

**Sexism in sports**  
 Actor Mandira Bedi opens up about the struggles she faced as a lady cricket presenter  
 LEISURE | P2

**PLA slams Pentagon**  
 The Chinese military has denounced a recent Pentagon report alleging corruption in denting PLA's modernisation  
 INTERNATIONAL | P10

**Record IPO frenzy**  
 Fundraising via IPOs in India hits another landmark as companies raise a record ₹1.6 lakh crore in 2024  
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**First-ever winners**  
 India beat Bangladesh by 41 runs to become first-ever winners of the inaugural U19 Women's Asia Cup  
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## Collectors asked to assess crop damage

**Bhubaneswar, Dec 22:** The Mohan Charan Majhi-led state government has directed the Collectors of districts affected due to the recent unseasonal rainfall to carry out proper assessment of the damages to crops, Revenue and Disaster Management Minister Suresh Pujari said Sunday.

Speaking to mediapersons, Revenue Minister Pujari said, "The Collectors have been instructed to carry out the proper assessment of crop loss due to the unseasonal rainfall. The assessment couldn't be carried out properly due to rainfall which continued till yesterday."

"The revenue officials- Tehsildars, Revenue Inspectors, Amins- from the unaffected areas have also been roped in to do assessment of the loss in the affected areas of the state. The assessment will be conducted accurately after the rain subsides," Pujari said.

Pujari assured the farmers that the state government will provide adequate compensation for the crop loss and also extend help for the sale of the remaining crops. The Revenue Minister stated that he would personally visit the affected

### UNSEASONAL RAINFALL



areas, if needed.

Meanwhile, the state government has urged the farmers who have insured their Kharif crops under Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (Kharif -2024) to report about the crop loss due to the unseasonal rainfall to avail the insurance compensation.

As per a press statement of the state government, the harvested crops of farmers in many coastal and interior districts - Angul, Balasore, Bhadrak, Boudh, Cuttack, Dhenkanal, Deogarh, Gajapati, Ganjam, Jagatsinghpur, Jajpur, Kandhamal, Kendrapara, Keonjhar,

Khurda, Koraput, Mayurbhanj, Nabarangpur, Nayagarh, Puri and Rayagada, would have been damaged due to the unseasonal rainfall over the last two days.

"About 15 lakh farmers from these districts have been enrolled under the scheme. The farmers who have insured their Kharif crops under PMFBY (Kharif -2024) are required to report loss of their harvested crops for claiming insurance compensation," the statement read.

The farmers have been advised to upload the information on crop loss using "Krishi Rakshak" app within 72 hours of the crop loss or inform through the Help Line No. 14447.

The state government further said that the post-harvest loss is covered under PMFBY - Crop Insurance Scheme, if the crop loss has occurred in cut & spread condition or in small bundled condition within 14 days of harvest.

The insurance compensation will be paid to the farmers after a joint survey of the affected fields by the officials of implementing insurance companies and government officers. The compensation will be paid to insured farmers on the entire sum insured amount based on the loss.



**RUBBLE TROUBLE:** Rescue operation continues after a multi-storey building collapsed Saturday evening, at Sohana village in Punjab's Mohali district, Sunday. At least two people were killed in the incident while several others are feared trapped under the debris, according to officials. PTI PHOTO

### IRREGULAR by MANJUL



So what if you couldn't see the culprit's number plate. You can always name RaGa

## India, Kuwait boost ties to strategic partnership

### PM MODI RECEIVES KUWAIT'S TOP HONOUR

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



Kuwait Sunday also conferred its highest honour - 'The Order of Mubarak Al-Kabeer' - on PM Modi for his role in strengthening the good relations between the two countries. The 'Order of Mubarak Al-Kabeer' is a knighthood or

der of Kuwait.

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

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

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

Modi arrived here Saturday on a two-day trip - the first to this Gulf nation by an Indian prime minister in 43 years. The last Indian prime minister to visit Kuwait was Indira Gandhi in 1981.

## Forest staffer faces villagers' ire as tusker tramples man to death

### POST NEWS NETWORK

**Rourkela, Dec 22:** A Forest staff member was thrashed by angry villagers following the death of a man in an elephant attack at Rugudi Sahi in Jakeikela panchayat under Bonai Forest Division, Sunday.

The victim, 40-year-old Dharanidhar Patra, was trampled by a tusker while he was sweeping in front of his house early Sunday morning.

This marks the fourth fatality in the region within a fortnight. Similar incidents have occurred recently, claiming the lives of three more people, including a minor, in elephant



attacks in nearby areas.

Tension erupted at the Bonai Hospital when Patra was declared dead. His nephew, Rohit Patra, was the first to find his uncle's body. "Around 4am, I heard the elephant's trumpet. I called my uncle, but his phone went unanswered, so I went outside. Near the crop

field, I saw the elephant standing about 200 metres away, and my uncle's body was lying near it," he said. Patra's niece added that the elephant had trampled her uncle on his chest and neck. "When the villagers tried to take him to the hospital, the elephant attempted to attack them. However, they managed to drive it away," she said.

In the midst of the unrest, one forest staff member was attacked and beaten by the villagers. They also staged a protest outside the residence of the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), demanding action to address the elephant menace and compensation for the victim's family.

### SHORT TAKES

#### New 'darshan' system in Srimandir from Jan 1

**Bhubaneswar:** The state government is going to introduce a new system in Srimandir from January 1 to provide devotees better facilities to have 'darshan' of the sibling deities, Law Minister Prithviraj Harichandan said Sunday. "Required arrangements are being made. The necessary work will be completed by December 27 or 28. For two days, December 30 and 31, the new system will be introduced on an experimental basis," Harichandan said, adding that from January 1, the new darshan arrangements will be fully implemented. Special arrangements are also being made for women, children, differently abled persons, and senior individuals visiting the temple, as part of the move, the minister said. P3

## Smuggler caught from theatre during 'Pushpa 2' show

### PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Nagpur, Dec 22:** Moviegoers watching a late-night show of 'Pushpa 2' at a multiplex in Maharashtra's Nagpur witnessed a real-life action scene as police stormed the cinema hall and arrested a man wanted in murder and drug cases.

The dramatic arrest of Vishal Meshram shortly after midnight Thursday left the packed audience stunned, but police assured them that they could continue enjoying the movie as they nabbed the accused and took him away.

Meshram was on the run for

### FROM REEL TO REAL



10 months and was eventually tracked down after police learnt about his interest in

The gangster had 27 cases against him, including two of murder and drug trafficking, and was known for his violent tendencies, even attacking police in the past, he said.

Authorities had been pursuing him relentlessly, using cyber surveillance and tracking his movements in a new sports utility vehicle (SUV), the official said.

After tracking him Thursday, police deflated the vehicle's tyres outside the cinema hall, located in central part of the city, to prevent his escape, he said.

When police personnel en-

tered the hall during the movie's climax, Meshram was engrossed in the film.

The police surrounded him and made the arrest swiftly, giving him no chance to resist, the official said.

Meshram is currently lodged in the Nagpur Central Jail and will soon be transferred to a prison in Nashik, the police said.

'Pushpa 2 The Rule', the blockbuster movie starring Allu Arjun, is a sequel to 2021's Telugu film 'Pushpa The Rise'. It was released December 5 with dubbed versions in Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali and Malayalam.

#### Rahul summoned by Bareilly court

**Bareilly (UP):** A court here has summoned Congress MP and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi to appear before it January 7 for his remarks related to the Economic Survey during the Lok Sabha sittings. District and Sessions Judge Sudhir Kumar Saturday issued notice to Gandhi. The summons is related to a plea filed by Pankaj Pathak, Mandal president of the All India Hindu Mahasangh outfit. Gupta alleged that Gandhi tried to provoke the financially weaker sections with his statements which were aimed at creating class hatred for political gain.

# leisure



## BLAKE ACCUSES BALDONI OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Hollywood actor Blake Lively has levelled sexual harassment accusations against her *It Ends With Us* co-star and director Justin Baldoni and alleged that there were coordinated PR efforts to "destroy" her reputation in a legal complaint.

## ANGELINA JOLIE'S RECENT RED CARPET LOOKS SPARK CONCERN

Angelina Jolie's recent red carpet looks for her *Maria Callas* biopic has sparked concerns about her health on social media. Fans are attempting to emulate her noticeably thin frame and prominent veins, resorting to dangerous dieting tips like dehydration and starvation.



### FORTUNE FORECAST



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**ARIES**  
Without apparent reason you may go into your shell today. No doubt you will acknowledge the contribution of others, but Ganesha says you have to do more than that; you will have to share your knowledge with your peers.

**TAURUS**  
Ganesha sees you being very planned and focuses, poised and practical in handling your affairs today. You'll be able to take identify the best strategy, course of action that the situations demand. This day you would be performing like a specialist, a real expert and will not fail to accomplish whatever you have set out to do.

**GEMINI**  
You are on your way to falling in love. Your parents or children are likely to fetch you substantial gains, financially or otherwise. You may want to make a few changes at work, probably a new business strategy.

**CANCER**  
You will not only make plans, but will also act on them. So you can save money, time and energy for creative pursuits. The quality of your work and accomplishments will be high. Your creativity plays a key role in your accomplishments in career or business.

**LEO**  
You will need to work hard to achieve your goals today. Those who are serious about their work will be easily able to tide over the day. You need to be cautious today. Not only at work, but even in personal relationships, you need to be on guard. You need to maintain a balance between home and at work, says Ganesha.

**VIRGO**  
Issues regarding religious beliefs and spirituality will surface today. Pursue your goals single-mindedly to attain success in the field of your choice, and exploit your abilities and talents to the hilt, advises Ganesha. You will be more logical and calculative, rather than emotional, in matters of your relationships.

**LIBRA**  
Ganesha says that today in your office you should be very careful in your work. It is likely that your superiors will not be happy about your work or your ability today. Those of you who are businessmen should try and delay sending off tenders today.

**SCORPIO**  
At work, you would want to change the perspective with which people see you. Your colleagues recognise you as the emerging alpha-lion. Ideas and opinions will impress your bosses. But keep a level head and learn where to stop, even when winning, counsels Ganesha.

**SAGITTARIUS**  
Lengthy business meetings keep you occupied almost throughout the day. You may also do some value addition to your work by taking co-workers' suggestions and inputs, says Ganesha. Implementation of these inputs will prove highly beneficial in the long run.

**CAPRICORN**  
The day will be of paramount significance as you are likely to meet someone who will be associated with you for life, says Ganesha. Also, relationships and relatives will keep you busy for major part of the day. You may not find it interesting, but you will not have any options either. A visit to holy places for some peace of mind is also likely.

**AQUARIUS**  
The day begins on high note. You work hard, put your best foot forward and at the end get the final output as per your requirements. Romantic and beautiful, the setting Sun will bring the softer side of your personality to the fore as you will spend the evening with your sweetheart, predicts Ganesha.

**PISCES**  
For you, today may all be work and no play, says Ganesha. This, however, will not stop you from putting in extra efforts to finish your pending projects and to meet your deadlines. But then who else but a Pisces is known to handle the pain nonchalantly without bemoaning the lack of pleasure?

## Are Triptii, Sam vacationing together?

**MUMBAI:** *Animal* star Triptii Dimri, who was recently seen in *Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3*, is enjoying the end of the year in Cotswolds in south central England.

However, the actress is not alone. She is in the company of her rumoured boyfriend Sam Merchant.

Triptii recently shared a series of Instagram stories showcasing her holiday spirit. In one snap, she is seen feeding goats, while another features her in a cozy attire enjoying hot chocolate. The third picture, likely taken by her rumoured beau Sam, captures her at a restaurant.

Sam Merchant also shared similar moments on his Instagram stories, clearly



indicating that they were enjoying the outing together. Despite the shared moments, neither has officially commented on their relationship status.

On the work front, Triptii Dimri was last seen in *Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3* with Kartik Aaryan, Vidya Balan and Madhuri Dixit. She will next appear in *Dhadak 2* with Siddhant Chaturvedi. Triptii also has Vishal Bharadwaj's *Arjun Us-tara* in the line-up. She will share screen space with Shahid Kapoor in the movie. IANS

## Manisha voices support for local art

**MUMBAI:** Actress Manisha Koirala, who was recently seen in the period drama streaming series *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar*, is voicing her support for everything local. The actress recently visited her homeland, and appreciated the local culture, food and craftsmanship. The actress took to her Instagram Sunday, and shared an array of pictures from her visit to Nepal. The actress was seen dressed in winter wear, and also attended an event where she took to the mic. She also penned a long note in the caption, as she wrote, "Yesterday was truly an inspiring day! I attended an incredible exhibition showcasing local entrepreneurs who are promoting handmade products, using local fabrics like Dhaka, creating unique jewelry, and preparing healthy, homemade food right from their kitchens. It was heartwarming to see a community so dedicated to preserving tradition and supporting sustainable, local practices". She further mentioned, "What made the experience even more special was meeting the young and dynamic Deputy Mayor of Budhanilkantha. Listening to her speak so eloquently about why it's every citizen's duty to promote local goods was truly motivating. Her passion for community development and supporting local talent was contagious! Here's to celebrating and supporting those who work tirelessly to uplift our heritage and make a difference. #SupportLocal #Sustainability #HandmadeWithLove #Inspiration". IANS



## MANDIRA talks about sexism in sports

**MUMBAI:** Mandira Bedi started her career as an actor in the 1990s. She was also appointed as a presenter during the cricket World Cup in 2003. However, her journey was not easy, at least for the first few days. Mandira recently opened up about the challenges she faced as a lady cricket presenter.

In an interview, Mandira revealed that she used to feel disrespected by the cricket legends, she said, "One week went by with absolute hesitation, fumbles and mistakes. At the end of every show, I would put my head down and cry. The legends on either sides of me, I would ask them questions and they just stared at me.

They turned to the camera and answered whatever the hell they wanted to answer, nothing connected to my question because my question was probably not relevant or important enough for them. It was very unnerving. I felt disrespected".

However, things changed after the channel's intervention. "At the end of the first week, there was an intervention and the channel called me and said, 'We have chosen you amongst a thousand women, we believe you belong there. You are not an analyst, expert or a commentator, you are a presenter. Go out there and have fun, show them your personality'. That intervention was really helpful, it was a turning point for me. I flipped a switch that day," she expressed. AGENCIES



## When Ameen Sayani explained the reason behind 'punch style'

**MUMBAI:** Ameen Sayani, the iconic radio personality, had once revealed how the "punch style" of rendering the voice on radio became a norm. An old video of the late radio legend has surfaced on the Internet, and it shows him explaining that the "dhoom, dhadaka" style of radio announcements and programs was born out of necessity.

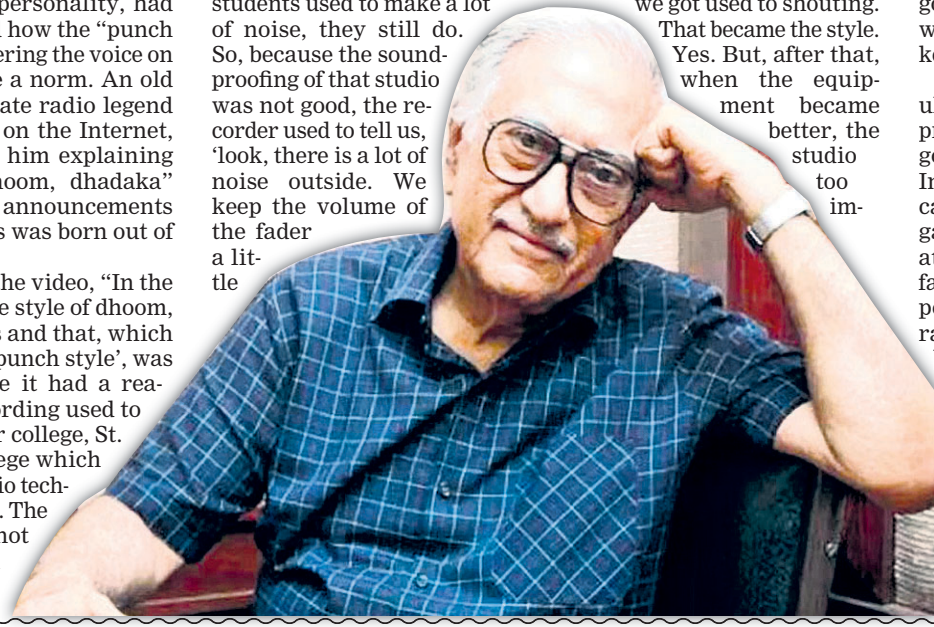
He said in the video, "In the beginning, the style of dhoom, dhadaka, this and that, which is called the 'punch style', was there because it had a reason. Our recording used to happen in our college, St. Xavier's College which also had a radio technical institute. The studio was not soundproofed properly".

In college obviously all of the students used to make a lot of noise, they still do. So, because the soundproofing of that studio was not good, the recorder used to tell us, 'look, there is a lot of noise outside. We keep the volume of the fader a little

less. You shout'. So, in this way, we got used to shouting. That became the style. Yes. But, after that, when the equipment became better, the studio too im-

proved. The tape was good, the transmission was good, so the sound kept changing", he added.

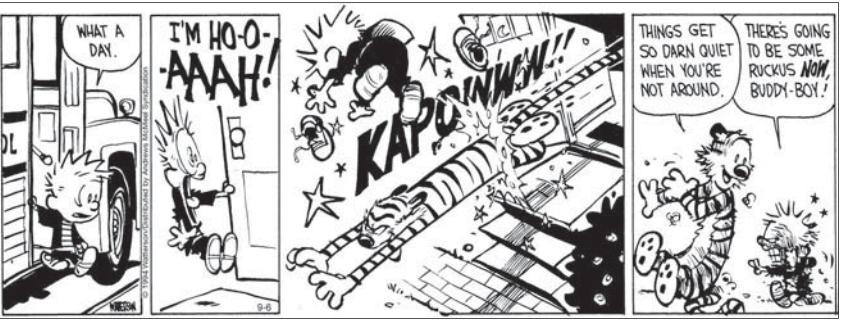
Ameen achieved huge popularity through his radio program *Geetmala* which has gone down as a milestone in India's radio landscape. His captivating voice and engaging style spelled a cast at the listeners cultivating fans across the country, and popularised the medium of radio which got a further boost in early 2000s as the dotcom bubble burst. His signature way of addressing listeners as "Behno aur Bhaiyo" (sisters and brothers) became instantly recognisable and widely imitated. He passed away at the age of 91 due to cardiac failure. IANS



### PEANUTS



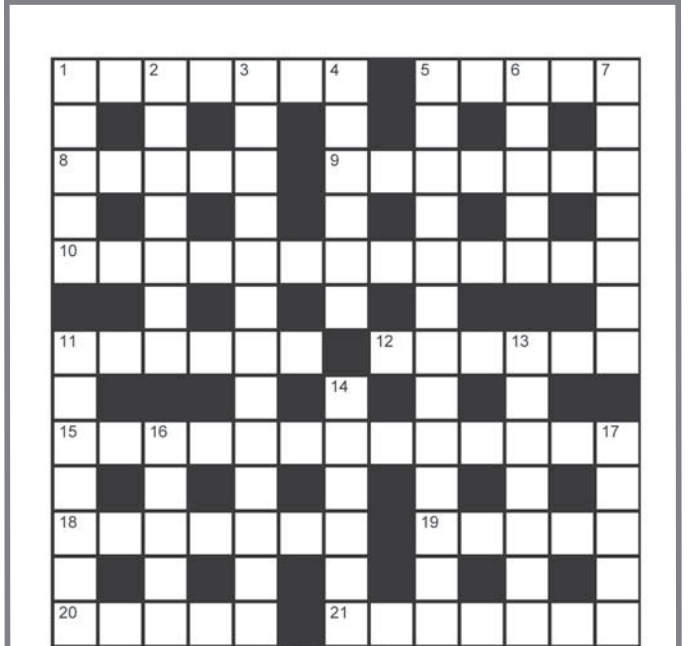
### CALVIN AND HOBBS



### BREVITY



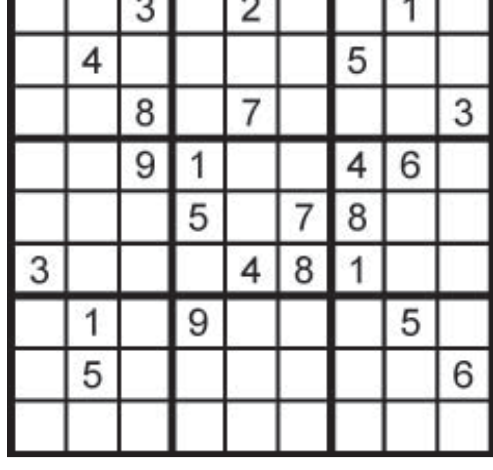
### FUN POST CROSSWORD



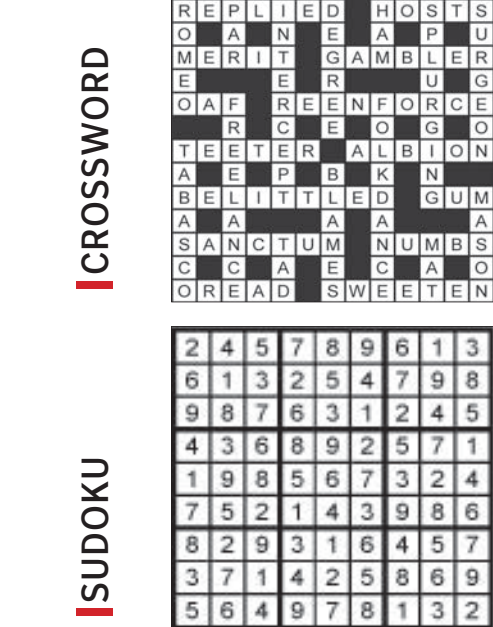
- Across**
- 1 Books are his thing
  - 5 No-frills
  - 8 Foxy-faced primate
  - 9 Jean-Baptiste Poquelin's pen name
  - 10 Store's interior decorator?
  - 11 Certain print
  - 12 Old Testament hunter
  - 15 Words fail me!
  - 18 Specific vocabulary
  - 19 Vigilant
  - 20 Supporter of the arts?
  - 21 Vessel turners
- Down**
- 1 Let happen
  - 2 Dominican Republic's
  - 3 Brush-footed butterfly
  - 4 Cure
  - 5 Message centre (8,5)
  - 6 Lawn starters
  - 7 Gave the home team a rousing welcome
  - 11 Cooking utensil
  - 13 Chest protector (3,4)
  - 14 Caldera
  - 16 Troy ounce parts
  - 17 Foil relatives

### SUDOKU

To solve the Sudoku puzzle, fill in the boxes in such a manner that every row, column and 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9, without repeating any.



### SOLUTIONS



CHECK FOR SOLUTIONS OF THE PUZZLES TOMORROW

# downtown

## New 'darshan' system trial run Dec 30 & 31

Devotees to benefit from enhanced darshan facilities at Srimandir starting January 1, with special provisions for women, children, seniors and differently-abled visitors



PNN & AGENCIES

**Bhubaneswar, Dec 22:** Experimental run for the proposed new 'darshan' system at the Srimandir in Puri will start December 30 and will continue till the next day, to ensure that the system is introduced seamlessly from January 1.

The state government is going to introduce a new system in Puri Srimandir to provide devotees better facilities to have 'darshan' of the deities, Law Minister Prithviraj Harichandan said Sunday.

Speaking to mediapersons here, Harichandan said the government is taking steps to introduce the new system for public 'darshan' in the 12th century shrine from January 1.

**As per the new arrangements, devotees will enter the shrine through the existing gate (Satapahacha) while exit will be made through two different gates (Ghanti and Garada)**

"Required arrangements are being made. The necessary work will be completed by December 27 or 28. For two days, December 30 and 31, the new system will be introduced on an experimental basis," he said,

adding that from January 1, the new darshan arrangements will be fully implemented.

Special arrangements are also being made for women, children, differently-abled persons, and senior individuals visiting the temple, as part of the move, the minister said.

As per the new arrangements, devotees will enter the shrine through the existing gate (Satapahacha) while exit will be made through two different gates (Ghanti and Garada).

Harichandan said he and Shree Jagannath Temple Administration (SJTA) chief administrator Arabinda Padhee visited the temple Saturday and reviewed the work being carried out for the introduction of the new facility in the temple.

## Ex-MLA Bijaya Mohanty passes away at 60

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Bhubaneswar, Dec 22:** Former MLA Bijaya Kumar Mohanty died here Sunday. He was 60.

Mohanty, a two-time BJD MLA from Bhubaneswar-Central constituency, was admitted to Capital Hospital after he fell unconscious at a guest house. He had been keeping unwell for the last few weeks.

Upon his arrival at the hospital, medical tests were conducted and he was declared dead, its deputy superintendent Dhananjaya Das said.

Later, Mohanty's body was brought to the Assembly premises and the BJD party office, where MLAs and party leaders paid their last respects.

Mohanty was elected to the Assembly for the first time in 2009 on a BJD ticket from the Bhubaneswar-Central constituency and re-elected in 2014.

Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi expressed his grief over Mohanty's demise and prayed for eternal peace of the departed soul.

BJD president Naveen Patnaik said he was saddened to learn about the death of Mohanty. Mohanty's contributions to the welfare of people will always be remembered, Patnaik wrote on X.

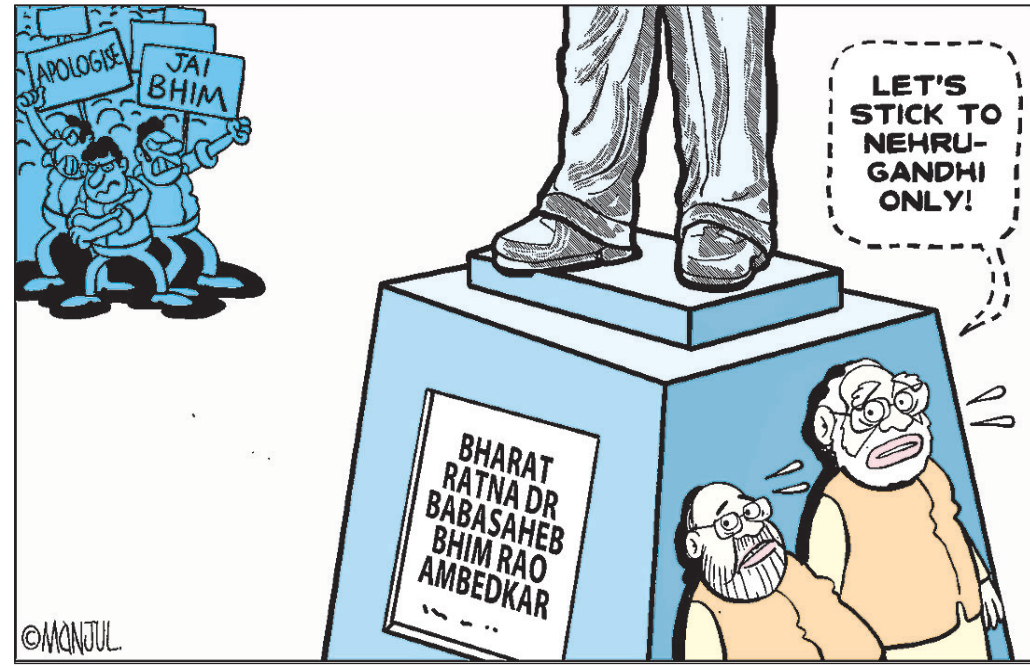


## SCIENTIFIC TEMPER

Students showcase their models during an exhibition-cum-competition 'Mathmagic Fest- 2024' organised by Regional Science Centre, Bhubaneswar in collaboration with Smart Vision Learning System on the occasion of National Mathematics Day in Capital City, Sunday



## POLITICKLE by MANJUL



## Jatra troupe owner held for duping actress

POST NEWS NETWORK

**Bhubaneswar, Dec 22:** Lingaraj police Sunday arrested the owner of a Jatra troupe for allegedly swindling over ₹8.25 lakh from a woman on the pretext of making her his business partner. The accused has been identified as Amaresh Sahu, 45, who lives in Cuttack along with his family.

Complainant Manorama Dash, 28, also an actress in the same troupe, had accused the owner of distributing salaries of the artistes from her account, said Purna Chandra Nayak, IIC of Lingaraj police station.

Nayak said the complainant came across Amaresh and his theatre group 'Om Siva Shakti' in February 2024. Subsequent-



AMARESH SAHU

ly, she joined the troupe with a monthly payment of ₹80,000. However, in March, Manorama received a salary of ₹50,000, and was asked by Amaresh to be his partner in the group. Then the duo reached a consensus that Manorama would start bearing the financial expenses of the group. Soon, Manorama stopped taking her salary from the group.

Nayak said Manorama had also lent ₹3.53 lakh to Amaresh, owing to their cordial relations. Amaresh had promised to settle the loan within a few months.

In September first week, when Manorama met Amaresh to discuss about her profit share in the business, the latter snubbed her, and threatened to kill her if she raises this issue again. Later, several attempts by Manorama for settling the financial issues also went in vain. Finding no other option, she quit the group and lodged a police complaint against Amaresh, September 26.

Nayak said Amaresh has been booked under Sections 318 (4), 296, and 315 (2) of BNS, and was produced before a local court Sunday for remand.

## Min launches medicinal plantation drive in City

POST NEWS NETWORK

**Bhubaneswar, Dec 22:** Acknowledging the crucial role of trees in maintaining ecological balance and ensuring a disease-free society, Forest and Environment Minister Ganesh Ram Singh Khuntia initiated a medicinal tree plantation drive at his official residence here Sunday.

Speaking on the occasion, the minister highlighted the divine contribution of trees as nature's gift to humanity. He emphasised the importance of medicinal plants in primary and Ayurvedic healthcare, urging everyone to cultivate medicinal gardens in their home premises.

"This initiative will not only contribute to a cleaner and healthier environment but also provide essential primary medicines at home," the minister said. He encouraged citizens to actively participate in such eco-friendly initiatives to enhance environmental sustainability and community health.

## SIRS FOUNDER'S DAY 'ACADEMICS, SPORTS KEY TO STUDENTS' HOLISTIC DEVPT'



POST NEWS NETWORK

**Bhubaneswar, Dec 22:** Cuttack District Magistrate Dattatraya Bhausaheb Shinde emphasised the importance of integrating academics, sports, and arts for the holistic development of students during the 7th Annual Founder's Day (AFD) celebration of SAI International Residential School (SIRS) held December 19 and 20.

The two-day event began with Sports Day at the SAI International Stadium, where former cricketer Narendra Hirwani inaugurated the annual sports meet. The evening featured a captivating performance by students, including the Founder's English Play

and Chronicles of Harry Potter, which left the audience enthralled.

On the second day, Shinde attended the event as the chief guest and addressed the gathering. He encouraged students to integrate their studies with sports and arts, stating, "Education is the solution to all issues. It teaches you to distinguish between right and wrong." Shinde also recounted his collaborative efforts with the late founder-chairman Bijaya Kumar Sahoo in Ganjam to support underprivileged communities.

Shinde lauded SAI International Education Group chairperson Silpi Sahoo for continuing the inspirational legacy of the late founder-chairman. He praised the group's contributions to government schools through initiatives like the Odisha Adarsh Vidyalayas.

The day also included a felicitation ceremony to honour students excelling in academics and extracurricular activities. Additionally, an exhibition showcasing students' innovative projects and creative works was a highlight of the celebration.

## Tigress 'Zeenat' spotted in Purulia



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

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

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

It earlier crossed over to West Bengal from neighbouring

Jharkhand and roamed around in Jhargram and West Medinipur district, all parts of the forested 'Jangalmahal' belt.

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

"Whether you call her Zeenat or Jamuna, we have information about one tigress leaving Simlipal, en-

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

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

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

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

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

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SRI AUROBINDO

## Transparency Missing

One of the cornerstones of a functioning democracy is transparency as the people have every right to information on all matters that concern them. The electoral procedure is one such aspect of a democracy that needs to be sacrosanct and kept out of any sort of controversy. In this context, the Centre's tweaking of an election rule to prevent public inspection of certain electronic documents such as CCTV camera and webcasting footage as well as video recordings of candidates has snowballed into a row with the Opposition seeing it as a sinister attempt to compromise elections.

Following the recommendation of the Election Commission of India (ECI), the Law Ministry amended Rule 93(2)(a) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, on 21 December. This amendment limits the types of “papers” or documents that are available for public inspection. As per Rule 93, all election-related “papers” are generally open to public scrutiny, but the amendment adds the phrase “as specified in these rules” after “papers.”

However, this amendment runs counter to a recent ruling by the Punjab and Haryana High Court. In the *Mahmoud Pracha vs EC* case, the High Court directed the poll body to share all the documents related to the Haryana Assembly elections, including treating CCTV camera footage as permissible under Rule 93(2), with the petitioner. Mahmoud Pracha, an advocate, had filed a petition seeking the videography, CCTV camera footage, and copies of Forms 17-C Parts I and II related to the conduct of elections.

While both the ECI and the Law Ministry defended the move claiming that it will safeguard the misuse of CCTV camera footage of polling stations, the Congress sees it as yet another attempt to “erode the integrity of the electoral process,” and accused the poll body of “opacity and a pro-government attitude in its dealings.”

The Conduct of Election Rules has mention of various documents, including nomination forms, appointment of election agents, results, and election account statements. The Rules mention election materials. However, they do not explicitly mention electronic records in relation to these election documents. In a bid to remove this ambiguity, the Rules were amended, a poll panel official said, justifying the move. Election Commission officials also expressed concerns that the misuse of CCTV footage from polling booths could jeopardize voter confidentiality. They also claimed that such footage could be manipulated to create misleading narratives using artificial intelligence.

Earlier, the Parliament passed the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Bill, 2023. This legislation sought to govern the appointment and service conditions of the Chief Election Commissioner and the Election Commissioners. Notably, the Bill excluded the Chief Justice of India from the selection panel, which includes the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. This change had led to a huge backlash from the Opposition parties.

These developments come at a time when the independence and integrity of an autonomous institution such as the ECI are being questioned by several quarters, while there are allegations on the misuse of electronic voting machines (EVMs), with some parties even demanding a return to the ballot paper system of voting. No matter how imperfect our democracy is elections are still taken seriously by the people, notwithstanding the occasional cribbing by parties on the losing side. However, opaque rules, such as the latest one, are sure to erode the common man's faith in the electoral system.

### FOCUS ECONOMY

# BEYOND MONETARY POLICY

South Korea's remarkable transformation from one of the world's poorest countries to one of the richest is unparalleled in recent history. But while official data show robust growth and low unemployment, the South Korean economy remains beset by deep structural challenges that could have a profound impact on its future prosperity.



Soohyung Lee

EARLIER THIS YEAR, SOUTH KOREA'S CENTRAL BANK WORKED WITH GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES TO DEVISE MACROPRUDENTIAL MEASURES TO STABILISE THE COUNTRY'S HOUSING MARKET



As countries increasingly grapple with rising housing costs, declining birth rates, and slow wage growth, more central banks may expand their remit and address the structural challenges that societies face today

ratio, at nearly 27, tops that of New York and Tokyo.

The financial squeeze of high prices and low wages leaves many Koreans reluctant to have children – a trend that has accelerated over the past 20 years. In 2021, the country's fertility rate was 0.81, the lowest in the OECD, behind Spain (1.19), Italy (1.25), and Japan (1.30). This decline, coupled with rising life expectancy, means that South Korea's population is aging more rapidly than those of other developed countries.

Structural challenges such as a dearth of quality jobs, excessive spending on education, soaring housing prices, and an aging population are typically not the purview of central banks, which tend to focus on inflation and employment goals. But the BOK has increasingly channeled its resources toward addressing these problems, including by identifying potential policy responses and considering how to incorporate them into its operations.

In October, the BOK's Monetary Policy Board (of which I am a member) cut the benchmark interest rate for the first time since it be-

gan raising rates in August 2021, from 3.5% to 3.25%. The Board first considered a rate cut in August, as inflation showed clear signs of moderating, and the Korean won was stable relative to the US dollar. But a rapid increase in household debt and high housing prices raised concerns about financial stability, delaying the decision.

The housing market is a particularly thorny problem for monetary policymakers. Around 64% of Korean household assets are held in real estate, and only 36% are financial, whereas the ratio is typically the reverse in the United States and Japan. Moreover, many Koreans rent property through a system called *jeonse*, whereby tenants make a large upfront deposit, usually around 50% of the property's value, in lieu of monthly rent. Given the sums involved, renters often rely on bank lending, making them vulnerable to housing-related debt, in contrast to countries like the US, where only homeowners take on such risk. Thus, there is a strong correlation in South Korea between financial-market liquidity, rising housing prices, and higher household

debt. Earlier this year, the housing market was heating up, particularly in Seoul's high-end residential areas. At the same time, government programmes that provided subsidies and liquidity to the market, intended to make it easier for young families to find homes, began to fuel the spread of high housing prices to other parts of Seoul and surrounding areas. The BOK spotted these trends early and worked with relevant ministries to devise macroprudential measures that were implemented in September. Its interest-rate adjustment came only after signs that the housing market had stabilised and the growth of household debt had slowed.

The BOK's proactive measures were a challenge to the status quo, prompting resistance from some policymakers and experts. To increase transparency and confidence, the BOK is devoting more resources to engaging directly with the public and market participants. Establishing direct lines of communication will build trust in the BOK's actions, without which it cannot effectively fulfill its mandate.

As countries increasingly grapple with rising housing costs, declining birth rates, and slow wage growth, more central banks may expand their remit and address the structural challenges that societies face today. The BOK's approach shows that monetary policymakers can, and perhaps should, play a critical role in tackling these deeper issues to ensure greater economic resilience.

The writer, Professor of Economics and Data Analytics at Seoul National University, is a member of the Monetary Policy Board of the Bank of Korea.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

### WISDOM CORNER

“ Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They came through you but not from you and though they are with you yet they belong not to you

KAHLIL GIBRAN

“ On the mountains of truth you can never climb in vain: either you will reach a point higher up today, or you will be training your powers so that you will be able to climb higher tomorrow

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

“ The simplest principles become difficult of practice, when habits, formed in error, have been fixed by time, and the simplest truths hard to receive when prejudice has warped the mind

FRANCES WRIGHT

### THIS DAY IN HISTORY

1815: British author Jane Austen published her fourth novel, *Emma*, which centres on a precocious young woman whose misplaced confidence in her matchmaking abilities occasions several romantic misadventures.

1876: The first comprehensive constitution of the Ottoman Empire went into effect, giving the sultan full executive power.

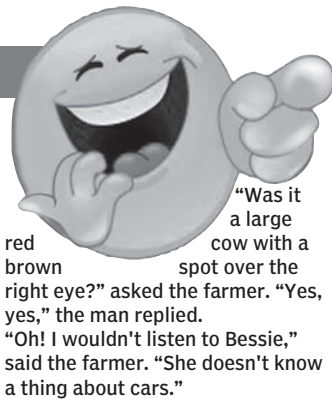
1941: Early in World War II, invading Japanese forces defeated U.S. troops at the Battle of Wake Island.

1975: Metric Conversion Act signed by U.S. President Gerald Ford. The act made the metric system the preferred system of weights and measures in the United States. Today, the metric system is predominantly only used by scientists and academics in the U.S. Common people tend to follow the customary units that were developed before American Independence. The U.S. is 1 of 3 countries in the world that do not use the metric system. Liberia and Myanmar are the other two.

1990: Slovenian referendum on independence from Yugoslavia. The Eastern European country had joined the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as a socialist republic state in 1945. Actual independence for the country did not occur until June of 1991, when the Slovenians rejected Yugoslavian interference in the form of a 10-day war that ended on July 7, 1991. A new constitution for the country came into force on December 23, 1991.

### LOL A TALKING COW

A man's car stalled on a country road one morning. When the man got out to fix it, a cow came along and stopped beside him. “Your trouble is probably in the carburetor,” said the cow. Startled, the man jumped back and ran down the road until he met a farmer. The amazed man told the farmer his story.



“Was it a large cow with a red brown spot over the right eye?” asked the farmer. “Yes, yes,” the man replied. “Oh! I wouldn't listen to Bessie,” said the farmer. “She doesn't know a thing about cars.”

### SPECTRUM ROAD TRANSPORT

## Time to scrap highway tolls



Shivaji Sarkar

THE LANDMARK SUPREME COURT JUDGEMENT MAY ENSURE ALL HIGHWAYS REMAIN FREE OF CHARGES TO USERS AND NO LEVYING OF ARBITRARY AND ILLEGAL FEE ON ROAD USERS

Indians tormented by high prices, high tolls and irrational ‘Fastag’ got a minor relief on consideration of the concept as anti-people. The Supreme Court ruled that the 9.2-km Delhi-Noida-Direct (DND) flyway will be toll-free as it dismissed a plea by a private firm challenging the 2016 decision of the Allahabad High Court order asking it to stop collecting toll from commuters.

In effect, the SC upheld the concept that awarding a contract to private firm Noida Toll Bridge Company Ltd (NTBCL) to collect toll from commuters plying on the DND flyway was unjust, unfair and arbitrary. This is the *sine qua non* of a continuous strife going on with both the Central government and its National Highway Authority of India (NHAI), which go on imposing irrational toll on people's highways. The

landmark SC judgement may ensure all highways remain free of charges to users and no levying of arbitrary and illegal fee on road users. “There is no reason for the collection of user or toll-tax to continue. We hold that the agreement (for toll collection) is invalid,” the bench of Justices Surya Kant and Ujjal Bhuyan held. It found the company realised costs within a short span.

The high court, in October 2016, had ruled following a PIL that there would be no toll collected from those using the 9.2 km-long, eight-lane DND flyway. In an over 100-page judgement, the high court had held, “the user fee which is being levied/realised is not supported by the legal provisions relied upon by the Concessionaire (Noida Toll Bridge Company), Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services (promoter and developer of the project)

and the Noida Authority.” It had said the “right to levy and collect user fee from the commuters suffers from excessive delegation and is contrary to the provisions of the UP Industrial Development Act.”

The PIL, filed in 2012, had challenged the “levy and collection of toll in the name of user fee by the Noida Toll Bridge Company.”

The court further suggested that the Prevention of Corruption Act could have been invoked had it not been for the long passage of time. It held “this blatant misuse of power and breach of public trust has profoundly shocked the conscience of the court.” This is a landmark judgment in toll grey areas. There are too many grey areas. In 2024, toll collection revenue on national highways was over ₹648 billion, a 35% increase from the previous year. Despite

that, since 3 June toll rates are hiked by 5% without an explanation. The total toll length in India has increased from 25,996 km in 2019 to 45,428 km as of November 2024.

The year-wise revenue collected as cess on petrol (quietly rephrased Excise duty) on all petroleum products during the last three years is: 2018-19 – ₹2,14,369; 2019-20 – ₹2,23,057; and 2020-21 – ₹3,71,726. This is a huge fraud committed on the road user. The figures if added to toll levies mean almost 50% extra amount is collected for the purpose of road construction.

This calls for scrapping of all tolls collected by the NHAI. The year 2024-25 could be unique if the DND toll principles applied universally over all NHAI tolls ensuring recoveries from the NHAI and state highway systems.

INFA

### Letters TO THE EDITOR

Readers of Orissa Post are most welcome to contribute letters (100 words), articles and columns (between 600-1000 words). Contributors are requested to send their contact numbers and full postal address/email ID. They may also send in their valuable comments, opinion and suggestions, preferably by email, to: [edit@orissapost.com](mailto:edit@orissapost.com)

OrissaPOST  
B-15, Rasulgargh Industrial Estate,  
Bhubaneswar-751010

### Polluted cities

Sir, Studies and statistics have revealed a disturbing trend with regard to air pollution in India: most cities have crossed the threshold limit imposed by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Particularly, the particulate pollution, or the particulate matter pollution (PM), is a cause for worry. India has exceeded the WHO standard threshold of PM 2.5 long ago. A latest study conducted by a reputed international journal has said that over 1.5 million Indians succumb to the ill-effects of air pollution every year. As many as 655 districts were analysed in a ten-year period from the year 2009 by the journal. Shockingly, the journal has claimed that there is no city in India which can be considered safe from air pollution. Everything boils down to effective implementation and better regulation of vehicular emissions and dust particles -- the two major causes of air pollution..

Ganapathi Bhat, AKOLA

### Ill-conceived policy

Sir, The proposal of holding simultaneous elections is fraught with a lack of clarity in its implementation and practicality for a country as vast and diverse as its expanse. The proposal has several loopholes, like midterm polls and the President's rule, and there is a lack of consideration for regional parties as well. Primarily, the proposal fails to address how precisely the Central government plans to hold simultaneous elections for the nation's 96.88 crore voters at the same time, as such a gargantuan exercise will be practically challenging to execute considering India's demography. Also, conducting all the elections in the same year becomes a major federal issue because it would force current state legislatures to shorten or lengthen their terms to make the election dates coincide with the national deadline. The attempt to impose an artificial cycle of elections and restrict electoral choice compromises with the spirit of democracy, which is a direct threat to the constitutional recognition of India as a democratic republic. A rushed and ill-conceived policy can produce unprecedented challenges to the polity of the nation.

Ranganathan Sivakumar, CHENNAI



# MORE HITS THAN MISSES



### TEAM GAME TO THE FORE

Expectations were high when the Harmanpreet Singh-led India hockey team left for the Paris Games. The players did not disappoint the fans. After losing a close match to Germany in the semifinals, the Indians regrouped to defeat Spain 2-1 and win the bronze. While Harmanpreet scored nine goals in the tournament, Odisha's Amit Rohidas also put up a sterling display in defence alongside the ever-dependable goalkeeper PR Sreejesh. Incidentally the bronze medal match was Sreejesh's last in his career following which he retired.

### WAIT FINALLY ENDS FOR ODISHA

Odisha has always produced iconic hockey players like Dilip Tirkey, Lazarus Barla and Michael Kindo - players who have represented the country for a long time. However, a national title always eluded the senior men's side. That ended in November when Odisha reached the final for the first time and trounced two-time champions Haryana 5-1. Out of the 18 players in the team, 17 were from Sundargarh district, the cradle of Odisha's hockey. At an average age of 22, with only four players over 25 and the oldest being 26, Odisha were by far the youngest and fittest team to have reached the knockout stage of the tournament. They won all their games in a convincing manner to emerge champions.

It was just the icing on the cake that the country needed when Dommaraju Gukesh became the youngest chess world champion December 12, 2024. The Indian was a shade over 18 years old, beating the record that the legendary Garry Kasparov had set in 1985 when he became the world champion at 22 years. In the process, Gukesh became the second Indian after Viswanathan Anand to become a world champion. But chess aside there were many moments of sporting glory in 2024 to look back upon. India managed to break the 13-year jinx of not winning an ICC trophy, by annexing the T20 World Cup title. The hockey team did the nation proud by winning bronze at the Paris Olympics. It was the second successive time that India won the bronze at the Olympics after the Tokyo Games. The Paris Games though was a bit disappointing as India failed to achieve their target of a double-digit medal haul. However, who can forget the double bronze of pistol shooter Manu Bhaker and Neeraj Chopra who continued with his heroics in the javelin throw event, bagging a silver at the Paris Games to back up his gold in the Tokyo edition. But there were heart-breaks too at the Paris Olympics. Wrestler Vinesh Phogat was disqualified after reaching the final as she was found 100 grams overweight; PV Sindhu

failed to replicate the form that took her to the podium at Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo. And above all the World No.1 doubles pair of Chirag Shetty and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy in badminton crashed out early in their event. They were being considered sure medal-contenders. Back home in Odisha, there were few glorious moments to linger on. Odisha ended their barren run in senior nationals hockey by winning their maiden title. The swimming quartet of Pratyasha Roy, Mannata Mishra, Shristi Upadhyay and Sonia Patel rewrote history books by winning gold medals in the 77th national swimming championships in September. It was Odisha's first ever gold in the competition. Sini Singh established her credentials by winning a bagful of medals at the 76th Senior National Track Cycling Championships in Chennai. Here's a look back on mostly glorious and some not so glorious India and Odisha's sporting achievements in 2024.

WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY SAKYASEN MITTRA



### HITTING BULL'S EYE

Carrying the baggage of failure on her shoulders after a disappointing show at Tokyo, shooting sensation Manu Bhaker achieved the rare feat of winning two medals at a single Olympic Games in Paris. Manu bagged bronze medals in the 10m air pistol women and 10m air pistol mixed team event. She thus became the first Indian to win two medals at a single edition of the Olympic Games since Independence. "I still have a lot of years left in me and hence I will be back in Los Angeles," Manu had stated after returning to India.



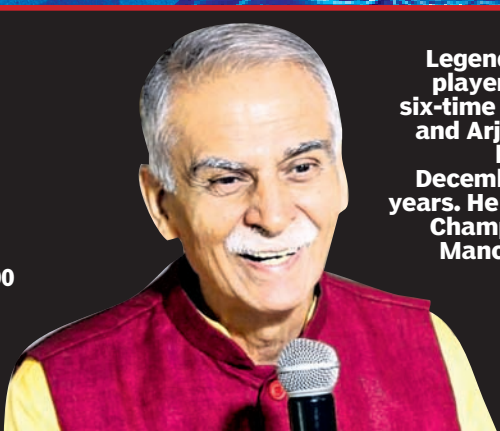
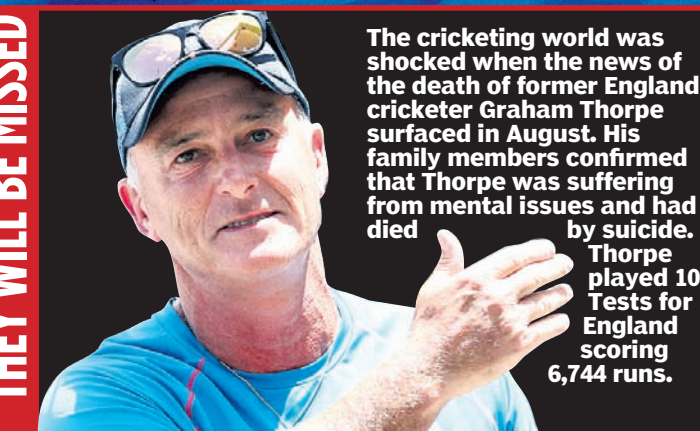
## 14<sup>TH</sup> HOCKEY INDIA SENIOR MEN NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP 2024 04<sup>TH</sup> - 16<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER | MAYOR RADHAKRISHNAN HOCKEY STADIUM, CHENNAI, TAMIL NADU CHAMPIONS

### NEERAJ SHOW CONTINUES

While it may not have been gold, Neeraj Chopra displayed another jaw-dropping skill of consistency at the Paris Games 2024 to win the silver medal. Neeraj has not finished outside the top since 2021 which demonstrates his consistency. The silver at Paris Games made him just the third Indian after wrestler Sushil Kumar and shuttler PV Sindhu to win individual medals in back-to-back Summer Games. Chopra also finished second in the Lausanne Diamond League event with a season's best throw of 89.49 metres.

### HOCKEY EVES DAZZLE

The Indian women's hockey team won the Asian Champions Trophy beating China 1-0 in the final. It was the same team that India had beaten 3-0 in the group stage and they did an en core again in the summit clash match. Deepika scored the all important goal of the match played at the Rajgir Hockey Stadium in Bihar. This was the third time that the Indian eves emerged champions in the tournament, their earlier victories coming in 2016 (the inaugural year of the event) and 2023. Deepika was the star of the show for India as she emerged the highest scorer with 11 goals, five of those coming from the game against Thailand which India won 13-0. India did not lose or draw a single match in the tournament, with their toughest game being against South Korea in which they emerged victorious 3-2.



The cricketing world was shocked when the news of the death of former England cricketer Graham Thorpe surfaced in August. His family members confirmed that Thorpe was suffering from mental issues and had died by suicide. Thorpe played 100 Tests for England scoring 6,744 runs.

Legendary Indian squash player Raj Manchandha, a six-time national champion and Arjuna Award winner, breathed his last in December at the age of 79 years. He also was an Asian Championship medalist. Manchandha overall won 11 national titles representing the Services in singles and doubles and made the game popular.

Spain won the European Championship for a record-breaking fourth time defeating England 2-1 in the final played at Berlin in July. It was England's second successive loss in the final having been beaten by Italy four years back. Spain had earlier won the title in 1964, 2008 and 2012. They were tied with Germany on three titles each, but then created history by winning the trophy for the fourth time.



### SPAIN ARE EUROPEAN KINGS

### RECORD-BREAKING SHOW

India's most successful Paralympic campaign to date unfolded at the 2024 Paris Games, where differently-abled Indian athletes secured a record-breaking 29 medals - 7 gold, 9 silver and 13 bronze. The Paris Paralympics not only underscored India's remarkable rise in para-sports but also highlighted the broader evolution of the Paralympic movement itself. Among the stars of the show were Avani Lekhara (shooting), Sumit Antil (javelin) and Harvinder Singh (archery). But none symbolised the grit and determination than archer Sheetal Devi. Shooting with her legs, as she doesn't have any arms, Sheetal missed out on a medal by a whisker.



### REVIVAL OF HIL

Hockey India's decision to revive the Hockey India League after seven years meant good news for the lovers of the sport. The HIL not only reintroduced the men's HIL, but also introduced the women's HIL. This will certainly be a shot in the arm for Indian hockey as top players from across the world will participate in the league. Harmanpreet Singh at Rs 78 lakh and Udita Duhani at Rs 32 lakh emerged the costliest players of HIL auctions.

WRITTEN & COMPILED BY SAKYASEN MITTRA



### BOSSING THE CHESS WORLD

Another historic moment in chess came in September. For the first time ever, both the Indian men's and women's teams won gold at the Chess Olympiad 2024 in Budapest. The men's team featured D Gukesh, Rameshbabu Praggnanandhaa and Arjun Erigaisi while the women's squad were represented by Harika Dronavalli, Vaishali Rameshbabu, Divya Deshmukh, Vanika Agrawal, and Tanja Sachdev. India became only the third country after the Soviet Union and China to bag the double team gold at the Olympiad.



### CYCLING TO GLORY

It was an incredible year for Odisha cyclist Swasti Singh who shone on the national stage like a beacon. She won a large number of medals, the most important being a gold at the 76th Senior Track Cycling Championships held at Chennai in November. To go with the gold she also won a silver and three bronze medals. Prior to that in May, the ace cyclist won five silver medals at the Khelo India Women's Track Cycling League finals. Overall, she did not return empty-handed from any of the tournaments she took part in.



### CRUEL BLOW

Wrestler Vinesh Phogat, who has now turned politician, found her dream of winning an Olympic medal turning into a nightmare at the Paris Games. Vinesh had reached the final of the 50kg category which meant that a medal was assured for her. However, on the day of the bout, she was found 100 grams overweight and disqualified. It meant that despite reaching the final there was no medal on offer for her. The entire nation plunged into a state of gloom as Vinesh's disqualification news spread.



## On the sidelines

### GRACIAS RAFA

Tennis legend Rafael Nadal announced his retirement from the sport and hung up his racket after Spain lost to the Netherlands in the Davis Cup in November. It marked the end of a 23-year-old career where Nadal took the game to improbable heights. He was the third among the 'Fab Four' - after Roger Federer and Andy Murray - to bow out of the game (Novak Djokovic still playing). During his career, Rafa won 22 Grand Slam singles titles with 14 of them - another record - coming at the French Open in Paris. He was the 'King of Clay' who could do no wrong on the red soil.

### SREEJESH BIDS ADIEU

A colossal among goalkeepers PR Sreejesh, has remained an insurmountable hurdle under the Indian goal thwarting the opposition with monotonous regularity. Probably he is the best hockey goalkeeper India has ever produced. Sreejesh played 336 matches for the senior Indian side from 2006 to 2024. It was fitting indeed that he bowed out with an Olympic bronze medal. Nicknamed 'the Great Wall of India' Sreejesh also had bagged a bronze in the 2021 Tokyo Games and was also a member of the Indian team that won Asian Games gold in 2014 and 2022.

### HAPPY ENDING

PV Sindhu ended her title drought since 2022 by winning the women's singles title at the Syed Modi Masters badminton tournament which was promptly followed by the announcement by her family that she is getting hitched. She tied the nuptial knot with Hyderabad-based Venkata Datta Sai, an executive director at Posidex Technologies, in Udaipur December 22. Incidentally the title at Lucknow this year came after she had won the gold at the Birmingham Commonwealth Games in 2022. As they say 'all's well that ends well'.

### MINING MONEY

It was on the cards and it so happened. Rishabh Pant became the costliest player in the history of the IPL when Lucknow Super Giants bought him at an astronomical sum of Rs 27 crore in this year's auction. A couple of hours before Pant's bidding, former KKR skipper Shreyas Iyer had become the costliest player when Punjab Kings acquired him for Rs 26.5 crore. But then Pant beat him to it.

### 13-YEAR WAIT ENDS

When the Rohit Sharma-led Indian cricket team left to participate in the T20 World Cup in the USA and the West Indies, there were doubts as to whether the Men in Blue will be able to win the title. They grew in stature as the tournament progressed and won all their nine games to reach the final. June 29, 2024, once more turned out to be red-letter day for India as they defeated South Africa by seven runs at Bridgetown. A cricket-crazy nation took celebrating like mad as it was India's first trophy after the 2011 50 overs World Cup title.

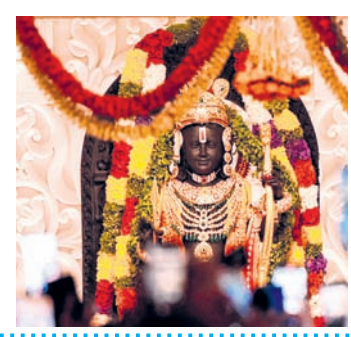




The registration for the scheme will start tomorrow, and women don't have to go anywhere for registration. Our volunteers will come to your home and complete the registration. ARVIND KEJRIWAL | AAP SUPREMO

TRITUALS TO MARK ANNIV OF RAM LALLA'S CONSECRATION

Three-day rituals beginning January 11 will be held at the Ayodhya Ram temple to mark the first anniversary of the consecration of the Ram Lalla idol



of the day quote

Tripura has given mandate to the BJP twice. For the third time (2028 Assembly elections), I will come with report card of our 10-year-rule and compare it with that of 35-year-rule of the CPI(M). I hope our report card will outweigh that of the communists



AMIT SHAH | UNION HOME MINISTER

Every scheme in the country is being implemented with the aim of benefiting the common people



NAYAB SINGH SAINI | HARYANA CM

In reality, saints, gurus and great men born in the Bahujan Samaj including Baba Saheb got full respect and honour only when there was a BSP government, which these casteist parties cannot digest



MAYAWATI | BSP CHIEF

SHORT TAKES

Ride to funeral turns fatal in UP

Banda: A ride to attend a funeral turned fatal in Uttar Pradesh's Banda district Sunday when an elderly woman and her nephew were killed after a speeding truck hit their bike, police said. Another woman riding on the same bike sustained serious injuries in the accident which occurred near the Mahaveeran temple on Atarra bypass under the Nagar Kotwali police station limits.

Jewellery store staffer shot dead

Thane: A 25-year-old jewellery store salesman was killed after two unidentified persons fired at him and his employer in Shahapur in Maharashtra's Thane district, a police official said Sunday. The incident took place at 10:30pm on Saturday when deceased Dineshkumar Manaram Chaudhary, his employer and one more person had called it a day and were waiting outside Mahalaxmi Jewellers in Gotheagar area, the official said.

NCB busts int'l drug racket

Ahmedabad: The Narcotics Control Bureau Ahmedabad has busted an international drug syndicate with the seizure of two kg ketamine and arrested four persons, including three Nigerian nationals, the NCB said Sunday. The accused conspired to traffic ketamine from India to foreign countries through courier parcels.

Man booked for employing minors

Thane: Police have registered a case against a 49-year-old person for allegedly making children work as labourers in his company premises in Maharashtra's Thane district, an official said Sunday. Personnel of the labour, women and child welfare departments and local police Friday raided four shops owned by the person who ran a packaging company at Vehale village in Bhiwandi area here.

Trainee cop dies of bullet wound

Srinagar: A trainee cop was killed at a police training institute in Jammu and Kashmir's Ganderbal district after being hit by a bullet allegedly fired by a sentry, officials said Sunday. Sentry Babu Ram, who was guarding a post at the Manigam police training institute, reportedly fired upon Mohammad Sareer, an under training recruit, in the wee hours Sunday, they said.

PROTEST IN BIHAR

Tejashwi joins calls for BPSC exam cancellation

The former deputy chief minister, who had on late Saturday night visited the site in the state capital where candidates have been carrying out a round-the-clock protest, shared on X a screenshot of the two-page letter addressed to his ex-boss



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Patna, Dec 22: RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav Sunday wrote to Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, seeking the cancellation of competitive exams conducted recently, under controversial circumstances, by the state's Public Service Commission.

The former deputy chief minister, who had on late Saturday night visited the site in the state capital where candidates have been carrying out a round-the-clock protest, shared on X a screenshot of the two-page letter addressed to his ex-boss.

Yadav, who is now the Leader of the Opposition, warned "many of the protesters I met last night have fallen ill. If anything untoward happens, the blame shall be on the government and the BPSC Chair-

man". Yadav had visited Gardani Bagh locality where he was told by the protesters that they were opposed to the decision of the Bihar Public Service Commission to order re-exam only at Babu Pariksha Parisar, one of the over 900 centres where, on December 13, the combined competitive exams were held. The young leader had told the protesters, "Be steadfast in your resolve. Rest assured that for every step you take, Tejashwi shall move forward with four paces."

In his letter to the JD(U) supremo, the RJD leader said he agreed with the protesting candidates' contention that if an exam for some aspirants was held "on a different date, with a different set of question papers" there will be "no level-playing field".

Notably, hundreds of aspi-

rants at the Babu Pariksha Parisar had boycotted the tests, alleging that question papers had been leaked.

The allegation met with a strong denial from the Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC), which claimed the disruptions were caused by "anti-social elements" who had turned up as part of a "conspiracy" to get the exams cancelled.

The commission, however, has ordered re-examination for about 5,000 candidates who were assigned to the examination centre. Yadav also drew the attention of the chief minister to the protesters' objection to "private agencies" being hired for the manpower required for holding such exams.

Invigilators and fourth-grade staff deployed at exam centres were appointed through these agencies. Incidentally, one such personnel, appointed through a private agency, was Ram Iqbal Singh, who suffered a heart attack at the Babu Pariksha Parisar and died on his way to a hospital, prompting the local administration to blame protesting candidates for the death and recommending that they be charged with murder.

Yadav also demanded an investigation into the claim of protesters that "model test papers" of many private coaching institutes "tallied more than 25 per cent" with the actual question papers and remarked "this could be more than a mere coincidence".

Making it clear that he would settle for nothing less than a re-examination for all the nearly five lakh candidates who had appeared for the December 13 tests, the RJD leader also said, "About 90,000 students could not take the tests as online forms could not be submitted in time because of a problem with the server. They should also get a chance".

ELECTION RULE AMENDMENT: CPI(M) demands immediate withdrawal



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

and other digital trails.

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

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

The CPI(M) said these steps were initially introduced by the EC in consultation with political parties to ensure greater transparency, and described as "retrograde" the move to amend the rule.

ISRO to study how crops grow in space on PSLV-C60 mission

The PSLV-C60 mission, slated for an yearend launch, is scheduled to place the twin satellites 'Chaser and Target' to demonstrate the space docking technologies that are crucial for building India's space station

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

New Delhi, Dec 22: Demonstration of seed germination in outer space, a robotic arm to catch a tethered debris there, and testing of green propulsion systems are some of the experi-

ments planned on the POEM-4 -- the fourth stage of ISRO's PSLV rocket that remains in orbit after launching a satellite.

The PSLV-C60 mission, slated for an yearend launch, is scheduled to place the twin satellites 'Chaser and Target' to demonstrate the space docking technologies that are crucial for building India's space station.

The PSLV Orbital Experiment Module (POEM) will carry 24 experiments -- 14 from various ISRO labs and 10 from private universities and start-ups -- to demonstrate various technologies in space. ISRO plans to grow eight cowpea seeds from seed germination and plant sustenance until the two-leaf stage in a closed-box environment with active



thermal control as part of the Compact Research Module for Orbital Plant Studies (CROPS) developed by the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre.

The Amity Plant Experi-

UP: Ancient stepwell unearthed in Sambhal



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Sambhal (UP), Dec 22: A stepwell, approximately 125 to 150 years old and covering an area of 400 square metres, was unearthed during excavation in the Laxman Ganj area of Chandausi here, an official said.

Excavation at the site began Saturday, said Krishna Kumar Sonkar, the Executive Officer of Chandausi Nagar Palika.

The excavation follows the reopening of the Bhasma Shankar temple in Sambhal December 13, after being closed for 46 years. Authorities said they discovered the structure during an anti-encroachment drive. Two damaged idols were found inside the well of the temple, officials had said.

According to local sources, the stepwell was constructed during the reign of the maternal grandfather of the king of Bilari. Sambhal District Magistrate Rajender Pensiya said the possibility of a survey by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) at the site is being considered, and a request may be submitted to ASI if necessary.

Speaking to the media, Pensiya confirmed that the site was previously registered as a pond. The well's upper floor is made of bricks, while the second and third floors are of marble. The structure also features four rooms and a well, he said.

Pensiya added that work is being carried out cautiously to avoid damage to the structure.

"The excavation, which has so far uncovered 210 square meters

The excavation follows the reopening of the Bhasma Shankar temple in Sambhal December 13, after being closed for 46 years

Authorities said they discovered the structure during an anti-encroachment drive

Two damaged idols were found inside the well of the temple, officials had said

of the site, will continue, and encroachments in the area will be removed. Preliminary estimates suggest the stepwell is approximately 125 to 150 years old," said the DM.

The officer also addressed concerns about the Banke Bihari temple, located nearby the stepwell, which has fallen into disrepair.

The DM said that the temple, believed to be about 150 years old, houses two idols that are safely kept in separate temples. He assured that steps will be taken to renovate the temple, and any encroachments around it will be removed.

During a public meeting held two days ago, Kaushal Kishore, a Chandausi resident, informed the District Office about the ancient stepwell and highlighted the deteriorating condition of the nearby Banke Bihari temple. Kishore claimed that, in earlier times, the area was inhabited by the Hindu community and that the queen of Bilari used to stay there.

Vandalism at Allu Arjun's residence

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Hyderabad, Dec 22: A group of persons, claiming to be members of Osmania University Joint Action Committee, Sunday vandalised flower pots and other things at the residence of top Telugu actor Allu Arjun here, demanding justice to the woman who died in 'Pushpa-2' screening stamped here. Some of them climbed the compound wall and threw tomatoes inside.

They raised slogans against Allu Arjun and demanding financial assistance of ₹one crore rupees for victim woman's family. A placard left by them said crores of rupees are made by making films, while those watching films are dying. The protesters were taken away by the police.

Police sources indicated that Allu Arjun was not at home when the incident happened. Police security is being provided at the actor's residence in the wake of the vandalism, they said.

Allu Arjun's father and veteran producer Allu Aravind said they would like to observe restraint and that law will take its own course. "You have seen what happened outside our house. But, this is time for us to observe restraint. We should not react to all this at present. Police came and took them away. They filed a case. Police are ready to take away if anyone comes here to cause any trouble. No one should encourage this type of incidents. We will not react to this. Law will take its own course," he told reporters. The OU-JAC was in the forefront of Telangana statehood agitation.

UP PCS prelims conclude with 42% turnout

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Prayagraj (UP), Dec 22: The PCS prelims, hit by large-scale protests at the beginning, were concluded Sunday, with only about 42 per cent of the candidates appearing.

Uttar Pradesh Public Service Commission (UPPSC) Secretary Ashok Kumar said the exams were conducted peacefully under the watch of police and other agencies.

"The PCS Pre exam was completed peacefully on Sunday. For the fairness of the exam, a double-layer system was put in place in which the police and the agency were conducting separate investigations," he told PTI.

He said all exams were conducted under the watch of CCTV and live streamed and candidates' iris and other biometrics were screened to filter out proxies.

"Every candidate of every centre was monitored from the control room set up in the commission. This monitoring was done through CCTV cameras installed in 1,331 centres across the state. As soon as any candidate was seen roaming around, we immediately alerted the concerned centre about what the particular candidate was doing," Kumar said.

Manastu Space will test Vyom-2U, the green propulsion thruster, that uses a blend of hydrogen peroxide and in-house additives as fuel, with the goal of providing a safer and higher-performing alternative to hydrazine for space applications.

The Varuna payload, developed by Piersight Space-Ahmedabad, is an orbit demonstration of a synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) in a CubeSat form factor. This mission marks the initial step towards establishing a constellation of SAR and Automatic Identification System (AIS) satellites, aiming to provide persistent, near real-time monitoring of all human and industrial activity at sea.

national



Those who did not shed a drop of blood for the country's freedom are today parading as custodians of nationalism

GANDHIS ENJOY SUNDAY FAMILY LUNCH AT KWALITY RESTAURANT

The Gandhi family was seen enjoying Sunday lunch at the famous Kwaliti restaurant at Connaught Place. Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, Congress Parliamentary Party Chairperson Sonia Gandhi, Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, her husband Robert Vadra, daughter Miraya, and mother-in-law Maureen Vadra enjoyed lunch at the restaurant



of the day quote

As the number of ministers is high, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis had to give each minister a portfolio. Obviously, some are happy and some are not

Because improper and incomplete knowledge of Dharma leads to Adharma. All the persecution and atrocities that took place across the world in the name of Dharma actually took place because of misunderstanding and lack of understanding of Dharma

Independence should never be confused with neutrality. We will do whatever is right in our national interest and for global good without being intimidated to conform. Bharat can never permit others to have a veto on its choices

POST OF THE DAY

Today morning while having coffee at the restaurant, I ordered Nirmala to increase the GST rates of coffee as follows: Black Coffee without sugar - 5% GST Black Coffee with sugar - 12% GST Coffee without sugar - 18% GST Coffee with sugar - 28% GST All other types - 35% GST

SHORT TAKES

4 killed in two road accidents

Raisen (MP): Four persons were killed in two separate road accidents in Madhya Pradesh's Raisen district, police said Sunday. A motorbike collided with a tractor-trolley Saturday night in Udaipura town, around 100 km from the district headquarters.

IT serves notice to PDP's MLA Para

Srinagar: The Income Tax department has served a notice to senior PDP leader and Jammu and Kashmir MLA Waheed Para to submit his books of accounts, officials said Sunday. Though, according to the notice, Para was scheduled to appear before the Income Tax authorities December 20, he received the intimation on the same day.

Narcotics worth ₹ 20 crore seized

Guwahati: Narcotics worth ₹20 crore has been seized and a person arrested in Assam's Cachar district, police said Sunday. Acting on a tip-off, an operation was launched by the Special Task Force (STF) under the supervision of IGP Parthasarathi Mahanta at Silcoori Road that led to the seizure of Yaba tablets and heroin from a person who was moving in a motorcycle in the early hours of Sunday.

Couple beaten up

Muzaffarpur (Bihar): A couple, who were in love with each other, were tied to a pole and beaten up mercilessly in Bihar's Muzaffarpur district, police said Sunday. A purported video of the incident went viral on social media Sunday.

JAIPUR The U-turn that should never have been there

The U-turn is just one of many dangerous cuts on this highway. According to NHAI norms, a U-turn should be spaced every 2 km, yet this stretch is riddled with frequent, short-distance cuts, making it resemble a street rather than a national highway

Jaipur, Dec 22: The devastating incident on the Jaipur-Ajmer Highway December 20, which claimed 13 lives, has its roots in a sharp U-turn near Delhi Public School (DPS), a dangerous spot that has now become infamous for claiming numerous lives. According to officials, this U-turn should not have been in use, as it was sanctioned as a temporary arrangement in a bid to ease traffic flow during construction activity. Originally, the U-turn was supposed to be closed by March 2023, as part of a plan

for a cloverleaf interchange, but the project was stalled, leaving it open. Built in November 2020, it was intended to streamline traffic flow from the newly constructed Ring Road. The cloverleaf interchange remained incomplete, and the U-turn stayed operational, facilitating traffic from both directions, also creating a jam-like situation most times. Had the accident occurred even an hour later, the consequences could have been far worse, particularly for DPS students and other nearby schools, whose buses pass through this stretch. Additionally, office



workers from the nearby SEZ would have faced severe risks. "The situation could have been horrific if it were a little later," said Pawan Bairagi, a government official whose children

this stretch is riddled with frequent, short-distance cuts, making it resemble a street rather than a national highway. Surprisingly, there are around 12 cuts on the service lane between Jaipur and Ajmer and 15 cuts on the opposite stretch. In addition, the railing along the service road is broken in several places, with people often seen jumping across. Traffic jams spanning kilometres are a daily occurrence, yet there is no visible traffic police presence to alleviate the situation, despite the road being a key route for

travellers to Jodhpur, Udaipur, Chittorgarh, and other important destinations. The Jaipur-Ajmer Expressway, which witnessed a horrific inferno that left over a dozen dead due to burn injuries, has become a hotspot for accidents in the last year. In July 2023, the local administration clashed with NHAI over the ongoing flyover construction, which had caused massive traffic jams. Despite assurances from NHAI that the work would be completed quickly, over a year later, the work remains unfinished, exacerbating traffic issues.



Naga sadhus of 'Panch Dashnam Avahan Akhara' take part in a religious procession called 'Peshwai', to reach the Mahakumbh ahead of Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh

Kejriwal slams govt over R-Day tableau exclusion

Kejriwal attacks the BJP, saying Delhi being the national capital, its tableau should be included in the Republic Day parade every year

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

New Delhi, Dec 22: Amid reports claiming that Delhi's tableau has missed the cut for next year's Republic Day parade, AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal Sunday accused the Centre of playing politics over the issue. Kejriwal also slammed the BJP, saying Delhi being the national capital, its tableau should be included in the Republic Day parade every year.



Virendra Sachdeva claimed Kejriwal shows his "true colour" whenever a national festival approaches. "Delhiites have not forgotten the incident from 2014 when the entire city was gearing up to celebrate Republic Day, but Kejriwal tarnished its dignity by staging a protest," Sachdeva said. He also said the decision to select tableaux for the Republic Day parade is made by a designated committee, and their numbers are also limited, which Kejriwal is well aware of. "However, since elections are approaching in Delhi, Kejriwal wants to divert people's

"I want to ask them - why is Delhi's tableau being excluded once again this year? Why are the people of Delhi being prevented from participating in the Republic Day celebrations," Kejriwal asked at a press conference. Claiming that Delhi's tableau has been missing the cut for several years now, Kejriwal said, "What kind of politics is this? Why is there so much hatred towards Delhi and its people? If these leaders hold such animosity, why should the people of Delhi vote for them?" Notably, Assembly elections in Delhi are due in February. Hitting back at the AAP chief, Delhi BJP President

Cong slams govt over different tax slabs for popcorn

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

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

Simple Tax," he said in a post on X. "GST evasion is significant, input tax credit fraud is common, and the number of bogus companies set up to 'game' the GST system runs into thousands." He said the recent data on tax frauds uncovered by the Directorate General of GST Intelligence (DGGI) reveal GST evasion of ₹2.01 lakh crore in FY24.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh also claimed GST evasion is significant, input tax credit fraud is common, and the number of bogus companies set up to "game" the GST system runs into thousands. "The absurdity of three different tax slabs for popcorn under GST, which has unleashed a tsunami of memes on social media, only brings to light a deeper issue: the growing complexity of a system that was supposed to be a Good and

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

3rd special drive against child marriage in Assam; 431 held

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Guwahati, Dec 22: Assam Police have arrested more than 430 people and registered 345 cases in its third special drive against child marriage, a top officer said Sunday. He added that some more arrests are likely to be made. Additional Director General of Police (ADGP) MP Gupta, addressing a press conference here, said, "The third special drive was conducted across the state last night, in which 431 accused were apprehended and 345 cases registered."

"Among those arrested are men who had married underage girls, family members and also two kazi, one each in Sonitpur and South Salmara districts," he added. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, in a post on X Sunday morning, said, "Assam continues its fight against child marriage. In Phase 3 operations launched on the night of Dec 21-22, 416 arrests were made and 335 cases registered. The arrested individuals will be produced in court today. We will continue to take bold steps



to end this social evil." The number of arrests and cases has increased since the post was made. Gupta said that in the first special drive against the social evil in February 2023, 3,425 arrests were made

and 4,387 cases registered. In the second crackdown in October 2023, 913 accused were held and 682 cases registered. "A total of 5,348 cases have been registered and 5,842 people arrested in three special drives and regular instances of child marriages being reported since last year," the ADGP added. In the latest drive, Dhubri district registered the highest number of cases at 59 and also the most arrests at 68. The highest number of cases was registered in Dhubri during the first two drives as well.

AI tool to predict IVF outcomes in men with infertility

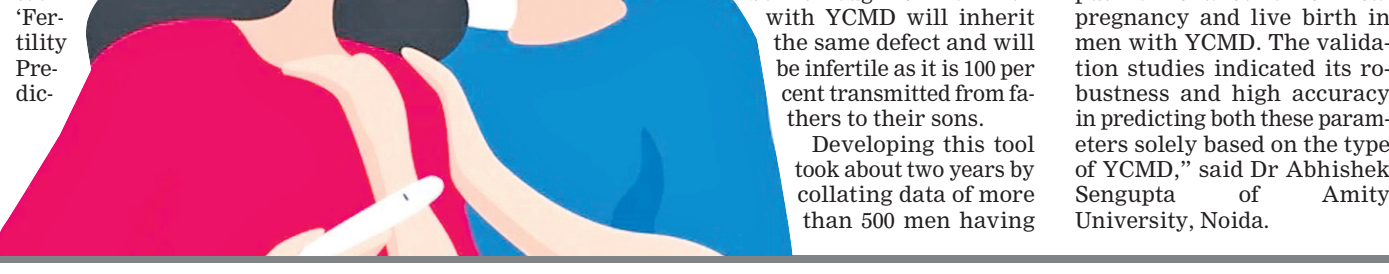
In nearly 50 per cent of couples experiencing infertility, the problem is with the male partner, said Dr Deepak Modi, senior scientist at ICMR's National Institute for Research in Reproductive and Child Health and the lead author of the study

crodeletion -- a genetic cause of male infertility -- and predict IVF outcomes. The study regarding the AI tool was published in the Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics last week. In nearly 50 per cent of couples experiencing infertility, the problem is with the male partner, said Dr Deepak Modi, senior scientist at ICMR's National Institute for Research in Reproductive and Child Health (NIRRH) and the lead author of the study.

enough sperm leading to infertility," Dr Modi said. Men with YCMD cannot benefit from medical treatment for improving the sperm count. To become fathers, such men require assisted reproductive techniques such as in-vitro fertilization (IVF) for parenthood, he said. The AI-based tool -- 'Fertility Predictor' -- developed by the ICMR-NIRRH in collaboration with Amity University, Noida can predict sperm re-

success rates of assisted reproductive technology (ART) in men having this genetic problem. It also predicts the rate of fertilisation, clinical pregnancy and live birth rates based on the type of Y chromosome microdeletion, Dr Modi said. This helps the couples make informed decisions, he said in a statement. However, Dr Modi cautioned that the male babies born through IVF from men with YCMD will inherit the same defect and will be infertile as it is 100 per cent transmitted from fathers to their sons. Developing this tool took about two years by collating data of more than 500 men having

YCMD and undergoing ART. After applying an artificial intelligence algorithm based on machine learning on this data, the tool could predict the outcomes. This was then validated on another sub-set and it was found to have accuracy of about 80 per cent, Dr Stacy Colaco, a scientist at NIRRH and the first author of the study, said. "Fertility Predictor also provides a numerical output for chance of clinical pregnancy and live birth in men with YCMD. The validation studies indicated its robustness and high accuracy in predicting both these parameters solely based on the type of YCMD," said Dr Abhishek Sengupta of Amity University, Noida.





# international



The fees being charged by Panama are ridiculous, especially knowing the extraordinary generosity that has been bestowed to Panama by the US. If the principles, both moral and legal, of this magnanimous gesture of giving are not followed, then we will demand that the Panama Canal be returned to us

**ALBANIA TO BAN TIKTOK FOR A YEAR**  
Albania's prime minister said Saturday the government will shut down the video service TikTok for one year, blaming it for inciting violence and bullying, especially among children



## of the day quote

**Negotiations continue today and I am optimistic that I will be in a position to designate a prime minister after parliament votes the leaders of its two chambers**  
KLAUS IOHANNIS | PRESIDENT, ROMANIA

**We're dealing with an extraordinary regime that for over a decade, quite frankly, has had all sorts of incursions in our country through national security, intellectual property, right down to cyber activity and misinformation**  
PRITI PATEL | SHADOW SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN, UK

**Young Syrian has nothing to lose and suffers from insecurity following Assad's fall. What can he do? He should stand with strong will against those who designed and those who implemented the insecurity**  
AYATOLLAH ALI KHAMENEI | IRANIAN SUPREME LEADER, IRAN

## SHORT TAKES

### 38 people die in road mishap

**Sao Paulo:** A crash between a passenger bus and a truck early Saturday killed 38 people on a highway in Minas Gerais, a state in southeastern Brazil, officials said. The Minas Gerais Fire department, which responded to the scene, said 13 others were taken to hospitals near the city of Teofilo Otoni. The bus had reportedly departed from Sao Paulo and was carrying 45 passengers. Authorities said Saturday afternoon that all victims had been removed from the site and an investigation would determine the cause of the accident. Witnesses told rescue teams that the bus blew a tire, causing the driver to lose control and collide with a truck. Others said that a granite block hit the bus, the Fire department added. A car with three passengers also collided with the bus, but all three survived.

### At least 10 killed in plane crash

**Brasilia:** A small plane with 10 people aboard crashed into shops in the center of the tourist city of Gramado in southern Brazil Sunday, civil defense officials said, and initial reports indicated that there were no survivors. Unfortunately, initial reports indicate that the aircraft's occupants did not survive, Governor Eduardo Leite said in a post on social media platform X. According to the public security office of Rio Grande do Sul state, at least 15 people were taken to the city's hospital, most of them suffering from smoke inhalation caused by the fire triggered by the crash. The plane reportedly first struck the chimney of a building, then the second floor of a house, before crashing into a furniture store, authorities said. Debris also reached a nearby inn.

### 4 dead in Turkish helicopter crash

**Mugla (Turkey):** An ambulance helicopter crashed Sunday morning in southwestern Turkey, killing all four people on board. Two pilots, one doctor and one health care worker were taking off from the city of Mugla on their way to pick up a patient in the neighbouring province of Antalya. The helicopter hit the hospital building from where it was taking off and crashed into a nearby field. Mugla Gov Idris Akbiyik noted that there was heavy fog at the time of takeoff and that authorities were investigating the incident.

# China slams Pentagon report

*The comprehensive Pentagon report spanning over 165 pages dealt with a host of issues, including Chinese military modernisation, and pointed out that corruption is impacting China's modernisation*



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Beijing, Dec 22:** The Chinese military has denounced a recent Pentagon report alleging corruption is denting PLA's modernisation, saying the report "desperately slandered" the Chinese military and "exaggerated" the military threat posed by China. Reacting to the Pentagon's report to the US Congress titled "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China" released recently, the Chinese Defence Ministry accused Washington of "fabricating false narratives" against the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The report "misinterpreted China's defence policies, speculated about China's military capacity development, flagrantly

interfered in China's domestic affairs, desperately slandered the Chinese military and exaggerated the so-called military threat posed by China," Defence spokesperson Zhang Xiaogang said Saturday. China "strongly deplores and firmly opposes" all these statements, Zhang was quoted as saying by the state-run Xinhua news agency. Zhang said that for over 20 years, the US has been publishing such deceptive and hypocritical reports year after year, only seeking excuses for the development of its own military capacity and misleading public opinion. "We urge the US to stop fabricating false narratives, rectify the erroneous percep-

**We urge the US to stop fabricating false narratives, rectify the erroneous perception of China, and push for the healthy, stable development of bilateral and military relations**  
ZHANG XIAOGANG | DEFENCE SPOKESPERSON, CHINA

tion of China, and push for the healthy, stable development of bilateral and military relations," he said. The 'war-addicted' United States has become the biggest destroyer of international order and the greatest threat to global security," Zhang said. On China's development of nuclear weapons, Zhang said that the intention is to safeguard

the country's strategic security. But the US, which has the largest and most advanced nuclear arsenal in the world, sticks stubbornly to the policy of first use of nuclear weapons, undermining international and regional peace and stability, he added. He also expressed the hope that the US would adopt a more positive, rational attitude toward China and the development of the Chinese military, and create bonds between the Chinese and US militaries that do not involve conflict or confrontation but champion openness, pragmatism and cooperation, and gradually accumulate mutual trust.

The comprehensive Pentagon report spanning over 165 pages dealt with a host of issues, including Chinese military modernisation, and pointed out that corruption is impacting China's modernisation. "In 2023, a new wave of corruption-related investigations and removals of senior leaders may have disrupted the PLA's progress toward stated 2027 modernization goals," the report said. Between July and December 2023, at least 15 high-ranking military officers and defence industry executives were removed from their posts, it said.

# Ukraine's air defence downs 52 Russian drones



REUTERS

**Kyiv, Dec 22:** Ukraine's air defences downed 52 of the 103 Russian drones launched overnight, the Ukrainian military said Sunday. The military said on Telegram that it had lost track of 44 drones, and another had left the territory of Ukraine to Belarus. The military gave no information on the fate of the remaining drones. However, they said that in Kherson, Mykolaiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Zhytomyr and Kyiv regions, private businesses and apartment buildings have been damaged by the Russian attack. "Tentatively, without casualties," the military added. Local authorities said that debris from one of the downed drones fell on the roof of a

## Ukraine says Russian forces executed 5 POWs

Russian forces executed five Ukrainian prisoners of war, Ukraine's Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights, Dmytro Lubinets, said Sunday. Lubinets said on the Telegram messenger app that Russian troops shot the five unarmed soldiers after capturing them. He gave no details, but will report this fact to the UN. "Russian war criminals who shoot Ukrainian prisoners of war should be brought before an international tribunal and punished with the most severe punishment provided for by law," Lubinets said. Russia did not immediately comment on the incident, but has previous denied committing war crimes. multi-storey building in the Kyiv region, causing a fire.

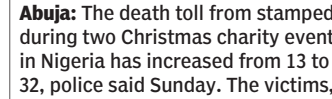
## SNIPPETS

### Pak forms panel to negotiate with jailed ex-PM Khan's party



**Islamabad:** The Shehbaz Sharif-led Pakistan government Sunday formed a negotiation committee to start formal talks with jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party after it threatened to give a call for civil disobedience. According to a government statement, the committee includes Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, the prime minister's political aide Rana Sanaullah, Education Minister Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui, Minister for Privatisation Aleem Khan, Minister for Religious Affairs Chaudhry Salik Hussain and Senator Irfan Siddiqui among others. The PTI welcomed the formation of the government committee for negotiations, calling it a "positive step". "We consider the committee's formation a constructive step. Meaningful dialogue based on positive intentions should be held," PTI chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan said. He stressed that the potential talks should have a defined timeframe, adding that the dialogue must progress positively considering the sensitivity of the situation.

### Stampedes in Nigeria leave at least 32 dead



**Abuja:** The death toll from stampedes during two Christmas charity events in Nigeria has increased from 13 to 32, police said Sunday. The victims, including at least four children, collapsed during crowd surges as people grew desperate for food items while the country grapples with the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation. The dead included 22 people in southeastern Anambra state's Okija town, where a philanthropist Saturday organised a food distribution, local police spokesman Tochukwu Ikenga said. Ten others died in the capital, Abuja, during a church-organised similar charity event. Police said they were investigating the two incidents, only days after another stampede in which 35 children were killed. Africa's most populous country is seeing a growing trend by local organisations, churches and individuals to organise charity events ahead of Christmas to ease economic hardship caused by a cost-of-living crisis. Witnesses of the Abuja stampede told The Associated Press there was a crowd surge at one of the church gates, as dozens tried to enter the premises at around 4 am, hours before gift items were to be shared.

## GERMAN CHRISTMAS MARKET ATTACK



Far-right demonstrators, Magdeburg, December 21

REUTERS

# Suspect held on murder charges

### Far-right protest in Magdeburg reflects tensions

**Magdeburg, Germany, Dec 22:** A man suspected of ploughing a car through crowds at a German Christmas market in an attack that killed five people and injured scores faces multiple charges of murder and attempted murder, police said Sunday. Friday evening's attack in the central city of Magde-

burg shocked the country and stirred up tensions over the charged issue of immigration. The suspect, who was in custody, is a 50-year-old psychiatrist from Saudi Arabia with a history of anti-Islamic rhetoric who has lived in Germany for almost two decades. The motive for the attack remained unclear. There were scuffles and some "minor disturbances" at a far-right demonstration attended by around 2,100 people Sat-

urday night in Magdeburg, police said. They added that criminal proceedings would follow, but did not give details. Protesters, some wearing black balaclavas, held up a large banner with the word "remigration", a term popular with supporters of the far right who seek the mass deportation of immigrants and people deemed not ethnically German. Other residents gathered to pay their respects to the dead.

**Attack stirs political debate on security and immigration**

## ISRAEL ORDERS HOSPITAL EVACUATION

# Gaza medics struggle to rescue patients

REUTERS

**Cairo, Dec 22:** Israel ordered the closure and evacuation Sunday of one of the last hospitals still partly functioning in a besieged area on the northern edge of the Gaza Strip, forcing medics to search for a way to bring hundreds of patients and staff to safety. The head of the Kamal Adwan hospital in Beit Lahiya, Husam Abu Safiya, told Reuters via text message that obeying the order to shut down was "next to impossible" because there were not enough ambulances to get patients out. "We currently have nearly 400 civilians inside the hospital, including babies in the neonatal unit, whose lives depend on oxygen and incubators. We cannot evacuate these patients safely without assistance, equipment, and time," said Abu Safiya. "We are sending this message

under heavy bombardment and direct targeting of the fuel tanks, which if hit will cause a large explosion and mass casualties of the civilians inside," he said. The Israeli military did not respond to a request for comment on Abu Safiya's remarks. It said Friday that it had sent fuel and food supplies to the hospital and helped evacuate more than 100 patients and caregivers to other Gaza hospitals, some in coordination with the Red Cross, for their own safety. The hospital is one of the only ones still partially functioning in the once crowded northern edge of Gaza, an area under intense Israeli military pressure for nearly three months in one of the most punishing operations of the 14-month-old war.

Abu Safiya said the military had ordered patients and staff to be evacuated to another hospital where conditions are



even worse. Photos from inside the hospital showed patients on beds crammed into corridors to keep them away from windows. Reuters could not immediately verify those images. Israel says its operation around three communities on the northern edge of the Gaza Strip - Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun and Jabalia - is targeting Hamas

- Israeli military says it targeted Hamas militants in school
- Military orders evacuation of Kamal Adwan Hospital
- Hospital staff say this is impossible due to lack of ambulances
- Mediators struggle to secure ceasefire

The Israeli military said in a statement that strike targeted Hamas militants operating from inside the school. It said fighters used the place to plan and execute attacks against Israeli forces. Hamas denies its forces operate among civilians. Medics said four Palestinians were killed when an airstrike hit a car elsewhere in Gaza City. An Israeli security official said troops had "struck a Hamas terrorist in a vehicle".



Jumblatt, a veteran politician and prominent Druze leader, said at the meeting that Assad's ouster should usher in new constructive relations between Lebanon and Syria. Druze are an Arab minority who practice an offshoot of Islam. Sharaa, dressed in a suit and tie rather than the military fatigues he favoured in his rebel days, also said he would send a government delegation to the southwestern Druze city of Seida, pledging to provide services to its community and highlighting Syria's rich diversity of sects. Seeking to allay worries about the future of Syria, Sharaa has hosted numerous foreign visitors in recent days, and has vowed to prioritise rebuilding Syria, devastated by 13 years of civil war.



