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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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A Department that cares neither for Commerce nor Industries

Ever wondered why industrialization has remained so distant from the people? Here's why

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 27 DEC:

When one is told that the Commerce & Industries Department does not even have a complete list of industries in the State, it becomes clear why industrialization, despite the mushrooming of industries here, is such a distant activity, one that has no direct connect with the people here or even the local economy.

A Performance Audit on "Development of Manufacturing Industries in Sikkim" included in the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India on Economic, Revenue and General Sectors for the Year Ended March 2018 tabled earlier this year in the Legislative Assembly informs that the Department did not carry out "any" study/ survey regarding the benefits that accrued to the State as well as improvement in the wellbeing of the people of the State due to enhanced industrial activities.

This was clearly because if such a "study" was undertaken, the Department would not know where to begin. The CAG Report informs that the Department could not furnish "even the basic data" on industrial units such as complete list of industries, area occupied by each industry, investment in land, buildings, plant and machinery, date of commercial operation, number of persons employed, annual turnover, net profit earned, amount of incentives enjoyed from different sources, etc..."

Simply put, the Commerce & Industries Department has no data on the sector it was tasked to oversee, an ambitious undertaking initiated in 2003 when the Directorate of Industries was promoted to Department status.

With the Department not even bothered to collect the basic information, the taller asks of monitoring CSR expenditure

or developing a growth centre for industries or ensuring the submission of prescribed returns and reports by the industrial units were beyond its capacity and thus mired in non-transparent functioning and overall inefficiency.

Since it had no idea of how many industrial units there were, it was found lacking in ensuring local employment as well, and then there is the loss to the lay people and the state exchequer as well. CAG auditors discovered that out that 15 companies checked by CAG should have spent Rs 211.57 crore for CSR activities between 2014-18, but because the Department is as incompetent as it is, these companies used only Rs 35.06 cr, falling short of their CSR commitments to Sikkim by a staggering Rs 176.52 crore. And got away with it.

Although there are prescribed rules to ensure CSR compliance, the Department

never bothered with either monitoring or supervision and no industrial unit ever submitted its annual report on CSR activities with the Department. Ideally, the Department should monitor and coordinate to ensure that CSSR funds are utilized to bridge the gaps in existing social infrastructure to optimize the benefits for the local populace. Yes, a bit too much to expect from the Department.

Companies here are also required to contribute to the industrial development fund and from a sample of 48 checked by CAG, only eight units paid. As a result, the state exchequer, which should have received Rs 11.10 cr, received only Rs 1.10 cr.

The ineptness hurts even more when one looks at the employment data ferreted out by CAG auditors. The HR rolls of 29 industrial units checked by the auditors revealed that merely 43% of the

workforce was "local" and that too primarily in the unskilled level. Of the skilled workforce in the employ of industries, only 24% were local. Did someone complain about unemployment in Sikkim?

It is obvious that the Department does not know what it is supposed to do. Take for instance the case of 38 proposals to set up industrial units in Sikkim checked by CAG. Of these, the Principal Secretary granted consent for five cases, the Minister concerned gave consent for 29 cases and the Chief Minister green-lighted four units. The time taken to clear these proposals ranged from 10 to 400 days. Favoritism and ad-hocism are writ large in the Department.

The Performance Audit also lists out several recommendations for the Department. A good place to begin would perhaps be for the Department to first figure out why it exists.

#cbseonoanger: Schools to become 'anger-free zones'

NEW DELHI, DEC 27

(PTI):

The CBSE has asked all schools affiliated to it to become "anger-free zones" where everyone teachers, parents and administration staff will try to manage their anger to set an example for children and teach them the value of "freedom from anger".

This, the board says, would help students become mentally active and emotionally healthy and they would go back home "charged and happy" and would also want to return the next day.

The Central Board of Secondary Education, which has issued an advisory to schools on this matter, said the initiative is part of its thrust on "joyful education and holistic fitness". Its recommendations include not looking at cell-phones all the time and breathing exercises by all.

The board has also asked schools to record their experience and announce on social media their endeavour to become an anger-free zone, using the hashtag "cbseonoanger".

"In the anger-free zone, everyone will try to manage his or her anger, whether it is the school educators, parents, school personnel or other stakeholders. The best way to teach children the

value of 'freedom from anger' is by setting examples ourselves," CBSE Secretary Anurag Tripathi said in a communication sent to schools.

"Making our schools anger-free zones will help our students in developing effective skills and in eradicating emotions like fear, disrespect, humiliation and hurt, which are the by-products of anger," Tripathi said.

The board has advised schools to place a board with the message "This is an Anger-Free Zone" in the reception area and other strategic locations in their campus.

"Children are the harbingers of change. What they learn in the school, they will teach that to their parents. Imagine children going home and telling their parents 'you are not allowed to be angry'. This way both school and home will have a happy environment for them.

"Therefore, as a part of this initiative, schools must also take up exercises with children to help them overcome their own anger issues and also empower them with tools so that they can help others overcome their anger issues," Tripathi added.

LEGSHIP, 27 DEC [IPR]:

Sakewa was celebrated in grand manner here at the public ground today with a special event organized by Akhil Kirat Rai Sangh [AKRS]. Area MLA, IPR Minister Lok Nath Sharma, was present as the chief guest accompanied by Jacob Khaling, the Political Secretary to the Chief Minister, as special guest.

The Minister, in his address, conveyed the CM's greetings to the Rai community and urged all to invest their best efforts to encourage the younger generation on the path of securing higher field of studies which would help them attain a secure future.

He then informed that under the able leadership of Chief Minister PS Tamang [Golay], the state has come up with various initiatives which will be very assistive to those who are ready to work hard to attain their goals and likewise he informed about the various schemes which would benefit the farmers of the Sikkim.

He also mentioned



that the demands placed by Rai community would be considered by the State Government.

He maintained that all the communities have equal rights to safeguard and promote their cultural heritage. He expressed that the State Government would remain supportive towards all the communities of the Sikkim and would work for their overall development.

He also asserted that a rock climbing centre would be established at Legship public ground.

Mr Khaling, in his

brief address, maintained that the government has created a secular environment for all the communities of the state to practice, promote and propagate their cultural heritage.

Adding that the present state government would never politicize cultural and religious events, carrying political flags to such programmes would be strictly forbidden, he said that such practices should not be entertained considering the sanctity of religious events.

He reiterated that any

person capable of leading any social organization could head such organizations irrespective of his/her political affiliation. He further stated that all the communities should be proud of their distinct identity in the forms of various cultural and religious practices and each and every community should be given equal rights to flourish in the state.

He maintained that harmonial co-existence of all the communities of the state together no matter of the cultural

and religious diversities is necessary for well being of the Sikkimese as a whole.

Further, while sharing that Rai community leads the population graph of Sikkim and the social organizations he urged for community to come forward for the upliftment of the community. He also stated that the Rai as a community should be united irrespective of his/her religious affiliations for the progress and development of the community, he said.

At the outset, Pres-

Grand Sakewa celebration at Legship

ident of AKRS Chandra Khaling floored the objectives of celebrating Sakewa and expressed that promotion and preservation of Rai community's cultural heritage was the main motive behind organizing it as a festival.

He added that Sakewa celebration was also about awaring the young generation about age old customs and culture of rai community. He also placed various demands such as construction of Mangkhim (Rai community's temple) at some places of Sikkim and others.

The celebration saw the various Cultural performance along with the presentation of souvenirs to Chief Guest and guest of honour by the committee.

The presentation of token of love was bestowed by the Minister on Dhurva Kr. Rai and felicitation to PM Chamling, Adviser AKRS, West and to KS Rai, Land donor of Rodungkhin.

Mangpas (Rai Community's priest) performed puja at the venue throughout the day.

Inflation leaves consumers teary-eyed as pricey onions, food items bite

KALPANA MANDAL

NEW DELHI, DEC 27 (PTI):

Onion literally brought tears to the eyes of consumers as retail prices touched Rs 200 per kilogram and tomato too turned pricier in the last quarter of 2019, leaving many scurrying for changes in dietary ways as costly food items pushed retail inflation to a more than three-year high.

Though well below the price jump seen for the humble 'daily consumable bulb' and tomato, potato also become costlier as crop damages and disruptions stoked supply crunch.

Albeit for a brief period during monsoon and afterwards, retail price of tomato went up to Rs 80 per kg.

Though trailing behind in the price race, potato joined its buddies of the 'TOP' priority grouping, selling for as high as Rs 30 a kg in retail market for sometime in December due to supply disruptions before moderating to the current level

of around Rs 20-25 a kg.

Costlier vegetables slowly pushed retail inflation, which had remained well within the Reserve Bank's comfortable level of 4 per cent during most part of 2019, peaked to more than three-year high of 5.54 per cent in November.

Tomato, Onion, Potato (TOP) have been accorded 'TOP' priority by central government in 2018-19 Union Budget and a Rs 500 crore Operation Greens was okayed in November last year to boost production and processing of these three commodities to check price volatility in these key kitchen staples.

For most part of 2019, the government was successful in price control but the party seemed to have lost the sheen later in the year, thanks to 'TOP' and other food items.

Government action to rein in rising onion prices came in very late, which contracted to import bulk supplies of onion

from markets such as Egypt, Turkey and Afghanistan. Even as supplies have been hitting the Indian shores on a daily basis, onion continues to rule at over Rs 130 a kg in various retail domestic markets, potato at Rs 20-30 a kg, while tomato has come down to around Rs 30-40 per kg.

Add to this, garlic prices have now started to spike, touching as high as Rs 30-40 for a mere 100 gram.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), which mainly gauges the retail inflation to arrive on its bi-monthly monetary policies, has set a medium-term target for Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation of 4 per cent within a band of +/- 2 per cent, while supporting growth.

In its monetary policy review in December, it raised the retail inflation projection to 5.1-4.7 per cent for the second half of 2019-20 mainly on costlier onion, fruits, pulses, milk and cereals, from 3.5-3.7 per

cent projected earlier.

For the first half of next fiscal too, it has raised the projection to 4-3.8 per cent.

Retail inflation hovered mainly in the range of 2-3.30 per cent during January to August, and started to move up steadily post monsoon as crop damage due to unseasonal rains hurt the supplies in a big way.

It unexpectedly hit a pause button on cutting the key (repo) interest rate, giving more importance to prevailing inflation pressure and rising food prices over a worrying slowdown in the economy.

The status quo came in after five consecutive cuts in repo rate since February, as the six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC), headed by RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das, unanimously voted to hold the key repo rate at 5.15 per cent and reverse repo rate at 4.90 per cent.

"Going forward, the in-

flation outlook is likely to be influenced by several factors. First, the upsurge in prices of vegetables is likely to continue in immediate months; however, a pick-up in arrivals from the late kharif season along with measures taken by the government to augment supply through imports should help soften vegetables prices by early February 2020," RBI said on December 5.

ICRA Economist Aditi Nayar expects moderation in vegetable prices to a large extent by early 2020.

"Healthy groundwater and reservoir levels bode well for rabi output and yields of various cereals. However, the year-on-year decline in the area sown under rabi pulses and oilseeds poses a concern, given the high inflation being recorded by some of these items," Nayar said.

ICRA expects the CPI

Turn pg 2

Governor releases aid to Rhenock institutions



SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 27 DEC:

Governor Ganga Prasad disbursed cheques of Rs 50,000 each to Rhenock

Senior Secondary School and Rhenock Gram Panchayat Unit.

A cheque for Rs 25,000 was also handed

over to Rhenock Horticulture Organic Farm, Rungdung, a Self Help Group, for purchase of farm tools.

The said amounts had been announced by the Governor during his recent tour to East Sikkim.

PMC Bank scam: 32000-page charge sheet filed against 5 accused

Mumbai, Dec 27 (PTI): Mumbai police's Economic Offences Wing on Friday submitted a 32,000-page charge sheet against five persons in the multi-crore Punjab and Maharashtra Cooperative (PMC) Bank scam in a metropolitan magistrate court here.

The charge sheet has named former managing director of the bank Joy Thomas, former chairman Waryam Singh, former director of the bank Surjit Singh Arora, along with Housing Development and Infrastructure Limited (HDIL) promoters Rakesh Wadhawan and Sarang Wadhawan.

The accused have been charged under vari-

ous sections of Indian Penal Code including cheating, fraud, destruction of evidence and falsification of documents.

All the five accused were arrested soon after the scam at the bank scam to light in September this year, and are presently in judicial custody.

Apart from these five, the police has also arrested seven other bank officials, and supplementary charge sheet will be filed against them later.

The 32,000-page charge sheet includes the forensic audit report of PMC bank and documents of properties purchased by the

accused bank officials with kickbacks received by them for giving undue favour to HDIL and the Wadhawans.

The charge sheet has statements of 340 witnesses, including account holders in the bank. The police had recorded the statements of four crucial witnesses before a magistrate under section 164 of the Criminal Procedure Code.

The fraud at PMC Bank came to light in September this year after the Reserve Bank of India discovered that the bank had allegedly created fictitious accounts to hide over Rs 6,700 crore in loans

extended to the almost-bankrupt HDIL.

According to the RBI, PMC bank masked 44 problematic loan accounts, including HDIL loan accounts, by tampering with its core banking system, and the accounts were accessible only to limited staff members.

The city police's EOW and Enforcement Directorate has registered offences in the case.

On September 23, 2019, the RBI had imposed regulatory restrictions on the bank. The withdrawal limit for account holders was initially kept at Rs 1,000 per day, which was increased gradually to Rs 50,000.

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Lalu Prasads family drama touches a new low

PATNA, DEC 27 (PTI):

The marital dispute between Lalu Prasads elder son Tej Pratap Yadav and Aishwarya Roy touched a new low on Friday with her father, RJD MLA Chandrika Roy refusing to allow unloading of vehicles laden with her personal belongings for fear that incriminating objects might have been concealed in it to frame his family.

Roy also lodged a complaint with the Shastri Nagar police station in the city insisting that the goods sent to his home last night cannot be unloaded without the presence of any member of Prasad's family and with no magistrate in attendance to supervise the process.

Aishwarya Roy had been allegedly driven out of her marital home, a few hundred meters away from her parents' house, by her mother-in-law, former chief minister Rabri Devi last week.

The allegations leveled by Chandrika Roy against Rabri Devi do not amount to any cognizable offence. Hence we are conducting a preliminary inquiry. If at a later stage a need arises, we may register an FIR under relevant sections, Shastri Nagar SHO Vimalendu Kumar told PTI.

The drama began late Thursday night when two pick-up vans carrying Aishwaryas personal items, which were loaded at Rabri Devis 10,

Circular Road bungalow, reached Roy's residence where his daughter has been staying for the past one week.

The MLA, whose late father Daroga Prasad Rai was a chief minister of Bihar in the 1970s, got furious when his security personnel informed him about it.

Standing guard outside his residence in the biting cold, Roy told reporters who had gathered at the spot We do not know what items they have sent. We had only sought our daughters mobile phone, jewellery and some cash that she was in possession of. I think they have sent this heap of trash keeping those items in their custody.

We cannot allow unloading of these items in the absence of a magistrate. Going by their (Prasads family) conduct, they might conceal bottles of liquor or some other illegal item to get us framed. And why is no member of their family present, which is a legal requirement, Roy asked.

Prasads eldest daughter Misa Bharti, who has been accused alongside Rabri Devi of domestic violence by Aishwarya Roy in an FIR she had lodged on Monday last, told news channels I am right now in Delhi and appalled at the lowly conduct of Chandrika Roy.

"His (Roy's) charge that we might have con-

cealed illegal items, keeping cash jewelry etc. with ourselves is disgusting. Why does he not allow unloading ? He can get videography done.

Bharti said We are in possession of a letter written by Aishwaryas mother to womens help line demanding her belongings. So we decided to return even all those items which were received as gifts during the wedding. Hence such a large volume. But Chandrika Roy wants to gain publicity out of this.

Aishwarya and Tej Pratap had tied the knot in May last year at a glittering ceremony which was attended by Lalu Prasad, who had come from Ranchi on parole since he is serving sentences in the fodder scam cases.

Tej Pratap, mercenary with an earthy demeanor in contrast to his soft-spoken and urbane wife, filed a divorce petition six months later.

While Tej Pratap, MLA and former minister, stays in a separate house allotted by the Bihar government, Aishwarya had chosen to stay at Rabri Devis house in an attempt to save her failed marriage until the bridges were burnt last week.

The drivers of the vans were heard muttering under their breath, We were hired for a few hours and we have ended up spending the night hungry, awake and shivering in the cold.

CPI(M) will not share dais with Mamata, says Yechury

HYDERABAD, DEC 27

(PTI): CPI(M) would not share dais with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee though she was also fighting against CAA, NRC and NPR because she had been 'butchering' democracy in the state, party General Secretary Sitaram Yechury said on Friday.

Talking to reporters here, he alleged the CPI(M) lost more than 278 of its comrades while thousands had been framed with false charges and issued non-bailable warrants in Bengal.

While the TMC won 22 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats, the BJP came second bagging 18 seats and the Left front drew a blank in the general elections.

Yechury was replying to a question whether the CPI(M) will share dais with the Trinamool Congress chief in the ongoing fight against the Narendra Modi government over Citizenship Amendment Act, National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the National Population Register (NPR).

"Sharing the dais (with Mamata) is not the issue. Because in Bengal, she and her party have been primarily responsible for the butchery of democracy.

"In the last Parliament elections, it was the people's anger against Banerjee which gave the BJP the benefit. She con-



tinues the murderous attacks (on CPI-M workers)," Yechury alleged.

Noting that chief ministers of 13 states have opposed the contentious NRC and two of them (Kerala and West Bengal) have stayed the NPR process in their states, he appealed to the others also to stop the updation of the population register.

"On that issue there is no problem. Coming together in Bengal (with TMC) will have different implications for all the other struggles that are going on," he said in apparent reference to the Left parties' fight against the Mamata Banerjee government.

"But on this issue (NPR, NRC) she seems to be on the same side. That is okay, Yechury said.

Hundreds gather at Jama Masjid to protest against CAA

NEW DELHI, DEC 27

(PTI): Braving cold weather, hundreds of people gathered outside the iconic Jama Masjid in Old Delhi on Friday to protest against the amended citizenship law.

Congress leader Alka Lamba and former Delhi MLA Shoaib Iqbal were among those who joined the demonstrations.

Lamba hit out at the central government, saying "unemployment

is the real issue in the county, but you (PM) are trying to put people in a queue for NRC, as it was done during demonetisation".

"It is very essential to raise the voice of democracy for the country and for the Constitution. A central government cannot become dictatorial and impose its agenda on people," she said.

The protestors, many of whom gathered after offering Friday

prayers at the mosque, raised slogans against the new legislation and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC).

"Is desh ko NRC, NPR nahi chahiye. Is desh ko rozgaar chahiye. Is desh ko aman aur shanti chahiye (This country does not need NRC, NPR, it needs jobs. The country needs peace and amity)," a protester said.

The protesters, who

leged CAA, NPR and NRC were aimed at making India a fascist country and hence people should reject them.

This is not Hindu-Muslim issue. The struggle is to save democracy, he claimed.

Replying to a query, he said he would not suggest people to give wrong information when the enumerators come for the NPR.

He said the additional details sought in the NPR may authorise the officials to keep any persons name under D category (doubtful) if there was no sufficient information such as parents' birth place.

Yechury accused the Modi government of pushing the country towards polarisation on religious lines.

DOCUMENTS LOST:

I, Sumana Lepcha D/o Laku Tsh Lepcha r/o Pabong Namphing, South Sikkim have lost my CBSE Class XII Pass Certificate bearing Roll No. 3639812 while travelling from Singtam to Pabong. My G.D. is 158/B.O.P dt. 17.12.2019 at Bermoik Potpost, PS Temi, South Sikkim. If found contact: 8116649154.

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Daryaganj violence: Police opposes bail plea of 9 accused, Delhi court order on Dec 28

NEW DELHI, DEC 26 (PTI): The Delhi Police opposed in a court the bail pleas on Thursday of nine accused arrested in connection with a violent protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in Delhi's Daryaganj area.

The counsel for the arrested claimed that the police had detained many people but decided to arrest on 15 who have no prior antecedents.

Additional Sessions Judge Satish Kumar reserved its order on the bail applications of the nine persons and said the decision would be pronounced on December 28.

The court will also hear on the same day the arguments on the bail plea of other six persons arrested in the case.

During the hearing, the prosecutor said the police has 19 witnesses to support its case and as per an eye witness, these accused were present at the incident site from where they were taken into custody.

The court has asked the police to verify the address and other details of one of the arrested accused in the case.

A magisterial court had denied bail to the 15 accused on December 23, after which they approached the sessions court for the relief.

They were arrested after a violence broke out in the area on December 20 when a group of agitating demonstrators resorted to stone-pelting when police tried to forcefully evict them. In the melee, one car was set on fire and several others were damaged.

All the accused are in judicial custody.

One of those arrested had claimed he was a juvenile. However, the police said he told them he was 23.

Meanwhile, another trial court is scheduled to hear on Friday, bail pleas of various accused who were arrested in connection with similar protest at Seelampur in North East Delhi.

Top five Bollywood films of 2019: Where are the women?

RAVI BANSAL

NEW DELHI, DEC 27 (PTI): If box office success is any yardstick, mainstream Hindi cinema continues to be overtly macho with four of 2019's five top grossers dealing with themes of hyper masculinity leaving women as mere props or maybe a side note at best.

While "War", "Kabir Singh", "Uri: The Surgical Strike" and "Bharat" demonstrated the skewed gender dynamic in Bollywood, the fifth in the list of the year's biggest hits is "Mission Mangal", which relegated women to the back-ground even while celebrating their achievements.

The film is about the women scientists that led India's mission to Mars but much of the attention is on the solo male star, Bollywood biggie Akshay Kumar.

"Bollywood is a male dominated industry and it has always been one, barring very few cases where films led by Madhuri Dixit and Sridevi being considered almost as big as male stars. They could pull crowds. But generally speaking, the A-listers have always been men," noted film critic Saibal Chatterjee told PTI.

"Not just in big pot-boilers, smaller films are also dominated by men. Unfortunately, in some cases, even content

doesn't seem to matter. You just need to have a right male star who can bring in the people to theatres for the first two-three weeks," he added.

"War", which topped the charts with collections of over Rs 500 crore at the box office, centres around the mentor-protégé bromance of Hrithik Roshan and Tiger Shroff, both RAW agents playing a globe-trotting game of spies.

The film has two prominent women characters -- Vaani Kapoor and Anupriya Goenka -- but both just forward the hero agenda of the film and get barely any screen time.

For many, the success of "War" was a relief as it dislodged Shahid Kapoor starrer "Kabir Singh", a remake of Telugu hit "Arjun Reddy", from the top spot.

Though praised for Shahid's performance, the movie polarised viewers with its glorification of toxic romance.

Director Sandeep Reddy Vanga landed in controversy when he said it was okay to express love by slapping each other. The audiences, it seemed, agreed. The film earned Rs 379 crore at the box office.

Defending the film, Shahid said it is hypocritical to criticise the movie when critics praise similar content from the west for being honest and politically incorrect.



Director Anurag Kashyap said it is futile to criticise the movie as urban Indian society is full of men who think like the lead character.

"Kabir Singh" does represent more than 75-80 per cent of urban India. Why not put it out? If I disagree with it, I won't see it. But sometimes it's necessary to see ourselves," the director told PTI recently.

"Uri", one of the early hits of the year, is about India's 2016 surgical strike on terror camps across the Line of Control. Its carefully crafted story coupled with the war cry "How's the Josh?" enabled it to tap into nationalistic sentiments at the box office.

The film made Rs 342 crore since its release in January and its catchphrase became a popular slogan for the ruling party.

Though debutant Aditya Dhar treated women characters -- played by

Yami Gautam and Kirti Kulhari -- rather well, they were not the ones leading the movie.

With "Bharat", which earned Rs 325.58 crore, Salman Khan again managed to sway audiences despite lukewarm reviews from critics.

"Bharat", a high octane post Partition father-son drama, also featured Katrina Kaif and Disha Patani. They were given opportunities to shine but it inevitably a "Salman Khan film".

The fifth highest grosser was "Mission Mangal", which made Rs 290 crore. The makers tried to promote it by boasting about the cast ratio -- five women versus one Akshay Kumar.

However, many who watched the film said Akshay had a bigger and more central part in the film than Vidya Balan, Taapsee Pannu, Nithya Menen, Kirti

Kulhari and Sonakshi Sinha even though the movie was about the women scientists who led the mission to Mars at Indian Space Research Organisation.

The film's poster showed Akshay getting bigger play than his women colleagues.

Taapsee said "star value" is a brutal truth in the industry and one must come to terms with it.

"The star value is such... That's a brutal truth that we need to accept and then think that there is no point questioning it. Be the reason to change this truth," the actor said.

She pointed out that the film would have performed better because of Akshay's star power even if the five female leads had not been there.

"There's already a big superstar in the film. We five being a part of it just makes it go higher. But the box office

wouldn't have dropped even if we were not in the film. Pick up any of our films, the five ladies, add them together and compare the collection of the opening day of all those films with an Akshay Kumar movie," she said.

The problem, as actor Katrina Kaif recently highlighted at an event, lies in the faith of the producers and viewers.

She believes that a project with female leads, a great story and an able director, if given the same budget and scale "has the potential to do those numbers".

"We just need to see that confidence come from the producers to take that risk and put that investment into the film. If we mount a film, it could be a different film, a comedy, a fun summer blockbuster, if we give that film the same mounting, the audience will feel that this is an event film.

Defence India Startup Challenge kick-starts in Kochi

KOCHI, DEC 27 (PTI): The third edition of the Defence India Startup Challenge (DISC 3) began at Maker Village here on Friday giving innovators a rare opportunity to engage directly with the military and showcase their technologies.

The programme got off under the iDEX (Innovation for Defence Excellence), where Maker Village is a partner, having been inducted one-and-a-half months ago as an official partner with the Defence Innovation Organisation (DIO) under the union government, a press release from Maker Village said.

Rear Admiral R J Nadkarni, Chief of Staff, Southern Naval Command, unveiled the Defence India Startup Challenges, while Development Commissioner of Cochin Special Economic Zone (CEPZ) D V Swamy launched the Defence India Open Challenge.

The event was attended by a team of 15 senior officers from Kochi-headquartered Southern Naval Command, the Army and the Air Force besides top officials from iDEX, the release said.

Also present were deep-tech startups from

across Kerala and representatives from the industry.

Hailing the quality of the startups at Maker Village, Rear Admiral Nadkarni said the companies are leveraging state-of-the-art technologies.

Of late, we are moving towards indigenisation in all spheres, he noted at the function at the Integrated Startup Complex in Kalamassery, 20 km north of this city.

There are certain technologies which nobody in the world would like to part with. A programme like the iDEX can thus be of immense benefit to the nation. It also boosts employment opportunities in the country," he said.

Rear Admiral Nadkarni, stressing the need for stronger education, invited domestic companies to contribute towards the requirements of the defence sector.

Confidence is the hallmark of a successful entrepreneur, who will never wilt if there are difficulties, he added.

There are two challenges India faces: improving economic complexity index and quickening the pace of technologies required

for a stronger defence, he added.

Maker Village CEO Prasad Balakrishnan Nair described iDEX as a unique venture to marry two seemingly contradictory establishments.

While defence is synonymous with discipline, an ecosystem like Maker Village usually works amid random bouts of creativity. Yet both can be congruent, as you see here in iDEX. It is a giant leap, he said in the welcome address.

The objective of iDEX is to facilitate rapid development of new, indigenised and innovative technologies for the Indian defence and aerospace sector.

It also seeks to meet the needs for these sectors in shorter timelines and create a culture of engagement with innovative startups by encouraging co-creation for defence and aerospace sectors.

The 2016-founded Maker Village is a joint initiative of Union Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and the Government of Kerala (through Kerala StartUp Mission) with IIITM-K as the nodal agency.

Forex reserves climb USD 456 mn to record USD 455 bn

MUMBAI, DEC 27 (PTI): The country's foreign exchange reserves increased by USD 456 million to a fresh lifetime high of USD 454.948 billion in the week to December 20, according to RBI data.

In the previous week, the reserves had swelled by USD 1.070 billion to USD 454.492 billion.

In the reporting week, the rise in reserves was mainly on account

of an increase in foreign currency assets, a major component of the overall reserves, which surged by USD 311 million to USD 422.732 billion, weekly data released by the Reserve Bank on Friday showed.

Expressed in dollar terms, the foreign currency assets include the effect of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units like the euro, pound and the yen held in the

forex reserves. During the reporting week, gold reserves increased by USD 164 million to USD 27.132 billion.

The special drawing rights with the International Monetary Fund dipped USD 1 million to USD 1.443 billion.

The country's reserve position with the Fund also declined by USD 17 million to USD 3.642 billion, the data showed.

Auto industry drives into 2020 with hope after a forgettable 2019

MUNISH SHEKHAVAT & RAJKUMAR LEISHEMBA

NEW DELHI, DEC 27 (PTI): Battered by an unprecedented slowdown, the Indian auto industry is desperately pinning hopes on the next financial year for a turnaround, banking on a host of new and upgraded models slated to make their way to the market.

The industry's hopes are also in line with expectations that the economy would finally come out of the slump, drawing people back to the showrooms. Yet, the challenges of transition to stricter emission norm BS-VI from BS-IV and compliance to new safety norms thereby making vehicles costlier are lurking around the sector.

With India's flagship motor show the biennial Auto Expo round the corner, the auto sector is treating the show as the launching pad of revival, having been through an unprecedented slump, which began from the last festival season and continuing unabated till date.

From two-wheelers to cars and heavy duty trucks, all segments of the sector were in the red. Such has been the impact of slowdown that the industry is expected to close 2019-20 with a decline of 13-17 per cent in wholesale dispatches as compared with last financial year.

The steep drop in sales caused operational hardships for many companies and production plans had to be re-evaluated through the year. The sector, including dealerships and auto components, witnessed around 3.5 lakh people losing jobs due to the downturn.



Despite hard times, all hope is not lost. Industry body Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) expects things to turnaround in 2020-21.

"2020 will be an interesting year with BS-VI getting implemented and entirely new platforms being available in the market," SIAM President Rajan Wadhwa told PTI.

But what gives the industry hope?

"The Indian economy is expected to revive early next year, which along with the low base of last year and availability of newer models should support growth in the auto sector," Wadhwa said.

According to him, the sector is expected to start reviving from the second quarter of the next financial year but it will be visible from the third quarter of the fiscal.

"Implementation of BS-VI norms will mean clearing of all old inventory, building up new inventory and making available new BS-VI compliant vehicles in the market, which will give some upside to the production and sale," Wadhwa noted.

However, with vehicle cost going up by 8-10 per cent due to technology

ramp up, industry fears that it could further lead volume loss.

"To get respite from this additional cost pressure, SIAM has submitted to the government to lower GST rate for vehicles to 18 per cent from 28 per cent and also introduce an incentive-based scrappage policy for vehicles," Wadhwa said.

Both these submissions, if implemented, will surely support quicker recovery for the auto sector, he added.

Wadhwa's optimism is shared by India's largest carmaker MD & CEO, Maruti Suzuki India Limited MD & CEO, Kenichi Ayukawa, who is also "hopeful that 2020 will be a better year for us and industry and approach it with optimism".

Yet, Ayukawa has a note of caution.

"On way forward, it is really tough to predict the turnaround but the long term story for Indian automobile industry continues to be promising," he said.

Expressing similar views, Hyundai Motor India MD and CEO S S Kim said, "Probably after the BS-VI implementation, for few months the customer will need time to understand new norms

and new situations. So, I would say demand will grow gradually from the second half of the next year."

Honda Cars India President and CEO Gaku Nakanishi said that it appeared that the industry has already hit its bottom this year.

"We are not sure of the speed of recovery yet but the situation will improve in next fiscal. After market adjusts in BS-VI regime, we think that industry will gradually start recovering from next festive season," he noted.

With BS-VI transition being the most immediate challenge, auto manufacturers have put their all as they get ready to be fully compliant by April 1, 2020.

"The investments towards the BS-VI transition has been the single largest investment for Tata Motors. We are ready with our BS-VI transition plan and our new BS-VI products will start rolling out from January 2020," Tata Motors CEO and MD Guenter Butschek said.

In order to ensure there is no BS-IV stock left after March 31, 2020 automobile companies have already

started aligning their productions accordingly.

As for new products set to hit the market in 2020, the upcoming Auto Expo from February 5-12 will give a glimpse.

"The Auto Expo 2020 will be the launching pad for the revival of the auto industry, we feel," Wadhwa said, adding the main attractions of the expo would be clean vehicles, keeping in mind the BS-VI norms besides electric, hybrid and connected vehicles.

Tata Motor's Nexon EV and MG Motor's ZS EV are set to hit the roads soon to follow the footsteps of Hyundai's Kona that has already found takers.

In all, over 60 new launches and unveilings of vehicles are expected at the expo where China's Great Wall Motor Company and First Automotive Works (FAW) will make their debut along with MG Motors India.

Holding the flag up for the industry at the motor show would be the likes of Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai, M&M, Tata Motors and Kia along with Skoda and Volkswagen brands, which are making a comeback after skipping the 2018 edition.

However, the slowdown witnessed by the auto sector in the past five successive quarters has had an impact on participation. Notable absentees are Honda, Toyota, Ford, BMW, Audi, Lexus, Volvo and Jaguar Land Rover along two-wheeler majors Hero MotoCorp, Bajaj Auto and TVS Motor Co.

The industry, during the current fiscal, witnessed successful debut of Kia Motors and MG Motor with their initial models hitting the bulls eye.

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Politics of Acrimony

Why prepare for debate when name-calling is also enough

When was the last time that Sikkim was treated to a genuine political debate? Discounting the half-hearted attempts at some digital media platforms in the run-up to the elections, which appear further in the past than they actually are, never. All that plays out in the space where debates - as in differing ideological positions on important issues - are allegations and counter insinuations. And now, the country also appears to be catching on. The exercise over the Citizenship [Amendment] Act reinforces itself as a good example of how there is always a lot of noise, but substance remains a rare commodity. We have an army chief taking cue from a predecessor and forgetting that the OG and Khadi should not mix. We have a Prime Minister and his sidekicks who see only some buses burned by protestors but not the Constitution which is being assaulted and the countless Indians who have problems with it or the countless on whom the establishment is unleashing violence and intimidation just because they have the spine and principles to express their disagreement and displeasure. At the political level, opponents have problems with how the drama is being executed, of how obviously ill-prepared and ill-intentioned the government was, and the government adamantly defends the righteousness of their decision. They were clearly not addressing each other, but are, like always, playing exclusively to their respective galleries. The bar has been falling fast and downright repulsive things are now being said. This bottom of the barrel scrapping for political brownie points has arrived in Sikkim as well.

Meanwhile, people in Sikkim remain locked out of discussions that could help them notice at least something different in the political parties beyond who heads them. If political parties engaged in ideological debates on issues, they would know exactly what to run with in the five years at hand till the next election cycle beyond allegations and claims. But when it comes to ideology, this position is either in very short supply or everyone has settled with jingoistic-jingles, because politics continues to remain obsessed with pot-shots and allegations, not plans or different approaches. And no, sops do not qualify as plans. It should worry every citizen and voter that most of the times, in most of the contests, they are expected to choose not which plan/ proposal is better but who do they trust more with the same, near identical set of promises. When we, as citizens, don't demand better homework from out leaders and political parties, and pick our leaders on superficialities like which group makes a more convincing argument to deliver the same results, we open the door for attacks where there should have been debates, and sops where there should have been visions grounded in ideology. In such a scenario, it becomes more important demonise opponents than convince people of your own "vision".

It is because we refuse to demand explanations and remain comfortable in the absence of nuance that vicious rhetoric, which should be allowed no space in the public domain, has become the only flavor around. Politics has come to such a pass that there is no other tone in which political debate is engaged in anymore. While distasteful remarks and exaggerated conspiracy theories might provide some vicarious thrills and entertainment for the otherwise disinterested, these are pronouncements which betray only a graceless lack of confidence and contribute nothing to either the delivery of governance or the responsibilities of the Opposition. Politics in a democracy might allow, even enjoy, for some theatrics, but should not be denigrated to a level where puerile arguments, obvious play-acting and/or unnecessary name-calling are stitched together to fill in for sane deliberations.

In Sikkim, as in the country, every segment, whether the ruling or the Opposition [whatever exists of it at present], has presented itself in rather poor light in how they have engaged important issues facing not just Sikkim, but arguments which have a resonance in the entire country. Significant issues, which could have inspired meaningful debate, have instead been reduced to acrimonious allegations and counters fuelling an environment in which political and ideological opponents are painted as enemies.

When debates focus only on vilifying, political dialogue becomes impossible. And what is democracy, if it cannot create the environment for political dialogue...

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How the cult of Virgin Mary turned a symbol of female authority into a tool of patriarchy

DOROTHY ANN LEE

THECONVERSATION.COM

Belief in the virgin birth comes from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Their birth stories are different, but both present Mary as a virgin when she became pregnant with Jesus. Mary and Joseph begin their sexual relationship following Jesus’ birth, and so Jesus has brothers and sisters.

Catholic piety goes beyond this, with Mary depicted as a virgin not only before but also during and after Jesus’ birth, her hymen miraculously restored. The brothers and sisters of Jesus are seen as either cousins or children of Joseph by an earlier marriage.

In Catholicism, Mary remains a virgin throughout her married life. This view arises not from the New Testament but from an apocryphal Gospel in the second century, the “Protoevangelium of James”, which affirms Mary’s perpetual virginity.

From the second century onwards, Christians saw virginity as an ideal, an alternative to marriage and children. Mary was seen to exemplify this choice, along with Jesus and the apostle Paul. It accorded with the surrounding culture where Greek philosophers, male and female, tried to live a simple life without attachment to family or possessions.

This extolling of virginity, however unlikely when applied to Mary, did have some advantages. The option of becoming a celibate nun in community with other women gave young women in the early church an attractive alternative to marriage, in a culture where marriages were generally arranged and death in childbirth was common.

Yet belief in the eternal virginity of Mary has also inflicted damage over the centuries, particularly on women. It has distorted the character of Mary, turning her into a submissive, dependent creature, without threat to patriarchal structures.

She is divorced from the lives of real women who can never attain her sexless motherhood or her unsullied “purity”.

A STRONG MINDED LEADER

Yet in the Gospels, Mary is a vibrant figure: strong-minded and courageous, a leader in the community of faith.

As the first Christian, Mary proclaims a radical message of social justice, where the poor are exalted and the powerful overthrown. She initiates Jesus’ ministry at the wedding of Cana and follows him to the cross, despite the dangers. She is a vital presence at the birth of the church at Pentecost, sharing the divine vision of a world transformed.

In line with the New Testament, the early church also gave Mary the title of “God-bearer” (Theotokos), which became part of Christian orthodoxy, not tied to her perpetual virginity.

Material art portrayed her in some contexts as a priestly figure (as in an 11th century mosaic from



Ravenna), with her own autonomy and authority, where she embodies the symbolic vocation of all Christians to “give birth” to the transforming presence of Christ.

DIMINISHING FEMALE SEXUALITY

In contrast to these powerful images, the alternative picture of Mary, the perpetual-married-virgin, deprives women of a model not only of leadership and courage, but also of sexual desire and passion.

Simone de Beauvoir, the influential, early French feminist, observed that the cult of the Virgin Mary represented the “supreme victory of masculinity”, implying that it served the interests of men rather than women.

The ever-Virgin diminishes women’s sexuality and makes the female body and female sexuality seem unwholesome, impure. She is a safe and non-threatening figure for celibate men who place her on a pedestal, both literally and metaphorically.

THE CONTRADICTION

It is true that Catholic women across the world have found great solace in the compassionate figure of Mary, especially against images of a very masculine, judgmental God, and the brutality of political and religious hierarchy.

But for this women have paid a price, in their exclusion from leadership. Mary’s voice has been permitted, in filtered tones, to ring out across the church, but real women’s voices are silent.

In today’s context, the cult of the Virgin becomes emblematic of the way the church silences women and marginalises their experience.

7 science-based strategies to boost your willpower and succeed with your New Year’s resolutions

JELENA KECMANOVIC
theconversation.com

It’s that time of year when people make their New Year’s resolutions – indeed, 93% of people set them, according to the American Psychological Association. The most common resolutions are related to losing weight, eating healthier, exercising regularly and saving money.

However, research shows that 45% of people fail to keep their resolutions by February, and only 19% keep them for two years. Lack of willpower or self-control is the top cited reason for not following through.

How can you increase your willpower and fulfill your New Year’s promise to yourself? These seven strategies are based on behavioral science and my clinical work with hundreds of people trying to achieve their long-term goals.

1. CLARIFY AND HONOR YOUR VALUES

Ask yourself why this goal matters to you. Do you want to lose weight because you value getting in shape to return to a favorite pastime of hiking, or because of societal expectations and pressures? People who are guided by their authentic values are better at achieving their goals. They also don’t run out of willpower, because they perceive it as a limitless resource. Figure out what makes you tick, and choose goals consistent with those values.

2. FRAME GOALS AND YOUR LIFE IN POSITIVE TERMS

Focus on what you want to accomplish, not what you don’t. Instead of planning not to drink

alcohol on workdays during the new year, commit to drinking your favorite sparkling water with Sunday to Thursday evening meals. Struggling to suppress thoughts takes a lot of energy, and they have a way of returning to your mind with a vengeance.

It also helps to reflect on the aspects of yourself and your life that you are already happy with. Although you might fear that this will spur complacency and inaction, studies show that gratitude and other positive emotions lead to better self-control in the long run.

3. CHANGE YOUR ENVIRONMENT TO MAKE IT EASIER

Research suggests that people with high willpower are exceptionally good at arranging their environment to avoid temptations. So, banish all credit cards from your wallet if your goal is to save money. And don’t keep a bowl of M&M’s at your work desk if you intend to eat healthy.

If your coworkers regularly bring sweets to work, ask them to help you with your goals (they might get inspired to join in!) and bring cookies only for special occasions. Supportive friends and family can dramatically increase your chances of achieving your resolutions. Joining a group whose members practice behaviors you’d like to adopt is another great way to bolster your willpower, because having role models improves self-control.

4. BE PREPARED WITH ‘IF-THEN’ STRATEGIES

Even the best resolution falls apart when your busy schedule and exhaustion take over. Formu-

late a series of plans for what to do when obstacles present themselves. These “if-then” plans are shown to improve self-control and goal attainment.

Each time you wake up in the middle of the night craving candies or chips, you can plan instead to read a guilty-pleasure magazine, or log into your online community of healthy eaters for inspiration, or eat an apple slowly and mindfully, savoring each bit. When you’re tired and about to skip that gym class you signed up for, call your supportive sister who is on standby. Anticipate as many situations as possible and make specific plans, vividly imagining the situations and what you will do in the moment.

5. USE A GRADUAL APPROACH

When you embark on a new goal, start small and build on early successes. Use one less spoonful of sugar in your coffee. Eventually, you might be able to forgo any sweeteners at all. If resisting that muffin initially proves to be too hard, try waiting 10 minutes. By the end of it, your urge will likely subside.

You might be surprised to realize that change in one domain of life – like abstaining from sweet processed foods – tends to spread to other areas. You might find you are able to bike longer distances, or moderate your caffeine intake more easily.

6. IMAGINE REWARDS AND THEN ENJOY THEM

Picture the feeling of endorphins circulating through your body after a run, or the sun on your skin as you approach a mountain summit. Pay attention to all your senses: smell, sight,

Marian piety in its traditional form has a deep contradiction at its heart. In a speech in 2014, Pope Francis said, “The model of maternity for the Church is the Virgin Mary” who “in the fullness of time conceived through the Holy Spirit and gave birth to the Son of God.”

If that were true, women could be ordained, since their connection to Mary would allow them, like her, to represent the church. If the world received the body of Christ from this woman, Mary, then women today should not be excluded from giving the body of Christ, as priests, to the faithful at Mass.

The Virgin cult cuts women off from the full, human reality of Mary, and so from full participation in the life of the church.

It is no coincidence that in the early 20th century, the Vatican forbade Mary to be depicted in priestly vestments. She could only ever be presented as the unattainable virgin-mother: never as leader, and never as a fully embodied woman in her own right.

The irony of this should not be lost. A fully human Gospel symbol of female authority, autonomy, and the capacity to envision a transformed world becomes a tool of patriarchy.

By contrast, the Mary of the Gospels, the God-bearer and priestly figure - a normal wife and mother of children - confirms women in their embodied humanity and supports their efforts to challenge unjust structures, both within and outside the church.

[the writer is Stewart Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity College, University of Divinity]

hearing, touch and taste. Visualizing rewards improves your chances of engaging in the activity that results in them.

If it’s hard to imagine or experience these rewards in the beginning, decide on small, meaningful gifts you can give yourself until the positive effects of the new behaviors kick in. For example, imagine yourself taking a half-day off work each month after you pay down your credit card debt: visualize exactly what you would do and how you would feel. And then do it.

7. BE KIND TO YOURSELF, EVEN DURING SETBACKS

Most people believe the way to increase willpower is to “whip oneself into shape,” because being kind to oneself is indulgent and lacks self discipline. But the exact opposite is true – people who harshly blame themselves for even small willpower failures tend to do worse in accomplishing their goals in the long run.

Try self-compassion instead. Cut yourself some slack and remember that being human means being imperfect. When you fall for that doughnut, don’t despair, and don’t throw in the towel. Treat yourself with care and understanding and then recommit to your goal the following day.

Remember, you aren’t likely to achieve your New Year’s resolutions by being self-critical and hard on yourself. Instead, boost your willpower through a series of small and strategic steps that will help you succeed.

[the writer is Adjunct Professor of Psychology, Georgetown University]

Mary Kom vs Nikhat Zareen in finals of trials for Olympic Qualifiers



NEW DELHI, DEC 27 (PTI): Six-time world champion M C Mary Kom and Nikhat Zareen will clash in the 51kg category finals of the women's boxing trials for next year's Olympic Qualifiers after claiming unanimous victories in their respective first-round bouts here on Friday.

Former junior world champion Zareen defeated reigning national champion Jyoti Gulia, while multiple-time Asian champion Mary Kom got the better of Ritu Grewal. The two-day competition will end on Saturday after the finals.

Zareen had kicked up a storm a few weeks ago by demanding a trial against iconic six-time world champion M C Mary Kom after the Boxing Federation of India's flip-flop on the selection policy for the Olympic Qualifiers.

Mary Kom had maintained that she would abide by the selection policy laid down by the BFI, which ultimately decided to have trials.

This was after BFI President Ajay Singh

triggered the storm by announcing at a felicitation ceremony that Mary Kom would be selected for the Olympic qualifiers without any trial due to her consistent international performances.

An irate Zareen then demanded a "fair chance" against the celebrated Manipuri, who is also a Rajya Sabha member.

In other trial bouts on Friday, world youth gold-medallist Sakshi Chaudhary defeated Asian silver-winner Manisha Maun in the 57kg category, while former national champion Simranjit Kaur got the better Pavitra in the 60kg opener.

The Olympic qualifiers are scheduled to be held in China in February next year.

All five categories in women's boxing are being decided by trials as none in the 51kg, 57kg, 60kg, 69kg, and 75kg divisions managed to make the finals of the world championships.

The two-day trials for men will be held in Bellary, Karnataka starting Sunday.

Protesters detained outside UP Bhawan

New Delhi, Dec 27 (PTI): Police on Friday detained a group of protesters who tried to stage a demonstration outside the Uttar Pradesh Bhawan against alleged police atrocities in the state following the agitation over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

The Jamia Coordina-

tion Committee, which comprises students from various political groups active on the campus, had called for a "gherao" of the UP Bhawan.

There was heavy security deployment outside the venue. As soon as some protesters arrived, they were detained and taken to the Mandir Marg police station.

IAF's MiG-27 decommissioned from Air Force



JODHPUR, DEC 27 (PTI): The iconic MiG-27 was decommissioned from the Indian Air Force at Jodhpur air base on Friday.

After serving the IAF for over three decades, the fleet of MiG-27 had their last sortie from the air base on Friday.

Jodhpur air base had

the squadron of seven MiG-27.

Air marshal S K Ghotia, the air office commanding-in-chief of South Western Air Command, who was present at the event, said the plane has been at the frontline and has proved its worth in the 1999 Kargil War.

Mamata to attend swearing-in ceremony of Hemant Soren: TMC

KOLKATA, DEC 27 (PTI): West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is likely to attend the swearing-in ceremony of Hemant Soren as Jharkhand chief minister in Ranchi on December 29, TMC sources said.

With top opposition leaders of the country scheduled to attend the programme, Soren's swearing-in ceremony is likely to be a "show of unity" in the wake of countrywide protests against the amended

Citizenship Act and the proposed pan-India NRC.

"We share a very good relationship with Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and Hemant Soren. So far, it has been decided that our party supremo along with some senior leaders would attend Soren's swearing-in ceremony on December 29," a senior TMC leader said.

The ceremony will be more of a "show of strength and unity of

opposition leaders", he said.

"This would send out a very crucial political message in the wake of ongoing unrest across the country over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act," another senior TMC leader said.

Banerjee, earlier this week, had written to all opposition leaders and chief ministers to unite and fight together against the amended Citizenship Act and the



proposed NRC.

Soren was projected as the chief ministerial candidate of the JMM-Congress-RJD alliance

in the recent Jharkhand assembly elections.

The three-party alliance has won 47 of the state's 81 seats. The

JMM won 30 seats, Congress 16 and RJD one.

The BJP clinched 25 seats, the AJSU Party two, the JVM (P) three and others four.

Onion at eye-watering Rs 150/kg; imports underway

NEW DELHI, DEC 27 (PTI): Retail onion prices on Friday remained higher at up to Rs 150 per kg even as the imported supplies have started arriving to boost the domestic availability and check prices.

In metros, retail price of onion was ruling at Rs 120 /kg Kolkata, at Rs 102/kg in Delhi and Mumbai and at Rs 80/

kg in Chennai, as per the data maintained by the consumer affairs ministry.

In most cities, onion prices were ruling at Rs 100/kg. In Itanagar, the bulb crop was at Rs 150/kg.

"Imported onions have started arriving. About 1,160 tonne has reached India. Addition-

al 10,560 tonne of shipments are expected to arrive in the next 3-4 days," a senior ministry official told PTI.

Both red and yellow onions have been imported from Turkey, Egypt and Afghanistan. The shipments are landing at Mumbai port, the official said.

State-owned MMTC,

which is importing the key kitchen staple on behalf of the government, has contracted 49,500 tonne of onion so far. Some shipments will arrive next month.

Onion prices have shot up sharply due to estimated 25 per cent fall in kharif production of 2019-20 crop year (July-June) compared to the

previous year because of late monsoon and even- tual excess rains in the major producing states.

The prices have failed to cool down despite several government measures in the last few weeks. The government has already banned export of onion, imposed stock limits on traders and is also supplying

buffer stock at a cheaper rate.

Traders and experts are of the view that onion prices will continue to remain firm till January when late kharif crop will start hitting the market.

The country had last imported 1,987 tonne of onion in 2015-16 when prices had shot up significantly.

In 2019, literary spotlight shone on first time writers

NEW DELHI, DEC 27 (PTI): With themes ranging from lost childhood to the complex journey from boyhood to manhood, 2019 was the year of the debutant in the literary world with first-time works dominating and sometimes topping awards in India and beyond.

While debut authors wrote 37 of the 90 novels read by the jury of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature jury, the Rs 25 lakh JCB Prize, India's most expensive literary award, went to first-timer Madhuri Vijay's *The Far Field*.

Vijay was joined by debut authors Amrita Mahale and Mukta Sathe in JCB's longlist of 10. And Roshan Ali, also a first-timer, beat better known writers such as Raj Kamal Jha and Amitabh Bagchi to make it to the short-list of the coveted award with *Ib's Endless Search for Satisfaction*.

Vijay's novel -- following a young woman's search for a lost figure from her childhood -- also took home the Tata Literature Live! First Book Award (fiction) besides being one of the six works shortlisted for the DSC Prize and the Crossword Book Award.

"We get a lot of submissions from first-time writers who tend to imitate or often are influenced by the style or story of an existing writer. What we look for is something unique - a plot or writing style that we haven't seen in a writer before," Tarini Uppal, editor at Penguin Random House India, told PTI.

Ali's much acclaimed book is the story of an "ordinary" boy as he transforms into an "ordinary" man, while trying to figure out life and understand himself.

For Ali, who also featured in the shortlist of the Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize, his "ability to play with language" did the trick.

"Roshan's ability to play with language

is something we don't see very often. He has a beautiful way of seeing the very normal and mundane things in life. It immediately grabs your attention and makes you want to read more," Uppal said.

Sathe's *A Patchwork Family* won her a spot in not just the JCB Prize longlist, but also in the shortlist of First Book Award category (fiction) of Tata Literature Live! awards.

"It is a novel that doesn't shy away from tackling important social issues, how to determine innocence or guilt, the role of law versus allegiance to family, the relevance of marriage and the impact of rape. These are all issues that would strike a chord with many readers," said Renuka Chatterjee, vice president, publishing, at Speaking Tiger Books.

That the number of debut authors who broke into the literary scene in 2019 was noteworthy is evident from the fact that of the 90 novels that the year's DSC Prize jury read, a strikingly high proportion of 41 per cent were by first time writers, said chairperson of the jury Harish Trivedi.

"This ratio went up to 50 per cent (3/6) in our shortlist. So, these breakout efforts were clearly not short on quality," Trivedi said.

This success, Trivedi said, could be attributed to the aspirational and hopeful approach of the "wannabe writers", combined with the increased commercialisation of the writing of novels, and more importantly, to novel-writing becoming more "professionalised".

"The authors of many 'first' novels are persons who have already learnt and practised the craft of fiction in various Creative Writing courses, especially in the US.

"Many publishing houses, too, employ experienced in-house editors who invest quality time in pruning or grooming these promising manuscripts...The so-called 'first



novels' are thus not as naturally fresh or innocent as they may seem to be or used to be," Trivedi said.

A lot of credit also goes to publishers worldwide who are encouraging and publishing young and first time writers, Surina Narula, founder of the DSC Prize, added.

Among other debut writers who grabbed attention were Amrita Mahale for *"Milk Teeth"* and Shubhangi Swarup for *"Latitudes of Longing"*.

While both made the cut to the Crossword Book Award shortlist, Mahale and Swarup also qualified for the longlists of JCB Prize and DSC Prize respectively.

According to Karthika V K, publisher at Westland, *"Milk Teeth"* scored because of its "elegant and imaginative prose, memorable characters, laughter and conflict that hold one's attention".

During the year, the publishing house brought out several other debuts which received "stellar reviews". These included Jane Borges' *"Bombay Balchao"*, Krupa Ge's *"Chennai Rains"*, Sharbari Ahmad's *"Dust Beneath Her Feet"*, Kapil Komireddi's *"Malevolent Republic"*, and Saba Dewan's *"Tawaifnama"*.

It was also a good year in terms of shining the spotlight on fresh talent from the subcontinent.

Both the DSC Prize and the Shakti Bhatt First Book Award shortlists saw many names from South Asia.

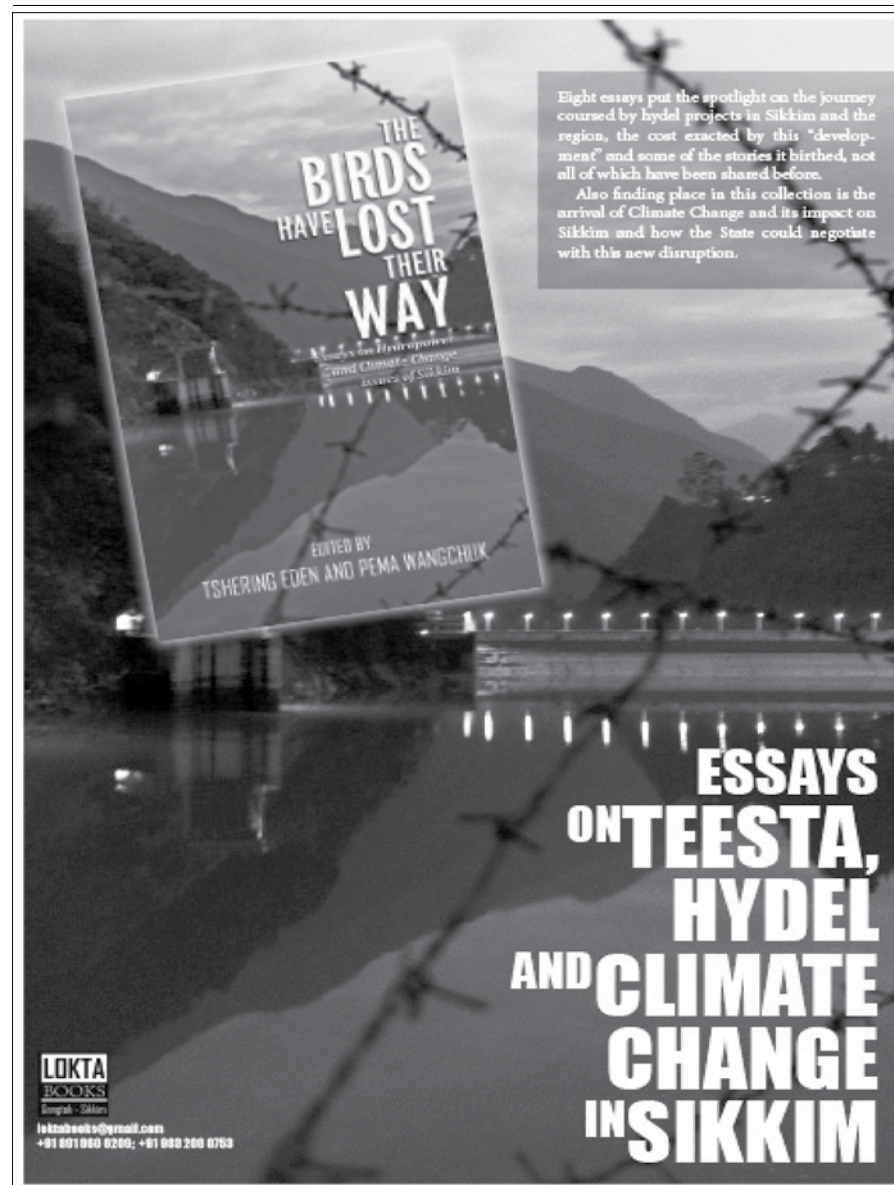
Akil Kumarasamy's *"Half Gods"*, Devi S Laskar's *"The Atlas of Reds and Blues"*, Jamil Jan Kochai's *"99 Nights in Logar"*, Mirza Waheed's *"Tell Her Everything"*, Nadeem Zaman's *"In the Time of the Others"* and Sadia Abbas' *"The Empty Room"* on the DSC Prize longlist were all debut works. The Shakti Bhatt Prize shortlist also

featured books by first time writers like Bangladeshi author Numair Atif Chowdhury's *"Babu Bangladesh"*, and Pakistani author Nadia Akbar's *"Goodbye, Freddie Mercury"*. While the search for "new young voices" is an eternal one, publishers said the magic of first-time writers was expected to continue in 2020 with several debut works slated to

be released in the new year.

Penguin Random House will bring out Deepa Anappara's *"Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line"*, as well as Megha Majumdar's *"A Burning"*, and Speaking Tiger has high hopes from Angshu Dasgupta's *"Fern Road"*, a coming-of-age story set in 1980s' Calcutta of a boy who struggles with his sexual identity.

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Ex-South Korea coach Shin to take over struggling Indonesia

JAKARTA, DEC 27 (AFP): Former South Korea coach Shin Tae-yong has been tapped to take over Indonesia's struggling national team, the country's football association said on Friday.

Shin, who led South Korea at last year's World Cup in Russia -- where they famously ousted defending champions Germany -- is expected to be formally unveiled on Saturday.

"We have invited Shin to finalise the contract. After that he will be introduced later on Saturday," Mochamad Iriawan, chairman of the Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI), said in a statement Friday.

"Hopefully all the process will run well."

The expected appointment of Shin, 50, comes after the PSSI sacked Scotsman Simon McMenemy in November with Indonesia bottom of their 2022 World Cup qualifying group on zero points from five games.

Indonesia also floundered in last year's Southeast Asian championship, the Suzuki Cup, where they finished fourth out of five teams in their group.

Indonesia have had significant problems off the pitch, with the two former chairmen leaving the PSSI this year amid match-fixing allegations.

In October, Indonesia's football association was slapped with a 45,000 FIFA fine over crowd chaos that erupted at a match against Malaysia in Jakarta.

Indonesian football and its professional league have been tarnished by a host of problems, including match-fixing scandals and deadly hooliganism.

India U-19 team beats SA by 9 wickets in first youth ODI

East London, Dec 27 (PTI): India under-19 team produced an impressive all-round performance to begin its tour of South Africa with a comfortable nine-wicket win in the first Youth ODI at the Buffalo Park here.

Batting first, South Africa Under-19 team folded for 187 in 48.3 overs. In reply, India dished out a solid batting display to overhaul the target, scoring 190 for 1 in 42.3 overs on Thursday to take 1-0 lead in the series.

South Africa's decision to bat first backfired as their batsmen failed to convert the starts into big scores with Luke Beaufort top-scoring with a 91-ball 64.

For India U-19 team, Ravi Bishnoi scalped three wickets, while Kartik Tyagi, Shubhang Hegde and Atharva Ankoekar picked up two wickets each.

Chasing the target, openers Divyaansh Saxena (86 not out) and N Tilak Varma (59) shared a 127-run stand to take the game away from South Africa.

Trent Alexander-Arnold is a unique playmaker in Liverpool's red machine

BARNEY RONAY LEICESTER, 27 DEC [THEGUARDIAN]: Joyful and, indeed, triumphant. The King Power Stadium was a boisterous place with Liverpool's world champions in town. New-build stadiums can often be deathly places. Not this one, with its operatic pre-match fanfare, its sense of high-end underdog glamour and with a Leicester team unbeaten at home in the league this season.

At which point, enter the red machine and, in particular, another extraordinary, incisive and deeply unusual performance from Trent Alexander-Arnold.

Every week the Premier League team-sheets seem to make the same category-mistake with Liverpool's defence. Liverpool's No 66 plays (it says here) at right-back. In reality Alexander-Arnold is something else, a 21-year-old footballer whose talent has redefined his role, creating in the process something new and excitingly disruptive.

Alexander-Arnold made two goals, scored Liverpool's last one in a

4-0 win and looked irresistible at times. He is an extraordinary player in so many ways, a full-back who operates at a constant level of creative urgency.

Some will point to the occasional holes in the defensive part of his game, flaws that were apparent here at times early in the match. But this is to miss the point to a world-class degree.

There is a basic sense of optimism about Liverpool's running game, a feeling the team can shift like a single mass to cover its weaknesses with strengths. Liverpool do not have a goalscoring centre-forward (he scored twice here). Liverpool did not have their best defensive midfielder (they did not need him). And, of course, Liverpool don't have a world-class playmaker. Except they do and he's currently bombing forward from right-back.

It helps when you play in a team like this. At times Leicester seemed almost craven in the face of Liverpool's passing, movement and – yes – that alpha dog energy this team carries with it now.



"We're champions of the world," the away section sang throughout the night. Not that a Fifa junket was needed to settle that question. From the Persian Gulf to the East Midlands this is a team operating at a thrillingly high pitch, the kind of run where every game feels like a rollover from the last, and where the plan remains always the same. Don't stop. Don't look back. Carry on being a bit more like themselves every time. There was something stately about Liverpool's dominance

in that first half. Even the half-scuffed clearances fell to a red shirt. Even Alexander-Arnold's shaky delivery on the first few set pieces felt like a high-grade machine settling into its rhythms. And in a game that always felt like a kind of homecoming, it was fitting that Liverpool's locally sourced right-back should create the breakthrough with half an hour gone.

The goal came from a cross from the left hit with a furious dipping power. Alexander-Arnold is sui generis in this too.

Nobody else kicks the ball in quite the same way, with the same inventive precision, the same flat skimming trajectory. His crosses are like shots. His shots are like passes. His corners are like free-kicks. The cross landed on the head of Roberto Firmino, who nodded it down into the corner. Liverpool had scored with their sixth effort on goal, to Leicester's zero. The second half brought more of the same. Alexander-Arnold's corner drew a handball from

Caglar Soyuncu. James Milner tucked away the penalty. Shortly afterwards Firmino made it 3-0 from another hard, flat cross from the right. That assist made it eight for Alexander-Arnold so far in the Premier League. Only Kevin De Bruyne has more. Look further back and Alexander-Arnold has 20 assists in the league since the start of last season, out on his own ahead of everyone. No doubt English football has produced deep right-sided creative players who can

match Alexander-Arnold's extraordinary productivity in the modern age. But none spring to mind right now.

Leicester were not helped by their own cautious start. In the first half Jamie Vardy was often the lone forward point of a distended 4-5-1 formation. The plan was obvious: sit deep, let Liverpool pass, break with precision. The only problem was, it never showed any sign of working. Liverpool know teams will play like this. They counter-press so aggressively the chances to break are hugely reduced. Before you know it 40 minutes have passed without a shot on goal and the game is being played at an exhausting level of intensity around your own goal. Liverpool absorbed some pressure as the game wore on but always looked like scoring more. Alexander-Arnold's goal arrived on 78 minutes, a low hard drive into the far corner, and the gloss on a performance of real drive and verve. Liverpool ended the day 13 points clear at the top of the Premier League, still a little jet-lagged from their desert break, still cranking the throttle. So much for the world. Next stop, England.

Anthony Martial at double for Manchester United in Newcastle rout

JAMIE JACKSON MANCHESTER, 27 DEC [THEGUARDIAN]: Manchester United again illustrated their ambiguous character by rebounding from Sunday's dismal defeat at Watford with this smooth-gearred, canter of a victory.

They even gave Newcastle the advantage of a goal start during a dire few first-half minutes before upping quality and control to pull away and display a ruthlessness they can sometimes lack.

It meant only a second league win when enjoying more possession than opponents in the 18 matches since Ole Gunnar Solskjær was made permanent manager in March.

Solskjær said: "You saw the intent straight away and the attitude was to win the ball and go forward. I was never worried about reaction [after Watford]. It's always been one loss – we lost one in August, in September, November,

December – not two in a row in the league."

The one sour note was Scott McTominay failing to emerge for the second half owing to injury. Solskjær added. "He's done his ligament in the knee probably – we'll find out [Friday] how bad. I'm not sure if he's going to be ready for Saturday [at Burnley] but we've seen him heal quickly before."

Solskjær entered the match talking of how the defeat at Watford was down to his team's callowness. That was not in evidence this time, though after a Marcus Rashford free-kick that was deflected to three successive corners, then came United's blip.

The last of the three was won back by Newcastle and suddenly Dwight Gayle and Jetro Willems were involved in a breakaway that Aaron Wan-Bissaka was relieved to halt just outside his area.



There was similar emotion when Mason Greenwood lost the ball inside the Newcastle half and again they charged through. This move ended with Joelinton feeding Gayle and he should have scored from close range.

There was no escape the third time as Matty Longstaff repeated his feat of two months ago, when scoring in the reverse fixture. Yet

again the home side were slipshod: Fred was dispossessed and black-and-white shirts flooded forward. Gayle fed Longstaff and he chipped sweetly into Joelinton who returned the ball – under extreme pressure – for his teammate to slide home.

United woke up quickly as they had to, though Newcastle's Martin Dubravka will not wish to see replays

of how Anthony Martial's equaliser squeezed in at his near post. This came after Rashford and Luke Shaw combined along the left before the latter found Andreas Pereira. His layoff was smart and allowed Martial to shoot.

Solskjær has spoken recently of the difficulty of leaving out Mason Greenwood and the young forward was about to remind us why. When

Fabian Schär passed loosely the 18-year-old pounced on the ball, advanced, then fired a shot that deflected off Federico Fernández and went in off the bar.

United threatened further with a Pereira shot and a Greenwood cross before striking again. This time Wan-Bissaka stood the ball up and Rashford hung high, outmuscling Schär to power in a magnificent header. VAR checked for a McTominay hand on Matty Longstaff but the goal – correctly – stood.

For the second half Paul Pogba – who asked his teammates to wear "We are one" and "No to racism" wrist bands during (and solely for) the warm-up – was sent on in place of McTominay. His opening action was a crafty dummy that allowed the ball to roll to Martial in the area. Next, a 20-yard shot that just missed the outside of Dubravka's

right post solidified the sense Pogba could help wrap up the result quickly, and moments later United had a fourth goal for only the second time in the league this term.

Again this was self-inflicted by Newcastle: Sean Longstaff swivelled near halfway and hit the ball back but only into Martial's path. He sprinted in and despite a heavy touch still dinked the ball over the advancing Dubravka. United were now rampant. Pogba's balletic feet created space but his left-foot shot was too close to the Newcastle goalkeeper. Next, he threaded the ball to Martial and his effort hit the left-hand post.

Next up is Burnley and who knows which of their two incarnations – poor or convincing – will turn up. Steve Bruce, the Newcastle manager and a former Manchester United captain, said: "Results-wise this place is bloody awful for me [as a No 1]."

Deepak the brightest in Indian wrestling; Bajrang, Vinesh rock steady in 2019

AMANPREET SINGH NEW DELHI, DEC 27 (PTI): The established names lived up to expectations for most part but what stood out for Indian wrestling in 2019 was the rise and rise of Deepak Punia amid a steady decline in the fortunes of Olympic trailblazers Sushil Kumar and Sakshi Malik. Five medals and four Olympic quota places made this year's World Championships an unprecedented one for India's wrestlers.

The mega-stars -- Bajrang Punia (65kg) and Vinesh Phogat (53kg) -- delivered podium finishes along with Tokyo 2020 quotas but more than a bronze was expected of them.

Deepak (86kg), who

was crowned junior world champion earlier this year, was the biggest takeaway from the worlds with a silver and an Olympic quota in his kitty. He could well have pulled off a gold, the first since the iconic Sushil Kumar's path-breaking one back in 2010, but an ankle injury came in the way and he had to forfeit the final.

The icing on the cake came towards the end of the year when he was named the junior wrestler of the year by the sport's governing body United World Wrestling (UWW).

With his achievements, Deepak became another story of limited-means-maximum-success in Indi-

an sports. The Haryana-lad's father used to sell milk and he first rose to prominence in 2016 with a cadet world championship gold.

In 2018, he managed just one medal at the senior level, but this year he pocketed two bronze and a silver before landing biggest second-place finish of his career in Nur Sultan. A smooth transition from junior to senior circuit and the fact that he is world No.1 now has raised expectations from Deepak going into the Olympic year.

The more established Punia won every tournament he entered till the worlds. The gold medals came from Dan Kolov, Asian Championship, Ali Aliev and Yasar Dogu but

his already-exposed leg defence was sorted by his rivals by the time the world event came along.

His unbeaten run was halted by Kazakhstan's Daulet Niyazbekov in Nur Sultan and it came as rude shock since he was the favourite to win the title as world No.1.

Bajrang cried foul after the loss, complaining that the judging favoured the home wrestler, but what was undeniable was also his tendency to concede early leads.

Against Niyazbekov, Bajrang trailed 2-8 at one stage in the bout.

Nevertheless, Bajrang consolidated his position as an undisputed star at the global stage with his supreme stamina and attacking style.

Currently ranked second in the world, Bajrang has already started the work on sorting out his vulnerable defence and has hired a new sparring partner in Russia's Viktor Rassadin at his training camp in Sonapat.

Another wrestler emerging from a humble background was 22-year-old Ravi Dahiya. His rock-solid technique, strong defence and above all, temperament, make him a strong contender for an Olympic medal.

His bronze medal at the worlds came as a surprise to many but he had shown his potential at the Pro League. In cool-headed Ravi, India can hope for more than one medal from its male grapplers in Tokyo.

Rahul Aware added to India's tally with a bronze, albeit in the non-olympic 61kg category.

In a sport dominated by Haryana, the diminutive wrestler from Pune is trying to carry forward the legacy of the great KD Jadhav, who was independent India's first athlete to win an Olympic medal.

Vinesh Phogat further fuelled the rising Olympic medal hopes from her by claiming her first ever medal at the World Championship. In one of the most competitive Olympic categories, the fiery Vinesh overpowered not just opponents but also a few demons in her head to gain confidence.

She showed that she can be at par with the best in this division with wins over top wrestlers, including then world No.1 Sarah Ann Hildebrandt, en route a bronze in Nur-Sultan.

However, for double Olympic-medallist Sushil Kumar and Rio 2016 bronze-winner Sakshi Malik, the year was a battle to stay relevant.

Both competed at the worlds after winning national trials but neither of them could last more than a round. The questions being asked of Sushil, 36, and his future are louder compared to the ones being posed to a much younger Sakshi, 27, who has been mostly underwhelming since her Olympic bronze.

Montenegro MPs held after violent protest over religion law

Podgorica, Dec 27 (AFP): More than a dozen Montenegrin opposition MPs were detained in parliament on Friday after they violently protested a controversial law on religious freedom, which was passed after the group was taken away.

The law has raised tensions in recent weeks between the government and a pro-Serb opposition which is close to the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), Montenegro's main religious body.

Under the legislation, religious communities need to prove ownership of property from before 1918, when Montenegro lost its independence, in order to keep it.

The SPC, which runs hundreds of monasteries in the tiny country, accuses the government of trying to appropriate church heritage and purloin its assets.

The government denies this, saying it only wants to sort out ownership rights.

During the parliamentary debate that started on Thursday, opposition MPs from the Democratic Front called on supporters to block roads around Montenegro and threatened to take up arms if the law was passed.

After amendments they proposed were rejected, opposition members hurled a firecracker in the parliament hall, vandalised the building, threw plastic bottles and tried to physically attack other politicians, according to an AFP reporter at the scene.

Eighteen opposition deputies were detained

inside the assembly. According to state media reports, they were questioned by police early Friday.

After the protesting MPs were marched away, the law was passed in the early hours with 45 votes in favour.

Prime Minister Dusko Markovic told the public "not to expect a radicalisation of the situation" in the country.

"I condemn this behaviour as irresponsible towards other members of parliament and towards the citizens of Montenegro, but I believe that this is a valuable experience and that this kind of incident will not be repeated," he said.

There were also protests in Podgorica and attempts to block roads in other parts of the country by the opposition's supporters, according to local media.

Montenegro was part of the same country as Serbia for nearly 90 years until its independence in 2006, and relations between the neighbours remain complicated.

The SPC is still the official Orthodox church in the country, where nearly 72 per cent of Montenegro's population of 620,000 adhere to the faith.

But Montenegro's President Milo Djukanovic, has called for the "renewal" of the independent Montenegrin Church.

The Montenegrin Orthodox Church declared its separation from the SPC in the mid-1990s, but it is still not recognised by most Orthodox churches.

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Israel's Netanyahu sweeps party primary in re-election boost

JERUSALEM, DEC 27 (AFP): Embattled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told supporters Friday he would win a March general election after scoring a landslide victory in the leadership primary of his right-wing Likud party.

Israel's longest-serving premier, who faces a corruption indictment as well as a third general election in 12 months, was expected to beat rival Gideon Saar in the leadership primary.

But the convincing margin of victory -- by 72.5 to 27.5 percent -- strengthens his position in the party he has dominated for 20 years.

Netanyahu, 70, called it a "huge win" and pledged to emerge victori-

ous in the March 2 general election.

"Now is the time to unite and bring a tremendous victory for the Likud and the right in the election," Netanyahu told a press conference.

"Most of the people support the right and support me to lead the government" In what appeared to be a general election campaign speech, Netanyahu did not mention the defeated Saar once.

He thanked US President Donald Trump, a close ally, for his support for Israel and said a Likud victory in the next election would bring more "historic achievements."

Likud and the centrist Blue and White party were deadlocked after

elections in both April and September, with neither able to command a parliamentary majority under Israel's system of proportional representation. Last month, Israel's attorney general indicted the prime minister for fraud, bribery and breach of trust over a series of corruption allegations he denies.

Blue and White leader Benny Gantz also used Friday's primary result as a rallying call for the general election.

He said Netanyahu's victory showed Likud members had "elected a leader facing three indictments, who is seeking to unravel the rule of law and secure personal immunity".

"These elections demand that we place a

mirror in front of 'the Netanyahu party' and make the choice for unity, dignity and internal reconciliation." Ofer Zalzberg, Israel analyst with the International Crisis Group think tank, said the result kickstarted the election campaign.

"Netanyahu is going for a third shot, hoping the next election will prove more successful," he told AFP.

"This strengthens his position within the right wing who saw he is still able to achieve victories but it doesn't fundamentally change the arithmetic for the next election." Early polls indicate that the March 2020 election could again result in stalemate.

Twelve people died and dozens were injured on Friday when a passenger plane carrying 100 people crashed shortly after takeoff from Kazakhstan's largest city and slammed into a house, officials said.

A video released by the Central Asian country's emergencies committee showed the plane operated by budget carrier Bek Air split into pieces with its nose crushed into a partially collapsed house, as rescue crews worked to pull people from the wreckage.

Rescue workers could be seen reaching into the windows of the shattered cockpit, as scores of emergency staff rushed to the site.

The plane disappeared from the radar minutes after it took off from Almaty airport at 7.05 am (01:05 GMT) on its way to the capital Nur-Sultan with 95 passengers and five crew members, the airport authority said in a statement.

It hit a concrete barrier and then slammed into a two-storey building near the city's boundary northeast of the airport.

Kazakhstan re-

sponded to the crash by grounding the model, which makes up the whole of the Bek Air fleet, and launched an investigation. The country's emergencies committee released a list of 12 people who died, including the captain, revising down earlier tolls provided by officials and media.

Eight of the victims died at the scene of the disaster, two while receiving medical attention at the airport and two in hospital.

The health ministry said 53 people had been injured, nine of whom were children, adding that 10 adults were in critical condition.

Deputy Prime Minister Roman Sklyar said the tail of the 23-year-old had touched the runway twice during takeoff.

"Either this is a pilot error, or there were technical reasons," Sklyar said at a press conference in Almaty.

No one was inside the house that the plane crashed into, Khabar state television reported.

- Those responsible 'will be punished' -

Iran, China, Russia start joint naval drills

TEHRAN, DEC 27 (AFP): Iran, China and Russia started four days of joint naval drills in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman on Friday, the commander of Iran's flotilla announced.

The exercise comes at a time of heightened tensions since the United States withdrew from a landmark 2015 nuclear deal with Iran in May last year.

"The message of this exercise is peace, friendship and lasting security through co-operation and unity ... and its effect will be to show that Iran cannot be isolated," Rear Admiral Gholamreza Tahani said on state television.

Tahani added that the drills included rescuing ships on fire or vessels under attack by pirates and shooting exercises, with both Iran's navy

and its Revolutionary Guards participating.

State television showed what it said was a Russian warship arriving at Chabahar port in southern Iran and said the Chinese will join shortly, calling the three countries "the new triangle of power in the sea".

"The aim of this drill is to bolster security of international maritime commerce, combatting piracy and terrorism and sharing information... and experience," the flotilla commander said.

"Us hosting these powers shows that our relations have reached a meaningful point and may have an international impact," he added.

The United States reimposed crippling sanctions on Iran after quitting the nuclear deal last year, prompting Tehran to hit back with counter-



President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev pledged to provide families of the victims with compensation and tweeted that those responsible "will be severely punished in accordance with the law."

Tokayev also said a government commission had been set up to investigate the circumstances surrounding the tragedy.

The interior ministry said it had also launched a criminal investigation

into the incident over violations of air transport safety rules.

The plane was 23 years old and had passed safety checks in May, Kazakh authorities said.

The industry ministry said in a statement that the Fokker 100 model, which is no longer manufactured, would be grounded until the cause of the accident became clear.

Bek Air describes it-

self on its website as Kazakhstan's first low-cost airline.

In March 2016, a Bek Air Fokker 100 plane with 116 passengers made an emergency landing at the capital's international airport after its landing gear failed to deploy. None of the passengers or five-member crew were injured.

Swiss regional carrier Helvetic Airways phased out its Dutch-built Fok-

ker-100s earlier this year after 15 years of service.

Informburo.kz news agency said one of its journalists, Dana Kruglova, was among the dead.

"(Her) trip had been uncertain, since she had work meetings planned in Almaty. But Dana wanted to celebrate the New Year with her parents in Nur-Sultan and decided to take this flight," the news agency said.



measures by dropping nuclear commitments.

Remaining parties to the badly weakened agreement include Britain, France and Germany as well as China and Russia.

In June, US President

Donald Trump authorised a military strike after Iran shot down a US drone, only to call off the retaliation at the last moment.

The crisis deepened with September 14 attacks on Saudi energy

giant Aramco's Abqaiq processing plant and Khurais oilfield, which halved the kingdom's crude output.

Yemen's Huthi rebels claimed responsibility for the attack but Washington accused Tehran,

a charge it has strongly denied.

Washington has responded with a military build-up in the Gulf and has launched an operation with its allies to protect navigation in Gulf waters.

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Bruce Lee's daughter sues fast food chain for USD 30 million

BEIJING, DEC 27 (PTI): Bruce Lee's daughter, Shannon Lee has sued a popular Chinese fast food chain Real Kungfu over its use of an image of the legendary martial artiste in its logo.

Shannon, who runs Bruce Lee Enterprises, alleges Real Kungfu has used the image in its logo without permission, reported BBC.

In the lawsuit, Shannon has asked that the chain to stop using her father's image, clarify that it has no connection to Bruce Lee for 90 consecutive days, and pay 210 million yuan in damages (USD 30 million).

Real Kungfu, the Guangzhou-based fast food chain was founded in 1990 and has around 600 outlets across China.

In a statement, the restaurant said that the local authorities approved its use of the logo.

"The Real Kungfu chain's logo is one that the company had applied for and obtained after a rigorous screening by the national trademark agency, we have already been using



this for 15 years.

"We are baffled that after so many years we are now being sued, and we are currently energetically studying the case and preparing our response," the company said in a statement posted on China's Weibo platform.

Recently, Shannon also spoke out against Lee's portrayal in Quentin Tarantino's "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood", saying it had made a "mockery" of her father.

David Fincher's next 'Mank' has completed 50 per cent of shooting, says crew member

LOS ANGELES, DEC 27 (PTI): David Fincher is halfway done with the shooting of his next feature "Mank", starring Oscar winner Gary Oldman as screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz, the director's longtime location manager William Doyle has revealed.

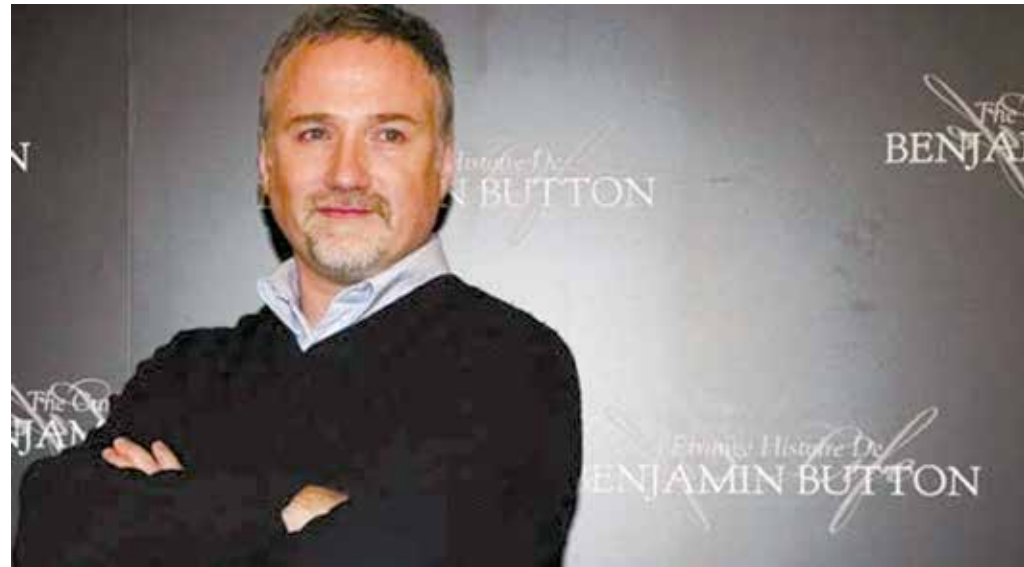
The movie is based on the script by Fincher's father, Jack, who had written the draft before his death in 2003.

Plot details are vague, but as per the sources the story will follow the troubled development of the "Citizen Kane" script by Mankiewicz alongside director Orson Welles.

Doyle told Daily Press that the film is not "just a biopic".

He said the film was also shot at Kemper Campbell Ranch in Victorville, California as the location has direct ties to the film's storyline.

Mankiewicz was a notorious drinker and suffered a leg injury in a car crash, after which Welles brought the screenwriter to the Kemper Campbell Ranch so that he could work on "Citizen Kane" without distractions.



He spent two months at the dry ranch and wrote hundreds of draft pages of the film's script for Welles to edit.

Mankiewicz later won the Oscar for the best original screenplay at the 1941 Academy Awards.

"Mank", which is Fincher's follow-up to 2014's "Gone Girl", also features Amanda Seyfried as Marion Davies, Lily Collins as Mankiewicz's secretary Rita Alexander, Tuppence Middleton as wife Sara Mankiewicz, and British actor Tom Burke as Welles.

Kevin Spacey accuser Ari Behn commits suicide

Los Angeles, Dec 27 (PTI): Norwegian author Ari Behn, who was one of the people to accuse Hollywood actor Kevin Spacey of sexual misconduct, has committed suicide, his family's spokesman Geir Hakonsund said. He was 47.

According to The Hollywood Reporter, Hakonsund shared the news in a statement to Norwegian paper VG.

"It's with great sorrow in our hearts that we, those closest to Ari Behn, must report that he took his own life today. We ask for respect for our private lives in the time to come," he said.

Further details related to his death have not yet been ascertained.

Behn was the ex-husband of Norway's Princess Martha Louise, whom he married in 2002. The couple parted ways in 2016.

He shared three daughters with Princess Martha Louise -- Maud Angelica, 16; Leah Isadora, 14; and Emma Tallulah, 11.

As an author, Behn was best known for penning the short story collection "Sad as Hell". He was also an equally successful artiste and playwright.

In 2017, he had accused Spacey of groping him at a con-



cert for the Nobel Peace Prize 10 years ago. He said the actor had reached under a table and inappropriately touched him.

Spacey, who was facing similar accusations from many people, never responded to the allegation.



BOLD AND COZY! The star, Ashlee Simpson shows off her cool gal style with a fluffy hat and green coat while shopping in Aspen, CO.

Farah Khan apologises for 'inadvertently' hurting religious sentiments



MUMBAI, DEC 27 (PTI): Director-choreographer Farah Khan has apologised a day after Amritsar police booked her, actor Raveena Tandon and comedian Bharti Singh for allegedly hurting the religious sentiments of a community in a TV show.

Farah on Friday took to Twitter to apologise on behalf of entire team of Flipkart Video Original's quiz show "Backbenchers", on which she serves as the host.

"I'm extremely saddened that some

sentiments have been inadvertently hurt by a recent episode of my show. I respect all religions, and it would never be my intention to disrespect any. On behalf of the entire team, Raveena Tandon, Bharti Singh and Myself.. we do sincerely apologise," the filmmaker tweeted.

A case was registered on Wednesday on the basis of a complaint filed by Sonu Jafar, president of Christian Front of Aajna Block, along with video footage of the show aired on Christmas eve.

The complainant alleged that "the religious sentiments of Christians have been hurt..".

The FIR was registered at Aajna police station in Amritsar under section 295-A of the IPC (deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage reli-

gious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs).

Raveena also posted an apology on social media on Thursday saying she never intended to insult any religion.

"I haven't said a word that can be interpreted as an insult to any religion. The three of us (Farah Khan, Bharti Singh and I) never intended to offend anyone, but in case we did, my most sincere apologies to those who were hurt," she tweeted.

ARIES: This is a time of wish fulfillment. Get ready to receive exactly what you asked for, in the format you desire. Such is the power of manifestation. For some, this could be a time or completing a significant journey. Ready to share your masterpiece with the world? Remember, perfection is but an illusion.

Tip: This is a time of completion and fruition.

TAURUS: Putting food on the table is paramount. But do you really need to lose you mental peace and sanity to create a stable life? Beware, Taurus. You could be holding on to a false sense of security. Where does your true happiness lie?

Tip: The Universe is supplying all of your needs.

GEMINI: You are closer to your destination than you can imagine. Continue to wrap up your projects and meet

your deadlines. Spend some time at the end of the day to review your progress and adjust the sails. Clearly envision the port you want to dock and speed away. New possibilities are opening up right this minute.

Tip: Envision your destination and set sail.

CANCER: Even though the change seems frightening, you're being asked to roll with it. Resisting it will feel a lot like rowing upstream without a paddle—impossible and exhausting all the same. You've survived a hundred per cent of your bad days.

Tip: Embrace the winds of change.

LEO: There is no harm in mixing business with pleasure, especially if it opens the doorway to more business and pleasure. Your wit and charm know no bounds today.

Tip: A successful partnership is on the cards for some.

VIRGO: The law of attraction works in mysterious ways, Virgo. Be cognizant of the signs and synchronicities, especially if you've been wanting to work in partnership with somebody. You will know if this association is worth your time and effort. On a side note, have you checked in with your body lately?

Tip: A blessed partnership is on the cards.

LIBRA: Oh, the perils of micromanaging. See how and where you need to detach. This will help you focus on what's really important and put your best work out. Thinking about expanding the team to take the load off?

Tip: It's to curate an A-team.

SCORPIO: Life is a giant ferris wheel and you're on the top of it, Scorpio. Expect many breakthroughs today. The blocks that were standing

in your way will now get cleared up. Keep an eye out for signs and synchronicities as you go about your day.

Tip: The blocks are getting cleared.

SAGITTARIUS: Yes, you deserve to be where you are today. Kiss goodbye to the demons. Replace fear and self-doubt with love. Remember there is a reason you were chosen for this sacred mission. What you do need to be mindful of, however, is that there is a lot more to learn.

Tip: Put in the work.

CAPRICORN: This is a period of major movement, Capricorn. The blocks that previously held you back are now being cleared. Does that mean you will face no challenges whatsoever? No, it just means that your will to win is stronger. Remember, haters are going to hate, especially when they see you moving closer to the final destination.

Don't let that be the reason you take your sparkle down a notch.

Tip: Let the will to win be strong.

AQUARIUS: Writer's block, what? Here's a simple exercise to get your creative juices flowing: take a piece of paper and start journaling the thoughts that come to you. No stopping. No editing. Revisit the copy with a fresh mind. You'll find that some of the ideas you've channelled are pure gold.

Tip: Give free writing a thought.

PISCES: This is a time of movement and progression. Major news is on its way to you, and it could permanently change the game. Be sure to ground your energy, Pisces. This will help you stay focused despite the endless to-do list. For some, a major business trip may be on the cards. Put your best suit on as you board the flight.

Tip: Things are finally picking up pace.