India Review

January 1, 2013

Vol. 9 Issue 1

India, ASEAN upgrade ties

Call for ‘Second Green Revolution’

Focus on energy exporting nations

Bharat Ratna Pandit Ravi Shankar, who took Indian classical music to the world, passed away on December 11.

And the sitar gently weeps...
He was a classical musician in the purest sense and was also dubbed the ‘godfather of world music’ by Beatles friend George Harrison. Ravi Shankar, who took Indian classical music to the world in the 1950s and effortlessly bound two worlds with the stirring notes of his sitar, leaves behind an unparalleled legacy of commitment to his art.

India’s most effective cultural ambassador, who died on December 11 at the age of 92 in a hospital near his south California home following complications from a heart surgery, leaves behind his wife Sukanya and daughters Anoushka, the heir to his legacy, and singer Norah Jones.

“God has blessed me with Lakshmi and Saraswati,” he would often say of his daughters.

The dancer-turned-instrumentalist was born Robindro Shunkar Chowdhury on April 7, 1920 in Varanasi. He gave up dancing in his illustrious brother Uday Shankar’s troupe in 1938 to study music under Allaudin Khan — bequeathing his art to daughter Anoushka and legions of students who trained at the Ravi Shankar Foundation in the U.S. and in the national capital, where he had built a gurukul-like school. Shankar spent his early years touring Europe and India with Uday Shankar. But he took to instrumental music in 1934 and studied for 10 years under his mentor. Before embarking on a formal musical career, Shankar worked as a composer setting the score for Satyajit Ray’s Apu Trilogy.

Later, with George Fenton, he shared the Oscar for the music of the epic Gandhi that released in 1982. In

And the sitar gently weeps...

‘Godfather of world music’ Pandit Ravi Shankar, who took Indian classical music to the world, leaves behind an unparalleled legacy of commitment to his art.
Ravi Shankar was a national treasure: PM

Pandit Ravi Shankar was a global ambassador of India’s cultural heritage and a national treasure, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh said in New Delhi on December 12 while condoling the death of the sitar maestro in a San Diego hospital.

“An era has passed away with Pandit Ravi Shankar. The nation joins me to pay tributes to this unsurpassable genius, his art and his humility, a national treasure and global ambassador of India’s cultural heritage,” the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) said in its message.

“India has lost an eminent son, the world of sitar has lost one of its ablest exponents ever and a shining light in the firmament of music has been extinguished,” added the message.

“The nation was fortunate not only to be able to enjoy his music, but also to have him as one of its most effective cultural ambassadors across the world. His humanism, combined with his musical genius, helped him in building cross-civilizational contacts that served the world of music and benefited humanity at large,” the Prime Minister said in his message.

“I pray that Pandit Ravi Shankar’s soul finds eternal peace and that (his) family members be granted the strength and fortitude to bear this loss,” he added.

In his condoleance message, the External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid described Pandit Ravi Shankar as one of the foremost exponents of India’s classical music tradition and praised his capacity to bridge cultures and make India’s ancient tradition accessible to the world.

Ambassador Nirupama Rao visited Encinitas, California to convey her deep condolences to Sukanya Shankar and Pandit Ravi Shankar’s two daughters Norah Jones and Anoushka Shankar on December 15.

Consul General of India in San Francisco N. Parthasarthi attended the memorial service convened in Encinitas and presented flowers on behalf of the people and the Government of India as a mark of tribute to the life and legacy of Pandit Ravi Shankar on December 20.

The same year, he composed the ‘Swagatam’ welcome song for the ninth Asian Games.

The mid-1950s were the key to Shankar’s contribution to making Indian classical music a world genre. In 1956, Ravi Shankar crossed the seas with his music to Europe and US. Throughout the sixties and for the better part of the seventies, he taught abroad and collaborated with legends like Yehudi Menuhin and Beatles star George Harrison, who drew from Shankar’s ragas for his repertoire, most famously in ‘Norwegian Wood’.

Harrison produced and participated in two record albums, ‘Shankar Family & Friends’ and ‘Festival of India’; both composed by Shankar.

Shankar also played in the epic concert Woodstock, performing after Joan Baez. The maestro was perhaps the first musician to write a concerti for sitar and orchestra — ‘Concerto for Sitar and Orchestra’ which was performed by the London Symphony Orchestra under Andre Previn.

As music director of All India Radio (1949-56), Shankar composed the classical version of ‘Saare Jahan Se Acha’ that was sung by Lata Mangeshkar. He was awarded India’s highest civil honor Bharat Ratna in 1999 and won three Grammy Awards.

Shankar was nominated for another Grammy for 2013, the news of which reached him just a day before his surgery.

Performer till the very end, he was last seen on stage on November 4, 2012 in Long Beach when he played with Anoushka.

He was also nominated to the Rajya Sabha between 1986 and 1992.

“How does one put the spiritual significance of music on paper? Music transcends all barriers and is one of the most beautiful communicative skills one can have. Music makes us all experience different emotions or the navarasa as well call it,” the maestro would often say about his music.

A man of numerous awards, recognitions

Some achievements of the iconic musician:

- He received the Padma Bhushan in 1967, Padma Vibhushan in 1981 and Bharat Ratna in 1999.
- He is also a three-time Grammy award winner. He bagged a nomination again for the 2013 Grammy Awards for his album ‘The Living Room Sessions Part-1’.
- He was named a Lifetime Achievement Grammy Award recipient, a day after his death at 92 in a U.S. hospital.
- He shared an Oscar with George Fenton for the original musical score for the 1982 movie Gandhi.
- He received the Music Council UNESCO award in the year 1975.
- He received the Kalidas Samman from the government of Madhya Pradesh for 1987-88 and the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1992.
- In 2001, Shankar was made Honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II for his “services to music”.

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Unveiling the vision of a resurgent and integrated Asia, India and the 10-nation ASEAN on December 20 declared the conclusion of negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in services and investments and upgraded their ties to a strategic partnership that includes closer cooperation in political, economic and security areas.

Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh held wide-ranging talks with leaders of 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that included intensification of trade and investments, closer security cooperation and enhanced physical and cultural connectivity. “We declare that the ASEAN-India partnership stands elevated to a strategic partnership,” said the vision document which was unanimously adopted by the leaders of India and ASEAN countries at the end of the plenary session of the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit.

The leaders agreed to work toward “the full, effective and timely implementation of the ASEAN-India dialogue relations across the whole spectrum of political and security, economic, social and development cooperation.” Placing the strategic partnership in context, Prime Minister Singh said: “This is a time of great flux and transition, with several unsettled questions and unresolved issues in our region. Our responsibility to work for peace has increased and become more urgent.”

“Our shared values, convergent world views and similarities in approaches to the region should help us make the India-ASEAN relationship more comprehensive and elevate it to a Strategic Partnership for the next decade and beyond.”

The focus was clearly on scaling up economic ties to new heights, with the leaders airing their collective confidence to achieve $100 billion bilateral trade by 2015. Currently, trade between India and ASEAN is around $80 billion.

The showpiece of the summit was the formal declaration of the successful conclusion of negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement in services and investments.

Addressing the plenary of the
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India-ASEAN SUMMIT

Car rally symbol of ASEAN-India partnership: Prime Minister

After travelling nearly 8,000 km through nine countries, the ASEAN-India car rally was flagged in by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh in the Indian capital on December 21, marking a “new journey of closer cooperation and a deeper strategic partnership” through increased connectivity.

Prime Minister Singh along with his wife Gursharan Kaur flagged in the rally at Vigyan Bhavan. The ceremony was attended by leaders of the 10 ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) nations who were in New Delhi for the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, marking 20 years of their partnership.

Addressing the event, the Prime Minister said he had no doubt that a new era awaits both India and ASEAN. The car rally had entered India on December 17 at Guwahati, Assam. The event comes a day after India and ASEAN elevated their ties to a strategic partnership and finalized a pact for free trade area in services and investments.

The Prime Minister said the car rally highlighted the connectivity between India and ASEAN which were “joined together on land and by water, with shared borders and shared cultures”. He said the rally “symbolizes the vision of an ASEAN-India community where people, goods, services and ideas can travel freely between us”. He said their “physical bonds will be strengthened by digital links, which will help our younger generations to network better” and “unleash the vast economic potential of our region, accelerate development and deepen our strategic partnership”.

The increased connectivity would especially benefit the northeastern states, he said adding that he would “encourage the establishment of institutions linked to the India-ASEAN relationship in the northeastern states”.

Remarking that India-ASEAN relations “are at an exciting stage”, the Prime Minister expressed confidence that the FTA on services and investments would be as “transformational” as the FTA on goods.

India became a sectoral dialogue partner of the grouping in 1992 and was elevated to full dialogue partner in 1995 in recognition of the country’s rising stature and economic potential. The two sides have been holding annual summits since 2002.

Commemorative Summit, Prime Minister Singh said the FTA “represents a valuable milestone in our relationship. I am confident it will boost our economic ties in much the same way the FTA in Goods has done”.

The vision document stressed on “fostering greater security cooperation and information sharing in the form of regular and high-level dialogues to address traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including transnational crimes and terrorism.”

“We should intensify our political and security consultations, including in regional forums such as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus,” said the Prime Minister.

“We should work together more purposefully for the evolution of an open, balanced, inclusive and transparent regional architecture,” he said.

The leaders also decided to give a strategic cast to their burgeoning trade and investment by agreeing on closer consultations in crafting regional economic architecture and organizing multi-sectoral economic dialogues. The two sides also decided to scale up private sector investment and public-private partnership linkages. The vision document focused on spurring connectivity in the region through closer rail, road and air links. The two sides pledged to complete the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway by 2016 and its extension to Lao and Cambodia.

India and the ASEAN leaders also agreed to “strengthen cooperation to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation, and safety of sea lanes of communication for unfettered movement of trade in accordance with international law.”

Excerpts from the Opening Statement by Prime Minister at Plenary Session of India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit:

“India and South-east Asia have centuries-old links. People, ideas, trade, art and religions have long criss-crossed this region. A timeless thread of civilization runs through all our countries. While each one of us has a unique and rich heritage, there are abiding linkages of culture and custom, of art and religion and of
civilization, all of which create a sense of unity in the diversity and pluralism in our region. In addition, given that together we constitute a community of 1.8 billion people, representing one-fourth of humanity, with a combined GDP of $3.8 trillion, it is only natural that India should attach the highest priority to its relationship with ASEAN.

We see our partnership with ASEAN not merely as a reaffirmation of ties with neighboring countries or as an instrument of economic development, but also as an integral part of our vision of a stable, secure and prosperous Asia and its surrounding Indian Ocean and Pacific regions.

The breadth and intensity of India’s engagement with Southeast Asia is unmatched by any of our other regional relationships. We have institutionalized annual summits; many of our sectoral dialogues have been elevated into ministerial consultations; and nearly 25 mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation between us cover virtually every field of human endeavor.

This engagement has flourished particularly in the area of trade. India-ASEAN trade has grown over ten times in the ten years since we launched the annual summits. Following the implementation of our FTA in Goods, trade grew by 41 percent in Indian fiscal year of 2011-12. Two-way flows in investments have also grown rapidly to reach $43 billion over the past decade. As ASEAN investments into India have multiplied, ASEAN countries too have emerged as major destinations for Indian companies. From energy resources to farm products, from materials to machinery, and from electronics to information technology, Indian and ASEAN companies are forging new partnerships of trade and investment.

It gives me great pleasure, therefore, to see that our Commemorative Summit today coincides with the conclusion of negotiations for the FTA in Services and Investments. This represents a valuable milestone in our relationship. I am confident it will boost our economic ties in much the same way the FTA in Goods has done.

The India-ASEAN engagement began with a strong economic emphasis, but it has also become increasingly strategic in its content. Our political dialogue has grown, our consultations in regional forums have intensified, and our defense and counter-terrorism cooperation have expanded. Naturally, this partnership is important because our histories are intertwined. Equally, I feel, our future is inter-linked and a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for our own progress and prosperity.

The path to regional peace and stability is greater coordination, cooperation and integration among our economies.”
India, US to strengthen cultural relationship

The Art Institute of Chicago is all set to provide training to personnel from Indian museums and conduct seminars and workshops in India.

As a part of the Vivekananda Memorial Program for Museum Excellence, the Art Institute of Chicago, one of the world’s greatest encyclopedic art museums, is all set to share best practices with Indian museums by way of seminars and workshops through 2016. Each year, a small number of personnel from a select group of Indian museums will be sent to the Art Institute for professional level training. In turn, the Art Institute staff will also travel to India to conduct seminars at different institutions each year for the duration of the Program.

Minister of Culture, Kumari Selja, inaugurated the first seminar at the National Museum Institute, New Delhi (August 30 – September 1, 2012). The Fellows selected for the 2012-2013 Program were: S. K. Bagi (Assistant Archaeologist, Archaeological Survey of India, Velha-Goa); R. B. Naik (Keeper in charge of Galleries, Collection, and Reserve Collection, Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad); W.V.S. Narasimham (Assistant Superintending Archaeologist, Archaeological Survey of India, Nagarjunkonda); Anamika Pathak (Curator, Decorative Arts and Textiles, National Museum, New Delhi); Dr. S. R. Shukla (Assistant Keeper, Allahabad Museum, Allahabad); and Dr. S. K. Upadhyay (Preservation Officer, Indian Museum, Kolkata).

The Art Institute of Chicago then conducted three and a half weeks of seminars, workshops, and tours for the selected Fellows in Chicago from September 24 to October 17, 2012. The focus of this year’s program is Collections Management and Preventive Care. In 2013-2014, the Fellows will continue to adhere to an intensive follow up work schedule. In the coming months, the Fellows will complete a self-assessment report of their museum, the implementation of a database system to manage their collections, and provide progress updates to each other and Art Institute staff with regular, monthly videoconference calls.

The Vivekananda Memorial Program for Museum Excellence emerged out of an agreement signed between the Government of India, represented by the Ministry of Culture and The Art Institute of Chicago on January 28, 2012 in the presence of the then Finance Minister of India Pranab Mukherjee and Ambassador Nirupama Rao. The Program honors and commemorates the visit of the great Indian philosopher Swami Vivekananda to Chicago during the World Parliament of Religions (a part of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893.) His memorable speech delivered at the site of the museum’s Fullerton Hall on September 11, 1893 sparked an important dialogue between Eastern and Western religions.
To discuss the present state of India-U.S. relations and the global strategic partnership between the two countries, Ambassador Nirupama Rao met with the Minority Leader and former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. on December 11.

Ambassador Rao informed Minority Leader Pelosi about recent developments in the relationship and India’s perspective on regional and global issues of common interest.

Speaking of the shared values and complementaries between India and the U.S. and the broad spectrum of opportunities for the two countries to collaborate, the former Speaker warmly recalled her visit to India in 2008.

Discussing the regional situation in South Asia, Minority Leader Pelosi welcomed India’s positive contribution to Afghanistan’s reconstruction and viewed the India-US partnership as having an important role to play in ensuring Afghanistan’s peace and prosperity. Ambassador Rao and Minority Leader Pelosi acknowledged the contributions made by the Indian-American community to the development of India-U.S. relations and agreed that the community was an important bridge between the two countries.

Ambassador Nirupama Rao has said that over the last decade India’s relations with the U.S. has substantially improved and its partnership with the U.S. has become multidimensional. In a conversation with Australian Ambassador Kim Beazley and Philippine Deputy Chief of Mission Maria Austria, moderated by U.S. Congressmen J. Randy Forbes (R-VA), Member of the House Armed Services Committee, at a forum held by the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI) on November 27, Ambassador Rao said India had developed a very thriving trade and business relationship with the U.S.

Speaking of India’s robust relations with the Asia-Pacific region and its commitment of deepening engagement with the region, Ambassador Rao said that India had always regarded the U.S. as a Pacific power.

The full video of the conversation can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBrUgeoX78Q

Ambassador Nirupama Rao met with a group of American China Scholars from the National Committee on United States-China Relations Public Intellectuals Program (PIP) at the Indian Embassy on December 6 and had an interactive briefing session on developments in the India-U.S. strategic partnership and on India-China relations. Scholars and academicians on the program are drawn from key universities and colleges across the United States. Ambassador Rao had earlier hosted participants of the PIP program at the Indian Embassy in Beijing in 2007 and 2009 during her tenure as Ambassador of India to China.
Indian and American educational systems must develop “strategic linkages” to develop trained and skilled human resources to meet the emerging needs of the coming decades, Indian Ambassador Nirupama Rao has said.

“The challenges before us demand an integration of our efforts at home with the partnerships we are developing abroad, and seeking a mutually reinforcing synergy between the two,” she said in a keynote address at the American Council on Education’s Leadership Network on International Education on December 10.

“As both India and United States work toward becoming truly knowledge economies, there are immense opportunities for forging dynamic linkages between our two countries in the areas of education, research, innovation and skill development,” Ambassador Rao said.

Education, she said, had clearly emerged as a priority area of the two countries’ bilateral engagement with the Singh-Obama Initiative launched in 2009 amply highlighting their shared emphasis on education and knowledge in their strategic partnership.

Today, the U.S. remains a preferred destination for Indian students to pursue their advanced degrees, Ambassador Rao said. Nearly 100,000 students from India, around 32 percent of whom are women, are enrolled in U.S. universities.

Noting that the U.S. government is also taking several initiatives to promote India as an educational destination for American students, she said: “We would definitely like to see more and more American students come to India in the years to come.”

She said India was looking at the U.S. model of Community Colleges as an important ingredient of its strategy to build capacity for vocational education and skills development.

“Our goal is to build strategic linkages between the educational systems of India and the United States, with the optimism and confidence that this would be for our mutual benefit and the benefit of the whole world, as we join hands to develop trained and skilled human resources capable of meeting the challenges that exist in a globalized world of the 21st century.”

Noting that there is tremendous interest in U.S. and Indian universities and colleges to forge links and partnerships with each other, Ambassador Rao said: “There is a great opportunity for partnership unfolding ahead of us, which we must seize.”

Excerpts from Ambassador Rao’s speech on the occasion:

“The India-U.S. Higher Education Summit that we held in October 2011 in Washington, followed by the Higher Education Dialogue in June this year, laid out the road map for promoting strategic institutional partnerships, deepening collaboration in research and development, fostering partnerships in vocational education and focusing on junior faculty development. As part of this vision, steps have already been initiated for awarding research projects under the Singh-Obama Knowledge Initiative. The first batch of 300 junior faculty for placement in post-doctoral research programs has been finalized.

As I said, we are looking at the U.S. model of Community Colleges as an important ingredient of our strategy to build capacity for vocational education and skills development. An international conference on community colleges is scheduled to take place in New Delhi early next year. I have made it a point to visit Community Colleges during my tours to various parts of the U.S. and I am truly impressed by the service they render to local communities through the use of the latest educational technologies and course content, integrating the local with the national and indeed, the global.

Our goal in educating the youth of our countries is to create not only well-formed but well-filled minds, minds that are open and not confined or closed.”

The full text of Ambassador Rao’s speech can be viewed at: http://www.indianembassy.org/prdetail2079/keynote-address-by-ambassador-nirupama-rao-at-the-american-council-on-education-andrsquo%3Bs-leadership-network-on-international-education
Embassy celebrates Hanukkah

1. Ambassador Nirupama Rao welcoming the guests at Hanukkah celebrations at the Embassy Residence on December 10.
2. Ambassador Rao lighting the Menorah, the traditional oil lamp, on the occasion.
3. Nissim B Reuben, Program Director: Indian-Jewish Relations, American Jewish Committee, and his sister Dr. Shamira Shallom doing the invocation in Indian Jewish tradition.
6. Jason Isaacson, Director, Office of Government & International Affairs, American Jewish Committee, addressing the audience.
7. Dan S Mariashin, Executive Vice President, Bnai Brith International, addressing the gathering.
Embassy celebrates Christmas

1. Ambassador Nirupama Rao welcoming the guests during Christmas celebrations at the Embassy Residence on December 21.
2. Invocation by Rev. Binoy Thomas of the Mar Thoma Church.
4. Doug Gansler, Attorney General, Maryland, speaking on the occasion.
5. St. Alban’s Episcopal Church Choir during the Christmas celebrations at the Embassy Residence.
6. Jacinta Mascarenhas of Indian American Catholic Association proposing the vote of thanks.
7. Guests in attendance.
President calls for ‘Second Green Revolution’

President Pranab Mukherjee on December 11 called for a second Green Revolution in agriculture that is more holistic and widespread.

“This second Green Revolution should be accompanied by development of rural infrastructure, human development and increased sensitivity to ecology and environment. The government should seek right partnerships by building innovative structures that adequately encourage the involvement of the private sector in this area,” said President Mukherjee.

The President was speaking at the inauguration of a national conference on ‘Ushering Second Green Revolution in Indian Agriculture through Public-Private Partnership’, organized by the Ministry of Agriculture in collaboration with the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) at Vigyan Bhawan in New Delhi.

“The linkage that the agriculture sector has to almost all facets of society is indisputable. Its growth can spawn the much-needed social and economic transformation, without which economic growth in other areas and that of the nation as a whole would lose its meaning,” the President said.

“Agriculture is the heart and soul of this nation,” said President Mukherjee.

The President stressed on the need to improve the seed replacement rate, promote adoption of hybrid seeds, incentivize balanced use of fertilizers and ensure efficient water management.

More policy reforms to boost growth

Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on December 15 promised to bring in more policy reforms to accelerate inclusive growth and lift the spirits of investors in the economy, addressing all concerns about fiscal consolidation, taxation, disinvestment and infrastructure.

Addressing captains of industry, the Prime Minister said his government had the “courage of conviction and the interest of people at heart”.

“I stand before you to reassure you that our government is committed to doing everything that is possible to alter the policy environment, to accelerate economic growth and to make the growth process socially and regionally more inclusive,” said the Prime Minister.

He told the annual general meeting of industry association Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) that the steps the government had taken recently were only the beginning of a process to revive the economy and take it back to its trend growth rate of 8 to 9 percent.

“We need to complete the exercise that was begun on GAAR and taxation of the IT sector. The day before yesterday, the Cabinet has approved the constitution of a Cabinet Committee on Investment. This would help in the issue of clearances for major projects in a time bound manner.

“We will speed up the disinvestment process which will also revive our equity markets.”

“We are bringing greater clarity in the FDI policy in the pharma sector... The Direct Tax Code and the Goods and Services Tax Bills are high on our priority,” the Prime Minister said.

President hails role of cooperatives

Cooperatives were pivotal institutions for bringing socio-economic development for inclusive growth in rural areas, President Pranab Mukherjee said on December 8. T

“Cooperatives in India have made a visible and significant contribution to the overall economic growth of our economy. This is especially so in the sectors of agricultural credit, sugar, dairy, textiles, fisheries, distribution of fertilizers and agricultural inputs, storage and marketing,” the President said in New Delhi at a function to give biennial excellence awards to the cooperative societies.

Three cooperative societies won the award at national level, and 24 societies were awarded at the state level.

President Mukherjee added that with a network of 600,000 cooperatives and a membership base of 240 million, the Indian cooperative movement has proved to be an effective economic instrument for ensuring growth with equity and inclusiveness.

Agriculture and Food Processing Minister Sharad Pawar, Minister of State Charan Das Mahant, and Managing Director of National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC) C.B. Paliwal were also present at the function.
New policy to foster growth of communications industry

Inaugurating the India Telecom 2012 conclave in the capital, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on December 13 said the new policy being brought in would address concerns of investors, providing a new impetus for growth of the communications industry.

He also stressed on the need to strengthen the country’s manufacturing capabilities in telecom in particular and in electronics in general. He added that the new telecom and electronics policies laid down the regime for enabling this to happen.

He asked the captains of industry, especially in the private sector, to seize the opportunity.

“We need leaders in telecom and electronics manufacturing who can break new ground and create the ecosystems to enable India to be a major producer of hardware.”

“Our government is committed to doing everything possible to support such efforts.”

The Prime Minister said the telecom revolution offered myriad opportunities for accelerating the country’s development and urged the industry to come up with strategies to boost teledensity in rural areas in creative partnership with the government.

“I urge industry, which has shown great innovation in the telecom sector, to come up with strategies to expand teledensity in rural areas,” he said.

Touching on the significance of broadband connectivity as a tool for empowering India’s rural masses, he said the National Optical Fiber Network (NOFN) project would usher in a new era in telecommunications by establishing information highways across the country, particularly in rural areas.

Banking laws amendment bill gets Parliament nod

Parliament on December 20 gave its nod to banking laws amendment bill, paving the way for issuance of new bank licences and consolidation in the sector.

The Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2012, which has now been cleared by both houses of Parliament, seeks to increase voting rights of investors in the private sector banks to 26 percent from the existing 10 percent. Shareholders’ voting rights in the public sector banks is capped at 10 percent.

This will make the Indian banking sector attractive for the overseas investors and is expected to lead to consolidation in the industry. The new regulation gives power to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to issue new bank licences.

Finance Minister P. Chidambaram said the modified legislation would help create “world size” banks in India. “We need more banks. Yes, we are opening new branches, but that’s not enough... We need two-three world-size banks,” said Minister Chidambaram.

The new regulation also seeks to bring the banking sector under the purview of the Competition Commission of India (CCI). The Finance Minister said while the RBI would regulate the banking sector, the CCI would look into competition practices in the banking sector. He said the RBI would frame the guidelines and issue new bank licenses without any bias.

India to fortify ties with energy exporting nations

India would enhance relations with energy exporting countries and make strategies with international markets to meet its growing energy needs, External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid said on December 13.

Saying that the country’s demand for energy was growing at a “terrifying pace”, he said, “There is a need to explore, enhance, develop and fortify relations with energy exporting countries and also develop technologies for alternate energy sources.”

The Minister was addressing the “Energy Security Conference 2012” organized jointly by the Ministry of External Affairs and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), in New Delhi.

Stressing the strategic and economic importance of achieving energy security, he said: “There is a need to better integration for strategizing with international markets and enhancing relations with energy exporting countries.”

At the domestic level, he said, the country needed to optimally exploit and utilize its energy resources; leverage on opportunities provided by coal bed methane and shale gas and develop technologies to scale up renewable energy.

“Going forward, if we continue to grow at 8-9 percent, import dependence is likely to increase and India would be importing 35-57 percent of coal, 90-94 percent of oil and 20-57 percent of gas by 2031-52.”
Indian Navy gets first Boeing P-8I maritime patrol aircraft

Boeing has made an on-site delivery of the first of the eight long-range maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare P-8I aircraft it is building for the Indian Navy in Seattle.

India will receive this aircraft and two more of its eight contracted P-8Is in 2013, Boeing said on December 20.

The program is progressing on schedule as Boeing assembles the fourth and fifth P-8Is, which are designed for long-range maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare, it said.

The first P-8I for the Indian Navy, a derivative of the Boeing Next-Generation 737-800 commercial airplane, began its official flight test program last July with a fully loaded version of the plane demonstrating its flying qualities and handling characteristics in a test flight.

Over the next few months, Boeing test pilots put the first P-8I through its paces over a U.S. Navy test range west of Neah Bay, Washington, and a joint U.S./Canadian test range in the Strait of Georgia, Boeing said.

The P-8I features open system architecture, advanced sensor and display technologies, and a worldwide base of suppliers, parts and support equipment.

India’s foreign reserves up $1.63 billion

India’s foreign exchange (forex) reserves went up by $1.63 billion to $296.63 billion for the week ended December 14, data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on December 22 said.

The reserves had gone up by $484.2 million to $294.99 billion in the week ending December 7.

The foreign currency assets (FCA) — the biggest component of the forex reserves — increased by $1.61 billion at $262.11 billion, according to the weekly statistical supplement released by the RBI.

The FCA was up 492.7 million to $260.50 billion in the week ending December 7.

The central bank said FCA in US dollar terms included the effect of appreciation or depreciation of non-US currencies held in reserve, such as the pound sterling, euro and yen. Gold reserves value remained the same at $27.80 billion.

Eight Indians among world’s best performing CEOs

Eight Indian CEOs have made it to Harvard Business Review’s (HBR) list of 100 best performing global chief executives headed for the last 17 years by the late Steve Jobs of Apple.

ITC Chairman Y C Deveshwar, ranked seventh overall (Rank 7), was first among the Indian CEOs. Under his leadership, ITC saw its value increase by $45 billion.

He was followed by former ONGC’s late Chairman and Managing Director Subir Raha (Rank 13).

Reliance Industries Chairman Mukesh Ambani (Rank 28), was ranked third among Indians.

Larsen & Toubro Chairman and managing Director A M Naik (Rank 32), came next.

Former Bharat Heavy Electricals CMD A K Puri (Rank 38) is ranked fifth among the Indians. He is followed by Bharti Airtel Chairman Sunil Bharti Mittal (Rank 65).

Jindal Steel & Power CEO Naveen Jindal (Rank 87) is ranked seventh among Indians. He is followed by former SAIL Chairman, V S Jain (Rank 89).
‘India, US must work together more in science and tech’

Calling for greater India-U.S. collaboration in science and technology, American Ambassador to India Nancy Powell on December 7 said sustained educational exchanges were a key to developing human capital in the two countries.

“India and the U.S. have much to do to collaborate in future in the field of science and technology. Although India’s science and technology establishment has made enormous progress in the last few decades, further collaboration is needed,” Ambassador Powell said in her speech at the PANIT Global Conference, 2012.

Stressing on joint ventures between Indian and U.S. companies, she said “Indian companies have huge human capital and our products are technologically innovative.”

India-based Mphasis to acquire US firm

India-based global services provider, Mphasis, a Hewlett Packard (HP) company, is set to acquire Digital Risk, America’s largest independent provider of mortgage risk, compliance and transaction management solutions.

The transaction is expected to close late in January 2013 subject to the satisfaction of regulatory requirements and customary closing conditions, the Florida-based company said announcing the $175 million all-cash deal.

The acquisition provides Digital Risk a global footprint to accommodate clients’ global risk and compliance needs, access to U.S. facilities to further accelerate growth of U.S. operations and access to Mphasis’ technology and analytical centers of excellence, the company said.

The acquisition is also central to Mphasis’ ‘hyper-specialization’ strategy, bringing in over 1,500 highly trained mortgage specialists and a deep domain expertise in mortgage risk and compliance. “The need for risk management in the mortgage market is not only a US issue, but also a global necessity. This acquisition provides the industry and clients a unique offering,” said Peter Kassabov, Digital Risk Chairman and CEO.

“This acquisition is central to our strategy of offering specialized services in chosen segments,” said Ganesh Ayyar, Chief Executive Officer, Mphasis.

American business center in Guwahati inaugurated

U.S Ambassador to India Nancy J. Powell on December 13 inaugurated the American Business Corner (ABC) in Guwahati — the first such in northeast India.

The ABC will be housed by the Indian Chamber of Commerce’s (ICC) northeast regional office.

Speaking on the occasion, Ambassador Powell noted the long history of co-operation between U.S. Commercial Service office at the U.S. Consulate in Kolkata, and the ICC which led to setting up of the ABC.

“It’s been 20 years now that I visited last and I see Guwahati has undergone sea change in all spheres. I could see the difference while I landed and traveled by road to Guwahati,” she said.

“The ABCs are designed such a way to help everyone who wants to trade with the United States,” she added.

It is also a value added service by industry chambers to their members who seek American technologies and equipment to upgrade production capabilities and become more competitive in global markets.

‘Developed world looks at India for investment, trade’

As the global center of economic growth moves to Asia, India has captured the attention of developed economies looking for new investment and trade opportunities, says a new report.

Noting that recent growth in India has also emanated from a number of under-examined sectors other than information technology (IT) sector, it says, the Indian economy will need to continue to diversify in order to propel its development.

And the U.S. will need to pay close attention to all aspects of these changes in order to sustain strong bilateral economic ties, says the report by Wadhwani Chair in US-India Policy Studies at the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS).

There is arguably no sector more critical to India’s future growth than energy, says the report authored by CSIS fellow Persis Khambatta Karl Inderfurth, Wadhwani Chair and former Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia.
Technique to detect genetic variations proposed

In what could help predict one’s susceptibility to various ailments, a new technique to detect genetic variations associated with diseases, including cancer, has been proposed by scientists at the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (IACS) in Kolkata.

Some of these genetic variations termed SNPs are associated with cancer, certain infectious diseases like leprosy, AIDS, and others. “These genetic variations can give us an idea about how humans respond to pathogens (microorganisms infectious agents like virus, bacterium, prion or fungus that cause diseases), chemicals, drugs, vaccines and other agents,” IACS’s Associate Professor in Biological Chemistry, Rupa Mukhopadhyay, said.

Identification of genetic variations is often done by using DNA probe based biosensor technologies.

“We have proposed that LNA, which is a synthetic analogue of DNA, can be a much better probe in surface-based DNA detection techniques,” said Mukhopadhyay. According to her, during testing, LNA stands nearly upright to the testing surface because of its unique structure and this gives it the ability to overcome the disadvantages of DNA probes.

Animal nutrition award for Manju Wadhwa

Manju Wadhwa, an eminent scientist of Department of Animal Nutrition, Guru Angad Dev Veterinary and Animal Science University, Ludhiana, has been conferred the Fellow of Animal Nutrition Association award for her outstanding contribution to the field of animal nutrition. The recognition of her contribution came at the Animal Nutrition Association’s eighth biennial conference held at Rajasthan University of Veterinary & Animal Sciences in Bikaner, Rajasthan, from November 28-30.

Wadhwa is known for her pioneering work on improving efficiency of nutrient utilization in poor quality crop residues as also nutritional status of dairy animals in Punjab.

Her work in reducing global warming by animals led to breakthrough studies on the methane production potential of feedstuffs available in the region and development of methane mitigation strategies and has won her peer and global accolades.

Wadhwa has published over 80 research articles in national and international peer reviewed journals, a number of technical bulletins and popular articles, in addition to successfully guiding MSc students.

She has served as the editor of the Indian Journal of Animal Nutrition for two consecutive tenures besides contributing to academic discussions and conferences in Canada, Malaysia, China and Thailand, contributing to the cause of science.
Four Indian Americans named 2013 Marshall Scholars

Four Indian Americans are among the recipients of the prestigious Marshall Scholarships, giving them the opportunity to study at a university of their choice in Britain next autumn.

The two-year scholarship is distributed to approximately 40 promising young American students by the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission every year.

The Indian-American winners are Aditya Ashok from Boston College, Aditya Balasubramanian from Harvard University, Paras Minhas from the University of Pittsburgh and Rahul Rekhi from Rice University.

Ashok, a history and biology graduate, served in numerous leadership positions on campus during his time as co-president of the AIDS Awareness Committee. He will be studying global health at the University of Glasgow from August 2013.

Rekhi, a Barry M. Goldwater and Harry S. Truman Scholar, has chosen to study biomedical engineering at the University of Oxford.

Balasubramanian will be studying econometrics and mathematical economics at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Minhas, who will be studying molecular cell biology at the University College London next autumn, is interested in furthering his career as a physician and scientist. He is currently an Amgen Scholar at MIT and Research Fellow at the Mayo Clinic.

— IANS

Indian-Americans shine in politics and administration

Prominent in administration, well educated and well-heeled, with their population touching three million, Indian-Americans joined politics in large numbers in 2012 with a California physician creating history by winning a Congressional seat.

Ami Bera, 47, defeated a sitting Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives in a very close contest to become the third member of the community to enter the lower chamber of U.S. Congress after Dalip Singh Saund and current Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal.

Five other Indian Americans, including Shanti Gandhi, a great-grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, were elected to state assemblies in Kansas, Michigan, Connecticut, Vermont and Colorado.

President Obama, whose administration has more Indian Americans in high places than any other before, named a few more after his re-election, including Sachin Dev Pavithran, who is blind, to an independent U.S. agency devoted to people with disabilities.

In the world of academics, Autar Kaw, an India-born Professor of Mechanical Engineering at the University of South Florida, became one of the four recipients of the 2012 U.S. Professor of the Year award.

Preetinder Singh “Preet” Bharara, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, made it to the cover of Time Magazine. — IANS
Making merry with literature

With more and more cities organizing their own literary festivals, not only has book reading ceased to become a lonely exercise, but arts, crafts, cultures and languages of different parts of India have gained global exposure.

Literature in India is moving beyond the confines of print space to reach out to people in interactive venues across the states. The new breed of literary galas is going beyond core literary brainstorming to take up local, cultural and political issues with a cast of international participants, thus rendering a global hue to immediate local concerns.

In the last decade, a spurt in regional literary festivals in places like Jaipur, Kolkata, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Goa, Thiruvananthapuram and New Delhi has integrated literature with the distinctive local cultures, demography, identities and other issues to relate to the people.

Homegrown flavors are the lifeline of the new literature festivals in the states.

“The residents of Bangalore (Bengaluru) felt there was need to provide a platform to the very local literary traditions and literary voices. We wanted to establish an annual flagship event on a national and international scale at a historic place,” said writer Vikram Sampath, co-founder of the Bangalore Literature Festival, a three-day event held for the first time in this city, that concluded on December 9.

Sampath said the festival offered a mix of vernacular and global literature. “It was global. The festival featured writing in south Indian languages as well,” he said. Sampath, the co-founder, along with Srikrishna Ramamoorthy, of the Bangalore festival, further added: “The issues in Bangalore were different from those of Kolkata.”

And is there a danger of too many lit fests in the country?

“Too many literature festivals are like too many restaurants — there’s room for all,” Sampath said.

Kolkata is gung-ho about the five-day Apeejay Kolkata Literature Festival starting January 9.

The festival was first started in 2010 to coincide with the centenary of the Apeejay Group, as one of the company’s 100 community initiatives to benefit people in small neighborhoods.

The mood was distinctly ethnic at the Apeejay Literature Festival, says Renu Kakkar, Vice-President of the Apeejay Surendra Group.

The festival will use literature to connect to the heritage of Kolkata with emphasis on the Victoria Memorial, St. John’s Church and the Lascar Monument on the Hooghly river — landmarks that will be prominent stops on the festival map.
The festival will design an interactive ‘patachitra’, a modern-day version of the scroll painting with narrative songs of 19th century Kolkata on computer to tell the story of the city through the voices of the people,” Kakkar said.

The festival this year will host writers like Ramachandra Guha, who will speak on “What kind of Asian was Gandhi”.

The uniqueness of the Kolkata Apeejay festival is that it is only one in the country organized by a bookstore, the Oxford Bookstore — a shop intricately woven into the intellectual consciousness of Kolkata, Kakkar said.

The Oxford Bookstore partners the Surendra Apeejay group for the festival.

At the Jaipur Literary Festival scheduled for January 24-28, the focus will be on literature in Indian languages.

Writers in 17 Indian languages will connect to an essentially Hindi-speaking audience in Jaipur under a project entitled Ek bhasa hua karti hain.

“The creative and dynamic programming of Indian languages will make the Jaipur Literature Festival more democratic in one sense, more Indian in a deeper sense, and make these languages familiar to the wider audience,” says poet Ashok Vajpeyi, who is associated with the festival.

The Jaipur Lit Fest also attempts unique outreach programmes. Last year, more than 1,000 children attended the festival as “guests”.

The Music Stage — a separate segment of the Jaipur festival — plays host to new fusion culture of Rajasthan with collaboration between local musicians playing folk instruments and foreign bands.

Book fests are devising innovative ways to reach wider audiences.

A roving book festival, The Bookwallah, supported by the Asialink Writing Programme affiliated to the University of Melbourne, Australia, took six writers from the Mumbai Live, a literature festival, on a 2,000-km train journey of southern India to meet readers, students and the general public. The traveling writers also carried along a pop-up library.

“Our writers experienced a little of southern India on train and visited each city on foot. They discussed their books and ideated across a range of topics — modern love, the politics of travel and migration, Australian and Indian culture and identity,” Nick Low, one of the organizers of Bookwallah, said.

The Goa Arts and Literary Festival and Kovalam Literary Festival speak of the local cultural issues on the sidelines of the mainstream session while the Bookeraoo, the annual children’s book festival in Delhi, intervenes in more than 100 government schools on issues of education and new forms of creative expression.

“The festivals allow us to cross the boundary between the present and future and connects us — in many different languages,” Roy said.
“Tuk, tuk, tuk...”

The noise began like a wail, begging her, entreating her, then rose into a sea-roar, deafening her ears, and blinding her eyes with a veil of mist.

Her mind raced back.

Sushila looked at him shyly, sweetly, and smiled. The smile spread a sort of moonlight before Mahadev’s eyes; Taking a step forward, he caught her hands.

The boughs rose and fell, the leaves brushing their faces in an intimate way. A red ripe fruit fell on their clasped hands.

“See! A blessing! The tree has blessed us!” — Mahadev exclaimed joyously, squeezing the juice over Sushila’s palm...

“Red for love, Forget me not my dove...” He whispered, in a tremulous voice. “Remember this fruit, remember this tree, and you will always remember me... This tree is the living witness to our engagement.”

Thus began the halo round the tree. It became a sacred spot to them, a sort of shrine, and they met daily under it to renew touching vows.

One fine day Mahadev bought the entire site, and commenced building a house with the tree overlooking their nest, caressing their bedroom windowpane with its tapering foliage.

The house was planned by them both; First few months saw them devoting plenty of time toward developing a beautiful garden. Flowers of every kind and hue crowned the place. Butterflies swarmed around them. In

By Nuggehalli Pankaja

Veteran novelist and poet Nuggehalli Pankaja writes in both Kannada and English. Winner of many literary awards, two of her novels — Barale Innu Yamune and Gagana — have also been made into popular films.
the middle towered the mother tree, its wiry branches waving to all the passers-by. As Mahadev put it, “Like our guardian angel, bless her.”

That spring brought them a new neighbor. “Oh look at it, how pretty!” Exclaimed Sushila pointing at the multicolored pair perched on the uppermost bough.

“Seems to be another happy couple like us” — Mahadev told his wife — “Wonder if they mean to settle down?”

That they did. A snug nest was soon formed, fledglings cropped up, then grandchildren... Soon the tree was a miniature city! The noise lent a sort of peaceful beauty to the place and their presence a finishing touch to the superb work of nature.

“See how happy that pair is,” Mahadev remarked one evening, then added wistfully, “It would have been nice if we too had an offspring.”

Yes, he had voiced Sushila’s yearning. How often had she not prayed?

“Mother tree!” She murmured that night, stroking its shimmering leaves, “You have made the nest of that pair warm; Why have you not shown the same consideration toward us? Bless us also with a child, mother...”

The prayer bore fruit!

The first thing Sushila heard on that memorable day was the gentle tapping of the boughs on the window; the first thing she saw on opening her eyes was its leafy crest bending its brow so proudly over her baby, and the first thing she touched were its lovely leaves brushing her cheeks with motherly gentleness. “I love you, our dear mother tree!” She whispered. “We thank you like anything! You have been very very good to us, bless you.”

“Vasant,” Mahadev called his chubby infant after his favorite season — Spring. “This Vasant will be the sunshine of our lives,” he told the proud mother. The child gurgled happily as though it understood its parent’s desire and concurred. He grew up spending most of his time playing under the tree while the mother lay sprawled by the trunk stitching or reading as time permitted. Mahadev often joined them there for tea.

Time flitted like seconds.

Vasant grew up to be a promising lad. The lad developed into a robust man with admirable principles and goal. He was the center of their hopes — future.

“I am indeed very lucky to have such a son!” Mahadev exclaimed joyfully the day Vasant came through his course in flying colors and secured a very good job. “May he always be lucky like this!”

Next day Mahadev was dead!

Sushila shed not a tear. Everybody wondered — worried; The tears simply would not come forth; Maybe because they had drunk their share of happiness too well to sour it with even a tinge of sorrow, or the shock of separation had hit the lone woman’s tender heart so much as to render it expressionless. The tree was her only friend now; Her only solace. Deep mournful sighs had emanated from it while the body was being carried away. The foliage had dropped as though convulsed with sobs.

Leaning her head against the trunk, Sushila — now Sushilabai, gained immense strength. Could it be that the tree was whispering soothing words to her? Scenes of past would stride past her. Bliss, remorse, pang — they would all simultaneously overwhelm her, the glossy foliage fanned her, and the loving neighbor-family rocked her to sleep with their sweet lullabies.

One day Vasant brought his girl home; To be seen and judged by the mother.; Sushilabai did the former, but not the latter, her mind running back to that poignant period in her life...

When she and Mahadev had loved each other, and the travail of suspense following the usual snag — opposition of parents.

“If you love her, go ahead and marry her,” Sushilabai advised her son. “Don’t worry about anything. If she keeps you happy, I am also happy.”

Prem, the bride, was all that Sushilabai could wish for, and bit by bit, she handed over the charge to the newcomer.

A girl nicely equipped with ultra-modern ideas backed by college education, Prem lost no time in reorganizing the household. Bells were installed at every corner, and tick-tock of the clock commanded every movement, each gesture in the house, while dances and parties invaded the place. Not once did Sushilabai raise her voice in protest.

“Still in their heyday of life; let them enjoy life the way they want — as myself and Mahadev did. They are trying to keep pace with the modern trend see?” She would confide to her mother tree, and relax in the armchair, now a permanent fixture there. The sun may blaze for all she cared, the clouds glitter with silver edgings — a distant rumble threaten, but she would be sitting there as in a trance.

One day alas, that tranquility was rent apart!

“What’s that awful tree over there?” She heard her daughter-in-law exclaim.

“That? Oh, It is an old tree; As old as the house, I should say. Don’t know the name,” Sushilabai heard her son’s reply.

“Then it cannot be worth knowing; How monstrous it looks! Vasant, why have you allowed it to occupy such a lot of space marring the beauty of the house?”

What Vasant replied, Sushilabai heard not; Her eyes opened wide, and her heart began to pound with fright, anger, and bewilderment.

“What did Prem mean by talking so? Is ‘Awful’ the name for my beautiful tree? Far from being a blemish, has it not lent celestial charm to the house?”

Yes, she felt terribly hurt, and strangely afraid... afraid to leave the tree alone even for a minute. She

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**The first thing she saw on opening her eyes was its leafy crest bending its brow so proudly over her baby, and the first thing she touched were its lovely leaves brushing her cheeks with motherly gentleness**
would not get up even for food, or her night sleep, lest some harm come to her tree.

Prem and Vasant could not help laughing when they saw her concern.

“Absolutely no flowers, no fragrance, no fruit! What do you see in that tree mother?” Prem, the daughter-in-law derided her mother-in-law.

“It gives a fruit — a small red fruit…” Sushilabai replied defiantly, her mind dwelling upon that significant red juice squeezed over her palm with so much ardor.

“Red for love, Forget me not, my dove… Remember this fruit, Remember this tree, And you will forever remember me…”

“Ugh, quite unpalatable too! Even the birds don’t munch that berry!” Prem laughed, and tapped the bark.

“The fuel will fetch a good price,” she said.

“F…u…e…l! Price! Are you thinking of cutting it down?” Sushilabai stood frozen. “My tree! Never! I won’t allow it! No, I won’t ever — never allow it…”

“Don’t be so sentimental mother! There is absolutely no place for sentiments these days. The tree is a real nuisance, swallowing up a lot of space; And that when people are simply crying for accommodation! You know what…” Prem had a sudden bright idea. “We will build a small house there, a tiny one-and that will go to our little Manu. Won’t it, Manu darling? Don’t you want a tiny tiny house of yours sweetie? From your dear granny?” She pinched the child’s cheeks. “Yes Granny, I want my house— tiny tiny house,” the child shouted in glee. “I will keep my doggie in it.”

Sushilabai gazed stunned at the child, her pet grandson, with resentment.

Her mind flew back to that golden evening when she and Mahadev had sealed their lives together under this very tree. Could she ever erase that picture from her mind? Not in this life!

One morning Sushilabai noticed white patches on the tree; Sure, the bark had been peeled away deliberately!

An enraged mother-in-law encountered Prem.

“Yes amma, I was the one who ordered it,” Prem admitted, wincing not a bit. “Today is your husband’s death anniversary, don’t you remember? There was a slight shortage of fuel, so I had this bark utilized to heat Vasant’s bath; The good-for-nothing pet of yours has become useful for once.”

How ironical! Mahadev’s death anniversary… and the son was bathing in the water warmed by the skin of his father’s beloved shrine — to perform the rites.

Clasping the trunk, she burst into heartrending sobs.

Her vigilance increased.

This rigorous watch and concern of granny became a source of delight to the mischievous children around. They would flock about the forbidden spot, deliberately pluck this leaf or twig, and romp out of the place, while the enraged woman chased them with her cane.

“This is becoming a ludicrous scene!” Feeling humiliated, Vasant confided to his wife, “I can’t stand it anymore.” “Yes”, Prem agreed, “Getting on my nerves too! That man, he offers quite a big sum for the tree; And you know we need the cash urgently… A lot of bother will be wiped away…”

“But amma…”

“Ignore the doddering woman… these old people. They are all the same; sentimental, conservative, stubborn; refusing to keep pace with time. Typical frog in the well!” Prem laughed derisively, “Don’t worry, she will get over it… She has to.”

So, the deal was made; The deed began to be executed the very next morning.

Vasant was apprehensive his mother might create a scene; The children had also gathered around, to watch the fun. But Sushilabai remained strangely silent… Each blow of the axe brought forth a swift onrush of memories, and each crack a sort of rigidity in her form. She felt the tree reaching out to her, begging her help… “I am also helpless,” She whispered silently.

At last the task was done; With a heavy sigh and rustle of memories, and each crack a sort of rigidity in her form. She felt the tree reaching out to her, begging her help… “I am also helpless,” She whispered silently.

The birds soared up, as though to bid goodbye. With a heavy thud, the mighty tree fell down. Wiping their faces, the men sat down.

The anxious lines on Vasant’s face relaxed. Thank God the giant task was over; He turned towards his mother.

“Time for lunch, come in amma.”

There was no reply.

Sushilabai’s body was as cold as ice!!
Lappuzha, often referred to as Venice of the East, is the ideal place to be in if one wants a ride in a houseboat. One can travel the pristine backwaters here, which connect this district to Kumarakom and neighboring towns like Kottayam, Changanacherry and Kollam. It has the largest number of houseboats in the state with 650 of them operating in the Vembanad lake alone.

As tourism season peaks in the state, all the houseboats that ply the Vembanad Lake are much in demand. “This season, domestic tourists have led from the front,” says Tony Pullikattil, who owns a dozen houseboats here, and is considered an innovator of houseboats. Among Pullikattil’s boats is a houseboat with a convention facility that can seat 100 people on the deck.

Pullikattil said that the boats in the area have been running full since the beginning of December. Since bookings have now been completed till mid-January, getting a houseboat at short notice is practically impossible.

Traditionally known as rice boats, these boats have undergone numerous renovations. Today, they come in varied sizes; and some are like floating palaces, with as many as five bedrooms.
Welcoming a new dawn...

Indian artist Harwinder Singh Gill displays an art work that captures the spirit of celebrations on the eve of the New Year, in Amritsar on December 31. (Photo: AFP)