

FARMERS CALL BANDH TODAY

SC watching, Punjab Govt reaches out to fasting farmer leader, makes no headway



Farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal has been on a hunger strike at Khanauri border for over a month now. *PTI*

KANCHAN VASDEV
CHANDIGARH, DECEMBER 29

A DAY after the Supreme Court pulled up the Punjab government for not complying with its order to shift fasting farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal to a hospital, and with the court set to hear the matter again on Tuesday, the state government is racing against time, without making much headway. Dallewal is on a fast-unto-death for over a month now, as part of a protest by the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha (KMM) and Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) (Non-Political), which have been camping at Shambhu and Khanauri — on the Punjab-

Haryana border — since February 13 this year. The farmers have raised several demands, including legal guarantee for MSP (minimum support price). The two organisations have called for a Punjab shutdown on Monday, and sought support from other states. Sources said that twice since Saturday evening, Punjab's AAP government led by Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann has sent a delegation of senior police officers to Khanauri to meet Dallewal, who is the coordinator of the SKM (Non-Political), and open a channel of communication with the protesters, but failed to convince the farmer leader to break his fast. Till reports last came in, another

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After 300 km in three states over 21 days, tigress Zeenat finally captured in Bengal



The tigress, which had strayed from Odisha's Similipal Tiger Reserve, was captured in West Bengal's Bankura. *Screengrab*

RAVIK BHATTACHARYA & SUJIT BISOI
KOLKATA, BHUBANESWAR, DECEMBER 29

AFTER WANDERING through three states and covering 300 km over the last 21 days, the three-year-old tigress that had escaped from Odisha's Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) earlier this month was on Sunday sedated and captured from a forest near Gosaindih village in West

Bengal's Bankura district, Chief Wildlife Warden Debal Ray said. "At around 4.09 pm, Zeenat was successfully sedated and later caged," Ray told *The Indian Express* over the phone. "This was achieved through hard work and with the contribution of forest officials from both West Bengal and Odisha," he said. Forest officials said the animal would first be transported to Alipore Zoo in Kolkata, where vets would check her health and

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Rescue teams near the wreckage of the aircraft that crashed at Muan International Airport, South Korea, on Sunday. *AP*

179 killed as plane crash-lands in South Korea, 2 of crew rescued

Video shows plane skidding without landing gear and crashing into a wall

HYUNG-JIN KIM & KIM TONG-HYUNG
SEOUL, DECEMBER 29

A JETLINER skidded off a runway, slammed into a concrete fence and burst into flames Sunday in South Korea after its landing gear apparently failed to deploy. All but two of the 181 people on board were killed in one of the country's worst aviation disasters, officials said. The Boeing 737-800 operated

by Jeju Air arrived from Bangkok and crashed while attempting to land in the town of Muan, about 290 kilometres south of Seoul. Footage of the crash aired by South Korean television channels showed the plane skidding across the airstrip at high speed, evidently with its landing gear still closed, and slamming into a concrete wall, triggering an explosion. Other TV stations aired footage showing thick, black smoke billowing from the plane, which was engulfed in flames.

THE WORLD

EXPERTS QUESTION BIRD STRIKE AS CAUSE OF SOUTH KOREA PLANE CRASH

AZERBAIJANI PLANE WAS SHOT AT FROM RUSSIA, CLAIMS PRESIDENT
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The crash killed 179 people, the South Korean fire agency said. Emergency workers pulled two crew members to safety. They were conscious and did not appear to have any life-threatening injuries, health officials said. Lee Jeong-hyeon, chief of the Muan fire station, told a televised briefing that the plane was completely destroyed, with only the tail assembly still recognisable in the wreckage. Officials were investigating the cause of the

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India-Australia: All eyes on Rohit, Virat today to plot a magical win



EXPRESS IN AUSTRALIA

SRIRAM VEERA
MELBOURNE, DECEMBER 29

IF SUNDAY'S Test cricket at the MCG was exhilarating, a mouth-watering Monday awaits the audience. With Australia's overall lead sitting on 333 — the highest score a team has chased to win

here is 332, almost a century ago — and with a wicket in hand, all three results are possible. A historic Border-Gavaskar retaining triumph by the Indians; a vital win for Australia, who were reeling on Saturday morning but were revived by captain Pat Cummins and the fellow bowlers; or that cricket-romantic's dream of a tie that both countries can't stop talking about since the 1987 one in Chennai. But two Indians have more reasons than most to dare, hope and dream: Rohit Sharma, the under-fire captain whose batting

has suggested he is playing from a fading memory in this series, and Virat Kohli, who hasn't been quite able to discipline his mind from betraying him. Both were let down by their inability to rev up what used to be their strengths: Rohit's attacking batting, Kohli's mental strength in taming his urges. Their days couldn't have started more contrastingly, before ending almost similarly. Rohit started the day, standing in his jumper and watching the rest of the team warm up. He never quite joined in; just a look at

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Equity market gets ₹1,600 cr FPI inflows, down 99% from last yr

HITESH VYAS
MUMBAI, DECEMBER 29

THE YEAR 2024 saw a sharp slowdown in foreign portfolio investor (FPI) activity, with foreign investors pumping in just over Rs 1,600 crore on a net basis into the domestic equity market, a steep fall of 99 per cent from the robust inflows of Rs 1.71 lakh crore in the previous year. The significant shift can largely be attributed to concerns over the

valuation of Indian stocks, below-expected domestic GDP growth in the second quarter of fiscal 2025, weak corporate earnings and higher US bond yields. According to the National Securities Depository Limited (NSDL) data, FPIs injected Rs 1,656 crore on a net basis into the Indian equity market this year (until December 27). Foreign investors were majorly selling in the stock market while buying in the primary market.

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EXPRESS NETWORK



PARTICIPANTS LIST BENEFITS OF 'DISPUTED' KERALA EXERCISE COURSE

CONGRESS AND BJP CONTINUE TO SPAR OVER MANMOHAN SINGH'S FUNERAL
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Born on a rescue ship, tsunami miracle baby hopes to join Navy: 'Want to repay the debt'

SUNANDA MEHTA
PUNE, DECEMBER 29

HER BIRTH certificate is testimony to the unusual birth of B Glory. The place of birth is stated as: "On Board INS Gharial, on route Hut Bay to Port Blair". The date of birth is December 29, 2004. Glory turned 20 on Sunday. It was on December 26, 2004, that her parents, B Balram and B Laxmi, watched the tsunami wreck their home and village in Hut Bay Island (Little Andaman). Holding on to her husband,



B Glory was born on board INS Gharial on December 29, 2004

Laxmi, then nine-months pregnant, clambered up a nearby hill that was still safe from the waters. "We stayed there for three days, without food or water or anything warm. On the fourth day, INS Charial came like an angel from above and rescued us both, my mother and sister, along with many others who had also sought shelter there," recounted Balram, who worked as a fisherman at the time. "Somehow, we managed to get on the lifeboat that took us to the ship that was in anchorage a

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PAGE 1 ANCHOR

RAHUL V PISHARODY
HYDERABAD, DECEMBER 29

SECONDS AFTER the bird of prey soars under the blue Telangana skies, the "hunt" is over and it is on the ground with its "prey" — a rogue drone ensconced in a net that the eagle has been trained to deploy as part of its training for the Garuda Squad, the state police's unique bird squad. Among the latest additions to the Telangana Police security apparatus, the five-bird squad has been undergoing training to intercept nano (weighing up to 250 grams) and micro (between

250 g and 2 kg) rogue drones, especially in no-fly zones during VIP movement. The squad's primary role is to secure no-fly zones, say trainers. Deployed recently, the Garuda Squad has proved to be cost-effective and efficient in counter-attacking small drones (costing around Rs 1 lakh), which have become a headache for security forces due to their size and maneuvering abilities. By teaching the birds to deploy nets, the Telangana Police has taken care of a critical concern — the safety of its squad from the spinning propellers of rogue drones as they are inter-



An eagle deploys a net to snag a drone during a training exercise; (right) trainers with a kite and an eagle from the Telangana Police's Garuda Squad. *Rahul V Pisharody*

cepted. "The training process involved a lot of trial and error, but no birds were harmed in the process. Instead of the bird seizing the drone directly, they have been trained to deploy a net, ensnare the drone and drag it to a secure, predetermined location, away from public areas," says Taseer Iqbal, Deputy Inspector General, Intelligence Security Wing. Stating that Telangana is now ready to assist or share its knowledge and capabilities with other police departments and security forces across the country, Iqbal says, "The Garuda Squad, the

first-of-its-kind, was conceptualised in 2021, following a state government order. Three years on, it has achieved operational readiness and is currently being utilised on a pilot basis." Recently, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had spoken about the need to establish a "comprehensive" anti-drone unit to protect the country from threats posed by drones. Shah was referring to a laser-equipped anti-drone gun mount system that has been developed, especially for border areas. However, training the squad, which comprises kites and eagles, was easier said than done.

"There were challenges, because these are birds and not machines. But the Garuda Squad is operationally ready for deployment now. We have been utilising their services for a while," says Iqbal, director, Integrated Intelligence Training Academy (IITA), Telangana's premier institution that provides expert training in canine handling, bomb detection and disposal techniques, and specialised instruction for both personal security officers (PSOs) and private security agencies. At the sight of an aerial intruder, a bird is released from its location to snatch from the skies

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EXPLAINED

Changing stand

DURING DONALD Trump's first term as US President, his administration imposed restrictions on H-1B visas, citing concerns over "abuse" and "economic strain". His hard line on immigration, focussed mostly on illegal entrants, formed an important part of his campaign this time too. His support for H-1B comes at a time when the programme faces intense scrutiny, including from a section of his supporters.

them "very bad" and "unfair" for US workers. During his first term as President, he unveiled a "Hire American" policy that directed changes to the programme to try to ensure the visas were awarded to the highest-paid or most-skilled applicants. In his interview to the

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BUSINESS AS USUAL

By UNNNY



IDEA EXCHANGE

'Real stardom lasted only till the time technology became big. But one thing that will always survive is the story'

MANOJ BAJPAYEE
ACTOR
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EXPLAINED

RIISING ABOVE THE AI LINE
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Joining Katra ropeway protesters, J&K minister calls on parties to unite

ARUN SHARMA
JAMMU, DECEMBER 29

ON THE fifth day of the shutdown in Jammu and Kashmir's Katra as locals protest against the proposed Rs 300-crore ropeway project to the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi shrine, J&K Deputy Chief Minister Surinder Choudhary on Sunday evening called on Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha to "listen to the protesters".

Addressing the protesters in Katra town, Choudhary said, "L-G sahab, you will have to listen to these people as the Shrine Board is under you. A poet has said, '*Na sataa gareeb ko, ki gareeb ro dega*."

Pata chalega uske malik ko to, tu-jhey kabar se bhi khod ke nikalega (Don't harass the poor as they will cry. If their God comes to know, you will be pulled out even from your grave!)"

He said he came to meet the protesters following directions of his leaders, National Conference president Farooq Abdullah and J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, and that he would give a report of the situation to them.

"Those elected and those not elected, and also those of us — ministers and the Deputy Chief Minister — we all can face these challenges in a united manner, not separately," said Surinder Choudhary.

• South Korea plane crash kills 179

crash, including whether the aircraft was struck by birds, Lee said.

The control tower issued a warning about birds to the plane shortly before it intended to land and gave the crew permission to land in a different area, ministry officials said. The crew sent out a distress signal shortly before the crash, officials said.

Senior Transport Ministry official Joong-wan said workers retrieved the jet's flight data and cockpit voice recorder. He said it may take months for investigators to complete their probe. The runway at the Muan airport will be closed until January 1, the ministry said.

Kyle Bailey, former FAA safety team representative in the US, told Fox News that it appeared to him that the aircraft was travelling too fast as it skidded on the runway before striking what he believed was a structure that housed instrument landing equipment.

"I think that's pretty much what spelled disaster for that airplane," he said.

One of the survivors was being treated for fractures to his ribs, shoulder blade and upper spine, said Ju Woong, director of the Ewha Womans University Seoul Hospital. Ju said the man, whose name was not released, told doctors he "woke up to find (himself) rescued." Details on the other survivor were not immediately available.

The passengers were predominantly South Korean and included two people from Thailand. Officials identified 88 of them in the hours after the crash, the fire agency said.

Thailand's Prime Minister, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, expressed condolences to the families of those aboard the plane in a post on X. Paetongtarn said she ordered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to provide assistance.

Boonchuay Duangmanee, the father of a Thai passenger, told The Associated Press that his daughter, Jongluk, had been working in a factory in South Korea for several years and returned to Thailand to visit her family.

"I never thought that this would be the last time we would see each other forever," he said.

Kerati Kijmanawat, the director of Thailand's airports, confirmed in a statement that Jeju Air flight 7C 2216 departed from Suvarnabhumi Airport with no reports of anything abnormal aboard the aircraft or on the runway.

Jeju Air in a statement expressed its "deep apology" over the crash and said it will do its "utmost to manage the aftermath of the accident."

In a televised news conference, the company's president,

• Birds 'hunt' rogue drones

the rogue drone — just as it would its prey. "As an advanced training measure, the team has been acclimatising the birds to different scenarios, including crowd and noise levels that they would encounter in real-life situations," says an officer.

As K Aravind Rao, Deputy Superintendent of Police, IITA, reiterates that the bird squad offers "an efficient and cost-effective alternative", Alladi Nagesh, who heads the team of trainers — Mohammad Fareed and Abir Bandari — says the species chosen for the squad are "aerial hunters with a killer instinct".

Different birds have been designated for different purposes depending on their nature, size, flying pattern, hunting style and ability. For instance, kites are used for aerial surveillance due to their ability to fly at great heights with stability. "Cameras have been attached to the kite for such surveillance. Besides providing extremely stable visuals, they go unnoticed in the skies," say officials, adding that eagles have been deployed for an attack over a short distance.

Yet another bird on the squad — officials declined to reveal the species — is best suited for long-

range sniper-like attacks. Nagesh, who heads the team of bird trainers, says the squad's "sniper" can hit a speed of 390 miles per hour (approximately 620 km per hour), something a drone cannot achieve even while trying to evade it.

Nagesh adds, "The birds are identified while still young and trained just like a canine — by using feeding as incentive. GPS trackers are attached to the birds so we don't lose them. They are given training in different real-life scenarios involving public address systems and loud music, to prepare them for various operational environments."

Talking about a "key limitation", officials say the birds are unable to distinguish between authorised drones and the rogue ones.

Calling the inclusion of birds in safeguarding the country's internal security a "welcome" move, Rajeev Khandelwal, general secretary, Hyderabad Birding Pals, an NGO dedicated to promoting birdwatching across Telangana, says, "As long as the birds are trained ethically, internationally set norms are followed, and they are not hurt or tortured and allowed to fly freely, it's a fantastic move."

FROM PAGE ONE

FULL REPORTSON
WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

H-1B a great programme: Trump

New York Post, Trump did not appear to address questions about whether he would pursue any changes to the number or use of the visas once he assumes office on January 20.

Trump's hardline immigration policies, focused mostly on immigrants who are in the country illegally, were a cornerstone of his presidential campaign and a priority issue for his supporters. But in recent days, his coalition has split in a public debate, largely taking place online, about the tech industry's hiring of foreign workers.

Hard-right members of Trump's movement have accused Musk and others in Trump's new flank of tech-world supporters of pushing policies at odds with Trump's "America First" vision.

Software engineers and others in the tech industry have used H-1B visas for skilled foreign workers and say they are a critical tool for hard-to-fill posi-

tions. But critics have said they undercut US citizens who could take those jobs. Some on the right have called for the programme to be eliminated.

Between October 2022 and September 2023, 72 per cent of the nearly 4 lakh visas issued under the H-1B programme went to Indian nationals. During the same period, top four Indian IT majors with a presence in the US — Infosys, TCS, HCL, and Wipro — obtained approval for around 20,000 employees to work on H-1B visas, as per the latest US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) data.

Musk's sharp and assertive take came days after a controversy broke out over the H-1B visas, prompted by the appointment of Sriram Krishnan as an adviser on artificial intelligence policy in the upcoming Trump administration. Krishnan had said in November, "Anything to remove country caps for green

cards/ unlock skilled immigration would be huge."

With Krishnan favouring the ability to bring more skilled immigrants into the US under the H-1B programme, right winger Laura Loomer criticised the stance to be "not America First policy" and said the tech executives who have aligned themselves with Trump were doing so to enrich themselves.

This has reopened the debate of immigration of skilled workers, with Musk, Krishnan and fellow tech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy — who was a presidential candidate in the primaries before dropping out — supporting the H-1B visa programme even as right-wingers have criticised it.

Trump has appointed Musk and Ramaswamy to lead the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) in the new US administration. Born in South Africa, Musk was once on an H-1B visa himself. **WITH AGENCIES**

• All eyes on Rohit, Virat to plot a magical win

distance in nothing in particular for a while. Kohli contrastingly was here, there, everywhere, and addressed the huddle, after Nitish Reddy had holed out and Australia's innings was about to begin.

Rohit had stepped out onto the playing arena for the Australian innings, tucking in his jersey. He approached Akash Deep and had a chat about the bowling plans, going by how he gestured a few shots with his hands. Jasprit Bumrah, who seems to have made up his mind to immortalise himself into the Australian imagination in this series, joined the two. Kohli emerged out of the tunnel later and spoke in the huddle.

For a while after Bumrah took out Sam Konstas and whipped up the crowd, just as he had done after he had fallen on Friday evening, leaving Reddy nervy on 99 under dark clouds. Payback, Bumrah style. When Akash Deep and Mohammad Siraj, who has had his own battles to face this series from being booed by Australian fans and dissed by Indian fans for his bowling, stood up, Rohit the leader began to stir and get into the contest.

Old selves

In that initial phase, Rohit had allowed Kohli to handle the field-placings and such. Not that he was disinterested — he very much was standing at the slips, clapping almost every ball, and saying stuff to the bowler as he would run past them at the end of the over, but there was a marked visible change in him. Perhaps, it struck him then that India could win this.

He signalled his men to move, encouraged his bowlers to bowl a line of attack he wanted,

implored his fielders to look at him and respond, and sighed at missed chances. He told Yashasvi Jaiswal, almost in a fit of annulment that has become his earthy style, "yaar, baithey rehna neeche (just crouch down)," when Jaiswal had gotten up too early from silly point to resolutely spill the catch offered by Cummins. And so on and so forth.

Kohli, too, by then became his old self, running, gesticulating, jumping, acting as if the balls well away from the bat had only missed the wood by the barest of the margins. Living every moment.

But as the day wore on and evening arrived, with Australians fighting back till their last men and their pacers tired out, a sense of despondent resignation set in both men. Not resigning to fate or surrendering, but a realisation that now it was up to the chase on the final day. That it wasn't going to be simple. Both fell silent by the end.

When Nathan Lyon was caught at the slip cordon in the final over off Bumrah, both turned and began to walk. Kohli ahead, with Rohit picking all three helmets from behind Rishabh Pant when they realised it was no ball. Neither reacted this time, just trudged back to slips, and Rohit would keep the helmets back on the field.

But one good thing about the chase not being simple on a pitch where variable bounce is likely to play out more on the final day by conventional logic is that India's destiny is in their own hands.

Australia hasn't seen the best of Rohit yet. He himself hasn't seen it in a while. Unlike Indian fans in general, Australians rate the foreigners who perform in

• Tsunami miracle baby

little distance away," said Laxmi, who was just 23 years old then. As she boarded the ship, she started to feel labour pains, she recalled.

Balram told the first senior officer he met about his wife's condition. "He assured me that all would be fine, now that we were with them," said Balram. As the ship started to sail towards Port Blair, Laxmi's pains intensified. The ship's doctor, assisted by a motley crew untrained for such situations, successfully delivered her baby girl — B Glory, at 7 pm on December 29, 2004.

When the ship reached Port Blair the next day, Glory and her mother were admitted to a hospital, and Balram was given accommodation nearby. "We stayed in Port Blair for five months while the government rebuilt our house," said Balram.

While the miracle of the birth was not lost on the grateful family, for the Indian Navy too, it was a first-of-its-kind emergency delivery on a warship. The Navy marked the occasion by declaring that it would "adopt" Glory and take care of her education. Later, when Balram could no longer make a living by fishing, the Navy also facilitated a job for him at his village.

"We had picked up 645 people from the overloaded jetty of Hut Bay on December 29, the priority was to accommodate women and children first. Laxmi was among 4-5 women who were pregnant," recounted Commodore A Venugopal (retired), the then Commanding Officer of INS Gharial.

"We sailed out at 2 pm. By evening, it was clear that Laxmi would deliver. We had just one

doctor on board and he was a little apprehensive, having never delivered a baby before, but it was a normal and smooth delivery by God's grace," he said.

Venugopal informed the Naval Headquarters of the birth, and the message was soon relayed to all Naval ships and establishments. "The Commander-in-Chief then sent a request to the highest authorities for the Navy to adopt the girl and look after her education. That was cleared and it continues till date. We also helped the family in their resettlement. I, too, visited them when I went there on promotion a few years later," said Venugopal, who was later awarded the Nau Sena Medal for the tsunami rescue operations.

Glory now has two younger siblings — a 19-year-old brother and a 15-year-old sister. "Right from childhood, I was aware of how blessed I was to have survived those circumstances and be a part of the Indian Navy throughout my growing up years. They have called me so often for functions, felicitated me, given me a platform to speak, wished me every year on my birthday, have had their personal checking in on us to see if we need anything and, of course, supported me completely in my education, paying all my fees," she said.

Two years ago, Glory moved to Port Blair to complete her graduation in computer science from the JNRM College. After her graduation, she aspires to join the Indian Navy as an officer. "Once I graduate, I will appear for the SSB (Services Selection Board) exam and, God willing, join the Indian Navy. It's the only way I know to repay the debt," she said.

• SC watching, Punjab Govt reaches out to Dallewal

team was at the spot talking to Dallewal and other protesters.

On Friday, the Supreme Court had pulled up the Punjab government, saying there was an "impression" that it was not doing enough to save Dallewal's life. When the state argued on Saturday that the protesters had called youth to gather at the spot to thwart any move to shift Dallewal, the Court asked why the situation had been allowed to reach this stage. "It is abetment of suicide. You first create a problem and then you take a plea, now there is a problem, we can do nothing," the Bench said.

If the state government fails to get Dallewal to agree to medical help, it may have to use force to admit him to a hospital or face contempt of court. Given the situation at Khanauri, the government will want to avoid this scenario, particularly as a similar attempt at the start of the fast by Dallewal had backfired on it.

A government functionary told *The Indian Express*, "As of now, there is no headway. Dallewal is adamant, he does not want to break his fast until the Centre agrees to the farmers' demands, the foremost being a legal guarantee for MSP on all crops and the waiver of debts of farmers."

The official said they had gone to Dallewal with a clean slate and urged him that a way be found so that "there is no collateral damage and the Supreme Court order is complied with at the same time". "We are trying to find a solution so that there is a graceful exit for both Dallewal and the Punjab government."

The official admitted that the

government feared the worst if it used force, and the farmers must realise this. "There could be loss of human lives. There are farmers guarding Dallewal. Police might have to use extreme measures."

But KMM leader Sarvan Singh Pandher, whose outfit is part of the Khanauri protests, suggested that the farmers were ready for the consequences. Speaking to *The Indian Express*, he said: "Dallewal saab has already said he will not relent. It now depends on the Centre and Punjab government whether they want the blood of farmers on their hands. I have already appealed to the youth from villages near Patiala to reach Khanauri border by Sunday night so that police are not successful if they plan an operation to pick up Dallewal in the dark of night."

The official admitted that the state government was caught in a cleft stick, given that the Supreme Court order has to be complied with. "We were waiting for the CM to come back from Australia. He is back. Mann spoke to DGP Gaurav Yadav and Chief Secretary K A P Sinha. The government is now working out a way, otherwise our Chief Secretary and DGP can face arrests."

The timing of Mann's Australia trip in the midst of the crisis had earlier received flak from the Opposition.

On the face of it, the AAP government remained optimistic. Finance Minister Harpal Cheema, who met Dallewal Friday — almost the entire state Cabinet has made the trip over the past month — told *The Indian Express*: "We had a very

good meeting. Dallewal did not say anything negative, but said he would not break his fast. Now, officials are engaging with him. Let us hope all this ends peacefully."

Cheema added that the Centre too bore responsibility for the situation, and "should at least talk to the agitating farmers". "The Supreme Court should tell the Centre to sort out the issue."

The state government earlier removed Dallewal from the site on the intervening night of November 25-26, before he began his fast. Police broke into his temporary hut, and it was all over in a matter of minutes as there were very few protesters around.

Admitted to a Ludhiana hospital, Dallewal had begun his strike as planned on November 26, from the hospital itself. At the Khanauri site, another farmer union leader, Sukhjot Singh Hardojhande, had taken up the fast on his behalf.

However, the anger over Dallewal's removal had led to the Khanauri protest swelling, with farmers coming from across the state. Some of their ire was now also directed towards the Punjab government, apart from the Centre. With the civic polls coming, the AAP government had given in and discharged Dallewal on November 29 evening. Dallewal had resumed his hunger strike at Khanauri then, with Hardojhande suspending his fast.

Government sources admitted that crucial time was lost after that, as the AAP got busy with the civic polls, and then the results.

WITH INPUTS FROM RAAKHI JAGGA, LUDHIANA

• After 300 km in 3 states, tigress Zeenat captured

vital parameters. Later, it would be transported back to Simlipal Tiger Reserve, from where it had first wandered to Jharkhand and then into West Bengal.

According to sources, forest officials had been trying to find Zeenat since Saturday. Out of the five attempts made on Saturday and Sunday, three darts hit Zeenat, but the animal could not be properly tranquilised. The forest officials then resumed their operation on Sunday afternoon.

Explaining the difficulties in sedating a tiger with a tranquiliser dart, Ray said, "One has to see whether the dart has hit the right angle, whether the dart has properly penetrated, and whether the tranquilising liquid in the dart is enough to put the animal to sleep."

Odisha's Principal Chief Conservator of Forest (Wildlife), P K Jha, said the animal was healthy and would be brought back to Similipal as soon as possible. He said a 15-member team from Odisha's Forest Department was part of the operation held jointly with West Bengal Forest Department officials to capture the tigress.

"We will keep the tigress in a soft enclosure within the Similipal core area and keep it there for a longer period to en-

sure that it can better adapt to the region. We will track the movement of the tigress in the enclosure through the radio collar attached to its neck," Jha told *The Indian Express*.

Zeenat was introduced to Similipal Tiger Reserve from Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra on November 14, as a part of a programme to strengthen the gene pool of tigers in the reserve. Ten days later, the tigress was released to the core area of the reserve.

On December 8, Zeenat wandered out of the reserve and strayed into Jharkhand. After roaming in Jharkhand's Chakulia area for over a week, Zeenat entered Jhargram in West Bengal.

It then moved to Bandwan in Purulia, and from there to Manbazar in the same district. On Sunday morning, the tigress entered the Ranibandh area in Bankura.

During its trek from Similipal to Bankura, Zeenat covered over 300 km.

Experts believe it is common for tigers to cover distances to find a suitable area or territory with a good prey base.

Praising the forest officials and district administration for their successful efforts in rescuing tigress Zeenat, West Bengal

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee posted on X, "My heartiest congratulations to the forest officials of West Bengal on the successful rescue of the tigress Zeenat. My sincere gratitude to the district administration, police, panchayat functionaries and the local people for their invaluable support and collaboration in this remarkable effort. This rescue is a shining example of teamwork and dedication towards wildlife conservation. Your combined efforts have not only saved a majestic creature that strayed out of its habitat, but also reinforced the importance of protecting our natural heritage. Thank you for your outstanding work."

Bengal Forest Minister Birbaha Hansda told *The Indian Express* over the phone that officials successfully prevented any human-animal conflict during the hunt. "Officers and workers of the state forest department worked day and night for Zeenat. Apart from officials from Odisha, we had brought in experts from the Sunderbans to tranquilise the tigress. We were all very tense. There was a chance that the tigress could get hurt or villagers could get hurt. The best part is that no man-animal conflict arose. We could save both sides," he said.

• FPI inflows in equity market

In contrast to equities, FPIs net bought Rs 1.12 lakh crore of domestic debt in 2024, up from Rs 68,663 crore in 2023. Inflows in the debt voluntary retention route (VRR) and fully accessible route (FAR) categories were Rs 13,782 crore and Rs 28,795 crore in 2024, respectively, the NSDL data showed.

"The larger picture in 2024 from a global investor's point of view was that the US market was doing well and the US dollar remained strong. Post Donald Trump's election, the view was that the dollar would remain a stronger currency and the US market would be a good investment destination. It was the biggest factor driving the global flows. When the largest market appears favorable, every other asset class has to offer something better. That was a big challenge for other (emerging) markets (including India) in 2024," said Nitin Jain, CEO, Kotak Mahindra Asset Management, Singapore.

Despite the inclusion of a couple of India stocks into MSCI's emerging market indices, foreign investors stayed away from the Indian market. MSCI indexes are globally tracked by investors who allocate funds based on the weightage given to countries and stocks.

"This (inclusion in MSCI indices) would have meant passive flows coming into the Indian market. However, we haven't seen flows. This means that investors were underweight on India," Jain said.

On an aggregate level, foreign investors' holding of Indian equities has reduced to around 17 per cent at present, from 21-22 per cent in 2020.

The year began with FPIs buy-

FPI FLOWS INTO EQUITIES IN 2024	
Month	Inflows (+) and outflows (-) ₹ cr
January	-25,744
February	1,539
March	35,098
April	-8,671
May	-25,586
June	26,565
July	32,365
August	7,320
September	57,724
October	-94,017
November	-21,612
December*	16,675
TOTAL	1,656
*(until Dec 27) Source: NSDL	

ing Indian equities, purchasing Rs 1.12 lakh crore of domestic shares in the first nine months. This upbeat sentiment was driven by robust GDP growth, strong corporate earnings and macroeconomic indicators like fiscal and current account deficits remaining under control.

"It was a Goldilocks scenario. But the situation reversed after the Q2 FY2025 corporate results. Nobody expected that the growth would be flat. That was an indication that the Q2 GDP growth would also come lower," said V K Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services.

During Q2 FY2025, non-financial firms reported a slower growth of 5 per cent year-on-year in net sales, as compared to 6.4 per cent in the previous quarter. The contraction in profit after tax (PAT) also deepened, falling by 2 per

cent y-o-y in Q2, a sharper drop than the 0.4 per cent y-o-y decline seen in Q1, according to a CareEdge Ratings report.

In the July-September quarter of 2024, the real GDP growth slumped to a seven-quarter low of 5.4 per cent. Following the sub-optimal GDP growth in Q2 and disappointing corporate earnings, FPIs offloaded Rs 1.16 lakh crore worth of local shares in October and November, resulting in a nearly 6 per cent fall in the Sensex and Nifty during the period.

However, in December, FPIs turned purchaser of domestic shares, buying Rs 16,675.11 crore worth of equities on a net basis.

Selling in stock market, buying in primary market
A notable trend was seen in FPI investment into the equity market — while foreign investors were selling heavily in the stock market or cash market, they remained purchasers mainly in initial public offerings (IPOs). In the cash market (upto December 27), FPIs sold Rs 1.19 lakh crore while investing Rs 1.21 lakh crore through the primary market route, the data showed. "The selling through exchanges was mainly due to the high valuations and investing through the primary market was mainly due to the fair valuations," said Geojit's Vijaykumar.

At the start of the year, India, within the emerging market, had the highest premium in terms of valuation, which was justified by strong earnings outlook and GDP growth. However, during the later part of the year, there were some events with not-so-best outcomes, such as below-expectation GDP growth in Q2, weak quarterly earnings and elevated inflation levels. This indicated that the valuation premium which India enjoyed was not commensurate with economic news during the

year. Due to this, foreign investors looked at booking profits in the secondary market, said Kotak Mahindra Asset Management's Jain. "At the same time, there were new-age companies such as digital, renewables, electric vehicles contract development and manufacturing organisation (CDMO), electronic manufacturing services (EMS), and food delivery and quick commerce in the primary market that caught the attention of foreign investors. Since there were some interesting companies, foreign investors were selling in the secondary market and buying in the primary market," he said.

Purchase in the primary market includes buying through preferential allotment, rights issue, initial public offers and buyback of shares.

Analysts see a turnaround in FPI flows into India in 2025 on the expectation of a recovery in GDP growth, pick-up in government spending, improvement in corporate earnings and ease in inflation. They also expect the RBI to cut interest rates in 2025. "Everyone knows that India will be the best-performing market for the next 3, 5, 10 years. Therefore, FPIs cannot sell consistently. They will turn buyers in India when there are indications of growth and earnings recovery," said Vijaykumar.

A recent RBI article said the country's growth trajectory is poised to lift in the second half of 2024-25, driven mainly by resilient domestic private consumption demand. In addition to this, sustained government spending on infrastructure is expected to further stimulate economic activity and investment.

However, the headwinds for FPI flows into India in 2025 would be an appreciation of the US dollar and higher US 10-year bond yield, Vijaykumar added.

DU to propose ending Muslim student quota in joint course with Jamia

VIDHEESHA KUNTAMALLA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

DELHI UNIVERSITY'S (DU) Cluster Innovation Centre (CIC) is set to propose the removal of Muslim reservation in admissions to the Master of Science (MSc) in Mathematics Education programme, a course jointly offered with Jamia Millia Islamia under the Meta University concept, *The Indian Express* has learnt. The matter is to be tabled at the CIC's governing body meeting on Monday, Jamia Millia Islamia did not respond to queries from *The Indian Express*. Launched in 2013, the programme represents a collaboration between DU and Jamia. Admissions to the programme, conducted through the Common University Entrance Test for Postgraduate Programmes (CUET-PG), currently follow a seat distribution policy that includes specific reservations for Muslim candidates. Of the total 30 seats, 12 are meant for the unreserved category, six for Other Backward

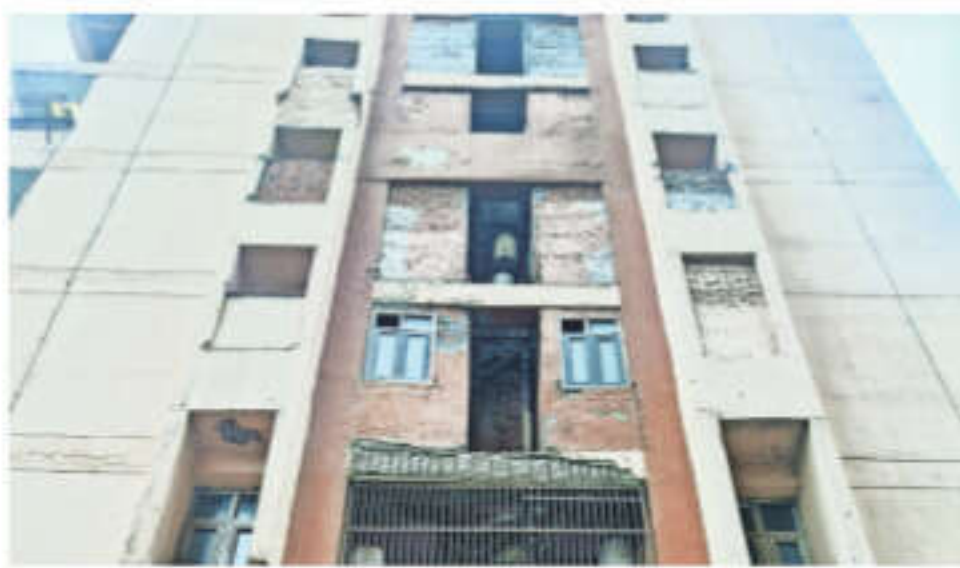
Classes (non-creamy layer), four for Muslim general, three for Economically Weaker Sections, two for Scheduled Castes as well as one each for Scheduled Tribes, Muslim Other Backward Classes and Muslim women. Pointing out that religious reservations are inconsistent with the university's policies, a senior DU official told *The Indian Express*: "The whole idea is that there should be no reservation for any course in the university on the basis of religion." The official added, "It is a different case when it comes to having a quota for the underprivileged as part of caste reservation..." Over the past few years, the admission process for the MSc programme has been fully computerised, with all students admitted through DU rather than Jamia. "Now, it is being discussed that since the students are being admitted at DU, naturally one must follow the reservation policy that is being followed at DU only," said an official at the CIC. "This is under discussion. Once the governing body

makes a decision, we will put forth the proposal to the Vice-Chancellor for consideration," the official added. The MSc programme falls under the Meta University concept, which, according to its official website, "marks a paradigm shift in higher education in India". The initiative aims to create synergy by pooling resources and expertise from multiple institutions. The CIC administratively manages the programme. Despite its inter-university nature, the CIC maintains that DU's policies should prevail. "This is the only degree in the country that bears the logo of two central universities... when a student finishes his/her postgraduation," the official said. "The course started in 2013. The committee constituted during the inception of the course had decided that 50% of the students would be admitted into DU and the other 50% to Jamia." While the official memorandum of understanding did not specify seat distribution, the committee overseeing the programme's logistics devised the current allocation model at the time, the official added.

For residents of Signature View, HC order telling DDA to pay them rent welcome relief

DEVANSH MITTAL
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

SHWETA VERMA is relieved. A former resident of Signature View Apartments in Mukherjee Nagar, the 48-year-old was forced to move out of her 3BHK flat in April 2023 after the complex was declared structurally unsafe in 2022. Since then, Verma, who is a homemaker, has been forced to pay rent for her current accommodation as well as EMI for the loan she took to buy the flat. On December 24, the Delhi High Court came to the rescue of several residents like her. Upholding the MCD's demolition order, the court ordered the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) to pay rent to owners and occupants of the flats from the date they vacated them. The order requires the DDA to pay Rs 38,000 per month for MIG (middle-income group) flats and Rs 50,000 a month to HIG (high-income group) flat owners. Further, the facilitation amount/rent shall be enhanced at the rate of 10% per annum by the land-owning agency, at the end of each year, till possession of the reconstructed flats is handed over to the owners. The court also turned down DDA's offer to start paying rent only when all 336 residents had vacated the buildings.



The apartment complex in Mukherjee Nagar was declared structurally unsafe in 2022. *Express*

Out of the total 336 flats, 125 families have already moved out. "It is a very pro-resident judgment," Verma, who is also vice-president of the Signature View Apartments RWA, said. Amarendra Jha, former RWA president, also said it's a welcome move by the High Court. He still lives in the apartment complex, and a crack running across the main column of his house reminds him of the dangers of living there. "We want the order to be executed immediately," he said. "In the next three months, once we hand over the flats, the DDA has to sign an agreement and start paying rent. The DDA has to give us a timeline for all this. It also has to come up with a new plan and layout and show it to us as

part of the agreement." Residents had started noticing the sub-standard construction when they moved in around 2012. Since then, there have been repeated instances of debris falling inside flats and outside on cars. A 2022 report by IIT-Delhi recommended the demolition of all the 12 buildings. The MCD issued a demolition order in December last year, declaring the buildings structurally unsafe. In her judgment, Justice Mini Pushkarna rapped the DDA, which had constructed the towers under the DDA Housing Scheme, for its "delinquency and gross negligence". The court also did not accept DDA's request to construct an additional 168 flats on the 2.83-hectare land due to

an increase in the available floor area ratio as per current norms of construction in Delhi. Amarendra Kumar, the 52-year-old RWA president, said: "We are happy about this as it would've led to a resource crunch and caused devaluation of our property." While residents termed the order "positive", they were apprehensive regarding the DDA's next course of action. "Those who could afford to and were scared have already moved out... the rest are waiting and watching. People are scared DDA might challenge this single-bench order... If it does, then the legal process will again take up to a year," said Kumar. DDA refused to comment as the matter is sub-judice.

Two robbers held in West Delhi shootout, police link them to 40 cases each

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

TWO MEN, linked to around 40 criminal cases each, allegedly met each other in prison earlier this year. Once they got out, they teamed up and started committing armed robberies together. The duo was arrested on Sunday following a brief exchange of fire with police, said officers. Police said they had got a tip-off about the accused, Rohit Kapoor and Rinku, who had been allegedly involved in multiple cases of armed robberies in Delhi and Madhya Pradesh. "Around 4.30 am, the movement of two suspects was noticed near Madipur in Punjabi Bagh. Their way was blocked by a team of police personnel and they were asked to stop," said DCP (West) Vichitra Veer. "They then opened fire at the team. The team retaliated in self-defence, and the accused sustained injuries to their legs. They were taken to a hospital, where they are undergoing treatment," he further added. Veer further said some incidents of robbery were reported in the last few days at different police stations of West district — gold ornaments (earrings and chains) were robbed by a group of robbers at gunpoint or knife-point. Most of these incidents took place in the morning hours or late at night, police said. Rinku alias Sagar's first involvement in a criminal case dates back to 2000, when he was first arrested in a house theft case in Kirti Nagar. Since then, he has been involved in more than 48 cases. He was last arrested in June in a case under the Arms Act and got out in September this year. Kapoor was first arrested in a house theft case of Bindapur in 2009. He has been involved in more than 40 cases till now. He got out of jail in May.

On the run for three years, murder convict held by Delhi cops from Mumbai

HIMANSHU HARSH
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

ON SATURDAY morning, 46-year-old food delivery agent Akshay Kumar Tripathi left his home in Gautam Nagar, Panjrapole Chawl, in Mumbai's Chembur to head to work when a team of the Delhi Police Crime Branch nabbed him. Tripathi was no ordinary man. He was a convicted criminal whose real name was Ajay Kumar Tripathi, said Sanjay Kumar Sain, DCP (Crime Branch). "A former storekeeper of a banking and investment company, Tripathi had kidnapped a child named Neeraj

in 2000 and murdered him when the ransom demand was not fulfilled," added Sain. Tripathi was married, living with his second wife and son in the city. "They had no clue about his criminal history," a police officer who was part of the operation said. Police had been looking for Tripathi since 2021 when he jumped parole in the murder case; he had been sentenced to life in prison. "After this, he changed his name from Ajay to Akshay and forged his documents," said the DCP. This wasn't the first time the convict had absconded. "In 2010

too, Tripathi was granted 30-day parole but he absconded for five years. He was subsequently captured from his hometown of Agra (UP) in 2015," DCP Sain said. In the interim, Tripathi got married in 2011. "His wife, whose family was against the wedding, was initially unaware of his criminal past," said an officer. The two had a son in 2013. "It was only in 2015, when the police came searching for Tripathi, that his wife came to know the truth," he confirmed. DCP Sain said during Covid, Tripathi got emergency parole on July 23, 2021, which was further extended by a high-powered



The accused with the team of police personnel. *Express*

56 days on September 19, 2021, but he went on the run again," the officer added. During investigation, a Crime Branch team led by Inspector Rakesh Kumar reached his residence in Agra only to learn from neighbours that he had left the city three years ago. "After jumping parole for the second time, he went to his wife," said an officer. "He wanted to live with her and their son." The woman, who was bringing up her son by doing odd jobs, didn't want anything to do with Tripathi, the police officer said. "They frequently quarrelled over the matter. The woman's family

had also cut all ties with her after the marriage and refused to provide any help. Frustrated, she died by suicide one day," the officer stated. Tripathi then sold all his belongings before moving to Mumbai with his son. A neighbour revealed to police that he had assumed a new identity. "He forged all his documents under the name Akshay and started working as a delivery person at a reputed online food delivery company," DCP Sain said. An officer said in Mumbai, the accused married his current wife, a homemaker, in late 2021. "He also enrolled his son in a

boarding school the same year," he said, adding that his new family knew nothing of his past life until he was arrested on December 29. Police brought the accused to Delhi on Sunday to put him back in Tihar Jail. Speaking about the operation, an officer said, "Since the accused had assumed a new identity and a new life in a crowded area in Mumbai, it was tricky to catch him. We reached Mumbai and camped out there for days. With coordinated efforts and assistance from the delivery firm and its staff, we zeroed in on the suspect before finally making the arrest."

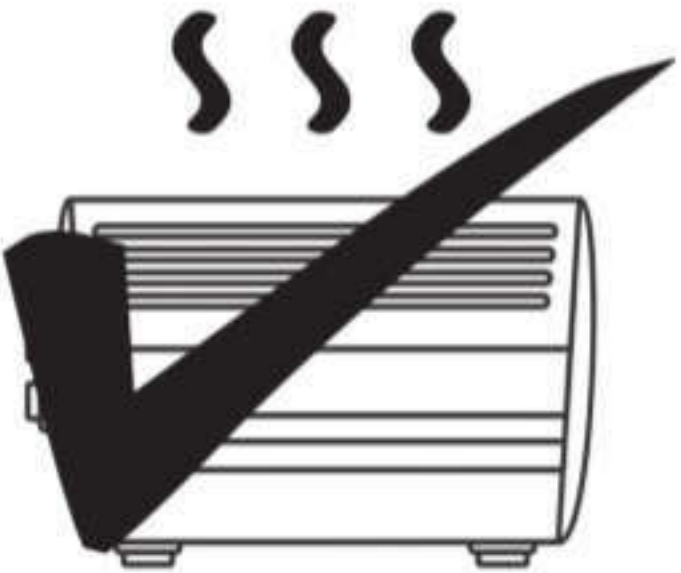


KIND ATTENTION

RESIDENT WELFARE ASSOCIATIONS/ BUILDERS/ PROJECT PROPONENTS/ NGOs/ CITIZENS



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AVOID AIR POLLUTION



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✓ **Avoid open burning of biomass & solid waste**

✓ **Do not use coal and wood for heating purpose**

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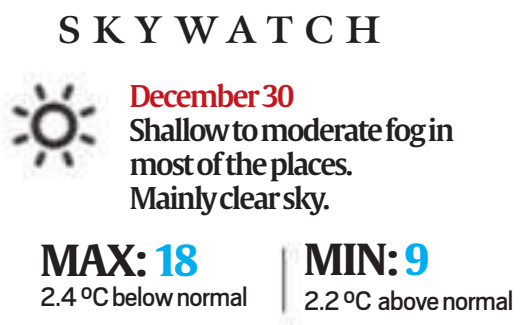
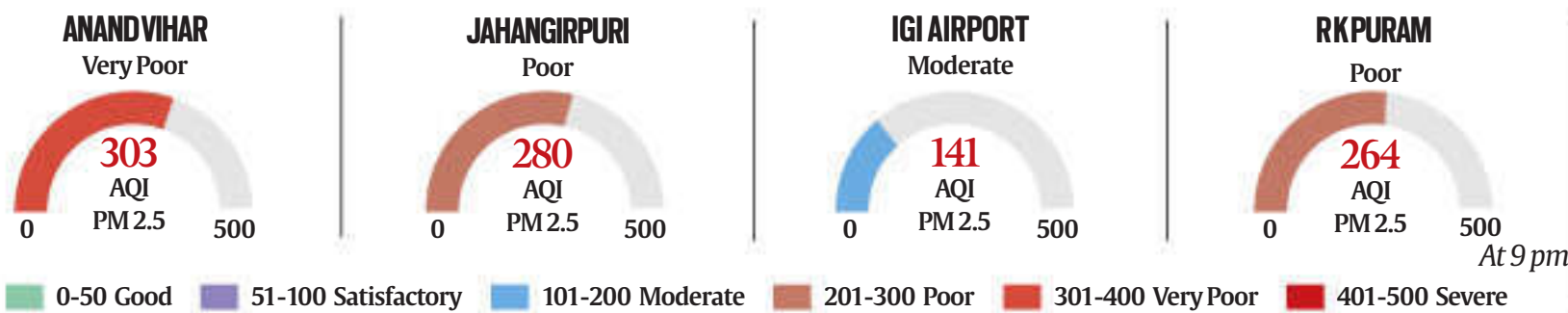


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AHEAD OF DELHI ASSEMBLY POLLS

BJP is manipulating voter lists under ‘Op Lotus’, says Kejriwal

Desperate attempt to distract from governance failures: BJP’s Parvesh Verma

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

LEVELLING FRESH allegations of voter list tampering against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convenor Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday alleged that the opposition party is planning to launch ‘Operation Lotus’ in the New Delhi constituency. His claims triggered a sharp response from BJP leader Parvesh Verma who said it was “a desperate attempt to distract from governance failures and cover up the (AAP) government’s shortcomings”.

Kejriwal will be contesting from the New Delhi seat for the fourth time in the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections due in February. While the BJP is yet to release its list of candidates, sources had said Verma may be fielded from New Delhi.

Addressing a press conference with Chief Minister Atishi and AAP MP Raghav Chadha, Kejriwal dubbed the alleged manipulation of electoral rolls as BJP’s ‘Operation Lotus’ in action. “The BJP is trying to win this election by any means. It does not have any CM face or candidates. Last time, they tried to remove the names of 11,000 voters from another constituency, from where we won the polls by 5,000 votes. If they had been successful, we would have lost the election. Staff at the election offices even started working on the deletion but due to the intervention of the Chief Election Commissioner, this was



AAP national convenor Arvind Kejriwal, flanked by Delhi CM Atishi and AAP MP Raghav Chadha, addresses a press conference in New Delhi, Sunday, PTI

stopped,” he claimed.

The former CM further alleged that the BJP “started ‘Operation Lotus’ from October 15 and in the last 15 days, it submitted applications for deleting nearly 5,000 voters and for addition of 7,500 names”.

“This is clear manipulation of almost 12% of votes. What is the need for elections if such kind of activity is going on? They did this in Haryana and Maharashtra but we will not let them do this in Delhi,” Kejriwal said.

Kejriwal has also written to the New Delhi district election officer, seeking details of individuals (objectors) who have submitted more than five applications for deleting names since October 29. Kejriwal added that between August 20 and October 20, a summary revision was conducted in Delhi and 1,06,873 voters were recorded in the New Delhi constituency as per the revised list on October 29.

Reacting to Kejriwal’s comments, Verma, a former BJP MP, said the claims were “baseless”. “Kejriwal’s repeated theatrics are nothing new. His baseless allegations about ‘Operation Lotus’ are a clear indication of his insecurity and fear of losing public support. Filing applications for voter addition or deletion is a routine process in any democracy, and to paint this as a conspiracy is laughable... If Mr Kejriwal is so sure of voter manipulation, why hasn’t he submitted concrete evidence to the Election Commission or courts? His press conferences are merely a stage for sensationalism, not accountability,” he said.

Verma further alleged the former CM of Delhi was attempting to divert attention from his government’s poor performance, citing issues like the mismanagement of public funds, deteriorating infrastructure, and “unfulfilled promises”

BJP trying to delete my wife’s name: MP Singh

New Delhi: AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh accused the BJP of allegedly attempting to delete his wife’s name from the voter list. Accusing the BJP of targeting him personally as he spoke up for rights of Purvanchalis and people from UP and Bihar, he said, “Is my wife, a Purvanchali from Jaunpur, a Rohingya or Bangladeshi?...” Hitting back at AAP, the BJP said it will not allow fake votes to be cast in Delhi. “Two women... who submitted the applications to cancel (his wife’s) voter ID have family ties with Sanjay Singh... He should clarify the nature of their relationship with him and his wife...,” said state BJP Chief Virendra Sachdeva. **ENS**

related to schools, hospitals, and employment.

“Kejriwal’s claim of 12% voter manipulation is not just an insult to the BJP but to the integrity of democratic institutions like the Election Commission... The BJP believes in democracy and respects the people’s mandate. We don’t need to manipulate voters. AAP’s track record of mismanagement and corruption is enough to convince the public to reject them,” Verma said.

Vocational training, self-defence for girls, security: Sisodia unveils education manifesto for Jangpura

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

VOCATIONAL TRAINING to prepare students for the future, advanced self-defence courses for girls, emphasis on mother tongue, adequate staffing, and improved sanitation and security at educational institutions: these are among the highlights of the education manifesto for Jangpura unveiled on Sunday by senior Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Manish Sisodia.

The former deputy chief minister and education minister, who has been elected thrice from Patparganj as an MLA, has been fielded by the party from Jangpura this time. Ahead of the Assembly elections due next year in the Capital, education has, as expected, emerged as the focus of his campaign.

The education manifesto highlights plans for two world-class schools in Sarai Kale Khan and Nizamuddin, along with modern facilities at existing schools in Kotla and Ashram. It also promises fully-equipped classrooms. In a nod to inclusivity, it also proposes to hire teachers to teach students their mother tongues, such as Tamil, Punjabi, Urdu, and Hindi, alongside German, French, and Japanese language courses.

“Quality education for children is the key to the progress of any family,” Sisodia was quoted as saying in a statement.

“We all aspire for our children to grow up to be successful and respected individuals. To achieve this, access to quality education is crucial. As Delhi’s Education Minister, I have laid a strong foundation



AAP leader Manish Sisodia during a ‘Mega PTM’ at a government school in New Delhi. PTI

to provide quality education to every child in Delhi. Now, as the MLA candidate from Jangpura, I am here to continue this work and realise the dream of providing the best possible educational facilities to every child,” read the statement.

With an eye on leveling the playing field, the manifesto vows to bring the 11 aided schools in Jangpura at par with Delhi government schools with timely funding and enhanced monitoring. It also promises stringent monitoring of private school fee hikes and improved training opportunities for educators, both domestically and abroad.

In a move to “prepare students for the future”, Sisodia plans to integrate vocational training, post-school arts and sports programmes, and advanced self-defence courses for girls.

The manifesto also outlines new courses at ITI Hazrat

Nizamuddin, leveraging cutting-edge technology to create employment opportunities.

“Vocational subjects will be tailored to meet future employment needs so that students who complete their schooling can find suitable jobs or pursue higher education while working,” Sisodia said in the statement.

Parental engagement forms another key focus, with proposals for regular parent-teacher meetings and strengthened school management committees. “Parents must feel empowered and involved in their child’s education,” the AAP leader emphasised.

The manifesto also pledges to track students’ progress after graduation for up to four years, offering guidance on higher education and employment. Alumni networks will be formed to foster community engagement and mentorship for younger students.



Transport dept rejects Kejriwal’s claim of inquiry against Atishi

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

DAYS AFTER AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal alleged attempts were being made by central probe agencies to arrest CM Atishi over the free bus rides scheme for women, the Additional Chief Secretary of the Transport Department called the claims “misplaced” and “misleading”.

In a note dated December 26, ACS (Transport) Prashant Goyal said, “My attention is drawn to news reports on TV and social media wherein former CM Kejriwal is seen alleging an inquiry is being contemplated in the Transport Department implicating your good self in a matter pertaining to free bus rides for women.”

“I would like to place on record that no such inquiry has even been contemplated by the Transport Department. Also, no communication has either been received from the Vigilance Department, GNCTD, in this regard. The aforesaid claim is absolutely misplaced and mislead-

ing,” the note further reads.

The letter has been sent to the CM, and Chief Secretary cum Chief Vigilance Officer.

Last week, Kejriwal, addressing a press conference, had accused the BJP of hatching a conspiracy to arrest Atishi in a false case to distract the party from campaigning for the polls.

AAP responded, saying, “We will continue to thwart every conspiracy of the BJP and ensure that the free bus travel scheme for women in Delhi remains intact at all cost...”

Meanwhile, Delhi BJP chief Virendra Sachdeva in a statement Sunday said, “The administrative note sent by Delhi ACS Transport to CM Atishi, clearly stating that there is no investigation ongoing against her, has exposed Kejriwal’s false claims... For quite some time, we’ve been asserting that the former CM is intimidating and politically misleading his colleagues... it is regrettable that Kejriwal, for his petty politics, first degraded the dignity of the CMO and now (dragged the) CM into controversial matters.”

Cops screen over 5k people, dozens of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants deported from Delhi

HIMANSHU HARSH
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

OVER 5,000 people questioned, their documents screened, and 30 among them deported for staying illegally in India — the Delhi Police has intensified its special drive against illegal immigrants.

The ongoing verification drive, following L-G V K Saxena’s order on December 10, is aimed at identifying, detaining and repatriating foreign nationals residing in the Capital without valid documents, police said.

The *Indian Express* reached out to Deputy Commissioners of Police (DCPs) of multiple districts to ascertain the status of the drive.

ANKIT CHAUHAN

DCP, SOUTH DELHI

He said documents of over 1,500 people have been checked so far in his district. Of these, 12 Bangladeshi immigrants were found to be illegally residing in the country, and have been deported as per procedure, he added.

SURENDRA CHOUDHARY

DCP, SOUTHWEST DELHI



Police conduct a verification drive in Delhi, Sunday. ANI

Choudhary said 10 alleged illegal Bangladeshi migrants were identified and deported from the district after document verification of over 500 people.

RAVI KUMAR SINGH

DCP, SOUTHEAST DELHI

He said 12 people have been arrested or deported so far, while documents of 1,297 people have been checked during the ongoing verification drive.

SACHIN SHARMA

DCP, OUTER DELHI

Sharma said 175 individuals suspected of being Bangladeshi immigrants were identified for

further investigation. Over 1,000 people have been checked so far.

RAJA BANTHIA

DCP, NORTH DELHI

He said two Bangladeshi nationals have been deported following document verification of around 500 people.

RAKESH PAWERIYA

DCP, NORTHEAST DELHI

He said five Bangladeshi nationals were deported after verification of 60 people in the district.

AMIT GOEL

DCP, ROHINI

Even as no illegal immigrants

have been found in Rohini so far, Goel said 734 immigrants have been covered under the drive.

NIDHIN VALSAN

DCP, OUTER NORTH DELHI

Around 550 suspects underwent a screening process in the district but nobody was found to be lacking relevant documents, he said.

15 deportations this weekend

This weekend, police said they deported 15 more alleged illegal Bangladeshi immigrants through the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) from South and Southwest districts.

DCP Choudhary said on Friday, a team from Vasant Kunj South police station identified a family of eight Bangladeshi nationals residing in Southwest Delhi’s Rangpuri area. “Originally from Kekerhat village of Madanipur district in Bangladesh, Jahangir, his wife Parina Begam, and their six children illegally entered India via unofficial routes and had been living in the country without valid documents. After thorough verification, appropriate legal action

was taken and they have been deported to Bangladesh through FRRO,” he said.

The DCP added that in the last 2-3 weeks, police teams conducted door-to-door document verification of nearly 400 families in the area. “During the drive, they collected verification forms (*parcha-12*) and sent them to their respective homes in West Bengal for further verification. A special team was also sent to West Bengal to conduct manual checks.”

In another operation Saturday, seven illegal immigrants from Bangladesh were apprehended near Arjan Garh Metro Station. “On checking, their Bangladesh citizenship documents were recovered. They were then produced at the FRRO in RK Puram and following completion of necessary documentation, they were detained at the centre at Inderlok before final deportation,” said DCP Chauhan.

On December 12, DCP (Shahdara) Prashant Priya Gautam said police teams collected documents from 32 suspected individuals for verification.

DCPs of other districts did not respond when contacted.

MAHILA SCHEME

After L-G orders inquiry, police told to look out for ‘suspicious people’ collecting data from women

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

FOLLOWING AN inquiry ordered by L-G V K Saxena, Delhi Police has directed senior officers of all 15 police districts to keep a lookout for suspicious “private” individuals collecting personal details of women on the pretext of enrolling them under the Mahila Samman Yojana ahead of the upcoming elections, a senior police officer said Sunday.

“The DCPs have been instructed to keep a close eye on the matter to investigate it,” the officer said.

On Saturday, officials from the L-G Secretariat confirmed that a high-level inquiry has been ordered into the AAP Delhi government’s proposed Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana, after a complaint from Sandeep Dikshit, former Congress MP and the New Delhi Assembly seat candidate. Dikshit alleged that cash was being transferred, in crores, from various parts of Punjab to Delhi ahead of the upcoming Assembly polls.

Recently, senior officers in the Delhi Women and Child Development (WCD) disowned the registration process started by Chief Minister Atishi and Kejriwal for the scheme.

In response, the AAP said: “Launching an inquiry over a simple election promise exposes the BJP’s desperation, highlighting their lack of CM face, plan, and vision for Delhi. Arvind Kejriwal wants to give Rs 2,100 to every woman in Delhi and the BJP is trying its best to stop this. We want to tell the people of Delhi - this time in the elections, press the *‘Jhaadu’* (broom) button so hard that the BJP gets a strong electric shock.”

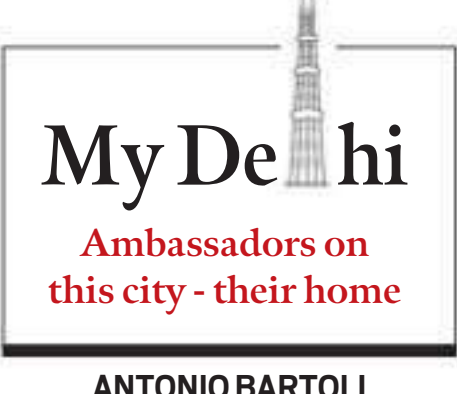
Delhi man falls unconscious at Goa music fest, dies a day later

Panaji: A 26-year-old man from Delhi died in Goa on Sunday, a day after he fell unconscious during an electronic dance music (EDM) festival, police said.

Police said they got a call Sunday morning from a hospital in Mapusa informing them that a man, Karan Kashyap from Rohini in Delhi, was declared dead in ICU. “It was revealed during an inquiry with his friends that he... had attended the Sunburn EDM party on Saturday at Dhargal, Pernem, in Goa. At 9.45 pm, the deceased fell unconscious during the event. He was immediately taken to Vision Hospital, Mapusa, by ambulance. Despite treatment, he passed away,” North Goa SP Akshat Kaushal said in a statement. Police said the cause of death is yet to be ascertained.

SP Kaushal said, “The post-mortem is being conducted at Goa Medical College and necessary legal action will be taken if any foul play is noticed.” **ENS**

‘Delhi’s markets remind me of the famous ones of Naples or Palermo’



ANTONIO BARTOLI
AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE OF ITALY
TO INDIA AND NEPAL

NIRBHAY THAKUR
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

HAVING LANDED in India at the end of July, Ambassador-Designate of Italy to India and Nepal Antonio Bartoli is navigating the streets of his new home, New Delhi, and discovering new things — Humayun’s Tomb, Lodhi Gardens and the city’s colourful markets.

Bartoli was a scholar at the Corriere della Sera School of Journalism and studied at the LSE Summer School, where he

was awarded a Master’s degree in International Relations at Sciences Po after presenting a thesis on ‘asymmetric warfare’.

Before entering the diplomatic career, he worked as a professional journalist from 1991 to 1997. A member of the Order of Journalists and the Parliamentary Press Association, he covered politics and economics.

In 2012, he worked at the US State Department for a year, handling the economic dossiers of the Middle East and North Africa. As Ambassador in Tbilisi (2014-2019), he promoted political dialogue (very first visit of the President of the Italian Republic to Georgia), business and trade (in particular in infrastructure, energy and hospitality segments), scientific and cultural cooperation (several exhibitions from Roman mosaics to contemporary art, including focuses on Michelangelo, Bernini and De Chirico; tenfold increase in the number of students learning Italian language).

He is married to Ester with whom he has five daughters.

Bartoli spoke to *The Indian Express* as part of a series of interviews with Ambassadors about Delhi — their home.

Edited excerpts:

What is the one place in the city that you love to visit often?

Since I arrived in New Delhi, I’ve delved into the unique (and sometimes hidden) beauty of this vibrant city with enthusiasm and curiosity. I’ve already had the chance to visit a certain number of historical sites. My favourite is Humayun’s Tomb; I fell in love with its wonderful gardens and architectural majesty.

Three things that stood out in Delhi during your stay here?

Well, first of all, I still consider myself new to Delhi and the country at large. Not only for the limited time I’ve been here, but above all for the remarkable amount of art, culture, and history India can boast. An incredi-



Ambassador-Designate of Italy to India and Nepal Antonio Bartoli. *Express*

ble heritage that would probably make me “new to India” even at the end of my stay.

However, if I have to choose today, here’s my choice. The parks, such as Lodhi Gardens or Nehru Park. These and other green areas are stunning, as you get the chance to appreciate nature and history together, with a simple walk.

Second, street food. My favourite is the *samosa*.

Last but not least, the markets: colourful, melting pot of cultures and traditions. They remind me of the famous and crowded markets of Naples or Palermo. Perfect places to better understand people, their lives, tastes, and habits.

Does pollution in Delhi

bother you? How do you and your family deal with it?

We can simply protect ourselves indoors with air purifiers and masks while going outdoors. I usually spend the entire day outdoors for meetings and events, so exposure to the polluted air is definitely not a joke. But the issue is not how we deal with it, but what should we do to avoid dealing with it.

Is there anything that you would suggest Delhi’s administrators work on to make this city a better place?

I would lie if I were not saying that pollution is a big issue here. A huge one. I understand this is a major challenge that the government and all authorities are seriously addressing. However, in India just as in Italy, I believe everyone can be the driver of change.

Favourite food in Delhi?

As I consider myself a food lover and an open-minded food

traveller, Delhi is a never-ending daily discovery. I love the wide array of regional cuisines. I am still discovering many of them and I am keen on understating the best use of spices. With moderation, though.

I love simple food. *Dal* and *naan* are my favourites.

How is Delhi different from other major capitals or cities you have served in?

Everything. There is no place in this world which can be considered a replica of others. And this is the beauty of being a diplomat. You live your life discovering new and different cultures, values, traditions, much of the time far from your past but, perhaps, surprisingly and unexpectedly so close to your heart.

Is there anything that you or your family would miss once you say goodbye to this city?

I am sure many. Starting from the warmth and hospitality of the people. But it’s too early to

say goodbye. We will enjoy our life in Delhi. We already are. We were, for example, stunned by the beauty of Purana Qila.

Memories which you think will stay with you always?

There is no single episode. But a precise feeling: of feeling at home, notwithstanding the diversity and, often, the striking inequalities. In the natural smile of people, in the immediate empathy, in the importance of friendship and family, we — Indians and Italians — are really very similar.

If you have to introduce Delhi to someone back home, what will you tell them?

I would describe Delhi as an unforgettable — overwhelming — medley of cultures and traditions, languages and cuisines. A challenging and yet fascinating experience, capable of opening your heart and conquering your soul. Incredible Delhi. Or, in Khushwant Singh’s words, “Delhi is not just a city, it’s an emotion.”



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6 GOVT & POLITICS



DELHI **CONFIDENTIAL**



PRESSED FOR TIME

ALL GOVERNMENT programmes were cancelled on Friday following the death of former prime minister Manmohan Singh the night before. In Gujarat's Lothal, however, a routine ministerial press conference had to be cancelled at the last moment on Saturday as Union Ministers Sarbananda Sonowal and Mansukh Mandaviya decided to skip the briefing, asking officials to speak to the press. The two BJP leaders were in Lothal to take part in a review meeting and monitor the progress of the 'National Maritime Heritage Complex'. The Gujarati press was waiting for the ministers and Gujarat CM Bhupendra Patel to address the presser at 1.30 pm when an official came and announced that the ministers were flying back to Delhi after the review meeting, and that officials would brief them on the progress of the heritage complex.

HELPING HAND

AT THE funeral of Dr Manmohan Singh, one member of the Congress's digital media team caught the attention of many who had come to pay their last respects to the former PM. Girish Kumar, who works in Congress leader Supriya Shrinete's team, was given the responsibility to receive the guests and dignitaries who arrived at the Nigambodh Chat on Saturday. As he tried to escort the guests and dignitaries, Kumar, who mostly works behind the scenes, was mistaken by many as a member of the Singh family. He was, in fact, "blessed by many members of the Singh family for helping the elderly guests" in the crowd at the packed cremation ground.

Health, social bonds: Participants list benefits of a 'disputed' MEC-7 exercise programme in Kerala

SHAJU PHILIP
CHEMBAKKUNNU
(KOZHIKODE), DECEMBER 29

AROUND 5.45 AM, men and women wearing white T-shirts start trickling into the spacious compound of the Narikkuni English Medium School at Chembakkunnu village, located 18 km from Kozhikode in Kerala. Fifteen minutes later, as some in the group, between the ages of 40 and 60, start with their morning walk, a trainer instructs, "Line up."

Soon, men and women take their positions in separate formations, marking the beginning of another day of the multi-exercise combination (MEC-7) programme, which has become the subject of a political row lately, after the ruling CPI(M) alleged that the Jamaat-e-Islami and Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), the political wing of the banned Popular Front of India (PFI), were using the platform to further their political agendas.

Raising alarm over the fitness programme, CPI(M) Kozhikode district secretary P Mohahan recently said, "Lifestyle diseases should be fought and remaining physically fit is important for everyone. However, the Jamaat-e-Islami and the SDPI are using MEC-7 for their narrow politics. The Jamaat is using it as a shield for its campaign for Islamic nation. Secular society should be

vigilant against such attempts."

Mohanan was forced to soften his stance – which was seen by some as continuation of the CPI(M)'s attacks on "radical" Muslim outfits – after it emerged that CPI(M) leaders in Kozhikode district supported the programme. CPI(M) state secretary M V Govindan also stepped in, saying the party did not consider MEC-7 a tool for communal activities.

While a section of Muslim clerics also came out against MEC-7, their stand did not get any support from the larger community.

Even as the controversy was in the limelight, Congress Palakkad MP V K Sreekandan inaugurated a new session of the fitness programme in Pattambi, saying he wanted MEC-7 to be expanded across India, and underlined that there were "no religion elements" in it.

At the Chembakkunnu school compound, the trainer guides those gathered through the paces. The MEC-7 programme comprises 21 exercises in all, each for the duration of a minute, performed over 21 minutes.

The brief instructions to the 130-odd participants are about the only sounds around as they navigate from one exercise to another – jumping jacks, ankle rotations, knee rotations, hip rotations, head rotations and so on.

The sound of synchronised inhaling and exhaling fills the ground as the second set of ex-



During the MEC-7 exercise programme at a school in Chembakkunnu village, Kozhikode district. *Shaju Philip*

ercises, focusing on breathing, begins. A minute later, with their fingers interlocked, the participants stretch both arms over their heads while holding their breath. Next, the participants begin clapping overhead, and then stretching their arms behind their backs and bending forward, as they exhale.

The next steps of the routine are sit-ups and acupressure, in which participants squeeze the sides and centre of their stomachs. After a moment's rest, they begin with abdomen vibrations, meant to strengthen muscles and improve blood circulation, and then toe jumps for the next minute. After a pause, standing with their eyes closed, they begin meditating. Once that is over, they massage their faces with both hands.

After the final exercise, the participants break out of their formation to stand in a circle, and

end the day's session by shaking each others' hands.

The participants say that the MEC-7 programme in Chembakkunnu began nearly four months ago, and has been part of their morning routine, for both men and women, since.

It was more than a decade ago that ex-CISF assistant sub-inspector Salahudheen P conceptualised the programme, and now an estimated 1,000-plus groups which follow it, concentrated in Malappuram and Kozhikode.

A public sector bank employee, K M Venugopalan, 54, says he has been attending MEC-7 sessions since they began in 2012. "I used to go for morning walks, but got interested when I heard about the programme and joined it in the initial days itself. I lost 3 kg after I started regularly doing this exercise. People from all parties and religions take part.

Every morning, we meet for nearly half an hour. This gives a pleasant start to the day, apart from helping us build social bonds," he says.

Shafeeque K M, the instructor at Chembakkunnu, says more and more people are drawn to the programme due to special benefits. "Social life and personal relations have improved. We have two brothers who had been estranged, hadn't spoken to each other for several years. But after they started attending MEC-7, change came, as every participant has to shake the hands of all the others before leaving the day's session," he says.

Many participants at Chembakkunnu tell *The Indian Express* the exercise session has helped them manage weight, lower cholesterol and blood pressure, plus regulate their mornings, which otherwise they may have idled away.

Aneesa, who works as a public relations officer at a nearby hospital, says that for women in particular, MEC-7 has been a game-changer. "This has grown into a collective of women. Homemakers get an opportunity to meet people of their locality and improve their bonds. We all live in the same village, but are not familiar with one another. This session gives us a positive energy for the day," she says.

Graphic designer Shiny, who

is in Chembakkunnu these days on a work-from-home assignment, agrees. "Homemakers are now celebrating their social life. All us women participants a MEC-7 recently went on a tour and are planning another next month. We discuss our issues and look at how we can help a member in need," she says, adding that the sessions have taught them a way to be happy.

Usha, a homemaker, says her family was accommodative when she wanted to make MEC-7 part of her daily routine. "We rescheduled the domestic chores... I take a half-an-hour break from the kitchen. Earlier, by noon, I used to get exhausted both mentally and physically. Now, I feel the change."

MEC-7 Kozhikode district coordinator Asharaf Pulparambil says the controversy has not impacted the fitness programme's conduct or popularity. "We are getting inquiries to start more such clubs... No religious element is involved in the exercise module," says Pulparambil.

He also dismisses the claim of Muslim clerics that the exercise is against religion, putting it down to their fears regarding the intermingling of genders. "Women have separate sessions at MEC-7 and they too realise that health is important," the coordinator says, adding that they expect more units in Kozhikode after the present issues settle down.

Traders' body opposes farmers' call for bandh: 'Punjab hurting'

RAAKHI JAGGA & SUKHBIR SIWACH
LUDHIANA, CHANDIGARH, DEC 29

THE PUNJAB Pradesh Beopar Mandal has come out against Monday's bandh call given by the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha (KMM) and Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) (Non-Political). The two organisations, which had earlier called for a Punjab shutdown, have sought support from other states.

Indicating fissures as farmer protest for legal guarantee for MSP continues, Anil Bansal, vice-president of the Mandal, an organisation of traders and shopkeepers of Punjab, said: "We supported 2020-21 agitation and even visited Delhi borders to extend support. But no agitation should harm the people of that state. In the present case, we are feeling the heat and so expressed ourselves. Not everyone is able to speak the truth."

Bansal said: "Repeatedly enforcing Punjab Bandh is a conspiracy to ruin Punjab commercially, economically and socially. We, the people of Punjab, respect and will always respect farmers and soldiers. However, we oppose and will continue to oppose political opportunists disguised as farmers who aim to destroy Punjab."

The KMM and SKM (Non-Political) have been camping at Shambhu and Khanauri, located on the Punjab-Haryana border, since February 13 this year, rais-



Members of Kisan Mazdoor Morcha and Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) at Khanauri border, Sunday. *Express*

ing several demands, the main being MSP as a legal guarantee. Jagjit Singh Dallewal is the coordinator of SKM (Non-Political).

While the two protest sites – blocking NH-44 at Shambhu, and NH-52 at Khanauri – have attracted supporters, they are nowhere close to the level of 2020-21, when the farmers were protesting against the three agricultural laws. Moreover, there is a growing feeling that while farmer anger is directed at the Centre, it is Punjab that is suffering more.

Badish Jindal, the convenor of the All Industries and Trade Forum, said: "They (the farmers) need to clarify whether they are with Punjab or against Punjab. Last time, the industry supported them wholeheartedly, but this time we are totally against the agitation. If there is a chakka jam or a rail roko, what impact does it have on Centre? It's Punjab's econ-

omy that is hurting. Tomorrow, if something happens to Dallewal, Punjab will suffer. In a nutshell, we are with the farmers but against the nature of the agitation."

Last week, BJP Punjab spokesperson Pritpal Singh Baliawal said on X: "Farmer unions are in Punjab, Khanauri and Shambhu Morcha in Punjab, farmers who are dying are from Punjab, rail roko protests are in Punjab, Punjab bandh in Punjab, sit-ins in Punjab, Dallewal, Shubhkaran (who died during a protest earlier this year), and the injured youth and elderly of Punjab, suffering farmers, traders, youth, and others in Punjab. If everything is happening in Punjab, how is this movement for entire nation? Answer... Why are you sacrificing the sons of Punjab's mothers for others? Why are you damaging Punjab's economy?"

The farm unions themselves are not on the same page. The

SKM, the flagship organisation which led the 2020-2021 agitation, is not a part of the protests at Haryana border, though it has expressed support for them. A call for all farmer unions to come together earlier this month failed.

Still, some SKM constituents such as Krantikari Kisan Union and BKU (Dakaunda) have said they will support chakka jam and rail roko Monday, while BKU (Ugrahan) has announced separate programmes in support of bandh. SKM has announced a kisan mahapanchayat in Tohana on January 4, while SKM (Non-Political) has called for a meet at Khanauri on January 4 inviting farmer unions of other states with whom Dallewal has worked in the past.

On Sunday, khap leaders of Haryana and UP who met in Haryana's Hisar said unless the farmer organisations "struggle unitedly", the khaps would not back them.

Announcing the formation of an 11-member committee to talk to farmer leaders, Dahiya Khap president Jaipal Singh Dahiya said: "If the SKM holds a panchayat for unity and calls the panel for a mediation, we will go."

Sources within farmer unions said a certain disillusionment has set in given that the 2020-21 protest led to limited outcomes. "Our demand for repealing farm laws was met, but the associated ones such as MSP as a legal guarantee, implementation of Swaminathan commission's report and others remained on paper," said a farmer union leader.

Expanding poll reach: Women fought in 390 LS seats, highest since 1957, shows EC data

WOMEN CANDIDATES IN LOK SABHA POLLS

General election	Seats having women candidates	Seats with no women candidate	Total women candidates	Total no. of winners
2024	390	152	800	74
2019	372	171	726	78
2014	377	166	668	62
2009	332	211	556	59
2004	249	294	355	45
1999	206	337	284	49
1998	206	337	274	42
1996	292	251	599	40
1991	227	310	330	39
1989	146	383	198	29
1984	136	405	171	43
1980	127	415	143	28
1977	65	477	70	19
1971	NA	NA	86	21
1967	60	460	67	29
1962	59	435	66	31
1957	37	366	45	22

Source: Election Commission

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

WITH MORE and more women participation in electoral exercises, the 2024 Lok Sabha elections saw 800 women candidates contesting across 390 parliamentary constituencies, the higher-ever since the second general elections in 1957, showed an analysis of the data released by the Election Commission recently.

With 800 women candidates in the fray, this also led to a decline in the number of seats having no women candidate to its lowest-ever of 152. Comparable data was unavailable for 1951 and 1971. Over the years, however, the number of women candidates has been on the rise.

Women candidates contested in 372 seats in 2019, 377 in 2014, and 332 in 2009. In 2004, women candidates were in fray in less than half (249 of 543 seats) the country's parliamentary seats. The figure was even below 200 in the 1980s, when women candidates contested just 127 to 146 seats of the 543 seats. In the 1957 LS polls, only 37 seats had women candidates.

According to the poll panel, a total of 8,360 candidates contested in 2024.

According to EC data, no women candidate was in fray in 152 constituencies of the 543 constituencies, down from 171 in 2019 and 166 in 2014. (see chart).

Of the constituencies having no female candidate in 2024 LS polls, the highest of 30 was in UP, followed by Bihar (15) and Gujarat (14). In the 2024 LS polls, 167 constituencies saw at least one woman candidate. There were two women candidates in 119 seats, 3 in 59 seats, 4 in 25 seats, 5 in 10 seats, 6 in 5 seats, 7 in 2 seats, and 8 in three seats.

Three constituencies – Baramati, Secunderabad, and Warangal – had the highest number of women candidates at eight.

Of the 800 women candidates this year, only 74 won and 629 lost their deposits, data showed.

More and more women are coming out to vote, and in fact they again outnumbered men in exercising their franchise in 2024, in continuation of a trend from 2019. According to the poll panel, 65.78% of women voters cast their votes in 2024 (excluding Surat) as compared to 65.55% men. "Females outnumbered men in 2024 again like in 2019; this is only the second time in the history of GE to Lok Sabha," the EC noted.

Assam's Dhubri seat recorded the highest women voter turnout of 92.17%, followed by Tamluk (West Bengal) at 87.57%, according to EC. The number of registered women voters stood at 47.63 crore of total 97.97 crore electors in 2024 LS polls, compared to 43.85 crore women electors in 2019. In 2024, number of female voters per 1,000 male voters saw a new high of 946, as against 926 in 2019, EC noted.

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

INDIA'S CONSTITUTION has stood the test of time and it is the country's guiding light, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Sunday in the year's final episode of the Mann Ki Baat radio address. "On January 26, it will be 75 years since our Constitution was adopted. It is a matter of immense pride for all of us. The Constitution that our Constitution makers gave us has stood the test of time. The Constitution is a guiding light for us, it is our guide. It is because of India's Constitution that I am here today and am able to talk to you," he said.

Modi said that to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Constitution's adoption, a year-long series of activities had commenced on November 26, Constitution Day. He mentioned a new website designed to "connect citizens with the legacy of the Constitution" – *constitution75.com*.

"On this, you can read the Preamble of the Constitution and upload your videos. You can read the Constitution in different languages, you can ask questions about the Constitution," he said.

PM Modi also referred to the Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj and said the Maha Kumbh's message



Specialty of Maha Kumbh is not just in vastness, it is also in its diversity: PM Modi

is to "unite the entire country". "... When I visited Prayagraj a few days ago, I saw the area from the helicopter and was very pleased – so massive and beautiful, such grandeur. The specialty of Maha Kumbh is not just in its vastness, it is also in its diversity. Crores of people gather for this – lakhs of priests, communities, akharas, everybody becomes a part of this. There is no discrimination, nobody is big or small. Such unity in diversity is not seen anywhere else in the world. This is why our kumbh is the Maha Kumbh of unity," Modi said.

He also said a digital navigation system will help devotees visit ghats, temples and akharas. For the first time, India will host the World Audio Visual and Entertainment Summit next year, a step towards turning the country into a "global content-creation hub", he said.

PM Modi also referred to the Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj and said the Maha Kumbh's message

50%-plus margins: Five such seats in 2024 LS polls, all for BJP

In India's history, only two seats have been won by over 90% vote margin

ANJISHNU DAS
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

WHILE THE BJP's overall performance fell in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, as compared to 2019, it won five seats by a margin exceeding 50% of the vote share, up from three in 2019, data released by the Election Commission recently showed. No other party in 2024 won any seat by a vote share of more than 50%.

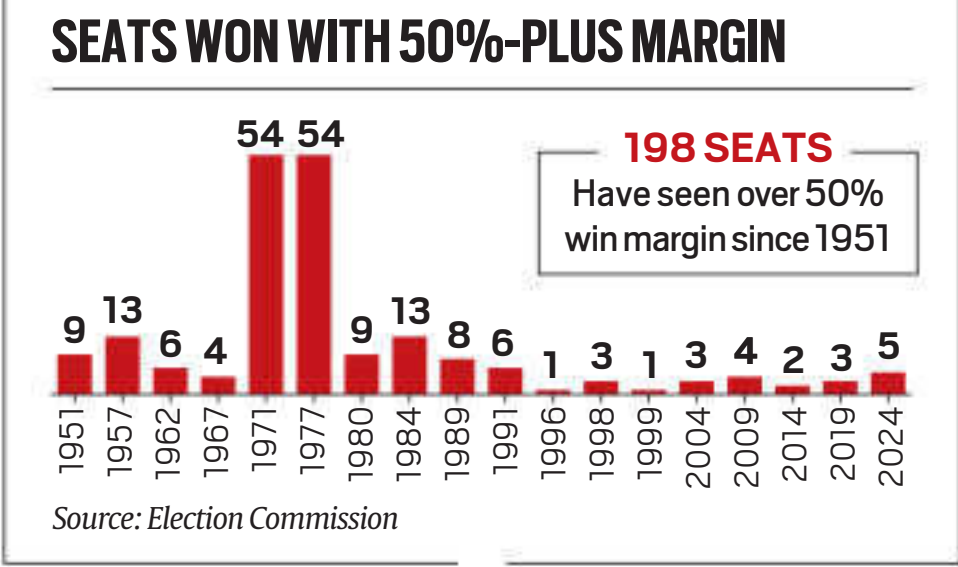
The candidates who cornered more than half the votes in their seats included Union Home Minister Amit Shah (Gandhinagar) and Union Jal Shakti Minister C R Paatil (Navsari), both in Gujarat; Union Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan (Vidisha) and Shankar Lalwani (Indore), both in Madhya Pradesh; and ex-CM Bipul Deb

(Tripura West). Four of these five seats, barring Tripura West, are considered BJP strongholds.

Lalwani recorded the highest vote share of 91.32% of the ballots cast and beat his closest rival by 75% of the votes. The contest for the MP seat was notable given the Congress candidate withdrew his nomination days before polling and joined the BJP, handing Lalwani an easy fight against the remaining candidates, largely Independents and one from the BSP.

The other BJP candidates won by margins between 50% and 60% of the votes.

Across all the Lok Sabha elections since Independence, only 198 seats have seen the winning margin cross 50% of the vote share. The record for the highest vote-share margin stands at 97.19%, secured by late



Independence activist Piyaare Lal Handoo from Jammu and Kashmir's Anantnag seat in 1989.

Overall, since Independence, just two seats have been won by a vote-share margin exceeding 90%; six seats by between 80% and 90%; 16 seats by between 70% and 80%; 45 seats between 60% and 70%; and 129 seats between 50% and 60%.

The 1971 and 1977 elections,

the latter of which was held after the Emergency period, saw the highest number of seats won by more than 50% of the votes, at 54 each. Barring these two years, the number of 50%-plus margin seats has not exceeded 13 (in 1957 and 1984, the post-Indira Gandhi assassination election). In 1996 and 1999 (both of which threw up minority governments), the fewest such seats were won, at one each.



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COMMUNITY VISION DOCUMENT

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ব'ড'লেণ্ড হাযুডাৰি আনসোল (বি.টি.আৰ.) সোৱখাৱনি মৌনসে হাৰাফাৰি

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30th December, 2024



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Shri Lakshman Prasad Acharya

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IPR(BTC)-D-2024-25-51

Navyug tunnel should be named after Manmohan Singh: J-K CM

Srinagar: J&K CM Omar Abdullah Sunday proposed the Navyug tunnel, connecting Kashmir to Jammu region, should be named after former PM Manmohan Singh to recognise his contributions to the development of Jammu and Kashmir.


“There are two tunnels on Srinagar-Jammu highway. One has been named after Shyama Prasad Mookerjee. The other tunnel should be named after Manmohan Singh,” he said. **PTI**

SALUTE THE SOLDIER




BORDER SECURITY FORCE
CT/COOK TAHAL SINGH
25.12.1951 - 30.12.1971

Bordermen Salute and proudly remember today their brave comrade, who made supreme sacrifice while defending Raja Mohittam post (Punjab) during 1971 Indo- Pak war.




CT MAHABIR SINGH
05.06.1966 - 30.12.1991

Bordermen Salute and proudly remember today their brave comrade, who made supreme sacrifice while fighting Anti National Element s in vill Tharpur, Distt Bijnor (UP)




CT P S ALAKUNTE
01.06.1967 - 30.12.1991

Bordermen Salute and proudly remember today their brave comrade, who made supreme sacrifice while fighting Anti National Elements in vill Tharpur, Distt Bijnor (UP)




LNK SUBHASH SINGH
08.11.1961 - 30.12.1991

Bordermen Salute and proudly remember today their brave comrade, who made supreme sacrifice while fighting Anti National Element s in vill Tharpur, Distt Bijnor (UP)




CT JEET PAL
01.05.1972 - 30.12.1998

Bordermen Salute and proudly remember today their brave comrade, who made supreme sacrifice in counterpart firing in area of Naugam (J&K)




CT SURESH CHANDER
16.04.1970 - 30.12.1992

Bordermen Salute and proudly remember today their brave comrade, who made supreme sacrifice while fighting militants in Srinagar (J&K)



NK ABDUL GANI DHAR
07.05.1952 - 30.12.1992

Salute and proudly remember today their brave comrade, who made supreme sacrifice while fighting militants in Srinagar (J&K)



HC MANMOHAN SINGH
30.08.1958 - 30.12.1996

Bordermen Salute and proudly remember today their brave comrade, who made supreme sacrifice while fighting militants in area of FDL Ragini (J&K)


CENTRAL RESERVE POLICE FORCE
29 December 1987

In December 1987, to maintain law and order, 34 Battalion of CRPF was deployed in the region around Darjeeling. On 29th December 1987, militants launched a sudden attack on a CRPF party at Alagarh, 18 km from Kalimpong. In the ensuing encounter, Constable Singh Raj Singh displayed exceptional bravery before attaining martyrdom. His valiant sacrifice remains an enduring inspiration.


Shaheed Constable Singh Raj Singh 01-07-1961 To 29-12-1987 **34 Bn**

30 December 1994

On 30th December 1994, the 119 Battalion of CRPF, deployed in Manipur for antiinsurgency operations, faced an ambush by insurgents. As the vehicles approached, the insurgents unleashed indiscriminate fire. The troops responded with unwavering determination, sparking a fierce encounter. In the line of duty, Shri P. N. Singh, Asst. Commandant, and Ct/Dvr S. Rajan Babu sustained severe bullet injuries. Despite their critical condition, they continued to engage the insurgents, forcing them to retreat. Tragically, both bravehearts later succumbed to their injuries, attaining martyrdom. Their selfless sacrifice stands as a testament to their exceptional bravery, presence of mind, and unwavering dedication to duty.



Shaheed Shri P. N. Singh, Asst. Comdt. 01-07-1943 To 30-12-1994 **119 Bn**



Shaheed Ct/Dvr S. Rajan Babu 07-02-1971 To 30-12-1994 **119 Bn**

30 December 1994

On 30th December 1994, CRPF troops of 113 Battalion, were traveling in a convoy of two gypsies to visit a platoon post at Buwal Khali near the India-Bangladesh border. En route, insurgents ambushed the convoy with indiscriminate fire, improvised cannons, and bombs. The troops swiftly took positions and repelled the attack. In the ensuing fierce encounter, L/Nk/Ftr Krishan Lal, fighting valiantly from the front, sustained severe injuries. Undeterred, he continued firing, playing a pivotal role in uprooting the insurgents. His heroic sacrifice remains a source of pride and inspiration for the Force.

Shaheed L/Nk/Ftr Krishan Lal 07-07-1966 To 30-12-1994 **113 Bn**


30 December 2010

On 30th December 2010, HC Tek Chand ventured to Hanumantpur market, PS Chandrapur, district Rayagada, for intelligence gathering. While discreetly observing the area, he spotted suspicious movements of Maoists and immediately alerted his company, trailing them to monitor their activities. Before reinforcements could arrive, the Maoists grew suspicious and opened fire. Despite being critically injured, HC Tek Chand's courageous actions provided crucial intelligence. He later succumbed to his injuries, attaining martyrdom. His selfless sacrifice remains a beacon of courage and bravery for generations to come.


Shaheed Head Constable Tek Chand Harjan 06-07-1970 To 30-12-2010 **32 Bn**

30 December 2009


On 30th December 2009, troops of 177 Battalion of CRPF conducted a Road Opening Patrol along the Bandipora-Sopore road in district Baramulla. After securing the area, pickets were established near village Janwara for surveillance. Around 1430 hrs, militants hiding in an orchard launched an indiscriminate attack on the picket. The troops swiftly retaliated and advanced toward the enemy. In the fierce gunfight that ensued, HC A.K. Upadhyay, HC Prabhakar Singh, Constable Kuldeep Singh, and Constable Shiv Shankar Das, who led the counter-attack, sustained critical injuries. Despite their wounds, they continued the assault, forcing the militants to flee. Tragically, the four bravehearts later succumbed to their injuries, attaining martyrdom. Their unparalleled courage and determination will forever inspire generations.




Shaheed Head Constable A.K. Upadhyay 27-07-1963 To 30-12-2009 **177 Bn**



Shaheed Head Constable Prabhakar Singh 07-09-1962 To 30-12-2009 **177 Bn**



Shaheed Constable Kuldeep Singh 01-01-1984 To 30-12-2009 **177 Bn**



Shaheed Constable Shiv Shankar Das 09-02-1975 To 30-12-2009 **177 Bn**

Focus was on PM Modi at Singh’s funeral, says Cong; BJP hits back

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

THE ROW over former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s State funeral continued on Sunday with the Congress alleging that Singh’s family members were given only three seats in the front row and that “the focus (of DD coverage) was on Prime Minister Narendra Modi”. The BJP hit back, asking the Congress to “stop politicising the former PM’s death”.

Congress media and publicity head Pawan Khara asked why the government didn’t agree to build a memorial at the place where the former PM was cremated.

“Have you ever heard of another former PM whose funeral was conducted at Nigambodh Ghat? We didn’t speak a lot about it because it wasn’t such a time. Rahul ji and Priyanka ji even said that you (the government) can use some place in Shakti Sthal. They wanted Dr Manmohan Singh’s funeral to happen in a place where his memorial could be built, but the government didn’t agree to it,” said Khara.

Khara alleged the funeral ceremony was mismanaged by the government. “News agencies weren’t allowed. And Doordarshan was showing the PM and his ministers. There was no focus on family members of the person whose funeral was being performed. Is it necessary to always show the PM? It was the cremation of a son of India, but the focus was on the PM,” he said.

He asked why Dr Singh’s family was given “only three seats” in the front row. “There were three daughters of the former PM, their families and his wife. Congress leaders had to struggle to get seats added in the front row... people

Dr Manmohan Singh’s wife Gursharan Kaur brings his ashes to Gurdwara Majnu Ka Tilla Sahib in Delhi on Sunday. **ANI**

who had to perform rituals during cremation couldn’t be found. When Home Minister Amit Shah’s convoy came, everything was disrupted,” Khara alleged.

The Congress leader said the “the Prime Minister was sitting when the Tricolour was being handed over to the former PM’s wife”. He said the government issued a notification for a memorial construction for the former PM “only after pressure from the Congress”.

Replying to Khara’s allegations, BJP’s IT department head Amit Malviya said: “It’s a shame that the Congress continues to politicise the former PM’s death.”

On Khara’s allegation that no other news agencies were allowed to cover the event, Malviya said national functions are covered by only DD.

The BJP leader said seating at the funeral site was arranged by the Central Public Works Department in consultation with the Delhi Police. “Five seats were earmarked for family members in the first row. These were occupied by Mrs Manmohan Singh

and her three daughters.”

The remaining 20 seats were for constitutional authorities who were to lay a wreath. “These included the President of India, the King of Bhutan, the Vice President, the Prime Minister, Cabinet ministers, leaders of the Opposition and service chiefs...,” he said.

“No other person was allotted a front-row seat...,” he said.

On Khara’s allegation that Modi and the Union ministers did not stand up when the national flag was handed to Singh’s widow, Malviya said the State funeral was done with “full military honours”.

On the charge that Singh’s family was given inadequate space around the pyre, Malviya said only family members, priests and ceremonial guards were present there.

The BJP leader also denied the allegation that Shah’s motorcade disrupted the funeral.

“We hope the Congress will stop exploiting Dr Manmohan Singh in death and accord him the dignity he deserves,” Malviya said.

ADVENTURE SPORT HUB

BJP MP Anil Baluni on Sunday pitched for developing Auli, a ski resort in Uttarakhand, as a world-class adventure tourism place. He said he is making efforts to organise a world-level competition in Auli where skiers can also be trained.

Key mediator in Ram temple row, ex-IPS officer Kishore Kunal dies

SANTOSH SINGH
PATNA, DECEMBER 29

ACHARYA KISHORE Kunal (74), who passed away here early Sunday morning following a massive cardiac arrest, wore many hats — the most important being as a key official mediator between the VHP and Babri Masjid Movement Coordination Committee as officer on special duty under the Union Home Ministry between 1989 and 1996.

This was remarkable as that tumultuous period saw three Prime Ministers — V P Singh, Chandra Shekhar and P V Narasimha Rao — who all trusted Kunal to handle the issue.

In caste-bound Bihar, Kunal’s other big achievement was paving the way for the official appointment of the first-ever Dalit priest in any temple in 1993, under his tenure as head of the Bihar State Board of Religious Trust.

At the same time, the Gujarat-cadre IPS officer earned professional laurels for probing cases like the Shwetnisha Trivedi ‘Bobby’ murder when he was Patna SP, and for taking on the dacoits of Rohtas when he was the SP there.

After his voluntary retirement in 2001, Kunal earned a name for philanthropy and re-

Acharya Kishore Kunal

search, including for authoring two books, *Ayodhya Revisited*, and *Ayodhya Beyond Evidences*.

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat and general secretary Dattatreya Hosabale in a joint statement said: “The news about the demise of Acharya Kishore Kunal ji... is sad and heartbreaking... He was a scholar of the Bharatiya knowledge tradition and an active participant in the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the work of temple construction in Ayodhya.” UP CM Yogi said: “The demise of Acharya Kishore Kunal ji, secretary of Mahavir Mandir Trust, is extremely sad and an irreparable loss to the social and religious field...”

Kunal was involved in the construction of what will be one of the biggest temples in India, a ‘Virat Ramayana Temple’ near

Kesaria in East Champaran. Bihar CM Nitish Kumar described Kunal as “an able administrator, whose death has left an irreparable loss in the administrative and social fields”.

Leader of the Opposition and RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav said: “Acharya ji played an important role in the educational, religious and social fields.” In Kunal’s biography *Daman Takshon Ka*, written by his son Saayan Kunal, the former cop recounted his association with the Ayodhya dispute. “It was during my study leave (October 1988 to October 1990) that I got a call from Union Minister of State in the V P Singh government Subodh Kant Sahay (an MP from Ranchi, then in Bihar), who asked me to assist the government on its official position in the Ayodhya matter.” Kunal talked about an excavation in the 1970s finding “evidence of a temple adjacent to Babri Mosque,” and that then PM Indira Gandhi advised the digging to be stopped “immediately... as it could cause tension, uproar and open a Pandora’s box.”

After he took VRS in 2001, Kunal was Vice-Chancellor of KSD Sanskrit University and was later made president of the Bihar State Board of Religious Trust.

P K Mishra recalls former PM’s sincerity, humility

New Delhi: Calling Dr Manmohan Singh a distinguished leader and an eminent economist, P K Mishra, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, recalled his student days at Delhi School of Economics where Dr Singh was a professor.

“We have lost a very distinguished leader, an eminent economist and a great human being... My memories of Dr. Manmohan Singh date back to the time when he was teaching at the Delhi School of Economics. I was in my M.A. first year those days. Seeing him among the stalwart professors in that era was reassuring for a student like me, having come from Sambalpur district in Western Odisha. Those were the days when very eminent professors such as Amartya Sen, Mrinal Datta Chaudhuri, AM Khuro, KN Raj, Sukhamoy Chakraborty, Dharma Kumar and others were teaching there. Dr Singh had a remarkable ability to explain complex topics in international trade in a way every student can understand, making learning easier for students. He was extremely unassuming and low profile,” he said.

“Later I had the privilege of interacting with him when working as Secretary to the National Disaster Management Authority and Secretary to Government of India in the Ministry of Agriculture during his tenure as PM. Whenever I met him, I found the same simplicity, sincerity and humility in his demeanour.”

“My heartfelt condolences and thoughts are with his family and friends during these difficult times,” he said. **ENS**

Abhishek Banerjee slams sports, film celebs’ ‘silence’ on Manmohan’s demise

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
KOLKATA, DECEMBER 29

TRINAMOL CONGRESS’S national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee Sunday hit out at the sports and film personalities for not condoning the death of former prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh, claiming that the “complete silence” may have stemmed from the fear of BJP government backlash.

Hailing Singh, who died on December 26, as one of India’s “greatest statesmen” whose visionary leadership reshaped the nation’s economy, Banerjee in a post on X wrote: “As the architect of the 1991 economic reforms, his (Singh’s) contributions remain unparalleled steering India onto a path of growth and global recognition. Tributes poured in from across the political spectrum, reflecting the immense respect he commanded. However, it is both shocking and disheartening to see the complete silence from prominent figures in the sports and film industries — individuals who are often celebrated as ‘role models’.”

“Their reluctance to even acknowledge Dr Singh’s passing raises uncomfortable questions about their priorities, responsibility and integrity. It appears this silence is driven by fear of government backlash, as staying silent on national issues has become the norm for many of these so-called ‘ICONS,’” he said.

“They have built their wealth and fame by leveraging public admiration, yet they shy away from taking even the smallest moral stand when the nation needs them most,” he wrote.

TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee

MEMORIAL: SIDHU WRITES TO MURMU

Chandigarh: Senior Punjab Congress leader Navjot Singh Sidhu Sunday wrote to President Droupadi Murmu, urging her to direct the Centre to raise a memorial for former prime minister Manmohan Singh at the Raj Ghat complex. Sidhu’s letter comes a day after the Congress accused the Centre of insulting Singh by carrying out his last rites at the Nigambodh Ghat instead of a designated spot that could have become his memorial. Sharing his letter on X, Sidhu posted, “This is not just about a memorial; it’s about upholding historic norms and the dignity of our democracy. India must rise above petty parish pump politics.” **PTI**

“As we enter a new year, it’s time to reconsider who we look up to as role models. Let’s stop glorifying those who prioritise their careers and comfort over courage and accountability. Instead, let us honor and support those who truly contribute to our nation and society — our freedom fighters, soldiers and individuals who sacrifice for the greater good...” he wrote.

‘National Maritime Heritage Complex at Lothal will be a bridge between past, present & future’

IN LOTHAL on Saturday for a re-view meeting on the upcoming National Maritime Heritage Complex at the Harappan dockyard, Union Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways **SARBANANDA SONOWAL** recalled former prime minister Manmohan Singh as an “affable leader”. In a conversation with **VIKAS PATHAK**, Sonowal said he considered the upcoming heritage complex crucial to reinforce the point that India was a great power in the past, and would remain a great power in the future.

What is the vision behind the National Maritime Heritage Complex being built at Lothal?

The vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is heritage as well as development. We have to work to preserve whatever our ancestors have done...

Our PM says India has been strong for ages. Look at Lothal. We have to prove that we are the best. In the maritime sector, we were once a world leader. From the dockyard to the planned city

in Lothal, it’s a fact that in maritime trade and shipbuilding, we played a crucial role in the ancient world. If we don’t tell this to the present generation, how will they understand? We want

to show the world that we have been a maritime power in the ancient past. We are building a museum and cultural centre, which will be crucial for tourism and research, to show the world how we interacted with the world for thousands of years. We recently invited historians and archaeologists from across the world to Delhi to share knowledge about our civilisation. This structure at Lothal will be a bridge between the past, present and future. It will preserve global maritime culture and trade.

What do you think about the row over Dr Manmohan Singh’s cremation at Nigambodh Ghat?

I want to stay away from political questions today. This construction of museum is very important, I would want to stick to it.

What is your memory of Dr. Manmohan Singh?

He was a true gentleman. He was very cooperative and positively responded whenever any-

one approached him. When I was Dibargarh MP from 2004 to 2009 and he was the PM, I once wanted to inform him about some incident in the state, but he was not in office. I conveyed the information to his staff. After 4-5 hours, Dr. Singh called me up to enquire about the issue. This was a very positive way of behaving with his colleagues in the House. This was a learning experience for me.

What is the deadline for the maritime complex at Lothal?

The first phase will be completed by August 2025, and the entire project will be completed by 2028. It’s not just for tourists to see the museum and go. We have created lots of amenities for a wholesome experience.

What kind of economic impetus do you foresee for the area around Lothal?

It is going to generate 22,000 jobs. We expect 25,000 visitors per day. So, it will generate an ecosystem that will be helpful for people.

Cong MLA on ventilator after fall from stadium gallery in Kochi

Thiruvananthapuram: Congress legislator Uma Thomas suffered multiple injuries after falling 15 feet from the VIP gallery of Jawaharlal Nehru International Stadium in Kochi Sunday, and was put on ventilator support at a private hospital.

The Congress’s Thrikkakara MLA, was among the guests at a dance programme at the stadium.

While entering the stadium’s VIP gallery, she reportedly got caught up in a queue manager on the side of the stage and fell from a height of around 15 feet along with the queue manager. She fell on a concrete floor. Thomas was rushed to the Renai Medicity Hospital.

Renai Medicity hospital’s medical director Dr Krishnan Unni Polakulath said the MLA was put on ventilator support soon after she was admitted. “She has sustained injuries in brain, spine and lungs. There is a blood clot in the lungs which got injured by broken ribs. She will be under observation for the next 24 hours... Major concern is the injuries to her brain and lungs,” Polakulath said.

Health Minister Veena George said doctors from the State Health Department will review the MLA’s condition. **ENS**

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in Mhow on Sunday. **PTI**

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
MHOW, DECEMBER 29

DEFENCE MINISTER Rajnath Singh Sunday termed India a “not very lucky” nation on the security front and urged soldiers to keep a sharp eye on internal and external foes who he said are always active.

He was addressing Army personnel at the more-than-two-century-old Mhow cantonment in the Indore district of Madhya Pradesh.

“Taking the security scenario into account, Bharat is not a very lucky country because our northern border and western border continuously face challenges,” said Singh.

Mhow Cantonment is home to premier training institutes Army War College (AWS), Military College of Telecommunication Engineering and Infantry School other than the Infantry Museum and Army Marksmanship Unit. “We also face challenges on the internal front. In the backdrop of this, we can’t sit quietly, unconcerned. Our enemies, whether internal or external, remain active always. In these circumstances, we must keep a close eye on their

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EXPRESS NETWORK

BRIEFLY

KERALA 22-year-old man dies in elephant attack

Idukki: A 22-year-old man died after being attacked by a wild elephant in Kerala's Idukki district, police said Sunday. The incident occurred when Amar Ilahi, a resident of Mullaringadu, a forest-fringe plantation area, went to bring back his cow after grazing, they said. "He sustained critical injuries in the elephant attack. **ENS**

KARNATAKA Gas cylinder blast toll mounts to six

Hubballi: One more Ayyappa devotee who sustained burns in a cylinder blast died Sunday morning, taking the toll to six, police said. Manjunath Waghmore (22), who died on Sunday, was among the nine who sustained burns in a fire accident that occurred on December 24, police said. Six of them died including Waghmore. The accident was caused by a gas cylinder blast. Police on Saturday said that fifth Ayyappa devotee Shankar Chavan had died. Three are undergoing treatment. **PTI**

ODISHA Man dies after bee attack in Mayurbhanj

Baripada: A 32-year-old man died Sunday after a swarm of bees attacked him outside his residence in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district, police said. Biswanath Murmu was employed with the rural development department as a junior engineer. "He was attacked by a swarm of bees in front of his residence on Sunday morning," police said. **PTI**

Primenewspapers search on telegram for free and earliest PDFs

A plane's tail end seats safer? What studies say on survival rate

SUKALP SHARMA & ANIL SASI
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

ON December 25, 38 of 67 people on board died when Azerbaijan Airlines flight J2-8243 — from Baku to Grozny in Russia's Chechnya region — crash-landed near Aktau in Kazakhstan after the aircraft (an Embraer 190) was purportedly hit, mistakenly, by Russian air defence. Videos of the accident site showed a few survivors crawling out of the rear of the aircraft, which was relatively less damaged.

On Sunday, a Jeju Air Boeing 737-800 aircraft operating a flight from Bangkok crashed during an emergency landing at Muan

International Airport in South Korea. Of the 181 people on board, only two are reported to have survived.

The plane was reportedly attempting a belly landing as its landing gear failed to deploy. During the emergency landing, the aircraft skidded off the runway and crashed into the airport's peripheral wall. The two survivors were reportedly pulled out by emergency responders from the tail section of the aircraft.

Even as investigations are on into the causes behind these accidents, it can be inferred that the two crashes were not similar on most counts. Be that as it may, there is one commonality — the survivors were mostly seated in the rear part of the aircraft.

Safer at the back, in the middle?

Most flyers don't like the idea of sitting in the last rows of a plane. And it is even worse if one is allocated a middle seat in the deep depths of the aircraft cabin, right? Perhaps not so much.

Statistically, those seated in the last few rows seem to have better odds of survival in the event of an accident. While underlining that air travel is statistically the safest form of transportation and survival in any crash depends on a plethora of factors, there are some limited studies that show that the rear section of a plane could be the safest spot to sit, if and when a crash occurs.

The *Time* magazine, in a 2015

study, analysed 35 years of crash data up to that year and reported that statistically fewer people who were sitting in the back died in plane crashes. This study, which went through US aviation regulator Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) database tracking accidents with both fatalities and survivors, found 17 with seating charts that could be analysed. While the oldest accident was in 1985, the most recent was in 2000.

According to the study, seats in the rear third of the aircraft had a 32 per cent fatality rate, compared to 39 per cent in the middle third, and 38 per cent in the front third. Looking at row position, the study found that the

middle seats in the rear of the aircraft had the best outcomes (28 per cent fatality rate). The aisle seats in the middle third of the aircraft cabin fared the worst (44 per cent fatality rate).

In April 2012, a team of television studios staged an airplane crash in Mexico where a Boeing 727-200 fitted with crash test dummies and other scientific instruments, was flown into the ground. The test result showed that passengers at the front would be the ones most at risk in a crash, while those seated closer to the airplane's wings were reported as having suffered survivable injuries. The test dummies near the tail section were largely intact.

Another study, done by popular American science magazine, *Popular Mechanics*, in 2007, also led to similar inferences. The study analysed the US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) data for all commercial aircraft crashes in the US since 1971 that had fatalities as well as survivors, and for which seating charts were available. It found that those seated behind the trailing edge of the aircraft wing had a survival rate of 69 per cent. The survival rate was 56 per cent for those in the middle section, and 49 per cent for the seats in the front.

Conditions apply

These statistical trends, however, are very specific to the cir-

cumstances of the crash. In some crashes, such as when the tail hits the ground first, fatalities could be higher in the rear of the aircraft. In others, where the front or the middle of the aircraft bears the major brunt of the impact, those in the rear may have a better shot at surviving the accident.

It is worth noting that the *Time* magazine study found that in a number of crashes, survival was random — "those who perished were scattered irregularly between survivors".

The FAA has consistently stated that there isn't any section of an aircraft that is more or less safe than another, and the most important thing passengers can do for their safety on any flight is to follow the crew's instructions.

4 workers killed after gas leak at Gujarat plant

Chemical firm announces ex gratia of ₹30 lakh each for next of kin

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
VADODARA, DECEMBER 29

LEAKAGE OF toxic gas from a plant at the Gujarat Fluorochemicals Limited (GFL) in Bharuch district's Dahej on Saturday led to the death of four workers, police said.

Police have initiated a probe into the incident on Sunday while the company has announced an ex gratia of Rs 30 lakh each for the families of the deceased. According to officials of Dahej Marine police station, the four workers were inside the production unit of the Chloromethane plant when a gas leak due to a valve malfunction caused them to inhale toxic fumes and pass out. The workers were rushed to a local hospital, where they succumbed, they added.

The Bharuch district police, which has taken the four bodies into their custody, said that the forensic experts as well as industrial safety teams were rushed to the spot after the accident to investigate the matter.

A senior officer of Bharuch district police said, "The incident occurred around 9.30 pm on Saturday when a leakage took place in the distillation unit of the Chloromethane plant. The plant has a mixture of methyl chloride, CT chloroform and hydrogen chloride vapours. The leakage affected four workers, who were rushed to the medical unit within the company and then shifted to a multispecialty hospital in Dahej. They had been admitted to an ICU but succumbed in the wee hours of Sunday."

The deceased have been identified as Rajesh Magnadia (48), Mahesh Nandlal (25), Suchitkumar Prasad (29), and Mudrika Thakor Yadav (29). While Nandlal and Prasad were natives of Sonbhadra in Uttar Pradesh, Yadav hailed from Jharkhand. Officials of the district administration said that the company had announced a compensation of Rs 25 lakh for the family of each of the deceased workers and also initiated an internal probe into the accident.

Sub-Divisional Magistrate Manisha Manani said, "The incident took place late on Saturday night and four workers. The administration was informed in the morning (about the incident) and we have initiated an inquiry."

The GFL said, "There was an incident at the CMS-1 plant...which was immediately isolated but the operations of the said plant were temporarily disrupted. Due to this, four persons who were present at the said plant and within the vicinity of wind direction, got affected. (They) were immediately admitted to the hospital at Dahej and shifted to Bharuch. During the treatment at Bharuch Hospital, due to the subsequent complications, they could not be saved."

The statement further said, "Each family will receive an ex gratia amount of Rs 30 lakh, along with the full settlement of statutory dues, insurance benefits, and pending salaries. Additionally, to secure the future of (one of) our deceased employee's family, we are offering employment to his ward and sponsoring his education, including his degree in engineering."



Police resort to lathicharge to disperse BPSC aspirants demanding a retest of the prelims, in Patna on Sunday. **ANI**

Patna police use water cannons, lathicharge on BPSC protesters

SANTOSH SINGH
PATNA, DECEMBER 29

BIHAR POLICE Sunday used water cannons and resorted to lathi charge to disperse hundreds of civil service aspirants, who have been demanding re-examination of Bihar Public Service Commission prelims, when some of them tried to break through barricades set up to stop them from going towards the Chief Minister's residence in Patna.

Jan Suraj Party founder Prashant Kishor had called the students at Gandhi Maidan in Patna and led the march with the aim of meeting Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. Kishor then sat on dharna after police barricaded the road leading to the CM House via Bailey Road.

Hundreds of candidates who had appeared for the BPSC prelims conducted on December 13 at 912 centres across Bihar have been protesting in Patna since

December 18, calling for the cancellation of the exam, alleging that CCTV cameras and jammers had not been functional at several exam centres and that question papers had been distributed late at some locations. The BPSC has agreed to reschedule the exam only for those who took it at one centre in Patna, where an exam official died of heart attack amid ruckus. "How can BPSC reschedule the examination for just one centre? There should be a level playing amid complaints of delayed distribution of question papers, non-functional CCTV cameras and jammers at several other centres. Students are justified in seeking fresh prelims for all 912 examination centres," Kishor said.

Around 3.8 lakh students had written BPSC prelims on December 13.

On Sunday, after the protesters were blocked from meeting the Chief Minister, the Patna administration advised them that a delegation of five aspirants could

meet Chief Secretary Amrit Lal Meena. With the protesters divided over whether to accept the offer, Prashant Kishor left the protest site after some time.

Hundreds of aspirants continued to shout slogans against the BPSC, and when some of them tried to break through barricades, police used water cannons and lathi charge to disperse the protesters. Leader of Opposition Tejashwi Yadav has backed the protesting aspirants and called on the BPSC to conduct fresh prelims.

Earlier, leading Patna educators Khan Sir and Guru Rahman, and Independent Purnia MP Pappu Yadav, have taken part in the protest.

A BPSC official has said, however, that there had been clear evidence of delayed distribution of question papers at just one centre in Patna, where re-examination has been ordered. "We cannot go by students' allegations and cancel the examination held at all centres," the official said.

10-yr-old boy who fell into borewell in MP's Guna dies

Bhopal: A 10-year-old boy, who fell into a 140-feet borewell in Madhya Pradesh's Guna district, lost the battle for life despite hectic efforts by multiple agencies for 16 hours to save him, officials said on Sunday.

The boy, Sumit Meena, slipped into the open shaft of the borewell at around 5 pm on Saturday in Pipliya village under Raghogarh assembly segment,

located 50 km from the Guna district headquarters.

He was unresponsive when he was brought out at around 9.30 am on Sunday, the officials said. The boy was rushed to a hospital in Raghogarh on life support system, Guna SP Sanjeev Sinha told PTI. "Sorry to say, he is no more," Guna district chief medical and health officer Dr Rajkumar Rishishwar said. **PTI**

Balakrishnan has said the letter is "fabricated". Asserting that "truth must prevail", he said: "I had taken a strong stand against corruption when I served as the president of the bank. No applicant ever approached me. I will file a police complaint."

Current Wayanad district Congress president N D Appachan said they have urged the state leadership to probe the incident and the related allegations. "A Kerala PCC-level probe will be launched into the deaths. It is the party's responsibility to bring the truth out," he said.

Vijayan was a senior Congress leader in Wayanad and had held posts of president of the Sulthan Batherly panchayat and later, a councillor, after it became a municipality.

back to 2019. The CPI(M) and BJP have claimed that Vijayan took lakhs of rupees from job aspirants at the behest of Congress leaders, including Balakrishnan, promising them posts at the bank. No formal complaint was ever lodged in connection with the allegations. But what has contributed to the Congress's embarrassment is that a copy of a job agreement, purportedly signed by Vijayan, has surfaced.

The letter, which names Balakrishnan, states that Rs 30 lakh was paid for a job at the Sulthan Batherly co-operative bank. And that Vijayan had accepted the money in his capacity as the Congress's Wayanad district treasurer, with the promise to return the money in case the aspirant failed to get the job.

death had been registered. A person close to the family said Vijayan was lonely since his wife's death a few years ago, particularly as a road accident had left Jijesh bed-ridden. An employee of, incidentally, the same cooperative bank as named by the CPI(M) and BJP in the allegations, Jijesh had been on leave after his disability.

Kerala BJP president K Surendran sought Balakrishnan's arrest, saying: "The father-son duo is the latest victim of the fraud in cooperative banks of the state. The MLA must be arrested and complaints of those who lost money in the job fraud must be probed."

The alleged scam, involving a Congress-controlled cooperative bank at Sulthan Batherly, dates



Priyank Kharge's aide, five others booked

Referring to the alleged suicide note, Ashoka said that former corporator Raju Kapanur, Kharge's aide, had taken more than Rs 15 lakh from the contractor. "Kapanur was also demanded Rs 1 crore from the contractor, which led to his suicide. Since the minister has such aides, he should also be held responsible," he said.

Countering the allegations, Priyank Kharge held a press conference Sunday and questioned whether there was any evidence to link him to the alleged suicide. "It is Sachin's alleged death note. It is yet to be proved (that he wrote it). Even if he had written it, he has named eight people. Is Priyank Kharge's name in the list?" he said. Police are investigating

Contractor's death: BJP demands Karnataka minister's resignation

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
BENGALURU, DECEMBER 29

WITH A case being registered against Karnataka Minister Priyank Kharge's close aide Raju Kapanur and five others on Saturday in connection with hatching a conspiracy to kill BJP MLA Basavaraj Mattimadu, the Opposition BJP on Sunday demanded the resignation of Kharge and alleged that the minister's close aides were involved in the death of Bidar-based civil contractor Sachin Panchal.

Panchal ended his life on Thursday and the alleged suicide note surfaced on social media.

Leader of Opposition R Ashoka said that Kharge, who is Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, and IT/BT Minister, "should be held responsible for the death of the civil contractor". "It is clear that his (Kharge's) aides are behind the suicide of the contractor. He should resign," he said.

2 suicides open can of worms for Cong in Wayanad

SHAJU PHILIP
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, DECEMBER 29

THE DEATH of suspected suicide of local Congress leader N M Vijayan and his 38-year-old son Jijesh has kicked up a political storm in Wayanad, the constituency represented by Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, with the CPI(M) and BJP raking up an alleged cash-for-job fraud at a co-operative bank involving senior Congress leaders.

Calling for a comprehensive probe into the deaths, CPI (M) district secretary K Rafeeque said Congress Sulthan Batherly MLA C Balakrishnan (once the Congress Wayanad district president) and the party leadership

must be booked for "abetment to suicide". "After Congress leaders pocketed large amounts of money by promising jobs in the cooperative urban sector and failed to give them, the aspirants wanted Vijayan and other leaders to return the money. This drove Vijayan and his son to suicide," Rafeeque claimed.

Vijayan, 78, the Wayanad District Congress Committee treasurer, and Jijesh, who was bed-ridden, are believed to have consumed poison on Tuesday, and died at a government medical college in Kozhikode Friday. Deputy Superintendent of Police of Sulthan Batherly K K Abdul Sharreef said that while they had not discovered any suicide note nor received a complaint from the family, a case of unnatural

seats of Phulbani, Talsara, Ekamra-Bhubaneswar, Titlagarh, Sambalpur and Balasore, which were won by the BJP. "These variations raise questions about the integrity of the whole process," said BJD leader Amar Patnaik.

On the difference in the voter turnout revealed by the EC on polling day and the final figures, which ranged between 15 and 30 percentage points in as many as 50 Assembly seats, the BJD pointed out the "unusual increase" in Keonjhar, CM Mohan Charan Majhi's constituency, and Kantamal. In Keonjhar, between the close of polling at 6 pm and the EC's final figure released two days later, turnout rose by 30.64 percentage points, the BJD alleged. And between the 11.45 pm figure announced on polling day and the final figure, turnout rose by 10 percentage points, the party said. BJD said the EC is yet to respond to the party's petition.

BJD insiders said the move could help the party politically, claiming the public has "doubts" over the election process. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan described allegations as "sour grapes". "When they continued to win, the EVMs were fine. When they lost, they found faults with the EVMs," Pradhan said.

FULL REPORT ON
www.indianexpress.com



Akhilesh Yadav

AKHILESH PITCHES FOR BALLOT VOTING

Lucknow: SP chief Akhilesh Yadav has called for elections to be conducted using ballot papers, citing a lack of trust in electronic voting machines. He said this at a press conference here on Sunday, alongside Rahul Kumar Kamboj, an Indian-origin member of Parliament in Germany. "Even a country like Germany conducts elections using ballot papers," Yadav said. **PTI**

turnout revealed by the EC on polling day and the final figures declared two days later.

"The data and analysis show there has been a machine (EVM) error, or manual error, or process error or combination of all these," the BJD petition told the EC.

The BJD said the gaps ranged from one vote to 784 votes in booths located in the Assembly



The IndianEXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

SPENDING SHIFTS

Household consumption expenditure survey findings need to be correlated with other data, like those on wages

LAST WEEK, THE government released the results of the household consumption expenditure carried out during August 2023 to July 2024. This large scale survey — information has been collected from 2.61 lakh households — follows a similar survey that was carried out the year before. While in the past, large scale consumption expenditure surveys have typically been carried out once every five years, the rationale for conducting two back-to-back surveys was to check the robustness of the results and the methodology used in the 2022-23 survey.

As per the latest survey, in rural areas, the average monthly per capita consumption expenditure rose to Rs 4,122 in 2023-24, up from Rs 3,773 in 2022-23. For urban areas, the comparable numbers are Rs 6,996 and Rs 6,459. Adjusting for inflation, consumption has grown at around 3.5 per cent during this period. Data from the survey does show a marginal increase in the share of spending allocated towards food. The percentage share of food in average monthly expenditure, which had fallen from 52.9 per cent in 2011-12 to 46.38 per cent in 2022-23 in rural areas, and from 42.62 per cent to 39.17 per cent in urban areas, edged up slightly to 47.04 per cent and 39.68 per cent in 2023-24 respectively. This could be partly because of high food inflation during this period. Some experts are also reported to have said that such differences are within the margin of error. The latest survey data also shows that the rural-urban gap continues to fall with spending in rural areas growing at a relatively faster pace. The difference in average monthly consumption expenditure between rural and urban areas has fallen from 83.9 per cent in 2011-12 to 71.2 per cent in 2022-23 and further to 69.7 per cent in 2023-24. However, as per a report in this paper, in the five years ending in 2023-24, nominal rural wages grew at 5.2 per cent, while real wage growth was -0.4 per cent. The trend of subdued rural wages has continued in the ongoing year as well. The survey results also reveal a decline in consumption inequality. The Gini coefficient has fallen from 0.283 in 2011-12 to 0.266 in 2022-23 and further to 0.237 in 2023-24 in rural areas, and from 0.363 in 2011-12 to 0.314 in 2022-23 and to 0.284 in 2023-24 in urban areas. The disaggregated data shows that in 2023-24, consumption of the top 5 per cent in rural and urban areas was actually lower than in 2022-23. In comparison, other data points towards greater spending by those at the top end of the distribution. There is also the issue of how much of total household spending is captured by these surveys when compared to consumption expenditure estimates from the national accounts.

Household consumption expenditure surveys do not just provide information on the changes in spending patterns, but are also used for estimating poverty and for constructing economic indicators such as the consumer price index. Considering the dramatic shifts in the household consumption basket since the survey in 2011-12 — for instance, the fall in the share of food, especially cereals — these surveys will have wide ranging implications.

A CRISIS TO THE WEST

Cross-border strikes by Pakistan, Afghanistan's retaliation mark a deepening of volatility in a fragile region

IN AUGUST 2021, there was a barely disguised triumphalism in Rawalpindi and Islamabad after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the swift takeover of the country by the Taliban. Then PM Imran Khan had said that the Taliban's return marked the Afghan people "breaking the shackles of slavery" and there was talk from senior members of the government about the "creation of a new bloc" in the region. The clashes between the two countries on Pakistan's western border — Afghanistan retaliated with strikes across the Durand Line after Pakistan targeted what it called hide-outs for militants in the former — mark a deterioration of ties and the deepening of instability in an already volatile region.

There has been an intensification of insurgencies in both Balochistan and Pashtun territories. The Pakistan Army, which has long fostered militant groups to deploy against India, faces significant challenges to its authority. It has accused Kabul of sheltering the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and trying to foment insurgency in parts of Pakistan. The Taliban does not recognise the Durand Line — it continues to refer to it as "hypothetical". The Pashtun people continue to suffer at the hands of extremists and Rawalpindi's counter-terrorist operations. The Pakistan state's refusal to engage with the Pashtun Tahafuz (self-respect) Movement (PTM) — the organisation was banned earlier this year — and take seriously the grievances of the community only make a peaceful, constructive dialogue more difficult. The fact is that at the current moment, the Pakistan Army and the government have their backs to the wall. The country has gone through a sustained economic crisis, and the insurgency in Balochistan is a threat to the security of Chinese-backed projects. It has also had border clashes with Iran.

For long, the Pakistan state has sought "strategic depth" on its western front vis-a-vis its conflict with India. At a time when the focus must be on economic reforms and expanding state capacity, the army seems to be sinking deeper into the morass of its own making. Landlocked Afghanistan, facing sanctions and with a regime that is not officially recognised by much of the world may need Islamabad's support for the time being. However, Rawalpindi and Islamabad would be ill-advised to underestimate the depth of the grievances of the Pashtun, who have suffered for the better part of five decades. Military force can only be one aspect of dealing with an insurgency. The degree of maturity with which Pakistan deals with the current unrest and violence will be watched closely in New Delhi. That may well be among the defining elements for both regional security and bilateral ties.

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ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

ALONE IN THE post-independence history of India, Manmohan Singh rose to the highest office of the land on the basis of his policy accomplishments, not because of a mass political base. He altered India's economic future in 1991. Though his contributions are manifold, as I discuss later in this column, the fundamental transformation in the direction of economic policy is his truly monumental legacy.

Let us recall the circumstances of the first half of 1991. The balance of payments had lurched from one crisis to another, and in mid-July, India had so little foreign exchange left that only two weeks of imports could be financed. Put simply, India was on the verge of bankruptcy.

Earlier, a macroeconomic crisis of this kind typically required a short-run economic stabilisation plan under an IMF-led stand-by arrangement. The aim used to be getting at least two macroeconomic balances — the external balance of payments and internal fiscal deficit — in control. To India's great fortune, Manmohan Singh, as the nation's finance minister in 1991, saw the crisis as an opportunity to attend to the long-term economic issues, not viewing it only as a short-run problem, which, of course, it also was. In a historic speech given to Lok Sabha on July 24, 1991, he argued that "macroeconomic stabilisation and fiscal adjustment alone cannot suffice. They must be supported by essential reforms in economic policy... (facilitating) a transition from a regime of quantitative restrictions to a price-based mechanism."

The argument, in other words, was that India's economic policy, based as it was on state-directed quantitative planning since Independence, required a market-based reformulation. Otherwise, such macroeconomic crises would continue to erupt, and economic progress would be stalled. There had to be a movement towards economic freedom and state retraction from the economy.

Internally, this led to what Jagdish Bhagwati called "a bonfire of investment licences". Instead of the state telling investors where to invest, how much and with what kind of technology, domestic entrepreneurs were now free to invest in most sectors of the economy. Externally, trade pessimism, typical of the earlier era, was to be abandoned, and a

Manmohan Singh's programmes viewed the poor as rights-bearing citizens, not recipients of largesse

All programmes for the subaltern were legislated as the rights of the less privileged. It can be argued that many governments in India, including the present one, conceptualise welfare as acts of government kindness or what social scientists call patrimonialism. Rights-based welfare is not embodied in government schemes. It is anchored in legislation and laws, which then spawn schemes.

market-oriented trade regime was embraced, supplemented with openness to foreign investment. "We have reached a stage of development", argued Manmohan Singh in the justly famous July 1991 Lok Sabha speech, "where we should welcome, rather than fear, foreign investment. Concern is sometimes expressed that... foreign investment may jeopardise our economic sovereignty. These fears are misplaced. We must not remain permanent captives of a fear of the East India Company as if nothing has changed in the past 300 years."

Thus began India's economic transformation that, unreversed by later governments, has lasted till today. In 1980, India was the 50th largest economy in the world. By the time Singh left office in 2014, the Indian economy was among the top 10 in GDP (and has become the fifth-largest by now). A large middle class has come into being, literally for the first time in modern Indian history. India always had some very rich people and a large mass of the poor, but the middle class was minuscule. Not so any more.

Finally, given the World Bank's poverty line (\$1.90 a day at 2011 prices), nearly 250-300 million people have been lifted out of poverty since 1991. This poverty-alleviation record is substantial but not as phenomenal as China's, where over 700 million have ceased to be poor in the post-Mao era.

Indeed, the inability of markets to not lift more people out of poverty led Manmohan Singh to institute a new set of policy innovations in his second coming — when he became India's Prime Minister (2004-14). In this phase, the makings of a modern welfare state were put in place, with a focus on the poor and the marginalised. In 2005, rural India got a right to employment for 100 days a year via the world's largest employment guarantee program (MNREGA). In 2009, a right to education was created, and in 2013, a right to food security. All of this was undergirded by a right to information (2005), which citizens could exercise to find out how serious the government's rights delivery was.

It is important to emphasise that this was a rights-based welfare regime. All programmes for the subaltern were legislated as the rights of the less privileged. Using modern social science terminology, it can be argued that many

governments in India, including the present one, conceptualise welfare as acts of government kindness or what social scientists call patrimonialism. The idea of 800 million citizens covered with ration is an example. Rights-based welfare is not simply embodied in government schemes. It is anchored in legislation and laws, which then spawn schemes (yojanayin). These are two very different concepts. Manmohan Singh's welfarism viewed the underprivileged as rights-bearing citizens, not simply as recipients of largesse.

Beyond economics and welfare, the civil nuclear deal with the US was a massive achievement of Manmohan Singh as India's Prime Minister. The deal ended what used to be called the nuclear apartheid and took the US-India relationship to a new level. The tensions that used to mark the US-India relationship during the Cold War had lost their rationale as the Cold War ended. Still, a systematic diplomatic effort had to be made to turn the post-Cold War phase into a set of policies and programmes. Both for geopolitical and economic reasons, a close relationship with the US is beneficial for India. Manmohan Singh saw the desirability of it and managed to institute a new phase in the Indo-US relationship. India's diaspora was, in any case, heavily inclined towards the US. Even during the Cold War, there was no great citizen enthusiasm for the Soviet Union. Government policy finally gravitated closer to citizen wishes.

A word may also be said about Manmohan Singh's personal conduct — before, during and after his years in power. I had several meetings with him, starting with his days as the head of the Reserve Bank of India and later when he held important positions in Delhi. Unwavering civility would perhaps be the best way to describe what I experienced. Even when in positions of high power, arrogance never touched him, and civility never failed.

India has lost one of its greatest citizens after Independence, one who gave the nation so much.

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. Views are personal



SANDEEP DWIVEDI

THERE IS ONE line in the ICC's statement on Virat Kohli's shoulder-barge of 19-year-old Aussie opener Sam Konstas that most would disagree with: Kohli had "negligently bumped his shoulder with the batter inappropriately". It also said no formal hearing was required as Kohli had admitted the offence and accepted the 20 per cent match-fee cut.

Negligence means "failure to take care". One needs to be either blind or biased to conclude that Kohli was anything but aware of what he was doing when he walked to the edge of the pitch in his attempt to shatter a young batting buccaneer's confidence and turn cricket into a contact sport.

Konstas remained unperturbed. He continued to treat India's famed bowling with disdain. But with ICC confusing Kohli's planned trek to the side of the pitch as a forgetful professor bumping into a fellow walker, the world body inadvertently encouraged the prospect of turning cricket into football, if not rugby.

The Aussie commentators were livid, maybe their criticism was more shrill than the moment deserved. But the issue that should ideally be unanimously condemned had turned into whataboutery and a bizarre debate.

Former Aussie skipper Ricky Ponting would say that a fielder "should be nowhere near the batsman at that stage... where the batsmen congregate and get together". Voices in the Indian media would remind Ponting of his own disciplinary record as an active professional. By that logic, should

OUT OF LINE

Virat Kohli's shoulder-bump to Sam Konstas was aggression, not negligence

Television broadcasters love confrontations involving Kohli. They can't resist taking sides in a good old face-off during modern cricket's most-watched rivalry. In these times of 'reels' and 'shorts', an angry exchange is gold dust and a Kohli shoulder-barge priceless.

commentators with problems with the rising ball be allowed to commentate in Perth or those facing issues with swing be allowed in the media area in England?

Kohli's actions didn't go down well with leading Indian voices. Ravi Shastri and Sunil Gavaskar pulled up the Indian star for his on-field behaviour. But the broadcaster had their balancing act ready. The voiceover for the day's most-talked-about moment said: "Aussie teenager bumps into Kohli, who isn't too impressed". It's the same as reporting deforestation with the headline: "Tree walks up to the axe, falls over it and cuts itself".

Television broadcasters love confrontations involving Kohli. They can't resist taking sides in a good old face-off during modern cricket's most-watched rivalry. Since the start of the series, the Indian television audience has been subjected to a documentary that discusses the Monkeygate series and R Ashwin-Tim Paine "See you at Gabba" sledge.

It plays on loop, reminding of the history of confrontation. It goads the fans to stay tuned, suggesting that another angry exchange could be round the corner. In these times of "reels" and "shorts", an angry exchange is gold dust and a Kohli shoulder-barge priceless. Even the promos of the Test series make two of the most endearing and well-behaved cricketers — captains Rohit Sharma and Pat Cummins — into scowling, menacing characters.

Despite the best efforts of marketers, the series has been mostly cordial. The Mohammad Siraj-Travis Head fight turned out

to be short-lived. They seemed to have made up when they met at the end of the innings. This would have broken the hearts of television producers, like it might have when young Konstas poured freezing water over the issue by saying "it happens, it is cricket".

Over the last few years, there is an "outrage industry" that has grown around Kohli. Any criticism of Indian stars is followed with the social media meltdown of those who associate with the Virat Army. Such is the popularity of cricket's superstar that support for him also gets monetised.

But Kohli should have known better. There is nothing wrong in showing aggression, it has made him a modern-day great. But he should have picked someone of his stature and age to confront. Konstas is a teenager who didn't get intimidated by the grand occasion of a Boxing Day Test. He wasn't conscious of the bowler he was facing or the greats standing behind him in the slips, one of them being Kohli, his role model since his childhood. Konstas was sure of his skills, and played like he always had. He was exactly what Kohli was when he was a teenager.

At least, Kohli should have respected that. At least, for once, he could try to be a hero who would not disappoint his fanboy. Konstas deserved a pat on the back for carrying forward his legacy, not a shoulder-barge. But why does Kohli do this? Because he is allowed to and because it keeps the wheel moving.

sandeep.dwivedi@expressindia.com

DECEMBER 30, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

CONG'S LANDSLIDE WIN

THE CONGRESS (I) GAINED a three-fourths majority in the Lok Sabha as it continued its winning streak shattering all previous electoral records in the country and virtually obliterating the Opposition in most states. The massive wave in its favour saw the party chalk up a mind-boggling 395 of 495 seats.

AIADMK WINS TN

THE RULING ALL-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam has been enthroned for the third time in Tamil Nadu, returning with its

highest-ever election majority. With all the 232 results announced, elections in two constituencies being reprimanded, the AIADMK won 133 seats and the Congress (I) won 62.

PM'S NEW HOUSE

THE GOVERNMENT HAS found a new residence for the Prime Minister. It will comprise two bungalows — numbers 5 and 7 — on Race Course Road in New Delhi. The Central Public Works Department will soon take over these bungalows and make changes to suit the PM's needs. The search comes after Indira Gandhi's assassination while walking

from No. 1 Safdarjung Road to her office.

NEW CABINET

MR RAJIV GANDHI'S new cabinet, which may be sworn in on December 31, is likely to combine old and new faces. Among those likely to be reinstated as cabinet ministers in the new government are P V Narasimha Rao, Pranab Mukherjee, S B Chavan, Buta Singh, and Mohsina Kidwai. The new entrants are likely to be K C Pant, who has served in India Gandhi's government in the past, and Madhavrao Scindia, who defeated Atal Bihari Vajpayee in Gwalior.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Paradigm shift without shocks

Manmohan Singh's reforms combined growth with equity, took care of needs of vulnerable groups



C RANGARAJAN

DR MANMOHAN SINGH will go down in history as one of the ablest prime ministers of the country. As Finance Minister in the Narasimha Rao cabinet, he brought about fundamental changes in the Indian economy. The changes he introduced were revolutionary by any yardstick. They required vision and courage, and he had these qualities in abundance. As Prime Minister, he showed the same vision and courage and made India an important voice in the world.

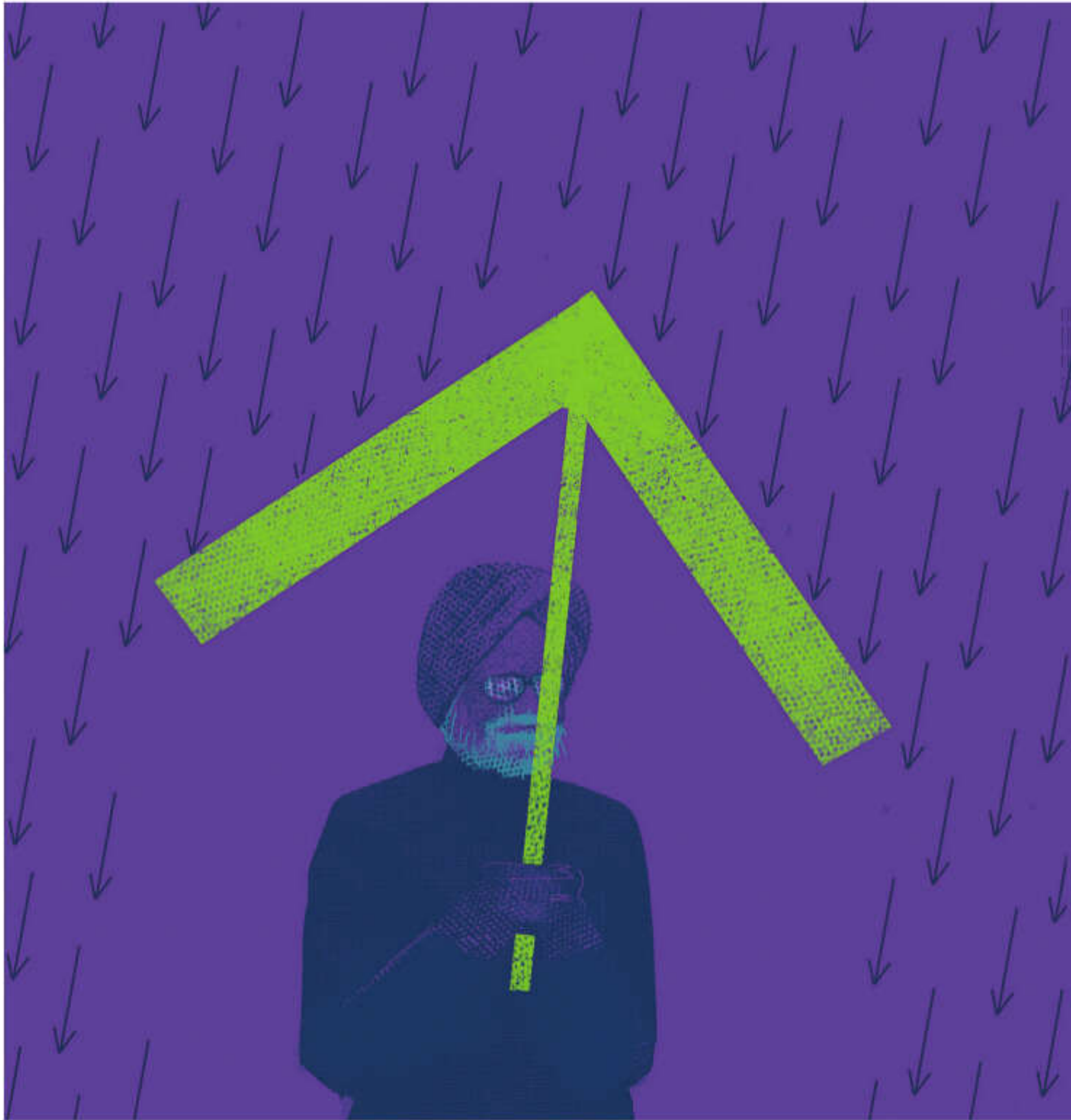
My association with Dr Singh goes back to the late 1960s when we were both in New York — he in the United Nations and I at New York University. Later in the mid-1980s, when he was governor of the Reserve Bank of India, I was the Deputy Governor. At the time of the economic crisis of the 1990s, which precipitated the introduction of the reforms, I was the RBI governor. We worked closely and had frank exchanges of views.

People are aware of the three major breaks we made in the economic paradigm in the early 1990s. The first was the dismantling of the wide network controls, licenses and permits that dominated the system. The second was to redefine the role of the state in the economy and the third was to give up the “import substitution” policy and be a part of the world trading system. It showed that India was willing to compete.

In the area of finance, we carried through changes which reflected the basic shift in economic philosophy. We reoriented the relationship between the RBI and the government. When I suggested ending the system of issuing ad hoc treasury bills which had the effect of automatically monetising the fiscal deficit, he readily agreed to do so because he concurred with the basic logic of the idea. One of the basic elements of the reform process was to introduce greater competition. We applied that principle to the banking system by allowing new banks to be set up by the private sector and also by reducing the share of government from 100 per cent to 51 per cent in public sector banks.

The foreign exchange market underwent a big change. By 1993, India moved to a market-determined exchange rate system. We managed the system in such a way that there were no shocks. Manmohan Singh's strengths are not only in ideas but also in implementation.

Fiscal reforms were an integral part of the early reforms because they had an impact on restoring stability in the economy. A major part of the fiscal correction was to contain the fiscal deficit. In fact, it was the growing fiscal deficit in the 1980s that led to the crisis of 1990. Trade policy reforms which tried to bring down import duties made the task difficult. A balancing act had to be performed. Tax reforms, which meant lowering rates and widening the tax base, had to be undertaken with care. The concept of reducing fiscal deficit took a more formal shape under the Fiscal Responsibility and



C R Sasikumar

Budget Management Act.

The reforms undertaken in the early 1990s had a big impact when Manmohan Singh became prime minister. Between 2005-06 and 2007-08, India's real growth was in excess of 9 per cent, a remarkable achievement. After 2011-12, the growth declined but that was partly cyclical.

In the early part of his career in the government, Dr Singh was a believer in planning and the importance of the role of the state. However, even at that time, he was a strong advocate of export promotion. He did change his views. That is why we call the reforms a paradigm shift. In the final analysis, what is important is benefit to the country. His emphasis on efficiency did not take away his concern for the vulnerable groups. The Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is one good example of how he tried to take care of the deprived. The National Food Security Act was another example. Given the production and procurement capabilities, he asked the Committee that he set up under my chairmanship to formulate a scheme of entitlements for the vulnerable. We modified the scheme suggested by the National Advisory Council but kept in greater part the

The Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is one good example of how he tried to take care of the deprived. The National Food Security Act was another example. Given the production and procurement capabilities, he asked the Committee that he set up under my chairmanship to formulate a scheme of entitlements to the vulnerable. We modified the scheme suggested by the National Advisory Council but kept in greater part the spirit of the recommendations.

spirit of the recommendations. There is a mistaken impression that reforms ignored equity considerations. That is not correct. Dr Singh always regarded growth and equity as the two legs with which a nation must walk. In the execution of certain types of projects like roads, he also thought in terms of public-private participation.

When we look back at his life, several facets strike us as impressive. He was intellectually firm and a man of ideas. He was also a man of implementation. These qualities were to the fore when he guided the country through difficult times. Of course, no description of Manmohan Singh is complete without reference to his humility. He was courteous to the extreme.

Today, there is talk about India becoming a developed country by 2047. Perhaps that is possible. Manmohan Singh laid the foundation for this. Had he not altered the direction of the Indian economy in 1991, India would not have been on the road to becoming a developed nation.

The writer is former Chairman, Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council and former Governor, Reserve Bank of India

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“When Mr [Narendra] Modi looked like [he was] winning the 2014 general elections, Dr [Manmohan] Singh openly warned that such an outcome would be disastrous for India. In his death, Pakistan has lost a partner for peace, and the world a true statesman.”
—DAWN, PAKISTAN

India's last true Nehruvian

To the outside world, Manmohan Singh was India's wisest sage. In his living room, he had a greater desire to learn than lecture



PRAVEEN CHAKRAVARTY

INSPIRED BY JAWAHARLAL Nehru's call for nation-building, Manmohan Singh plunged into public service and for seven decades, embodied, shaped and directed the Nehruvian idea of India as a plural, peaceful, institutionalist sovereign republic. India's last true blue Nehruvian has passed.

Thomas Carlyle's proposition that the history of the world is the biographies of great leaders may be contestable. But it is indisputable that the contemporary economic history of India is the biography of Manmohan Singh. But he was steadfast in his refusal to write his biography or authorise others to write one. “It's not for me to judge myself for the world” he would say with his characteristic modesty. Nevertheless, many history books will be written about his role as the founding father of modern India's “inclusive growth” development paradigm. But the most befitting legacy of Manmohan Singh, as he may have preferred, will be to inspire youth to pursue public life with the zest of catapulting India's next phase of development and the zeal for virtues of integrity, sincerity and honesty.

Any tribute to Manmohan Singh would inevitably list his long and dazzling array of professional accomplishments and the offices he occupied from Chief Economic Advisor to the Prime Minister of India. But the larger and more meaningful story of his life is about how it is possible to uphold the highest principles and still succeed in public life. At a time when the pursuit of power has supplanted all decency and decorum in public life, when showmanship trumped workmanship, Manmohan Singh showed that virtues of sincerity, honesty, loyalty and ideological commitment can succeed enormously.

Since 2019, I called on him nearly every month, and our typical 90-minute conversation would encompass a wide range of subjects — the state of Indian politics, internal affairs of the Congress party, intricate government policy details, global developments, reminiscences of his past from Cambridge to North Block, our current readings, and technical economic trends of Modern Monetary Theory. To the outside world, he was a global statesman and the wisest sage in India. Inside his living room, he was curious like a child, with a greater desire to learn than lecture, to be informed than to inform. I last met him few weeks before the US presidential elections. He mused about how the lopsided gains of global free trade — one he had fervently advocated for — have fundamentally impacted the political landscape in nations from Argentina and Germany to the United States. He had a Keynesian approach to letting new facts change his old opinions about theories, issues and people. This is perhaps the greatest hallmark

of the sagacity of Manmohan Singh.

When I went to wish him on his 90th birthday in September 2022, he was more interested in discussing the then UK Prime Minister Liz Truss's controversial budget than cutting a cake or greeting visitors that were streaming in to wish him. While he acknowledged the technical mishandling of her budget, he was also sympathetic to the fact that Truss only did what she promised to her supporters. Keeping one's word in public life was enormously important to him even if it led to one's own downfall. He talked about having a resignation letter handy in his pocket all the time which he could use, should he be forced to compromise on his core principles. He emphasised being detached from power and attached to purpose. Counter-intuitively, such a “tapasvian” and virtue-laden approach to power may have helped him scale Himalayan heights in public office. Credit is due to Sonia Gandhi for using the power bestowed on her to choose Manmohan Singh and shine a light on his politics of virtues and principles.

He was convinced that politics is the best medium to make a meaningful impact, however treacherous and harsh it may be. Navigating the brutal terrains of politics, riddled with jealousy, insecurity and deceit while still upholding the highest virtues may have been Manmohan Singh's greatest challenge in his professional life. His Napoleonic approach of “picking the right battles” and his disarming equanimity helped him steer through this maze and emerge victorious.

Above all else, he was foremost an unflinching and unabashed patriot. He adored his country and nothing mattered to him more than its progress and development. He was acutely concerned in his last months over the volatile political situations and deteriorating relationships with every country in India's neighbourhood and its impact on national security. When this newspaper requested him for an interview on the day prior to the G20 summit in September 2023, he was reluctant, out of concern of being misinterpreted that could even remotely harm the nation's interests and agreed to it only after an assurance that it would only be to outline his vision for India in the world. Such was his commitment to the nation's interests even in the twilight of his years.

He was a deep-rooted institutionalist. During the Covid-19 pandemic, he argued that the government should spend whatever it takes to ensure that people don't slip into poverty but not force the Reserve Bank of India to monetise the deficit (print money) and destroy its independence. He firmly believed that institutional integrity is the bedrock of our republic and that attacks on the independence of institutions are attacks on the nation itself.

Manmohan Singh devoted his entire life to exemplary service to the nation and improved the lives of a billion people. He is perhaps the only Indian leader after Nehru to command unanimous respect, admiration and awe from all over the world. The last Nehruvian may have died. But Manmohan Singh would not want our nation's pursuit of Nehruvian ideals to die.

The writer is chairman, the All India Professionals' Congress



JANAKI NAIR

Small triumphs, larger lessons

Eggs on a Karnataka event's menu is step towards accepting plurality of cultures

THE MEATATARIANS OF Mandya scored a small victory on Sunday, December 22, the last day of the 87th Kannada Sahitya Sammelana. More than a lakh people who attended the last day's programmes were offered boiled eggs as a token concession to the clamour for meat to be served on all days of the three-day annual event. The demand came from many groups who claimed that meat-eating, particularly in the Vokkaliga heartland of Mandya, is a cultural inheritance and practice that had long been denied an equal place in what is arguably one of Karnataka's most important cultural events. Even Kannada literature that focuses on or talks about meat, some progressive groups claimed, was a taboo subject in previous sammelanas. On Saturday night, defiant meatatarians, who sported badges about the “historic” step towards equality between themselves and vegetarians, brought “baadootta” — “maamsahaari” food including home-cooked egg and chicken biryani and other meat dishes for distribution at the meal counters to over 500 participants.

A hard-boiled meatatarian would justifiably question the egg as a substitute for the real thing. But even such a pyrrhic victory may be a giant symbolic step forward. The mathadishas of several important mathas in northern Karnataka had in 2021 expressed strong opposition to the introduction of eggs as part

of the midday meal scheme in seven districts. At that time, the mathadishas cited data proving that a large proportion of children are not accustomed to eggs, and preferred to serve bananas, or peanut chikkis in schools. As a 16 to 17 per cent sizable minority of the Karnataka population, the Lingayats, combined with Brahmins and Jains, chose to oppose the (ironically, BJP) government scheme, despite all evidence pointing to the urgency of altering the stunting and wasting index of the seven northern districts through this nutritional change. Tamil Nadu has successfully introduced eggs to turn its nutritional status around since 1989, and as studies have shown, BJP-ruled states have increasingly resisted this nutritional innovation.

It is another matter that better sense has prevailed, and with the additional support of the Azim Premji Foundations, eggs are now provided to all government and aided schools throughout the week. But well-trenched prejudices continue, even as all evidence points to increasing meat consumption across the country, covering, as K S Singh's Peoples of India project had it, about 83 per cent of the population. Of course, in India that is Bharat, this varies, from those who eat meat only on Sundays, or all days except Tuesdays, or outside the home, but not inside, to only boneless chicken, or when cooked by a family member or just when

they drink. Karnataka even boasts of a self-confessed “chicken-eating Brahmin” (Gundu Rao). All these caveats would prove a headache to colour code on a map.

But the protesters were not merely claiming equality: They were pointing to the deep-seated value attached to vegetarianism, that puts the “shameful” meat on a segregated counter, and sees meat eaters as unclean, if not criminal. Only in Kerala have I seen a sign that promised “pure non-vegetarian” food; even here, the negative connotation of “non” was hard to jettison.

The attachment of purity to food items, their producers, or consumers, has segued into subtly branding products of everyday use in overtly caste terms. Where else would “Brahmins” become the unique selling point of a mere sambar masala? Where else would “Sankethi” suggest a reliable and tasty brand of snacks? And of course, the colloquial “bhattaru” for cook also implies a Brahminical monopoly of public cooking.

We cannot imagine a similar public branding of food cultures from the opposite end of the caste spectrum. Food preferences are many and varied: Aravind Malagatti in his unforgettable autobiography, *Government Brahmana*, recalls the revulsion he felt when he first entered a house that used the “devil's dung” (asafoetida/hing) in cooking. But food preferences need not be prejudices,

and our young need to be urgently taught this distinction.

Even 75 years after Independence, and long after India has conquered food scarcity, traces of the civilisational anxiety about eating remain. “Ootaayithaa/Have you eaten?” is the standard greeting in Karnataka. As some accounts have it, the Chinese too opened their conversations with this query, but, after the revolution of 1949, and following the pushback against the severe privations of the early post-revolutionary decades, it has faded from everyday use. This is not only a significant nutritional shift, but equally important, a linguistic one.

So it may be no coincidence that this small victory has happened at the Kannada Sahitya Sammelana. Apart from making the aroma of “meat” more acceptable, it strongly suggests that nothing short of a linguistic revolution is necessary. Shedding the negative connotations associated with meat eating, and cultivating toleration — in schools, colleges, public events — would go a long way in making the plurality of food cultures acceptable, a feature of our diversity to be celebrated. Perhaps nothing less than a revolution will ensure this, but meanwhile, the small triumphs should suffice.

The writer is a Bengaluru-based historian and was Professor of History at JNU, Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CROSSING A LINE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Babu as neta’ (IE, December 27). The actions of Delhi's senior bureaucrats who issued notices labelling AAP's campaign promises fraudulent deserve condemnation. Bureaucrats should not involve themselves in political matters unless constitutionally required. The bureaucrats in question overstepped their authority, particularly since the Model Code of Conduct has not yet been implemented. The inconsistency is staggering as similar actions by other parties have gone unchallenged. Acting under influence could harm the integrity of India's institutions.

Ananya Anil, New Delhi

ADIEU, DR SINGH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘The unfinished task’ (IE, December 28). Dr Manmohan Singh remains one of the most significant figures in post-Independence India. Serving as Prime Minister from 2004 to 2014, Singh is credited with driving major economic reforms and opening India up to the global market. Despite facing substantial criticism for his leadership style, Singh remained committed to his principles. His tenure as Finance Minister is regarded as the foundation of India's economic liberalisation. Bold steps like reducing import tariffs were pivotal in transforming India into a global player.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

HIS IDEA OF INDIA

THIS REFERS TO the report, ‘Farewell, Dr Singh’ (IE, December 29). Dr Manmohan Singh made unparalleled contributions to the Indian economy and helped lay the foundation for growth and prosperity. He was had a great deal of humility and integrity. The principles of equality, and accountability he believed in would place no individual above the common citizen. Unfortunately, controversy and acrimony following his demise have overshadowed his contributions. We must focus on transcending partisan agendas and reflect on upholding his values and imbibing his vision to build an inclusive and developed India.

K L Sharma, Gurugram

A VISIONARY LEADER

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘The pragmatic idealist’ (IE, December 28). In 1991, India faced an economic crisis. It was during this critical juncture that Manmohan Singh introduced landmark economic reforms that redefined India's future and spearheaded policies to liberalise the economy. This shift from a closed to a market-driven economy not only stabilised the country but also unleashed its potential on the global stage. Known for his integrity and intellectual prowess, Singh's contributions underscore the transformative power of leadership rooted in pragmatism and foresight.

Avineshwar Bhardwaj, Darbhanga

TOPOF THE
WORLDSyria's de facto leader
Ahmed al-Sharaa. *File*

SYRIA

'Holding polls
could take
up to 4 years'

Cairo: Holding elections in Syria could take up to four years, de facto leader Ahmed al-Sharaa said in remarks to be broadcast Sunday, the first time he has commented on a possible electoral timetable since Bashar al-Assad was ousted. Drafting a new constitution could take up to three years, Sharaa said in written excerpts from the interview with the Saudi state-owned broadcaster Al Arabiya, due to be transmitted. He also said it would take about a year for Syrians to see drastic changes. The comment from Sharaa comes as the new government in Damascus has been seeking to reassure its neighbours that it has moved away from its roots in Islamist militancy.

REUTERS

NEPAL

Chopper makes
emergency
landing

Kathmandu: A helicopter en route to Kathmandu carrying five US nationals had to make an emergency landing at Banepa, 50 kilometres east of the capital, after it was hit by a bird on Sunday. The 9N-AKG chopper, belonging to the private Heli Everest airlines, was coming from Lukla, gateway to Mt Everest, when it was struck by the bird at 11 am, an official said. The pilot managed to land the aircraft safely, the official added. According to the airline, the helicopter was carrying five US nationals as passengers and one Nepali pilot.

PTI

UNITED STATES

Tornadoes in
Texas and
Mississippi kill 2

Huoston: At least two people were killed and six more injured as several tornadoes touched down in Texas and Mississippi on Saturday, damaging homes and flipping vehicles as the storm system moved east across Alabama. The National Weather Service's severe storm tracker indicated the system was moving east through Alabama into Georgia shortly before 4 a.m. There were "multiple touchdown points" between Liverpool, Hillcrest Village and Alvin.

AP

AGENCIES

SEOUL, DECEMBER 29

SUNDAY'S CRASH is the deadliest air accident involving a South Korean airline in nearly three decades, South Korea's transport ministry said.

"Only the tail part retains a little bit of shape, and the rest of (the plane) looks almost impossible to recognise," said Muan fire chief Lee Jung-hyun.

According to *Yonhap* news agency, airport authorities are saying a bird strike may have caused the landing gear to malfunction.

While the anxious family members were waiting for their loved ones at the airport, the passengers wrote messages to their loved ones.

According to a *Reuters* report citing *News1* agency, a passenger had texted a relative to say a bird was stuck in the wing.

The person's final message was, "Should I say my last words?"

As speculation swirled about the cause of the crash, hundreds of family members of passengers endured the painful wait for news of their loved ones returning home from a trip abroad. Wails and screams filled the Muan airport on Sunday afternoon. A young woman comforted an older woman weeping about her son. Two crying women embraced each other.

By Sunday evening, only 65 of the dead could be identified through their fingerprints and other means, officials said. A dozen bodies were so badly damaged that officials could not immediately identify their gender. Those who were identified included a 23-year-old flight attendant and a 78-year-old male passenger. Jang Gu-ho, 68, sat stoically in the arrivals hall next to his teary-eyed wife after rushing from his home in the nearby city of Mokpo. He said five of his relatives had been on the plane returning from a vacation: his wife's sister, her daughter, son-in-law and two grandchildren.

"We're thunderstruck," he said. In a closed area of the airport, officials were working to identify the bodies they recovered from the crash site. When officials posted on the walls of the arrivals hall the names of those confirmed

Air Canada flight
catches fire on
landing, all
passengers safe

Ottawa: An Air Canada flight coming from St John's city on Newfoundland Island had a rough landing at the Halifax airport in Goffs in Nova Scotia province that saw the aircraft skid down the runway and part of it catching fire.

A statement issued by the airport said the incident involved Air Canada Flight 2259, which was operated by PAL Airlines, CBC News reported. The incident happened around 9:30 pm local time. The statement does not say how many people were on the plane.

The people on board were evacuated, and then taken to a hangar to be checked out by paramedics, CBC News said.

Due to the incident, the Halifax airport was temporarily closed Saturday night. A passenger told CBC News that one of the plane's tyres did not deploy properly upon landing.

PTI

People listen as an official names the passengers who died in the aircraft crash at Muan International Airport on Sunday. *Reuters*

dead, people rushed to check the lists. The disaster left South Korea in shock at a time when the country was grappling with a political crisis unleashed by President Yoon Suk Yeol's ill-fated and short-lived declaration of martial law and his subsequent impeachment this month. Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok, an unelected official, rushed to the scene to deal with his biggest challenge since he took office as acting president on Friday.

The plane crash was especially shocking for the country because it has had no major aviation disaster after a spate of deadly air accidents in the 1990s and earlier. In the last major aviation accident involving a South Korean airline, a Korean Air jet slammed into a hill in Guam, a US territory in the western Pacific, in 1997, killing 229 of the 254 people on board.

The crash of the Jeju Air plane on Sunday was likely the deadliest worldwide since that of Lion Air Flight 610 in 2018, when all 189 people on board died as the plane plunged into the Java Sea.

Azerbaijan President says Russia
shot down jetliner unintentionallyASSOCIATED PRESS
BAKU, DECEMBER 29

AZERBAIJANI PRESIDENT Ilham Aliyev said Sunday that the Azerbaijani airliner that crashed last week was shot down by Russia, albeit unintentionally, and criticised Moscow for trying to "hush up" the issue for days. "We can say with complete clarity that the plane was shot down by Russia. (...) We are not saying that it was done intentionally, but it was done," he told Azerbaijani state television.

Aliyev said that the airliner, which crashed Wednesday in Kazakhstan, was hit by fire from the ground over Russia and "rendered uncontrollable by electronic warfare." Aliyev accused Russia of trying to "hush up" the issue for several days, saying he was "upset and surprised" by versions of events put forward by Russian of-

MAJOR CRASHES IN SOUTH KOREA OR INVOLVING SOUTH KOREAN AIRLINES

In September, 1983: Korean Airlines Flight 007 was shot down by a Soviet jet when it strayed into Soviet airspace over Sakhalin island, killing all 269 people on board.

In July 1993: a Boeing 737-500 operated by Asiana Airline landed several kilometres short of the runway at South Korea's Mokpo airport in poor weather. More than 60 people died.

In August 1997: Korean Air flight 801, a Boeing 747-3B5B (747-300) operated by Korean Air, ploughed into a hill near Guam's international airport, killing 228 out of 254 persons.

It also appeared to have been the first fatal one for Jeju Air, which was established in 2005 and flies to dozens of countries in Asia. Kim E-bae, the chief executive of Jeju

In July 2011: an Asiana Boeing 747-400 cargo aircraft crashed in the sea off South Korea's Jeju Island. This was later determined to have been caused by a fire in the cargo hold. Both pilots were killed.

In July 2013: Asiana Airlines flight 214 crashed at the San Francisco airport when the Boeing 777 jetliner's tail struck a seawall short of the runway, sending the aircraft into a spin, leading to the deaths of three teenage passengers from China and injuries to more than 180 passengers out of about 300 people on board.

179 people killed in deadliest air accident ever in South Korea



Air, bowed as he publicly apologized for the crash. He said that the exact cause of the crash was unclear. The plane, Jeju Air Flight 7C2216, a Boeing 737-800 jet,

had taken off from Bangkok with 175 passengers and six crew members. All passengers were South Koreans, except for two Thai nationals.

Kim vows toughest
anti-US policy before
Trump takes chargeHYUNG-JIN KIM
SEOUL, DECEMBER 29

NORTH KOREAN leader Kim Jong Un vowed to implement the "toughest" anti-US policy, state media reported Sunday, less than a month before Donald Trump takes office as US president.

During his first term, Trump met Kim three times for talks on the North's nuclear program.

Many experts however say a quick resumption of Kim-Trump summits is unlikely as Trump would first focus on conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. North Korea's support for Russia's war against Ukraine also poses a challenge to efforts to revive diplomacy, experts say. During a five-day plenary meeting of the ruling Workers' Party that ended Friday,

tempted to land, to deflect a Ukrainian drone strike.

Aliyev said Azerbaijan made three demands to Russia in connection with the crash.

"First, the Russian side must apologise to Azerbaijan. Second, it must admit its guilt. Third, punish the guilty, bring them to criminal responsibility and pay compensation to the Azerbaijani state, the injured passengers and crew members," he said.

Aliyev noted that the first demand was "already fulfilled" when Russian President Vladimir Putin apologized to him on Saturday. Putin called the crash a "tragic incident" though stopped short of acknowledging Moscow's responsibility.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russian state media on Sunday that Putin had spoken to Aliyev over the phone again, but did not provide details of the conversation.

Experts question
bird strike as
cause of crash

BART MEIJER

SEOUL, DECEMBER 29

UNCERTAINTIES SURROUND the deadliest crash on South Korean soil, experts said on Sunday, questioning initial suggestions that a bird strike might have brought down the Jeju Air (089590.KS), opens new tab flight.

The apparent absence of landing gear, the timing of the twin-engine Boeing (BA.N), opens new tab 737-800's belly-landing at Muan International Airport and the reports of a possible bird strike all raised questions that could not yet be answered.

The single-aisle aircraft was seen in video broadcast on local media skidding down the runway with no visible landing gear before slamming into a wall in an explosion of flame and debris.

"Why didn't fire tenders lay foam on the runway? Why weren't they in attendance when the plane touched down? And why did the aircraft touch down so far down the runway? And why was there a brick wall at the end of the runway?" said Airline News editor Geoffrey Thomas.

A spokesperson for Jeju Air was not immediately available for comments. Jeju Air declined to comment on the cause of the accident during news conferences, saying an investigation is under way. Under global aviation rules, South Korea will lead a civil investigation into the crash and automatically involve the National Transportation Safety Board in the US where the plane was designed and built.

Chain of events

Experts said it seemed unlikely a bird strike would have caused the landing gear to malfunction.

Jeju Air staff bow in apology to relatives of passengers. *AP*

"A bird strike is not unusual, problems with an undercarriage are not unusual. Bird strikes happen far more often, but typically they don't cause the loss of an airplane by themselves," Thomas said.

Australian airline safety expert Geoffrey Dell said, "I've never seen a bird strike prevent the landing gear from being extended."

Australian aviation consultant Trevor Jensen said fire and emergency services would normally be ready for a belly-landing, "so this appears to be unplanned".

A bird strike could have impacted the CFM International engines if a flock had been sucked into them, but that would not have shut them down straightaway, giving the pilots some time to deal with the situation, Dell said.

It was unclear why the plane did not decelerate after it hit the runway, Dell and Jensen said.

Typically in a belly-landing, "You are going to land on your engines and you're going to have a bumpy ride," Thomas said.

"You come in with minimum fuel, you have fire tenders in attendance, covering the runway with foam and you land at the furthest end of the runway and usually it ends up being an OK situation."

REUTERS

Musk stirs row
after backing
Germany's
far-right party

Berlin: Tech entrepreneur Elon Musk caused uproar after backing Germany's far-right party in a major newspaper ahead of key parliamentary elections in the Western European country, leading to the resignation of the paper's opinion editor in protest.

Germany is to vote in an early election on February 23 after Chancellor Olaf Scholz's three-party governing coalition collapsed last month in a dispute over how to revitalise the country's stagnant economy.

Musk's guest opinion piece for *Welt am Sonntag* — a sister publication of *POLITICO* owned by the Axel Springer Group — published in German over the weekend, was the second time this month he supported the Alternative for Germany, or AfD.

"AFD is the last spark of hope for this country," Musk wrote. *AP*

North
Korean
leader Kim
Jong Un

Kim called the US "the most reactionary state that regards anti-communism as its invariable state policy." Kim said that the US-South Korea-Japan security partnership is expanding into "a nuclear military bloc for aggression."

"This reality clearly shows to which direction we should advance and what we should do and how," Kim said, according to the official Korean Central News Agency. It said Kim's speech "clarified the strategy for the toughest anti-US counteraction to be launched aggressively" by North Korea for its long-term national interests and security.

AP

AFTER THE END OF THE AFGHAN WAR IN 2021, THE NEW TALIBAN RULERS BEGAN ENCOURAGING TOURISTS TO VISIT THE COUNTRY

Ignoring warnings, a growing band of tourists venture to Afghanistan

DAVID ZUCCHINO

BAMIYAN, DECEMBER 29

YI-PIN LIN, an associate professor at Tufts University, proudly says he has vacationed in 120 nations over the past decade.

But there was one country he had always dreamed of visiting, only to be frightened off by decades of war, kidnappings and terrorism: Afghanistan.

With the end of the Afghan war in 2021, the country's new Taliban rulers began encouraging tourists to visit. So last month, Lin packed his bags, paid \$130 for a visa and boarded a flight to Kabul,

the Afghan capital.

Lin, 43, is part of a small but growing vanguard of venture-some tourists making their way to Afghanistan, disregarding dire warnings issued by their governments. The State Department advises Americans not to travel to Afghanistan "due to terrorism, risk of wrongful detention, civil unrest, kidnapping and crime."

Over the past three years, Taliban officials say, 14,500 foreign tourists have visited the isolated, poverty-stricken nation. They have arrived with hard currency that Afghanistan desperately needs.

Many tourists have experi-

enced the country's traditional hospitality while visiting its famous mosques, its towering mountain ranges, its scenic high deserts and the remains of the renowned Buddha statues in Bamiyan.

In the minds of many around the world, Afghanistan has conjured another image since the Taliban takeover: something akin to a prison. The Taliban's rise to power, however, has also brought a relative calm to the country with the end of the 20-year war.

The government has assured tourists that Afghanistan is safe, scenic, welcoming — and a bargain to boot.

Many tourists seem spellbound by the spectacular landscape and its wealth of historical and archaeological sites. *NYT*

"Ninety-five percent of tourists have a negative idea about Afghanistan because of incorrect media information and propaganda worldwide," said Khobai Ghofran, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Information and Culture in Kabul.

When tourists visit the country, he said, they "see it is completely normal. When they get home, they share their photos and the positive information they found in Afghanistan."

Taliban officials said they relied on tourists, especially bloggers and YouTubers, to extol the virtues of visiting Afghanistan.

Despite painful memories

among Afghans of U.S. aerial bombings and night raids, American tourists are as welcome as anyone else, Ghofran said.

However, foreign businesspeople and journalists — and many Afghans — are routinely monitored by agents of the General Directorate of Intelligence.

A small percentage of foreign visitors are women, tourism officials said. Ghofran and Mawlawi Ahmadullah Muttaqi, the information and culture director for Herat province, said there were no written strictures governing how female tourists should dress and behave in public.

"They can see for themselves our culture here," Muttaqi said.

Tourists have visited from China, Russia, Ireland, Poland, Canada, Taiwan, Germany, France, Pakistan, Estonia, Sweden and elsewhere, tourism officials said. Travelers typically get their visa en route to Afghanistan, often at the Taliban-run consulates in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, or Peshawar, Pakistan.

Many tourists seem spellbound by the spectacular Afghan landscape and its wealth of historical and archaeological sites. The Silk Road crossed Afghanistan, creating a crossroads of cultures rich in history and artifacts.

NYT

13ECONOMY

TO SOME EXTENT THE SHARP GROWTH SLOWDOWN IN Q2 WAS TRANSIENT: RBI MPC MEMBER

‘Rate cut would help revive economy without worsening inflation’

NAGESH KUMAR, one of the three new external members of the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Monetary Policy Committee (MPC), said that the slowdown in GDP growth during Q2FY25 was transient and the economy is likely to be a pick-up in the second half of the current fiscal.

Kumar, who voted for a 25 basis points (bps) cut in the repo rate in the last two consecutive monetary policies, told HITESH VYAS and GEORGE MATHEW that a rate cut would revive economic growth without worsening the inflationary situation. If the RBI does not follow the process of normalisation when most other central banks have moved forward, it runs the risk of currency appreciation, said Kumar, who is Director and chief executive of the Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID). Excerpts:

Given that the growth has

BRIEFLY

PM Internship Scheme receives 6.21L applications

New Delhi: About 6.21 lakh applications have been received for 1.27 lakh opportunities under the Prime Minister's Internship Scheme and the selection process is continuing, the government said on Sunday. The scheme, announced in the 2024 Union Budget, aims to provide internship opportunities to 1 crore youth in top-500 companies over five years. A pilot project of the scheme, started on October 3, aims to provide 1.25 lakh internship opportunities during 2024-25. **PTI**

Economy to grow at 6.5-6.8% in FY25: Deloitte

New Delhi: Indian economy is likely to grow at 6.5-6.8 per cent this fiscal and slightly higher between 6.7-7.3 per cent in FY26, boosted by domestic consumption, Deloitte said on Sunday. **PTI**

Auction of 11 critical mineral blocks cancelled

New Delhi: The government has cancelled the auction of 11 critical mineral blocks in the fourth round due to poor response. While no bids were received for four blocks, the remaining seven mines got less than three technically qualified bidders, according to the annulment notice. The four blocks which include tungsten and glauconite, are located in the states of Chhattisgarh and Arunachal Pradesh. **PTI**

Charles Dolan, HBO, Cablevision founder, dies

New Delhi: Charles Dolan, who founded some of the most prominent media companies including Home Box Office and Cablevision Systems, has died at age 98, according to a report. A statement issued Saturday by his family said Dolan died of natural causes, *Newsday* reported late Saturday. **AP**

High employee attrition of 25% in private banks poses operational risk: RBI report

New Delhi: Employee attrition in private sector banks has witnessed an increase to about 25 per cent and this high turnover rate poses significant operational risk, according to the latest Report on Trend and Progress of Banking in India 2023-24.

Employee attrition rates are high across select private sector banks and small finance banks (SFBs), the report, which was released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said. The total number of employees of private banks surpassed that of public sector banks (PSBs) during 2023-24, but their

been sluggish, do you believe a 50 bps reduction in the repo rate at this point in time would be a more effective step to stimulate the economy? Do you think RBI is behind the curve in cutting rates and boosting growth?

To some extent the sharp growth slowdown in Q2 was transient. We should expect an improvement in growth in the coming two quarters. The government capex, which saw a squeeze in the first quarter, has begun to revive in the second quarter and should gain momentum in the third and fourth quarters. The government capex should, therefore, help to lift the growth rate in the second half of the year. Yet, there is a slowdown from the earlier projections of growth around 7 per cent or higher to around 6.5 per cent. I believe that it needed a policy response because it largely reflected the slow-down of the manufacturing sector. The

agriculture growth rate actually improved from 2 per cent in Q1 to 3.5 per cent in Q2 and the services sector was still posting a robust growth rate of 7 per cent (even though slight moderation from 7.7 per cent). The deceleration of manufacturing growth from 7 per cent to just 2.2 per cent was rather sharp.

A reduction of the cost of capital through a reduced repo rate could help to revive the growth of private investment besides consumer demand. Keeping in mind the deceleration of the manufacturing sector, I made a case for a 25-basis point cut in the repo rate to start the cycle of normalising the monetary policy. In addition I made a case for a 50-basis point cut in CRR, to help enhance liquidity. Expanding the manufacturing sector could also help in containing inflationary pressures by enhancing the supply capacity.

You said monetary policy has



HOUSEHOLD CONSUMPTION EXPENDITURE SURVEY 2023-24 RELEASED BY MOSPI

Shifting spending trends: Sugar and salt decline; beverages, processed food rise

AANCHAL MAGAZINE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

IN AN indication of the impact of rising food prices, the share of spending on food items in the consumption basket of rural and urban households went up in 2023-24, even as non-food items constituted the majority chunk of the spending. Fact sheet of the latest round of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2023-24 released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (Mospi) on Friday also showed rural spending growing at a faster pace than urban areas, narrowing the gap between the two, and also perhaps signalling a cut in consumption by urban households.

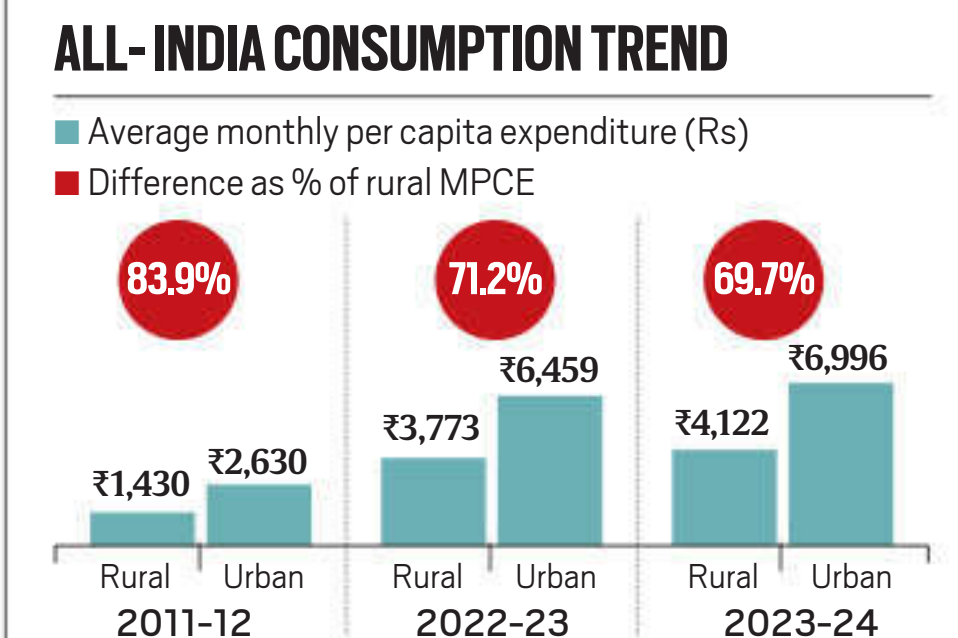
Among states, western, northern and southern states such as Maharashtra, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Kerala, Karnataka, Haryana, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh fared better with per capita monthly consumption spending higher than national average, while lower spending was recorded by eastern and central states of India such as West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh. Key trends from the latest consumption survey are:

Overall consumption spending

Rural average monthly consumption spending per person increased to Rs 4,122 in 2023-24, an increase of 9.3 per cent from Rs 3,773 in 2022-23. It had stood at Rs 1,430 in 2011-12. This increase in rural spending over the one-year period was higher than the urban average monthly consumption expenditure per person at Rs 6,996 which increased by 8.3 per cent from Rs 6,459 in 2022-23. The urban average monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) stood at Rs 2,630 per person in 2011-12.

The difference in average monthly consumption expenditure between rural and urban households narrowed further to 69.7 per cent in 2023-24 from 71.2 per cent in 2022-23, and 83.9 per cent 11 years ago in 2011-12.

This seems to suggest that the pace of spending is higher in rural India compared with the urban population, which seems to be cutting down on its consumption.



SPENDING ON FOOD ITEMS (% share of MPCE)						
	2011-12		2022-23		2023-24	
	RURAL	URBAN	RURAL	URBAN	RURAL	URBAN
Beverages, processed food	7.90	8.98	9.62	10.64	9.84	11.09
Milk & milk products	8.04	7.01	8.33	7.22	8.44	7.19
Vegetables	6.62	4.63	5.38	3.80	6.03	4.12
TOTAL *	52.90	42.62	46.38	39.17	47.04	39.68

SPENDING ON NON-FOOD ITEMS							
RURAL INDIA (% share of MPCE)				URBAN INDIA (% share of MPCE)			
	2011-12	2022-23	2023-24		2011-12	2022-23	2023-24
Conveyance	4.20	7.55	7.59	Conveyance	6.52	8.59	8.46
Durable goods	4.85	6.89	6.48	Durable goods	5.60	7.17	6.87
Fuel and light	7.98	6.66	6.11	Rent	6.24	6.56	6.58
Total *	47.10	53.62	52.96	Total *	57.38	60.83	60.32

It could also be reflective of a decline in income levels or slower pace of income growth and hence, a reduction in consumption levels.

Spending on food and non-food items

Reversing a trend of decreasing share of spending on food, the share of spending on food in the monthly consumption basket for a person in rural as well as urban areas went up in 2023-24. The average monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) or the spending by a person on an average, for food increased to 47.04 per cent in 2023-24 from 46.38 per cent in 2022-23. For urban households, the spending on food inched higher to 39.68 per cent in 2023-24 from 39.17 per cent in the previous year.

In the previous year 2022-23, it was the first time in over two decades that the share of spending on food for a person in rural ar-

ees had slipped below 50 per cent of his or her total consumption spending in a month. Similarly, for urban areas, spending on food had seen a declining trend from 48.06 per cent in 1999-2000 to 42.62 per cent in 2011-12 and 39.17 per cent in 2022-23.

In absolute terms, the average monthly spending on food by a person in a rural household was Rs 1,939, while that in urban areas was Rs 2,776. For non-food items, a person in rural areas is estimated

to have spent Rs 2,183 in a month, while the spending by a person in urban areas was Rs 4,220.

What food items did people spend on?

Like 2022-23, the highest spending among food items as a share of the total MPCE was on 'beverages, refreshments, processed food' in both rural and urban areas in 2023-24. While the rural population spent 11.09 per

limitations in addressing inflation largely driven by a supply-side shock. What measures can address supply-side shocks?

The inflation hitting a high rate of 6.2 per cent is also a challenge. However, the bulk of the inflation is accounted for by the food, especially those of vegetables, namely tomatoes, onions, and potatoes (TOP). Excluding food, the CPI headline comes down to just 3.1 per cent in October 2024. Keeping in mind the easing of vegetables and edible oil in November, food inflation should be easing further in the coming months.

I have argued in my statement that while looking at the policy options for reviving growth and containing inflation, one should factor in their determinants. This is because monetary policy instruments such as interest rate changes have more to do with demand management and have limitations in ad-

ressing the rising vegetable prices, which are primarily due to a supply-side shock, namely seasonal demand-supply mismanagement, which was beginning to correct itself in November. However, the inflation-targeting framework of MPC is currently focused on addressing the headline inflation based on CPI, which includes food as well as non-food items.

Therefore, I believe that a rate cut would help in reviving economic growth without worsening the inflationary situation, which may soften with seasonal correction in prices.

Rupee has breached 85 level. How big a concern is a depreciating currency?

The Indian rupee is depreciating vis-à-vis the USD, which is strengthening against different currencies in nominal terms. In real terms, the rupee is actually appreciating, as a recent RBI paper has shown.

MARKET WATCH

MCAP OF 6 OF TOP-10 VALUED COS JUMPS

Six of the top-10 most valued firms together added Rs 86,847.88 crore in market valuation last week, with HDFC Bank and Reliance Industries emerging as the biggest gainers. Last week, the BSE benchmark climbed 65748 points, and the Nifty rose 225.9 points. **PTI**

If the US Fed slows down rate cuts, will it impact emerging economies like India?

We are living through highly uncertain times with upcoming changes in the economic and trade policy in the US with the change of administration in January, the ongoing geopolitical conflicts, which have a bearing on the oil prices, exchange rates, etc. The MPC will factor in the trends of the past months and projections for the future when it meets next to arrive at its decisions. We look at the trends in monetary policy over the past two months. The impact of the transition in the US government is a guess as of now. One has to wait and see how the new government will act.

The MPC meeting in February will take stock of how the inflation-growth balance was shaping up between now and then against the backdrop of global trends. Most central

banks around the world, barring a few, have embarked on a cycle of normalising the monetary policy in recent months. The US Fed has cut the policy rate by 100 basis points in three rounds. While we do not have to follow what other central banks do. But if we do not follow the process of normalisation when most others have moved forward, we run the risk of currency appreciation. India needs to guard against the risks of currency appreciation in real terms as it would hurt the competitiveness of Indian products.

There is a debate on the exclusion of food from the inflation-targeting framework? Can you please share your views on this?

There is indeed a debate on whether food should be excluded. It was raised in the Economic Survey 2024, besides several economists expressing their opinions.

After 2 years of India-Australia trade deal, export utilisation reaches 79%

TRADE HAS DECLINED IN CURRENT FINANCIAL YEAR

TRADE UTILISATION of a FTA indicates the extent to which trade benefits from the agreement. It also provides insights into whether businesses are effectively leveraging the FTA or finding its concession procedures burdensome

INDIA-AUSTRALIA trade has declined during current financial year

RAVI DUTTA MISHRA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

THE MINISTRY of Commerce and Industry on Sunday said that export utilisation under the India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) has reached 79 per cent after two years of implementation, while import utilisation stood at 84 per cent.

Trade utilisation of a free trade agreement (FTA) indicates the extent to which trade benefits from the agreement. It also provides insights into whether businesses are effectively leveraging the FTA or finding its concession procedures burdensome.

However, trade between India and Australia has declined during the current financial year. Official trade data revealed that goods exports to Australia totalled \$3.99 billion during the six months from April to September 2024, down from \$4.89 billion in the same period last year, marking an 18 per cent decline.

Imports during the same period also fell by 18 per cent, dropping to \$6.7 billion this year from \$8.3 billion last year. This has resulted in a narrowing trade deficit.

"Exchange of preferential import data has commenced between both countries, highlighting the effective implementation of the agreement in 2023. The data reveals export utilisation at 79 per cent and import utilisation at 84 per cent," the Commerce and Industry Ministry stated.

The ministry said that key sectors such as textiles, chemicals, and agriculture have recorded significant growth. Additionally, exports in new categories, including gold studded with diamonds and turbojets, demonstrate the agreement's role in diversifying trade.

Imports of essential raw materials such as metalliferous ores, cotton, and wood products have bolstered India's industries, underscoring the mutually beneficial nature of the partnership. Meanwhile, sectors such as electronics and engineering have potential for further growth. The data also indicated that India has benefited from cheaper coal imports, which received a 2.5 per cent duty concession under the agreement.

The ministry further stated that the India-Australia Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) is now progressing, with 10 formal rounds and inter-session discussions completed so far.

"CECA builds on the foundation laid by the ECTA, advancing the bilateral trade agenda with greater ambition. A stocktake meeting on the India-Australia CECA was recently held in New Delhi from 4-6 December 2024 to evaluate progress and chart the path forward," the ministry said.

Both nations remain committed to capitalising on the momentum created by the ECTA, driving deeper economic integration, and achieving the target of AUD 100 billion in bilateral trade by 2030, the ministry added.

CII study: Manufacturers recognise tech adoption as a critical driver

New Delhi: The CII has released a Manufacturing Competitiveness Study, focusing on the transformative impact of smart technologies on India's manufacturing sector. The report, titled 'Smart Manufacturing: Unlocking India's Potential', highlights the sector's ongoing digital transformation and its critical role in achieving the ambitious goal of increasing the manufacturing GDP share to 25 per cent in the near future.

The report showcases how cutting-edge technologies are reshaping manufacturing landscape. Key findings reveal that while most manufacturers recognise technology adoption as a critical driver of profitability and competitiveness, current investments remain modest, with many allocating less than 10 per cent of their budgets. **PTI**

Budget FY26 should focus on boosting consumption: CII

ENSECONOMIC BUREAU
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 29

THE CONFEDERATION of Indian Industry (CII) has urged the government to announce some specific policies in the upcoming Union Budget, which are aimed at boosting consumption in the economy.

According to CII's Director General Chandrajit Banerjee, the government should reduce excise duty on fuel products, cut personal income tax rates for individuals earning up to Rs 20 lakh per annum, and increase daily wages under Mahatma Gandhi National

Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS), to augment consumption. "Domestic consumption has been critical to India's growth story, but inflationary pressures have somewhat eroded the purchasing power of consumers. Government interventions could focus on enhancing disposable incomes and stimulating spending to sustain economic momentum", said Banerjee.

"...targeted government interventions, such as increasing per unit benefit under its key schemes like MGNREGS, PM-KISAN and PMAY, and providing consumption vouchers to low-income households, can further enhance

the rural recovery", he said.

The central excise duty alone accounts for approximately 21 per cent of the retail price for petrol and 18 per cent for diesel. Since May 2022, these duties have not been adjusted in line with the approximately 40 per cent decrease in global crude prices. "Lowering excise duty on fuel would help reduce overall inflation and increase disposable incomes," said Banerjee. Additionally, increase the daily minimum wage under the MGNREGS from Rs 267 to Rs 375 as suggested by the 'Expert Committee on Fixing National Minimum Wage' in 2017, he added. **FE**

Rising above the AI line

The year 2025 will see recalibration of the actual use cases of AI — many large corporations are expected to cut the scale of deployment, limiting AI to areas where it has had visible impact. Users will increasingly find that this wondrous new technology is more of a copilot than a replacement for humans



NANDAGOPAL RAJAN

LOOKING AT 2025

TECH

"2024 HAS been a year of significant advancements, with AI cementing its role as the defining technology of the decade. While many predictions came true, the speed and depth of some changes — especially in responsible AI and greener tech — highlighted both the promise and challenges of this transformative year."

This is how ChatGPT responded when asked if the tech predictions made in these columns last year (*The Indian Express*, December 29, 2023) had been any good.

Our predictions for 2024 were that Artificial Intelligence (AI) would become all-pervasive, with a move toward responsible AI; more Made in India tech products; greener tech; a more private Internet; and virtual reality (VR) adding a virtual layer over reality.

We got it broadly right — even though we did overestimate the impact of a cookieless world, which seems to have been largely put off. Also, on extended reality becoming more prevalent, India seems to be holding off for now — even as this technology gains ground in other parts of the world.

AI has indeed entered lives in a big way — and has opened up existential issues for both the technology and its users. Everyone is adopting AI, but finding returns on these heavy investments has not been easy.

In 2025, there is going to be some recalibration of the actual use cases of AI — with a lot of large corporations expected to cut down on the scale of deployment, limiting it to areas where the technology has had visible impact. Companies that have been early adopters have realised that while there is no future without AI, this is not the one answer to all their problems, at least not yet.

For users, it is becoming increasingly clear that this new technology is more of a copilot than a replacement. Humans will need to work on top-of-the-line specialised stuff that differentiates us from computers as more and more below-the-line stuff can be handed over to AI for processing — and even decision-making. Focus on elevated thinking could help develop game-changing ideas, and keep those who are able to do this, ahead in the race.

So with all the caveats that the fast-moving technologies of our times warrant, here are our predictions for what to expect in the world of tech in 2025.



This image was generated by OpenAI's chatbot ChatGPT-4o, which was given the text written alongside and then prompted to "create an image for this story."

Takeover by AI agents

The adoption of AI agents that can perform certain tasks without any guidance, learn from their mistakes, and even make decisions on these tasks, will become the more popular way to adopt AI for enterprise as well as consumer uses.

It is easy to create AI agents for a variety of use cases, and to train them to take care of mundane processes that do not need human intervention, though alerting humans when something needs their attention. As of December 2024, users have created more than 3 million custom GPTs on ChatGPT, only about 5% of which are publicly accessible through the GPT Store.

Soon, a lot of work on the Internet, on apps, and software can be executed by these personalised agents, although we are still waiting for companies to release consumer-facing agents that solve specific problems that users might have. One impact of this will be a shift beyond the chat-driven paradigm that GenAI processes are now dependent on — these agents will be pre-programmed, and will not need prompts to get on with what they are supposed to do.

This will also raise some ethical questions — for instance when you get an agent to reply to emails sent by human contacts expecting you to respond. Banks could already be using specific AI agents to evaluate loan applications on specific criteria before they reach the desk of a manager, and hospitals could be using

agents to highlight critical points in blood reports to doctors before they go on their rounds.

Death of dashboards

AI has started to make data more accessible, removing hurdles of skill behind analysing large data sets. This will gradually lead to dashboards being replaced by GenAI tools that answer specific data questions with visualisations, trend lines, or even predictions based on their visibility.

You could see products that show analytics move to this format by the end of 2025, even though the costs involved in handling these queries might limit the conversational data analytics to enterprise products for some time.

At the same time, data itself will have to move to formats that support the requirements of these new tools. As user queries will no longer be limited by the headers on a spreadsheet, data collection will need to become more complex and detailed in order to capture all the metrics that could possibly be summoned.

Rise of not-so-social media

Social media platforms are in the midst of a crisis. TikTok is staring at an uncertain future despite its massive popularity in the United States and other markets. X users unhappy with the way Elon Musk is using the platform are moving *en masse* to Bluesky. Facebook struggles to find younger users, and

Threads any serious engagement. Instagram continues to grow, though — with some help from dodgy content and even more questionable content moderation.

All this could produce a whole new platform that would sweep up audiences — even though such attempts have not been successful in the past. Interestingly, a lot of localised platforms, even in India, have died down over the past year or so, having realised that engagement induced by Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns was not something they could sustain when users have other things to do.

Making matters worse, younger users have found ways to socialise on not-so-social platforms where closed groups make more sense than the bulletin board formats of the now archaic platforms of the desktop era.

Unmatched computing power

A lot is happening in the world of computing. Google Willow quantum chips have shown the potential to take users to a whole new level, and NVIDIA's new GPUs can power AI to solve the biggest problems of our times much faster than we could ever imagine. All this is happening as the new Apple M4 processors bring professional-grade processing power to even portable PCs like the Mini.

With a new wave of devices expected soon, processing times could be cut like never before, opening up new possibilities on what computers can do. But even as computational

power scales up, questions will be asked on whether the data models are good or complex enough for these computers to put to good use. The 'data wall' with maxed-out computing capabilities could start pushing AI models to their limits and potentially trigger a pivot to new trajectories of reasoning.

AI meets hardware

The first few AI-led hardware products such as the Humane AI Pin and Rabbit r1 have been disasters. This is where companies have realised again that being an early mover is not always an advantage, especially when the technology is nascent.

In the new year, expect a new wave of products that use AI at their core, and maybe solve more specific problems instead of trying to be a smartphone equivalent. It's difficult to predict what these devices will be. Some of them could be unveiled at the CES in early January.

Expect some experimentation on getting AI platforms to take the lead on smartphones and laptops — how about an OpenAI phone full of agents that replace apps or a Perplexity laptop that replaces the OS with an AI chat?

The possibilities are endless — expect all possible paths to be trod.

Nandagopal Rajan is Chief Operating Officer, The Indian Express Digital

NEXT: DIPLOMACY

How do the Houthis of Yemen figure in Iran's 'axis of resistance' against Israel?

EXPERT EXPLAINS



BASHIR ALI ABBAS

ISRAEL HAS been bombing Yemen since the middle of December, directly striking the Houthi (Ansar Allah) militant group, and expanding its ongoing campaign against Iran and the so-called "axis of resistance".

Although Israeli fighter jets have conducted such long-distance operations in the past, the scale of the ongoing strikes is wider, and the bombing of Sana'a is a first. With the capabilities of Hamas and Hezbollah severely degraded even as the Houthis continue to succeed in direct attacks, Israelis have been debating whether to focus on the "last remaining Iranian proxy" in Yemen or to go after Iran itself.

What is the background of the Israeli strikes in Yemen?

In January this year, the United States, United Kingdom, and their allies launched Operation Poseidon Archer, a sustained bombing campaign to degrade Houthi military capabilities in Yemen. The campaign supplements Operation Prosperity Guardian, a maritime security operation begun in December 2023 to protect shipping in the Red Sea from attacks by the militants. Even so, the Houthis have succeeded in

forcing commercial shipping between Asia and Europe to either go around the Cape of Good Hope or, if passing through Bab-el-Mandeb, the narrow entrance to the Red Sea between Yemen and the Horn of Africa, to make peace with very high insurance premiums. Most companies have chosen the former — thus ensuring that the Houthi response to Israel's war in Gaza has continued to have global implications.

The Houthis have long had an interest in fighting the US (which supported Saudi Arabia in its war against the Tehran-backed group) and Israel. While the tactical necessities of the civil war, ongoing since 2014, kept Ansar Allah focused on Yemen, by October 7, 2023 — the day of the Hamas attacks on southern Israel — they were at an interesting juncture.

The Houthis had broadly tilted the local balance of power in their favour, and forced Riyadh and Abu Dhabi into negotiations as these regional powers sought to extricate themselves from the war in Yemen. Saudi and the UAE have continued to stay out of the US-led military coalitions, despite being the Houthis' principal opponents. The Zaidi Shia militant group now controls most of Northern Yemen, including Sana'a.

Following the October 7 attacks, as Israel began its bombardment of Gaza, the Houthis declared their *casus belli* as stopping Israel and deterring the US. At that point, they were a group that had not only survived a 10-year civil war and high-casualty Saudi and Emirati air strikes, but one that, from 2021 onward, began projecting a certain permanence. Exploiting the window of opportunity

to increase their profile, the Houthis first mounted a cruise/ ballistic missile and drone campaign against Israel, before shifting their attacks to the maritime domain by December 2023. They benefited not only from Iranian military aid and supply, but also Russian targeting intelligence. And they have remained defiant in the face of the fresh Israeli air strikes.

Where do the Houthis stand in the Yemeni civil war?

The unprecedented success in the Red Sea and the renewed American focus on destroying them have raised the domestic profile of the Houthis.

By early 2024, Ansar Allah was announcing large numbers of recruitments — between 150,000 and 200,000 by their own estimates. In July, Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat declared bankruptcy after eight months of paralysis caused by Houthi attacks on shipping. In September, officials from Yemen's internationally recognised government in capital-in-exile Aden conceded that Western air power had failed to weaken the Houthis.

Ansar Allah has benefited from the Arab powers' desire to move away from conflict and focus on economic diversification, which requires risk reduction for critical energy infrastructure. And despite the Tehran-Riyadh rapprochement of 2023, Iranian arms have continued to flow to Ansar Allah.

The Houthis do face lingering threats from other factions in the civil war, however. The UAE-backed secessionist Southern Transitional Council has declared its willingness to collaborate with Israel against them.

Where are the Houthis placed in the 'axis of resistance'?

The Houthi stock in Iranian overseas operations continued to rise through 2024, as Israel significantly weakened Hezbollah and Hamas, and the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria severed Tehran's lines of communication with Lebanon.

The uptick in direct Houthi attacks against Israel since July took place as the Yemeni group increased its coordination with the Iraq-based Islamic Resistance (or the Popular Mobilization Forces/Hashd al-Shaabi). That month, the Houthis opened an office in Baghdad, even as the Hashd began to mount its own direct attacks against Israel.

Days before he fled, Bashar al-Assad had urged the Iraqi government to allow the Hashd to cross over into Syria — especially since the Shia militias in Iraq have significant operational experience fighting both ISIS and other jihadist groups. Neither Baghdad nor Tehran were keen, however — which signalled Assad's approaching end.

December may be seen as having injected a stronger instinct of self-preservation into the weakened Iranian axis — even as Iranian government officials themselves write editorials in *The Economist* and *Foreign Affairs* signaling openness to engaging the West. The Houthis are currently the spearhead of the axis against Israel, with the Hashd enabling that effort, even as they keep their own distance from the war, at least for now.

Bashir Ali Abbas is a research associate at the Council for Strategic and Defence Research, New Delhi

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SPEED OF HUMAN THOUGHT LAGS FAR BEHIND INTERNET CONNECTION: STUDY

HUMAN BRAIN processes think at a much slower rate than the rate of information transmitted over the Internet, according to a new study.

While the speed of information flow in the human brain is just 10 bits per second (bps), a typical wi-fi connection processes 50 bps. One bit is the smallest unit of data that a computer can process and store.

The study, 'The unbearable slowness of being: Why do we live at 10 bits/s?', was published by the journal *Neuron* earlier this month. To carry out the analysis, the researchers examined data on human behaviours such as reading, writing, etc.

Markus Meister, a neuroscientist at the California Institute of Technology and an author of the study, told *The New York Times*, "It is a bit of a counterweight to the endless hyperbole about how incredibly complex and powerful the human brain is... If you actually try to put numbers to it, we are incredibly slow."

The researchers noted that the human brain processes sensory information from sight, smell and sound much more

rapidly — about 100,000,000 times the rate that cognition does. In other words, while humans can process one thought at a time, their sensory systems — and computers — process thousands of bits of information at once. "Psychological science has not acknowledged this big conflict," Meister told *The NYT*.

The slow pace of conscious thought could be a result of how human brains have evolved. "Our ancestors have chosen an ecological niche where the world is slow enough to make survival possible," according to the study. "In fact, the 10 bits per second are needed only in worst case situations, and most of the time our environment changes at a much more leisurely pace."

Some researchers are not entirely convinced by the findings of the new study. Britton Sauerbrey, a neuroscientist at Case Western Reserve University told *The NYT* that the study may not have fully captured the flow of information in the human nervous system. If those were included, "you're going to end up with a vastly higher bit rate," he said. **ENS**



15

IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

ON STARS IN THE OTT ERA

Since the films were played on the big screen, all the stars looked larger than life. There was a mystery element about them. They led a very private life because there was no social media or a paparazzi culture

Vandita Mishra: You come from a village close to Bettiah in Bihar. I remember going there in 2005, and what struck me was how casually people spoke about the presence of a kidnapping industry there. This place and Mumbai, how did the two affect your acting?

I come from a very remote place in our country, near the Nepal border. That was a difficult time for the people living there — dacoity, kidnapping and murders were part of our lives. The journey from that place to Delhi, Mumbai, in all of these years... not only do you draw inspiration or references from the place you come from, but those things are rooted in your mindset and are part of your personality. Sometimes it feels like a dream that I have come this far. My formative years were spent in Delhi, going to Delhi University, and then theatre days in Delhi. Life has been about learning and unlearning many things because of the setup I came from. Learning the ways of the metropolis was also part of everyday routine. Inculcating the habit of extensive reading, meeting people and educating yourself; there were skills that I was learning, including English. I come from a Bhojpuri area and we studied in Hindi medium, but even Hindi was mostly with a Bhojpuri twang.

I stayed in Bihar for 18 years and I've been in Mumbai for 30 now, but there is a very small percentage of Mumbai in me. Most of it is very Bihari. For references, I always go back to my roots. When I was playing Bhiku Mhatre (in *Satya*, 1998), I hardly knew any mafia guy from Mumbai, so I got all my references from Bettiah. *Bahubalis* or local young mafias roaming around freely were very stylish. I knew one of them.

Vandita Mishra: Did you model Bhiku Mhatre on anyone?

The shirt I bought for Bhiku Mhatre was colourful. That reference came from a guy who was quite dreaded in Bettiah. He was good-looking, and a Jeetendra fan. So he used to wear all white — white trousers and bobby print shirts or white shirts.

For some reason, I keep going back to Bihar for all of my references. These are mostly emotional references.

Vandita Mishra: You once said that Mumbai is not a city for the old or the very young.

It is not. Look at the infrastructure. They never cared about parks, they only cared about skyscrapers. They never cared about pedestrians, they only cared about the cars to move or buses to ply. If there are no parks, no greenery, there is no place for children to play, how will old or retired people spend their mornings and evenings. They have to be locked up in their apartment. The city clearly indicates that it doesn't need you. There is an unwelcoming approach to the old and the very young.

Vandita Mishra: In an interview, you had said that the life of an actor can be divided into two phases, pre-40 and post-40. You also said that post-40 what also starts happening is that your acting has to find dialogues in silence. What did you mean?

Till you hit 40, you are full of energy and life. You take it for granted and feel that there are a lot of years in your hands. It's only after 40 that you start calming down. You start using all that you have learnt through the years really well because now you are quiet, you are not in a hurry. You start understanding the importance of each day. Today, I put in a lot more time, energy and experience into my work than I have ever done. Earlier it was mostly about energy, giving it all. After 40, actors mature. They sit back and analyse what they have done and what is left and how to make use of it in the wisest and most productive way.

Vandita Mishra: Bhiku Mhatre is an iconic character. Would you have played him differently now? Did that cast a shadow on your other roles?

It would have, had I not taken a different path of doing different kinds of roles and genres. That kind of success through that kind of a cult role was not easy for any actor to come out of. For three years, I was only known as Bhiku Mhatre. It's only after *Shool* (1999), *Kaun* (1999), *Aks* (2001) and *Zubeidaa* (2001) that people started separating the actor from the character.

Vandita Mishra: In *Gali Guleiyan* (2017), you play this middle-aged man who is living in a small room in Old Delhi. He has put up cameras and watches people cross the alleys. At the



WHY MANOJ BAJPAYEE

Winner of four National Awards and a Padma Shri, Manoj Bajpayee has played iconic roles in films such as *Satya* (1998), *Shool* (1999), *Aligarh* (2015) and *Gali Guleiyan* (2017). Playing a journalist in the recently released film *Despatch* on ZEE5, the versatile actor from a

small village near Bettiah in Bihar is known to completely immerse himself in the characters he portrays. Adopting an intense, research-driven approach of method acting, his career spans a wide range of genres and includes a rich experience in theatre.



ON HOW BIHAR SHAPED HIM AS AN ACTOR

I stayed in Bihar for 18 years and I've been in Mumbai for 30, but there is a very small percentage of Mumbai in me. Most of it is very Bihari. For references, I always go back to my roots

‘Real stardom lasted only till the time technology became big. But one thing that will always survive is the story’

Actor Manoj Bajpayee on the future of cinema, how every character he plays becomes a part of him and how he is still *babua* for those in his village. This session was moderated by Vandita Mishra, National Opinion Editor, *The Indian Express*



Actor Manoj Bajpayee (right) in conversation with Vandita Mishra *Gajendra Yadav*

same time, he is losing his grip on sanity. You've said that you reached the verge of a breakdown because of that character.

The extreme depth that you are trying to touch as an actor, for the character, started becoming evident from the beginning of my preparation, though not to me. It was my wife who said, 'take care of yourself because I see you talking to yourself when you are walking by'. I didn't take it that seriously. It's only on the 29th day of shooting that I started hearing a whistle in one of my ears. All doctors were of the opinion of putting me on sedatives immediately... After that I felt alright but it was risky. It was risky to take that preparation to that extent.

Vandita Mishra: There are two ways of approaching a role. One is what you did in *Gali Guleiyan*, you immerse yourself and reach a point of breakdown. Is it the character that defines this approach or do you decide as an actor?

I have done many roles where I retained my equanimity. It's always the character. *Gali Guleiyan* would have failed if the character's restlessness and breakdown were not seen in the eyes of the actor. The same is in *Despatch* (ZEE5). Kanu Behl is a taskmaster and has a process of workshop. This is very tedious, exhausting to the point of a breakdown.

Vandita Mishra: You were at the National School of Drama (NSD) as a teacher, you've also done workshops with (theatreperson) Barry John.

I was rejected at NSD three-four times. I did a lot of theatre. With Barry, I worked for seven years.

Vandita Mishra: Theatre is a very testing space, there is no retake. As an actor on the screen now, does theatre give you a certain creative energy? Do you draw from your theatre days or do they give you a sort of confidence?

The confidence of knowing the craft and ways to achieve the character are definitely there. Also, we are coming from outside and our fathers and relatives are not from the film industry. So you always want to make the best of each opportunity that you are getting. I still remember, I got this big opportunity in one serial and on the first day itself they said, 'get out, we

don't like your performance'. Even after doing theatre for a decade, this could happen. Just imagine trying to learn on the job. It will be disastrous for your mental health. Theatre gives you the confidence that even after 10 rejections, you know this is not my time, the day my time will come is when I will shut them up.

Devyani Onial: When you go back home to Bihar, how do people there interact with you?

I go back to Bihar just to visit my village, my house. My parents are no more, so I don't go there as often as I used to. The villagers never looked at me as a known star or known actor. They always looked at me as their own. I have always had a relationship with them, they have seen me growing big, from a child to an adult, who is now living somewhere else. I am just a *babua* for them, not Manoj the actor.

Raj Kamal Jha: You once said actors on the big screen are literally larger than life. So who's the star when more and more people are watching a film on their phones? A related question: as an actor, what does streaming six episodes mean in place of a one-and-a-half-hour film?

Because the stars have changed, the genre has changed. Mainstream films used to have a very concrete storyline, even in the days of Rajesh Khanna. If you name five Rajesh Khanna films right now, all of them were directed by the greats of Hindi cinema, all of them had



great songs and great music directors. I would love to be part of it. At the same time, since the films were played on the big screen, the stars all looked larger than life. Even the character actors looked larger than life. There was a mystery element about all the stars. You would hardly see them in real life. They led a very private life because there was no intervention of social media or a paparazzi culture. With the rapid evolution of technology, the mystery went away. Now, look at the endorsements. For two-and-a-half decades, every second product is endorsed by an actor, right? He is everywhere. Rajesh Khanna or Amitabh Bachchan were organic superstars, but now superstars are also created through social media. It is completely PR-driven and whoever is good at it, whoever has deep pockets, a hype is created around them. So real stardom lasted only till the time technology became a big thing. But the one thing that will always survive is the story.

Rinku Ghosh: You've played many landmark characters and some of them probably stay behind in your head. How do you wipe the memory of the characters that you are known for?

Isn't it impossible? That's the downside of being an actor. I have not been chasing stardom, I have only been chasing good roles. So when you are so immersed and invested in playing a character, you may outwardly move on but you

cannot be sure that the character has gone away. Subconsciously they are there, and I have come to terms with it.

Muzamil Jaleel: There are debates on whether films should only be for entertainment or whether actors also play a role in shaping opinion. Do you think taking a role is also a political act, or do you think actors should only be entertainers?

I will answer it differently because cinema is not only for entertainment, it is also a medium of art where I get a chance to express myself, where I get a chance to put out a story, where I'm not consciously trying to drive a message to the people. Each individual in the auditorium who is watching it or on OTT, it's up to them what to take from a good story and what not to take. A good story also instigates a good conversation. And that is our job, to tell a good story. But taking sides as a storyteller is something I don't think will help you in remaining just a director. Then you'll become a political director, political actor. And that is not my job.

Aakash Joshi: Martin Scorsese has famously said about Marvel movies... we are getting a sense now that the big spectacle film is the cinema hall film. Do you think that's what's going to happen? That cinema hall is no longer going to be a place of communal watching? That the hall is for spectacle and the technically brilliant, and somehow the more writer-driven, actor-driven, craft-driven films are going to be on OTT?

What you're saying is something which has been happening for a few years, but I can't say it is going to remain like that because Marvel films are not doing well lately. As long as people are enjoying them, they will go to the theatre to watch a Marvel film or to watch a VFX-heavy film. But the moment it becomes repetitive, they look for different options. Either they will watch a good film on OTT or a good series or they will wait for a good film to come in the theatre to watch it with family. So, this is just a phase.

Nikhil Ghanekar: The first major credit that you got was for *Bandit Queen* (1994) and it was a controversial film... There are concerns about artistic freedom in

terms of how the audience perceives controversial films and how the administration deals with them.

People are becoming more offended worldwide, on both sides. People have become very sensitive. Look at wokeism. Look at the way people are attacking each other. We are in a time when people are in conflict with each other. For reasons that are completely ambiguous, they are just angry, upset.

Jatin Anand: From the mid '80s to the mid-2000s, there was a sort of a sub-genre of Bollywood: the 'Indian gangster film'. *Dayavan* (1988), *Satya* (1998), *Company* (2002), *Sarkar* (2005) were best examples of it. A similar attempt was made with *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) but there's been nothing really since then. Do you think this is because of a lack of actors who can fit such a profile or of storytellers and directors who can do this?

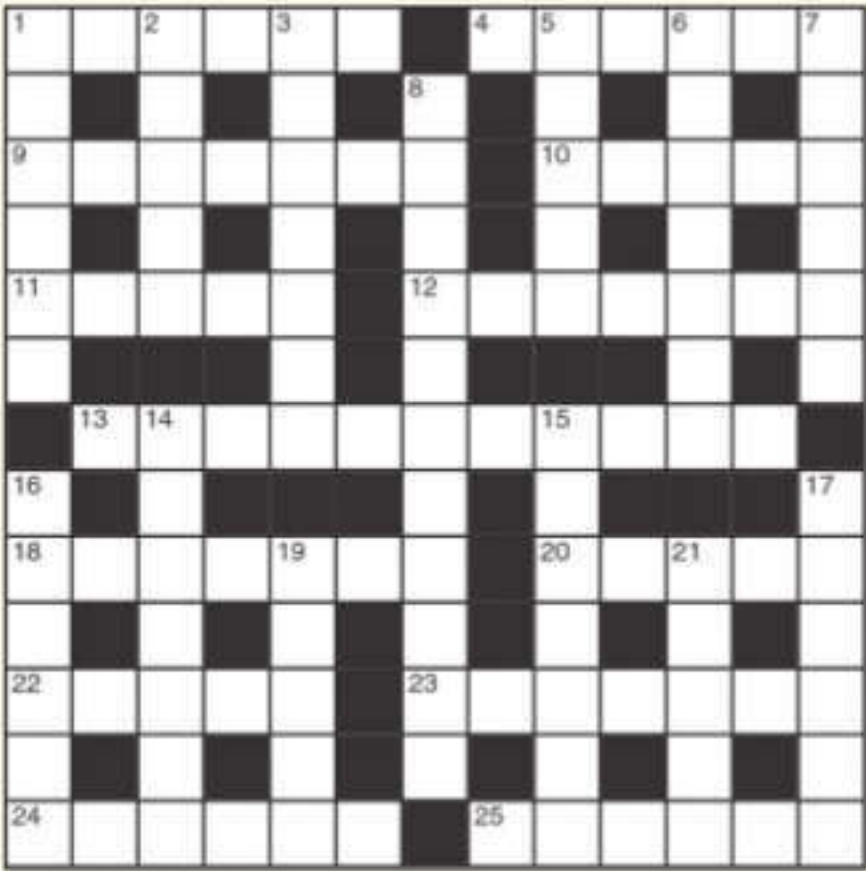
This has been the way of the industry, that one thing becomes successful and then suddenly you see lots of filmmakers making the same thing. After *Satya*, every second filmmaker would come to me with a similar kind of role. This also says that we, as an industry, are lazy, we don't want to work very hard. We try to find a formula. Like now, every second or third filmmaker is writing or making a horror comedy... But there are few filmmakers who are quite amazing, like *Gangs of Wasseypur* was written by the same guy who has written *Satya*. Both of them were about violence and mafia but they were very different.

Shalini Langer: You spoke about how Irrfan Khan's method of acting was very different from yours — that you were drawn into the character and he drew the character to himself. What exactly does that mean? Also, what do you think happened to Ram Gopal Varma?

The good news is that he (Varma) is going to make his next movie with me. He was taking a long break, chilling out.

I take a role and try to really change it completely, change myself according to the role. Irrfan has given a different interpretation to it, he made the role his own, he gave a beautiful shape to the character.

CROSSWORD 5560



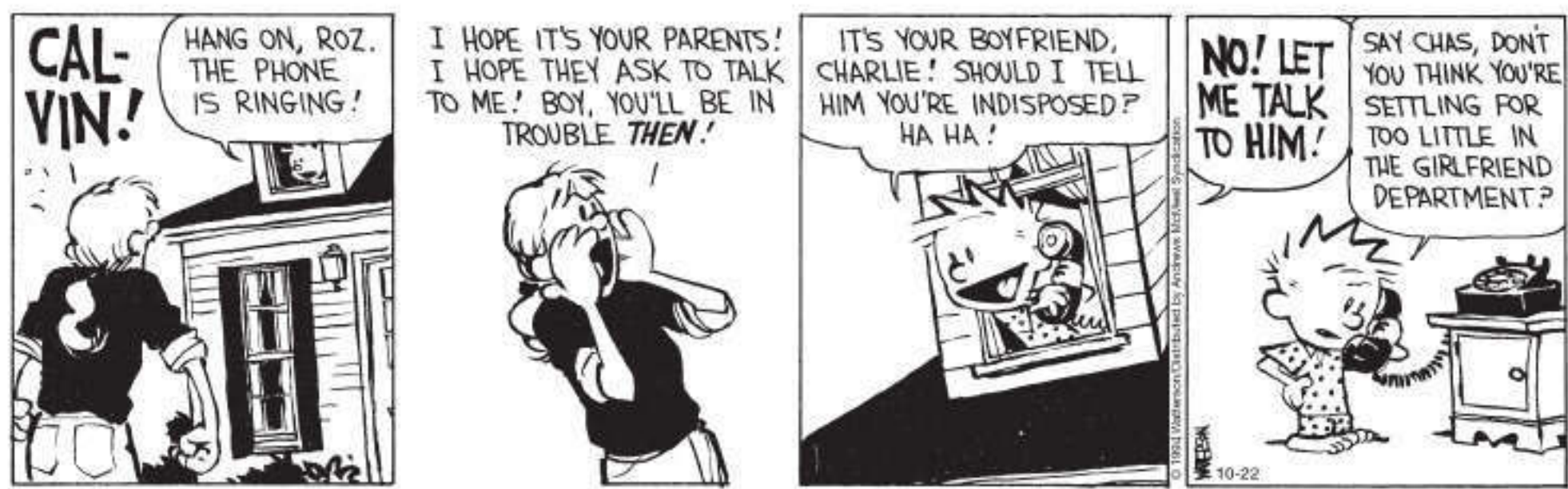
- ACROSS
- 1 Doctor has a chap upset (6)
- 4 Pursued by two boys (6)
- 9 Overindulgence in a salad of eastern fruits (7)
- 10 She brings endless anguish to a male (5)
- 11 Permission to be absent in Latin (5)
- 12 He looks after a dog on a hill (7)
- 13 Remove it wrongly to spend as extra wages (8,3)
- 18 Not a subject put on in advance (7)
- 20 When established, something to one's credit (5)
- 22 A clergyman lost his head for this crime (5)
- 23 Vain yet possibly showing innocence (7)
- 24 Soft-hearted nurse (6)
- 25 He drops a line hoping for some response (6)
- DOWN
- 1 She may be relatively disposed to resist (6)
- 2 Unusually eager to come to terms (5)
- 3 One who helps another to a seat (7)
- 5 Where the lumberjack is disturbed (5)
- 6 Island in strife produces traumas (7)
- 7 They've taken food off plates and rinsed out (6)
- 8 Whip out one's trading reserve? (5,2,4)
- 14 Meat stewed in ovens (7)
- 15 A subterfuge no one's welcome to subvert (7)
- 16 I'm given a role to communicate (6)
- 17 Yet this horse keeps going (6)
- 19 Distance to target in the mountains (5)
- 21 Time passed in a trance (5)

Solutions Crossword 5559 Across: 1 Sackbut, 5 Tapes, 8 Complementary, 9 Spree, 10 Arrange, 11 Rushes, 12 Adapts, 15 Cherish, 17 Apart, 19 Transgression, 20 Large, 21 Stagger Down: 1 Socks, 2 Compressed air, 3 Believe, 4 Tympan, 5 Tuner, 6 Plain speaking, 7 Shyness, 11 Recital, 13 Dead Sea, 14 Sharks, 16 Issue, 18 Tenor

OVER THE HEDGE by Michael Fry & T Lewis



CALVIN & HOBBS by Bill Watterson



MARVIN by Tom Armstrong



DAY TODAY BY PETER VIDAL

- ARIES (Mar 21 - Apr 20)
Today's Mercury-Uranus pattern is one of those magical planetary alignments that favours dreams and imagination, but lays out banana skins for those who allow confusion to creep in. Poetic aspirations come first and practical goals may have to wait.
- LIBRA (Sep 24 - Oct 23)
If the past few weeks have been free from disagreements then you're lucky. However, although, the nature of the game is changing, I don't think any of you will be unaware of the turbulent undercurrents building up this week. Keep your eye on the ball, Libra.
- TAURUS (Apr 21 - May 21)
Venus, your ruling planet, is teaming up with Saturn in a pattern which gives all sentimental, self-indulgent and creative Taureans a welcome boost in the right direction. But you may have to voluntarily renounce one commitment, if you are to make the space for a much better one.
- SCORPIO (Oct 24 - Nov 23)
You'll soon have a brighter perspective on the immediate future. If you're a typical mainstream Scorpio, you may rub your hands with glee at what is just around the corner. If you've spoken out against certain practical arrangements, you may soon be vindicated.
- GEMINI (May 22 - June 21)
We'll start off with the good news: your stars are prosperous. But here's the downside: romantic chaos and inspired confusion may be great fun but could result in costly mistakes. That's precisely why your main priority should be extra self-control.
- SAGITTARIUS (Nov 24 - Dec 22)
You have little understanding of other people's intense feelings. You may even be rather bemused by this week's emotional events and general air of hysteria. Unless, that is, you have been here, done that and got the tee shirt. Experience counts for a lot.
- CANCER (June 22 - July 23)
The typical Cancerian is a peace-loving creature, but you can still be easily provoked. You may move from an idyllic illusion of harmony towards a realisation that a battle must be joined. And, when it comes, the struggle will be one of ideas rather than emotions.
- AQUARIUS (Jan 21 - Feb 19)
The winds of change will be blowing, gently at first but then with great force. Relax, but retain a guarded approach to all developments. If people do end up putting pressure on you, then it's probably because you need them to give you a shove in the right direction.
- LEO (July 24 - Aug 23)
Sometimes life is just not what it seems. Yet you have a huge amount going for you. This might be more obvious to other people than it is to you. That's why you have to trust in the future - and have faith that you are indeed on the right track.
- PISCES (Feb 20 - Mar 20)
You should be in your element this week, at least until Thursday or Friday. A series of major planetary patterns decrees that this is a week when Piscean qualities - imagination, intuition, romance and compassion - are dominant for everyone. And especially, of course, for you.
- VIRGO (Aug 24 - Sep 23)
Everything that takes place this week will be encouraged by the fact that Mercury, your ruling planet, is now in an increasingly lively condition. Your smart ideas will help you pick your way through a rapidly approaching emotional minefield.

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.

Observe due measure, for _____ is in all things the most important factor. - Hesiod (5,6)

DGIIR

AETHMN

DOITT

GILYGG

Solution: WORDS: RIGID, DITTO, ANTHEM, GIGGLY Answer: Observe due measure, for rigidity is in all things the most important factor. - Hesiod

SUDOKU 5820

SOLUTION SUDOKU 5819

Classifieds

PERSONAL

I, Urmila Gupta, W/O Ved Prakash Gupta R/o 5193, Gali Bai Kishan Dass Basant Road, Pahar Ganj, Swami Ram, Tirth Nagar, Central Delhi-110055, have changed my name and shall hereafter be Known as Urmila Rani 0070942489-1

LOST & FOUND

I, RENU MOR W/O NAVEEN R/O VILLAGE MADINA KAURSAN(105)ROHTAK, HARYANA-124111.HAVE CHANGED MY NAME TO RAINU MOR FOR ALL PURPOSES. 0040766255-7

BUSINESS

One Software for your Entire Business. ZOHO One. zoho@excelssoftware.net <mailto:zoho@excelssoftware.net>. 9820096484

PUBLIC NOTICE

Public at large is hereby informed that in the Minutes of Meeting dated 27.12.2024, and dated 29.12.2024, it was deliberated that as the **SUDHISH PRAKASH IRREVOCABLE FAMILY TRUST** was not achieving the objectives for which it was formed, the Settlers of the said Trust with the consent of all Beneficiaries of said Trust have dissolved the **SUDHISH PRAKASH IRREVOCABLE FAMILY TRUST** with immediate effect. Settlers **Sudhish Prakash Veena Agarwal**

PERSONAL

I, Rakesh Kumar S/o Late Sh. Harkishan R/o H.No. B-1901, Angel Jupiter near DPS, Ahinsha Khand-2, Indirapuram, Ghaziabad UP have changed my minor daughter's name from Mishika Kumar to Mishika Singh for all future purposes 0040766174-1

PERSONAL

I, Kiraj Kumar S/O Ram Lakan Singh, R/o JE-31A, Block-JE, Khirkhi Extension, Malviya Nagar Delhi-110017, I have changed the name of my minor Son Tarang aged about 12 Years and He shall hereafter be known as Agastya 0070942450-1

PERSONAL

I, Chojit Singh S/O Gurbachan Singh, R/o 16/19, Third Floor, Subhash Nagar, Tagore Garden, West Delhi-110027, have changed my name and shall hereafter be Known as Jeet Singh. 0070942469-1

पावरग्रिड POWERGRID

Ref: CG/INT/W-TR/DOM/A06/24/17118 Date: 30.12.2024

NOTICE INVITING 'REQUEST FOR EMPANELMENT' (RfE) FOR EMPANELMENT OF VENDORS FOR REPAIR OF TRANSFORMERS AND REACTORS UP TO 765KV CLASS AT FACTORY OR SITE

POWERGRID intends to empanel vendors for repair of Transformers and Reactors separately for factory repairs/ site repairs for each voltage class of equipment i.e. 765kV, 400kV, 220kV & 132kV Transformers /Reactors.

Against the EOI (2022) notice, issued in the media in January 2022, certain vendors were empaneled up to 11th September 2022. The purpose of this EOI (2024) Notice is to facilitate empanelment of new agencies as well as for existing empaneled agencies for change of categories (voltage rating or equipment) where they have not already been empaneled but meet the QR and other terms of empanelment of this EOI (2024). The validity of empanelment shall be up to 11th September 2027.

The Vendors who are already Empaneled with POWERGRID and interested in empanelment in categories (voltage rating or equipment) where they are not empaneled need to submit their applications supported with credentials for meeting the QR for empanelment and other terms of empanelment against this RfE (2024).

This empanelment shall be used by POWERGRID for inviting bids for participating in the future tenders for repair of Transformers and Reactors.

POWERGRID, however, reserves the right to invite RfE from time to time and to undertake RfP in one or more than one tranches, as per requirement in due course of time. POWERGRID also reserves the right to delist any empaneled Vendors at any time during the validity of Empanelment without assigning any reason whatsoever.

POWERGRID, therefore, invites Applications against this RfE (2024) from interested Indian Vendors for aforesaid purpose. The RfE Documents including the detailed Qualifying Requirements for empanelment are available for downloading on e-portal <https://tender.powergrid.in>, free of cost. A pre-RfE conference shall be held on 10.01.2025. Soft copy part of Application shall be uploaded on the portal <https://tender.powergrid.in> upto 11:30 Hrs. on 29.01.2025 and Hard copy part of Application shall be submitted upto 11:00 Hrs. on 31.01.2025. The applications submitted by Vendors shall be opened on 31.01.2025 at 11:30 Hrs onwards.

For further details including addendum/changes to RfE (2024), if any, please visit e-portal <https://tender.powergrid.in>. The complete RfE Documents are also available on our website <http://www.powergrid.in> and on Government of India's Central Public Procurement Portal (<https://eprocure.gov.in/>) for the purpose of reference only. In case of any discrepancy between the documents downloaded by the prospective Applicants from POWERGRID website and from the portal <https://tender.powergrid.in>, the latter shall prevail.

All correspondence/communication shall be made to: 'Sr. DGM/Manager (CS-G7), POWERGRID, "Saudamini", Plot No. 2, Sector-29, Gurgaon-122001, Haryana'. Phone no.: +91-124-282 3313/3316.

POWER GRID CORPORATION OF INDIA LIMITED (A Government of India Enterprise)

Reg. Office : B-9, Qutab Institutional Area, Katwaria Sarai, New Delhi-110 016

Corp. Office : "Saudamini", Plot No. 2, Sector-29, Gurugram-122001, (Haryana)

A Maharatna PSU

PROCLAMATION REQUIRING THE APPEARANCE OF ACCUSED PERSON

See Section 82 Cr. P.C.

Whereas complaint has been made before me that accused Person **Bhagwan Singh S/o: Hukum Singh R/o: H.No.: 165/14, First Floor, Kh. No. 36/14/2, Brahampuri, Phase-1, Ranhola, Delhi** has committed (or is suspected to have committed) the offence in **FIR No. 583/20, Dated: 16.05.2020 U/S: 457/380/411 IPC, PS: Ranhola, Delhi** and it has been returned to a warrant of arrest thereupon issued that the said accused person(s) **Bhagwan Singh** cannot be found and whereas it has been shown to my satisfaction that the said accused person(s) **Bhagwan Singh**, has absconded (or is concealing himself to avoid the service of the said warrant). Proclamation is hereby made that the said accused person **Bhagwan Singh**, of **FIR No. 583/20, Dated: 16.05.2020 U/S: 457/380/411 IPC, PS: Ranhola, Delhi** is required to appear before this Court to answer the said complaint on or before **30.01.2025**.

By Order
Sh. Ankit Karan Singh
Metropolitan Magistrate (West),
Tis Hazari Court, Delhi

DP/17124/ OD/2024
(Court Matter)

KMML The Kerala Minerals and Metals Ltd (A Govt. of Kerala Undertaking) Sankaramangalam, Kollam-691 583 Phone: 0476-2651215 to 2651217, e-mail: md@kmmcl.com, URL: www.kmmcl.com

TENDER NOTICE

For more details, please visit E-Tendering Portal, <https://tenders.kerala.gov.in> or www.kmmcl.com

Sl No.	Tender ID	Items
1	2024_KMML_718010_1	For the supply of Shell and Tube Condensers/ Heat Exchangers
2	2024_KMML_717670_1	For the supply of Ladle Furnace-Resistance Heating 3 Zone
3	2024_KMML_720298_1	For the supply of Plate Inconel-0.5 MT

Chavara 27.12.2024 Sd/- Managing Director for The Kerala Minerals and Metals Ltd

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POSSESSION NOTICE for Immovable Property in case of one borrower (For Immovable Property)

Whereas, The undersigned being the Authorised Officer of the Punjab National Bank under the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets & Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002, and in exercise of powers conferred under Section 13 read with Rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002, issued demand notice(s) on the dates mentioned against each account calling upon the respective borrower/s to repay the amount as mentioned against each account within 60 days from the date of notice(s)/date of receipt of the said notice(s).

The borrower/s having failed to repay the amount, notice(s) is hereby given to the borrower/s and the public in general that the undersigned has taken possession of the property/ies described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him under Section 13(4) of the said Act read with Rule 8 of the said Rules on the date mentioned each against account.

The Borrower's/Guarantor/Mortgagor's attention is invited to provision of sub-section (8) of section 13 of the Act in respect of time available to redeem the secured assets.

The borrower/s in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property/ies and any dealing with the property/ies will be subject to the charge of Punjab National Bank for the amount and interest thereon.

Name of the Account/Borrower/Morgager/Branch/Account No.	Owner of the property	Description of the property mortgaged	Date of Demand Notice	Date of Possession Notice Affixed	Amount outstanding as on date of Demand Notice
M/S Raushan Kumar (Borrower/Proprietor- Sri Raushan Kumar S/o Sri Arun Kumar/ Smt. Renu Kumari W/o Sri Arun Kumar Branch : SS1 (3891), Patna A/C No. 3891008700001940	Smt. Renu Kumari W/o Sri Arun kumar	EM Land and construction thereon if any having a total area of 1590 sq feet situated at Mauza- Adaluchak, Daulatpur, P.S- Jehanabad, Town & District- Jehanabad, Thana No.- 382, Khata No.- 31 & 72, Survey Plot No.- 435(P) & 434 (P) under Sadar Registry Office- Jehanabad in the name of Smt. Renu Kumari W/o- Sri Arun Kumar, Sale Deed No.- 301 dated 11.02.2005 Boundary as per Deed:- North- Jairam Singh, South- Road, East- Srikant Sharma & Dukan Chaudhary, West- NIJ	08.10.2024	24.12.2024	Rs. 55,05,448/- (Rupees Fifty Five Lakh Five Thousand Four Hundred Forty Eight Only) and interest thereon.

Place : Patna
Date : 24.12.2024

Authorised Officer
Punjab National Bank

BHARATIYA RESERVE BANK NOTE MUDRAN (P) LIMITED (Wholly owned subsidiary of Reserve Bank of India) P.O.: RBNML, Salboni - 721132, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal Phone No. 03227-280176 / 280317; Fax No. 03227-280744 / 280222

OPEN TENDER ENQUIRY (OTE)/NATIONAL COMPETITIVE BIDDING (NCB)

Bids are invited under Two-Part bidding system for the following e-Tender through MSTC Portal - 1. DESIGN, SUPPLY, INSTALLATION, COMMISSIONING, PERFORMANCE TESTING AND TRAINING OF KNIFE EDGE GRINDING MACHINE WITH ACCESSORIES AND BUYBACK OF EXISTING KNIFE EDGE GRINDING MACHINE AT BRBNMPL, SALBONI; MSTC EVENT NO. BRBNMPL/SALBONI/PRESS/IMMD/42/24-25/ET/77 (KNIFE EDGE GRINDING MACHINE); BRBNMPL TENDER No. 018/SAL/PUR/2024-25; (ESTIMATED COST - ₹150.00 LAKH)

Last date of tender submission - 21.02.2025 by 11:00 Hrs. For downloading tender document and other details, kindly visit website www.mstccommerce.com. Tender details are also available at our website www.brbnmpl.co.in. Further extension or amendments, if any, shall be uploaded on the above websites. Senior General Manager

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SA qualify for WTC Final with win over Pak

EXPRESSNEWSSERVICE
DECEMBER 29

SOUTH AFRICA became the first team to make the final of the ongoing World Test Championship as they defeated Pakistan by two wickets in a thrilling match at the Centurion. Needing 148, for a place in their first-ever WTC final, South Africa were reeling at 99/8 with Mohammad Abbas, playing his first Test since August 2021, running through their top-order before a counter-attacking 31 from Kagiso Rabada took them home soon after lunch on Day 4.

The win elevated the Proteas to 88 points from 11 games in the WTC cycle, boosting their points percentage (PCT) to 66.67 ahead of Australia (58.89) and India (55.89), who are currently locked 1-1 in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. At the beginning of the year when they had one win from five Tests, a ticket to the final looked beyond their reach. But they have now won six Tests on the bounce to make it to the summit clash which will again be played at Lord's from June 11.

Coming into the series against Pakistan, South Africa needed only one win to seal their spot. When Day 4 began, the Test was neatly poised with the hosts needing 120 runs to win with seven wickets in hand. With some luck and close shaves, South Africa's overnight batsmen Temba Bavuma and Aiden Markram quietly went about the chase. In the first hour, despite some nervy moments, they found boundaries that helped them absorb pressure and inch slowly towards the target.

In the next hour, Abbas - who had been troubling them all morning - would change all of it. First up, he bowled Markram with one that kept low and took the off-stump. The Proteas, though, still looked in control with David Bedingham looking assured alongside Bavuma, whose reckless shot brought Pakistan back into the game. In the next 11 deliveries, South Africa will lose three more with Abbas striking twice and Naseem Shah once.

A first win on South Africa soil for 17 years was in Pakistan's sight. However, Rabada in the company of Marco Jansen put together a 51-run stand to take the Proteas into the final. **Brief scores:** Pakistan 211 & 237 lost to South Africa 301 & 150/8 (Bavuma 40, Rabada 31; Abbas 6/54, Naseem 1/34) by 2 wickets.

INDIA'S WTC FINAL SCENARIOS

■ For India to make a third straight final, they need to win the Boxing Day Test and the next one at Sydney. In that case, even if Australia beats Sri Lanka by 2-0 margin, they won't be able to finish above India.

■ If India win one Test and draw another, then Australia could end up taking the second spot if they win both Tests in Sri Lanka. If Australia win one and draw one in SL, then India can go through.

■ If India win one and lose one in Australia, then Sri Lanka has to beat the Aussies by 1-0 margin.

■ If India draw both their Tests, then Sri Lanka will take the WTC spot if they beat Australia 2-0. Australia, on the other hand, will need only one win in SL.

■ If India draw one and lose one, they will be out of the race.



SRIRAM VEERA
MELBOURNE, DECEMBER 29

JASPRIT BUMRAH stood there, head down, hands on his knee at the centre of the MCG pitch when an exhilarating Test-match day ended. His pace partner had just laid down on the ground a couple of balls previously, and took his own sweet time to stir and get up. At fine-leg, Akash Deep could barely move his legs. He stretched his back and rubbed his knees. India's players trudged off towards the tunnel, but Bumrah wouldn't budge. KL Rahul casted a look back, ran, collected the cap from the umpire, went to Bumrah and patted his back. From near the boundary end, Rohit Sharma turned, looked at his premier fast bowler, who had busted his guts out to conjure something special from nothing, and blew out a long deep breath.

It's a day where one didn't need commentators and former players trying to hype about Test cricket saying, 'Test cricket you mad lil' beauty, the true test of character' and all that cliched-jazz. We would have felt it in our bones. In the way our eyes would have bulged. In the way goosebumps would have been experienced. In the way we shook our heads and sighed in admiration or shock, in the way the game can move us like nothing else can. In some ways, a day like this—and hopefully Monday too—can be the greatest wrinkle-free cream out there, taking us back to childhood to when we fell in love with the sport.

India nearly manufactured something out of nowhere, but Yashasvi Jaiswal's palms betrayed him. Three catches clanged out of his hands, and he would balefully look at them in the aftermath. The hands that rocked the Indian cradle beautifully in Perth's second innings and in the first innings here at Melbourne, suddenly turned against him on Sunday. He dropped Usman Khawaja, but that was relatively inexpensive. When Australia were 99 for 6, he grassed Marnus Labuschagne at gully that triggered Akash Deep to end his explosive-filled mutterings with 'kya yaar!'. At 135 for 6, off Ravindra Jadeja, he reprieved Pat Cummins, a remarkable leader who put his body and spirit behind the line for a most stirring fight.

Siraj's succour

Where does one start? With Bumrah one must, but that's the most obvious one. Perhaps with Mohammad Siraj, for he symbolised India's great fightback when not much was expected from the day. It was supposedly a 'declaration day' where Australia were supposed to pile up runs and throw India under the match pressure and the best India could get out of this game seemed a draw. But not just Bumrah, but Siraj too stood up. He has been criticised in his bowling in the last two games. Out of ideas, out of skill apart from the wobble seam, out of energy at times, bereft of a discernible plan. But how he startled the Australians and his critics!

His set-up of the ageing and lucky



With another match-turning spell, Jasprit Bumrah led India's fightback, finishing Day 4 with figures of 4/56.

AP

India nearly manufactured something out of nowhere, but Yashasvi Jaiswal's palms betrayed him. Three catches clanged out of his hands, and he would balefully look at them in the aftermath.

Usman Khawaja, who was beaten umpteen times, was rather neat. Away, away, for a few deliveries, from over the stumps, before he got the ball fuller, straighter, and not deviating. Khawaja went for the expansive drive, his top hand coming off just like it did in second innings at Gabba, and heard the rattle of the stumps. Later, luckless Siraj returned and dismissed Steve Smith.

Until that moment, things were still going on that 'declaration day' way - not quite the way Australians would have wanted to dominate but they had still lost only couple of wickets. Smith was imperious. Luck smiled on Labuschagne. But he held on, even after the implosion.

More than 20 overs passed, Labuschagne had worked out a great tactic with Cummins. "I shall take on Bumrah as much possible, we shall run from the other but make sure I am on non-striker's end by the end of those overs." Simple, but rarely easy to pull it off.

His batting has been much criticised, even more than Siraj's bowling, by Australian fans. 'Boring', 'fidgety', 'no in-

tent', 'looking to just survive', 'no good'. Australian cricket prides itself on their No.3. Don Bradman, Ian Chappell, Ricky Ponting, Labuschagne is antithesis to them. Here he wedged himself between India and history.

In that partnership-phase, Bumrah was taken off and a mini-battle was won. It's when Siraj struck, getting a ball from back of length to keep a touch low. It's still not drastically up-and-down to make India fret, but variable bounce has set in. Siraj's delivery cannoned into the pads, and a DRS couldn't save Labuschagne. When the umpire initially lifted his finger, Bumrah turned and whipped up the Indian section of the crowd.

We can't stay away from Bumrah any longer. The world of batsmen can never get away from him. Early on, he had knocked down the bails of Sam Konstas with a sharp nipbacker. He re-entered the scene after Smith's fall. A soft dismissal of Travis Head would get him going, the birthday boy shovelling a back-of-length delivery straight to Nitish Reddy at square-leg. Bumrah pumped his arms—that was his 200th Test wicket. None in history has done it with a better average than him.

Four balls later, Bumrah struck again with a peach of a straightener, the delivery that lands Mitch Marsh in trouble. Unsurprisingly, hard hands emerged and Pant's soft gloved-hands pounced it. Two overs later, he landed another blow—his third in 10 balls, when he curled in an inward-angler that seamed in sharply to sneak through the bat-and-pad gap of Alex

Carey to clatter the stumps. It was his 23rd wicket at the MCG—the most by a visiting bowler in the last 110 years—and Australia were tottering at 91 for 6.

Comeback hour

But what's Test cricket without a fight-back? Bumrah had five more overs, but Cummins faced just one ball off him. By plan, by design. Apart from one day at Perth when Kohli and Reddy clattered them, Cummins hasn't done one thing wrong. Never allowed the game to drift as a captain, never allowed India to breathe easy as a bowler, and rarely left the batting crease without a fight. His inspiring fight deflated India.

By the time he departed, soaking up 90 balls for 41, adding 57 runs with Labuschagne and then with Lyon to take the score to 173, India's bowlers, the ball, and the pitch had tired out. Nathan Lyon bashed a 54-ball 41 and Scott Boland put his mind and body on the line for a hard-earned 10 from 65 balls as the last-wicket pair added an unbroken 55 runs.

That brutally left Bumrah, Siraj, and Akash feeling every ache in their body at stumps. But whatever the target Australia set, it presents a great opportunity for Rohit Sharma to set the tone in the chase. The great Indian hope would be that Rohit sets it up and Virat Kohli finishes it. But then, mere mortals don't decide the way this game plays out; it has its own moods and fancies. What will the final day at MCG bring us?

SCORECARD

AUSTRALIA vs INDIA	
MELBOURNE CRICKET GROUND	
Toss: Australia, chose to bat	
AUSTRALIA 1ST INNINGS	474
INDIA 1ST INNINGS	(O/N: 358/9)
NK Reddy c Starc b Lyon	114 (189b, 11x4, 1x6)
M Siraj batting	4 (15b)
■ Extras (lb 2, nb 4, w 5)	11
■ Total (119.3 Ov, RR: 3.08)	369
■ FoW: 1-8 (Rohit Sharma, 1.6 ov), 2-51 (KL Rahul, 14.6 ov), 3-153 (Yashasvi Jaiswal, 40.6 ov), 4-154 (Virat Kohli, 42.1 ov), 5-159 (Akash Deep, 44.3 ov), 6-191 (Rishabh Pant, 55.4 ov), 7-221 (Ravindra Jadeja, 64.5 ov), 8-348 (Washington Sundar, 111.6 ov), 9-350 (Jasprit Bumrah, 113.3 ov), 10-369 (Nitish Kumar Reddy, 119.3 ov)	
■ Bowling: Mitchell Starc 25-2-86-0, Pat Cummins 29-6-89-3, Scott Boland 27-7-57-3, Nathan Lyon 28.3-4-96-3, Mitchell Marsh 7-1-28-0, Travis Head 3-0-11-0.	

AUSTRALIA 2ND INNINGS	
S Konstas b Bumrah	8 (18b, 1x4)
U Khawaja b M Siraj	21 (65b, 2x4)
M Labuschagne lbw b M Siraj	70 (139b, 3x4)
S Smith c Pant b M Siraj	13 (41b, 1x4)
T Head c NK Reddy b Bumrah	1 (2b)
M Marsh c Pant b Bumrah	0 (4b)
A Carey b Bumrah	2 (7b)
P Cummins c Sharma b Jadeja	41 (90b, 4x4)
M Starc run out (NK Reddy/T Pant)	5 (13b)
N Lyon batting	41 (54b, 5x4)
S Boland batting	10 (65b, 1x4)
■ Extras (lb 9, nb 6, w 1)	16
■ Total 82 Ov (RR: 2.78)	228/9
■ FoW: 1-20 (Sam Konstas, 6.3 ov), 2-43 (Usman Khawaja, 18.5 ov), 3-80 (Steven Smith, 32.3 ov), 4-85 (Travis Head, 33.2 ov), 5-85 (Mitchell Marsh, 33.6 ov), 6-91 (Alex Carey, 35.6 ov), 7-148 (Marnus Labuschagne, 55.1 ov), 8-156 (Mitchell Starc, 58.1 ov), 9-173 (Pat Cummins, 64.1 ov).	
■ Bowling: Jasprit Bumrah 24-7-56-4, Akash Deep 17-4-53-0, Mohammed Siraj 22-4-66-3, Ravindra Jadeja 14-2-33-1, Nitish Kumar Reddy 1-0-4-0, Washington Sundar 4-0-7-0.	

NUMBER PLATE

231

The highest successfully-chased target at the MCG this century is Australia's 231, made on the Boxing Day Test against England in 2013, showing India's uphill battle for the final day.

200 Jasprit Bumrah became the fastest Indian to reach 200 wickets, doing so in 44 matches (in 8,484 balls, the fourth-quickest ever). He is the only bowler to reach the mark at a sub-20 (19.56) average.

It is just a different planet, that Bumrah is playing on. It is so impressive to watch. We are running out of words to describe it. He is a world class performer, one of the best we have ever seen operating here at the MCG."

ADAM GILCHRIST (ON FOX SPORTS)

NITISH'S PARENTS SPEAK TO THE INDIAN EXPRESS

‘Maturity of a once mischievous boy stuns me’

MUTYALU REDDY

WHENEVER I speak of Nitish I get tears in my eyes. As a child, he was so mischievous and the Nitish we are seeing now is totally different. At times, we ourselves doubt if it is the same person. Nitish to me is a god-given child. After praying to lord Venkataramana he was born to us. For Nitish, 2024 has been a golden year.

I will describe to you an incident when we came to Australia to meet Nitish. I hugged him and told him you have brought us this far; I am feeling proud of you and this is enough. And he replied, 'Daddy, it is not over yet, I will show you more and more going forward'. And he showed it by scoring a 100 yesterday. I hugged him saying you have brought us this far. It is enough that I am happy. Within 24 hours, he scored a century. If you don't keep faith in a son like this, whom else should I trust?

We know who we are and where we come from. I come from a small town; no one knows my name if I leave my small region. But today in Australia, people are asking for selfies. I cannot explain how happy and proud I am. And when I saw Sunil Gavaskar the day after my son hit that hundred, I just couldn't control myself. I had to do proper namaskaram, touch his feet, and seek his blessings. Gavaskar is like the god of cricket. Be it Sachin Tendulkar or Gavaskar or MSK Prasad or Rahul Dravid everyone sees them like god. The moment I saw him it felt like I had seen god, so I asked for his blessings. I touched his feet and asked for the blessings; even if my son was here I would have asked him to touch his feet. When he used to



Nitish Kumar Reddy's family at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Express

hit a boundary, I used to clap and now today talking about my son, he had tears in his eyes! I broke down. After all, what is the name of the trophy? (Border Gavaskar Trophy) When you meet such legends and if you don't bend to touch their feet it will look like we are egoistic. Gavaskar sir said, "You have given a good boy to Indian cricket; he is playing well and has the stability to play in all the formats. And I want to see more 100s from him".

I have been often asked about my decision to quit my job and focus on Nitish's cricket. I have to thank my wife for it. I love sports and she likes education. I told her, 'Let's make our daughter a doctor and let Nitish play cricket'. It was during his U14 days I still had 23 years of

service left and I got transferred to Udaipur. Should I go or not, I was in a state of confusion as he had not played for the state at that point and the coaches said he was playing cricket well. Since that day when I resigned she used to take care of household chores; I would just wake up and go with my son to the ground and stay there the whole day even if I had food or not. Some days I used to be happy and some days I used to be sad. On the day he used to get 100 I was happy and on the day he went out for a duck I used to be sad. My wife is not emotional like me and used to lighten the mood with some comedy! If it had been someone else they would have complained that there are still 23 years of service left, how will our life

go on. Had she said that then, I would not have been able to do what I did. She just said all is fine, don't worry. We had to plan his diet, everything. If you just cook it and ask him to eat he will not eat. If you explain to him if you eat fish, calcium will increase and mutton will increase protein, and leafy vegetables will improve your eyesight... if you explain to him these reasons, even if it doesn't taste good, he will eat it. When he comes back from this series, my wife will cook his favourite meat dish - Mutton Gongura. I will also go to the shipyard and get fresh prawns for him. As his uncle, my wife's brother, just told you, Nitish was a naughty kid. When he would return from school with his uncle, he used to do naughty things like take a stone, hit the mango tree, and run away. The uncle was left to fight for him! Now I can't recognise that mischievous boy; his maturity is far beyond his years and still stuns me.

The change happened during COVID-19. Until that point, he had played U14, U16 casually. Those two years when he was at home is when he realised that 'my mother and father are going through these many hardships'. Those days even people who had money suffered but we suffered a little more. That is when he realised 'Dad is not doing any job, they are all dependent on me. I should play cricket and take my father to the same status as he was before. For everyone to respect us again, I have to play cricket well'. That was his mindset.

We used to wake him at 6 am, his mother used to wake up at 4 am to boil eggs, and prepare milk. Once Covid was over Nitish was fixated mentally and he used to wake me up! "Dad let's go to the ground, let's go to the gym".

‘He promised me he would make his father proud’

MANASA REDDY

NITISH USED to be very mischievous when younger but later realised, this is how much his parents are worrying about him. He is not someone who will say the same thing again and again. If he says once he will do it, he will prove it, do it.

He told me once that he would give his father his previous stature again. And as soon as I went into his room after this 100, do you know what was the first thing he asked me? "Are you happy now?" And I just replied, "Yes I am!".

I am a little more emotionally balanced than my husband! He wouldn't sleep if my son didn't score runs and this I am talking about from years ago back in the day. But the beauty is, he wouldn't sleep if Nitish score runs also - sleepless with happiness, sleepless being sad!

I would keep telling them that 'We should not take things seriously, we need to be balanced. That whatever is destined will happen at that time'. My husband is quite emotional, but I keep telling him no point in being so emotional, whatever god gives, it will come to us.

Nitish is very scared/respectful of his father, he will be all mischievous but once his father comes, he becomes very silent. This year he has spent very little time with us. He would say that he is coming for one week to rest at home and also tell me what

he wants to eat. Every night I keep thinking about the menu the next day and what I should cook for him. Within one or two days, he will get a call and has to leave, which is a bit disappointing.

I trust Nitish a lot. He is very dedicated and very determined. I remember telling him once, 'Look how your daddy used to be when we got married. And now how he is (totally dedicated to your game) now. Only you can do something about it. Just make sure that everyone looks at Daddy and he gets to feel that proud feeling again'. He promised me that he would do it and I am very happy.

We have struggled a lot financially. To make my daughter study medicine (She was studying medicine in Ukraine but post the war, she was one of the people airlifted by the Indian government and now she studies in Uzbekistan). Financially it was very difficult. Some people also cheated us financially. But we as a family were dedicated to our goals. We have planned a house for our son and also to fund our daughter's education in medicine; we have faced a lot of troubles but we didn't change. But all of that is because of the trust we had in Nitish. It is all God's blessing. Nitish also took it all seriously as he saw our hardships

Mutyalu Reddy, Nitish's father, and Manasa Reddy, his mother, spoke to Sriram Veera at the MCG (Translation by Tanishq Vadda)

BRIEFLY



Haryana Steelers win maiden PKL crown

Pune: The Haryana Steelers, who finished top of the table in the league stage during PKL Season 11, produced an out-standing display on the mat on Sunday evening, as they went onto clinch their maiden PKL crown, after they defeated the Patna Pirates, at the Shree Shiv Chhatrapati Sports Complex, Balewadi, Pune. With the Show Stopper Shadloui in full flow, the Haryana Steelers won the final with a scoreline of 32-23. For the Haryana Steelers, Shivam Patare scored 9 points, Mohammadreza Shadloui bagged 7 and Vinay added 6 more to the cause. **ENS**

Sen finishes third at inaugural King Cup

Shenzhen: India's Lakshya Sen delivered a dominant performance, outplaying Alex Lanier in straight games to finish third at the inaugural King Cup International Badminton Open on Sunday. The 23-year-old defeated Lanier 21-17 21-11. In the third place play-off, Lakshya started strong, taking a 6-1 lead, but Lanier fought back to level the score at 10-10, eventually gaining a one-point advantage at the interval. However, Lakshya regained control to move ahead 18-15 and grabbed three game points before sealing the opening game when Lanier went wide. After the break, Lakshya continued with the momentum and wrapped up the victory when Lanier sent a shot long. **PTI**

Chouksey clinches 3P women's national title

Bhopal: Ashi Chouksey overcame a strong field, that had the likes of Olympians Anjum Moudgil and Shriyanka Sadangi, to clinch her maiden national title in the 50m rifle 3-positions event here on Sunday. Ashi shot a superb 466.7, 3.1 points clear of two-time Olympian Anjum during the 67th National Shooting Championship. Sakshi Sunil Padekar won the bronze with an effort of 451.3. **PTI**

Nottingham Forest rise to 2nd in EPL

Liverpool: Goals from Chris Wood and Morgan Gibbs-White gave Nottingham Forest a 2-0 win over Everton on Sunday to move up to the heady heights of second in the Premier League after another superb performance away from home. The win gives Forest, who battled relegation for much of last season, 37 points after 19 games. They are five behind leaders Liverpool, who have two games in hand. **REUTERS**



MY DIARY 2024

As a hectic year of sports gallops to the finish line, India's top athletes pause and reflect; tell the stories of their podium highs, battered bodies and shattered dreams. In a special series, some look back with fondness, a few others with regrets. But all with the hope – and wish – of a better 2025

KULDEEP YADAV, CRICKETER

Everyone asks me, ‘Now that you have won World Cup, when are you marrying?’

Kuldeep, who picked 10 wickets in five matches in India's T20 World Cup triumph, relives the campaign and the 'madness' that followed

KULDEEP YADAV

WE HAVE a tradition of sorts in the dressing room that we follow during the first team meeting before a major tournament where every member of the squad has to give a speech. We followed that routine at the T20 World Cup as well.

When my turn came, I got emotional. The disappointment of losing in the final of the ODI World Cup in 2023 hadn't subsided and I told my teammates that I hoped that this time, we would return home with the trophy. It was a sentiment many in the room shared.

For many outside our close circle, we might not have been favourites to win the T20 World Cup. We were aware that people were saying that India won't win, citing our previous record. But within the group, we were desperate to go all the way because the defeat in the 2023 World Cup final against Australia still hurt.

Heading into the T20 World Cup, we wanted to rectify that and I was confident we could. In fact, I remember that on the eve of the final against South Africa, I was seated in the dressing room and imagined that the World Cup trophy was next to me. I even told this to some of my teammates. And guess what, it happened the next day!

Before the final, everyone in the team was relaxed. We'd had a good run until that point — we had reached the decider by beating the likes of Australia and England. So, confidence was high and no one was over-thinking. We had a very normal practice session on the morning of the game.

It was a great final but when, at a crucial juncture, when Hardik Pandya got Heinrich Klaasen's wicket and when we got Marco Jansen, I knew we were closer to the title as it was difficult to score 20 runs in 12 balls. South Africa didn't have batsmen left and when Suryakumar Yadav took 'that' stunning catch to dismiss David Miller, we knew the Cup was coming home.

We had a long night of celebration after the win. Rohit bhai was screaming at everyone to come down and ordered that no one would leave the party. Everyone around me had smiling faces, enjoying themselves to their fullest.



Kuldeep Yadav (R) with Rohit Sharma at the open-top bus parade in Marine Drive after India's T20 World Cup victory. *File*

Be it Rahul (Dravid) sir, Jay (Shah) bhai... no one was allowed to leave the room as Rohit bhai told us that such nights do not come often in a player's life.

The magnitude of our achievement didn't sink in straight away because when we reached the team hotel, it was dead silent. A cyclone was about to hit Barbados, which delayed our departure and we could leave only when a special flight was arranged.

The flight to Delhi was 16 hours long. I spent a lot of time replying to the 800 or so WhatsApp messages that I'd received, hoping that my 'thanks' would be delivered when we touched down in Delhi.

Upon reaching India, we went to meet

Prime Minister Narendra Modiji and later, we flew to Mumbai where we were greeted by sheer madness.

Only one member from our squad had been a part of such a bus ride before — it was Rohit bhai, back in 2007. Our parade was shorter than the one back then but I had never seen such a big crowd at one place before. We are used to seeing huge crowds at the stadiums but this was on another level.

On a normal day, the ride from Nariman Point to Wankhede — a mere 500 metres — takes approximately five minutes. That day, it took us more than three hours. I remember the line Mahi bhai once said, "Mumbai doesn't stop for anyone." Well,

that day, the city stopped for us.

People blocked the roads and climbed on trees. It was special, I still have videos from that day. Wherever we saw, people were cheering for us; going mad, screaming and dancing. It was then each of us realised we had done something special.

There's no greater joy than to be a part of a World Cup-winning team and it was a moment when it dawned upon us that stats don't matter when you represent your country; winning trophies does.

Years later, when someone searches my name on the web, it will always show that I was a part of the team that won the ICC T20 World Cup. Looking back, it looks as if

LOOKING FORWARD

REDEMPTION YEAR

2024 was a mixed year for Kuldeep Yadav. After a stellar show in the Test series against England, because of team balance, he featured only in 5 matches at the T20 World Cup. And more importantly missed out on home Tests against Bangladesh and New Zealand before missing the Australia tour. Now with R Ashwin retiring and Ravindra Jadeja too in the November of his career, Kuldeep has the opportunity to take over the mantle. Practising a tough art, he has the guile and variations to trouble batsmen across all conditions and as India enters a transition period, the left-arm wrist-spinner will have a huge role to play. He now seems ready to take India's proud spin legacy forward.

KEY DATES: ICC Champions Trophy Feb 19-Mar 9.

THE MOMENT

THERE'S NO greater joy than to be a part of a World Cup-winning team and it was a moment when it dawned upon us that stats don't matter when you represent your country; winning trophies does. Years later, when someone searches my name on the web, it will always show that I was a part of the team that won the ICC T20 World Cup.

we achieved it easily but trust me, winning a Trophy is never easy. Remember Ahmedabad 2023?

When I returned to Kanpur, my hometown, the streets there too were crowded. Thousands gathered to welcome me and there were hundreds more waiting at home. I remember meeting people till 1 in the night.

There were some bizarre moments too. Everyone kept asking me, "Now that you have won the World Cup, when are you getting married?" To that, I had no answer! But a photographer friend made an album that captured the entire World Cup journey. It has a special place at home.

AS TOLD TO DEVENDRA PANDEY

Indians shine in Bengal Tigers' thrilling win

VINAYAKK MOHANARANGAN
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THE OPENING night of the men's Hockey India League saw a 2-2 draw in regulation time where all four goals were scored by overseas players. But in Match 2 on Sunday, the Indian internationals took centerstage for Shrachi Rarh Bengal Tigers in a thrilling 3-2 win against Hyderabad Toofans at the Birsa Munda Hockey Stadium in Rourkela.

Abhishek, the 2nd most expensive player signed up in the auction, wasn't on the scoresheet but he had a significant hand in all three goals for the Tigers. Jugraj Singh (9'), Sukhjeet Singh (20') and Affan Yousuf (36') were on target for the Bengal franchise, who raced to a 3-0 lead. But Toofans fought back impressively, thanks to goals from Tim Brand (41') and Arthur de Sloover (59'). A missed penalty stroke earlier in the match by Maico Casella, thanks to a stunning save by Jamie Carr for the Tigers in goal, ultimately proved costly for the Hyderabad franchise.

After a patient start by Toofans, the Tigers started to gain momentum in the opening quarter, with their aerial passes posing a constant threat. Sam Lane won a penalty corner from one such move. Receiving a strong injection from Abhishek, Jugraj became the first Indian scorer of the season with a rocket of a drag flick that thundered into the roof of the net.

From there on the Tigers dictated proceedings as Toofans struggled to get a foothold in the second quarter. They did get a couple of PCs, but their high-profile signing Gonzalo Peillat couldn't convert either.

Tigers then extended their lead through a stunning field goal. Abhishek was sharp in the build-up down the middle, then Sebastian Dockier did well down the right byline to find a pass into the circle where



Jugraj Singh (C) was on target for Shrachi Rarh Bengal Tigers on Sunday, scoring their opening goal in the ninth minute in Rourkela. *HIL*

Abhishek had continued his run and his cutback was then fired in by Sukhjeet. Toofans had a good chance to halve the deficit before half time and that is when Carr saved Casella's stroke.

At the interval, Toofans head coach Pasha Gademan admitted that they were allowing Tigers to come at their defence a little too easily in the first half and hoped to convert the chances that were being created. But it was the Tigers who struck first in Q3.

Affan, who played his last match for the Indian men's team at the 2017 Sultan Azlan Shah Cup, had a moment to savour. The instigator was Abhishek once again. From a deeper midfield position, he won the ball back and played a quick pass down the

middle to Affan who found a nice pocket of space, drove into the circle, and fired home a powerful forehand shot.

But Toofans kept fighting. Rohit Singh Irengbam, all of 17, set up Tim Brand with a fine inside-out pass into the danger area from the left and the Australian tapped it in. With a minute left in the match, De Sloover scored off a deflection from Peillat's effort on goal and it made for a nerve-racking finish. Then with seconds left, there was more drama. Toofans thought they won another PC but the referees ruled that the clock had wound down, much to the dismay of the Hyderabad players.

While the Tigers did end up finding themselves under pressure, their captain

A missed penalty stroke earlier in the match by Maico Casella, thanks to a stunning save by Jamie Carr for the Tigers in goal, proved costly in the end result for the Hyderabad franchise

Rupinder Pal Singh had a fine match in defence, even though he wasn't involved in the penalty corner situations. The Tokyo Olympics bronze medalist, who has since retired from international hockey, stood tall in critical comments, coming up with crucial defensive interceptions.

Soorma clinch shootout bonus

The second match on Sunday turned out to be a rather cagey affair. Despite featuring quite a few bonafide superstar goalscorers of the international game, Soorma Hockey Club and Tamil Nadu Dragons were unable to break the deadlock for three quarters. When the opening goal eventually came, it was a messy one. Both teams were repeatedly looking for penalty corners, given the quality of flickers they had. In the final quarter, Jip Janssen's shot on goal was saved initially but Nathan Ephraums somehow squeezed the ball past the goal line.

Soorma's equaliser too came off a penalty corner situation as Gurjant Singh lofted in a rebound. The match finished 1-1 in regulation time, then Belgian legend Vincent Vanasch ensured Soorma picked up the bonus point after the shootout. While Harmanpreet Singh couldn't quite find his radar from PCs, he produced a moment of magic in the shootout with a 360-degree dummy to open the scoring.

Koneru Humpy becomes World Rapid chess champion

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
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A WOMEN'S World rapid chess champion in 2019, Koneru Humpy had contemplated retiring before she went on to pick the 2024 title at Wall Street in New York on Saturday. The 37-year-old logged 8.5 out of 11 points, and joined China's Ju Wenjun as only two women to clinch the title more than once.

Humpy told PTI it had been a tough leap. "Since start of the year, I didn't do well in any tournament placing last in two. I was in a low state, and wondered if I deserved to continue playing or it was time to retire," she said.

She played with black and said the title was nowhere on her mind, though she was prepared to fight till the end. "After the first round loss, I was nowhere thinking about the title, but things turned out well... especially winning four games in a row yesterday," she said. The mother of one, 7, said she had been sleep-starved posing troubles.

"Yeah, off the board, it was difficult because of the time difference. I was lacking sleep. Literally, I haven't slept properly since coming here. So, it wasn't easy to play (without enough rest)," she added.

The chess mom added, "I want to thank my parents for their tremendous support and my husband. It's not easy to be a professional in India after having a marriage and a kid. But he supported me a lot, and my parents took care of my daughter when I traveled. All these things helped me achieve this."

Before the final round, seven different players were tied for the top spot: China's Ju Wenjun and Tan Zhongyi, India's Koneru Humpy and Harika Dronavalli, Russian GM



This is Koneru Humpy's second Rapid World Championship title. *FIDE*

Kateryna Lagno, Uzbekistan's Afruza Khamdamova and Indonesia's Irine Kharisma Sukandar.

In Round 11, Humpy was paired to take on Irine and with black pieces, the Indian managed to put the Indonesian under pressure and prevailed in sensational style on what seemed to be a drawn end-game. Wenjun ended up drawing her match against Bibisara Assaubayeva.

Harika and Tan, both in contention for the title, also drew their match. In another clash of contenders Khamdamova and Lagno also played out a draw. This combination of results gave Humpy the outright win when tiebreakers loomed to decide the champion. 2024 has already been a sensational year in chess for India and Humpy added to the list of achievements by being crowned the World Rapid Champion in New York.

"In my career, whenever I'm on the lower side, thinking I'm dropping off, some miracle happens, and I come back. That gives me the motivation to compete further," Humpy told FIDE.