

# What was learnt and gained in 2023: Bouquets and brickbats India has earned



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2023 set to end soon has been a mixed year for India, what with political controversies, social tension, accidents and complications in external affairs, on the one hand, and milestone Bills, achievements in the space sector and economic growth, on the other.

## **Political controversies**

Back in January, some female wrestlers' accusation of sexual harassment against Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, BJP MP and president of the Wrestling Federation of India, and their agitations in this regard hogged the global limelight. The opposition parties raised a banner of revolt against the union government helmed by the BJP, miffed over the absence of action against the controversial MP.

In yet another political controversy, Congress heavyweight Rahul Gandhi's remark made in Karnataka during the parliamentary elections in 2019, "Why do the names of all thieves end with Modi?" landed him in the soup. Subsequently, he forfeited his MP post following a two-year jail term slapped on him by the Surat court on March 23, 2023. Yet he regained his position after the Supreme Court granted an interim stay on the conviction.

In another instance of political row, Trinamool Congress MP Mahua Moitra, who was criticizing the Adani Group, was suspended on December 8 on the charge of having got a bribe for raising questions in Parliament. Even as opposition parties were demanding resignation of Home Minister Amit Shah owning moral responsibility for the episode of some unauthorized persons' trespassing entry into the House, 14 MPs were suspended. The BJP government was criticized for having suspended MPs 71 times since 2019.

In a spin-off of various ideologically different parties joining hands to take on the BJP, a mega front called I.N.D.I.A was cobbled together on July 18, raising grand expectations. However, the Congress, a main component of the opposition front, went it alone in the recent Assembly elections held in the five states and lost power in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, drawing flak all around. The party, though, is at it again now, resurrecting the mega opposition alliance.

The Supreme Court's verdict pronounced on December 11, 2023, which upheld the validity of the abrogation of the Article 370 granting special status to Kashmir, came as a shot in the arm for the BJP's ideological politics. The day of opening the Ayodhya Ramar temple is also drawing closer.

### **Shocking Manipur riots**

On April 19, the High Court ordered the Manipur government to submit a report on the social and economic status of the Meiteis, a dominant ethnic population in Manipur, who were demanding Scheduled Tribe status. Opposing this court directive, Kukis, a tribal community, launched an agitation which got worse with a backlash from the Meiteis. The struggle escalated into riots.

Rising to the occasion, the opposition parties, which demanded that Prime Minister Modi speak out on the Manipur riots, tabled a no-confidence motion against the government in Parliament in August, which, however, did not pass muster.

Other controversial matters were the union government's plan about 'one country and one election' which was castigated mostly and the sensational talk about the government's idea of changing the country's name to 'Bharat.'

### **Plus and minus points in foreign relations**

India, which has assumed one-year leadership of G-20, held meetings away from Delhi, attracting the global attention. The inclusion of the African Union as a member of G-20 and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor are the major benefits of the Indian initiatives. India has received bouquets from around the world for the G-20 conference that helped link together the world countries which had been torn apart by war and commercial competitiveness.

Yet on the flip side, India received brickbats from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on September 18 for allegedly being behind the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Khalistan supporter. Later, another charge came from the U.S. against India. The U.S. government charged that an Indian External Affairs official had plotted through Nikhil Gupta to assassinate Khalistan supporter Gurpatwant Singh Pannun.

### **Train accidents**

Over 200 people were killed in the Baganaga Bazar railway station in Balasore district in Odisha on June 2. Similarly 13 persons were killed in a rail accident at Vijayanagar in Andhra Pradesh. These train accidents have raised concerns over safety of train journey.

That 3.12 lakh job vacancies in the Railways have not yet been filled has been questioned. While road accidents reduced by five per cent in the period of 2010-2021 all over the world according to a global report on road safety, road mishaps in India have increased by 15 per cent. The increase in accidents on the Indian roads has been attributed to the drop in road infrastructure works owing to heavy rains and election engagements. It has also been reported that more funds will be earmarked on this count in the forthcoming budget.

### **Moments of joy**

It was a moment of joy when India touched the southern pole of the Moon through Chandrayaan-3 on August 23. The photographs of the historic event sent by rover Pragyan have put Indians on cloud nine.

Besides, ISRO sent on September 2 the Aditya L-1 to explore the Sun, which is expected to hit its target on January 7, 2024. More dream projects such as Gaganyaan, a crewed orbital spacecraft, are in the pipeline.

By the way, the Bill on women's reservation passed in Parliament is a great milestone. It is an optimistic initiative though the law will come into effect only after certain formal exercises including delimitation of constituencies are completed.

India heaved a sigh of relief when the Uttarakhand government rescued through Operation Zindagi 41 workers trapped for 17 days in the Silkyara Bend - Barkot tunnel in Uttarakashi, a crucial component of the Char Dham all-weather road project, which collapsed on Nov. 12.

Another matter of positive joy, which has raised hopes of growth, is that there was 7.8 per cent growth in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the first quarter of the fiscal 2023-24 and 7.6 per cent growth in the second quarter. The government views positively the 65 per cent increase in the number of GST returns.

### **Challenges waiting**

India has reached the top slot in terms of population. So, plans proper and appropriate are needed as the numbers of job-seeking youth and medicare-seeking senior citizens are set to go up.

Another challenge is the danger posed by stray street dogs all over the country. This problem has claimed some human lives too

Climate change, a global issue, is haunting India too in the form of heavy rains and intense heat waves in several regions of the country. What plans does India have to tackle this most serious environmental problem? This is an important question concerning our future.

**Translated by V. Mariappan.**