his legacy. Three months later, Nitish said Deputy CM Tejashwi Prasad Yadav of RJD would lead the Mahagathbandhan's Assembly election campaign in 2025.

Cut to January 2024, Nitish and Tejashwi maintained distance at a Republic Day function in Patna as speculation continued to swirl about the CM again deserting his allies and switching sides.

Why did Nitish quit NDA in August 2022?

Once the senior NDA partner

in Bihar, the JD(U) found itself shrinking and falling behind junior ally BJP. Nitish had been upset with the BJP since his party's tally in the Assembly plummeted from 71 in 2015 to 43 seats in the 2020 polls while the BJP's seat count increased from 53 to 74, which was next only to the RJD's 75.

In private parleys with his party colleagues, Nitish started blaming the BJP for getting Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) leader Chirag Paswan to field candidates in almost all the constituencies where the JD(U) was in the fray. The JD(U) believed that Chirag had acted as the BJP's proxy to cut his party's votes and defeat its candidates. Even though the LJP won just one constituency, it made a serious dent in Nitish's vote base.

Nitish is said to have not felt comfortable about Deputy CMs Renu Devi and Tarkishore Prasad, not enjoying the same level of rapport as he did with Sushil Kumar Modi who had been Deputy CM for 13 years. The two had had a close association since the JP

EXPLAINED

Movement days, JD(U) was also wary of the BJP's alleged attempts to split it, using then JD(U) leader RCP Singh, who was a Union Minister at the time.

Why is Nitish looking to get back to NDA?

JD(U) insiders cite several reasons for Nitish's growing disengagement with the Congress, RJD, and INDIA bloc. The chief reason is said to be he sensing unease

in the current political set-up.

At least seven JD(U) MPs were said to be in touch with the BJP ahead of the LS polls. These MPs won in 2019 because of the social combination of the NDA and were not expecting the same result in alliance with the RJD, Congress, and Left. Also, most of the top senior JD(U) leaders, except former party chief Rajiv Ranjan Singh, were in favour of an alliance with BJP. Nitish likely sensed that the party could split if he did not act. Last month, he replaced Lalan Singh, whose growing proximity to Lalu Prasad and Tejashwi the CM did not like, as the JD(U) national president.

The JD(U) won 16 out of 17 seats it contested as part of the NDA in the 2019 LS polls. With internal surveys not showing encouraging results, Nitish likely worked out that his party would improve its chances of winning under Narendra Modi's leadership. The JD(U) likely sensed that the Ayodhya Ram Temple inauguration

ration, coupled with Modi's popularity and his government's welfare schemes, was part of a winning formula.

Nitish was the leader who worked to get all the parties on board last year to form the INDIA bloc and expected a key post. But that did not come to pass amid unease of parties such as the TMC and AAP. In 2017, when it blamed the RJD for breaking away from the Mahagathbandhan, the JD(U) this time is pointing the finger at the Congress, blaming it for conceding too much space to other INDIA members. The JD(U) also saw little reason to stick with the alliance after Rahul Gandhi embarked on the Congress's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra rather than making it about the alliance. With the INDIA bloc failing to come off as a cohesive unit and providing a counter-narrative to BJP and Modi, Nitish again took a pragmatic call with his party's future in mind.

FULL REPORT ON

[www.indianexpress.com](#)

Gyanvapi row: Parties silent; RSS, BJP may leave matter to courts

VIKAS PATHAK
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

WHILE THE Opposition maintained silence on the matter of an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) report saying a "huge temple" existed where the Gyanvapi Masjid next to Kashi Vishwanath Temple now stands, the RSS and BJP indicated they were in no hurry to get into the issue, and would wait for courts to take the lead on the matter.

The ASI report, submitted to the Varanasi district court hearing the Kashi Vishwanath-Gyanvapi matter, was handed over to the petitioners in the case on Thursday. As per the report, "there existed a large Hindu temple prior to the construction of the existing structure", and that parts of it had been reused.

Asked about the issue, an RSS functionary, not wishing to be named, said: "In the 1980s, the Sangh had to take up the Ayodhya Ram temple as a mobilisation issue so as to reach out to people and get our concerns into the

mainstream debate. At that time, society was not alive to these concerns, like it is today. Now, it is society that has taken up all these cultural concerns as collective concerns. What is the need for the Sangh to do anything when society is itself active? Now people are themselves filing cases and also discussing these issues regularly."

An RSS insider also said: "The court asked the ASI to report its findings, and it has done so. We don't feel any need to do anything about this. There will be discussions among people in society... These matters are not exclusively ours... Let people discuss the issues and let courts do their work."

A source in the BJP said roughly the same thing, "I don't think we are going to do much on this. The court asked for an ASI report, the ASI report has said what it has said. The courts will look into the matter and eventually find a solution, just as they did in the case of Ram Janmabhoomi."

An RSS leader from UP contended that the aim of the Sangh Parivar was to make society "think like the Sangh". "We have little

other work. Social discussions are already happening around religious and cultural issues. From Varanasi, 5,000 buses a day are

plying to Ayodhya and all seats are getting sold out. What is the need for us to do anything, when society is showing great interest in matters of cultural resurgence?"

While sources in the VHP said that the organisation would wait for what the courts say, it was with a rider: "Society as a whole should see that what we were saying is coming out as the truth, with each ASI report. And Muslim society should also understand that it is important to recognise these historical facts and accordingly side with the national mainstream, in-

stead of going into litigation each time," a VHP leader said.

BJP leader and Union minister Giriraj Singh, however, said on Friday that Muslims should hand over the Gyanvapi mosque site to Hindus, adding that the ball was in their court to ensure communal harmony. "The Pran Pratishtha at the Ram Temple has been done by PM Narendra Modi, and the Sanatanis have welcomed it... But our demand has always been Ayodhya, Kashi and Mathura... I will appeal to my Muslim brothers, when all evidence is out, hand over Kashi to Hindus, so that communal harmony is maintained," Singh was quoted by PTI as saying.

"We have not broken any mosques after Independence, but there is no temple left in Pakistan."

The minister also said, "This is a changed India, the Sanatan youth has awakened... If someone tries to be Babur or Aurangzeb, youths will have to become Maharastra Pratap. You should ensure peace is maintained, the ball is in your court."

FULL REPORT ON

[www.indianexpress.com](#)



The Gyanvapi mosque complex in Varanasi. File

Adhir slams TMC govt: Rahul Yatra rallies not being allowed

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
KOLKATA, JANUARY 26

WEST BENGAL Congress president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury on Friday accused the Trinamool Congress (TMC) government of not permitting rallies in the state during Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra.

Speaking to the media in Siliguri, Chowdhury said the schedule of the yatra, set to resume from Falakata in Cooch Behar on January 28, was submitted to the state administration long ago. "Then, the administration said nothing but now they are saying they are not ready to give permission. We faced hindrances in Manipur and Assam, and now we are facing the same problem in West Bengal as well," he said.

"We were denied permission to hold a public meeting in Siliguri. We expected better cooperation from the state government. Anyway, the route and the itinerary of the yatra remain the same except for a few changes," he said.

The yatra, which began in Manipur on January 14, entered Cooch Behar in West Bengal from Assam on Thursday, and took a two-day break. It will travel through north Bengal on January 28 and 29 and then enter Bihar on January 29 evening.

The Bengal leg of the yatra comes amid rumblings within the INDIA bloc, with TMC chief and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee saying that her party would contest the upcoming Lok Sabha polls independently. She also said the TMC had not joined the yatra as the Congress had not let her know of the yatra entering the state.

Countering Chowdhury's claims, the TMC said the administration in Bengal is free of political influences. "Adhir Chowdhury is responsible for the INDIA alliance falling apart in West Bengal. Secondly, all Opposition parties conduct programmes in the state, nobody faces any problems. The administration must have taken the decision as there are board examinations in schools," said TMC

MP Santanu Sen.

The BPs said that Congress was getting a taste of "authoritarianism" from its ally. "Does the TMC own Bengal that they will decide who will get permission to hold a rally? Now, the Congress, which complains against the BJP, is getting a taste of authoritarianism from its ally TMC," BJP state president Sukanta Majumdar said.

— WITH PTI INPUTS



75TH REPUBLIC DAY: 'NARI SHAKTI' AT THE FOREFRONT



BRIEFLY

Greetings from Maldives

Male: Highlighting the Maldives-India bond "nurtured by centuries of friendship, mutual respect, and a deep sense of kinship," President Mohamed Muizzu on Friday wished India on its 75th Republic Day. The President's greeting "from the Government and the people of the Maldives" to "the Government and the people of India," came in the backdrop of a diplomatic row between the two nations.

PTI

Sukma unfurls Tricolour

Raipur: This Republic Day, the national flag was unfurled for the first time in Chintagufa in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district, a core Naxal area in the state where security forces have slowly started making inroads. The tricolour was unfurled at the two police camps set up deep inside the forest earlier this month.

ENS

Unite against terror: J&K L-G

Jammu: J&K Lt Governor Manoj Sinha on Friday called for the "society to be united, courageous and disciplined" to fight against those who are "promoting, justifying or condoning terrorism". "We need to foil the efforts of the terror ecosystem which is trying to draw sustenance and support from individuals or groups..." the L-G said in Jammu.

ENS

Unnao rape: No HC relief for Sengar's brother

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

THE DELHI High Court has refused to suspend the sentence of Jaideep Singh Sengar, who was convicted in a case related to the death of the father of the victim in the 2017 Unnao rape case.

Sengar, who is the brother of former Uttar Pradesh BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar, had sought suspension of the 10-year sentence while his appeal against the conviction for culpable homicide not amounting to murder and criminal conspiracy (among other offences) was pending.

He was awarded 10 years' rigorous imprisonment by a trial court in Delhi in March 2020. He claimed that his medical condition is such that he cannot serve his sentence in jail and must be released from judicial custody.

A single-judge bench of Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma, in its January 24 order, perused a report filed by a medical board of AIIMS, and said that the report is clear on point that medical condition of the appellant is not of a nature that he cannot serve the sentence awarded to him, in the jail."

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
GUWAHATI, NEW DELHI,
JANUARY 26

</

EXPLAINED LAW

ASI opinion on Kashi mosque: legal questions

Report will likely be contested, SC view on 1991 law remains key

AUPRVA VISHWANATH
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL Survey of India (ASI), which was asked to ascertain whether the Gyanvapi mosque was "constructed over a pre-existing structure of a Hindu temple", submitted its report to the Varanasi district court in a sealed cover last month.

Copies of the report were given to both the Hindu litigants — who have claimed that the mosque was built on the site of the original Kashi Vishwanath temple after its destruction in the 17th century — and the Muslim side on Thursday.

The ASI has confirmed that the mosque was built above a pre-existing temple that "had a big central chamber and...at least one chamber to the north, south, east, and west respectively".

How significant is this report in the ongoing litigation over the Kashi Vishwanath temple-Gyanvapi mosque complex?

Expert opinion

The 800-odd-page ASI report would be considered expert evidence that can be contested in court, and need not simply be taken at face value.

The parties in the civil suit will bring witnesses to testify, who will be cross-examined by the other side. Historians, archaeologists, epigraphists, witnesses of facts, and expert witnesses with religious knowledge will be presented before the court.

In the Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhoomi case, the ASI's findings on the use of lime *surkhi* were interpreted differently by the two sides. The Muslim side argued that lime *surkhi* "is a typical material used in Islamic structures". Senior advocate C S Vaidyanathan, who appeared for the Hindu side, contested this, and cited evidence from testimonies of experts.

The Hindu side relied on the depositions of archaeologist Suraj Bhan who said that "it is correct to say that lime water was found to have been used in the 3rd century AD during the Kushana period in Takshashila and Pakistan..."; and archaeologist Dr Jaya Menon who said "...lime mortar was definitely used from Neolithic period."

Court's determination

Essentially, the courts will have to determine, first, whether the ASI report can be relied upon conclusively, and then, what the existence of a Hindu temple means to the religious character of the mosque on August 15, 1947. (*More on this in the next section.*)

An ASI report from 2003 was cited in the Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhoomi suit, and in its 2019 decision, the Supreme Court did not completely rely on it.

"A finding of title cannot be based in law on the archaeological findings which have been arrived at by ASI. Between the twelfth century to which the underlying structure is dated and the construction of the mosque in the sixteenth century, there is an intervening period of four centuries... No evidence is available...on (i) the cause of destruction of the underlying structure; and (ii) whether the pre-existing structure was

demolished for the construction of the mosque. Title to the land must be decided on settled legal principles and applying evidentiary standards which govern a civil trial," the SC had said.

The way forward

First, the preliminary issue of maintainability — whether such a suit can even be filed will have to be conclusively decided by the Supreme Court. This issue, however, rests on the fate of the Places of Worship Act, 1991.

Sections 3 and 4 of the Act, which was enacted in the wake of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement in 1991, essentially declare that the religious character of a place of worship shall continue to be the same as it was on August 15, 1947 — and that no person shall convert any place of worship of any religious denomination into one of a different denomination or section.

The then existing disputed structure in Ayodhya was the sole exception to this law. The ASI report is not material to the title case since the timeline that the 1991 Act sets is the date of Independence.

The Gyanvapi district court has rejected this challenge to the maintainability, and the Supreme Court orally observed in 2022 that "finding the nature of the religious place" is not barred under the Act of 1991. "But the ascertainment of a religious character of a place, as a processual instrument, may not necessarily fall foul of the provisions of Sections 3 and 4 (of the Act)..."

The Supreme Court is yet to hear final arguments to decide the preliminary issue of whether the 1991 Act bars even the filing of such a plea. So far, only oral observations have formed the basis of this argument.

Separately, a constitutional challenge to the 1991 Act — on the grounds that it introduces an artificial timeline — remains pending before the court. In 2019, the SC indicated that the case could be referred to a larger Constitution Bench, but the Centre is yet to file its response.

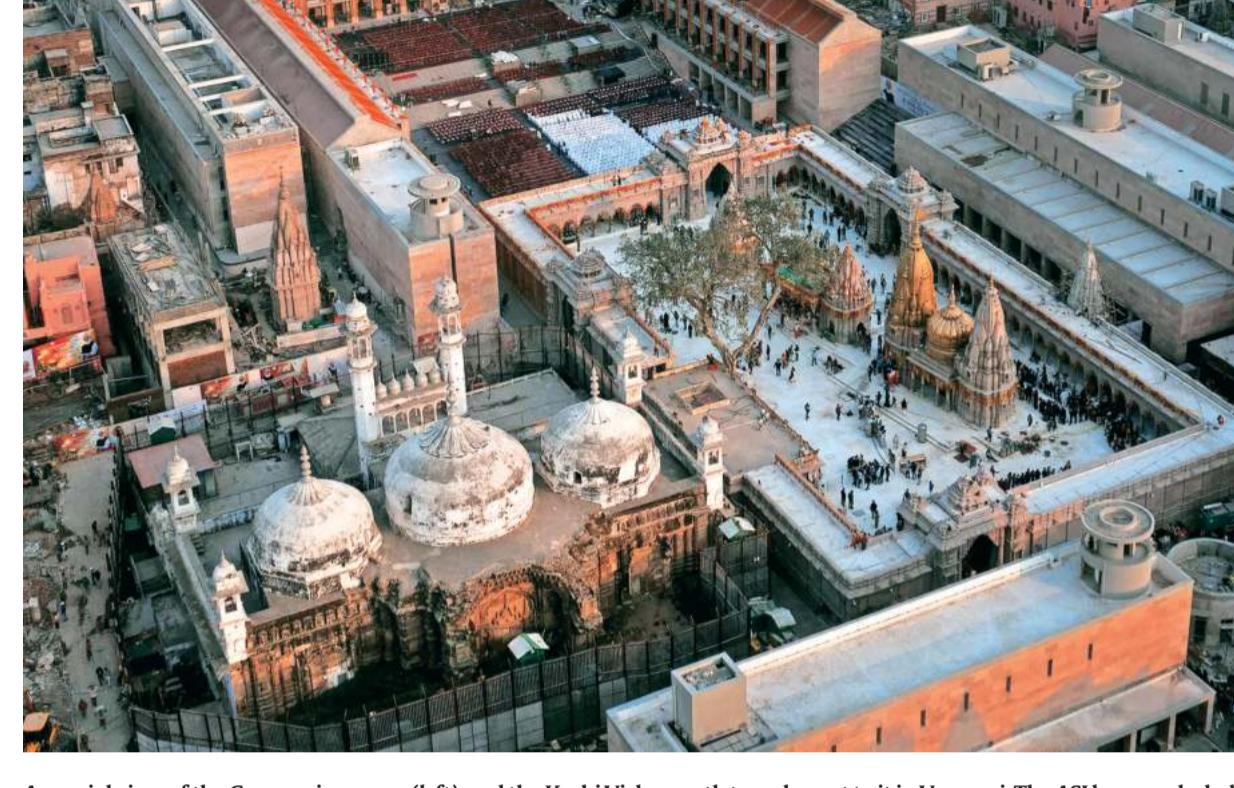
In a situation where the 1991 law ceases to exist — if, for example, the SC strikes it down or if Parliament reviews it — the relevance of the ASI report could change significantly.

In the 2019 Ayodhya judgment, the SC said the 1991 law was "a basic feature of the Constitution".

"The State, by enacting the law, enforced a constitutional commitment and operationalized its constitutional obligations to uphold the equality of all religions and secularism which is a part of the basic features of the Constitution," the court said.

"The Places of Worship Act imposes a non-derogable obligation towards enforcing our commitment to secularism under the Indian Constitution. The law is hence a legislative instrument designed to protect the secular features of the Indian polity, which is one of the basic features of the Constitution," it said.

"Non-retrogression is a foundational feature of the fundamental constitutional principles of which secularism is a core component. The Places of Worship Act is thus a legislative intervention which preserves non-retrogression as an essential feature of our secular values," the court said.



An aerial view of the Gyanvapi mosque (left), and the Kashi Vishwanath temple next to it in Varanasi. The ASI has concluded that there existed a large Hindu temple at the site of the present-day mosque. AP File

The temple that Aurangzeb razed: evidence from history

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL Survey of India (ASI) has concluded that "there existed a large Hindu temple prior to the construction of the existing structure" at the Gyanvapi mosque site in Varanasi. The ASI has said it has relied on "scientific studies and observations"; there is also ample textual evidence that supports its conclusion.

The 1669 farmaan

A temple that stood adjacent to the existing Kashi Vishwanath temple is thought to have been razed on the orders of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, and the Gyanvapi mosque erected on its ruins.

The most popular primary source cited for this is Saqi Mustaid Khan's *Maasir-i-Alamgiri*, a Persian-language chronicle written shortly after Aurangzeb's death in 1707. The ASI report refers to historian Jadunath Sarkar's 1947 translation of the text.

"His Majesty [Aurangzeb], eager to establish Islam, issued orders to the governors of all the provinces to demolish the schools and temples of the infidels, and with the utmost urgency put down the teaching and the public practice of the religion of these misbelievers," says the *Maasir-i-Alamgiri*.

The royal farmaan (decree) issued in Aurangzeb's twelfth regnal year on April 9, 1669 led to the destruction of both the Vishwanath temple in Kashi and the Keshavdev temple in Mathura. Sarkar interpreted this as part of Aurangzeb's larger "attack on Hinduism". (*A Short History of India*)



The ASI refers to Jadunath Sarkar's translation of the *Maasir-i-Alamgiri*

Aurangzib 1618-1707 (1930)

Historian S A A Rizvi wrote that "Aurangzib's reign was marked by a gradual departure from Akbar's policy of coexistence". In 1665, he fixed the customs duty on imports by Hindu traders at double the rate payable by Muslims and, two years later, altogether abolished customs duty for Muslims.

"In January 1669 the wedding of Prince Azam (the third son of Aurangzeb)...offered the Emperor a chance to show his orthodoxy by issuing innumerable puritanical ordinances," Rizvi wrote in *The Wonder That Was India Vol II (1200-1700)* (1987).

"A general order to demolish temples and Hindu centres of learning was issued. The celebrated Visvanatha Temple of Banaras and the Keshava Rai Temple of Mathura, which had been presented with a stone railing by Dara Shukoh, were reduced to ruins. This policy was implemented even in remote East Bengal, Palamau, Rajasthan, and later in the Deccan," Rizvi wrote.

Political motives

Historian Richard Eaton argued that the 1669 farmaan was not a "general order for the immediate destruction of all temples", rather it was "targeted at those institutions where a certain kind of teaching had been taking place". (*Temple Desecration And Indo-Muslim States: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2000).

Eaton pointed to a line from the *Maasir-i-Alamgiri* saying Aurangzeb had learnt that in certain places, "and especially at Benares, the Brahman misbelievers used to teach their false books in their established schools, and that admirers and students both Hindu and Muslim, used to come from great distances to these misguided men..."

Historian Richard Eaton argued that the 1669 farmaan was not a "general order for the immediate destruction of all temples", rather it was "targeted at those institutions where a certain kind of teaching had been taking place". (*Temple Desecration And Indo-Muslim States: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2000).

Eaton pointed to a line from the *Maasir-i-Alamgiri* saying Aurangzeb had learnt that in certain places, "and especially at Benares, the Brahman misbelievers used to teach their false books in their established schools, and that admirers and students both Hindu and Muslim, used to come from great distances to these misguided men..."

Historian Satish Chandra wrote that "Aurangzeb began to look upon temples as centres of spreading subversive ideas, that is, ideas which were not acceptable to the orthodox elements". (*History of Medieval India 800-1700*, 2007)

There is also a theory that Chhatrapati Shivaji's humiliating escape from Mughal custody in Agra, provoked Aurangzeb to order the destruction of the Kashi temple, as retribution.

"In 1669, there arose a rebellion in Benares among landholders, some of whom were suspected of having helped Shivaji, who was Aurangzeb's arch enemy, escape from imperial detention," Eaton wrote.

Historian Audrey Truschke wrote: "Aurangzeb brought the bulk of Benares' Vishwanatha Temple down in 1669. The temple had been built during Akbar's reign by Raja Man Singh, whose great-grandson, Jai Singh, many believed helped Shivaji flee from the Mughal court in 1666." (*Aurangzeb: Life and Legacy of India's Most Controversial King* (2017)).

Chandra agreed that "in case of conflict with local elements, he (Aurangzeb) now considered it legitimate to destroy even long-standing Hindu temples as a measure of punishment and as a warning."

Gyanvapi mosque erected

The mosque at the site of the destroyed temple likely came up in the 1670s or '80s.

"A part of the ruined temple's wall [was] incorporated into the building," Truschke wrote. "This reuse may have been a religiously clothed statement about the dire consequences of opposing Mughal authority."

Unlike the Shahi Eidgah built over the destroyed Mathura temple, the Gyanvapi mosque's patron remains unknown. It does not find mention in Mughal court documents.

The present-day Kashi Vishwanath temple was built next to the mosque by Queen Ahilyabai Holkar in the 18th century.

From 2021 civil suit to 2024 ASI survey report: a timeline

THE DECADES-OLD litigation around the Gyanvapi mosque gained momentum in 2022 after five Hindu women sought the right to worship Maa Shrinagar Gauri on the outer wall of the mosque complex. Here is what has happened since then.

2021

AUGUST: Five Hindu women file the civil suit, arguing that the mosque was built on the original temple's site. The mosque committee challenges the maintainability of the suit citing the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991.

2022

MAY 16: A videographic survey of the complex, carried out by a Commission appointed by the local court, is completed. A structure that the Hindu side claims is a "Shivling" and the Muslim side claims is a "fountain" is found within the mosque premises. Subsequently, the court orders the sealing of the mosque's ablution area.

MAY 20: SC transfers the case to the district judge (from the civil judge); says it will intervene only after the district judge decides on the case's preliminary aspects.

SEPTEMBER: The Varanasi District and Sessions Court dismisses the mosque committee's plea; committee then petitions the Allahabad HC.

OCTOBER: Varanasi district court rejects Hindu petitioners' plea for a scientific survey and carbon dating of the "Shivling"; they approach Allahabad HC.

NOVEMBER 11: The SC extends interim direction securing area of the complex where the "Shivling" was found, without restricting the rights of Muslims to access the mosque and offer namaz.

2023

MAY: The Allahabad HC orders a "scientific survey", including carbon dating, to determine the age of the "Shivling".

JULY 21: A Varanasi district court asks for a "scientific investigation/survey/excavation" of the mosque premises by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), directing it to "find out...whether the [present structure] has been constructed over a pre-existing structure of a Hindu temple."

JULY 24: The SC orders an interim stay on the survey after being petitioned by the mosque committee.

JULY 25: The mosque committee moves the Allahabad HC against the district court's order.

AUGUST 3: The Allahabad HC dismisses the pleas filed by the Muslim side. The ASI survey resumes a day later.

DECEMBER 11: The Varanasi district court grants the ASI one more week to submit its survey findings. The ASI complies.

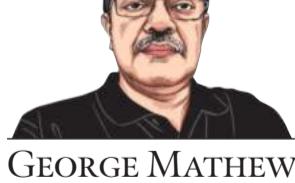
DECEMBER 19: The Allahabad HC dismisses the Muslim side's challenge to a 1991 case related to the Gyanvapi complex claiming that the Muslim community had illegally occupied the property.

2024

JANUARY 25: Court hands over ASI report to the Hindu and Muslim sides.

KHADIJA KHAN

Why 100% cashless system could be a health insurance game-changer



GEORGE MATHEW

FROM THURSDAY, all general and health insurance companies have begun to offer 100% cashless treatment to their policyholders.

The step, which has been initiated by the insurance regulator Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), is expected to boost insurance penetration in the country, and make things easier for policyholders and hospitals by getting rid of delays and disputes that are often seen during the processing of reimbursement claims.

How will the system work?

Essentially, the policy holder can get treatment in any hospital of their choosing without having to put down any money upfront, even if this hospital is not in the network of the insurance company that has issued the policy.

The insurer will pay the hospital on discharge, according to the terms of the policy.

The General Insurance Council, the apex body of general insurers, which is coordinating the "Cashless Everywhere" system, has said the customer should intimate the insurance company at least 48 hours ahead of admission to hospital for a planned procedure.

"For emergency treatment, the customer should intimate the insurance company within 48 hours of admission. The claim should be admissible as per the terms of the policy and the cashless facility should be admissible as per the operating guidelines of the insurance company," the GI Council said.

Segar Sampathkumar, director of health insurance, GI Council, said the 100% cashless system will be backed up by a technological platform with the aid of the National Health Authority (NHA), the body that is responsible for implementing Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, the central government's flagship public health insurance/assurance scheme.

Apart from a tech platform, the new system also needs significant standardisation of rates and services.

What is the currently existing situation?

The cashless facility has so far been avail-

able only at hospitals where the insurance company has an agreement or tie-up. If the policy holder goes to a hospital where the in-

surer does not have a tie-up, she has to pay out of her pocket, and then file a claim with the insurer for reimbursement. Policy hold-

ers in rural and semi-rural areas find it especially difficult to access network hospitals for cashless treatment.

Hospitals often ask for hefty deposits to begin treatment. If the bill is high, many patients struggle to raise funds, and could end up borrowing at exorbitant rates of interest. The reimbursement process can take weeks, and lead to difficulties and frustrations for the

The Indian **EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

BUILDING ON TRUST

Modi-Macron meet frames strengthening ties between traditional allies. Collaboration will be crucial to stability

PRESIDENT EMMANUEL MACRON'S two-day visit — he was chief guest at the country's 75th Republic Day function — has reinforced France's special place in India's strategic calculus. The partnership underlined during PM Modi's visit last year to France, is built on three pillars — deepening cooperation in defence, sustained engagement in global issues, especially in emerging and green technologies, and people-to-people contact. These have emerged stronger after Modi-Macron talks in the past two days. The two countries have adopted a roadmap for defence industrial production. This cooperation aims to create supply chains that fulfil Delhi's security needs and provide it with the necessary bandwidth to negotiate partnerships with other countries. The pacts on clean energy and technology take forward the engagement begun on the sidelines of the Paris Climate Pact in 2015 — the International Solar Alliance, an expanding club of nations, is amongst the most tangible outcomes of this collaboration. In 2021, the two signed a memorandum on green hydrogen, which aims "to bring the French and Indian hydrogen ecosystems together." Macron's reiteration of his last year's commitment to increase the number of students studying in France to 30,000 and give them attractive post-study work visas will also go down well in a country undergoing an educational churn. The Alliance Francaise network will also be strengthened — this will be particularly welcomed by Indian students who often find language a barrier in accessing French higher education institutes, 35 of which find place in the QS ratings.

In recent years, India has inched closer to Washington. France, too, acknowledges the US's place in the global order. At the same time, the traditional importance that Paris attaches to its strategic autonomy vis-a-vis Washington has earned Delhi's trust, especially after the French government refused to toe the dominant Western line after India's nuclear tests in 1998. France recognised India's strategic importance at a time when other Western powers turned their back on it. In 2019, France blocked China from raising the Kashmir issue at the UN Security Council after the abrogation of Article 370. French domestic procedures on defence deals have made the country a reliable defence partner. While pacts with the US are dogged by unpredictability due to Congressional interventions and export control regimes, French deals have no such strings attached.

Modi and Macron also exchanged perspectives on Gaza, Red Sea turmoil and conflict in Ukraine. In recent months, it has become clear that peace in these theatres of conflict will require a multi-pronged effort. The Red Sea is a significant conduit for Indo-European trade and the frailties of a US-led defence against the Houthi attacks are already evident. With Trump's return to the White House becoming imminent, fears that the US will be a less engaged player on the global stage may not be unfounded. Indo-French collaboration could be among the keys to ensuring stability in a complex geopolitical environment.

STOOPING LOW

Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan's swipe at Fali Nariman is a low blow, more so because he should know better

KERALA GOVERNOR ARIF Mohammed Khan's remarks, in response to criticism by (retired) Supreme Court judge Justice Rohinton Nariman for holding up bills in the state, are low blows. They ill behove the high constitutional office that Governor Khan holds. Speaking at a public event on Wednesday, the governor pointed to Justice Nariman's father, the eminent advocate and jurist, Fali Nariman, being employed by the Pinarayi Vijayan government for legal advice and alleged a conflict of interest. Justice Nariman's comments over the governor's "wholesale reference of bills to the President after sitting on 23 bills without a decision", he suggested, had to do with the fee paid to his father for legal opinions given to the government.

It is not as if Justice Rohinton's criticism was his alone. For some time now, Governor Khan has been engaged in a very visible and very unseemly tussle with the Pinarayi government. And while both sides have failed to abide by norms of civility in their frequent run-ins, the growing belligerence between the government and Raj Bhawan has hurt the governor's office particularly. It has also drawn a sharp rebuke from the Supreme Court. After the Kerala government moved the top court, a bench headed by CJI DY Chandrachud asked: "What was the governor doing for two years sitting on the bills?" But this is not just a story of a governor with a thin skin. His drawing of Fali Nariman into the disagreement with his son is outrageous, also, for the disrespect it shows to one of the country's most distinguished constitutional experts, seen by many, because of his formidable body of work, as the conscience-keeper of the court. And because Governor Khan, especially, should know a thing or two about heeding the call of conscience. He is, after all, the politician who famously went against the current, took a stand and resigned from his position as minister of state, protesting against the Rajiv Gandhi government's dismal somersault on the Shah Bano case in 1986.

For Governor Khan to stoop to make a point, therefore, is a terrible let-down. He needs to urgently mend relations with the government so that he can better fulfil his role as the custodian of constitutionalism in the state. Lashing out at critics and criticism, and making bad faith arguments while doing so, is an unnecessary and unflattering diversion from the onerous task at hand.

TENDER AT THE BONE

Butter chicken is a legend. Does it matter who got to it first?

BUTTER CHICKEN CAN be many things to many people. It can be a taste of home or a sinful indulgence; a weightwatcher's bane or a foreigner's foray into a new, vaunted cuisine. As it turns out, it can also be a bitter bone of contention, capable of simmering for years and dragging colleagues-turned-foes to court. The fight between Delhi restaurants Moti Mahal and Daryaganj over the ownership of butter chicken has now moved into legal territory. With Moti Mahal filing a trademark violation suit against Daryaganj, Delhi High Court is set to be the arbiter of who got to the coveted recipe first.

The dish's disputed legacy harks back to the moment of Partition. Moti Mahal claims that in the 1930s, leftover pieces of tandoori chicken at their original restaurant in Peshawar had been given a new lease of life by owner Kundan Lal Gujral, who cooked it in a decadent gravy of butter, tomatoes, cream and spices. It had amassed such a following of its own that when the Gujrals moved to India in 1947, butter chicken remained on the menu of their new outlet in Delhi's Daryaganj, where they were joined by Kundan Lal Jaggi in the kitchen. Jaggi's relatives, proprietors of Daryaganj restaurant, claim that this gives them trademark rights over the dish.

The fight over ownership is likely to linger on — the next hearing has been scheduled for May. But shorn of its commercial consequences, the dispute is an indication of the charged sentiments that food, especially as storied as butter chicken, with a fan following among prime ministers and visiting heads of states, actors and commoners, evokes. Family recipes and star dishes in restaurants rely equally on acts of collaboration and moments of inspiration in the kitchen. They signal a continuity of tradition, but also a hint of distinction that sets them apart, makes memories out of them. The butter chicken has long passed that test. It remains a legend. Does it really matter who got to it first?



RAJANI SINHA

THE UNION BUDGET will be presented at a time when India's economic landscape appears to be relatively stable. GDP growth has been robust, inflation is moderating, the current account deficit is narrowing and corporate results have been healthy. This is not to deny concerns around a weak revival in consumption demand, feeble private investment and global economic uncertainties. Hence, this year's budget becomes important in terms of the policy direction it provides for sustained economic growth.

However, as the national elections will be held in a few months from now, the finance minister will present an interim budget, rather than a comprehensive annual budget. With the likely announcement of election dates around mid-March, the model code of conduct will come into effect, barring the government from announcing any policy decisions. Hence no major policy announcements are expected in the upcoming interim budget. Yet, it is important because we could get some sense of policy direction, especially if the BJP is voted back to office.

The following are five areas that we feel would be critical from the budget's perspective in terms of setting the government's priorities and policy focus.

First, moving towards fiscal consolidation. India's general government debt to GDP was at 82 per cent of GDP in 2022-23, with interest payments at around 17 per cent of the total expenditure. This leaves limited scope for more productive government spending. Hence, it is very important that the government continues to focus on fiscal consolidation and move towards a sustainable debt trajectory. We expect the government to broadly achieve the fiscal deficit target laid out for 2023-24. Robust direct tax collections and higher dividend transfers from the Reserve Bank of India and public sector undertakings are likely to compensate for lower divestment this year. With healthy tax buoyancy, we ex-

The quality of growth

Interim budget should provide a sense of policy direction, especially on equity and sustainability

pect a budgeted fiscal deficit target of 5.3 per cent for 2024-25 as the government moves forward on the glide path of achieving a fiscal deficit of 4.5 per cent for 2025-26.

Second, continuing focus on capital expenditure. Post the pandemic the government has increasingly used capital expenditure as a means of propelling growth. The government capex to GDP ratio is budgeted to increase to 3.4 per cent in 2023-24. The government in the last two years has also budgeted for interest-free loans amounting to Rs 2.3 trillion to state governments for capital expenditure. Given the strong multiplier effect of capex on growth, the focus on capex is likely to continue next year as well. We expect the capex to grow by 10 per cent to around Rs 11 trillion, with a continued focus on infrastructure.

Third, the need to spur consumption. The revival in consumption has been relatively weak and appears to be skewed towards the upper-income category. While GDP is estimated to grow by a strong 7.3 per cent this year (as per advance estimates), consumption growth is estimated at only 4.4 per cent. The government has been focussing on capex-led growth, but it is equally important for consumption to pick up. A revival in domestic demand becomes even more critical given the poor external demand scenario. Even while being cognisant of the fiscal limitations, there is a need to come up with measures to spur consumption demand. For instance, a small cut in excise duty on petrol/diesel by Rs 2-3/litre will provide some fillip to consumption and help contain inflation, without significantly disturbing the fiscal mathematics.

Fourth, increased spending on human capital. India is in a unique position of enjoying a large working-age population at a time when most economies are struggling with an ageing population. However, for the economy to enjoy the demographic dividend, the government must invest in human capital. This requires a significantly higher expenditure on health, education and skilling so that the working-age population is equipped to be meaningfully employed.

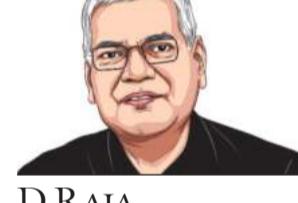
health, education and skilling so that the working-age population is equipped to be meaningfully employed. The general government spending on social services (primarily health and education) has been budgeted to increase to 8.3 per cent of GDP in 2022-23 from 6.7 per cent in 2017-18. However, this compares poorly with some of our global peers. For instance, for many European countries, government spending on social services is more than one-fifth of GDP. Given that a large part of India's population is dependent on the government for these services, it is critical to increase the spending on these services.

Fifth, a focus on agriculture and the rural sector. Rural India is home to 65 per cent of the country's population and has a large dependence on the agriculture sector. Agriculture productivity in terms of GVA (gross value added) is a third of that in China and around 1 per cent of that in the US. Measures to improve productivity in the sector will help improve rural incomes. This could be done through the adoption of the latest technology and by boosting rural infrastructure. Appropriate skilling of the rural workforce and enabling them to move to the manufacturing and services sectors will also help to reduce the large reliance of the rural workforce on the farm sector. India cannot sustain its growth story with its rural areas in distress. Hence, focused attention on improving rural health is the need of the hour.

Apart from the broad areas listed above, many others warrant attention. For instance, the need to create an enabling environment for businesses to thrive, the focus on environment-related issues, and the upliftment of the marginalised section of society are some other issues to watch out for in the budget.

This is the time to focus on the quality of growth. To ensure that it is equitable, sustainable and green.

The writer is Chief Economist, CareEdge



D RAJA

REPLACING THE colonial Government of India Act, 1935, the Indian Constitution formally came into effect on January 26, 1950. That day declared to the world and to its own citizens that India chooses to be a modern, secular, democratic, republic embodying the universal ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Yet, in 2024, the Republic Day that commemorates the genesis of modern democratic India comes days after the Ram temple consecration event in Ayodhya, blessed by the ruling dispensation, the Prime Minister and the entire Cabinet.

Moving across the national capital, one is inundated with saffron flags etched with Ram's pictures, in many places as a replacement for the tricolour — the fulfilment of one aspect of the political project of the Sangh Parivar. Looking at India in 2024, B R Ambedkar would have been deeply worried at the irreparable impairment done to its constitutional vision. The Ram temple consecration being led by the head of the government is a move intended to unravel secularism from the tapestry of the constitutional values that have sustained India as a democracy in progress. Hinduism, marked and built around the idea of hierarchy in the form of graded inequality, is fast replacing the fundamental tenets of our Preamble. "We the people" are sought to be segregated and otherised by the imminent might of the state.

The demolition of the Babri mosque, in the words of the Supreme Court, was executed by egregiously violating the rule of law. After that violation, India is now witnessing the breach of a sacred line. The very republic is mandated by the Constitution to separate itself from religion.

People's faith has been

weaponised by the RSS-BJP combine in pursuit of a vengeful vision of India.

IN NAYA BHARAT

With PM at Ayodhya, constitutional promise of secularism is broken

itself from religion. People's faith has been weaponised by the RSS-BJP combine in pursuit of a vengeful vision of India.

A little history lesson is useful here. When Somnath temple was being consecrated, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, C Rajagopalachari, and S Radhakrishnan reached out to the then President of India Rajendra Prasad not to attend the consecration ceremony. Nehru specially wrote to Prasad that there was no problem if the President of India visited any shrine but cautioned that his visit to a special event like the consecration ceremony would, in effect, come to mean the lending of state's legitimacy and subscription to one particular religion, setting an unfair and dangerous precedent. Prasad claimed that he would participate in his personal capacity and not as President of India. However, Nehru, Rajagopalachari, and Radhakrishnan made it clear that none would accept the narrative that the office of the President of India can be separated from his personal capacity in the context of special religious functions. In this Naya Bharat, this distinction doesn't matter.

Plotting through this disregard for the Constitution, Modi continues to pay lip service to Ambedkar. There remains an attempt to reduce Ambedkar to being an empty signifier by decoupling him from his ideas of equality, justice, and emancipation. Ambedkar, in his draft Constitution, provided that the state would have no religion and any call for comprehensively boycotting minorities in India would be treated as a cognisable offence. He also prescribed in the draft that the future legislature of India would have to

frame a law for stringently punishing those who would commit the crime of leading people to boycott minorities from social and economic domains. Ambedkar would have been disturbed to see the sense of justice of the state so compromised. For, it was Ambedkar who said that the cultivation of constitutional morality by citizens was imperative for the success of the working of the Constitution itself. Yet, under the aegis of this regime, we are witnessing a reversal.

The government wilfully ignores the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal history of the Subcontinent and replaces it with myths, wishful claims, and unscientific temperament. Here it is worthwhile to recall Ambedkar's call to the people of the nation to resist and fight against the calamity of the Hindu Rashtra. Some revel in empty signifiers of statues, temples, life-size banners, beautification of the city by physically covering up the poor and their dwellings, changing the name of cities, and peddling pseudo-science and history. On the other hand remain those who continue to raise fundamental and objective concerns regarding record high unemployment, the commodification of education, increasing brute as well as institutionalised violence against women, especially Dalit and Adivasi women, decrease in women's workforce participation, accelerated gigification of employment, and the theft of commons. Time and history are pressuring upon all to mobilise our collective will and political courage, to uphold the constitutional fabric of our country.

The writer is general secretary, CPI



JANUARY 27, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

REPUBLIC DAY PARADE

AN UNIMPRESSIVE FLY-PAST in contrast to the colourful spectacle of marching columns, dancing troupes and tableaux marked the Republic Day parade celebrations in the Capital. Heroes were celebrated and martyrs remembered. The customary silence was observed at the Amar Jawan Jyoti at India Gate as Mrs Gandhi wearing a yellow sari with a gold and rust border and a brown coat, laid a wreath for the dead soldiers.

FARMER ARRESTS

THE INDEFINITE RAIL and rasta roko agitation called by the Karnataka Farmers

Association went off peacefully except in Chikmagalur district where police fired tear-gas shells and resorted to lathi charge to disperse stone-throwing farmers. Reports said 8,000 people had been arrested in various parts of the state. An association spokesman said 10,000 farmers had been arrested.

AKALI ACTION PLAN

THE AKALI DAL high command at an informal meeting reportedly finalised the new action plan which would be officially announced by party president Harchand Singh Longowal. Under the plan, farmers were likely to be asked to deposit their land revenue with the highest seat of the Sikh religion, the Akal Takht.

instead of paying it to the government. The Akali circles said this would strengthen the morcha and the Akali leadership.

IRS CONTROVERSY

A UNION CABINET minister has thrown a spanner in the promotion list of income tax commissioners by reportedly supporting the candidature of a person way below in the eligibility list leading to a commotion in the entire Indian Revenue Service. A spate of writ petitions have been filed in the high courts all over the country, over the reported super-session. The writs have been filed even though the cabinet appointment committee has yet to clear the promotion list.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Inauguration, not closure

At Ayodhya, PM Modi used new vectors of language to articulate Hindu supremacy. But to see temple consecration as a decisive victory of Hindu theocracy would be an overstatement



ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

SYMBOLICALLY AND DISCOURSIVELY, the consecration of a Ram temple in Ayodhya has dealt a monumental blow to India's constitutional republic. Legally and politically, however, the construction of a Hindu state remains unfinished, and it may not come about. This paradox needs to be understood and explained.

Consider, first, how the consecration represented not only a fusion of the state and religion, but also a union of the state with the majority religion, something that India's Constitution-makers explicitly fought against and forbade. Even the ghastly violence of Partition, which accompanied the birth of a Muslim homeland in 1947, did not convince the Constitution-makers that post-Independence India should be a Hindu homeland. The Constitution-makers were firmly committed to the idea of religious neutrality of the state and religious equality of citizens.

Such high principles are not easy to practice in politics, in India or elsewhere, which inevitably raises the question of how one should evaluate political practice. In some circles, it is said that Indian secularism, presented as religious neutrality of the state, was an empty shell even under pre-Narendra Modi governments. All that PM Modi has done is taken the pretence away.

This argument is wrong. Political practice is normally not analysed in binary terms ("yes or no"). It is appraised on a scale ("more or less"). We judge whether the practice has been close to the ideal (1) or to its opposite (0). Thus, it is plausible to argue that in the pre-2014 era of Indian politics, the principle of religious neutrality was never fully executed, just as we can legitimately say that the idea of equality was not fully practised in the US or France, despite a constitutional commitment to it. The important thing is that, in India, the principle of religious neutrality was not abandoned for over seven decades, and was in fact repeatedly made the yardstick for judging state practice, just as ethnic, racial or religious equality was often the touchstone of evaluating state conduct in the US or France. The Ayodhya consecration has changed all that. It is not just a practical deviation from a normative practice. It has fully invalidated the principle of the state's religious neutrality.

For illustration, ask a simple question. Can a Prime Minister lead a ceremony of religious consecration? To consecrate, according to the dictionary, means "to make or declare sacred". That is typically done by a "holy" or religious figure. The very idea of a politician leading a consecration ceremony in modern times would be abhorrent to most religious leaders and theologians. But that was precisely the point. Regardless of what the Shankaracharyas or the scholars said, the Prime Minister led the consecration. For him and his organisation, it was unquestionably a political project.

Though Hinduism, unlike Catholicism, does not have a clearly established ecclesiastical hierarchy and, a bit like Protestantism,



it is highly decentralised, the four Shankaracharyas, in the Sanatani tradition, are nonetheless viewed as epitomising the summit of Hinduism's religious establishment. If they had led the consecration, it would have been a purely religious event. They were entirely absent.

Moreover, the consecration was not simply a union of the state and religion. The most political aspect of the pious event was the fusing of the state with the religion of the majority, the Hindus. Given the RSS's century-long commitment to restoring Hindu dominance in India, which the 1950 Constitution denied, a Constitution which the RSS explicitly disowned, January 22 was aimed at taking a massive step towards a Hindu *rashtra*, or what many comparative scholars would call Hindu supremacy. Modi used new vectors of language — such as *Dev se desh* (divinity to nationhood) and *Ram se rashtra ki chetna ka vistaar* (Ram as a mode of the spread of national consciousness) — to articulate Hindu supremacy.

But to see Ayodhya as a decisive victory of Hindu theocracy, or as the establishment of a Hindu nation, would be an overstatement. The term "Hindu theocracy" does not make sense without a clear dominance of the Hindu religious establishment. It is the political establishment of Hindu nationalism that dominated January 22, not the Shankaracharyas. And it is the RSS which will most probably dominate a possible Hindu *rashtra* in the future, not the religious heads.

Equally important, a Hindu nation will require legal changes, which codify Hindu supremacy and reduce Muslims, the key contestants in Ayodhya and the prime object of Hindu nationalist ire, to second class citizenship. Politically speaking, given the key ideological arguments of Hindu nationalism, Hindu primacy and Muslim marginalisation are two sides of the same coin. While January 22 is a monumental step towards Hindu primacy, the project still lacks legal foundations.

The consecration was not simply a union of the state and religion. The most political aspect of the pious event was the fusing of the state with the religion of the majority, the Hindus. Given the RSS's century-long commitment to restoring Hindu dominance in India, which the 1950 Constitution denied, a Constitution which the RSS explicitly disowned, January 22 was aimed at taking a massive step towards a Hindu *rashtra*, or what many comparative scholars would call Hindu supremacy.

Legally, the biggest step thus far has been the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). India's original Citizenship Act (1955) contained no religious distinction. But the CAA said that all, except Muslim, immigrants from the neighbouring Muslim-majority countries were eligible for citizenship. A National Registry of Citizens (NRC) was to follow the CAA, and its aim was to deny citizenship to those who did not have the right ancestry papers. Hindus without such papers would not lose citizenship, for the CAA could provide a cover. But a Muslim documentary deficit would be legally fatal, for the CAA could not help them. Losing citizenship can lead to disenfranchisement and possibly loss of welfare benefits. In India, only citizens can vote, and generally speaking, if not always, only citizens can receive state-mandated benefits.

The CAA has not been operationalised yet, nor has the NRC been announced as a central government policy. The biggest obstacle is federalism. The BJP not only has to win national elections, bring about legal changes through the national parliament and have them constitutionally approved by the judiciary, but it also needs to win many more states. States have the biggest machinery for policy implementation in India. If they don't cooperate, many central legislations will simply fail. In economic policy, this problem is well-known. Delhi-legislated land reforms in the 1950s and nationalisation of grain trade in 1973 faltered on the bedrock of state resistance.

India will be a Hindu state if the BJP wins central and most state elections. Elections and politics thus remain critical to India's future. Ayodhya is not a Hindu nationalist closure. It is simply a very big start.

The writer is Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and the Social Sciences at Brown University, where he also directs the Saxena Center for Contemporary South Asia at the Watson Institute

A political ratna

Honour to Karpoori Thakur is a shrewd move, costless yet offering multiple gains



SATISH DESHPANDE

PERHAPS, IT IS only coincidence that the Union government's announcement of the Bharat Ratna to the late Karpoori Thakur came the day after the spectacular inauguration of a temple at Ayodhya. After all, the legendary Bihar backward-caste leader's birth centenary fell on January 24, and the announcement of national awards usually happens a few days before Republic Day. Even otherwise, it is quite plausible that the date for the *pran pratishtha* — a far more important event for this government — was decided independently. But it is no coincidence that both events are part of the lead-up to the imminent Lok Sabha elections.

Whether it was by accident or by design, the juxtaposition of these two events invites attention to the central question facing our polity today: Will the almost-successful Hindutva agenda seal its victory by co-opting and engulfing the social justice agenda? Or, put more bluntly, will the campaign to manufacture (and weaponise) a newly homogenised Hindu identity manage to overcome the hierarchical hatreds of Hindu caste?

The question is important and must not be treated as already answered (despite claims to the contrary) because the Hindutva agenda, at this point, remains dependent on state power. Another 10 or even five years of control over state organs may be enough to future-proof it. But as of today, elections remain the only durable and legitimate route to state power, and therefore numbers — in the shape of electoral majorities — matter. So far, the only tried

and trusted constituency for Hindutva are the Hindu "upper" castes, who have been, and remain, an electoral and demographic minority. It is the so-called lower-caste Hindus who have the numbers and are, therefore, key to an electoral majority. Cobbling together such a majority is not easy because electoral politics demands at least a minimally credible rhetoric of implicit equality, whereas the institution of caste is all about the reproduction of explicit inequalities.

To make matters worse, the broad segments of the caste spectrum may allow the blurring of older internal distinctions but remain committed to guarding their external boundaries. As is well known, the middle castes are actively oppressing the bottom castes across India today, but rivalries and resentments between the top and middle, or the top and bottom have hardly disappeared, despite temporary local alliances. Finally, none of these caste segments is homogeneous or singular, with many fractions within them, which in turn allows for complex strategies of electoral alliance-building by poaching existing coalitions to build new ones.

The Bharat Ratna to Thakur is a shrewd move because it is costless and yet offers multiple gains. It appropriates some of the ideological capital of RJD and JD(U), given that Thakur was the political elder brother of both Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad. It reminds all the current players that both these leaders (especially Lalu Prasad) climbed to power on Thakur's shoulders — and at his expense. Third, it amplifies the Bharatiya Janata Party's

claims of representing the interests of the backward castes elsewhere, without ceding anything substantial to them. But even a cursory look at the actual political agenda that Thakur pursued as a leader in the 1970s will bring out the glaring contrasts with what the BJP is trying to do today. In the statements about the award, Thakur is praised for his integrity and his pioneering role in expanding reservation policy beyond the then constitutional bounds of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes through a disaggregated distribution of benefits to different caste clusters. It is this policy of the sub-division of the backward caste quota (rejected by the Mandal Commission) that has been revived in the post-Mandal phase of UP-Bihar politics.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that if a Bharat Ratna were to be awarded for the advancement of backward castes, then Devaraj Urs, the father of today's *viksit Karnataka*, and its chief minister in the 1970s, would arguably be a better candidate. Breaking the stranglehold on power of the dominant Lingayat and Vokkaliga caste-conglomerates, Urs pioneered a development-centric social justice agenda that prioritised land reform over reservation, though he was also a vigorous proponent of the latter. His politics certainly involved compromises, concessions and corruption, but he built alliances between Muslims, backward castes and Dalits without preaching hatred towards any community.

The writer is a visiting professor at the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"In recent times, there have been signals from top officials in India indicating a desire to ease tensions with China. We hope this signifies India's recognition of the broader situation... 'Openness' requires not only widespread publicity but also concrete actions, and what India needs is action." — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

Temple for Viksit Bharat

January 22 is not about Hindu triumphalism. It's an inspiration in the country's journey to the future



RAM RAJYA
RAM MADHAV

trembled nor overwhelmed by the mighty task. Instead, he exhorted in his address that "January 22, 2024, is not a mere date on the calendar, it is the origin of a new *kaal chakra* — wheel of time".

Modi's address was full of confidence and optimism about the glorious future that lay ahead for this nation. He talked not about a century, but a millennium. *Dev* (divine) to *desh* (country) and *Ram* to *rashtra* (nation) were the euphemisms he used to exhort countrymen that the time has come for them to move ahead from the temple and build a "strong, capable, grand and divine India". He insisted that the country will reach the goal of prosperity by following the path of purity as well as the pursuit of modernity. "This grand Ram temple will become a witness to the rise of Viksit Bharat (developed Bharat)," he confidently exclaimed.

As Modi was pronouncing his dream of Viksit Bharat from the ramparts of the Ayodhya temple came the news that the stock market had scaled up to overtake the Hong Kong stock exchange and become the world's number four. A day later, the HSBC survey projected the Indian economy to be on a very strong footing. Another report concluded that "Indian equity markets generate strong returns across time periods" and "India's growth story remains strong — expected to be the third largest economy by FY2028".

For some critics, January 22 marks the arrival of Hindu supremacy. This flawed view existed even at the time of our Independence. Consecrating the temple at Somanath on May 11, 1951, Rajendra Prasad, then President of India, clarified that the restoration shouldn't be seen only as an attempt at rectifying history. "Our only aim here is to proclaim anew our attachment to the faith, convictions and values on which our religion has rested since immemorial ages," he explained, a sentiment that aptly reflects today's situation. He also reminded the nation that the great truth that Sanatan Dharma proclaims is that every individual should have full independence and opportunities for rising to the highest glory of life.

Whether it was Rajendra *babu* then or Narendra Modi now, the emphasis was on using the sacred symbol of the restored historic temple to infuse "new life into the Temple of Prosperity of our people". Building a prosperous Bharat requires humongous effort and tremendous unity. A \$5 trillion economy may make Bharat the third largest in the world, yet not the most prosperous. To become truly *viksit* requires a much bigger economic clout, which the Prime Minister wants the nation to achieve by its centenary.

There cannot be a better way to explain Modi's *Viksit Bharat* dream than turning once again to Rajendra *babu*'s words of wisdom seven decades ago: "In my view, the restoration of this temple of Somanath would be complete, not on the day when a fine building would have been constructed on these foundations, but when we raise the level of our culture to such a degree that if a modern Al Biruni sees our country, he would express himself about our culture in the same eloquent terms in which, a thousand years ago, Al Biruni had expressed himself about the India of his day".

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the RSS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ON REPUBLIC DAY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Republic restated' (IE, January 26). While the call for a "second republic" and "relocation" seems alluring, it's imperative to remember the bedrock of our nation: the Constitution. The rise of social unrest, the shrinking space for the opposition, and the potential loss of humility in victory all point towards a deviation from the path our founding fathers envisioned. Therefore on this Republic Day, let us also reaffirm the fundamental values that bind us together.

Kaninika Sarkar, Bengaluru

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Republic restated' (IE, January 26). PM Modi's conflation of *dev* with *desh*, and *Ram* with *rashtra* has the effect of changing the vocabulary of political narratives. It also has the potential to homogenise the diversity within Hinduism. Similarly, the Union Cabinet resolution claimed that while the "body" of the country attained independence in 1947, the "soul" was infused through the *pran pratishtha* of Ram Mandir could be misconstrued to convey that the Constitution that guided the us for 75 years was soulless. Regardless of how we understand the idea of the republic, it must be in tandem with the egalitarian ideals enshrined in the Constitution.

SS Paul, Nadia

PM MODI'S PROMISE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The promise of Ram Rajya' (IE, January 26). The BJP is sure to use the Ram temple issue to garner votes in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. However, the PM, inspired by the principles of governance set by Lord Ram, said that "Ram rajya" in its true sense has dawned on India. He said that previous governments lacked *niyati*, *niti*, and *nishtha* (intent, attitude, and dedication). He also said the "garibi hatao" slogan had been a mere slogan for decades. But the Ram temple alone is not going to bring "Ram rajya" in the country. One hopes the PM will walk the talk.

GUARD INSTITUTIONS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Old, new, cautious optimism' (IE, January 26). Beyond the dialectical past and present, the synergy between both is also necessary. The Ram temple consecration had the presence of a wide variety of groups. The Chief Guest of the Republic Day celebrations is French President Emmanuel Macron, as a sign of goodwill and friendship between the nations. The glue holding it together is the various institutions and processes like the elections and timely trials that must be safeguarded and improved.

Anany Mishra, Bhilai

10

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, SATURDAY, JANUARY 27, 2024

TOP OF THE WORLD



Farmers on roads around Paris, Saturday, AP

FRANCE

Farmers encircle Paris, govt drops subsidy cut plans

Paris: The French government dropped plans to gradually reduce state subsidies on agricultural diesel as angry farmers surrounded Paris and threatened to converge on the capital in their tractors. After two weeks of protests that have spread across France, with irate farmers on Friday blocking a major highway out of Paris, Prime Minister Gabriel Attal announced a series of measures to ease financial and administrative pressure on farmers. "We will stop this planned trajectory of increasing tax on non-road diesel fuel," said Attal on the first crisis of his premiership. **REUTERS**

IRAQ

US set to start talks on calling back troops

Washington: The United States and Iraq will begin talks soon to wind down the mission of a U.S.-led military coalition formed to fight the Islamic State group in Iraq, both governments said Thursday. The Pentagon said the size of the U.S. military footprint in the country will be part of the discussions. The announcement comes as U.S. forces in Iraq have been increasingly targeted by Iran-backed militias, though the U.S. says the talks were first discussed last year and the timing is not related to the attacks. **AP**

RUSSIA

Court extends detention of reporter 'spy'

Moscow: A court in Moscow Friday extended the pretrial detention of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, arrested on espionage charges, until the end of March, meaning the journalist will spend at least a year behind bars in Russia. United States Consul General Stuart Wilson attended the hearing at Lefortovo District Court, which took place behind closed doors because authorities say details of the criminal case against the American journalist are classified. **AP**

GERMANY

Bolsonaro's intel chief probed over political spying

Rio De Janeiro: Brazil's federal police are investigating the country's former intelligence chief as part of a wider probe into alleged spying on political opponents under former President Jair Bolsonaro, court records showed Thursday. The former intelligence chief, Alexandre Ramagem, was among those targeted by the 21 search warrants that the Supreme Court authorized and that were carried out by police early Thursday morning. Police are investigating an "organized crime" group that operated within the intelligence agency. **AP**

THE WORLD

COURT KEEPS SOUTH AFRICA'S CASE ON PALESTINIAN RIGHTS ALIVE

ICJ says Israel must prevent genocide in Gaza, but doesn't call for ceasefire

Demand to halt military action 'justly rejected', says Netanyahu

REUTERS
THE HAGUE, JANUARY 26

THE WORLD Court ordered Israel on Friday to prevent acts of genocide against the Palestinians and do more to help civilians, although it stopped short of ordering a ceasefire as requested by the plaintiff South Africa.

While the ruling denied Palestinian hopes of a binding order to halt the war in Gaza, it also represented a legal setback for Israel, which had hoped to throw out a case brought under the genocide convention established in the ashes of the Holocaust.

The court found that there was a case to be heard about whether Palestinian rights were being denied in a war it said was causing grievous humanitarian harm. It also called for Palestinian armed groups to release hostages captured in the October 7 attacks.

The Palestinian Foreign Ministry said the decision was a welcome reminder "no state is above the law". Senior Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri told Reuters the decision would contribute to "isolating the occupation and exposing its crimes in Gaza".

Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the court had "justly rejected the outrageous demand" to deprive Israel of "basic right to defend itself".

British senior doctors reject pay deal in narrow vote

REUTERS
LONDON, JANUARY 26

SENIOR DOCTORS in England have narrowly voted to reject a pay deal which would have ended months of disruptive strike action, their trade union, the British Medical Association (BMA), said on Thursday, in a blow to the government.

Strikes by doctors have heaped more pressure on an already overburdened National Health Service (NHS), where more than 7 million patients on waiting lists seek treatment, leading to thousands of cancelled appointments and procedures.

A prolonged pay dispute with healthcare staff will hinder Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's ability to meet one of his key pledges, of cutting those waiting lists, ahead of an election expected later this year.

The doctors voted 51.1% against the pay offer, the BMA said. "With the result so close, the consultants committee is giving the Government a chance to improve the offer," BMA consultants committee chair Vishal Sharma said.

Britain's health minister Victoria Atkins said the government was disappointed at the doctors' rejection of what she called a "fair and reasonable" offer. A separate long-running dispute with junior doctors over pay also remains ongoing.



Displaced Palestinians' tents in Rafah, south Gaza, near the Egypt border. Reuters

EXPLAINED
E 6 out of SA's 9 pleas got cleared in ICJ

ISRAEL WAS asked by the Hague to: Prevent acts of genocide; ensure its military doesn't carry out any such act; prevent, punish incitement to genocide; ensure essential humanitarian aid to civilians; prevent destruction of war crime evidences; submit a report of steps taken within a month.

Israeli military says engaged in heavy fighting in heart of Khan Younis city

REUTERS
GAZA, JANUARY 26

ISRAELI FORCES continued to pound the main southern Gaza city of Khan Younis, from where thousands of Gazans were fleeing to the south.

The Israeli military said on Friday it was engaged in "intensive battles in the heart of Khan Younis", with forces striking

dozens of Hamas fighters and infrastructure from the air and ground. It said forces also fired at Hamas targets in northern Gaza and along the Gaza coastline.

Residents said gun battles continued overnight, with Israeli forces blowing up buildings and houses in the western part.

Gaza officials said the death toll from the campaign, now in its fourth month, has risen to 26,083, with 183 killed in the

past 24 hours and many more feared trapped under flattened buildings.

The huge assault this week on the city of Khan Younis is one of the biggest yet, now hitting territory housing hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians. Palestinians say Israel has blockaded hospitals making it impossible for rescuers to reach the dead and wounded.

BOTH IN BANGKOK FOR SEPARATE TALKS

US security adviser to meet China top diplomat as both seek better ties

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BANGKOK, JANUARY 26

SENIOR US and Chinese representatives are expected to meet in Bangkok, Thailand as the two countries seek to cool tensions.

Officials from both sides said U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi would meet.

The exact schedule for their talks was not announced, but both are scheduled to be in the Thai capital from Friday, where they're meeting separately with Thai officials.

National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said their planned meeting "continues the commitment by both sides at the November 2023 Woodside Summit between President Biden and President Xi to maintain strategic communication and responsibly manage the relationship."

That summit meeting was seen as an effort to patch up frayed relations due to quarrels over a range of economic and geopolitical issues.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin confirmed that Wang Yi plans to meet with Sullivan.

An immediate issue of concern to both countries is tensions in the Red Sea that have upended global trade by forcing many shippers to avoid the Suez Canal.

China has been in "close



Jake Sullivan; Wang Yi

BEIJING DELEGATION VISITS NORTH KOREA

Seoul: North Korea said Friday it was hosting a visit by a Chinese government delegation led by Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong, as it continues its efforts to strengthen ties with Beijing and Moscow in the face of deepening confrontations with Washington. **AP**

communication with all parties concerned and making positive efforts to de-escalate" the conflict, during which Iran-backed Houthi rebels have attacked international ships with missiles, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said Wednesday.

Washington has reportedly sought to have Beijing use its influence with Iran to address the attacks.

Sullivan and Wang are separately holding bilateral talks with Thai officials, according to the U.S. and Chinese statements.

Turkey to ratify Sweden NATO bid with fighter jets in sight

REUTERS
ISTANBUL, JANUARY 26

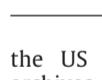
TURKEY IS expected to send the final instrument of ratification for Sweden's NATO membership to Washington as early as Friday, in a move that Turkish and U.S. leaders say clears the way to Ankara's purchase of US F-16 fighter jets.

President Tayyip Erdogan signed off Sweden's membership on Thursday after parliament endorsed it on Tuesday, ending 20 months of delays.

Under NATO rules, the final document in the process - the instrument of ratification - needs to be deposited in the US State Department archives in Washington. A source familiar with the issue said that may happen on Friday, marking last step in a process that began in 2022.

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron told Reuters he was "delighted" by the decision.

Turkey's backing, long seen as the main obstacle in securing Sweden's accession into the western military alliance, leaves Hungary as the only member yet to ratify the Swedish bid.



Turkey President Tayyip Erdogan

Under NATO rules, the final document in the process - the instrument of ratification - needs to be deposited in the US State Department archives in Washington. A source familiar with the issue said that may happen on Friday, marking last step in a process that began in 2022.

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron told Reuters he was "delighted" by the decision.

Turkey's backing, long seen as the main obstacle in securing Sweden's accession into the western military alliance, leaves Hungary as the only member yet to ratify the Swedish bid.

Some politicians criticized what they saw as a media witch hunt on 25-year-olds who later entered politics. **NYT**

The reports also spurred in-

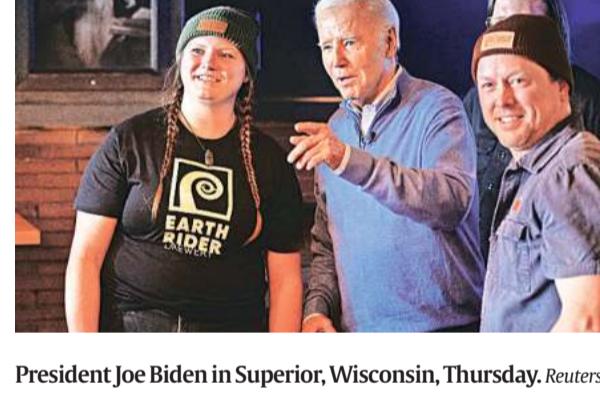
HALEY FIGHTS ON TO OVERTAKE FORMER PRESIDENT IN HER HOME STATE

Shifting focus to rematch, Trump, Biden trade barbs

REUTERS
MANCHESTER, NH, JAN 26

DONALD TRUMP and Joe Biden attacked each other on Wednesday as they prepared for a likely election rematch in November after Trump's win in New Hampshire's Republican presidential primary made White House nomination increasingly likely, though his remaining rival Nikki Haley vowed to stay in the race.

Former Republican President Trump's back-to-back wins in nominating contests put him on an almost certain path toward a general election contest with Democratic President Biden. Both turned their fire on each other after Trump's New Hampshire vic-



President Joe Biden in Superior, Wisconsin, Thursday. Reuters

tory over Haley on Tuesday night.

Biden's reelection campaign issued a statement saying it is

"now clear that Donald Trump will be the Republican nominee," and repeated warnings

that the former president is a threat to democracy.

Trump took to his social media platform Truth Social to repeat unfounded allegations that Biden and his Justice Department were engaged in political persecution, following the multiple criminal indictments of Trump last year.

But Haley pledged to take race to South Carolina and beyond.

In a speech to supporters in South Carolina on Wednesday night, Haley said US voters deserved a better option than a Biden-Trump rematch, "and

we're going to give it to them."

She also repeated her challenge to Trump to debate her. "Bring it Donald, show me what you got!". Trump is seeking to knock Haley out and become the presumptive nominee quickly.

On Truth Social, he said anybody contributing to Haley would be "permanently barred" from his political orbit.

In South Carolina, Trump, 77, will be looking to embarrass Haley, 52, by defeating her in her home state. Haley is aiming for an upset delivered by voters who twice elected her as governor.

Alabama carries out first nitrogen gas execution

ASSOCIATED PRESS
ATMORE, JANUARY 26

ALABAMA EXECUTED a convicted murderer with nitrogen gas Thursday, putting him to death with a first-of-its-kind method that once again placed the U.S. at the forefront of the debate over capital punishment.

The state said the method would be humane, but critics called it cruel and experimental.

Officials said Kenneth Eugene Smith, 58, was pronounced dead at 8:25 p.m. at an Alabama prison



Kenneth Eugene Smith, 58

after breathing pure nitrogen gas through a face mask to cause oxygen deprivation.

It marked the first time that a new execution method has been used in the United States since lethal injection, now the most commonly used method, was introduced in 1982.

THEY HAVE lined up by the thousands across Russia in recent days, standing in the bitter cold for a chance to sign petitions to support an unlikely challenger to President Vladimir Putin. Boris Nadezhdin has become a dilemma for the Kremlin as he seeks to run in the March 17 presidential election. The question now is whether Russian authorities will allow him on the ballot.

public, openly calling for a halt to the conflict in Ukraine, the end of mobilizing Russian men for the military. He also has criticized the repression of LGBTQ+ activism.

"The collection of signatures has gone unexpectedly well for us," Nadezhdin told The AP Wednesday in Moscow. "We didn't expect this, to be honest."

Nadezhdin's name is a form of the Russian word for "hope," and although he is highly unlikely to defeat the still-popular Putin, the lines are a rare sign of protest.

Boris Nadezhdin in Moscow in December. AP

The stocky, bespectacled 60-year-old local legislator and academic has struck a chord with the

Anti-Putin candidate gives hope to thousands though few expect a win



some issues that the Supreme Court should clarify. The Supreme Court has not weighed in so far.

The government has proposed doubling the penalty for cheating and plagiarism, from a two-semester suspension to four, in a bill that is expected to land in Parliament later this year.

Rytterager said he was inspired by accusations of plagiarism against Claudine Gay, Harvard's former president.

When Rytterager searched Google, he found that parts of Borch's 2014 thesis in law were almost identical to a government report that she had not referenced.

The reports also spurred in-

tense scrutiny of the academic work of other lawmakers, and reporters found that parts of the health minister's thesis resembled other texts.

The minister, Ingvild Kjerkol, has acknowledged that some references were missing, but she denied deliberate copying. Still, some academics called for her resignation.

Some politicians criticized what they saw as a media witch hunt on 25-year-olds who later entered politics. **NYT**

"You shouldn't have any skeletons in the closet."

The case that angered him involved a student who had submitted an exam with some excerpts from a test she had turned in — and failed — the previous year. The student was suspended for two semesters in 2022, and her lawyer said the case had psychologically devastated her. More than 100 professors and other academics signed a petition objecting to her treatment.

A court eventually acquitted the student, but the ministry of research and higher education, headed by Borch, appealed the decision, arguing that it raised



Some politicians criticised what they saw as a media witch hunt on 25-year-olds who later entered politics. NYT

some issues that the Supreme Court should clarify. The Supreme Court has not weighed in so far.

The government has proposed doubling the penalty for cheating and plagiarism, from a two-semester suspension to four, in a bill that is expected to land in Parliament later this year.

Rytterager said he was inspired by accusations of plagiarism against Claudine Gay, Harvard's former president.

When Rytterager searched Google, he found that parts of

FIGHTER ★★½

Director: Siddharth Anand **Cast:** Hrithik Roshan, Deepika Padukone, Anil Kapoor, Rishabh Sawhney, Karan Singh Grover, Akshay Oberoi, Sanjeeda Shaikh, Talat Aziz, Ashutosh Rana



STREAMING WATCH LIST

BY ALAKA SAHANI



GRISELDA

NETFLIX
This fictional dramatisation of real events shows Griselda Blanco's journey from Medellin to becoming 'the Godmother' of Miami's drug empire. *Griselda* was created by Eric Newman (*Painkiller*) and Andrés Baiz — who directs every episode — reuniting the team behind *Narcos*. *Griselda* tells the story of a devoted mother who created one of the most profitable cartels in history.



SAM BAHADUR

ZEE5
Sam Bahadur delves into the life of India's first field marshal, Sam Manekshaw. Actor Vicky Kaushal essays the role of one of the most decorated Indian Army officers in this biopic directed by Meghna Gulzar. *Sam Bahadur* also features Sanya Malhotra and Fatima Sana Shaikh. The 150-minute film focuses on the high points of Manekshaw's personal and professional life. Kaushal delivers a compelling performance as the titular protagonist.



EXPATS

PRIME VIDEO
The six-part limited series directed by Lulu Wang is based on the internationally best-selling novel *The Expatriates* by Janice YK Lee. Set against the vibrant and tumultuous tapestry of 2014 Hong Kong, *Expats* centres on three American women — Margaret (Nicole Kidman), Hilary (Sarayu Blue), and Mercy (Ji-young Yoo) — whose lives intersect after a sudden family tragedy. The series interrogates privilege and the fine line between victimhood and culpability.



THE PIPER

LIONSGATE PLAY
The Piper is a classic tale where terror meets melody. This is an edge-of-your-seat horror film that spreads its 'evil' through a variety of cursed musical instruments. The film follows the enigmatic Charlotte Hope, as she copes with the loss of her mentor, takes up his mantle and continues to finish his concerto. Unbeknownst to her, the musical instruments are cursed and playing them unleashes deadly consequences.

SHUBhra GUPTA

TWO THINGS prevent *Fighter* from being a total humdinger: excessive jingoism and schmaltz. This drama-in-the-sky, part *Top Gun*, part *Uri*, and part other Siddharth Anand films, has enough well-executed action set pieces, filled with several effective flourishes from its lead actors to have coasted through. Why didn't the film have enough confidence in its USP: the brave boys and girls looping those loops?

India's most wanted *dushman*, as far as Hindi cinema goes, has forever and always been Pakistan. But didn't we show them what's what in the 2019 surgical strike, *Uri*? Didn't an ISI agent curl up and roll over in the director's own 2021 *Pataan*? I could go on, but you get the point.

So the first feeling when you hear pointed

references to Pulwama, and a convoy being blown up, and *ghar mein ghusna*, is that of ennui. Why can't Bollywood think of a new enemy? Or is that too much work? Don't know about you, but I'm tired of terrorists with kohled eyes, plotting in make-shift shacks somewhere in Pakistan, snarling and shooting and scooting. Even the new face as the antagonist, Rishabh Sawhney as the Lashkar mastermind Azhar Akhtar, blow-dried long hair reaching the chin, one eye carefully bloodshot, does old things: stomp on brave Indian soldiers and spout melodramatic dialogues dripping with hate.

Hrithik Roshan reunites with Anand af-

ter their *War*, this time as Shamsher Pathania, call sign Patty, as an ace fighter pilot — needless to say, he's 'our best' — who lays the table and washes up with as much dexterity as he flies his plane. Matching him on eye-candy stakes is Deepika Padukone as helicopter pilot Minnal Rathore, aka Minni, who is as much an expert on rescue missions as any man. There is the bonding with the other aviators, chiefly Karan Singh Grover as Sartaj 'Taj' Gill, and Akshay Oberoi as Basheer 'Bash' Khan. The latter is your token patriotic Indian Muslim; there's also a Sikh officer who gets the 'comic relief' lines before his 'action scenes'. A Sardar being the

but of jokes? What else?

Last year, around the same time, we got from the same director, *Pathaan*, a spry spy saga. It was all about reclaiming ground that along-time hero had to cede; it was also about the declaration that he wasn't going anywhere. It was a lot of fun because it had the smarts to not take itself seriously. In *Fighter*, there's an uneasy mix of wanting to be real in a plot awash with mainstream clichés: when the camera lingers for a moment too long on a pilot, you know he's in for the chop. You know which one will be sacrificed; you know who will come home. You know a pair of reluctant parents will become aware of their

'mistake', and more tears will be shed. After a point, everything feels like a stretch: Minni's line about 'men and women being equal in the sky' makes you want to cheer, but not when it comes around again.

This is one of those films that you wish that the desire to get the easy claps, with dialogues like 'baap kaun hai', and 'har galli will become Indian Occupied Pakistan', could have been kept at bay. A lot of effort has gone into keeping the proceedings at Air Force stations authentic, and there's a great aerial sequence in the second half — I loved the snow whooshing of a row of fir trees — which can compare with the best of the *Top Gun* flicks. Hrithik and Deepika make a great pair; Anil Kapoor, as fit as the hero, provides able support.

Succumbing to the current atmosphere of hyper-nationalism leads to bombast, which in turn weakens a film. *Baaps* don't go around declaring who they are. They just know.



Reaching for the skies

AFTER CONQUERING the land (*Band of Brothers*) and the seas (*The Pacific*), Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks and Gary Goetzman aim for the skies in *Masters of the Air*, the new nine-episode miniseries that follows a unit of the US Air Force during World War II. Spanning two years and featuring dozens of characters, it's one of the most lavish productions — it was made on a reported budget of \$250 million — in the history of television.

The first few episodes can, however, be a bit overwhelming. Several characters are introduced by name and subsequently sheathed behind masks and caps. But after a few hours, you begin to get your bearings. Not unlike an airman gazing out into the horizon and spotting a mountain or a river, you begin to identify soldiers from their accent or the colour of their hair. And before long, a handful of lead characters emerge from the crowd. The Oscar nominee Austin Butler stars as Major Gale Cleven, and Callum Turner plays Major John Egan. Together, they're Buck and Bucky, the two parallel protagonists of this sprawling story.

Their friendship is in many ways the

MASTERS OF THE AIR

★★★

Director: Steven Spielberg
Cast: Callum Turner, Austin Butler, Barry Keoghan, Anthony Boyle, Nate Mann, Ncuti Gatwa

Streaming on: Apple TV+

he heart of *Masters of the Air*, a show that features at least half a dozen extended sequences of harrowing aerial warfare. Entirely computer-generated, these sequences require no investment in individual characters; they're gripping, instead, on a visceral level. *Masters of the Air* is, after all, the kind of show in which you know a man is doomed the second

he says something like, "I'll see you on the other side," to one of his buddies before a mission.

Writing tropes aside, the show's combat sequences might remind viewers of the naval warfare in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, the 2003 Russell Crowe-starred that regained popularity during the pandemic because masses of millennial men found in its stoicism something to relate to. As with the rest of the show, however, they come across as more of a collective than individuals in their own right. It's a tactic that worked handsomely for Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*, and perhaps also Zack Snyder's 2009 *Masters of the Air* doesn't quite get away with it initially, but despite the turbulent takeoff, it soars.

ROHAN NAHAAR

No strain on the brain

KARMMMA CALLING ★★½

Director: Ruchi Narain
Cast: Raveena Tandon, Namrata Sheth, Waluscha De Sousa, Varun Sood, Rohit Roy, Gaurav Sharma, Viraf Patel, Amy Aela, Masi Wali, Piyush Khati, Rachit Singh
Streaming on: Disney+ Hotstar

A MYSTERIOUS young woman parachutes into the highly-scented, tightly-knit community of Alibag, that little oasis of privilege and wealth just off Mumbai, and everyone is agog: who is Karmma? Where is she from? How did she manage to buy the large beach house right next to the richest of them all, the Kothari family?

Many hornets in many nests are well and truly astir, and as the sleek, stylish Karmma (Namrata Sheth) starts unpacking her wares — from taking on resident diva Indrani Kothari (Raveena Tandon) who ruled Bollywood in the '90s and is now the undisputed empress of her exclusive little patch, and catching the eye of handsome Kothari scion Ahaan (Varun Sood) — we know that something twitchy this way comes.

The big reveal, a childhood tragedy involving Karmma's upright father (Rohit Roy) being unjustly implicated in a scam, comes quickly enough. And to begin with, as we get to know the depths of the depravity of some of the main characters, we are sympathetic toward this wounded young woman as she goes after those who ruined her father's life, and, by extension, hers. But soon enough, as she keeps crossing one line after another, we are forced to ask, just like a character in the series does, how much is too much? How long can she keep doing this without it rebounding?

Mostly, things are kept nicely on the boil in the seven episodes of *Karmma Calling*, officially adapted from Mike Kelley's *Revenge* by series director Ruchi Narain. It is the kind of enjoyably trashy show that revels in its contrivances, and for a change, the cast



seems to have gotten the memo: a range of characters keep popping up to keep our interest from flagging, and except for a few places where some slackness creeps in, I kept up with this well-produced, smartly-cast desi tale of revenge-and-retribution.

It has an eating-the-rich *White Lotus* vibe, brightly lit for the most part, going dark for the nasty bits — there are gunshots and a body-on-the-beach right in the first episode — and things roll out just as they should for daytime soap for dummies. No one will have any difficulty in understanding motives and consequences: *Karmma Calling* is not going for any ambiguities. The actors match the tone and tenor. As the woman with buried vulnerabilities that surface when she looks back, Raveena Tandon has her moments, and clearly, her starry persona is the reason the show got green-lit.

Mostly, things are kept nicely on the boil in the seven episodes of *Karmma Calling*, officially adapted from Mike Kelley's *Revenge* by series director Ruchi Narain. It is the kind of enjoyably trashy show that revels in its contrivances, and for a change, the cast

seems to have gotten the memo: a range of characters keep popping up to keep our interest from flagging, and except for a few places where some slackness creeps in, I kept up with this well-produced, smartly-cast desi tale of revenge-and-retribution.

It has an eating-the-rich *White Lotus* vibe, brightly lit for the most part, going dark for the nasty bits — there are gunshots and a body-on-the-beach right in the first episode — and things roll out just as they should for daytime soap for dummies. No one will have any difficulty in understanding motives and consequences: *Karmma Calling* is not going for any ambiguities.

The actors match the tone and tenor.

As the woman with buried vulnerabilities that surface when she looks back, Raveena Tandon has her moments, and clearly, her starry persona is the reason the show got green-lit.

It's the lesser-known faces, like Sheth in the lead role of Karmma, the girl who will leave no one unscathed in her quest for re-

Striking a balance

MALAIKOTTAI VAALIBAN

★★★
Director: Lijo Jose Pellissery
Cast: Mohanal, Sonalee Kulkarni, Hareesh Peradi, Danish Sait, Manoj Moses, Katha Nandi

ANANDU SURESH

WHAT HAPPENS when an auteur joins forces with the biggest star in their industry? This thought is exactly what propelled Lijo Jose Pellissery's Mohanal-starrer *Malaikottai Vaalibhan* to become the most anticipated Malayalam movie of 2024. For Lijo, *Vaalibhan* was his next directorial venture after the heavy-

ly acclaimed Mammootty film *Nanpal Nerathu Mayakkam* (2023), raising expectations to a remarkable level. Whereas for Mohanal, this film was seen as an opportunity for redemption from the extensive criticism he has faced in recent years, with none of his performances standing out. Hence, the stakes were exceedingly high.

But, there is a Lijo Jose Pellissery out there for every Mohanal; as long as you don't find your LJL, you will never truly see the Mohanal in you.

Unlike Mohanal's most recent films, where makers often got carried away by either his stardom or his potential as a performer, the multi-genre *Malaikottai Vaalibhan* strikes a fine balance between these aspects, while striving



not to compromise on its overall quality. This approach affords Mohanal ample space to showcase his A-game, as many of the old films that propelled him to his current stature shared similar characteristics. In *Vaalibhan*, we are not immediately introduced to a Lal delivering punch dialogues at every moment. Instead, our first glimpse of the actor is as he snores

while resting on a bullock cart. As the stage is set for a wrestling match, Mohanal emerges, accompanied by a Clint Eastwood-esque background score, adorned in maroon attire that seems stained with the blood of countless battles. Without being tethered to a specific landscape or period, *Malaikottai Vaalibhan* unfolds alongside the titular character's journey, traversing various locales as he asserts his strength and garners admiration from all, much like a folk tale. He is constantly accompanied by two persons: Ayanar (Hareesh Peradi), whom he reveres as a father figure, and Chinna (Manoj Moses), the former's son, whom *Vaalibhan* treats as his own brother.

This movie marks Lijo's second venture into a realm where the real and unreal seamlessly blend, following *Nanpal Nerathu Mayakkam*. *Vaalibhan* refuses to adhere to a monotonous tone, including in terms of genre. It often shifts between genres like martial arts, war, drama

and fantasy, all interconnected by the central character. It also artfully weaves together diverse cultures, languages and emotions against a backdrop of rugged landscapes devoid of lush greenery, reminiscent of the fictional land in *Rajiv Anchal's Guru* (1997).

Every frame and shot composition in *Malaikottai Vaalibhan* is outstanding, characterised by superb lighting, captivating colouring and elaborate production design. Mohanal impresses with his deep dive into *Vaalibhan*'s character, adeptly conveying emotions without veering into exaggeration. Madhu Neelakandan's cinematography elevates the film, compensating for its narrative shortcomings. Prashant Pillai's music sets the perfect tone for *Vaalibhan*, occasionally evoking the atmosphere of spaghetti Western films. Gokul Das's art direction effectively realises the fantastical setting.

As the BJP government presents an Interim Budget, its second in a decade, UDIT MISRA attempts to decipher the politics of economics in the choice of words the Finance Minister may use in the speech

WHEN FINANCE Minister Nirmala Sitharaman stands up to present her sixth Union Budget — the one for the forthcoming financial year (2024-25) — it is quite likely that most of her speech will focus on the achievements of her five Budgets or indeed of the previous 10 that have been presented under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. That's because this Budget is going to be an interim one — a Vote-on-Account — to enable the government to discharge its duties and to meet all essential expenditure until a new government takes charge after the general election.

Given this setting, here are the words and phrases that are most likely to feature in the Budget speech.

A: ANNADATA

'Annadata' (or the farmer) wins this contest hands down. It is most likely to feature in the speech since it is one of the only four "castes" the PM said he recognises. The government had promised that India would witness the doubling of farmers income between 2016 and 2022. Maybe the Budget can shine some light on that.

There are some other worthy contenders under 'A'. For instance, '**aspirational**'. India is overrun by aspirations — from people to districts. Then there are the **Agniveers**, who walk on **Agnipath**. There's the PM's **Awas** Yojana as well.

B: BENEFITS

Few understand the political significance of using the word 'benefit' to describe all manners of economic welfare schemes.

Think for a moment: How would the tens of millions of needy feel if the government called its help to them charity, dole, assistance, welfare or freebies? It is disempowering.

What if the government called it their "entitlement"? This would be a huge improvement but it runs the risk of people getting the idea that the government's primary job is to assist the needy and that it has no choice in the matter.

So what would be great word to describe welfare in a manner that it:

- a. doesn't hurt their sentiments and morale, and
- b. leaves the welfare as a discretionary power with the government?

Benefit is that word. To make it even more emphatic, it can get the prefix "di-rect". Adding "transfer" as a suffix lends an almost tangible sense of action. In reality, such benefits refer to anything from cash to rice to toilets.

C: CUSP OF TAKE-OFF

That the Indian economy is on the cusp of take-off is quite likely to be mentioned. The government claims the Indian economy, which was fast losing its growth momentum going into the Covid pandemic, has shaken off both structural and cyclical factors coming out of it. Speaking of cusps, it is unclear if India is also on the cusp of a new **Census**.

D: DEVELOPMENT

There are quite a few phrases starting with D that can figure in the speech. After all, apart from being the "mother of Democracy", India is now also the father of **Demography**. But it is **Development** that is the front-runner to feature in the speech. The lack of credible **data** in certain areas that affect policy-making is unlikely to find a mention.

E: EMPOWERED

Education would be the most obvious choice for a young population but the findings of the latest Annual Status of Education Report are too close for comfort.

Employment could, but the details in the latest (official) Periodic Labour Force Survey aren't too encouraging. For instance, the jobs getting created are of poor quality and in segments where wages have been stagnant for long periods.

While any government will always project data that looks good, the front-runner is **Empowered**, because it is more about how a person feels, a state of mind.

F: FOREIGN EXCHANGE (FOREX)

Fiscal Deficit has to be the winner here. If the FM can only speak one sentence, then it must be about the Fiscal Deficit. However, with the NDA government not meeting the prudential norm of fiscal deficit being 3% of the GDP, and given that the target for the current year is 5.9%, chances are other words

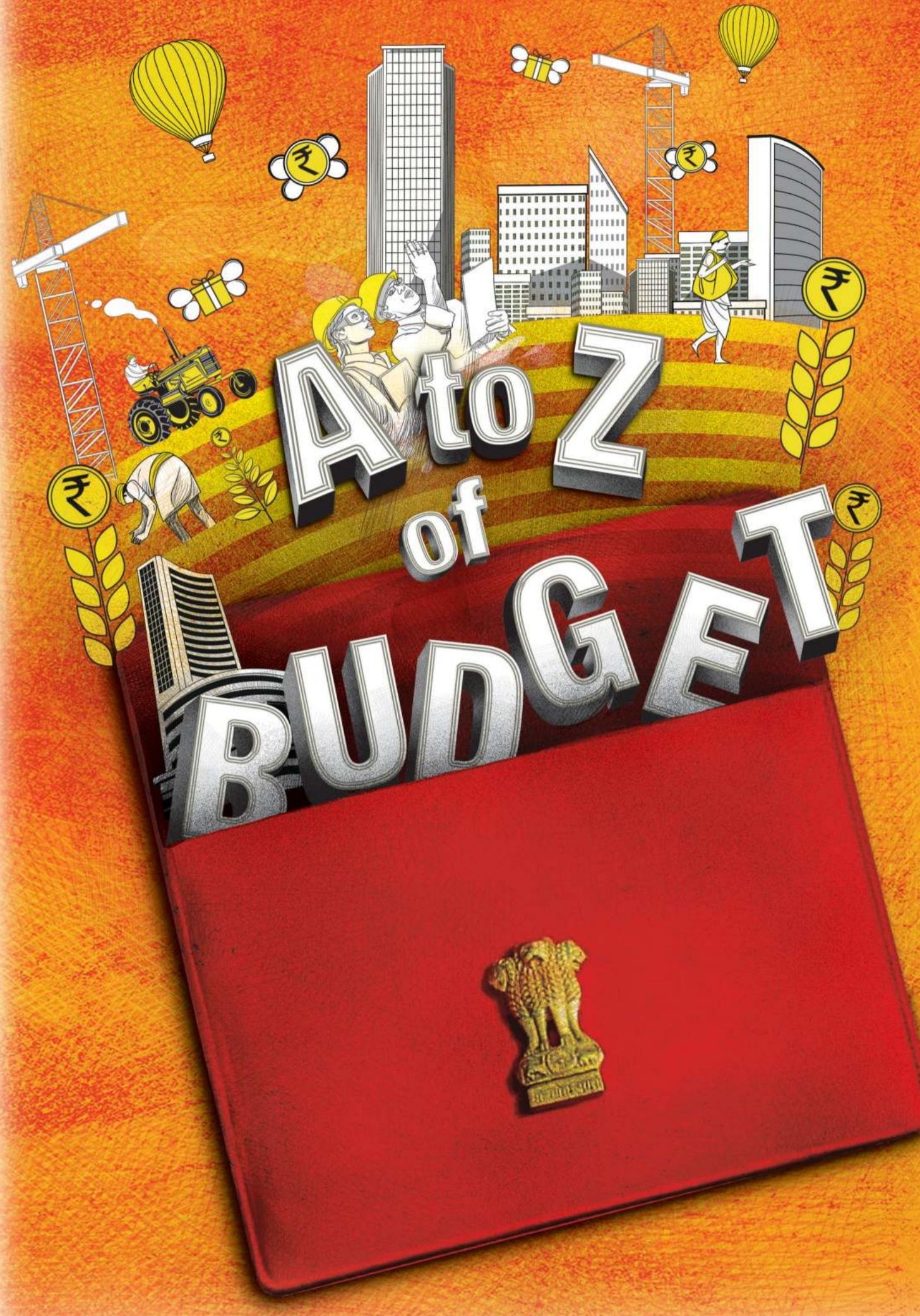


Illustration: Suvajit Dey

BRIEFCASE, BAHI KHATHA AND HALWA

The first Indian Budget was presented in 1860 by Scottish economist James Wilson.

The first Budget in independent India was presented on November 26, 1947, by Finance Minister R K Shanmukham Chetty. It was just an overview of India's economy.

Statistician Prof P C Mahalanobis, who was on the Planning Commission of India, was influential in

designing independent India's Budget



Jawaharlal Nehru was the first PM to present the Budget in 1958 (after Finance Minister TT Krishnamachari resigned), followed by PM Indira Gandhi in 1970 (after Finance Minister Morarji Desai resigned) and PM Rajiv Gandhi in 1987-88 (after Finance Minister V P Singh resigned).

Morarji Desai has presented the most Budgets (10), followed by P

Chidambaram (9) and Pranab Mukherjee (8).



A few days before the Budget is presented, the Finance Minister stirs a large pan of **halwa**.

After the **halwa** is served, the staff directly associated with preparing the document stays "locked-in" at North Block till the Finance Minister gives the Budget speech in Lok Sabha.

The lock-in period has become shorter since the government moved to paperless Budgets from 2021.

Till 2018, Finance Ministers carried Budget papers to Parliament in a briefcase, a British-era tradition.



In 2019, Nirmala Sitharaman brought the documents in a red cloth tied with a string called **bahi khatha**, with the national emblem emblazoned on it

starting with F may gain currency. Such as **Forex** (India has hundreds of millions in dollars) or **Finance Commission** (India has just got a new one) or **Foreign investments**.

G: GAREEB

This is another of the four castes outlined by the PM and as such looks certain to be mentioned in the speech. The other words under G that are very likely to get mentioned in the same breath are GDP growth, G-20, **Global Innovation Index** (one of those rare international indices that the Indian government agrees with), **Gift**, **CST**, **Gau Mata** and **Good Governance**. What may get a miss is the Ganga or Namami Gange mission.

H: HEALTHCARE

The government disagrees with the so-called global hunger rankings. The government provides free food to 800 million Indians — that's the total population of the US, Indonesia and Pakistan combined. Does this mean that no one can go hungry or does it mean, as the Opposition alleges, that there is hunger and this policy is a tacit acceptance of it? Take your pick, but it is unlikely that hunger will figure prominently. There may be a mention of the '**Hindutva Rate of Growth**', which the government says has overtaken the 'Hindu rate of growth'. **Healthcare**, though, is

a natural choice under H.

I: ISRO

Too many eligible words here. **Inequality**, **Inflation**, **Infrastructure**, a simplified **Income Tax** structure. But what stands out is **ISRO**'s singular achievement.

J: JAN ANDOLAN

The original favourite is the famed **JAM trinity** — Jan-Dhan, Aadhaar and Mobile — that undergirds the digital revolution taking place in India. There is also the Pradhan Mantri **Jeevan Jyoti** Bima Yojana — a scheme that provides term life cover of Rs 2 lakh to subscribers for an annual premium of just Rs 436. But the dark horse is a call for a new mass movement or a **Jan Andolan** to achieve some new goal.

K: KARTAVYA KAAL

K must be the most irritating letter for those in the government. As the economy came out of the Covid pandemic there was this all-mighty tussle between the government and its critics on the shape of the recovery. The government saw a "V" while the critics saw an "L". The end result: a "**K-shaped**" recovery, suggesting those who were well-off before the pandemic recovered fast while the rest continue to struggle.

L: LABHARTHI

There was a time where reams upon reams were written about how a genuine conservative leader in the mould of Thatcher and Reagan will bring about long-pending labour reforms and fundamentally alter the land acquisition legislation. A decade since, the main reason for the BJP's relentless election march is the growth of the **Labharthi** (beneficiary) class. From Ujjwala to PM Awas Yojana, from health insurance to free ration, the labharthi has emerged as a new voting bloc.

M: MODI KI GUARANTEE

Make in India, **Manufacturing boom**, **Monetising unused government assets**, **Modul** loans for India's small and micro enterprises, tax cuts for the middle class, increasing **MSPs** and turning them into a credible safety net for Indian farmers. There are too many contenders under M. The one that backs all these claims? **Modi ki guarantee**.

N: NARI SHAKTI

This is the third of the four castes that the PM recognises and as such **nari-shakti** is a phrase most likely to feature in the Budget. The Nari Shakti Vandhan Act has already taken the first step towards increasing the participation of women in India's

Parliament, though there are, of course, many more steps that are needed to actually achieve the goal. There is also the PM's mantra of "**nation-first**". Not to forget the **Nal se jal** initiative or the focus on the right **niti** (policy) and **niyat** (intention).

O: ODF+

In October 2019, the country answered the PM's call and declared itself open defecation free. But that wasn't the end of the business. The bar was raised for the country to be declared ODF+. This required that at no point during the day should anyone be found defecating and/or urinating in the open, and all community and public toilets should be functional and well maintained. By September 2023, 75% villages were ODF+ compliant. The next target is **ODF++**, which requires a place to treat all sewage properly.

P: PANCH PRAN

A country's slogans often best capture how it has progressed and where it stands. The Budget is likely to remind citizens of the **Panch Pran** (five resolutions) outlined by the PM last year — working for a developed India, shedding the mentality of slavery, being proud of our traditions, dedicating lives towards India's unity, and awakening a sense of duty. Two decades ago, Jaswant Singh (also of the BJP) had in

his Interim Budget of 2004 outlined the government's "Panch Priorities": enhanced employment and eradication of poverty; a second green revolution; infrastructure development; fiscal consolidation; and greater manufacturing sector efficiency.

Q: QR CODE

Since the first **QR code** was introduced in India in 2016, reportedly 50 million more QR codes have been designed. The government may use this to talk about the pace of technological transformation under its watch.

R: RAM AND RAILWAY STOCKS

Budgets are written in a set language. For instance, **revenues** are always 'mobilised' and duty structures are always '**rationalised**'. **Roads**, **rozgar melas** and **rotis** are in contention, but it seems only two things deserve the reader's attention: **Ram** and **railway stocks**.

S: SLOGANS

This letter has many words that may figure in the speech: **Shreshta Bharat**, **soft-power**, **Shramve Jayate**, **smart cities**, **Skill India**, **Start-up India**...the list is long. But it is the slogans one has to watch out for. Just like Atmanirbhar Bharat was in 2021, the new Budget, especially with the election round the corner, may provide a new tagline

T: TRILLION DOLLARS

As things stand, India is set to become the world's third-largest economy by 2027. India wants to become a developed country by 2047. This goal has led to different people providing different estimates of India's future GDP. The numbers can be mind-boggling. Would India's GDP be \$35 to \$40 trillion by 2047? In a world where it is hard enough to get any consensus on the GDP growth rate in the next 12 months, such lofty numbers are at best of limited use. Perhaps the current FM will be able to give a more concrete number.

U: URBANISATION

One of the key promises of this government has been to reduce the unorganised sector — both in terms of its contribution to the economy and the number of people it employs — and expand the scope of the organised sector. Expect some clarity on how successful the government has been on this count. There is likely to be a round of applause for the role of UPI and how it has allowed India to leapfrog over many developed countries. Then there are unicorns — not the ones with horns but start-ups with a billion dollar valuation — although both can just as easily disappear. Ask Byju's. But the most important issue will be **urbanisation**.

V: VIKSIT BHARAT

Vande Bharat is likely to be pipped to the post by **Viksit Bharat** because it is a train that needs to run in the physical universe we inhabit while the latter is an idea. The goal of becoming a developed country — **Viksit Bharat** — is now the central target for the next 25 years. Expect to hear more on how India might want to achieve this. There will be a mention of India's leading role in the global distribution of vaccines.

W: WELFARE VS WEALTH CREATION

India experiences an odd conundrum — there is a lot of **wealth creation** but the average person's wages are stagnant. This happens because most of the wealth generation accrues to a small number of people while a large number of workers survive on with constantly falling purchasing power. The more the government spends on **welfare**, the less it has to invest towards wealth creation and vice-versa.

X: X-CHANGE RATE

There are two emerging concerns for India. One is the performance of its exports. With the global growth slowing down, India will have to work doubly hard to gain or sometimes even retain its level of exports. The second issue is that of the rupee's **exchange rate** with the other hard currencies such as the US dollar. Weakening exchange rates help exporters but also create a political problem since the optics are poor.

Y: YUVA

This is the fourth of the GYAN castes that the PM talked about. To a great extent, the **youth** population is a huge reason why so many observers across the world are upbeat about the prospects of the Indian economy. But youth alone will not help. Pakistan's median age is less than 21 years — seven years lower than India's — and yet it struggles to be taken seriously, mired as it is in religious intolerance and institutional decay.

Z: ZERO

Zero-budget farming is a perennial favourite of Budget makers. **Zero waste** and **zero emissions** are also gaining popularity as **zero-sum game**.

SENSEX: 70,700.67 ▼ 359.64 (0.51%) NIFTY: 21,352.60 ▼ 101.35 (0.47%) NIKKEI: 35,751.07 ▼ 485.40 HANG SENG: 15,952.23 ▼ 259.73 FTSE: 7,646.41 ▲ 116.68 DAX: 16,942.79 ▲ 35.87

GOLD

₹ 63,050

USD RATE

₹ 83.11

OIL

\$ 80.22

SILVER

₹ 76,200

Note: Gold, silver rates at Delhi spot market, gold per 1 kg, silver per 1 kg; Crude oil (Indian basket) as of January 24

Domestic market were closed on Friday. International market data till 1900 IST

UN raises alarm over Red Sea route crisis

RAVIDUTTA MISHRA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

THE UNITED Nations (UN) on Friday raised alarm over the chaos in global trade due to disruption in the Red Sea shipping route stating that the ongoing crisis would particularly hurt developing nations such as India.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) warned that the crisis is impacting global food prices, with longer distances and higher freight rates potentially cascading into increased costs. "Disruptions in grain shipments from Europe, the Russian Federation and Ukraine pose risks to global food security, affecting consumers and lowering the prices paid to producers," UNCTAD said in a statement.

This assumes significance as India has already witnessed rising food prices forcing it to announce export curbs on items including wheat, rice and sugar.

"Developing countries are particularly vulnerable to these disruptions, and UNCTAD remains vigilant in monitoring the evolving situation," UNCTAD's head of trade logistics, Jan Hoffmann said.

While current container rates are approximately half of the peak seen during the Covid-19 crisis, it will take time for the higher prices to hit consumers, with the full impact expected within a year, the UN trade body further said. **FULL REPORT ON**
www.indianexpress.com

PREMIUMS RISE FROM 0.05% IN EARLY DECEMBER TO 1% NOW

War risk premiums for cargoes surge amid Red Sea tensions

GEORGE MATHEW
MUMBAI, JANUARY 26



Officials said some insurance companies are unwilling to cover cargo sent on voyages transiting the Red Sea route. File

he said. S&P Global said marine insurance rates for war risks have tripled following the latest spate of attacks in the Red Sea while tanker forward freight agreements are trading higher amid heightened shipping risks.

Officials said some insurance companies are unwilling to cover cargo sent on voyages transiting the Red Sea route, as they want to avoid the risk of high-value claims from cargo owners. There were reports about insurers even pulling back policies already in place for shipments passing through high-risk areas, as both parties typically have an option to undo existing cover with a 30-day notice.

Houthi rebels have attacked vessels suspected of being linked to Israel as they transit through the Red Sea, prompting the London market's Joint War Committee to extend the territory constituting the Red Sea war

risk to account for missile range.

Sobel Network Shipping Co, a worldwide freight forwarder, said the London insurance market has classified the southern Red Sea as a high-risk area, requiring ships to notify their insurers when sailing through such regions and pay an additional premium, typically for a seven-day cover period.

Analysts forecast further rise in transportation costs in the region. The escalation in insurance premiums will contribute to higher costs and the perceived risk increase might lead many vessels to bypass the region altogether, opting for longer routes such as circumnavigating the Horn of Africa, Sobel said. However, this will push up the cost of the cargo, leading to price rise at a time when countries like India and the United States are trying to rein in inflation.

Sobel Network said ships sail-

ing under the Bahamas flag registry have been among those targeted in various attacks. The Bahamas delegation addressed an already scheduled assembly session of the United Nations shipping agency in London on Monday, characterizing the situation as a "deliberate attack on international shipping" in a critical region. Fitch Ratings said total oil shipments via the Suez Canal, the SUMED pipeline, and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait accounted for about 12 per cent of global oil seaborne trade in the first half of 2023, according to United States Energy Information Administration (EIA).

Houthi attacks have primarily been concentrated in the narrow strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. Northbound oil shipments via the Suez Canal and the SUMED pipeline are directed to Europe, mainly from Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Southbound flows are primarily Russian oil exports to China and India following the European Union sanctions on Russian oil imports, it said.

According to Fitch Ratings, BP, Shell, QatarEnergy, and many shippers have halted transit through the Suez Canal, with some shippers re-routing around Africa. This may marginally tighten the oil and gas markets, albeit temporarily, as supply chains need to adjust to the alternative route taking about a fortnight longer, but we do not anticipate any material impact on prices.

"Under this partnership, Tata Advanced Systems Limited (TASL), a subsidiary of Tata Group, will set up the facility along with Airbus Helicopters." Airbus said Friday while announcing the deal. The announcement was made in conjunction with the state visit of the French President Emmanuel Macron to India.

Airbus and the Tata group said



The location of the proposed facility will be jointly decided. File

ification, and delivery of the H125 to customers in India and the region. The FAL will take 24 months to set up and deliveries of the first 'Made in India' H125s are expected to commence in 2026," Airbus said.

The proposed helicopter manufacturing facility will be the second aircraft FAL to be established in India by Airbus and TASL. The two are already building an FAL in Gujarat's Vadodara to produce the C295 military transport aircraft.

"This collaboration marks a significant milestone in promoting indigenous manufacturing and will also give a major boost to our economy by creating diverse opportunities for employment and job creation, unlocking the potential of the Indian aerospace sector, and further solidifying Indo-France relations," Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia posted on X (formerly Twitter).

Airbus expects the H125 production in India to "catalyse" the use of helicopters in the country. The company expects the helicopter to "revolutionise" passenger and goods transportation in India, along with increasing use segments like emergency medical services, disaster management, law enforcement, tourism, aerial work missions, and even regional air connectivity.

"Providing last mile connectivity to remote areas, the H125 will significantly contribute to the Government of India's regional connectivity scheme—Ude Desh ka Aam Naagrik (UDAN) that will further promote the tourism sector in the country," Airbus said.

Helicopter use in India lags many other countries where choppers are routinely used for a number of purposes. India's massive population and notable economic growth make it an attractive potential market for increased civil helicopter use.

"The H125 is the world's best-selling single-engine helicopter that outclasses other helicopters in its category. This high-performing versatile helicopter is a member of Airbus' Ecorelief family, which has accumulated more than 38 million flight hours worldwide. It can operate in high-and-hot and extreme environments and can be easily reconfigured for various missions, including aerial work, firefighting, law enforcement, rescue, air ambulance, passenger transport, and many others," Airbus said.

Disney Star mulls action against ZEEL for backing out from \$1.4-billion deal

PRESSTRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

DISNEY STAR is mulling legal actions against Zee Entertainment for backing out from a USD 1.4-billion sub-licensing agreement for TV broadcast of international cricket matches in India, according to industry sources.

This could brew another legal trouble for Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd (ZEEL), which is already facing an arbitration ple by Sony Group at the Singapore International Arbitration Centre, claiming USD 90 million for breach of conditions of their merger agreement.

Flipkart leads e-comm mkt

Flipkart is estimated to hold 48 per cent market share in online smartphone, as per AllianceBernstein report

GROWING USER BASE YEAR-ON-YEAR



MARKET SHARE



Source: AllianceBernstein/PITI



FASHION E-COMM SHARE



Akasa Air orders over 300 CFM LEAP-1B engines for 150 Boeing 737 MAX aircraft

States (US)-based GE Aerospace.

Akasa Air and CFM International did not divulge the exact number of engines that are part of the order, nor did they give details of the deal's financials. In November 2021, a similar deal was announced for over 144 LEAP 1B engines by Akasa Air and CFM International. That order, according to CFM International, was valued at nearly \$4.5 billion at list prices. It is worth noting that airlines negotiate significant volume discounts in such orders.

The agreement, announced in conjunction with the state visit of the French President Emmanuel Macron to India, also includes spare engines and a services contract. CFM International is a joint venture between France's Safran Aircraft Engines and United

aircraft, of which 22 are currently in service.

"This significant, long-term agreement is testament to the confidence that CFM International has in Akasa Air. Continuing to partner with CFM as our engine maintenance provider not only reaffirms our focus on operational reliability but equally underscores Akasa Air's relentless pursuit of world class safety," Akasa Air Founder and Chief Executive Officer Vinay Dube said.

On January 18, Akasa Air had topped up its earlier order of 76 planes with another 150-aircraft order. While the earlier order was for Boeing 737 MAX 8 aircraft, the latest one in-

FULL REPORT ON
www.indianexpress.com

Why European Union is shifting from being the global tech regulator to AI innovation advocate

SOUMYARENDRA BARIK
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26



European Commission reached a deal to introduce an AI Act last year, but the legislation has drawn criticism. File

ures to support European startups and small businesses in the development of trustworthy AI. The package includes a broad range of measures to support these startups and innovation, along with a proposal to provide privileged access to supercomputers to AI startups and the broader innovation community. The plan includes:

■ Acquiring, upgrading and operating AI-dedicated supercomputers to enable fast machine learning and training of large general-purpose AI (GPAI) models.

■ Facilitating access to the AI dedicated supercomputers, contributing to the widening of the use of AI to a large number of public and private users, including start-ups and SMEs.

■ Supporting the AI startup and research ecosystem in algorithmic development, testing, evaluation and validation of AI boom which it envisions will

be a crucial economic driver. In total, the country is looking to build a compute capacity of anywhere between 10,000 GPUs (graphic processing units) and 30,000 GPUs under the PPP model, and an additional 1,000-2,000 GPUs through the PSU Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), Minister of State for Electronics and IT Rajeev Chandrasekhar had earlier told this paper.

The government is exploring various incentive structures for private companies to set up computing centres in the country - ranging from a capital expenditure subsidy model which has been employed under the semiconductor scheme, a model where companies can be incentivised depending on their operational expenses, to offering them a "usage" fee, Chandrasekhar had said.

The government's idea is to create a digital public infrastructure (DPI) out of the GPU assembly it sets up so that startups can utilise its computational capacity for a fraction of the cost, without needing to invest in GPUs which are often the biggest cost centre of such operations.

■ Enabling the development of a variety of emerging AI applications based on GPAI models.

■ Supporting the AI startup and research ecosystem in algorithmic development, testing, evaluation and validation of AI boom which it envisions will

Europe, which has so far regulated technologies from a human-rights-first approach, was being accused by the industry of yet again regulating AI even before it has spread across the continent in a meaningful way.

The US has so far not needed to offer hardware service to businesses in the country because that is an area where a number of American companies have made formidable strides.

For instance, according to a 2020 blog by Microsoft, the company had developed a supercomputer for OpenAI - the firm behind ChatGPT - which consisted of 10,000 GPUs among other things.

This also comes after the European Commission reached a deal to introduce an AI Act last year, but the legislation has drawn criticism. The legislation includes safeguards on the use of AI within the EU, including clear guardrails on its adoption by law enforcement agencies, and consumers have been empowered to launch complaints against any perceived violations. The deal includes strong restrictions on facial recognition technology, and on using AI to manipulate human behaviour, alongside provisions for tough penalties for companies breaking the rules.

Governments can only use real-time biometric surveillance in public areas only when there are serious threats involved, such as terrorist attacks.

Ola founder's Krutrim becomes India's first AI unicorn startup

ANEES HUSSAIN
BENGALURU, JANUARY 26

drive innovation, and accelerate the company's goal to reshape the AI landscape. Aggarwal said in a statement that the funding round "not only validates the potential of Krutrim's innovative AI solutions but also underscores the confidence investors have in our ability to drive meaningful change out of India for the world".

"Bhavish has consistently brought cutting-edge tech innovation to India at scale with Ola Electric. Now, with Krutrim, he's poised to power the digital transformation of 'Viksit Bharat'. We're incredibly privileged to deepen our partnership with Bhavish and Krutrim," Avnish Bajaj, founder and MD of Matrix Partners India, said. FE

Govt halves Budget support to oil firms

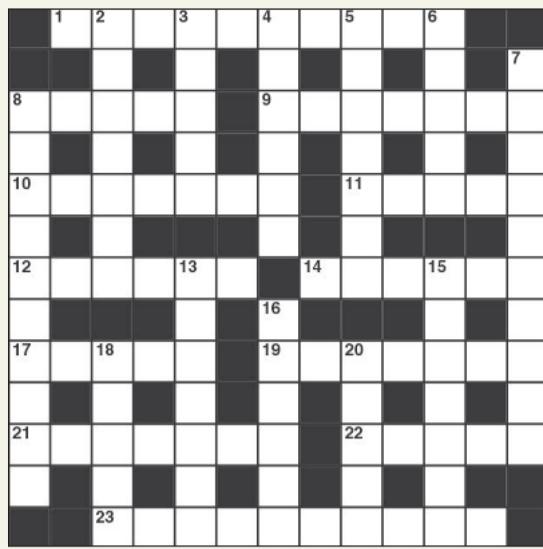
ARUNIMA BHARADWAJ
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

THE CENTRE has cut down equity infusion in the state-owned oil marketing companies to Rs 15,000 crore from the budget estimate of Rs 30,000 crore for the financial year 2023-24. The move is in the wake of the improvement in the finances of these firms in recent quarters.

The ministry has recommended that the proposal of filling up of crude oil to fill strategic underground storages in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh be deferred 'in view of emerging trends in oil markets'.

In the Budget 2023-24, the finance ministry has earmarked Rs 35,000 crore for priority capital investments towards energy transition, energy security, and attaining net-zero objectives by the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas. FE

CROSSWORD 5272



- ACROSS**
- Short measure of time in the middle (10)
 - Nellie is back but I'm wanting another (5)
 - Levy for arranging travel by air (3,4)
 - Contrary commercial jingle (7)
 - They entertain armies (5)
 - Note the appearance of upper-class people (6)
 - Having the flavour of the seasons (6)
 - She amasses a hoard (5)
 - The French prohibition on a Middle East republic (7)
 - Watching the way things go? (7)
 - Can turn into American fighting formations (5)
 - A bad standard in the main (6,4)
- DOWN**
- Cheer even about nothing perhaps (7)
 - Can he possibly get the right note? (5)
 - Annoyed a number if overfed (6)
 - It caters for those seeking childish amusement (7)
 - Part of the roof often dropped (5)
 - Quiet people in occupation like directors (10)
 - Overdraw an account (10)
 - More willing to give up the struggle and back out (7)
 - Outspoken article by GB Shaw (7)
 - Soft illumination leads to engagement (6)
 - Admit having won somehow on a horse (3,2)
 - Only pretend to be hearty (5)

Solutions Crossword 5271 Across: 1 Boards, 4 Tared, 9 Riviera, 10 Incur, 11 Falla, 12 Edifice, 13 Good company, 18 Prepare, 20 Denim, 22 Keats, 23 Calling, 24 Setter, 25 Crises Down: 1 Beret, 2 Anvil, 3 Die-hard, 5 Alibi, 6 Ruction, 7 Darken, 8 Malevolence, 14 Overact, 15 Peddler, 16 Spikes, 17 Images, 19 Aisle, 21 Nails

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 quip.

Courtesy is as much a mark of a gentleman as courage. - Theodore Roosevelt (7)

EGLAE

CNORCU

GPYOR

EGGNOG

Answers: EAGLE, CONGRUE, GOURMET, EGGSNOG

SALUTE THE SOLDIER

9426472P RFN RAHUL THAPA
No 9426472P Rfni Rahul Thapa of 1/11 Gorkha Rifles (BATALIK) left for his heavenly abode in an unfortunate accidental death during Boxing practice in Binnaguri, West Bengal on 27th Jan 2015. The brave soldier will always be remembered for his raw courage and indomitable team spirit. To this braveheart we pledge that we shall always be guided by his immortal spirit and make his name proud.

1/11 Gorkha Rifles (BATALIK)
(BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE)

UJVNL LIMITED
H.O.: "UJJWAL", Maharanji Bagh, G.M.S. Road, Dehradun-248006
Telephones: 0135-2763808, Fax: 0135-2763508
CIN No.U40101UR2001SGC025866, Website:www.ujvnl.com

Letter No:124 E-Tender Notice Date: 25/01/2024
Office of Executive Engineer (E&M-I), Lakhwar Project, Dakpathar, invites online bids from interested parties. Brief summary of tender is given below:
Tender No.: 14/EE/(E&M-I)/LP/2023-24

Name of the Work: Re-conducting & strengthening of 33 KV Dhakrani Lakhwar Construction Power line no-02.

Estimated Cost: Rs.8.28,000,000.00 (taxes extra)

Date of availability of bid document on website : 27/01/2024

Last Date for submission of bid on website: 19/02/2024 up to 17:00 hrs.

For fuller & further details, kindly visit e-procurement portal "http://uktenders.gov.in"

Executive Engineer (E&M-I) Lakhwar Project, Dakpathar

"AVOID WASTEFUL USE OF ELECTRICITY"

KARNATAKA POWER CORPORATION LIMITED
CIN : U85110KA1970SGC001919
No:KPCL/2023-24/SE0096 Date: 25.01.2024

SHORT-TERM NOTICE INVITING TENDER
(Through KPP portal only) (Two Cover System)

Tenders are invited from reputed companies / persons having adequate knowledge, expertise and funds mobilisation capacity for "Liaisoning, Movement, handling and delivery of upto 10.00 lakh MT of Coal from Mahanadi Coalfields Limited, Talcher in Odisha to Raichur Thermal Power Station (RTPS) in Karnataka by Rail-Rail route" for a period of 6 months. The last date for receipt of the completed bids is 17.00 hrs on 09.02.2024. The tender document can be downloaded from the website: <https://www.kppp.karnataka.gov.in>. Further details can be had from THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER (MINES), KPCL, No.82, Shakti Bhavan, 3rd Floor, Race Course Road, Bengaluru-560 001. Telefax. No.080-22203894 e-mail:cefuelskpcl@karnataka.gov.in website: www.kpcl.karnataka.gov.in KPPP (e-portal) helpdesk/ HP help desk: +91-8046010000/+91-8068948777

RAICHUR POWER CORPORATION LIMITED
(YERAMARUS THERMAL POWER STATION)
(A JOINT VENTURE COMPANY OF KPCL, BHEL)

CIN : U40101KA2009PLC049582
No.KPCL/2023-24/SE0095 Date:25.01.2024

NOTICE INVITING TENDER

(Through KPP Portal only) (Two Cover System)

Tenders are invited from reputed companies / persons for coal supplies from various loading point/s of SCCL & having adequate knowledge & experience about movement, handling & delivery of approximately 52.36 lakh MTs of coal per annum under Fuel Supply Agreement (FSA) by All Rail Route to Yermarus Thermal Power Station (YTPS) including the works of liaisoning, supervision & monitoring of quality and quantity from SCCL Loading Point/s for a period of one (01) year. The last date for receipt of the completed bids is 17.00 hrs. 08.02.2024. The tender document can be downloaded from the website <https://www.kppp.karnataka.gov.in>. Further details can be had from THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER (MINES), KPCL, No.82, Shakti Bhavan, III Floor, Race Course Road, Bengaluru-560 001. Telefax. No.080-22203894. e-mail:cefuelskpcl@karnataka.gov.in website: www.kpcl.karnataka.gov.in e-mail:cefuelskpcl@karnataka.gov.in website: +91-8046010000/+91-8068948777

OVER THE HEDGE by Michael Fry & T Lewis



CALVIN & HOBBES by Bill Watterson



MARVIN by Tom Armstrong



DAY TODAY

BY PETER VIDAL

ARIES (Mar 21 - Apr 20)

Your finances are more positive than you imagine. You're tempted to spend more than you can afford, but you don't have to break the bank. Maybe there are bargains to be had if only you take the time to look around. A friend can point you in the right direction.

TAURUS (Apr 21 - May 21)

Be enterprising this weekend and seek out fresh opportunities in new areas. There may be a chance of a flutter and there'll be no harm in that as long as you're completely sure of your ground. By the time partners realise what is happening, you will be home and dry.

GEMINI (May 22 - June 21)

Interesting planetary aspects are there to be used, yet there are difficult indications which you can minimise if you wish. At this stage, it's up to you to create your own future rather than abandoning responsibility to others. Independence is everything.

CAPRICORN (Dec 23 - Jan 20)

It's a day to enjoy yourself, spend money and extend hospitality to old friends. There are domestic chores to catch up with, in which case you might find that a partner is determined to be uncooperative. But then that is their problem. You have better things to do.

AQUARIUS (Jan 21 - Feb 19)

The Sun is backing and boosting you as hard as it can, creating exactly the right conditions for forming new friendships and healing long-standing rifts with rivals. New initiatives which you begin now will bring unexpected twists down the line.

PICTURES (Feb 20 - Mar 20)

You switch into a more emotional phase. That finds you feeling generally more comfortable with life and less agitated by the sense that you should be somewhere else and doing something completely different. Stick close to home if it makes you feel better.

LIBRA (Sep 24 - Oct 23)
Weekend stars favour peace and relaxation, and you'll achieve this desirable goal best if you pursue activities which take your mind off routine matters. Keep your eye out for hidden costs, otherwise one of your planned trips will unravel.

SCORPIO (Oct 24 - Nov 23)
Look on the bright side. At least the personal pressure should be lower than it was. You're far less likely to be subject to unfair criticism and far more likely to receive extra love and affection. That is surely cause for satisfaction. Plus, take care with cash offers.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov 24 - Dec 22)

Benevolent planetary aspects are there to be used, yet there are difficult indications which you can minimise if you wish. At this stage, it's up to you to create your own future rather than abandoning responsibility to others. Independence is everything.

CANCER (June 22 - July 23)

The next stage is to

reconsider recent developments, and decide whether

you're happy with your

progress so far. But events

may soon move so fast that

there'll be little time for

detailed thought. In that case,

you'd just better hang on to

what you've got.

LEO (July 24 - Aug 23)

Put the brakes on, especially in the financial department. If you can only learn to live within your means, you'll be fine. Family affairs look easier in the afternoon, so hang in until later if you have awkward things to say, and difficult discussions to handle.

VIRGO (Aug 24 - Sep 23)

Fortunately you've got what it takes to cope with current situations. You may not be experienced in practical ways, but you have a great skill in understanding human nature and predicting friends' reactions and behaviour. Your foresight is on top form.

FORM-19

[Sub – Rule (1) of Rule 27]

DECLARATION BY APPROPRIATE GOVERNMENT/COLLECTOR

[UNDER SUB-SECTION (1) OF SECTION 19 OF THE ACT]

NOTIFICATION

November 23, 2023

No.390/VIII-S.L.A.O./Moradabad/2023- Whereas preliminary notification no..... dated..... was issued under sub section (1) of section 11 of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Rehabilitation and Resettlement act 2013, in respect of 0.1493 Hectares of land in village- Sarthal, Pergana-Jargaon, Tehsil-Bilari, District-Moradabad is required for the public purpose, namely, MGC Stage-II through Madhya Ganga Canal Construction Division-15 Moradabad (name of requiring body) and lately published on The Deputy Collector/Assistant Collector..... was appointed as administrator for the purpose of rehabilitation and resettlement of the project affected families.

After considering the report of the Collector submitted in pursuance to provision under sub section (2) of the section 15 of the act, The Governor is pleased to declare under section 19(1) of the act that he is satisfied that the area of land mentioned in the given schedule "A" is needed for the public purpose and the land to the extent of..... hectares in Village-Sarthal, Pergana-Jargaon, Tehsil-Bilari, District- Moradabad as given schedule "B" has been identified as the rehabilitation and resettlement area for the purpose of rehabilitation and resettlement of the displaced families.

The Governor is further pleased under sub section (2) of section 19 of the act, to direct the Collector of to publish a summary of the rehabilitation and resettlement scheme with publication of declaration to this effect. The summary of the rehabilitation and resettlement scheme is attached herewith.

SCHEDULE-A
(LAND UNDER PROPOSED ACQUISITION)

District	Tehsil	Pargana	Village	Plot No.	Area to be acquired
1	2	3	4	5	6
Moradabad	Bilari	Jargaon	Sarthal	119	0.0784
				729	0.0240
				1152	0.0469
				Total	0.1493

SCHEDULE-B
(LAND IDENTIFIED AS SETTLEMENT AREA FOR DISPLACED FAMILIES)

District	Tehsil	Pargana	Village	Plot No.	Area to be acquired
1	2	3	4	5	6

NOTE: A plan of the land may be inspected in the office of the Collector for the purpose of acquisition.

(Sd.)ILLIGIBLE
Secretary/Authorised Officer
Moradabad

Classifieds

PUBLIC NOTICE

BE IT KNOWN TO ALL THAT THE REGISTERED ORIGINAL SALE DEED OF SHOP NO. B- 1/9, KRISHNA NAGAR, DELHI-110051 HAS BEEN LOST/ MISPLACED AND LR NO. 137553/2024 DATED 24/01/2024 HAS BEEN ISSUED BY DELHI POLICE.

CO-OWNER- MOHIT DUTTA
S/o. LATE SH. SUBHASH DUTTA
SHOP NO. B-1/9, KRISHNA NAGAR, DELHI-110051

"IMPORTANT"

Whilst care is taken prior to acceptance of 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.

indianexpress.com



I look at every side before taking a side.

Inform your opinion with insightful perspectives.

The Indian Express.
For the Indian Intelligent.

The Indian EXPRESS
JOURNALISM OF COURAGE

BRIEFLY

Saurabh's takes 5 for 102, India 'A' on cusp of win

Ahmedabad: Left-arm spinner Saurabh Kumar continued his brilliant run for India A with his 22nd career five-wicket haul, putting India A on the cusp of big win against England Lions at the end of day three in the second 'unofficial Test' here on Thursday. Starting the second innings with 341 runs in arrear, England Lions did perform far better in the second innings, ending the day at 304 for 8. They still need 37 runs to avoid innings defeat and only have two wickets in hand.

BRIEF SCORES: **England Lions** 152 & 304/8 (Ollie Robinson 84 batting, Saurabh Kumar 5/102) vs **India 'A'** 493 Devdutt Padikkal 101, Sarfaraz Khan 161; Mathew Potts 6/125. **REUTERS**

Australia recover after batting collapse

Brisbane: The West Indies tail batted superbly on Friday and followed up in commanding fashion with the ball to stun Australia, who trail in the second test by 35 runs after a top-order collapse necessitated a counter-attack at the Gabba in Brisbane. Leading 1-0 in the two-game series, the home side recovered from 24-4 to boldly declare 22 runs behind at 289-9 in the night session, after fast bowlers Kemar Roach (3-47) and Alzarri Joseph (4-84) inflicted maximum damage. **REUTERS**

BRIEF SCORES: **West Indies** 311 (Joshua da Silva 79, Kavem Hodge 71; Mitchell Starc 4/82) & 13/1 vs **Australia:** 289/9 dcl (Usman Khawaja 75, Alex Carey 65, Pat Cummins 64 no; Alzarri Joseph 4/84)

Malik refutes match fixing claims

Dhaka: Former Pakistan skipper Shoaib Malik has vehemently refuted allegations of match-fixing in the Bangladesh Premier League and unsubstantiated claims that his contract with Fortune Barishal was terminated. The speculation arose after he bowled three no-balls in the opening over during a match against Khulna Tigers on January 22. "I want to make it clear that I strongly refute these baseless rumors. It's crucial for everyone to verify information before believing and spreading it," Malik wrote in his 'X' account. **PTI**

Uttarakhand bowl out Delhi for 147

Mohali: Delhi continued to struggle in Ranji Trophy as Uttarakhand's pace bowlers bowled them out for 147 in a Ranji Trophy match in Mohali. In five completed innings so far this season, Delhi batters have failed to cross 200 on three occasions and highest individual score is Vaibhav Kandpal's 49 in last game. On the day, it was Yash Dhull's 47 and at stumps, Uttarakhand were 98 for four with Navdeep Saini scalping three wickets. **PTI**

BRIEF SCORES: **Delhi** 147 in 49.2 overs (Yash Dhull 47, Abhay Negi 3/34, Devendra Bora 3/40) vs **Uttarakhand** 98/4 (Avneesh Sudha 55 batting, Navdeep Saini 3/39).

STARS IN THE MAKING

Meet the Indian-origin chess prodigies taking Britain by storm

AMIT KAMATH

MUMBAI, JANUARY 26

IN AUGUST last year, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, on the verge of announcing a mega financial package for chess in the UK, invited two young chess prodigies to 10 Downing Street. They were eight-year-old Bodhana Sivanandan and 14-year-old Shreyas Royal – both British citizens of Indian origin, just like Sunak himself.

Since the pandemic, India has gained a reputation as a land of young chess stars, but these two Indian-origin prodigies have made a reputation for themselves in England. Last year, Bodhana won the under-8 title at the World Cadet Championship. She is also the World Youth Champion and is presently ranked 30th in England in the women's category. Shreyas is currently ranked 19th in England among active players.

Over the course of two months, Bodhana has defeated three International Masters – Lorin D'Costa at the European Blitz Championship in Zagreb last month, and Lela Javakhishvili and Nuryul Salimova at the European Women's Blitz Championship in Monaco last week – besides holding multiple others like Grandmaster Elisabeth Paehtz to draws.

Shreyas, too, has made waves recently. At the London Chess tournament in December 2023, he managed to defeat GM Jules Moussard and drew with players like India's

Gukesh, a considerable achievement since Shreyas' rating was at least 200 points lower than everyone else in the tournament. The performance at the London event also helped Shreyas earn his second Grandmaster norm, which puts him on course to become the youngest GM to represent England.

While Bodhana and Shreyas are British citizens, their families are first-generation migrants. Bodhana's parents lived in Tamil Nadu's Trichy while Shreyas was born in Bengaluru.

"I'm an economic migrant to the UK, having moved in 2007. I work in the IT sector. Bodhana was born and brought up in London. She started playing chess when she was just five years old. We had no plans to make her play chess. She just stumbled across a chess board at home, and started to play," Bodhana's father Sivanandan Velayutham tells *The Indian Express*.

"I knew just basic chess, so I downloaded Chess.com to help her learn by watching the videos there. Back then, I just got her a free version, thinking she might not continue the sport," he said.

Not only did Bodhana continue playing the sport, soon medals and trophies – spoils of winning online tournaments – started arriving at their home. Her talent also saw her become an ambassador for Chess.com's app for kids, ChessKid (the app also supports Shreyas).

While adulation for the young star has been unrestrained in the chess community, her parents are wary of letting it get to her



British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak with chess prodigies Bodhana Sivanandan and Shreyas Royal at 10 Downing Street in August. Flickr/Number10

head. "Her rating is 1856. You need to be 2500 to become a GM. It's not easy... it's miles away. She's getting a lot of appreciation because of her age and how she's winning. But we just make sure that she's grounded and

doesn't start thinking she's a legend or something. Things can go wrong if not taken with the right attitude," Velayutham says.

As a school kid growing up in London's Harrow, Bodhana does not have the same

KIRAN LOSES

Indian qualifier Kiran George's dream run ended in the quarterfinals when he lost to reigning world champion Kunlavut Vitidsarn of Thailand in the Indonesia Masters. The Indian world No. 36 went down 14-21 6-21. **PTI**

Wheels come off England's bus

Inexperienced England bowling unit, hampered by spin-spearhead Leach's sore leg, display ineptness to hand hosts Day 2 honours

VENKATA KRISHNA B
JANUARY 26

THE BAZBALLERS from England may have found a workable approach to survive against India's spinners, but they are in dire need of a Plan B in bowling if they are to nurse any chance of competing in the series. Having decided to bench James Anderson and Ollie Robinson, their attack that includes two spinners with just one Test experience between them and a fast-bowler who can't perform defensive roles meant they let India dictate the terms on Day 2 of the first Test.

With an inadequate bowling resource and Jack Leach unable to bowl long spells with a sore left knee, England were in no position to put any sort of pressure on India, who were 421/7 at stumps on Day 2 with a healthy lead of 175.

On a day where England needed their bowlers to keep them in the game, they fell way short of it as KL Rahul's wonderfully crafted 86 and Ravindra Jadeja's solid, unbeaten 81 on Friday put them into submission. Having put 246 on board, which seemed sufficient on the first day, England's two rookie spinners – Rehan Ahmed and debutant Tom Hartley – alone conceded 236 runs between them in 48 over, thus hardly helping their cause.

Overseas teams, who mostly play with one established spinner at home, bringing rookies to India and relying on them on rank turners isn't new. From Jason Kreza, Steve O'Keefe, Matthew Kuhnemann, Australia have done it over the years. While the likes of O'Keefe, Kuhnemann and Todd Murphy did manage to inflict damage on India's batting unit, the conditions here in Hyderabad were far different to those they played on.

Of course, England did read the pitch right, fielding three spinners like India did. But this isn't the sort of track that narrowed the gulf in class between the two sets of spinners.

It actually only widened it from the moment it became clear that it wasn't a raging turner, but a slow one where you need to have patience, impeccable control and guile to master these conditions, especially when the ball gets old.

"It's not going to be easy. Just because it's spinning doesn't mean it makes the game easier," England's assistant coach Jeetan Patel said. "For spinners sometimes it becomes harder because there's so much expectation. Our guys learned from yesterday and bowled better today and will bowl better tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. They have to no keep getting better in the series," he added.

As it was on Day 1, the pitch didn't crumble like it during England's tour in 2021. This had good bounce; there was turn too; and it got slower as the day progressed.

Like Rohit Sharma on Day 1, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill, Shreyas Iyer and KL Rahul got out going for aggressive shots. It was not a case of them not trusting their defence but those deliveries were asking to be punished. The last two were caught at deep mid-wicket to balls that sat up and were asking to be hit. One could argue they missed out on runs, but India didn't suffer because of those.

Indisciplined, insipid

On pitches like these, dot balls after dot balls build pressure, which in turn forces batsmen to search for boundaries, which could bring with it an element of risk. Truth

SCORECARD

INDIA VS ENGLAND

Rajiv Gandhi stadium, Hyderabad

Toss: England, chose to bat

ENGLAND 1ST INNINGS 246

INDIA 1ST INNINGS (Overnight 119/1)

Y Jaiswal c & b Root 80 (74b, 10x4, 3x6)

S Gill c Duckett b Hartley 23 (66b, 2x4)

KL Rahul c Rehan Ahmed b Hartley 86 (123b, 8x4, 2x6)

Slyer c Hartley b Rehan Ahmed 35 (63b, 3x4, 1x6)

R Jadeja batting 81 (155b, 7x4, 2x6)

S Bharat † lbw b Root 41 (81b, 3x4)

R Ashwin run out (Hartley † Foakes) 1 (1lb)

Akar Patel batting 35 (62b, 5x4, 1x6)

■ Extras (b5, lb6, nb2, w2) 15

■ Total (110 overs) 421/7

■ FoW: 1-80 (Rohit Sharma, 12.0v), 2-123

(Yashasvi Jaiswal, 23.4ov), 3-159 (Shubman Gill, 34.5ov), 4-223 (Shreyas Iyer, 52.3ov), 5-288 (KL Rahul, 64.5ov), 6-356 (Srikar Bharat, 88.2ov), 7-358 (Ravichandran Ashwin, 90.3ov)

■ Bowling: Mark Wood 13-0-43-0, Tom Hartley 25-0-131-2, Jack Leach 25-6-54-1, Rehan Ahmed 23-3-105-1, Joe Root 24-2-77-2.



Ravindra Jadeja remained unbeaten on 81 as India took a 175-run lead with three wickets in hand on Day 2 in Hyderabad. **PTI**

The mood and method behind Rahul, India's new man for crisis

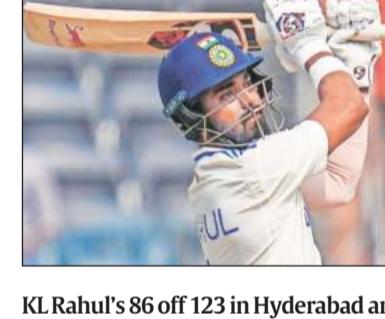
VENKATA KRISHNA B
HYDERABAD, JANUARY 26

LAST WINTER, when Australia toured India, KL Rahul was battling for a spot in the Test side. With a red-hot Shubman Gill waiting in the wings, mid-way through the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, India benched him for the final two Tests. He had gone more than a year without a century in Tests, struggling for runs across conditions. In the time he spent away from the Test side, and especially since his return from injury in August, his stocks have only increased. In a period where he has turned into a source of runs, especially in crisis situations, India could no longer overlook him even in Tests.

In South Africa, despite not having kept wicket in a first-class game, he donned the gloves behind the stumps, only because his batting was much needed.

Ahead of the series, before Virat Kohli took a break, head coach Rahul Dravid asserted that Rahul would not keep. But you could sense he was going to make the XI as a batsman. The local conditions haven't been kind to Rahul, who has scored only one of his eight centuries at home. And that came in 2016 against England on a flat deck in Chennai. His last of his nine fifties at home had come in Afghanistan's maiden Test in 2018.

But when Rahul walked in at No 4 in the first over of the day, India needed him more than ever before. In their bid to bat once and big, a good morning session was essential. It was the reason he earned a promotion here, ahead of Shreyas Iyer. Off the second ball he faced, Rahul edged Joe Root, but Ben Foakes



KL Rahul's 86 off 123 in Hyderabad and his recent 101 in Centurion provided solidity in the middle order. **PTI**

couldn't hold on behind the stumps. That the umpire signalled a bye meant even if had caught it, with no reviews left, England couldn't have overturned the decision.

Stroke of luck

It is perhaps the luck that Rahul needed. The first sign that he had overcome jitters came off the 18th ball Rahul faced, when he came down the track and lofted Tom Hartley over mid-on. Off the next delivery, he used his feet even better to fetch another boundary at long-on. Here was a batsman riding a wave of confidence. With all the technical qualities to assert his authority in any conditions, Rahul's career has been frustrating in the past. He had been showing signs of his calibre every now and then, but since his comeback from the injury, India are seeing the sparkling talent that everyone has been

raving about in his younger days on a more frequent basis.

If his century at Centurion was a test of character, the 86 showed Rahul has become a dependable player. Like he has done in the ODIs, Rahul is beginning to dictate his own terms in Tests. After an inside-edge that flew to the boundary, a punch standing tall through the covers and an improvised paddle shot to a short-ball fetched him boundaries that immediately put pressure back on England after losing Gill.

Rahul would repeat this pattern after India lost Shreyas Iyer immediately after lunch. Having let the Mumbaikar go for shots and dropping anchor for a while, with new man Ravindra Jadeja in, he would alter his gameplan. With the ball beginning to get softer, and England making attempts to come back into the game by slowing the pace down, Rahul would ensure the momentum stayed with the hosts. The charge would start with a boundary on either side of the square in Rehan Ahmed's over. The first came via his trademark late-cut. The second, a conventional sweep, scorched the green carpet to the fence. Off Ahmed's next over, he would show where he stood in terms of his game.

A leg-spinner, who mostly bowls with a scrambled seam, Ahmed's only mistake was to pitch it in the slot for Rahul to bring out the golf-bat-like swing as the ball soared over the long-on fence. Four deliveries later, as Ahmed provided a long hop, he would duly deposit it over the long-on fence. The 65-run partnership came in just 74 deliveries, before Rahul holed out at deep mid-wicket. The wait for a second home century continued, but it appears closer than ever before.

Last year, Bodhana won the

under-8 title at the World Cadet Championship. She is also the World Youth Champion and is presently ranked 30th in England in the women's category. Shreyas is currently ranked 19th in England among active players.

in the country reached out to British MPs to lobby for Shreyas to stay because of his "exceptional chess talent". UK Home Secretary Sajid Javid eventually agreed to tweak visa norms and England got itself a prodigy.

"I had initially come to the UK for one year, then got an extension on my visa for another five years. But there was a cooling off period, so we were told we would have to leave. We were packing our things, when we got a call from the Home Office that we could stay on because of Shreyas' exceptional talents," Jitendra tells *The Indian Express*.

"Our local MP Matthew Pennycook and Leeds MP Rachel Reeves, besides the English Chess Federation, really fought for us to stay. Now we're British citizens," he adds.

There is a fascinating story behind his name too – when an astrologer suggested the initials of SR, his mother chose Shreyas (meaning superior) and plucked Royal out of thin air, anglicising his name much before he had even been to the UK.

Shreyas, who spends five to six hours on chess daily, has come within touching distance of becoming chess royalty – the GM title. He's missed the third and final norm by a whisker a couple of times, including at the FIDE Grand Swiss Tournament. But he's hopeful that he'll cross the hurdle soon enough. "Maybe me playing for England is a slight loss for India. But I feel India already has enough chess prodigies. I don't think I am such a huge loss for a country like India," Shreyas says.

I have the belief that I can play the best players in the world. On Sunday, I'm in my first final. Let's see how it goes. I'm really happy, I'll come here with a smile and try my best - **Jannik Sinner**

Shockwave and awe

Jannik Sinner ends 10-time champ Novak Djokovic's 33-win streak at the Australian Open

NAMIT KUMAR
JANUARY 26

In a resolute, nerveless, three-hour-long display of destructive shot making and tactical mastery, Jannik Sinner, the rising 22-year-old World No.4, defeated Novak Djokovic 6-1, 6-2, 6-7(6), 6-3 in the semifinals of the Australian Open on Friday, reaching his first Major final and becoming the first Italian man to reach the singles final in Melbourne.

Sinner outplayed and outmanoeuvred the undisputed king of Melbourne Park – and men's tennis in general – and in doing so, not only strengthened his long-held credentials as a potential great in the making, but also achieved a feat that none of the Serb's greatest rivals had been able to accomplish even at the peak of their careers.

Prior to Friday, 10-time champion Djokovic had never lost in the semifinal or final of the Australian Open. A perfect 20-0 record. He was 33 matches unbeaten in Melbourne, a streak that went back to 2018 – 2195 days, as the broadcasters were keen to point out every chance they got.

The Serb's dominance of the Slams, and particularly Melbourne Park, was not simply down to extraordinary tennis repertoire, but instead part of a legacy built on a near-supernatural ability to expose best-of-five tennis for the collection of short sprints that it is, as opposed to the consistent long run marathon that has always been claimed to be.

Even when thoroughly outplayed, Djokovic has always possessed the athleticism and presence of mind to take matches deep, win the pressure points, keep himself competitive enough to give himself a chance to win the match in the finer margins.



So, Sinner's statement-making victory was not completed during the first half of the match, when the solid Italian took advantage of a streaky-looking Djokovic to race into an early two-set lead. Instead, it was earned during the second half, when he prevented the 24-time Grand Slam champion, who raised his game to try to take the contest deep, from completing one of his signature comebacks.

Superior in all departments

Djokovic was unquestionably flat at the start of this match, and his second-half recovery was never too convincing either, similar to his level in his first five matches of the tournament. Out of 90 completed points in the first two sets, Djokovic made 29 unforced errors.

He would admit to this himself, cutting a disappointed figure in his post-match press conference. "I was, in a way, shocked with my level, in a bad way," he said. "This is one of the worst Grand Slam matches I've ever played, at least that I remember... This tournament hasn't been, as I said, up to my standard or criteria or the level that I would normally play or expect myself to play."

And Sinner was in diametrically opposite form.

Baseline strategy has formed a primary emphasis of the work he has been doing with his new coaching team – led by Darren Cahill, Andre Agassi's former coach – since the start of 2022 and he nailed it in the biggest result of his career. The Italian's lean, wiry frame and composed demeanour do not betray the full strength of the destructive power that comes



World no 4 Jannik Sinner defeated Novak Djokovic 6-1, 6-2, 6-7(6), 6-3 in the semifinals of the Australian Open on Friday.

AP

off his racquet.

His pure ball striking ability would send Djokovic trailing to catch balls, and his aggression from start to finish allowed him to finish points before Djokovic could even get balls back into play to wear him down. Djokovic was out of sorts, but it was Sinner's baseline prowess that had him totally out of his comfort zone, making him rush his shots and ex-tracting errors.

Despite it not being the highlight of his game, Sinner served exceptionally – according to Opta, this is the first Grand Slam match of Djokovic's 19-year-long career where he did not even have a single break point opportunity.

Sinner won 80 of the points when the rallies were four shots or less, as opposed to Djokovic's 43. In the first two sets, that number is 32-16, showing just how well Sinner was serving and returning, and keeping points short to keep Djokovic out of his comfort zone.

Maintaining composure

Djokovic was subpar throughout the match, but recovered from the first two sets reasonably, he began to raise his level just enough to make sure he can take advantage if the player on the other side of the net buckled.

Lesser players would have tightened up one set away from the biggest result of their career, but Sinner's concentration never wavered. Even as Djokovic improved, the Italian stayed true to his aggressive strategy, and served consistently well to get over the line in the pressure moments and take the third set into a tiebreaker, where Djokovic typically showed signs of life and recovered from match point down – with an expertly executed lob no less – to edge the tiebreaker. Another famous turnaround was lurking.

But Sinner never cowered, coming out in the fourth set just as he had done all match – bombing down serves, putting pressure on Djokovic through aggressive return strategy, and striking the ball as purely as he had done from the start.

NUMBERS GAME

20 Prior to Friday, 10-time champion Djokovic had a perfect 20-0 record in the semifinals and finals of the Australian Open.

33 Sinner ended Djokovic's 33-match unbeaten streak at the Australian Open, a run that has spanned 2195 days, since 2018.

● In his 19-year-long career, this was the first Grand Slam match Djokovic played where he was not able to fashion a single breakpoint opportunity.

● Sinner has won four of the six matches he has played against Djokovic. Only Nadal with 5/6 has a better record. The Italian has won three of his last four encounters with the Serb.

It would be Djokovic who would blink. After saving two break points earlier in the set, his serve would be broken on a game in which he was 40-0 up. Anyone familiar with Djokovic's history would be aware that the match is far from over, but Sinner served out the win with the freedom of a player that was not simply attempting to protect his lead, but outrightly going for the kill.

Ever since he was a teenager, hype has swirled around the lethal nature of his shot-making and complete nature of his game. After growing into his body and peaking physically, Sinner's tendency to collapse meant he needed to prove that he could hold his nerve against an all-time great opponent with the Grand Slam pressure on him. After picking up his third win in four matches against Djokovic, and reaching his first Major final, some of those doubts have surely been put to bed.

Medvedev outlasts Zverev to book Sinner showdown

REUTERS
MELBOURNE, JANUARY 26

DANIIL MEDVEDEV fought back from the brink to beat Alexander Zverev 5-7 3-6 7-6(4) 7-6(5) 6-3 in a thrilling Australian Open semi-final on Friday and stay on course for his second Grand Slam title.

Having suffered heartbreak at Melbourne Park in back-to-back final defeats by Novak Djokovic and Rafa Nadal in 2021 and 2022, former U.S. Open champion Medvedev will hope to get third time lucky when he meets Italian youngster Jannik Sinner on Sunday.

"Very impressive," third seed Medvedev said of his opponent. "I need to recover well and be 100% on Sunday."

"We have a saying 'third time lucky'. Let's see, I can say from experience that it's not always like this but hopefully here it'll work. It would mean a lot. This court is not my best court in terms of my performance and my self-esteem."

"That's why I often have to dig deep at this tournament. I would be the happiest man on the planet but for that I have to play pretty well and win three sets on Sunday."

Russian Medvedev positioned himself well behind the baseline to counter Zverev's booming serves and extend the rallies but he fired a series of early double faults to fall behind. He clawed his way back from two breaks down to draw level at 5-5.

Zverev struck again to move in front and raised his arms to huge applause after taking the first set with a superb backhand volley, having set up the opportunity by winning the previous point after an exhausting



51-shot rally.

"In the first set, we both played not very good, second set I played better but he played very well, I was a bit lost" said Medvedev, shortly after pointing to his head while celebrating his sixth Grand Slam final appearance. "In the third set I just started saying to myself, 'I just want to be proud of myself, to fight to the end, fight for every point. If I lose, I lose'. I managed to win so I'm proud."

Draining match

The 26-year-old Zverev came into the net more and broke for a 3-2 lead in the second set, but Medvedev did not give up despite looking like he had just run a marathon and pinched the third set in a tiebreak.

"In the third set I was tired physically and I knew I could not run for 40-point rallies anymore, so I decided to go more aggressive. Again, if it doesn't work out, I tried. It started working," Medvedev said.

"I started to make better shots than I had done before, I served better, and the tiebreaks were really unbelievable. A bit lucky at 5-5 but that's tennis."

Medvedev continued to push hard in a tense fourth set and the 27-year-old shrugged off a double fault in the tiebreak to level the contest, before breaking in the fifth game of the decider to lay the platform for his great escape.

It was the second time he had come from two sets down in the tournament to prevail.

"I've never made it this tough, but I'm happy about it because before my statistics in five sets were never that good," Medvedev added. "Physically and mentally, it's tough, five sets and before I wasn't strong enough."

Fiery Sabalenka's final hurdle: Dreamer Zheng



Zheng Qinwen is China's first Australian Open finalist in 10 years.
Reuters

REUTERS
MELBOURNE, JANUARY 26

ARYNA SABALENKA has blown all-comers off court on her march to the final of the Australian Open and China's Zheng Qinwen will need to produce something extraordinary to deprive her of back-to-back titles on Rod Laver Arena on Saturday.

The Belarusian is the first woman since Serena Williams in the middle of the last decade to reach consecutive finals and, while she has a long way to go to match feats of the American great, they do have something in common. When combined with mental strength and consistency, raw power is a quality that almost guarantees success in women's games.

Sabalenka has always had the power and, since addressing the frequent on-court melt-downs that once blighted her career, has shown a frightening level of consistency at Grand Slams. The 25-year-old has now reached the semi-finals or better at the last six majors, going on to win her first Grand Slam title in Melbourne and losing the U.S. Open final to American teenager Coco Gauff last year.

Sabalenka got a measure of revenge for that Flushing Meadows defeat in a high quality semi-final on Thursday but, crucially, gave the impression that she would not have been absolutely devastated had she lost the tight contest. "Worst case, I'm like 'Okay, I'm gonna lose this tournament, and it's less points to defend next year. Then that's it,'" she said of her approach to the tournament.

"That's kind of like helping me to just stay focused and just try my best in each match."

Her more relaxed approach is reflected in a new pre-match ritual, signing the bald head of her performance coach Jason Stacy.

Complete player

Zheng, voted the most improved player on the WTA tour last year, was the only seed in the top half of the draw to survive into the quarter-finals and knows she will have her work cut out in her first Grand Slam final.

"She's the biggest hitter on the tour. She got the biggest serve, biggest forehand, big backhand. She's a really complete player," the 12th seed said after her semi-final win.

"I haven't faced any top seeds in the earlier rounds but, you know, it's a match, so let's see what happens."

Sabalenka beat Zheng 6-1 6-4 in their only previous meeting in the quarter-finals of last year's U.S. Open but said she was wary of the 21-year-old's forehand. "She's playing really great tennis," she said. "She's a really nice girl and really playing really great tennis once again. It's going to be a great battle." Zheng, who moved to Li's hometown of Wuhan as a child to pursue her tennis dream, was prepared to accept there was an element of destiny in her winning a place in the final 10 years to the day after her hero won the title on Rod Laver Arena. "My dream is not just the final," she added. "I'm almost there, but I know this little distance is still far away. I'm not there yet. There is still something that needs to happen."

Klopp to part ways with Liverpool at end of season

REUTERS
LONDON, JANUARY 26

JUERGEN KLOPP stunned the world of football on Friday when he announced he would stand down as Liverpool manager at the end of season, saying that after more than eight hugely successful years in charge he was running out of energy.

The German, who led Liverpool to the League Cup final and is hugely popular with the fans, told the club's hierarchy in November that he would end his eight-and-a-half year stay at Anfield after this season.

Assistant managers Pepijn Lijnders and Peter Krawietz are also leaving the club. "It is the one I have to take. "I have no problem now, obviously, I knew it already for longer that I will have to announce it at one point, but I am absolutely fine now. I know that I cannot do the job again and again and again and again."



The German joined Liverpool in October 2015 and has won the Champions League, Premier League, Club World Cup, FA Cup, League Cup and Super Cup, as well as the Community Shield during his time in charge.

"In keeping with Juergen's expressed wishes, we will save the comprehensive tributes for a more appropriate time but nevertheless, we would be remiss if

we did not take this opportunity to reaffirm that his appointment remains one of the greatest blessings of our time as owners," Mike Gordon, Fenway Sports Group president, said. "The incredible achievements of the intervening years speak for themselves, so too does the joy that Juergen and his team have brought to all of us supporters. His many accomplishments will never be taken for granted."

Klopp has won seven trophies at Liverpool and will always be remembered as the manager who brought the glory days back to the club, tasting success at home and abroad.

"I love absolutely everything about this club, I love everything about the city, I love everything about our supporters, I love the team, I love the staff. But that I still take this de-

Teen star Pavade eyes an encore at Paris

ANIL DIAS
PANAJI, JANUARY 26

SHE'S FRENCH, has Indian roots and at the Paris Olympics, six months away, she'll be ranked higher than any other female table tennis player from the country of her birth and ancestry.

No wonder, then, that 19-year-old Prithika Pavade is making heads turn in both the countries.

Prithika's father, who was born and raised in Puducherry, migrated to Paris after getting married. Prithika was born in the French capital and this summer, will get a rare opportunity to compete in an Olympics at home. On Friday, she gave a glimpse into what she's capable of.

Currently ranked 33rd in the world and number one in France, Prithika fought back after being two games and a match point down in the third to beat South Korea's Ryu Hanna 9-11, 9-11, 10-12, 7-11, 3-11 and set up a Round of 16 clash with another Korean paddler, Nayoung Kim.

In the table tennis circuit, it's quite common to see players of Chinese origin play for top European countries. Prithika's compatriot, 38-year-old Jia Nan Yuan, who recently won the European Top 16 Cup and the 2022 mixed doubles European Championship, also learned her sport in China before moving to France at the age



asked about switching allegiances to India but she dismisses it at the source. "I was born in France. I've lived there all my life. Of course, India will always have a special place in my heart, but I've learnt the sport in France," she says.

Though she learned and mastered the sport in France, her Indian roots played a huge role in her taking to the sport.

Her dad was a TT player and having played the sport at a regional level, he first encouraged Prithika to try out the sport when she was just six years old.

"My father wasn't a national-level player, but he still had good skills. When I was six, he took me to a gymnasium that was about two minutes from our apartment. There was a table there and I enjoyed playing," she says, adding that though her dad would have liked to coach the sport, he works the night shift at a hotel to support her family, making it almost impossible for him to become more involved with the sport.

"My dad was indeed the one who chose table tennis for me but he never forced me to stick to it. Later on, it became my choice because I just fell in love with the sport," Prithika, who's in her first year of university studying Chemistry and environmental science, says.

"I didn't take the sport seriously at first and it was only after I won the U-14 French Championships that I realised it was something I wanted to do," she says.

And she seems to be doing it quite well. At the age of 16, she won the European U-21 Championships and the same year, became one of the youngest-ever French players to qualify for the Olympics when she made the cut for the delayed Tokyo Games which was held in 2021. "That was probably the greatest moment of my life," she says.

She showed that making it to the Olympics as a 16-year-old wasn't just a one-off when she became the senior French national champion in 2022.

At her first Olympics, she was just happy to be there. This time around, there's a lot more pressure.