

Chautala was an amiable ally, a fierce opponent

WITH the death of former CM Om Prakash Chautala, an era in Haryana politics has come to an end. Known for his strong likes and dislikes, 'OPC', as he was known to many, was equally amiable when he chose to be. He could be a fierce critic of his political opponents at one moment and dining with them the next moment, if it suited his interests. He would often say there are no permanent enemies or friends in politics. He put this philosophy to use on several occasions.

In 1998, his party, the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), contested the Lok Sabha elections in alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Haryana. He assured the BSP supremo Mayawati that he would never go with the BJP or the Congress. But immediately after the elections, he extended support to BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Chautala had a strong reason to do so. At that time, Bansi Lal's Haryana Vikas Party (HVP) was heading the government in the state in alliance with the BJP. Chautala hoped that his support to Vajpayee would lead to collapse of the Bansi Lal government. But due to Sushma Swaraj's firm support to Bansi Lal, the BJP continued its alliance with the HVP.

Within months, however, Chautala got another opportunity when after 13 months the Vajpayee government collapsed. In the 1999 General Election, Chautala's party won five seats. The Vajpayee government was again short of the majority mark. Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader Parkash Singh Badal played a crucial role in persuading Chautala to again extend support to Vajpayee. Badal and Chautala's father, Devi Lal, shared a very close bond. They were known to be 'pag watt (exchanging of turbans) brothers. OPC and the entire Devi Lal clan used to treat Badal like the patriarch of their family. However, this time Chautala agreed to support Vajpayee only after getting a written assurance from him that the BJP would withdraw its support to the Bansi Lal government within a few months. Soon, the INLD formed the government in Haryana in alliance with the BJP and a few defectors from the HVP.

Chautala was known for his strong-arm tactics. He would often say a chief minister is of no use if a sleeping person does not jump out of his bed on hearing his name. In 1999, Chautala, however, worked hard to change this image, at least for the first few months. Once I jokingly told him "Chaudhry sahib aap ki yeh shalenta aap ko suit nahin karti (this modestly does not suit you)". He laughed and said one changes with time. OPC called for a midterm Assembly poll in 2000 and gained absolute majority. After that he was back to his old self. In 1991, when Chautala became the Chief Minister after his father Devi Lal became the Deputy Prime Minister, OPC had to become a member of the Assembly within six months to meet a constitutional requirement. Two byelections, Meham (Rohtak) and Thanesar (Kurukshetra), were due. Several delegations from Kurukshetra met Chautala and urged him to contest from their constituency. In Meham, his protégé Anand Singh Dangi, who had fallen out with him, challenged him to contest from there. When Chautala visited Ambala where I was then posted, I asked him why he was not contesting from Thanesar from where his victory was assured. The GT Road belt had never got a chief minister from the area and its people were yearning for one. He said: "Nyota to vapas karna padta hai (Challenge has to be answered)." When I insisted that in that case why not contest from both the constituencies, his reply was what is the use of causing another byelection later. However, after the infamous mayhem in Meham, Chautala contested from two places to become an MLA.

Whenever he was extremely polite with someone, it used to be an indication that the person was in for trouble. Once during an Assembly election, Karan Singh Dalal, a fierce critic of Chautala, crossed him to go to the Speaker's podium. Chautala politely asked Dalal how was his elder brother. Dalal was very surprised at the courtesy. It was only after Dalal came out of the Assembly that he learnt that his brother had been booked in a murder case.

Why agri draft policy is not inclusive or progressive

The policy framework should be redrafted after public consultations with farmer unions and meaningful engagement with state governments and experts.

THE draft National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing was circulated by the Centre to the states last month, inviting suggestions for its improvement. It has sparked a nationwide debate as well as apprehensions among different stakeholders. The draft accepts that small and marginal farmers are still not able to benefit from bumper production and growth in the agriculture sector. A significant gap still exists in rural and urban economies.

It admits that most farmers are struggling for optimum income due to highly fragmented landholdings, increasing cost of production, lack of demand-driven production, accessibility to good markets and optimum realisation of value for their produce.

The major marketing reforms proposed in the draft include permission to set up private wholesale markets and allow direct wholesale purchase from farm gate to organised retailers, processors, exporters and bulk buyers. It has also proposed for deregulation of perishables outside the market yard; declare cold storages, warehouses and silos as deemed market yards and permit establishment and operation of private e-trading platforms. THE draft National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing was circulated by the Centre to the states last month, inviting suggestions for its improvement. It has sparked a nationwide debate as well as apprehensions among different stakeholders. The draft accepts that small and marginal farmers are still not able to benefit from bumper production and growth in the agriculture sector. A significant gap still exists in rural and urban economies.

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support the government will provide to bridge the gaps between marketing and auxiliary infrastructure and carry out institutional reforms.

Suggestion to roll out a 'price insurance scheme' to insure the farmers' income at the time of sowing is apprehended to apply to contract farming by corporates or FPOs operated by them. What will be the basis for compensation — the MSP or contracted price and how the government will ensure it in a

the VCCI. The 'ease of doing agri-trade' at the expense of protection of farmers' interests and 'promotion of contract farming' again reek of revival of the earlier farm laws. A narrative is building up among the farmers and other stakeholders that the reintroduction of basics of the repealed laws by the government under a new guise should be resisted.

The farmers' concerns about the weakening of the marketing infrastructure of markets, regulated by agricultural produce market committees (APMC) over time, are also not ill-founded. The policy draft suggests that the states consider allowing the buying of contracted produce outside the mandi yard and waive off the market fee when produce is bought for the purpose of processing and export to give impetus to these sectors. Organised retailers, processors, exporters and bulk buyers will be able to make direct purchases from the farm gate or at deemed market yards where they can initially offer higher prices to the farmers due to lower taxes. It will also affect the income of APMC markets due to lower arrivals. Thus, over time, these will become unviable.

Though the draft policy takes cognisance of the fact that agricultural marketing is a state subject under the Seventh Schedule in the Constitution, its mere glimpse

brings out the government agenda of addressing the long-standing challenges in agricultural marketing through a unified national approach. To allay the fears of farmers and to make it inclusive, the policy framework should be redrafted after public consultations with farmer unions and meaningful engagement with state governments and experts. Public investment in agro-processing and cold chains for supply and storage should be increased to strengthen the agricultural marketing infrastructure. Indian agriculture is facing a series of crises — income crisis due to the falling or stagnant incomes; degradation of natural resources; adverse impact of climate change, and last but not the least the loss of interest of the younger generation in agriculture. An inclusive and progressive agricultural marketing policy can go a long way in meeting these challenges by addressing major issues like the MSP, higher public investment and a participatory quick response system for responding to changes in the international market.



deregulated market? The experience of Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana in this context has not been encouraging for the farmers. The process of making payments to the farmers is also not trustworthy in an unregulated market.

Given this background, the effectiveness of an 'empowered agricultural marketing reform committee' is dubious. This appears to be a mechanism where all BJP-ruled states will be forced to accept the government's proposals so that any resistance at the national level due to genuine issues can be sidelined. The draft envisages making intense efforts to bring all farmers under one or other farmers' organisations i.e. cooperatives, FPOs, self-help groups, etc, to reduce their inaccessibility to market and price uncertainty. However, it has been observed that in many cases, the primary processing alone is not sufficient to enable the FPOs or other farmers groups to gain substantial income for their members. However, the provision related to value chain centric infrastructure (VCCI) does not commit firmly to providing all-out support to FPOs to set up

IAF training hiccups

CAG red-flags glaring deficiencies

THE highlight of the Indian Air Force's (IAF) 92nd Raising Day celebrations in October this year was a typically spectacular air show, whose theme was 'Bhartiya Vayu Sena — Saksham, Sashakt, Atmanirbhar (potent, powerful and self-reliant)'. Those three words were supposed to reflect the IAF's "unwavering dedication to safeguarding the nation's airspace". The ground reality, however, is not all that rosy. In a report tabled in Parliament on Wednesday, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has flagged deficiencies in the training of IAF pilots. Under intense scrutiny is the Pilatus PC-7 Mk-II aircraft, which is being used to impart Stage-1 flying training since 2013. The performance audit has noted that 25 per cent of these aircraft reported 38 snags due to engine oil leaks between 2013 and 2021. No less worrying are the delays in



the IAF's aircraft modernisation plans that have affected stages 2 and 3 of pilot training for transport and helicopter streams.

Outdated equipment is another area of concern. The world's fourth-largest air force cannot afford to compromise on the upgrade of training simulators and aircraft. Trainee pilots need state-of-the-art technology to hone their skills. Issues such as engine oil leaks can dampen the spirits of aspirants who want to soar high and protect India's skies. Lowering the bar can prove to be a recipe for disaster.

There are problems not only in terms of quality but also quantity. The shortage of pilots has risen from 486 to 596 in about six years, as the recruitment has fallen short of the targeted intake. The CAG has done its job. Now it is up to the IAF and the government to take corrective action on priority. This vital pillar of India's defence edifice must not be allowed to lose its much-touted potency and

power.

Bhagwat offers balm to the soul

THE GREAT GAME: It has taken the RSS chief to remind his own govt about the nation's diversity

AS the year turns, it may not be a far cry to say that 2024, in many ways, has belonged to RSS chief Mohan Madhukar Rao Bhagwat. The RSS chief's latest comments on Thursday in Pune, during a lecture on "India — the Vishwaguru" at the Sahjeevan Vyakhyanamala lecture series, seem startling enough to provide balm to the soul. To say that "mandir-masjid disputes are unacceptable"; that "after the construction of the Ram Mandir, some people think they can become leaders of Hindus by raking up similar issues in new places and that this is not acceptable"; to ask, "who is a minority and who is a majority" and answer that question himself, "everyone is equal." Perhaps Bhagwat realised that the competitive politics over who is a better Hindu leader had to be properly nipped

agwat's comments, 75 years after the Constitution guaranteed a secular republic, should have been par for the course. Instead, they are the stuff of relief — and headlines. It has taken the RSS chief to remind his own government that the nation consists of folks with bewilderingly diverse views, traditions, customs, religions, language. And that if this 'khichri' has to retain its distinctive flavour, then maybe there's no point trying to stuff it into the One Nation One People straitjacket. Predictably, those on the political left are looking for a chink in the armour of his Pune speech — maybe something is lost in translation, since Bhagwat spoke in his native Marathi. Not so predictably, those on the political right are perhaps also wondering why Bhagwat is unhooking the saffron flag from its stump, especially since Hindutva's victory over Muslims is hovering around the horizon. It's not clear when the penny dropped and what caused Bhagwat to make the comments he did in Pune. After all, for him to say that "we need to stay together" — Hindus, Muslims, Christians, all — mere weeks after the RSS began the year-long celebration of its 100th anniversary and on

the eve of Christmas (which the Modi government marks as "good governance day", a working day to boot) — is both singular and interesting.

Perhaps Bhagwat realised, after five people were unnecessarily killed in police firing after the communities clashed over the architectural antecedents of the Sambhal mosque a few weeks ago, that the competitive politics over who is a better Hindu leader had to be properly nipped in the bud. Perhaps he saw that India's 200 million Muslims, as much as 14 per cent of the population, had to live peaceably and equably with the rest, and that even contemplating another partition of the country was beyond the realm of contemplation. Perhaps he recognised the dangers lurking closer than anyone else. Perhaps he looked around himself and saw how — and why — Islamic nations like Syria and Afghanistan and Palestine had fallen, like ninepins, in the past couple of years. Where would India's Muslims go if they were not allowed to live like equal citizens in their own country by bulldozer hotheads determined to raze their self-respect to the ground?

After all, back in 2018, Bhagwat had told reporters in Delhi that "without Muslims, Hindutva is incomplete." And last year, when the single Bench of the Allahabad High Court allowed a survey of the Gyanvapi masjid to see whether it had once been a temple and TV journalists began to palpitate over the implications of the decision, Bhagwat calmly said, "Why look for a shivling beneath every mosque?" Certainly, it is nobody's case that the RSS chief and PM Modi are not peas in the same pod or that the RSS has not benefited enormously from the BJP being in power over the last



decade. Of course, it has. The RSS knows that if not for Modi, there would be no Ram temple in Ayodhya or its expansion in 39 countries worldwide. The RSS chief is clear that all Indians of all religions are "Hindus", because once upon a time they were that.

In his Vijaya Dashami address earlier in October, Bhagwat made it clear that he had no time for "wokeism and cultural Marxism". He pointed out that Bangladeshi Hindus needed help from India. "Even the Gods do not care for the weak... What happened in Bangladesh should be a lesson for Hindu society. Weakness is a crime," he added. But Bhagwat's RSS is interesting in many more ways. It is credibly said that Sangh cadres, who often tip the scales between winning and losing, did not enthusiastically campaign for BJP candidates in the 2024 General Election like they had done previously

Khanna has shut down all legal conversation on whether mosques-were-once-temples. At least for the moment, Bhagwat is also trying to calm down his aroused flock — be satisfied with the Ram Mandir, he's saying, no need to take over Kashi or Mathura or dig under the Sambhal shahi masjid or the Ajmer Sharif dargah. It's more than likely that Bhagwat knows the inside story of the mediation that took place between Hindu and Muslim groups which resulted in the 2019 Supreme Court verdict that gave the 2.77 acres constituting the Ram Janmabhoomi sanctum sanctorum to the "Hindu side". Bhagwat probably knows the give-and-take that took place over months, why the Muslims gave up what they did and what they were promised in exchange.

Britannica didn't just survive. It's an AI company now

NEW DELHI. For nearly 250 years, the Encyclopaedia Britannica was a bookshelf-busting series of gilt-lettered tomes, often purchased to show that its owners cared about knowledge. It was the sort of physical media expected to die in the internet era, and indeed, the encyclopedia's publisher announced that it was ending the print edition in 2012. Skeptics wondered how Britannica the company could survive in the age of Wikipedia. The answer was to adapt to the times. Britannica Group runs websites, including Britannica.com and the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, and sells educational software to schools and libraries. It also sells artificial intelligence agent software that underpins apps like customer service chatbots and data retrieval. Britannica has figured out not only how to survive, but also how to do well financially. Jorge Cauz, its CEO, said in an interview that the publisher enjoyed pro forma profit margins of about 45%. The company is weighing an initial public offering, in which it could seek a valuation of about \$1 billion, according to a person with knowledge of the deliberations. That could provide a sizable return for the company's owner, Swiss financier Jacob E Safra, who acquired the publisher in 1995 and, in a lawsuit filed in 2022, cited an investment bank in valuing Britannica at \$500 million. The company says its websites draw over 7 billion annual page views a year, with users in more than 150 countries.

Britannica has come far from its origins in the 18th century as the publisher of a reference work put together by three Scottish printers. Over the years, the Encyclopaedia Britannica became a heavyweight of the knowledge business, both literally - the 32-volume 2010 edition, the last to run in print, weighed 129 pounds - and figuratively, drawing on contributions from thousands of experts. It also became an aspirational status symbol, with customers paying nearly \$1,400 for that edition.

By the time the last Encyclopaedia Britannica was printed, the company had already started its suite of websites and educational software. Now it sees even greater opportunity in the growth of generative AI tools, which the company says can help make learning more dynamic - and therefore more desirable.

Cauz said Britannica had experimented with the technology over the past few decades. It acquired Melingo, the company that makes its AI agent software, in 2000 because of its strength in natural language processing and machine learning. And it has two technology teams, based in Chicago and in Tel Aviv.

Ex-finance minister Arun Jaitley had given go-ahead to clean up bad loans, says Raghuram Rajan

MUMBAI. Former finance minister Arun Jaitley had encouraged Raghuram Rajan to take decisive action on cleaning up bad loans of Indian banks, the former RBI governor said in a recent interview to a news portal and asserted that the build-up of non-performing assets (NPAs) in the banking sector, worsened by corruption, delayed clearances, and the global financial crisis, had necessitated a comprehensive review.

"When I discussed the need to clean up the system with Jaitley, he said, 'fine, go ahead... We did it,'" Rajan told a digital news platform. However, he highlighted the slow pace of recapitalisation by govt, which hindered resumption of lending by banks. Rajan was RBI governor from 2013 to 2016. "We had problems in India over and above the global financial crisis which was that there were corruption scandals and therefore permissions started getting delayed a lot, projects weren't getting land, projects weren't getting environment permissions... they were building NPAs in the financial system," Rajan said. In a 2014 interview with TOI, Rajan had spoken of the need for "forensic skills" in RBI supervision to identify "where the bodies are buried" in banks. The RBI initiated an asset quality review (AQR) in 2015, which exposed significant bad loans that had been carried as performing assets. Rajan said, "Many loans became NPAs after the crisis and delays in projects. During my predecessor's time, a moratorium was allowed on terming them non-performing, but it only prolonged the problem."

While the system eventually stabilised, he emphasised the importance of avoiding a repeat of past mistakes, particularly in retail and MSME loans. The AQR turned out to be the biggest clean-up in Indian banking history with lenders posting losses worth crores and facing lending curbs.

Google proposes fix to solve search monopoly

WASHINGTON. Google said Friday what it thought should change to address a ruling that it had illegally maintained a monopoly over online search: not much. It follows the landmark ruling in Aug by judge Amit P Mehta of the US district court for the district of Columbia, who said Google had illegally maintained a monopoly in online search by paying companies like Apple and Samsung to be the search engine that automatically appears when users open a web browser or a smartphone. The govt then asked the judge to force Google to sell Chrome, the world's most popular browser, among other remedies.

In Google's own proposal to fix the search monopoly, it asked Mehta to allow it to continue to pay other companies for its search engine to get prime placement. But it said those agreements should be less restrictive than in the past.

Apple, for example, could select different search engines to come up automatically for iPhone and iPad users, said Lee-Anne Mulholland, the company's VP of regulatory affairs, in a blog post. Cellphone makers using Google's popular operating system, Android, could also install multiple search engines and could install other Google apps without installing its search tool or its Gemini artificial intelligence assistant product.

Holiday Week Ahead: Global Trends And FIIs' Moves To Drive Stock Market Sentiment

Last week, the BSE benchmark fell sharply, shedding 4,091.53 points or 4.98%, while the Nifty declined by 1,180.8 points or 4.76%.

NEW DELHI. Stock market participants are expected to focus on global trends and foreign investors' trading activity in the upcoming holiday-shortened week, analysts said. With no major domestic triggers, the markets will look to global cues for direction.

Equity Markets Closed for Christmas
Indian equity markets will remain closed on Wednesday, December 25, for Christmas, limiting market activity further during the week. Key Global Indicators to Shape Market Sentiment While no major domestic events are lined up, several global economic indicators, including US



bond yields, dollar index performance, initial jobless claims, and new home sales data, are expected to influence market direction. "Amid heightened volatility and persistent FIIs (Foreign Institutional Investors) selling pressure, investors are likely to adopt a cautious stance," said Praveesh Gour, Senior Technical Analyst, Swastika Investmart Ltd. "Despite recent weakness, the market outlook remains cautiously optimistic. However,

relentless selling by FIIs has added to market pressure."

Recent Market Performance Highlights
Last week, the BSE benchmark fell sharply, shedding 4,091.53 points or 4.98%, while the Nifty declined by 1,180.8 points or 4.76%. "The sudden change in FII strategy from buying to selling has impacted markets," noted V K Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services.

Rupee, Crude Oil Prices to Be Monitored
Apart from global indicators, the rupee-dollar trend and the movement of global oil benchmark Brent crude will play a key role in determining the market's trajectory.

December Derivatives Expiry to Add Volatility

The scheduled expiry of December's derivative contracts could further amplify market volatility this week. "The holiday-shortened week will see participants closely monitoring FII flow trends and global market performance for direction," said Ajit Mishra, SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd.

Low Activity Expected Amid Festive Season

Siddhartha Khemka, Head of Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, added, "With the festive season approaching and global markets closed for 2-3 days, including a domestic holiday on December 25, market activity is expected to be low this week."

Central PSUs Record 47 Per Cent Jump In Net Profit For 2023-24, Market Cap Doubles

New Delhi. Overall Net Profit of operating Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) rose to Rs 3.22 lakh crore in FY24 as against Rs 2.18 lakh crore in FY23 showing an increase of over 47 per cent, according to an official report. The market capitalisation of CPSEs more than doubled in Fiscal Year 2024-25 as compared to Fiscal Year 2023-24, the report said. The major contributors to the increase in market cap are NTPC Ltd, Oil & Natural Gas Corporation Ltd, Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd, Coal India Ltd and Indian Railway Finance Corporation Ltd. A major proportion of the increase in profit of Rs 0.89 lakh crore was contributed by the Petroleum (Refinery & Marketing) group, according to the report compiled by the Public Enterprises Department of the Finance Ministry. Within the Petroleum (Refinery & Marketing) group, the major contribution towards the increase in Overall Net Profit is contributed by Indian Oil Corporation Ltd (Rs 0.31 lakh crore). The profitability of the



Petroleum (Refinery & Marketing) group has impacted the overall profitability," the survey said. Net Loss of loss-incurring CPSEs was Rs 0.21 lakh crore as against Rs 0.29 lakh crore showing a decrease of over 27 per cent. Major loss-incurring CPSEs are Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd, Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd, Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Ltd, Bharat Petro Resources Ltd and NMDC Steel Ltd.

"Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd. converted from a loss of Rs 0.15 lakh crore to a profit of Rs 0.15 Lakh crores in FY 2023-24, while Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd was able to reduce the loss

from Rs 0.08 lakh crore in FY 2022-23 to Rs 0.05 lakh crore in FY 2023-24," the report said. Contribution to the Central Exchequer (CCE) of all CPSEs by way of excise duty, customs duty, GST, corporation tax, interest on Central Government loans, dividend, and other duties and taxes stood at Rs 4.85 lakh crore in FY 24 as against Rs 4.58 lakh crore in FY 23, showing an increase of around 6 per cent. Among the components of CCE, Excise duty is the highest component which accounts for 46 per cent in FY 2023-24. The increase in CCE is mainly due to an increase in Corporation tax from Rs 0.56 lakh crore in (FY 2022-23) to Rs 0.81 lakh crore in (FY 2023-24).

The top five CPSEs contributing to the Central Exchequer are Indian Oil Corporation Ltd, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd, Oil & Natural Gas Corporation Ltd and Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd.

Pegasus: 300 of 1,400 users from India, why ruling may re-open tapping debate

New Delhi. For the first time, a court in the US has held Israel's NSO Group liable for its intrusive spyware Pegasus, which could set up a measure of accountability for the company that it has, for long, allegedly downplayed.

The decision came in a case filed by Meta-owned WhatsApp against the NSO Group, with the judge in the case, Phyllis Hamilton, holding that the Israeli spyware maker was liable for targeting the devices of 1,400 WhatsApp users, and violating sections of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA), a federal cybersecurity law, and a similar state law in California called the California Computer Data Access and Fraud Act (CDAFA).

Victims of Pegasus's use included senior government officials, journalists,

human rights activists, political dissidents and diplomats. The installation of Pegasus also extended to devices in India, including those allegedly belonging to journalists, politicians, Union Ministers, besides members of the civil society. In the US, President Joe Biden's administration put the NSO Group on a blacklist in 2021 and forbade US government agencies from purchasing its products.

Pegasus has been implicated in hacks by authoritarian governments across the world. The alleged Pegasus targeting in India, Centre's denial in 2021, it was reported that Pegasus was used on more than 300 Indian mobile numbers, including that of two serving ministers in the Narendra Modi government, three Opposition leaders,

one constitutional authority, several journalists and business persons.

The revelations raised eyebrows over the Central Government and state government's involvement in the attacks, since NSO Group has repeatedly said that it only deals with governments and government agencies. However, it should be noted that as part of the WhatsApp vs NSO Group case, unsealed documents had shown that NSO Group, for years, downplayed its role in the deployment of Pegasus. Through interviews and an assessment of subpoenaed documents, WhatsApp contradicted this claim, alleging that Pegasus customers had "minimal role" in its deployment, with NSO Group managing a substantial part of the process.

GST Council Meeting Highlights: Key Recommendations To Provide Relief To Individuals And Businesses

Jaisalmer. From reducing the GST rate on fortified rice kernel (FRK) to fully exempt GST on gene therapy, the 55th GST Council meeting, chaired by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, on Saturday made some key recommendations to provide relief to individuals and businesses.

The Council recommended exemption of GST on contributions by general insurance companies from third-party motor vehicle premiums for the Motor Vehicle Accident Fund. It also recommended no GST on the transaction of vouchers as they are neither a supply of goods nor supply of services. The provisions related to vouchers is also being simplified. GST Council clarified that no GST is payable on 'penal charges' levied and collected by banks and NBFCs from borrowers for non-compliance with loan terms. The Council recommended reduction of payment of pre-deposit for filing an appeal before the Appellate Authority in respect of an order passed which involves only penalty amount. It recommended reduction in GST rate on fortified rice kernel (FRK), classifiable

under 1904, to 5 per cent, as the commodity is supplied to the weaker sections of society through the public distribution system (PDS).

Under goods category, the meeting decided to extend IGST exemption to systems, sub-systems, equipment, parts, sub-parts, tools, test equipment, software meant assembly/manufacture of LRSAM system. It also recommended to reduce the rate of Compensation Cess to 0.1 per cent on supplies to merchant exporters at par with GST rate on such supplies and exempt from IGST imports of all equipment and consumable samples by Inspection Team of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) subject to specified conditions. The GST members also recommended to extend the concessional 5 per cent GST rate on food inputs of food preparations under "HSN 19 or 21" that are supplied for food preparations intended for free distribution to economically weaker sections under a government program subject to the existing conditions. Under the Services category, the GST Council recommended to bring supply of the sponsorship services

provided by the body corporates under Forward Charge Mechanism and exempt GST on the contributions made by general insurance companies from the third-party motor vehicle premiums collected by



them to the Motor Vehicle Accident Fund, constituted under section 164B of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988.

This fund is constituted for providing compensation/ cashless treatment to the victims of road accidents including hit and run cases. It recommended to increase the GST rate from 12 per cent to 18 per cent on sale of all old and used vehicles, including EVs other than those specified at 18 per cent like sale of old and used petrol vehicles of engine capacity of 1200 cc or

more and of length of 4000 mm or more; diesel vehicles of engine capacity of 1500 cc or more and of length of 4000 mm and SUVs.

The Council also clarified that Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (ACC) blocks containing more than 50 per cent fly ash content will fall under HS 6815 and attract 12 per cent GST. It further clarified that pepper, whether fresh green or dried pepper and raisins when supplied by an agriculturist, is not liable to GST.

It also clarified that ready-to-eat popcorn which is mixed with salt and spices are classifiable attracts 5 per cent GST, if supplied as other than pre-packaged and labelled, and 12 per cent GST if supplied as pre-packaged and labelled.

However, when popcorn is mixed with sugar thereby changing its character to sugar confectionary (eg caramel popcorn), it would attract 18 per cent GST. The Council has approved an amendment to the definition of prepackaged and labelled items intended for retail sale. The step is aimed at clarifying the definition for all goods as currently there is a lot of confusion on the issue.

Indian skills will help build 'New Kuwait': PM Modi

NEW DELHI. Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said the diaspora has filled Kuwait's canvas with the colours of Indian skills and assured that India has the manpower, skills and technology needed by a "New Kuwait". Modi, who is on a two-day visit to Kuwait at the invitation of Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, addressed a gathering of the Indian community in Kuwait City.

His visit to Kuwait is the first for any Indian PM to this Gulf nation in 43 years. The last PM to visit Kuwait was Indira Gandhi in 1981. Ahead of his arrival in Kuwait, Modi graciously agreed to meet 101-year-old Mangal Sain Handa, a former Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officer, after a request from his granddaughter Shreya Juneja on X.

Juneja's post read, "Humble request to Hon'ble PM @narendramodi to meet my 101-year-old Nanaji, ex-IFS officer, in Kuwait during tmrv's interaction with the Indian Diaspora. Nana @MangalSainHanda is a great admirer of yours. Details have been emailed to your office." Modi's response was swift: "Absolutely! I look forward to meeting @MangalSainHanda Ji in Kuwait today."

Addressing the Indian diaspora, Modi said, "It takes you four hours to reach here from India but it took four decades for an Indian PM to travel to Kuwait." Greeting the gathering for the series of festivals that would be celebrated over next few weeks, he said, "You all have come from different parts of India, but looking at all of you, it feels like a mini India has gathered here."

"Every year, hundreds of Indians come to Kuwait; you have added Indian touch to Kuwaiti society. You have filled Kuwait's canvas with colours of Indian skills, mixed with the essence of India's talent, technology and tradition," the PM said. "India has manpower, skills and technology needed by New Kuwait," he added. Earlier, Modi met two Kuwaiti nationals who translated and published India's two iconic epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana in Arabic. He also signed copies of the Arabic versions of the two epics. "Happy to see Arabic translations of the Ramayan and Mahabharat. I compliment Abdullah Al-Baroun and Abdul Lateef Al-Nesef for their efforts in translating and publishing it. Their initiative highlights the popularity of



Indian culture globally," Modi said in a post on X.

Handa, a longtime admirer of Modi, was overwhelmed by the PM's warmth and approachability. In 2023, on the occasion of Handa's 100th birthday, PM Modi sent a letter to him, acknowledging his contributions to India's global engagement. In the letter, PM Modi wrote: "It is a pleasure to learn about your 100 birthday on September 1, 2023. Greetings and heartfelt congratulations to you on this occasion." He noted Handa's role as an IFS officer, mentioning his work in promoting India's diplomatic relations and navigating complex global issues. The Prime Minister concluded the letter with warm wishes, saying, "May you continue to be blessed with good health and well-being." Handa,

touched by the gesture, expressed his gratitude on X, sharing the letter with the message, "My heartfelt gratitude to our hon'ble @PMIndia @narendramodi for sending his kind wishes on my 100th birthday. It has been worth living for 100 years to witness India grow under his leadership & continue the stride."

Rann Utsav offers an otherworldly experience: PM Modi

PM Narendra Modi, ahead of his Kuwait visit on Saturday, urged people to explore the cultural richness and natural beauty of Gujarat's Kutch region, during the ongoing Rann Utsav. "Kutch awaits you all! Come, discover the pristine White Rann, the spectacular culture, and warm hospitality of Kutch during the ongoing Rann Utsav," Modi posted on microblogging site X. The festival, which began on December 1, is scheduled till February 28 next year, with extended arrangements to be made till March 25. Highlighting Kutch's attractions in detail on LinkedIn, Modi wrote, "Kutch's vast salt desert gleams under the moonlight, offering an otherworldly experience. It is equally celebrated for its thriving arts and crafts."

Government to check commercial viability of D2M tech

NEW DELHI. After the "reasonably successful" preliminary trials of direct-to-mobile (D2M) technology — telecast of live TV channels on smartphones without an internet connection — Prasar Bharati has sent a detailed proposal with findings to the government to seek approval for initiating large-scale testing to check its commercial feasibility.

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting officials said the proposal is considered "seriously" and a go-ahead is expected within two months. Initial short-term technology trials have "reasonably" been successful, and now it is only a matter of time before the commercial viability is established, they added.

"Short-term trials of D2M have been completed. We need to carry out large-scale trials, which will take two to three years. The project plans will have to be worked out accordingly. The detailed proposal to check commercial viability of the technology has already been sent to the government. With large-scale trials, commercial viability will be tested. That is a major step, so a policy decision is required. The proposal sent by Prasar Bharati is being seriously considered. It will take another two months to get approval," said officials privy to the matter. After the policy decision, the tendering process for the selection of agencies to conduct trials will begin. The officials, however, said that actual field work might start in the next 8-10 months depending on decision at the government level. Initial trials were conducted in different cities, including Delhi, Noida and Bengaluru last year in collaboration with Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur and Saankhya Labs. On the significance of second-stage 'long-term' trials, the officials said that during the small-scale trials, by and large, there are no difficulties as they are technology-focused trials. "Small-scale trials give you, by and large, an idea whether the technology will work or not because it has already been tested in the laboratory. In large-scale trials, you get a chance to check commercial viability. On that basis, people make investments," said an official.

The duration of the large-scale trial is only decided after an assessment, which will be undertaken by the agencies that will participate in the trial. "For trials, critical mass of people are required. They will not come overnight. One lakh people will not join or get the devices. It will be checked if people are actually using the devices. This takes time," the official said.

Live broadcasting of content directly to mobile devices is done using broadcast signals like television and radio, bypassing traditional cellular or internet data networks. For this, the phones or devices require specific hardware to receive and decode broadcast signals.

Delhi may get rain for 3 days next week, relief from pollution likely

New Delhi. Delhi and its neighbouring states, including Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan will likely see rainfall after Christmas from December 26 to 28. If the forecast holds, it could provide a respite for the people in these places, particularly Delhi, which has been seeing pollution levels ranging between 'very poor' and 'severe' for the past few days. The rain is expected due to the interaction of a western disturbance in the region and a low-pressure area over the Bay of Bengal. Western disturbance refers to a storm originating in the Mediterranean region that brings sudden winter rain to the northwestern parts of India and its neighbouring countries. It will likely enter India on December 26. The western disturbance will form a cyclonic circulation over Rajasthan and other states on December 27.

The interaction of the two wind systems is expected to facilitate high moisture from both the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, and may persist until December 28. This will likely result in rainfall and snowfall over the western Himalayan region, particularly peaking on December 27 and 28. The plains of northwest India, including Delhi, and adjoining central areas will also experience rain on these dates. Thunderstorms accompanied by hailstorms are expected across Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh on December 27 and 28.

1 killed, another injured in Patna shooting, victims were returning from funeral

The men were on their way back from a cremation ceremony when the attack occurred in Patna. One of the men died on the spot while other was rushed to a hospital in critical condition.

New Delhi. A man died while another one was critically injured after being shot by unidentified assailants in Patna on Saturday, December 21. According to the police, the incident happened in Pethiya Bazaar area in Patna's Danapur when the two men, identified as Gorakh Rai and Ranjit Rai alias Dahi Gop, were returning after attending the last rites of a person when the incident happened.

Gorakh Rai succumbed to his injuries on the spot, while Ranjit Rai, who is a former Deputy Chairman of Danapur Cantonment, was rushed to a hospital in a critical condition.



A Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) team was called to the spot and some cartridges were recovered from the crime scene. Speaking about the incident, Patna Police's Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP) Bhanu Pratap Singh said "Two people have been shot at in Pethiya Bazaar which comes under the jurisdiction of Danapur Police Station. One of the persons has been referred to Paras Hospital for better treatment. Meanwhile, the second person, Gorakh Rai, has succumbed to his injuries. The FSL team has been called and some cartridges have been recovered. Further investigation is underway."

Earlier in August this year, a BJP leader was shot dead near his house in the Bajrangpuri area of Patna by two bike-borne assailants. Ajay Sah, who was the General Secretary of the Patna District BJP, was shot dead when he was sitting inside his milk parlour, which he operated close to his residence.

Delhi's Air Quality In 'Very Poor' Category As Cold Wave Grips National Capital

New Delhi. Delhi witnessed yet another day of toxic air on Sunday, with the Air Quality Index (AQI) remaining in the 'very poor' category for the second consecutive day. At 6 am, the overall AQI was recorded at 386, as per data from the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). Parts of the city were covered by a dense layer of smog, reducing visibility and enforcing the strict implementation of GRAP Stage IV measures.

AQI readings from various parts of Delhi highlighted the severity of the situation: Okhla Phase 2 (388), Alipur (407), Rohini (423), ITO (382), Ashok Vihar (339), Wajipur (332), Shadipur (387), Mundka (426), Jahangirpuri (437), Narela (472), DTU (352), R.K. Puram (462), Anand Vihar (423), Pusa (377), and Punjabi Bagh (417). Notably, several locations approached or exceeded the "severe" threshold of



400.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) reported a slight rise in Delhi-NCR's minimum temperatures, ranging from 7 degrees Celsius to 9 degrees Celsius, with maximum temperatures hovering between 21-23 degrees Celsius.

The IMD warned that the smoggy conditions may persist in the coming days, with a potential intensification of the cold wave. Early mornings are

expected to witness reduced visibility and chilly conditions.

While the AQI has slightly improved from the 'severe' to 'very poor' category, a significant improvement appears unlikely due to unfavourable weather conditions. Prolonged exposure to such air poses serious health risks, especially for vulnerable groups. The wind speed on Saturday evening was four kmph making it difficult for pollutants to disperse. In the coming days, Delhi may experience continued poor air quality due to cold waves and unfavourable weather conditions. Authorities have urged residents to minimise outdoor activities and adhere to anti-pollution measures. The CPCB emphasised the health hazards of AQIs above 400, warning of grave consequences for all residents if pollution levels persist.

Stepwell dating back to 1857 revolt era found in UP's Sambhal during survey

New Delhi. A 250-foot-deep stepwell, dating back to the era of the 1857 revolt, was found on Saturday during a survey in Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal. The stepwell was found after two bulldozers were involved in excavation at the site in the Laxman Ganj area. The discovery of the stepwell, named Rani ki Bawdi, came after the ruins of an ancient Banke Bihari temple were found in the same area earlier this month, according to reports.

The matter came to light when Sanatan Sevak Sangh's state publicity chief, Kaushal Kishore, wrote to Sambhal District Magistrate (DM) Rajendra Pansia that Laxman Ganj used to house the royal family of Sahaspur and also had a stepwell. As per locals and historical accounts, the stepwell dates back to the era of the First War of Independence in 1857. Kishore urged



the DM to excavate and beautify the site.

Following this, the DM ordered an excavation at the site in Laxman Ganj. Two bulldozers were used in the operation and dug up the spot, following which the stepwell was discovered. "During digging, a two-storey building and Rani ki Bawdi were seen, which is there in historical records. Excavation is currently underway," an official told. The digging was halted at night due to

visibility issues. The DM said that those families who encroached on the site where the stepwell was found would be removed by giving notice to them. On Friday, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) conducted carbon dating at the Kartikeya Temple in Sambhal, which was reopened on December 13 after remaining locked for 46 years. The temple had been shut since 1978, following communal riots that displaced the local Hindu community, according to local accounts.

Officials conducted carbon dating and examined five pilgrimage sites in the vicinity, including Bhadrak Ashram, Swargdeep and Chakrapani, along with an inspection of 19 wells. Authorities had earlier said that the temple was discovered during an anti-encroachment drive. Officials described the discovery as unplanned, claiming they "stumbled"

The discovery of the 250-foot-deep stepwell, named Rani ki Bawdi, in Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal came after the ruins of an ancient Banke Bihari temple were found in the same area earlier this month.

upon the site during the operation.

The temple is just a stone's throw away from the Shahi Jama Masjid, where four people were killed in the violence on November 24 during a protest against a court-ordered survey.

At PM-UDAY camps, residents from Delhi's unauthorised colonies line up for 'pakka kaagaz'

NEW DELHI. Girish Sharma, a 41-year-old autorickshaw driver from Karawal Nagar, is giddy with happiness. He just got his property registered, fulfilling his dream to finally own his house. Sharma is at a camp organised by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in Mandawali under the PM-UDAY scheme, which aims to assist residents of unauthorised colonies secure ownership rights to their houses. The DDA is organising camps across the Capital's unauthorised colonies on the weekends throughout December.

The camp on Saturday saw several people about to finally get legal documents that prove they own the properties where they have resided for long, since generations in some cases. Following the registry or conferment of ownership rights, residents can sell their properties, avail loans against them, and also get plans approved if they want to make changes in the current building or construct structures in a vacant plot for which they have received ownership

rights.

Sharma explains why these documents are so important. "In a few years, I am going to get my daughter married and will need a loan for the wedding. If I didn't have registry papers for my house, the bank wouldn't have given me a loan against it." He is thankful to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "Unki wajah se humare pakke kaagaz ban gaye (We have proper documentation due to him)."

Modi and L-G V K Saxena's faces adorn the banners of the PM-UDAY scheme. The L-G had directed DDA to expedite PM-UDAY applications in November after the scheme did not see a high number of property registrations for over four years. According to a reply given by the Union Housing Minister in Parliament in July, of the 1,22,729 applications, only 23,811 have been granted ownership rights under the scheme. The push to the scheme comes at a critical time, just ahead of the Delhi elections. The approximately 50 lakh



residents in Delhi's 1,731 unauthorised colonies form about one-third of the Capital's electorate.

"This time, it seems government officials are under pressure to work," says Navratan Goel (64), who owns a general store. He is about to get his house registered at a camp in East Vinod Nagar. "Earlier, officials used to delay and postpone. Now, they are saying all problems will be resolved and the process will be over today." However, not everyone shares their optimism. Shankar Pandey (65), who installed dental chairs in clinics till 2016, is now retired. Residents of nearby Ganesh Nagar, he

and his wife Sunita Pandey have a power of attorney dating back to 1981 for the house where they stay, but it was not accepted as proof of ownership at the Mandawali camp on Saturday.

"DDA officials are saying that some papers are not stamped properly. How do I account for how documents were stamped back then?" Pandey asks as the couple make their second visit to such a camp in two weeks. Far from Mandawali, Manik Mukherjee (46), a financial broker, faces a similar fate at a camp in Bharat Vihar, Dwarka. In 2016, he had bought his flat that had come up in an unauthorised colony, but a 2021 policy change requires him to show proof of ownership which is from before 2015. He is here with his neighbour Jayant Jha. Residents of a society in Chandra Park, they are frustrated. "It's not as if they are not taxing us on our property. If they are collecting tax from us, why not recognise our property," Jha asks.

NEWS BOX

Seven Indians injured in German Christmas market attack

World . Seven Indians have been injured in the deadly car-ramping attack in the eastern German city of Magdeburg and the Indian embassy in Berlin is providing them all possible assistance, official sources said on Saturday night. A 50-year-old man drove his car into crowds at a Christmas market on Friday evening in Saxony-Anhalt state's Magdeburg, leaving at least five people, including a nine-year-old, dead and nearly 200 injured, according to German authorities. Three out of seven injured Indians have been discharged from hospital, the sources cited above said. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), condemning the "horrific and senseless" attack, said the Indian mission in Germany is in contact with Indians injured.

It, however, did not specify the number of injured Indians. The Indian embassy in Berlin said it is maintaining close contact with Indians who have been injured. In a statement, the MEA condemned the attack and said the Indian mission is rendering all possible assistance to the Indians injured in the incident. "We condemn the horrific and senseless attack at a Christmas market in Magdeburg, Germany," the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said. "Several precious lives have been lost and many have been injured. Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims." "Our Mission is in contact with Indians who are injured, as well as their families, and rendering all possible assistance," the MEA said.

Two US pilots shot down over Red Sea in 'friendly fire' incident: military

WASHINGTON. Two US Navy pilots were shot down over the Red Sea early Sunday in "an apparent case of friendly fire," the American military said.

Both pilots were recovered alive but "initial assessments indicate that one of the crew members sustained minor injuries," the United States Central Command said late Saturday local Florida time -- where CENTCOM is headquartered. "This incident was not the result of hostile fire, and a full investigation is underway." CENTCOM said the guided missile cruiser USS Gettysburg "mistakenly fired on and hit the F/A-18" fighter aircraft, which was flown by the Navy pilots off another ship, the USS Harry S. Truman. The potentially disastrous mistake underscores the dangers of a mission the



United States has been involved in for more than a year as Yemen's Houthi rebels have repeatedly targeted merchant vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden that they say are Israeli-linked. On Saturday the United States said it struck targets in Yemen's rebel-held capital, hours after a Houthi rebel missile wounded people in Israel's commercial hub Tel Aviv. American forces also shot down multiple Houthi drones and an anti-ship cruise missile over the Red Sea, it said.

At Least 10 Killed In Church Stampede In Nigeria's Capital

Abuja. At least 10 people, including four children, were killed in a stampede during a relief item distribution at a local church in the Maitama district of Abuja, the Nigerian capital.

Josephine Adeb, spokesperson for the police in the Federal Capital Territory, said in a statement that eight others sustained varying degrees of injuries when the distribution of relief items, including food and clothing ahead of Christmas celebrations, turned chaotic Saturday at the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Maitama. "Four of the injured had been treated and discharged, while the remaining victims are currently receiving medical care," Adeb said, noting the police



successfully evacuated "a crowd, numbering over a thousand." Padre Mike Nsikak Umoh, spokesperson for the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, earlier told reporters that the event attracted more than 3,000 people from nearby villages and low-income suburbs. Following the "tragic incident," the "palliative distribution" was suspended, he said. According to witnesses, many attendees arrived as early as 4 a.m. local time, despite the event being scheduled to start between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. Saturday, Xinhua news agency reported. In a separate statement, Nigerian President Bola Tinubu confirmed another stampede Saturday morning in Okija, a town in the southeastern state of Anambra, where a philanthropic initiative to distribute rice to locals also turned fatal. "The two tragedies claimed many lives and left many others injured," Tinubu said, canceling his official duties for the day in honor of the victims. Highlighting an earlier stampede in the southwestern city of Ibadan on Wednesday, which claimed at least 35 lives and left six critically injured, the Nigerian leader called on states and local authorities to implement strict crowd control measures nationwide.

Bangladesh commission finds India's 'involvement in enforced disappearances'

DHAKA. An inquiry commission formed by Bangladesh's interim government has said that it has found India's 'involvement' in incidents of 'enforced disappearances' during deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina's regime, the state-run news agency BSS reported on Saturday.

The Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS), quoting the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearance, said that the Indian involvement in Bangladesh's system of enforced disappearances is a matter of public record. The news report said that according to the five-member commission headed by retired Supreme Court judge Mainul Islam Chowdhury, there was a 'persistent suggestion in law enforcement circles' that some prisoners might still be languishing in Indian jails.

"We recommend the Ministries of Foreign and Home to extend their best efforts to identify any Bangladeshi citizens who may still remain incarcerated in India. It is beyond the jurisdiction of the commission to follow this trail outside Bangladesh," the commission said. The commission said it found intelligence information about the

practice of captive exchanges between India and Bangladesh and the possible subsequent fate of detainees. The commission cited two highly publicised cases that provide valuable insights into how such operations were carried out.

"One was the case of Shukhranjan Bali, who was abducted from the Bangladesh Supreme Court premises and resurfaced subsequently in an Indian jail, and the other was of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Salahuddin Ahmed," the commission said. The commission said BNP leader Ahmed's case exemplifies certain practices of the Bangladesh-India rendition system. It said that while hiding at a house in Dhaka's Uttara area in 2015, he recounted being imprisoned in a barren cell, where a hole in the ground served as a toilet. "The blanket provided to him bore the letters 'TFI', indicative of 'Task Force for Interrogation,'" it added. During that period, the commission said the only operational TFI centre that they knew of was managed by Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) Intelligence Wing working under the aegis of RAB Headquarters.



The commission said that since then, they visited this location and confirmed that RAB Intelligence Wing still controls access to it. "However, the interior of the facility was thoroughly decimated some time ago," the news report said quoting the commission. Last week, the five-member commission submitted an interim report titled "Unfolding The Truth" to Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus.

The commission estimated that there would be more than 3,500 enforced disappearances. Besides the chairman, the commission comprises Justice Farid Ahmed Shibli, rights activist Nur Khan, private BRAC University teacher Nabila Idris and rights activist Sajjad

Hossain. Hasina, 77, fled to India on August 5 after unprecedented anti-government protests. The student-led Monsoon Revolution under the banner of 'Students Against Discrimination' succeeded in toppling Hasina's 16-year regime, propelled by fervent demands for change and accountability. The chief adviser's press wing had claimed the commission also found the involvement of the deposed prime minister's now absconding defence adviser, retired major general Tarique Ahmed Siddique, a now sacked major general and two senior police officers and several other senior officials in the cases of enforced disappearance. The news report said that the police's elite anti-crime Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which draws men from army, navy, air force and regular police and other law enforcement agencies had collaborated with each other to pick up, torture and keep victims in detention. The commission simultaneously proposed the abolition of the RAB alongside scrapping or thoroughly amending the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009. Commission member and rights activist Sajjad

Russia's Tatarstan Declares Emergency After Ukrainian Drone Attacks

Moscow. Russia's Tatarstan Republic declared a state of emergency for government bodies and emergency response units to manage the aftermath of Ukrainian drone attacks. "The head of Tatarstan has signed an order imposing a special emergency mode for government agencies and the Ministry of Emergency Situations. This status is necessary to swiftly handle the consequences of the attacks in accordance with the law," the press service of Tatarstan President Rustam Minnikhanov said on Saturday. "The order applies exclusively to those involved in the response efforts and does not affect the general population." On Saturday, eight drone strikes were reported in Tatarstan's capital city of Kazan, six of which targeted residential buildings. Preliminary reports indicated there were no injuries,

Xinhua news agency reported. Tatarstan's governor, Rustam Minnikhanov, confirmed six drones



struck residential buildings, one hit an industrial site, and another was shot down over a river.

The attacks, which Ukraine didn't acknowledge in keeping with its security policy, come after a Ukrainian

attack on Friday on a town in Russia's Kursk border region using US-supplied missiles killed six people, including a child.

Moscow sent 113 drones into Ukraine overnight on Saturday, Ukrainian officials said. According to Ukraine's Air Force, 57 drones were shot down during the attacks. A further 56 drones were "lost," likely having been electronically jammed.

Following the attack, operations at Izhevsk Airport near Kazan were temporarily restricted. The restrictions were lifted by 15:00 local time (1100 GMT) on Saturday, Russia's TASS news agency quoted Alexander Sinelnikov, general director of Izhevsk-based aviation company Izhavia, as saying.

Pakistan Jails 25 Imran Khan Supporters Over Violent Protests

Islamabad, Pakistan. Pakistan military courts have convicted and sentenced 25 people for involvement in pro-Imran Khan unrest last year, the armed forces said Saturday, with the majority handed decade-long prison terms. Ex-prime minister Khan was arrested in May last year after being ousted from office and mounting an unprecedented campaign of defiance against the nation's powerful military leaders. His detention over graft allegations sparked nationwide unrest, some targeting armed forces installations, and prompting rare prosecutions of civilians in military courts. Amnesty International called the move "an intimidation tactic, designed to crack down on dissent" and said it was "contrary to international law".

Military courts are largely opaque, but after months of confidentiality the military public relations wing named 25 people who have been prosecuted.

All of the convicted are men and 14 have been sentenced to a decade of "rigorous imprisonment", the military said with the remaining 11 set to serve lesser prison terms. "All sentences announced by the military courts are disproportionate and excessive," said a spokesman for Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. "These sentences are rejected."

The verdicts were announced just three weeks after the capital Islamabad was gripped by fresh unrest, as tens of thousands of Khan supporters flooded in to demand his release.

The government said at least five security personnel were killed whilst PTI allege at least 10 of their own were shot dead by security forces before crowds retreated.

'Political terrorism'

A military statement did not make clear what crime each person had been convicted of or when, listing only the location of their offence. The shortest sentence meted out was two years.

During the May 2023 unrest Pakistan "witnessed tragic incidents of politically provoked violence and arson at multiple places," the military statement said. "These blatant acts of violence not only shocked the nation but also underscored necessity of checking this unacceptable attempt of political terrorism." The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said "no civilian should be tried in a military court under any circumstances." "This contravenes the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of Pakistan as well as the international human rights obligations to which Pakistan is a state party," the organisation said in a statement on

social media platform X.

Former cricket star Khan served as prime minister from 2018 to 2022, when he was ousted by parliament in a no-confidence vote. He blamed the then-head of the powerful military establishment for his downfall. Pakistan's generals are considered the country's political kingmakers and have directly ruled the nation for decades at a time. Khan's May 2023 detention lasted a matter of days but he was re-arrested three months later and has remained imprisoned since, facing a parade of court cases he claims are politically motivated.

Meanwhile, PTI was targeted by a sweeping crackdown following the unrest, with thousands of grassroots supporters and senior officials arrested. The 72-year-old was barred from running in February elections, which were marred by rigging allegations.

PTI defied the crackdown to win more seats than any other party, but a coalition of parties considered more pliable to military influence formed a government and shut them out of power. A United Nations panel of experts found in September that Khan's detention "had no legal basis and appears to have been intended to disqualify him from running for political office".

France Jails 8 Accused Who Beheaded Teacher For Showing Prophet's Caricature

Paris. A French court sentenced eight people to prison terms ranging from one to 16 years for their roles in a hate campaign that culminated in the murder of a teacher who had shown caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in class, local media reported.

Days after Samuel Paty, 47, showed his pupils the caricatures in October 2020, an 18-year-old Chechen assailant stabbed and beheaded him outside his school in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, near Paris. The assailant was shot dead by police moments after.

Among those convicted on Friday was the father of a student whose false account of Paty's use of the caricatures triggered a wave of social media posts targeting the middle-school teacher. The court sentenced Brahim Chnina to 13 years in prison for criminal terrorist association, according to broadcaster Franceinfo. Chnina had published videos



falsely accusing the teacher of disciplining his daughter for complaining about the class, naming Paty and identifying his school. Abdelhakim Sefrioui, the founder of a hardline Islamist organization, received a 15-year sentence. Both Sefrioui and Chnina were found guilty of inciting hatred against Paty.

Many Muslims consider any depiction of the Prophet Muhammad to be blasphemous. Sefrioui's lawyer said his client would appeal the decision, according to French media. Two associates of Paty's killer, Abdullakh Anzorov, were also convicted. Naim Boudaoud and Azim Epsirkhanov were sentenced to 16 years in prison for complicity in a terrorist killing. Both had denied wrongdoing, according to Franceinfo. Last year, a court found Chnina's daughter and five other adolescents guilty of participating in a premeditated conspiracy and helping prepare an ambush. Chnina's daughter, who was not in Paty's class when the caricatures were shown, was convicted of making false accusations and slanderous comments. French media reported that the 13-year-old made the allegations after her parents questioned why she had been suspended from school for two days.

Bangladesh Receives 1.16 Bn USD World Bank Financing For Inclusive, Climate-Resilient Development

The World Bank approved 1.16 billion USD to help Bangladesh improve health services, water and sanitation services and achieve greener and climate-resilient development.

Dhaka. The World Bank approved three operations totaling 1.16 billion USD to help Bangladesh improve health services, water and sanitation services and achieve greener and climate-resilient development.

"These new financing will bring to the people of Bangladesh essential services such as health and water and sanitation while laying the foundation for clean, climate resilient and sustainable development," Abdoulaye Seck, World Bank country director for Bangladesh and Bhutan, said in a statement received here Friday, as Bangladesh is among the most vulnerable countries to climate change and faces the greatest pollution challenges. According to the Washington-based lender, the 500-



million-dollar Second Bangladesh Green and Climate Resilient Development Credit will support reforms to help the country's transition to green and climate-resilient development, Xinhua news agency reported. The 379-million-dollar Health,

Nutrition, and Population Sector Development Program-For-Results will help improve access to quality health and nutrition services and build resilient health systems in Sylhet and Chattogram divisions. The 280-million-dollar

Chattogram Water Supply Improvement Project will provide safe water through new and rehabilitated piped water connections to over 1 million people in Chattogram. It will build about 200,000 new household water connections and provide improved sanitation services to about 100,000 people in low-income communities. This project is part of a World Bank South Asia regional initiative or program of programs to provide Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services to about 100 million people across the region by 2035. The project will also help the Chattogram Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (CWASA) improve operational efficiency and financial sustainability and address issues related to water loss such as high levels of leakage, metering inaccuracies, and illegal connections. It will help reduce water losses by installing new water meters and operationalising 46 Smart District Metered Areas (DMAs) for reliable water supply, leakage detection, and real-time tracking of water consumption.

NEWS BOX

Who is Gongadi Trisha? India's U19 World Cup winner, now U19 Asia Cup final hero

New Delhi. Gongadi Trisha was the star for India in the inaugural edition of the Under-19 Women's Asia Cup in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The 19-year-old finished as the top scorer of the tournament, having notched 159 runs from five innings at an average of 53 and a strike-rate of 120.45. It was on the back of her performance that India stayed unbeaten throughout the tournament. Trisha bagged a duck against Pakistan, after which he got an unbeaten 17 against Nepal. It was during the Super Fours that the teenager started showing her true class. She scored an unbeaten 58 against Bangladesh and helped India win by eight wickets. In the next Super Four match, Trisha made 32 against Sri Lanka as the Girls in Blue finished atop the points table. In the final against Bangladesh, Trisha scored 52 runs off 47 balls with the help of five fours and two sixes. On the back of her knock, India put up a decent score of 117 for seven. Thereafter, India bowled their opponents out for 76 runs in



18.3 overs to win the match by 41 runs. Not only did Trisha win the Player of the Match, but she also bagged the Player of the Tournament award. Gongadi Trisha shining for India Under-19. Interestingly, Trisha was a part of the Indian team that won the Under-19 Women's T20 World Cup in South Africa last year. In seven matches in the tournament, Trisha racked up 116 runs at an average of 23.20 and a strike-rate of 108.41. She got her top score of 57 off 51 balls against Katherine Fraser's Scotland at Willowmoore Park B Field in Benoni. In the final against England at the Senwes Park in Potchefstroom, Trisha made 24 runs off 29 balls with three fours, helping India chase down 69 in 14 overs. Trisha also plays for Hyderabad in domestic cricket.

India high on confidence after Gabba: Series 50-50 going into MCG, says Akash Deep

New Delhi. The Border-Gavaskar Trophy is 50-50 going into the final two Test matches of the series, said India seamer Akash Deep. Speaking to the media on Sunday, December 22, Akash Deep said that India took a lot of confidence from the 3rd Test match at the Gabba after they managed to save the follow-on, on Day 4. Akash Deep added that the team environment was quite cheerful after their sensational escape in Brisbane.

Despite trailing for the majority of the Test match, India managed to eke out a draw in the 3rd Test match. Akash Deep and Jasprit Bumrah's heroic partnership was key to India's survival, as they added crucial 47 runs for the final wicket, saving India from the embarrassment of follow-on. In the process, Australia were forced to come out to bat for the second time, which cut into their crucial bowling hours on the final day. With inclement weather playing part, the hosts failed to capitalise on their advantage, with the Test match ending in a draw. Speaking



ahead of the Boxing Day Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, Akash Deep said that the entire dressing room was happy when he and Bumrah returned to the dressing room unbeaten at the end of Day 4. On that day, Virat Kohli, Gautam Gambhir and Rohit Sharma celebrated wildly after India had crossed the 245-run threshold.

"The position that I bat it, if we can add 25 runs at the back end, it becomes very important. I always want to contribute with the bat. On Day 4 at the Gabba, my mindset was that I did not want to get out and thankfully by God's grace that worked out. When I went back to the dressing room, the mood had lifted up. When you save a follow-on, you get confident and you could see that on everybody's face, everyone was enjoying," Akash Deep said at the MCG on Sunday.

"The series is 50-50 going into the last two Test matches. In the last Test match, while we were behind for the most part, the confidence we got in the last day, I think that matters and.

IND vs AUS: Injury scare for Rohit Sharma after blow to knee in Melbourne nets

India captain Rohit Sharma and batter KL Rahul copped injury blows ahead of the Boxing Day Test match in Melbourne. While Rohit was hit on his knee, KL Rahul was spotted getting attended by the physio after an injury to his right hand.



under the leadership of Virat Kohli and then under Ajinkya Rahane. The hope for the three-peat might be under threat if the India captain gets injured for the last two Tests of the series. On Sunday, Sharma was spotted applying an ice pack on his knee after his injury and had hobbled out of the nets in Melbourne. Earlier on Saturday, India opener KL Rahul got hit on his hand while batting at the nets and was promptly attended to by the team's physio ahead of the fourth Test against Australia. Rahul was hit on his right hand and was seen in some discomfort at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. The BCCI did not provide clarity on either of the injuries.

India's Record at MCG
India have played 14 Tests at the iconic MCG. The team has won only 4 of the 14 Tests and has lost in 8 occasions. Only 2 Test matches have ended in a draw. India first played at the

MCG in January 1948 against a Donald Bradman-led Australian side. Under the leadership of Lala Amarnath, India lost the

match by 233 runs. India's recent record at the MCG is however quite good. India have not lost at the 'G' since 2014.

Frustrated Flick says 'losing 9 points not normal' after tough Atletico result

New Delhi Barcelona's disappointing run continued as they slipped off the top of LaLiga, suffering a 2-1 home defeat to Atletico Madrid on Saturday. Despite the setback, coach Hansi Flick urged his team to learn from their mistakes and come back stronger after the winter break. The loss extended Barcelona's winless streak to three LaLiga games, with just five points earned from their last 21 available. This includes defeats to Leganes and Las Palmas in their previous two home matches. With the loss, Barcelona now trail Atletico by three points, having played one more game than their rivals. Flick, despite the defeat, praised his team's performance, emphasising that the winter break would provide the perfect opportunity for a reset. "Today it was unbelievable how we

played," said Flick. "Maybe this break came at the right time. I appreciate how we played, but we have to learn from these things. Losing nine points is not normal, and we have to work on it." Acknowledging the frustration of recent results, Flick remained optimistic about his young squad's potential. "The points lost against Las Palmas and Leganes are in the past. We will show after the break how strong we are. We are very disappointed with the defeat, but life goes on." Reflecting on his players and their potential. "When I drive at 0630 to go to training, I am happy because I can train with these players. Now, there is not a good atmosphere in the dressing room, but that's football.

Delhi SG Pipers' Rajkumar Pal aiming for Hockey India League spotlight

New Delhi For Delhi SG Pipers' Rajkumar Pal, the journey over the past years in hockey has been sensational. After missing the chance to make the trip for the Tokyo Olympics, the midfielder went back to the drawing board and worked hard. This was rewarded in 2024, when he was part of the Indian team that won the bronze medal at the Paris Olympics. Now, set to be part of the revamped Hockey India League, Rajkumar is hoping to make the spotlight his own with the Delhi SG Pipers. The team made heads turn at the auction table with their eye for young talent and the midfielder feels this will help the side in the long run. Speaking exclusively to Indiatoday.in, Rajkumar was realistic about Delhi's chances in the 2024-25 season and also opened up about being reunited with PR Sreejesh. The midfielder also gave a sneak peek into his journey so far and his goals going forward.

Rajkumar Pal interaction
India Today: Let's start with the Hockey India League again. Last time we were here, many stars got a chance to make a name for themselves. People at home started recognising players. Do you expect the

same impact from the upcoming league?
Rajkumar Pal: Absolutely! In this league, I think three or four players will shine. I also want to give my 100 percent and take the



spotlight. Every player wants to be noticed, and everyone will try their best. It's great to be a part of a team. The whole game should be about making an impact, as every team has that one player who consistently scores goals and gets noticed. Scoring gives

confidence and motivation and the game continues to improve. I hope that if I start the tournament well, I can aim for better performances throughout the league.

India Today: As you mentioned, you are playing for Delhi SG Pipers. What makes the Delhi SG Pipers team special compared to other teams this time? Rajkumar Pal: I think our team has the most number of young players, which is going to be a huge advantage for Delhi SG Pipers. The players are young and fit, and we've built a well-balanced team. We have experienced forwards, midfielders, and defenders, and even the juniors are getting the support they need. So, I believe it's a strong team, and we will all support each other. The more experienced players will guide the younger ones. We have a good balance, and now it's just about preparing well and putting in our best effort.

India captain Niki elated after historic Asia Cup win: Bowlers did a fantastic job



New Delhi. Skipper Niki Prasad admitted that India were around 20 runs short in their Under-19 Women's Asia Cup 2024 final against Bangladesh. But she also heaped praise on the bowlers for defending a low total as India became the champions of the inaugural edition after winning the match by 41 runs at the Bayuemas Oval in Kuala Lumpur. After being asked to bat first, all India could manage was 117 for seven on the

back of Gongadi Trisha's half-century and a 17-run cameo from Mithila Vinod. Thereafter, Aayushi Shukla picked up three wickets as India bowled their opponents out for 76 in 18.3 overs. Prasad, who will play for the Delhi Capitals (DC) in the upcoming Women's Premier League (WPL), said that staying calm under pressure has helped the Indian team in the tournament. "We felt we were a few runs short, maybe 20 runs short,

but scoring 117 on this wicket is good. But we knew that we had a good bowling side and would bowl well. We were trying to stay in the game, have that intent, body language and our bowlers and fielders did a fantastic job," Prasad said in the post-match presentation ceremony.

"The first thing is that all of us are very calm in the dressing room and so, that brings a lot of confidence. When the batters are batting and things are not going in our side, it doesn't matter as we are calm and that's why we got to that score," Prasad said.

Niki lauded Trisha for scoring 52 runs off 47 balls while opening the batting. She also hailed Trisha as India's "mystery bowler" after the latter bowled three overs for 10 runs. "The way G Trisha has batted, it was fabulous. I liked the approach we had, and we batted really well. She is also our mystery bowler, and she bowled really well," Prasad added. After becoming the champions of Asia, India are set to defend their title in the Under-19 Women's T20 World Cup to be held in Malaysia from January 18 to February 2.



dominate.

Aayushi Shukla steps up again
Bangladesh did not get off to the best of starts as Mosammat Eva and Sumaiya Akhter could not go past single digits. Opening batter Fahomida Choya and Juairiya Ferdous scored 18 and 22 respectively. Skipper Sumaiya Akhter faltered after Sonam Yadav accounted for her wicket. Sonam and Parunika Sisodia picked up two scalps apiece. It was again Aayushi Shukla, who was the pick of the bowlers for India. Shukla, who finished the tournament as the top wicket-taker, rattled the Bangladeshi batting with figures of 3.3-0-17-3. After VJ Joshitha dismissed Eva for a duck in the second over, India did not look back. Bangladesh also slumped to a batting collapse as they lost their last seven wickets for 21 runs in a space of 40 balls. India, in the meantime, will be looking to carry the momentum into the U19 World Cup next year.

Disciplined Akash Deep credits Rohit-Kohli for massive growth-curve in Australia

India pacer Akash Deep credited senior batters Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma for the betterment of young India fast bowlers. The seamer credited the duo for helping young pacers not look like novices on their first tour of Australia.

New Delhi. Sunil Gavaskar has been critical of the timing of R Ashwin's retirement call, claiming that the spinner should have made the decision after the end of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Ashwin would make the shock call after the Gabba Test on Wednesday, December 18, after the match ended in a draw. The rumours had started to come in on Wednesday morning when Ashwin was seen

sharing a warm embrace with Virat Kohli in the dressing room as the game was halted by rain. Ashwin would then appear alongside Rohit Sharma in the post-match press conference and announce his decision to the reporters. Speaking to the broadcasters, Gavaskar said that the shock call had now left the Indian legend feels that Ashwin could have had a chance to make it to the side during the Sydney, where the pitch could have offered support to spinners. He could have said, listen after the end of the series, I won't be available for selection for India. What it does is that, similarly when MS Dhoni retired at the end of the 3rd Test in 2014-15 series, it leaves you one short. The selection committee has



picked so many players for a tour with a purpose. If there are any injuries they can select from the reserve players to have in the team. So, Sydney is somewhere where there

So that's the end of Ashwin as an international cricketer. He has been one heck of a cricketer," said Gavaskar.



Katrina Kaif

Reveals Vicky Kaushal's Advice On Balancing Work And Personal Life: 'Put Down The Phone'

Katrina Kaif and Vicky Kaushal, who recently celebrated their third wedding anniversary, continue to strike a balance between their flourishing careers and personal life. In a candid chat with The Week, Katrina opened up about the challenges of juggling her dual roles as an actress and entrepreneur. She also revealed how Vicky encourages her to take a break from work, saying, "Even now my husband asks me to put down the phone, and I want to send just one more email." Talking about the differences between her acting career and managing a business, Katrina explained that filmmaking comes with a fixed schedule, making it easier to coordinate with Vicky. However, running a business demands constant attention. "There's no schedule," she said, adding that setting boundaries is essential. "Otherwise, one would just go on sending emails and having discussions."

Katrina also shared a lighthearted detail about their life together. When asked if she and Vicky compete for counter space in the bathroom, she laughed and said no, calling him an "adjusting and understanding" husband. Katrina Kaif revealed that the secret to her gorgeous hair is her mother-in-law Veena Kaushal's homemade hair oil! The actress shares a close bond with Vicky Kaushal's mom and often spends time with her, "I'm equally passionate about skincare, because I have very sensitive skin. I



enjoy fun routines, like the gua sha. I know I'm late to the party, but I've just started using it and it's amazing. My mother-in-law also makes me this hair oil with onion, amla, avocado and two-three other ingredients. Home remedies are incredibly powerful too," she stated.

The couple celebrated their third anniversary on December 9, 2024, with a romantic getaway. Katrina marked the occasion with a heartfelt Instagram post, sharing a selfie with Vicky and captioning it, "Dil tu, jaan tu... (My heart, my life)," along with a red heart emoji. Later, she treated fans to glimpses of their jungle retreat, showcasing wildlife, bonfires, and cozy evenings. On the work front, Katrina was last seen in Merry Christmas earlier this year and is set to star in Jee Le Zaraa. Vicky, meanwhile, has an exciting slate of films, including Chhaava, Love & War, and Mahavatar.



Shah Rukh Khan's Jawan Co-star Ridhi Dogra On How She Dealt With Criticism



Ridhi Dogra has carved a niche for herself in the entertainment industry. Starting her career on the small screen with the TV show Jhoomo Jiiya Re, the actress featured in big-budgeted films like Shah Rukh Khan's Jawan, Salman Khan's Tiger 3 and The Sabarmati Report. Ridhi, who enjoys a significant fan base, recently shared some insights from her behind-the-scenes experiences during the initial stage of her career. During a chat with Pinkvilla, the actress recalled an incident while filming for a show where she offered some improvisation to her directors. In response, she shared that the director said things like she will get the Oscars.

"These are discouraging statements and I understand why people feel this way because no one takes pride in television. I even fought with them. If anyone comes and makes me feel small, I would always come back and tell them off," she added. Furthermore, the actress recalled another incident during the show's shoot, when one of her co-stars told her that the director mentioned that he couldn't shoot a show like a big film because the actress (Ridhi) wasn't Aishwarya Rai. "I confronted the director and objected to the situation. The director had stated, 'Yeh kaunsa Aishwarya Rai hai (She is not Aishwarya Rai),' and I replied him, 'Aap kaunsa Mani Ratnam ho (You're not Mani Ratnam),' said Ridhi. The actress revealed that she connects with those who don't take pride in calling themselves TV actresses. She stated that people in the TV industry degrade one another.

Meanwhile, on the work front, Ridhi was recently seen in the drama film The Sabarmati Report which also featured Vikrant Massey and Rashii Khanna in the lead roles. Helmed by Dheeraj Sarna and backed by Ekta Kapoor, the film received good responses from fans and critics alike. She will be next seen in the romantic drama Abir Gulaal, featuring Pakistani actor Fawad Khan and Vaani Kapoor in the lead roles. Directed by Aarti S Bagadi and produced by Vivek B Aggarwal, the film will also feature Lisa Haydon, Soni Razdan and Farida Jalal in significant roles.

Varun Dhawan Confirms Alia Bhatt And His Daughters' First Meeting: 'Lara and Raha Have Met'



Varun Dhawan and Alia Bhatt, one of Bollywood's most adored onscreen pairs, have captured hearts with their chemistry in films like Student of the Year (2012), Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhania (2014), Badrinath Ki Dulhania (2017), and Kalank (2019). Offscreen, the two now share the joys of parenthood. Alia, alongside her husband Ranbir Kapoor, welcomed their daughter Raha Kapoor in 2022, while Varun and his wife Natasha Dalal became proud parents to baby girl Lara Dhawan this year. But have these little stars-in-the-making met yet? In a recent chat with Bollywood Hungama, Varun confirmed, "Raha and Lara have met, I think. Lara is still very small, but they have met." Will these adorable babies grow up to share a bond as cherished as Alia and Varun's friendship? Only time will tell, but fans can't wait to see this sweet connection blossom.

As for their much-awaited onscreen reunion, Varun revealed that he and Alia are actively searching for a project that does justice to their dynamic. "We haven't found the perfect fit yet," he shared. For now, their conversations are all about their little ones, and we can't help but find that absolutely endearing.

During the same interview, while promoting his upcoming film Baby John, Varun was asked which of his movies he would want Lara to watch first. His pick? The one that started it all: Student of the Year. "I think still the first one which she could watch is Student of the Year only. I think that would be the first one she could watch because it's a very easy watch for her to see," Varun said.

Varun is all set to bring his real-life experiences as a doting dad to the big screen in Atlee's Baby John, an action thriller releasing this Christmas. The film also stars Wamiqa Gabbi and Keerthy Suresh. Meanwhile, Alia is currently busy shooting for Sanjay Leela Bhansali's highly anticipated project Love & War, co-starring Ranbir Kapoor and Vicky Kaushal. Fans are eagerly waiting to see what's next for both stars, on and offscreen!

Nikki Tamboli's

Fun Interaction With Paparazzi Is Winning Hearts

Nikki Tamboli is back with another look to make her fans go crazy. The Chikati Gadilo Chithakkotudu actress was spotted last night entering the eatery Chin Chin Chu in Juhu, Mumbai. Before going inside, the gorgeousness even posed for the paparazzi stationed outside the restaurant, which is beautifully decorated with Christmas special adornments. Her appearance in a chic denim look raised the temperature even during the chilly winters. In a video making rounds on Instagram, Nikki Tamboli was seen posing for



the paparazzi in her sizzling style. For the outing, she wore a little halter-neck top with a plunging neckline and a small knot in the front and back. The Khatra Khatra Show star teamed her look with baggy jeans and white-hued sneakers. To amp up her fashion game, she carried a box bag with a broad strap on one of her shoulders. The diva ditched any heavy accessories and let her chic glam minimal. Tamboli left her freshly-coloured tresses middle-parted and open to cascade down her shoulders. A glowy foundation base with rosy cheeks and the perfect amount of contouring on her face made her look

prettier. Thin strokes of eyeliner and pink lips finished off her overall appearance. The Bigg Boss 14 contestant's video is creating a ruckus on social media as she slayed her bold style in front of the camera. Soon after it was posted, her fans flooded the comments section, appreciating her bold look even during winter. While one person wrote, "Looking so pretty," another mentioned, "You look stunning." Not only this, Nikki Tamboli left her fans in a frenzy a few hours ago with another set of oh-so-glamorous photos from one of her recent photoshoots. On Instagram, she shared stunning pictures wearing an oversized white shirt. She layered her dress with a lacy bralette and paired them with denim shorts. Long boots teamed with open hair simply finished off her bold avatar. She opted for dewy makeup, which is setting the perfect style trend for this Christmas. On the work front, Nikki Tamboli made her acting debut in 2019 with the Telugu horror comedy film Chikati Gadilo Chithakkotudu. Following this, she appeared in a number of television shows, films and music videos. The actress even participated in reality shows such as Bigg Boss 14 and Bigg Boss Marathi Season 5, in both of which she emerged as 2nd-runner up. She was last seen in India's Best Dancer 4, also known as India's Best Dancer: Jab Dil Kare Dance Kar.

