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**FROM EDUCATIONAL STRUGGLES TO BOLLYWOOD INSPIRATION: REMEMBERING OM PARKASH CHAUTALA**

CORPORATES & INDUSTRY **5**



**STARTUPS HAVE POTENTIAL TO CONTRIBUTE \$120 BILLION TO INDIA'S GDP BY 2030**

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**DILJIT DOSANJH SAYS NOTHING CAN STOP HIS SHOWS**

**SAD appeals to political parties & Kisan Unions to work jointly to save the life of veteran Kisan leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal**

**CHANDIGARH:** Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) Working President Balwinder Singh Bhunder today appealed to all political parties as well as Kisan organizations to work jointly to save the life of veteran Kisan leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal.

Talking to newsmen after visiting the Kisan leader at Khanauri, Mr Balwinder Bhunder said "this is not the time to score brownie points by speaking in divergent voices. We should unite and appeal to the central government to accept the demands of Dallewal Sahab to pave the way for ending his fast unto death". He said it was unfortunate that the Aam Aadmi Party



(AAP) government and its chief minister had not taken up the issue in all earnestness with the centre. "The chief

minister should call on the Prime Minister and impress upon the latter to do justice with farmers since the Prime

Minister had assured that all the demands of the farmers, including making MSP a legal guarantee, would be accepted". Mr Bhunder also appealed to the Kisan organizations to come on a common platform to devise a common strategy to take up the issues of the farming community so that they could be resolved. He also made a personal appeal to the veteran Kisan leader to end his fast saying Punjab needed him and his services and that he should not endanger his life in this manner.

Mr Bhunder was accompanied by SAD leader Iqbal Singh Jhundan, Rajinder Deepa & Winderjit Singh Goldy during the visit.

**FM Nirmala Sitharaman to attend the 55th GST Council Meeting in Jaisalmer**



**JAIPUR:** Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has arrived in Jaisalmer for the 55th GST Council meeting scheduled to be held on Saturday at Marriott Hotel.

Chief Ministers, Deputy Chief Ministers, and Finance Ministers from various states, along with Finance Secretaries and senior officials, also reached Jaisalmer on Friday. The dignitaries were welcomed at Hotel Marriott amidst

tight security arrangements.

Jaisalmer Airport witnessed significant activity as leaders from across the country, including Deputy CM Diya Kumari, Haryana CM Nayab Singh Saini, J&K CM Omar Abdullah, Goa CM Pramod Sawant, Meghalaya CM Conrad Sangma, and Odisha CM Mohan Charan Majhi, arrived by special flights. Union Finance Minister Sitharaman was received

at the airport by Rajasthan Deputy CM Diya Kumari. Local officials, including MLA Chotu Singh Bhati, District Collector Pratap Singh and SP Sudhir Chaudhary, ensured smooth logistics and security for the event. Over 2,000 security personnel have been deployed across the city, with extensive arrangements in place to ensure the safety of more than 250 VVIPs participating in the meeting. The pre-meeting discussions at Hotel Marriott included Deputy CMs Samrat Chaudhary (Bihar), Jagdish Devda (MP), Chowna Mein (Arunachal Pradesh), Bhatti Vikramarka Mallu (Telangana), and T. R. Zeliang (Nagaland), alongside Finance Ministers from other states and Chief Economic Advisor Dr V. Anantha Nageswaran.

**1984 anti-Sikh riots: SC directs Centre to file fresh status report on trials**



**NEW DELHI:** The Supreme Court on Friday directed the Centre to file a fresh status report within two weeks on the status of trials in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. A bench comprising Justices Abhay S Oka and Augustine George Masih asked additional solicitor general Aishwarya Bhati to file an affidavit and permitted the petitioners in the case to file detailed objections. During the hearing, Bhati said recommendations of the special investigation team, set up by the top court, were carried out. A counsel appearing for one of the petitioners submitted there were some glaring instances in the SIT report and said 500 cases were clubbed in one FIR and the investigating officer could not probe them. "There were many instances where 498 cases were clubbed in one FIR and IO had to investigate all of them. Initially when the hearing began, the court felt that it should be confined to Delhi only."

**Protest Across Punjab Against Amit Shah's Controversial Remarks on Dr. Ambedkar**



**CHANDIGARH:** Aam Aadmi Party Punjab unit leaders staged protests across the state on Friday against Home Minister Amit Shah's derogatory remarks about the architect of the Constitution, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, in Parliament. AAP leaders strongly condemned

Amit Shah's statement, calling it an insult to the Constitution's creator. District leaders, office bearers, MLAs, and ministers of AAP, along with hundreds of party workers, staged demonstrations outside BJP's district headquarters in Jalandhar, Pathankot, Bathinda, Mansa, Ludhiana, Faridkot, Moga, and other cities. They submitted memorandums to the respective Deputy Commissioners against Amit Shah and also burned his effigies while raising slogans against him. In the memorandum, the party termed Amit Shah's remarks as an insult to the nation's democracy, the Constitution, and its architect. They demanded that the central government take action against the Home Minister and remove him from the cabinet. AAP leaders also accused the Bharatiya Janata Party of harboring hatred towards Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and the Constitution, alleging that the BJP-led central government aims to dismantle the Constitution created by Baba Saheb.

**LS sends 'one nation, one election' Bills to joint committee of Houses**

**NEW DELHI:** Amid uproar over Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks related to B R Ambedkar, the Lok Sabha on Friday referred the two bills on simultaneous polls to a joint committee of Parliament.

Opposition members were raising slogan hailing Ambedkar and slamming Shah when the House met for the day.

Instead of taking up the Question Hour, Speaker Om Birla asked Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal to move the resolution to refer the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024 and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024 referred to Joint Committee of Parliament comprising 27 members from the Lok Sabha and 12 from the Rajya Sabha.



The resolution was adopted by a voice vote amid noisy scenes. The Lok Sabha was then adjourned sine die (indefinitely), bringing to an end the Winter session which began on November 25. The two 'one nation, one election' (ONOE) bills, including

one requiring an amendment in the Constitution, lay down the mechanism to hold simultaneous elections and were introduced in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday after a fiery debate. BJP MP Bhartruhari Mahtab is being considered to head the

joint committee of Parliament that will scrutinise the two bills proposing simultaneous elections, sources said on Thursday.

With the BJP set to get the position of the chair for the crucial panel, official sources said Mahtab's parliamentary experience may weigh in his favour. The strength of the committee was increased from 31 MPs to 39, giving representation to more parties.

While the panel already includes BJP's P P Chaudhury and Anurag Thakur, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra of the Congress is another prominent member on the committee. Among the Lok Sabha members, 17 are from the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, including 12 from the BJP.

**State Govts Urged to Balance Fiscal Discipline with Economic Flexibility: RBI**

**NEW DELHI:** The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has urged state governments to adopt advanced fiscal rules and establish time-bound consolidation paths while controlling subsidies and welfare schemes, according to a report released on Thursday.

The central bank's comprehensive study of state finances for 2024-25 highlights both progress and areas requiring attention in state-level fiscal management.

States have demonstrated fiscal discipline by maintaining their consolidated gross fiscal deficit (GFD) within 3 per cent of GDP and revenue deficit at 0.2 per cent of GDP during 2022-23 and 2023-24. However, the projected GFD for 2024-25 shows a slight increase to 3.2 per cent of GDP.

While total outstanding liabilities have decreased from 31 per cent of GDP in March 2021 to 28.5 per cent in March 2024, they remain above both the pre-pandemic level of 25.3 per cent and the prudential threshold of 20 per cent.

The RBI report emphasises the need for "next-generation" fiscal rules that balance medium-term sustainability with short-term flexibility, enabling states to better manage economic shocks.

This advancement would require stronger institutions, improved fiscal reporting, and consideration of emerging challenges such as climate change and aging populations. The bank advocates for



leveraging data analytics, including machine learning and artificial intelligence, while strengthening State Finance Commissions to enhance public service delivery.

A significant concern highlighted in the report is the rising expenditure on subsidies, including farm loan waivers, free utilities, and various cash transfer schemes.

The report specifically notes the strain from electricity distribution companies, whose accumulated losses reached Rs 6.5 lakh crore (2.4 per cent of GDP) by 2022-23.

The RBI recommends comprehensive reforms in the power sector, including reducing transmission losses, rationalising tariffs, and considering privatisation options.

The central bank also addresses the issue of numerous centrally sponsored schemes, suggesting their rationalisation to provide states with greater spending flexibility and reduce fiscal burdens across both federal and state levels.

While acknowledging the progress states have made in fiscal consolidation, the RBI emphasises that there remains substantial room for improvement in overall fiscal management.

**India's Steel Imports Up 26% amid Rising Chinese Shipments**

**NEW DELHI:** India's steel sector is witnessing unprecedented levels of Chinese imports, with finished steel shipments from China reaching historic highs in the first eight months of fiscal year 2024-25, according to provisional government data.

The surge has intensified concerns among domestic steel manufacturers about the impact of cheaper Chinese steel flooding the market.

The world's second-largest crude steel producer has become a net importer during this period, with total finished steel imports climbing to an eight-year peak. Overall imports reached 6.5 million metric tonnes, marking a 26.6 per cent increase from the previous year.

Chinese shipments alone accounted for 1.96 million metric tonnes, up 22.8 per cent year-on-year, while Japanese imports more than doubled to 1.4 million metric tonnes, hitting a



six-year high. The import landscape shows significant concentration, with China, Japan, and South Korea collectively representing 79 per cent of India's total finished steel imports.

Hot-rolled coils emerged as the dominant import in the flat product category, while bars and rods led the non-flat product imports.

In response to these developments, the Indian government has initiated an investigation to assess the potential imple-

mentation of a safeguard duty of up to 25 per cent to regulate steel imports.

The influx of cheaper Chinese steel has begun to impact India's smaller steel mills, forcing some to reduce operations and consider workforce reductions.

This situation has prompted India to join other nations in exploring protective measures. Despite these challenges, India's steel demand remains robust, supported by strong economic growth and continued infrastructure development.

**Mahakumbh 2025: Hundreds of Organisations to Host Free Community Kitchens**



**PRAYAGRAJ:** Mahakumbh 2025, the largest gathering of Sanatan faith, is set to witness an estimated gathering of 40-45 crore devotees from across the country and the world, all coming to take holy dip at the confluence of Triveni Sangam.

Apart from ritual bathing, the act of charity, particularly food donation holds immense spiritual significance during the religious gathering. Reflecting this tradition, hundreds of organisations will organize 'bhandaras' (community kitchens) during the month-long religious festivities, offering free meals to devotees.

Starting from January 13, the fairground will host many bhandaras, ensuring that no visitor goes hungry. Some organisations have already commenced their services, while others are preparing to establish food distribution points.

Notable groups like Akshaya Patra, ISKCON, and Om Namah Shivay are set to serve large numbers of devotees through their langars and community kitchens.

According to Prayagraj Divisional Commissioner Vijay Vishwas Pant, between 8,000 to 10,000 organisations are anticipated to participate in the Mahakumbh this year.

"Representatives from nearly every religious sect in the country will be welcomed by the fair administration, with comprehensive arrangements in place for their participation. To further support devotees, the administration has established Fair Price Shops, providing essential food items at affordable rates, ensuring a seamless and fulfilling experience for all attending this spiritual spectacle," he added. According to Vivek Chaturvedi, ADM Mahakumbh, bathing and donating in Prayagraj hold special significance during events like Kumbh.

**Winter Session of parliament adjourns sine die**

**Session provided 20 sittings of Lok Sabha and 19 sittings of Rajya Sabha spreading over 26 days**

**NEW DELHI:** The Winter Session, 2024 of Parliament which commenced on Monday, the 25th of November, 2024 has been adjourned sine die on Friday, the 20th of December, 2024. The Session provided 20 sittings of Lok Sabha and 19 sittings of Rajya Sabha spreading over 26 days.

During the Session, 05 Bills were introduced in Lok Sabha and 04 Bills were passed by Lok Sabha and 03 Bills were passed by Rajya Sabha. One Bill namely "The Bhartiya Vayuyaan Vidheyak, 2024" was passed by both the Houses during the Session. The Bill seeks to re-enact the Aircraft Act to address the ambiguity owing to insertions/omissions/deletions effected by amendments to the Aircraft Act, 1934 from time to time. Our country commemorated a historic milestone on 26th November 2024, marking the 75th anniversary of the adoption of its Constitution. Year-long



celebrations were launched under four themes: the Preamble, Know Your Constitution, Making of the Constitution, and Celebrating its Glory on that day. A special function was held to commemorate this occasion at the Central Hall of Samvidhan Sadan on 26th November, 2024, where besides the launch of a commemorative coin and stamp two books titled "Making of the Constitution of India and its Glorious Journey" and "Making of the Constitution of India: A Glimpse" were released by President of India in the august presence of Vice-President,

Prime Minister, Speaker, Lok Sabha, Union Ministers, Leaders of Opposition, Members of Parliament from both Houses and other dignitaries. All Indians across the globe joined President of India in reading the Preamble. As part of yearlong celebration of 75th Anniversary of adoption of the Constitution, a special discussion on the "Glorious journey of 75 years of the Constitution of India" was organized in the Lok Sabha on 13 and 14 December and in the Rajya Sabha on 16 and 17 December 2024. The discussion

engaged the Lok Sabha for 15 Hours 43 Minutes in which 62 Members took part and was replied to by the Prime Minister. In Rajya Sabha, the discussion engaged the House for a total time of 17 Hours 41 Minutes in which 80 Members took part and was replied to by the Home Minister. First Batch of Supplementary Demands for Grants for 2024-25 were discussed and voted in full and the related Appropriation Bill was introduced, discussed and passed by Lok Sabha on 17.12.2024 after a debate of about 07 hours 21 mins. Two landmark Bills namely, (i) The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth) Amendment Bill, 2024 and (ii) The Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024 to give effect to the mechanism of simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha and State/Union Territory Assemblies under the vision "One Nation, One Election," were introduced in Lok Sabha, on 17 December, 2024 and got referred to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on 20 December, 2024.

**Formers Haryana CM Om Prakash Chautala dies at Age of 89**

**CHANDIGARH:** Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) president and five-time Haryana Chief Minister Om Prakash Chautala, whose family ruled the state's dusty and defection-ridden politics for decades largely in rural areas with predominant Jat voters, died in Gurugram after a cardiac arrest on Friday.

He was 89 and cleared his Class 10 and 12 exams two years ago. He suffered cardiac arrest at his home and was rushed to Medanta Hospital but passed away. Family said Chautala would be cremated at Teja Khara in Sirsa district on Saturday afternoon. His body would be kept there from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. for people to pay respects.

Expressing grief, Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote on X, "I am deeply saddened by the demise of former Haryana Chief Minister Om Prakash Chautala ji. He was active in state politics for many years and strove constantly to carry forward the work of (Chaudhary) Devi Lal."

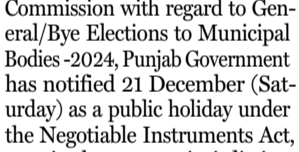
Former Deputy Prime Minister Chaudhary Devi Lal was Om Prakash Chautala's father. Condoling Chautala's death, Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini said, "His contribution to the state politics will



always be remembered." INLD spokesperson Rakesh Sihag said the former chief minister was feeling unwell in the morning. "However, a cardiac arrest took his life," he added. Om Prakash Chautala's wife Sneha Lata died in August 2019. Chautala has three daughters and two sons, Abhay Singh Chautala and Abhay Singh Chautala. Abhay, a former MLA from Ellenabad, was the Leader of Opposition in the state Legislative Assembly from October 2014 till March 2019. The Chaudhary Devi Lal clan has ruled the state seven times, with Devi Lal being the Chief Minister twice and his son Om Prakash Chautala five times since December 1989.

From March 2000 to March 2005 was the longest term of Om Prakash Chautala. After that, the

**Punjab Govt notifies 21 December as a Public Holiday on account of Municipal Bodies Elections**



**CHANDIGARH:** On the recommendation of Punjab State Election Commission with regard to General/Bye Elections to Municipal Bodies -2024, Punjab Government has notified 21 December (Saturday) as a public holiday under the Negotiable Instruments Act, 1881 in the revenue jurisdiction of the Municipal Bodies where elections are going to be held. Furthermore, Punjab Government has also declared a Special leave on 21st December 2024 to those voters who are working in Punjab Government offices/Boards/Corporations/Educational Institutions. Voters can avail this Special leave to cast their vote in the Municipal Bodies Elections by showing their voter card to the competent officer and this Special leave will not be deducted from their leave account.

# From Educational Struggles to Bollywood Inspiration: Remembering Om Parkash Chautala

TARUN BHAJINI  
Chandigarh

Om Prakash Chautala, a towering figure in Haryana's Jat politics and the eldest son of former Deputy Prime Minister Devi Lal, has passed away, marking the end of a significant political chapter in the state. A five-time Chief Minister of Haryana, Chautala holds the distinction of being the first non-Congress CM to complete a full term, a feat he achieved from 2000 to 2005.

## A Leader Born of Adversity

Born on January 1, 1935, Chautala faced hardship early in life, leaving his education unfinished due to his father's imprisonment. Despite this setback, he carved a political path for himself, beginning his career as CM in 1989 and later forming the Haryana



Lok Dal in 1996. The party, later renamed the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), became a key player in Haryana's politics.

## A Controversial Legacy

Chautala's political journey was not without controversy. In 2012, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison for his

involvement in the JBT recruitment scam. During his time in Tihar Jail, Chautala turned his focus to education, passing his Class 10 examination, a testament to his determination and belief in linking education to self-respect.

## A Visionary Leader

Despite his legal troubles, Chautala's contributions to Haryana's political landscape remain significant. His alliances, particularly with the BSP in the 1998 elections, brought notable success to his party. Under his leadership, the INLD gained recognition as a key force in Haryana politics, shaping the state's political dynamics for decades.

As Haryana bids farewell to one of its most iconic leaders, Om Prakash Chautala's legacy will remain a subject of discussion and reflection in the years to come.

## Bollywood Inspiration

Chautala's prison educa-

# Punjab Agriculture Minister Khudian holds crucial meeting with Farmer Unions



CHANDIGARH: Reaffirming the commitment of Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann led Punjab Government to firmly stand with farmers of the state, Punjab Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Minister Gurmeet Singh Khudian has assured farmer union leaders that the state government will not allow farmers' interests to be affected by the National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing.

The Agriculture Minister was holding in-depth discussions with farmer unions' leaders on the draft policy on "National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing here at Punjab Bhawan, on Thursday.

"The state government is con-

cerned as this policy could have serious implications for the State and its farmers, so we want to analyse and consult on the each and every aspect of the draft policy shared by the GoI," said the Agriculture Minister, while adding that agriculture experts and other stakeholders will also be consulted soon to analyse it thoroughly so that not a single point is left unconsidered.

Gurmeet Singh Khudian, along with Additional Chief Secretary Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Mr. Anurag Verma, Chairman of Punjab State Farmers' & Farm Workers' Commission Dr. Sukhpal Singh, Secretary Punjab Mandi Board Ramvir, appealed the farm-

# Implementation of 3 new criminal laws to develop Haryana as model state: DGP



PARVESH HANDA  
Chandigarh

The three new criminal laws, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), Bharatiya Nagrik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam (BSA), replaced the colonial-era Indian Penal Code 1860, Code of Criminal Procedure 1973 and the Indian Evidence Act of 1872 are being introduced in the state by 28th February 2025, effective from July 1 to develop Haryana as a model state. Haryana Director General of Police (DGP) Shatrueet Kapur, on Sunday chaired a video conferencing meeting with all senior police officers as well as Superintendents of Police from across the state, who joined through video conferencing to discuss the effective implementation of three new criminal laws, controlling violent crimes and a drug-free state campaign. Discussing the effective implementation of the three new laws, DGP Kapur said the Union Ministry of Home Affairs has set a target to develop Haryana as a model for effectively implementing them.

The DGP also said the three new laws will strengthen the justice system, and people will get speedy justice, adding that all types of resources are available with the Haryana Police to implement them, and more resources will be made available in future as needed. Reviewing the work done in the state on drug eradication DGP said that making Haryana drug-free is one of the top priorities of the state police. He added, although commendable work is being done to eradicate the menace of drugs from Haryana, it is essential to work in a more planned manner to make the state completely drug-free. Kapur said, police should not allow drugs to be sold in their areas and those who are addicted to drugs should be counselled and treated in OPDs or drug rehabilitation centres established at the district level across the state.

Kapur also emphasised that SHOs and DSPs should visit the villages and talk to people in the 'chaupals', which will help them obtain important information to make their respective areas drug-free. He also issued necessary guidelines to the officers on crime control, saying strict action should be taken against anti-social elements, hard core criminals and drug smugglers as well as drug suppliers, who should be dealt with severely. The meeting also discussed in detail how to deal with the new methods being adopted by criminals. The DGP said stern action should be taken against the medical stores selling prohibited drugs.

# Haryana CM approves shifting of Gur Mandi to new grain market in Karnal



GULSHAN KUMAR  
Chandigarh

Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini has approved the shifting of Gur Mandi from the old grain market to the new grain market in Karnal. Apart from jaggery, permission has also been given to shift fodder, pulses and spices market to this new grain market. Giving information, a government spokesperson said while this decision of the Chief Minister will provide relief to city residents from the congestion in the old grain market, traders of other items, including jaggery, will also benefit. The main agricultural products like wheat, maize, jaggery etc. were bought and sold in the old grain market of Karnal. In 1999, a new market was developed in Karnal where the grain related products were shifted. After this, in 2014, the fruit and vegetable market was also shifted to this new grain market. The spokesperson said in the layout plan of the new grain market, a provision was made for fodder market, jaggery market, spices market and pulses market, but a notification in this regard could not be issued due to which the market of the above items could not be shifted to the new place.

# Out of 12 who were found dead in Georgia restaurant 11 were from the State of Punjab: Aujla



JAGMOHAN SINGH  
Amritsar

Congress Member Parliament Gurjeet Singh Aujla here today said that among twelve people who were found dead in the Georgia restaurant wherein eleven were from the State of Punjab.

Talking to FW Aujla said that nevertheless to say that he didn't have the antecedents of eleven people who were from the state of Punjab but at the same time he urged the Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann, NRI Minister Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal and Government of India to do the needful in this regard for the repatriation of bodies.

# BJP Hates Ambedkar, Constitution and Dalits: Harpal Singh Cheema

CHANDIGARH: Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) Punjab launched a scathing attack on the BJP and Union Home Minister Amit Shah over his derogatory remarks against Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in Parliament. Punjab Minister Harpal Singh Cheema accused the BJP of harboring a deep-seated hatred for the Constitution, Dr. Ambedkar's ideology, and the rights of Dalits and marginalized communities.

Harpal Cheema strongly condemned Amit Shah's statement where he reportedly mocked the frequent references to Dr. Ambedkar in parliamentary discussions. "When the Union Home Minister says, 'Taking Ambedkar's name is becoming fashion, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar... if God's name was taken this much, one would earn a place in heaven for seven lives,' it is not



only an insult to Dr. Ambedkar but also a direct attack on the Constitution of India and the principles of equality and justice it upholds," said Cheema. He said that such remarks reveal the BJP's true intentions and mentality. "Dr. Ambedkar gave this nation its Constitution after years of struggle, ensuring the right to property, education, work, and equality for all, especially for the oppressed. For 75 years,

this Constitution has been the foundation of democracy in India. Yet, the BJP's actions and words clearly show their disdain for this document and the visionary who created it," Cheema added. Cheema reminded the public that the Aam Aadmi Party has consistently warned about the BJP's agenda to undermine the Constitution and erode Dr. Ambedkar's legacy. He accused the BJP of work-

ing to dismantle the rights enshrined in the Constitution, which have empowered millions from marginalized communities.

"The Home Minister's words have exposed the BJP's anti-Dalit and anti-Constitutional mindset. Their hatred for Baba Saheb and his ideology is undeniable. This is why the BJP is desperate to rewrite the very principles that define our democracy," Cheema said.

AAP's Punjab minister called for an immediate apology from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Amit Shah to the people of India. "The BJP's leadership must apologize for this disgraceful statement and clarify their stand on the Constitution and Dr. Ambedkar's vision. The people of India, especially the Dalit community, will not tolerate such blatant disrespect," he said.

# DGP Gourav Yadav Counters Police commissioner Bhullar statement



JAGMOHAN SINGH  
Amritsar

Commissioner of Police Gurpreet Singh Bhullar who was constantly denying attack at police station Islamabad since morning the same was countered by his boss DGP Gourav Yadav during his visit in the city when he arrived here to take stock of the situation.

Yadav in his statement to media said that in the wake of the attack at the Police Station Islamabad in Amritsar, he has directed officers concerned to ensure professional policing and take strict action against the perpetrators. The visit came a few hours after the incident reported at Islamabad Police Station at around 3am on Tuesday.

According to official statement released by DGP office

there was a blast but in reality there was no truth in it. The loud sound was heard since the police station was located in narrow thick lanes but no damage was there.

Local resident Pawan Kumar (55) living at close proximity to the Police station said, "There was a powerful defining sound heard around 3.15 a.m which created panic all around, resident rushed outside to see what happened but shortly returned inside their houses due to the panic atmosphere. He said that the Police station was the target but I don't know exactly rather it was a blast or something else but light photo frames hanging on walls fell on ground. DGP in his statement to media stated, "All the previous cases of attacks on the Police establishments including LED implant at Ajnala Police Station and hand grenade attack at Police Post Asron in Nawanshahr have been solved successfully and accused persons have been arrested," he said. In a separate meeting, the DGP addressed all the Superintendent of Police (SPs), Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSPs) and Station House Officers (SHOs) from border districts including Commissionerate Police Amritsar, Amritsar Rural, Batala and Tarn Taran to brief them about the top priorities of the Punjab Police.

He said that certain members of the public were claiming that

# Sandeep Singh from Tarn Taran among those killed in Georgia



JAGMOHAN SINGH  
Amritsar

The family of Sandeep Singh (35) from Tarn Taran among those killed in Georgia. Family constantly urging the authorities to do the needful to bring his body here to perform last rites. Sandeep Singh is one of the victim of the recently happened tragedy wherein eleven people died who were found dead in the Georgia restaurant. The family of Singh urged Union Government and Punjab government to bring back the mortal remains. Baljit Kaur the wife Sandeep Singh (34) resident of Mohall Jaswant Singh falling in the border district of Tarn Taran expressing her grief, said she had recently spoken to Sandeep telephonically last week, and he had informed about his settlement in Permanent job with good perks. Adding further she said that Sandeep was the sole breadwinner and his sudden demise left behind their 8-year-old daughter and family has no other source of income here in India.

# Primary Agricultural Credit Societies in Haryana digitized says Chief Secretary

GULSHAN KUMAR  
Chandigarh

Haryana Chief Secretary Dr. Vivek Joshi presided over the 3rd meeting of the State Cooperative Development Committee (SCDC) here today.

While expressing satisfaction on the computerization of 710 Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS), he said this step will not only improve efficiency of PACS, but will also help in tackling corrupt practices. The Chief Secretary also called for training of officials to ensure seamless transition to a digital framework.

It was informed in the meeting that PACS/PCCS (Primary Cooperative Credit Societies) have covered all gram panchayats in Haryana. Moving forward, a Joint Working Committee has been formed in all the districts for the formation of Multipurpose PACS, along with Dairy & Fisheries Cooperative Societies in every gram panchayat of the state. The meeting was informed that new Model Bye-laws have



been adopted by all PACS/PCCS in Haryana to increase their viability and diversify their activities, making them vibrant economic entities at the village level. Under a pilot project of central government, the PACS of the state are also working on construction of new godowns. The PACS will also provide Common Service Center (CSC) services to people. In all, 433 PACS have been boarded as Common Service Centers in the state while CSC services have already been started by 202 PACS. Four PACS, namely Bass, Matloda, Narnaud and Hathira have started the sale of medicines in Jan Aushadhi Kendras. In addition, 742 PACS have started functioning as Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samridhi Kendras.

# Haryana police breaks drug nexus: 4652 drug traffickers sent behind bars in 2024

Commercial-quantity cases registered against 841 drug traffickers in 2024, leading to their arrests

GULSHAN KUMAR  
Chandigarh

Haryana Police is setting new benchmarks in its ongoing campaign against drugs in the state. Under the campaign being run by the Haryana State Narcotics Control Bureau and district police to break the nexus of drug peddlers in the state, every possible effort is being made. In this series, Haryana Police has registered 3051 cases against drug ped-

dlers from January 1, 2024 to November 30, 2024, and sent 4652 accused behind bars. Along with this, taking strict action against habitual offenders, preventive detention action was taken against 63 drug peddlers under the PIT NDPS Act in the year 2024 to ensure that these criminals do not get involved in drug trafficking again.

Sharing information in this regard, Director General, Police, Shatrueet Kapur said that Haryana Police has prepared an effective strategy to break the drug supply chain. He informed that in the year 2023, Haryana Police had registered

326 commercial quantity cases, while in the year 2024, 411 cases have been registered in which action has been taken against 841 big drug peddlers. He informed that to expedite big cases related to drug smuggling, the time limit for getting reports from the Forensic Science Lab (FSL) has been reduced to 15 days, which will not only expedite the trial but will also help in increasing the conviction rate.

He informed that 5150 Gram Praharis and Ward Praharis have been appointed in the villages to make the state drug-free. Gram Praharis and Ward Praharis keep an eye on



those who sell drugs in the villages. Along with this, people who have become addicted to drugs are helped in quitting drugs. Similarly, due to the success of the Namak Lota campaign, there has been a

15 percent decrease in small-quantity NDPS cases this year compared to the previous year. Under this campaign, the community was made aware and small offenders were encouraged to quit drugs.

Giving detailed information about community participation and awareness programs, Head, Haryana Narcotics Control Bureau, O.P. Singh, said that under the drug-free Haryana campaign, community participation was ensured to make people aware of the ill effects of drugs. In these programmes, people were made aware of the ill effects of drugs through cultural activities, sports, and interactive sessions. Similarly, Haryana Police ran a Nashamukt Bharat Pakhwada in the state. During the Nashamukt Bharat Pakhwada, anti-drug messages were conveyed to lakhs of peo-

ple in 15 days. This initiative strengthened the state's efforts at the national level and laid the foundation for widespread public awareness.

Singh said that considering drug addiction more of a health challenge than a crime, Haryana Police focused on the rehabilitation of drug addicts. By conducting surveys in the state, people who had become addicted to drugs were identified and sent to rehabilitation centers for treatment. During this time, by making a strategic plan with the Health Department, people who were addicted to drugs were helped to come out of its pit.

# EVM verification plea to be heard by another SC bench, says CJI Khanna

**NEW DELHI:** The Supreme Court on Friday said the plea seeking a policy for verification of electronic voting machines will be heard by a bench headed by Justice Dipankar Datta in January next year.

A bench comprising Chief Justice of India (CJI) Sanjay Khanna and Justice Sanjay Kumar said the fresh plea of former Haryana minister and five-time MLA Karan Singh Dalal and one Lakhman Kumar Singla on the issue will be heard by a bench headed by Justice Datta in the week commencing January 20, 2025. A bench comprising Justice Khanna and Justice Datta had delivered a verdict earlier in April rejecting the demand for bringing back the old paper ballots.



At outset, senior advocate Maninder Singh, appearing for the Election Commission, sought dismissal of the plea, saying that similar petitions for same reliefs were rejected earlier. The CJI said the bench headed by Justice Datta would hear this now. Earlier on December 13, a bench of Justices Vikram Nath and P B Varale

had refused to hear the plea, saying let it be heard by a bench which had heard similar petitions. Now, it was listed before the CJI-led bench.

In its verdict on April 26, the apex court termed the suspicion of manipulation of the EVMs "unfounded" and said the polling devices were "secured" and eliminated booth capturing and bogus voting. The top court, however, opened a window for the aggrieved unsuccessful candidates securing the second and third places in poll results while allowing them to seek verification of microcontroller chips embedded in five per cent EVMs per assembly constituency on a written request upon payment of a fee to the poll panel.

The fresh petition of Dalal

and Singla has sought compliance of the top court's April 26 judgement delivered in the case of 'Association for Democratic Reforms versus Union of India'.

Dalal and Singla secured the second-highest votes in their respective constituencies and sought a direction to the Election Commission (EC) to implement a protocol for examining the original "burnt memory" or microcontroller of the four components of the EVM—the control unit, ballot unit, VVPAT and symbol loading unit.

The top court had mandated that five per cent of the EVMs in every assembly constituency should undergo verification by the engineers from EVM manufacturers after the election results were announced.

# Pilot error led to General Bipin Rawat's copter crash-Report

**NEW DELHI:** A report by the Standing Committee on Defence, tabled in the Lok Sabha, concluded that the helicopter crash that killed Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat, his wife Madhulika Rawat, and 10 others on December 8, 2021, was caused by pilot error.

The report, citing data from the IAF, classified the cause of the crash under "Human Error (Aircrew)". It comes more than three years after the incident, which claimed the lives of General Rawat, his Staff Officer Brigadier LS Lidder, and other personnel.

The copter, a Mi-17 V5 helicopter, took off from Sulur Air Force base in Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore and was headed to Defence Staff Services Col-



leges in Wellington. It crashed minutes before its scheduled landing. The Standing Committee's analysis covered IAF accidents from 2017 to 2022 and highlighted that a total of 34 accidents occurred during this period. Preliminary findings from an inquiry team, conducted shortly after the crash,

suggested that the accident occurred due to the pilot's disorientation after the helicopter entered clouds caused by an unexpected change in weather conditions in the valley. This led to a Controlled Flight Into Terrain (CFIT) incident, as revealed by the analysis of the flight data and cockpit voice recorders.

# ED Raids Former OPCC President Chief Niranjan Pattnaik's Residence

ARABINDA MOHAPATRA  
Bhubaneswar

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) sleuths raided the residence of senior congress leader and former Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee president Niranjan Pattnaik at Bhubaneswar's Nayapally on Saturday. A team of 8 to 10 ED sleuths arrived at Pattnaik's residence around at 7 am and began the search operation linked to allegations of financial transactions although the exact reason behind the raid is yet to be clear. Sources reveal that the former president Pattnaik has come under ED scanner for his reportedly involvement in illegal financial dealings. Deployed by industrial Security Forces to ensure the security around his residence ED also searched Pattnaik's residence along with two other at Nayapally in order to get vital information relating to illegal financial transactions. However, no official statement has been released by Pattnaik or his representative in this regard.

# Post Office Passport Seva Kendras in Bengal under Security Agencies' Scanner

**KOLKATA:** Some employees of Post Office Passport Seva Kendras (POPSKs) in bordering districts of West Bengal were under the scanner of security and intelligence agencies in connection with arranging fake Indian documents, including passports, for Bangladeshi infiltrators. Sources aware of the development said that the state police have started an investigation based on certain clues that some contractual staff attached to such POPSKs and some permanent employees of the Postal Department are acting as aiding agents for such rackets against hefty commissions. Four people have been arrested in connection with fake passport rackets during the last 72 hours, out of which two are contractual staff with the Indian Postal Department and attached to two such POPSKs. Two accused have been identified as Tarakanth Sen and Deepak Mondal. While Sen was arrested by the sleuths of the Special Task Force (STF) of Kolkata Police, Mondal was arrested by the cops of the coastal division of West Bengal Police.

# ASSOCHAM announces Deepak Sood's departure



**NEW DELHI:** The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) announced that Deepak Sood, Secretary General is moving on from the Chamber to pursue other interests. Sanjay Nayar, President ASSOCHAM said, "Deepak made important contributions to rebuilding a healthy balance sheet, delivering quality and a better national footprint for the chamber in recent years. The past presidents and I thank and wish him the best for the next phase." "I have decided to move on to pursue other interests, leaving behind more than five years of impact work at ASSOCHAM. After unlocking significant value following recent collaborations with Startup Mahakumbh 2024 and working on the Bharat@100 initiative, there is great satisfaction in ending the association with the chamber on a high. With guidance from Union and state governments, we have delivered insights in key growth areas. I thank the Presidium, Directors and members for their unwavering support" said Mr Deepak Sood.

# Technology must be economically viable and safe for Infra Projects: Nitin Gadkari

**NEW DELHI:** The infrastructure development is one of the important agenda for our government, without it we cannot make Atma Nirbhar Bharat. Developments in the field of water, power, transport and communication, are very important for our country because by creating such infrastructure, we can also create immense employment opportunity in industry and business, said Nitin Gadkari, Hon'ble Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways at an ASSOCHAM event.

Today, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi developing road infrastructure and tunnel, has a huge potential for auto investment and development in this



area. Regarding bridges and tunnels, these are very crucial work, and our objective is to reduce the cost without compromise with the quality, said Nitin Gadkari, Hon'ble Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways at ASSOCHAM's Annual Infrastructure Conference CEOs Roundtable Discussion and Achiever Awards 2024 at

New Delhi today. He said, there are a lot of tunnels not only in road and highways sector but also Railways. Besides central Government, state government are also developing tunnel infrastructure development.

The issue of importing machinery from China is very difficult. Need different types of

machinery. Reducing the cost is the need of the world, stated Gadkari. On the basis of that, we have to make technology economically viable and safe. We have just accepted a particularly formulated new policy for using the malicious technology that enforces ultra-modern concrete, where we are using steel fiber in the casting, and that is going to be a good successful experiment.

Key tunnel project in India is development of tunnels like Zojila Tunnel, which is 14.2 km and costing 6,500 crores and 55% overall physical progress is completed. This is one of Asia's most important and longest tunnels at an altitude of about 9,800 feet under Zojila Pass, highlighted by Gadkari.

# Govt should hold talks to Dallewalew soon to avoid nationwide farmers agitation: Shiv Kumar Kakka

SATISH HANDA  
Jind

Farmer leaders from four states on Tuesday supported Dallewalew, the farmer leader who is on a hunger strike at Khanauri border demanding minimum support price (MSP). The government was warned by holding a press conference at Jat Dharamshala in Jind by the leaders of Kisan Sangharsh Samiti, Janata Sarkar Morcha, Rashtriya



Kisan Mazdoor Mahasangh from Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Odisha and Bundelkhan

also participated in it. Farmer leader Shivkumar Kakka from Madhya Pradesh said that the government should soon hold talks with Jagjit Dallewalew, who is on a hunger strike at Khanauri border and fulfill the demands of the farmers. He warned that if their demands are not met soon, this movement will not only spread to Punjab and Haryana, but across the country. All the farmer organizations of the

sue of MSP.

Farmer leaders KV Biju from Kerala, Sachin Mahapatra from Odisha, Manish Raja from Bundelkhand were present in this meeting. Kakka said that the government is reneging on its promise and MSP is not being implemented, which is a breach of promise with the farmers. The government should give up its stubbornness and take the talks forward with the farmers.

# A Farmer on Death Bed: Is Nero Busy In Playing Flute?

JAG MOHAN THAKEN

His fast entered into 25th day on Friday with health deteriorating minute-by-minute; doctors say that his life is hanging by a thread, but no one in the power is caring for. Political circles raise the point, "Is Nero busy in playing flute? The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has time to call his party MPs Pratap Sarangi and Mukesh Rajput to inquire about their health, who just got injured in a push and shove, but has no time even to utter a lip sympathy towards the farmer leader, who is on the death bed."

ing the 'Delhi Chalo march' since February 13 after their march to Delhi was stopped by security forces. This, more than 10 months dharna, is the second longest sit-on after the 13 months dharna at Delhi border in 2020-21, which bowed down the central government to repeal the three anti-farmer agricultural laws and the Prime Minister himself had to apologize.

The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi then said, "I apologise to the people of the country with true and pure heart... we were not able to convince farmers. There must have been some deficiency in our efforts that we could not convince some farmers."

The farmers are demanding freedom from debt, legal guarantee for purchase of all crops on MSP on the basis of C-2+50%, pension for farmers and agriculture workers, withdrawal of the Electricity Amendment bill and resolution of other issues. The farmers' unions are claiming time and again that the government had assured them to resolve their issues, but all in vain till date.

Support from all corners, but government not budging at all

The opposition parties, farmer unions and even the second highest constitutional post holder of the country have supported the demands of the farmers, but the government has become so adamant that it is not budging at all. Not to talk about the acceptance of their demands, the farmers are being stopped even from entering Haryana for their 'Delhi Chalo' march by using teargas and water cannons in the chilling cold of December by the Haryana Police.



Showing his concern towards the aggrieved farmers, Vice-President of India, Jagdeep Dhankhar has said, "If farmers are protesting today, it would be a big misunderstanding and mistake to assess that movement in a limited way. The farmers who are not on the road are also worried and troubled today."

The Vice-President in his address on December 3, 2024, at the Centenary Foundation Day of Indian Council of Agricultural Research-Central Institute for Research on Cotton Technology (ICAR-CIRCOT), Mumbai supported the MSP demand of the farmers and warned, "We are not practical, our policy making is not on the right track. Farmers need a law that guarantees MSP. Look with an open mind, think with an open mind, and evaluate. And it pains me that the well-wishers of the farmers are silent today, they shy away from speaking. No power in the country can stifle the voice of the farmers. A nation will

pay a huge price, if it tries the patience of a farmer."

The General Secretary of the All-India Congress Committee, former Union Minister, and MP from Sirsa, Kumari Selja has expressed concern over the deteriorating health of farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewalew. Kumari Selja said that the government must take appropriate steps in this regard and urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to take immediate action to address the farmers' demands. "The government seems unwilling to listen to the farmers. The government has turned the Punjab and Haryana borders into something akin to the India-Pakistan border. Instead of addressing the farmers' issues, they are being met with water cannons and tear gas shells."

Supporting Dallewalew, Leader of the Opposition in Punjab assembly, Partap Singh Bajwa said, "The Congress party fully supports the farmers in their rightful demands. I urge every

Punjab Congress worker to stand in solidarity with our farmers and contribute to this historic movement. Jagjit Singh Dallewalew's sacrifice reflects the indomitable spirit of our farming community. We are committed to ensuring their voices are heard and their rights are protected."

Senior Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader and Bathinda MP Harsimrat Kaur Badal on Monday appealed to the union government to accept the demands of the farmers, including making MSP a legal guarantee, to save the life of Kisan leader Jagjit Singh Dallewalew.

While raising the issue of the precarious health of the senior Kisan leader in parliament on Monday, Mrs Harsimrat Badal said, "A promise was made to constitute a committee which would consider all the demands of the farmers but despite the martyrdom of 700 farmers during the Kisan Andolan these demands have still not been accepted."

Mrs Harsimrat Badal said it was unfortunate that despite directions by the Supreme Court to both the State and Centre to persuade Mr Dallewalew to end his fast, the centre had deputed a low-level official who had nothing to offer and simply asserted he had come to hear the views of the farmers. She said urgent action was needed to save Mr Dallewalew's life and to do so the centre should accept his demands including those on MSP.

Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) Working President Balwinder Singh Bhunder Thursday appealed to all political parties as well as Kisan organizations to work jointly to save the life of veteran Kisan leader Jagjit

Singh Dallewalew.

Talking to newsmen after visiting the Kisan leader at Khanauri, Balwinder Bhunder said, "This is not the time to score brownie points by speaking in divergent voices. We should unite and appeal to the central government to accept the demands of Dallewalew Sahab to pave the way for ending his fast unto death."

Advising Punjab chief minister to take up the issue in all earnestness with the centre, Bhunder said, "The chief minister should call on the Prime Minister and impress upon the latter to do justice with farmers since the Prime Minister had assured that all the demands of the farmers, including making MSP a legal guarantee, would be accepted."

Putting the ball into the centre's court, Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann advised the centre to set aside the stubbornness and listen to the farmers to address their grievances. "It is the responsibility of the central government to engage in dialogue with the farmers. Any issue can only be resolved through constructive conversation. The government must set aside its stubbornness and listen to the farmers."

The umbrella body of farmers' unions, Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) has also come forward to support Dallewalew and has appealed the farmers across India for strong and massive protests in all districts on 23rd December 2024 to demand immediate discussions with all farmers' organisations, end repression on farmers' struggle at Punjab border, release jailed farmer leaders in Greater Noida and immediate withdrawal of the 'New national Policy Frame-

work on Agri Marketing'.

The members of the 'AAP' Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, during the session of Parliament, slammed the central government on entering the 25th day of hunger strike of farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewalew.

They said that there was no such anti-farmer government as BJP government in the country. Centre should sit down and solve the problems of farmers.

Why the PM is Keeping Mum?

The farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewalew has written an open letter addressing the Prime Minister Modi on December 12, 2024 with his thumb impression shocked with his blood stating his firm stand that he would prefer to scarify his life for the farmers' issues. In his letter in Hindi, Dallewalew wrote to the PM, the gist is - "Honourable Prime Minister ji, ensuring MSP for every farmer is like his fundamental right to live. By denying legal guarantees of MSP, the central government is pushing the farmers towards poverty, debt and death. So, I have decided to sacrifice my life to stop the death of farmers. I hope the central government will awake from its long sleep after my martyrdom and proceed towards acceptance of our 13 demands including legal guarantee of MSP. Now you have two options—either you fulfil your 2011 promise by enacting law for legal guarantee of MSP or be ready to face my sacrifice through my fast unto death. But, respected PM ji, I want to clear that if I die, you will be responsible for my death, because being hurt due to the breach of repeated promises made by the central

government to the farmers, I have gone on fast unto death."

Vice-President Dhankhar had also warned the government for its lethargic attitude towards farmers. "We cannot fight with our own people, we cannot put our own people in a situation where they are wondering how long they will fight. We cannot have the mindset that their stay will be limited and they will get tired on their own."

Despite criticism from all corners, deteriorating health condition of Dallewalew, his heart touching blood shocked letter and aggrieved voice of the second highest post holder Vice-President of India, Jag Deep Dhankhar, why the Prime Minister is keeping mum, is astonishing to everyone. It is forcing us to think - "Whether the PM has no kind heart for the people, whom he is ruling. Why is he ignoring the advice of the Vice-President of India? Does the Vice-President's say have no weight in the eyes of the Prime Minister or he is raising the wrong issues?"

Will the Prime Minister heed to the advice of the Vice-President given to the agriculture minister, "The challenge for you is that when any government makes a promise and that promise is linked to the farmer, then we should never leave any stone unturned. The farmer is respectable for us, he is worth remembering in the dawn, he is always revered. I myself am a farmer's son, I know what all the farmer does not bear, and he is our provider of food."

Jag Mohan Thaken is a Senior Journalist, Columnist & Political Analyst, views are personal

**RIJO M. JOHN CALLS FOR TAX REFORMS TO ADDRESS HEALTH AND FISCAL CHALLENGES**



## Raise GST on tobacco, beverages



(WHO FCTC), to which India is a signatory, recommends that all tobacco products be taxed comparably to prevent substitution between them.

Concerns from the tobacco industry about increased illicit trade due to higher taxes are unfounded. Evidence, including from India, shows

for a stronger and more comprehensive taxation framework.

While much of the public discourse has focused on tobacco, the proposed GST hike on sugar-sweetened beverages is equally significant. Excessive consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages is a major contributor to obesity, diabetes, and other NCDs. Increasing the GST rate to 35% could discourage consumption and align with India's broader public health goals. However, the government should also consider introducing additional health-focused levies, such as a specific excise tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, to further strengthen the tax framework.

### Key considerations for GST Council

As the GST Council considers the GoM's recommendations, it should use this opportunity to reform the taxation of harmful products. Raising GST rates to 40% for tobacco and sugar-sweetened beverages would enhance public health benefits while aligning with the peak rate under GST law. Pairing this with higher excise taxes would create a mixed tax structure, proven more effective at reducing consumption than relying predominantly on ad valorem taxes. Reducing the discrepancy in tax burden between beedis, cigarettes, and smokeless tobacco is also crucial to discourage substitution and follow global best practices. These steps could significantly reduce the health and economic impacts of tobacco and sugar-sweetened beverages while generating vital revenue for development.

Rijo M. John is a health economist and professor at the Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Kochi, Kerala. Views are personal.

Over the past seven years, since the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), there have been no significant increases in GST rates on harmful products such as tobacco and sugar-sweetened beverages, except for two minor hikes in National Calamity Contingent Duties (NCCD) on tobacco. This has made these products more affordable, undermining efforts to curb their consumption. In this context, the proposal by the Group of Ministers (GoM) to raise the highest GST tier on tobacco and sugar-sweetened beverages from 28% to 35% is a welcome step. However, further tax reforms are essential to effectively tackle the public health and fiscal challenges associated with these products.

India is the second-largest consumer of tobacco globally, with 28.6% of adults above 15 years and 8.5% of students aged 13 to 15 years using tobacco in some form. Tobacco is a leading risk factor for non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and causes over 3,500 daily deaths in India. In 2017, the annual economic burden of tobacco use and second-hand smoke was estimated at 2,340 billion, or 1.4% of GDP — far exceeding the 538 billion collected annually in tobacco tax revenue.

The proposed GST hike to 35% is expected to reduce tobacco consumption and boost tax revenues. Preliminary estimates suggest the 35% rate would lead to a 5.5% price increase, a 5% drop in consumption, and an 18.6% revenue rise for beedis. For cigarettes, prices would increase by 3.9%, consumption decline by 1.3%, and revenue grow by 6.4%. Smokeless tobacco prices would rise by 3%, consumption drop by 2.7%, and revenue increase by 1.9%. Over-

all, this could generate an additional 43 billion annually, provided the industry does not "over-shift" the tax burden, which can result in excess profits at the expense of government revenue and public health.

The GoM's recommendation to raise GST rates to 35% is a positive step but falls short of the 40% peak rate allowed under GST law. A 40% rate would have a greater impact, leading to sharper price increases, larger consumption reductions, and an additional 72 billion in revenue. It would also lower the risk of the industry over-shifting the tax burden. Currently, the tax burden on tobacco products is uneven, with taxes accounting for only 22% of the retail price of beedis, while it accounts for 49.5% for cigarettes and 64% for smokeless tobacco. The 35% GST rate would narrow this gap slightly, raising their respective tax shares to 26%, 51%, and 65%, but a 40% rate could reduce this disparity further. The World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

that tax hikes have minimal impact on illicit trade. Instead, factors such as tax administration quality, regulatory frameworks, government commitment, governance strength, social acceptance, and informal distribution networks play a far more significant role in determining the scale of illicit markets.

### Balancing GST and excise taxes

Another key issue is the reliance on GST, a purely ad valorem tax, to regulate tobacco consumption. Ad valorem taxes are less effective than specific excise taxes in curbing tobacco use as they are tied to product prices, which the industry can manipulate. Since the introduction of GST, the share of excise taxes in total tobacco taxation has declined, reducing the tax system's effectiveness in discouraging tobacco use. Many countries with GST or value-added tax (VAT) supplement these with specific excise duties on harmful products such as tobacco. India should consider raising excise taxes alongside the GST revision

**ABHISHEK SHARMA SAYS THE GOAL IS TO REDUCE STRATEGIC VULNERABILITY, BUT ISSUES REMAIN**



## India's strategic push in mineral diplomacy

As India seeks to expand its manufacturing and technological capability, critical minerals will become vital to fulfil this ambition. However, India, a major critical mineral importer, still depends on other countries, primarily China, for its mineral security, which has become a cause of strategic concern. Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, who voiced India's apprehensions at a defence think tank gathering, said, "While [the] scramble for resources for economic reasons has had a long history, their weaponisation by some nations for strategic reasons is a comparatively new phenomenon", hinting at Chinese attempts. To address India's mineral security challenge, which is aimed at reducing its strategic vulnerability, New Delhi has started an attempt to engage in mineral diplomacy.

This attempt is based on the pillars of: developing international engagement with mineral-producing countries, and establishing strategic partnerships with intergovernmental organisations. The first pillar focuses on building bilateral ties with resource-rich countries such as Australia, Argentina, the United States, Russia, and Kazakhstan to secure the supply of lithium and cobalt. To facilitate this vision, post-2019, India established the Khanij Bidesh India Ltd. (KABIL), a joint venture company with a mandate "to ensure a consistent supply of critical and strategic minerals to the Indian domestic market". The objective was to achieve mineral security by securing agreements, and acquisitions through government-to-government, government-to-business, and business-to-business routes.

In March 2022, KABIL signed a Memorandum of understanding with Australia for



a critical mineral investment partnership, identifying two lithium and three cobalt projects. Latin America's Lithium Triangle, which constitutes Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia, has also attracted India's attention. In January 2024, India signed a \$24 million lithium exploration pact with a state-owned enterprise in Argentina for five lithium brine blocks. KABIL is also actively working to secure mineral supplies by facilitating the buying of assets from Bolivia and Chile. Apart from the government, India's private sector has also benefited. Altmin Private Limited signed an agreement with YLB, Bolivia's national company, to secure the raw material supply chain of Li-ion batteries.

Central Asia has also caught India's attention. Recently, India and Kazakhstan formed a joint venture, IREUK Titanium Limited, to produce titanium slag in India. This was one of India's first joint ventures with the Central Asian Republics. This attempt is aligned with New Delhi's proposal to establish an India-Central Asia Rare Earths Forum to leverage the region's rich resources.

### Cooperative engagements

The second pillar of mineral diplomacy is international engagement, which is forging and strengthening partnerships with multilateral and bilateral initiatives related to mineral security, such as the Quad (Australia, Japan, India, the United States), the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), Mineral Security Partnership (MSP) and the G-7, for cooperation in the critical mineral supply chain.

These cooperative engagements aim to align India with the global best practices in the critical mineral sector across its three segments — upstream, midstream, and downstream.

Additionally, they also facilitate knowledge sharing and capacity building, which is important for coordinating with international partners such as the U.S., the European Union (EU), South Korea, and Australia.

### The missing pieces

India's attempt at mineral diplomacy has led to many positive outcomes, but still lacks three essential ingredients required for its international diplomatic engagement. These are: a lack of private sector participation;

weak diplomatic capacity, and insufficient sustainable partnership. Also, India's private sector has largely been missing from the equation.

The absence of a critical mineral supply chain strategy and a clear road map for the private sector are two primary variables responsible for the lack of policy clarity, leading to their absenteeism. To address these, India needs to formulate a comprehensive approach for de-risking, considering the role of the private sector across the supply chain. An important step would be to have a supply chain strategy based on India's growth prospects and national security priorities.

Second, India must strengthen its mineral diplomacy engagement. Having a dedicated mineral diplomacy division within the Ministry of External Affairs, similar to the New and Emerging Strategic Technologies (NEST) division and a special position for mineral diplomacy in selected diplomatic missions can be the first step.

Third, India's goal towards mineral security necessitates that New Delhi forge strategic, sustainable, and trusted partnerships with bilateral partners and multilateral forums. Among all its partners, working with EU, South Korea, and the other Quad members is critical to India's mineral security due to its domestic capabilities, diplomatic network and technological know-how. If these issues can be resolved, India's attempts at mineral diplomacy will gain strength and will be able to better complement New Delhi's domestic critical mineral initiatives, which are currently moving at a slow pace.

Abhishek Sharma is a Research Assistant with the Observer Research Foundation's Strategic Studies Programme. Views are personal.

## Widening trade deficit a cause for concern

India's foreign trade story offered a fleeting moment of optimism in October as goods exports recorded a robust 17.2 per cent growth — the highest in 28 months. However, November's trade numbers have dashed hopes for a sustained recovery. Exports plunged to \$32.1 billion, the lowest in over two years, marking an 18.1 per cent drop from October. Simultaneously, imports surged to a record \$70 billion, driven by a 27 per cent year-on-year increase. This double blow highlights deeper issues in India's trade landscape that demand urgent scrutiny. Three of the past four months have seen record-breaking import bills, with November's spike largely attributed to a 331.5 per cent surge in gold imports, totaling \$14.9 billion. While festive and wedding season demands partly explain this trend, the broader picture is troubling. Gems and jewellery exports—a sector critical for employment—plummeted by 10.2 per cent between April and November, while imports surged by over 30 per cent. This mismatch culminated in a record \$14.4 billion deficit in November for this segment alone. Petroleum trade has also worsened, with exports halving to \$3.7 billion while imports rose 7.9 per cent to \$16.1 billion. Officials attribute this to lower oil prices, yet the same logic should reduce import costs—a discrepancy puzzling economists. The fading impact of discounted Russian oil, coupled with rising domestic demand, complicates the narrative further. The Commerce Ministry's optimism, citing imports as indicators of growth and export inputs, overlooks key vulnerabilities. Oil and jewellery are among India's top tradables, and the widening trade deficit—at \$37.8 billion in November, surpassing the export tally—cannot be dismissed lightly. Policymakers must delve deeper into these trends, especially as traditional export drivers falter. Without a clear strategy to address this tumult, India risks undermining its fragile trade recovery and broader economic aspirations.

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### BOOKS: REVIEW

## Icon and ideology: The complexities of Ambedkar

Anand Teltumbde's *Iconoclast: A Reflective Biography of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* is an incisive and provocative examination of one of modern India's towering figures. For those accustomed to the sanitized hero worship of Ambedkar, this book offers a necessary and sobering alternative. By stripping away the layers of iconography surrounding Ambedkar's life, Teltumbde presents a man who, while deeply flawed, remains profoundly impactful.

The most iconic image of Ambedkar—holding the Indian Constitution—symbolizes his legacy. Yet, as Teltumbde highlights, Ambedkar himself publicly expressed disillusionment with the Constitution he is credited with authoring. In a Rajya Sabha debate in 1953, Ambedkar declared that he was a mere "hack," compelled to draft a document that he would later be the first to "burn." This wasn't an isolated remark, as he repeated similar sentiments before

his death in 1956. For Teltumbde, these statements are a starting point for a deeper inquiry: Was Ambedkar truly the architect of the Constitution?

Teltumbde argues that Ambedkar's role as chairman of the Drafting Committee was more constrained than popularly imagined. Citing historian Granville Austin, he notes that the Constitution's content was largely dictated by the Congress oligarchy led by Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, and Maulana Azad. Ambedkar often acted as a legal advocate for Congress-driven draft amendments rather than expressing his own convictions. This sheds light on Ambedkar's famous "hack" remark and challenges the mythology of his unqualified authorship of the Constitution.

What sets *Iconoclast* apart is Teltumbde's refusal to mythologize Ambedkar. Instead, he explores his contradictions and shortcomings. Ambedkar's pragmatism, deeply influenced by philosopher John Dewey, left him in a perpetual

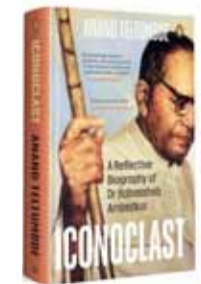
state of ideological experimentation—ranging from socialism to a Buddhist-inflected Marxism. This strategic incoherence, Teltumbde contends, diluted his impact as an organizer and thinker. Additionally, Ambedkar's institutions were often criticized for being "too Mahar-centric," reflecting the specific concerns of his caste rather than embracing a broader class-based approach.

A particularly compelling critique in the book is Teltumbde's analysis of Ambedkar's iconisation, which, he argues, has "deradicalised" his legacy. Political parties across the spectrum, including Hindutva forces, have appropriated Ambedkar's image to appeal to Dalits, often sidelining his critiques of caste oppression and Hindutva politics. The result, Teltumbde laments, is an "identitarian morass" that disorients Dalit politics and diminishes the radical potential of Ambedkar's ideas.

For Teltumbde, the key to reclaiming Ambedkar's true lega-

cy lies in breaking through this iconisation. Instead of idolizing "Ambedkarism," he urges readers to reconnect with the human Ambedkar—a relentless questioner of tradition and a fierce advocate for social justice. Teltumbde's meticulous research and sharp analysis make *Iconoclast* an invaluable resource for those seeking an honest engagement with Ambedkar's life and work.

Ultimately, *Iconoclast* is more than a biography—it is a call to action. It challenges readers to view Ambedkar not as an untouchable icon but as a fallible, flesh-and-blood revolutionary whose ideas remain relevant in the fight against caste oppression and social inequality. For those willing to engage with Ambedkar's complexities, this book offers a nuanced and thought-provoking perspective.



*Iconoclast: A Reflective Biography of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* By Anand Teltumbde. Penguin/Viking. 700 pages; Rs. 1,499.

The book does not shy away from difficult truths, making it a must-read for anyone serious about understanding Ambedkar's legacy. One of the most striking revelations in the book is the deliberate political maneuvering that elevated Ambedkar to the position of Drafting Committee chairman. Teltumbde attributes this to Mahatma Gandhi's strategic vision: projecting Ambedkar as the architect of the Constitution would align Dalit aspirations with the newly formed constitutional state, ensuring their emotional investment in its framework. This calculated move by Gandhi, however, sits uncomfortably with Ambedkar's own critique of Congress politics and its failure to genuinely address caste oppression.

## India's Coal Imports Dip as Domestic Production Rises

**NEW DELHI:** India's coal imports declined by 3.1 per cent to 149.39 million tonnes (MT) during April-October period of FY 2024-25 from 154.17 MT in the same period of the previous year due to the increase in domestic production, according to an official statement issued on Thursday.

Additionally, the Non-Regulated Sector (other than power) witnessed a more significant drop of 8.8 per cent, during April-October 2024 as compared to the same period of last year.

Despite possessing the fifth-largest coal reserves globally, India faces a significant shortfall in certain coal types, particularly coking coal and high-grade thermal coal, which are not adequately available from domestic sources.

This gap in supply necessitates coal imports to sustain key industries, including steel production, and to meet the



growing energy demand.

Although there was a significant growth of 3.87 per cent in coal-based power generation from April 2024 to October 2024 compared to the same period last year, imports for blending purposes by thermal power plants decreased substantially by 19.5 per cent during the same period, the Coal Ministry statement said.

This decline underscores India's steadfast commitment

to achieving self-sufficiency in coal production and reducing reliance on imports, the statement explained.

The increase in coal imports for the power sector is attributed to the imported coal-based power plants. These plants are designed to utilise only high-grade imported coal and their imports increased to 30.04 MT during this period, from 21.71 MT in the corresponding period of the previous year, which represents a growth of

38.4 per cent.

Domestic coal production during April-October 2024 increased by 6.04 per cent to 537.57 MT compared to 506.93 MT in the same period of FY 2023-24.

This upward trend reflects the government's ongoing efforts to streamline coal usage and enhance domestic production, the statement said.

The Ministry of Coal continues to implement strategic initiatives aimed at bolstering coal production and improving availability. These efforts are not only focused on safeguarding foreign reserves but also on enhancing the nation's energy security.

The proactive measures taken by the government to increase domestic coal output will ultimately reduce dependence on imports and contribute to the overall sustainability of India's energy landscape, the statement added.

## Startups Have Potential to contribute \$120 Billion to India's GDP by 2030



**NEW DELHI:** Startups will be a core driver of India's economic growth this 'Techade,' likely to contribute nearly \$120 billion (or 1.6 per cent) to the country's GDP by 2030, which will be nearly 3.5 times jump from \$35 billion in 2023, according to a new report. Given that most developed economies see between 5-10 per cent of their GDP being contributed by Tech startups, India's journey has only just begun, according to the

report by venture capital firm Kalaari Capital. In fact, the contribution by startups can surge to

a whopping \$1.6 trillion by 2047, thus contributing 5 per cent of the GDP when India aims to become a 'Viksit Bharat' with a \$35 trillion economy, the report mentioned. Also, the country is expected to have over 300 unicorns by 2030, from more than 100 at present. "The 'Techade' is just the first innings in India's golden Test match," the report said, adding that both manufacturing and services are expected to grow significantly,

## Over 5.5 Crore MSMEs Register on Udyam Portal as Government Pushes Formalisation



**NEW DELHI:** In a significant development for India's economic ecosystem, the Union Government announced that over 5.5 crore Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) have registered on the Udyam portal.

This milestone reflects the government's continued efforts to foster ease of business and provide streamlined access to benefits and schemes for MSMEs. Minister of State for Finance, Pankaj Chaudhary, shared these updates during a parliamentary session, emphasising the strides made towards formalising India's economy. Chaudhary highlighted that along with the Udyam portal registrations, the e-Shram portal has also seen remarkable growth, with 30.46 crore workers registering over the last three years.

"This surge demonstrates our commitment to integrating the informal sector into the mainstream economy," Chaudhary said. He further noted that the number of registered workers has nearly doubled compared to 2014-15 when only 15.8 crore workers were enrolled. The data underscores the success of initiatives like the Digital India campaign, which have accelerated outreach and accessibility for both businesses and workers.

The Udyam portal, launched in July 2020, enables MSMEs to register without paperwork and access benefits such as priority sector lending, market linkages, and reduced compliance burdens. Meanwhile, the e-Shram portal, introduced in 2021, focuses on unorganised sector workers, providing them with access to social security schemes and formal employment opportunities.

Experts see these developments as a pivotal shift in India's economic landscape. "The twin initiatives symbolise a structural transition towards formalisation, which is critical for economic resilience and inclusive growth," said an economic analyst. India's MSME sector contributes nearly 30 per cent of GDP and employs over 11 crore people. With more enterprises and workers coming under formal frameworks, the government aims to bolster productivity, employment generation, and long-term economic stability. The announcement reinforces the government's narrative of a growing, inclusive economy, paving the way for sustainable development in the years ahead.

## Bharat Mobility Global Expo 2025 highlighted in Mumbai



**DOMINICK RODRIGUES**  
Mumbai

The Bharat Mobility Global Expo 2025 - a Ministry of Commerce and Industry initiative -- is set to be held from January 17 to January 22 at the three venues of Bharat Mandapam (New Delhi), Yashbhoomi (Dwarka, New Delhi) and India Expo Center & Mart (Greater Noida). Piyush Goyal, Union Minister of Commerce & Industry, in a curtain-raiser of this Expo held in New Delhi earlier, had described it as the world's 2nd largest mobility show with its theme "Beyond Boundaries: Co-Creating the Future of the Automotive Value Chain." Emphasizing the Government's commitment to support this sector in becoming the pinnacle for mobility technology globally with a speedy transition to electric vehicles, Goyal said "Scaling production of electric vehicles will help achieving cost-effectiveness, while this Expo will showcase India's story in attracting investments and expanding trade and exports." Meanwhile, Pankaj Chaudhary, Chairperson of Engineering Export Promotion Council (EEPC), told media here recently that the EXPO will highlight the latest advancements and breakthroughs in the mobility ecosystem, which showcasing cutting-edge technologies and sustainable solutions.

## Bahadurgarh footwear industry facing 30% decline, hopes relief in 2025-26 budget

**SATISH HANDA**  
Bahadurgarh

Talking to The Financial World, Narendra Chikkara, Senior Vice President Bahadurgarh Footwear Park Association said if GST is reduced, the footwear industry will pick up pace, and the industry owners hope for relief in the 2025-26 budget. He said that earlier footwear up to Rs 1,000 was tax free. Now 12 percent GST has to be paid, and the industry is demanding to reduce the GST rate to 5 percent so that the demand for footwear can increase again. He said the footwear industry which was running fast along with the Indian economy has now slowed down, the reason for this is the increase in GST rate, which is creating obstacles in the path of the footwear industry



which provides maximum employment has declined by 30 percent due to lack of government support and less duty draw back.

The present scenario of Bahadurgarh non-leather footwear industry reveals that there are nearly 2500 manufacturing units in the town manufacturing about 80 lakh pairs of footwear daily, having annual total turnover of Rs 50 thousand crores which include

the export of footwear about Rs 3.5 thousand crores having nearly 50% share of export of footwear in the country and the industry providing employment to nearly 2.5 lakh persons. Chikkara said if the government gives incentives and increases the duty draw back from 1.5 percent to 6 percent, then the exports here will reach Rs. 10 thousand crores annually. He said, the duty drawback on footwear

in China is 12 percent, due to this the goods from there are being exported to other countries. Chikkara said, apart from this, 40 percent duty is levied on footwear components imported from China, which should be reduced to 5 percent. He said, now this industry is running in loss, if entrepreneurs are to be believed, the sale of footwear here has declined in the last three years.

Subhash Jagga Malik, President of Bahadurgarh Chamber of Commerce & Industry said there was a time when 80 percent of footwear in the country was being imported from China. With the construction of a footwear park in Bahadurgarh, not only did imports from China come down to two percent, but exports also started.

## Carraro India Limited has Rs 1,250 crore IPO

**DOMINICK RODRIGUES**  
Mumbai

Carraro India Limited is coming out with its Initial Public Offering (IPO) at a price band of Rs 668 to Rs 704 -- aggregating to Rs 1,250 crore -- which will open on December 20, 2024 and close on December 24, 2024.

The IPO is entirely an Offer for Sale by Carraro International S.E. with no fresh issue component and the company will not receive any portion of the proceeds from the Offer.

Tomaso Carraro, Vice Chairman and Non Executive Director, said here recently that the Company is a world leader in tractors



for 3rd party brands, transmission systems for agricultural and construction equipment, gears for diverse sectors.

Noting that Carraro has invested 200 million Euros in India over the years, he said the Company brought out this IPO as it has two such equipment manufacturing plants in Pune,

while India represents a huge market for tractors with increasing horsepower capacity.

Balaji Gopalan, Managing Director, Carraro India, said the Company supplies this equipment to OEMs here and has registered FY24 Revenue of Rs 17,889.7 million, besides EBITDA of FY24 being Rs 1,500 million.

Describing India as the world's largest tractor market and 3rd largest market for construction vehicles while being poised for significant growth, he said Carraro's equipment comprised 25% cost of the tractor price in sales to 38 manufacturers in India, besides exporting to 6 countries.

"Our U.S.P. is that we are the only one in India designing and producing such equipment that is made in India -- unlike others who have to import them," he said, adding "Localisation is the driver for our products and Carraro is well-placed to put into the market our technology comprising 153 products off its R&D center in Luxembourg."

### PRICING OF PATENTED DRUGS IN INDIA

# Balancing the Interests of Patent Holders and Patients



**DR. ANIL KUMAR ANGRISH**

In Indian context, drugs are categorized as Innovator Drugs/ Patented Drugs (protected by exclusive rights granted by the government to the inventor for a certain period, typically 20 years), Generic Drugs (not possessing a proprietary, trademark-protected name), Branded Generics (marketed using the route of brand promotion), Trade Generics (branded medicines but not promoted to the doctors, and are provided to the channel players, e.g., retail chemists, hospitals, etc.), and Generic Generics (unbranded, sold without any specific brand name and priced usually lower as compared to brand-name counterparts).

As per a recent study titled, 'Changing Dynamics of Indian Pharma Supply Chain' (2024) by Pharmarack Technologies with the support of Indian Pharmaceutical Association (IPA), Branded Generics comprise 87 per cent of the Indian Pharmaceutical Market (IPM) and valued at Rs. 2,10,000 crores in 2023, Trade Generics account for 10 per cent of IPM (valued at Rs. 24,000 crores),

and Generic Generics hold 0.5 per cent market share of IPM. Hence, the patented drugs hold a relatively small amount, i.e., less than 3 per cent of the IPM but are projected to reach Rs. 15,500 crores by 2030. Just about four years ago, AIOCD AWACS data (*Business Standard* dated February 10, 2020) showed that the patented and in-license products constituted 4.5 per cent of the domestic pharma market. In 2014, patented drugs accounted for about 0.9 per cent of the Rs. 72,000-crore IPM (*IMS Health*).

Low share of patented drugs in India is attributed to higher prices as these drugs remain unaffordable for a large part of the population. Further, out of pocket cost is higher in India so higher prices affect the patient. In 2014, a study was conducted by IMS Health for the Planning Commission of India (now, NITI Aayog) on affordability aspect of patented drugs. This study had shown that patented drugs were 'much less affordable' in India as compared to countries like Mexico, China, Indonesia, South Africa, and Brazil even when these were sold at 46 per cent of the prices prevailing in other developing countries. The study was based on 'relative affordability'



which considered factors such as per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of respective countries, cost of medicines, etc. Further, the study also concluded that patented drugs were available in India at 27 per cent of the average price of those drugs in developed countries.

Patented drugs and their pricing, has attracted the attention of all stakeholders because these drugs are priced on the higher side. Underlying rationale is the amount spent by innovator companies on R&D of these drugs including the cost of failure. Way back in April, 1975 the report of the Committee on Drugs and Pharmaceutical Industry (popularly known as *Hathi Committee Report*) had observed that in advanced industrial countries, the pharmaceutical industry spends

substantial amounts (around 10 per cent of total turnover at that time) on drug research and product development. But these expenditures are relatively less significant in developing countries, including India and by and large, the multinational corporations use their research outlays in the parent company to introduce new drugs/formulations by their subsidiaries in developing countries.

Pricing of patented drugs even during the patent term can be subject to price revision. In other countries, precedents are available. Most recently, in August 2024, the US government mandated price reductions on 10 popular prescriptions drugs which are covered by Medicare. Medicare accounts for almost 18 per cent of the US drug sales. This move was initiated under the

Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and list prices were slashed. Price reduction was 79% for Januvia (of Merck), 76% for Fiasp (of Novo Nordisk), 68% for Farxiga (of AstraZeneca), 67% for Enbrel (of Amgen), 66% for Stelara (of J&J), 66% for Jardiance (of Eli Lilly), 62 per cent for Xarelto (of J&J), 56% for Eliquis (of Bristol Myers Squibb), 53% for Entresto (of Novo Nordisk) and 38% for Imbruvica (of J&J). These drugs have no generic competition at all as of now, and the price cuts are going to become effective from 2026.

Regarding pricing of patented pharmaceutical products in India, norms exist for price reduction in addition to the option of Compulsory Licensing. These are beneficial from the patient's perspective. Paragraph 19 of the Drug (Prices Control) Order 2013 (DPCO) gives the government the power to 'fix' or 'revise' the retail or ceiling prices of drugs in extraordinary circumstances and in the public interest.

Compulsory Licensing has been applied only once when the Supreme Court sanctioned the grant of a compulsory license for Bayer's anti-cancer drug 'Nexavar' in 2014 to M/s Natco Pharmaceuticals Limited under the Patent

Act, 1970. In December 2010, Natco Pharma sought a voluntary license to manufacture and sell in India the patented drug under its brand name at a price of Rs. 8,800 per month of therapy as against the price of Rs. 2,80,428 per month of therapy charged by Bayer. In this case, Natco pointed out that in respect of the patented drug belonging to the Bayer all the three conditions for the grant of Compulsory Licence were fulfilled/satisfied with regard to the patented drug, i.e., Bayer had not met the reasonable requirement of public nor was the drug reasonably priced and patented invention has not worked in the territory of India.

In India, patent on drugs through indigenous R&D offers protection from price control. Paragraph 32 of the DPCO was brought in through the 2019 amendment and it offered advantage for 'new drugs' patented under the Indian Patents Act, 1970. Through this, provisions of DPCO do not apply to (i) a manufacturer producing a new drug patented under the Indian Patent Act, 1970 (product patent) and not produced elsewhere, if developed through indigenous R&D, for a period of five years from the date of commencement

of its commercial production in India, (ii) a manufacturer producing a new drug in India by a new process developed through indigenous R&D and patented under the Indian Patent Act, 1970 (Process patent) for a period of five years from the date of the commencement of its commercial production in India, (iii) a manufacturer producing a new drug involving a new delivery system developed through indigenous R&D for a period of five years from the date of its market approval in India.

Higher prices on the expiry of patent period become questionable so innovator pharmaceutical companies are expected to reduce the prices of drugs. On May 11, 2023, the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) notified that the ceiling price of the drugs going off patent will be reduced by 50 per cent (Source: The Drugs (Prices Control) Amendment Order, 2023). After one year, the ceiling price shall be revised again based on the market data of the preceding month. This move was to curb profiteering by pharmaceutical companies. It is commonly observed that on expiry of patent, there is significant price erosion in drug prices due to entry of

generic players. This has implications on the affordability as well as accessibility of those drugs. Further, this lowers the overall cost of healthcare.

Recently, in July 2024, the Organization of Pharmaceutical Producers of India (OPPI) which has prominent pharma MNCs as its member, sought exemption from patented and orphan drugs from price control. In a way, mandatory reduction of price by 50 per cent as imposed by the NPPA is seen in contrast to the previous option available to pharmaceutical companies had the option to charge the same price till the entry of generic players through launch of their generic products.

These developments reflect that interest of patent holders is in 'generation of revenue for investment in R&D and innovation', and 'earning profit', whereas interest of the patient lies in 'availability, accessibility and affordability of new medicines.'

**Dr. Anil Kumar Angrish** - Associate Professor (Finance and Accounting), Department of Pharmaceutical Management, NIPER S.A.S. Nagar (Mohali), **DISCLAIMER:** Views are personal and do not represent the views of the Institute.

# Centre, ADB Ink \$42 Million Loan to Strengthen Coastal Protection in Maharashtra

**MUMBAI:** The Central government and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on Thursday signed a \$42 million loan to provide coastal and riverbank protection to increase resilience of local communities and natural ecosystems in Maharashtra.

The ADB financing will help restore and stabilise Maharashtra's coastline and protect the livelihoods of coastal communities.

"The project builds on ADB's earlier investment by incorporating hybrid approaches to combat coastal erosion, such as offshore reefs, rock protection works, along with flexible nature-based solutions like beach and dune nourishment," said Mio Oka, Country Director of ADB's India Resident Mission, for ADB.

"It also uses advanced technologies to predict climate change impacts, like sea-level rise and extreme weather, and



enhances the coastal management information system with remote sensing satellite imagery, improving shoreline management," Oka added.

Enhanced coastal protection will help boost community resilience addressing key issues affecting the tourism and fishery sectors, two vital local industries,

which are severely impacted by coastal erosion, flooding, and poor coastal management.

Also, the project encourages increased participation of women, youth, and vulnerable groups in coastal zone management to enhance their ability to prepare for and respond effectively to disasters.

According to Ministry of Finance, ADB will help build the capacity of the Maharashtra Maritime Board in shore management planning, including the establishment of a coastal infrastructure management unit. The project will support capacity building of stakeholders on gender equality and social inclusion, coastal management, and livelihood activities.

Meanwhile, ADB will extend financial assistance of Rs 1,527 crore (USD 200 million) to speed up Phase II of the ongoing Nagpur Metro Rail Project.

A MoU to the effect was signed between MahaMetro and ADB in the presence of Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and other high-ranking officials from both sides this week. Fadnavis said that Phase II of Nagpur Metro would further accelerate the development of Nagpur City and its surroundings.

# Rs 22,280 crore of Vijay Mallya, Choksi restored to banks: FM Sitharaman



**NEW DELHI:** Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has listed several major cases where the Directorate of Enforcement has from time to time attached properties of individuals and companies connected to economic offence cases.

Replying to the debate on Supplementary Demands for Grants - First Batch for 2024-2025, the finance minister apprised the Lok Sabha on Tuesday evening that the central enforcement agency has successfully restored properties worth around Rs 22,280 crore -- only the major cases included. Of those restored, the

complete attached property worth Rs 14,131.6 crores of fugitive businessman Vijay Mallya has been restored to the public sector banks, the

minister said in Lok Sabha.

In the case of Nirav Modi, another fugitive, Rs 1,052.58 crores has been restored to the public and private sector banks. In National Spot Exchange Ltd (NSEL) scam, Rs 17.47 crores have been obtained and given to the banks, SRS Group worth Rs 20.15 crores, Rose Valley Group worth Rs 19.40 crores, Surya Pharmaceuticals Ltd worth Rs 185.13 crores, Nowhera Sheikh and Others (Heera Group) worth Rs 226 crores, Naidu Amrutesh Reddy and Others worth Rs 12.73 crores.

Properties worth Rs 2,565.90 crores have been restored related

to Mehul Choksi and others, she said.

Citing these numbers of attached properties and subsequently handing them over to the banks, the finance minister said that her government has not left anybody who committed economic offences. "It is important to recognise that we have not left anybody in economic offences; we are after them. We will ensure that money that has to go to the banks goes back," she said in Lok Sabha during the one-hour-long reply. Earlier in her address, the Union Minister expressed optimism about economic growth, saying that the sluggish figures of second-quarter GDP growth was a "temporary blip." She said the country's GDP growth averaged 8.3 per cent over the last three years which demonstrates resilience despite global uncertainties. She added that the second quarter was a challenging time not just for India but for the countries around the globe.

# Indian Rupee Hits Record Low of 84.94 Against US Dollar Amid Market Uncertainty



**NEW DELHI:** The Indian rupee experienced a significant decline on December 18, touching a new low of 84.94 against the US dollar, merely 6 paise away from the critical 85 mark.

The currency opened at 84.92, reflecting ongoing challenges in the foreign exchange market driven by multiple complex economic factors.

The imminent US Federal Reserve meeting stands as a pivotal moment influencing currency market dynamics. With 97.1 per cent of investors anticipating a 25 basis points rate cut, market sentiment remains highly sensitive to potential policy shifts.

Financial experts are particularly attentive to the Fed's potential insights on future monetary easing, which could substantially impact global currency valuations.

External geopolitical factors are compounding pressure on the rupee. Statements from US president-elect Donald Trump regarding potential tariff policies have created additional uncertainty, with explicit comments about reciprocal taxation against countries like India.

The weakening of the Chinese Yuan has further contributed to downward pressure on the Indian currency.

Domestic economic indicators have also played a role in the rupee's depreciation. Foreign investor outflows, an expanding trade deficit, and sluggish economic growth numbers from the second quarter have eroded market confidence.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) finds itself increasingly compelled to intervene in currency markets, a strategy that has led to a significant reduction in foreign exchange reserves.

Over the past two months, India's forex reserves have contracted by more than USD 46 billion, dropping from USD 704.885 billion on October 4 to USD 654.857 billion on December 6.

This substantial decline represents a marked shift from the previous trend of consistently rising reserves, underscoring the challenging economic environment.

Year-to-date, the rupee has depreciated approximately 2 percent against the dollar, reflecting the cumulative impact of global economic uncertainties, monetary policy expectations, and domestic economic performance.

Financial analysts and policymakers are closely monitoring these developments, recognising the potential broader implications for India's economic landscape.

# One-third of India Inc's Profit Surge by Prudent Cost Management: SBI Report



**NEW DELHI:** A comprehensive report by the State Bank of India (SBI) reveals that approximately 4,000 listed companies demonstrated modest yet strategic financial performance during the fiscal year 2024.

While revenue growth registered at a moderate 6 per cent, the companies exhibited significantly stronger profitability metrics, with earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortisation (EBIDTA) and profit after tax (PAT) surging by 28 per cent and 32 per cent, respectively, as reported by the State Bank of India (SBI).

The report highlighted a notable trend of prudent cost management, particularly in employee expenses. Wage costs increased by just 13 percent in fiscal year 2024, a marked decline from the 17 per cent recorded in the previous fiscal year. This indicates a deliberate corporate strategy of optimizing workforce expenditures while maintaining robust financial performance. Over the past four years, Indian companies have consistently maintained an impressive average EBIDTA margin of 22 per cent, concurrent with an average annual wage bill growth of approximately 12 per cent. This demonstrates a calculated approach to financial management, ensuring a sustainable margin of safety in an increasingly competitive economic landscape.

# FM Sitharaman Optimistic About India's Economic Future Despite Q2 Slowdown

**NEW DELHI:** Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman addressed the Lok Sabha on Tuesday, offering a nuanced perspective on India's economic performance, emphasising resilience despite a temporary economic deceleration.

The second quarter of the current financial year witnessed a GDP growth rate of 5.4 per cent, marking an 18-month low and a decline from the previous quarter's 6.7 per cent growth.

Acknowledging the challenges of the July-September period, Sitharaman characterised the economic slowdown as a 'temporary blip' while maintaining an optimistic outlook for future quarters.

She highlighted India's remarkable economic achievement of averaging 8.3 per cent GDP growth over the past three years, positioning the country



as the world's fastest-growing major economy. The Finance Minister provided a balanced assessment of the economic landscape, dispelling concerns about a broad-based manufacturing sector decline. She noted that while some sectors faced challenges, approximately half of the manufacturing basket remains strong, indicating underlying economic stability.

Inflation trends also offered a positive narrative. Sitharaman reported that retail inflation for April-October 2024-25 stood at 4.8 per cent, the lowest level since the COVID-19 pandemic.

This figure demonstrates effective price management despite global economic pressures, including volatile oil prices and supply chain disruptions. Employment statistics further

reinforced the government's economic narrative. The unemployment rate has significantly decreased from 6 per cent in 2017-18 to 3.2 per cent currently, signalling robust job creation and economic recovery across various sectors.

In her comprehensive address, Sitharaman credited the Indian people and leadership for the nation's economic performance.

She expressed confidence that the current quarter's growth dip is temporary and that the economy will soon return to a trajectory of healthy expansion.

The Finance Minister's statements, delivered during a debate on Supplementary Demands for Grants, underscored the government's commitment to maintaining economic momentum and addressing challenges with strategic interventions.

# Indians opt for lighter, lower carat jewellery as gold prices soar

**MUMBAI:** Soaring gold prices have led many Indian families to opt for lightweight and lower-carat jewellery to stay within their budgets, industry officials said.

"I wanted to gift my daughter 80 grams of gold, but I was forced to scale it down to 50 grams because of price increase in the past two years," said Mumbai-based Shubhangi More, choosing a necklace with a traditional design for her daughter's wedding. Gold prices in the world's second biggest buyer of the precious metal have surged 22 per cent so far this year, after rising 15 per cent in 2023. Most Indian buyers prefer traditional jewellery, but now they want it crafted in lightweight designs to fit their budgets, said Bachhraj Bama-



wa, partner at jewellery retailer Nemichand Bamaalwa & Sons.

"Recognising this preference, we are stocking more lightweight jewellery sets while scaling down our inventory of heavier designs," Bamaalwa said. Advances in manufacturing technology have enabled jewellery makers to craft traditional

designs in lighter weights, said Sachin Jain, CEO of the World Gold Council's Indian operations. Buyers are also switching to lower carat jewellery to reduce costs, jewellery said. Guddi Devi, a teacher from Jamalpur in the northern state of Bihar, bought 18-carat jewellery for her daughter's wedding instead

of 22-carat.

"I preferred the 18 carats of jewellery because it was cheaper compared to the 22 carats and is much stronger than it," she said. Indians traditionally prefer jewellery made in 22-carat gold, which contains 91.7 per cent pure gold, while 18-carat gold contains 75 per cent pure gold and 25 per cent other metals. The price of 18-carat gold is nearly a fifth lower than that of 22-carat gold.

"Lower prices and greater durability are making 18-carat jewellery increasingly popular. Its share in total sales has risen to over 15 per cent, compared to just 5 per cent to 7 per cent two years ago," said Surendra Mehta, secretary at the India Bullion and Jewellers Association.

# Challenges Ahead for RBI's New Governor



**DR P S VOHRA**  
The government has appointed a new Governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). Sanjay Malhotra has been entrusted with this responsibility. Since his appointment, conversations have started about the difficulties he would encounter. The government has made it very evident through the actions of former Governor Shaktikanta Das and newly appointed Governor Sanjay Malhotra that it views control over the nation's banking system and economic structure as crucial, and it has left no place for debates or divergent opinions in this regard. The six years that Shaktikanta Das served as governor were certainly successful and ended without any issues with the government. Previously, renowned economist Raghuram Rajan, who had served as the RBI chief, warned the U.S. of an impending recession as early as 2003. Following Rajan, the Modi government appointed Urjit Patel

as Governor during its first term. However, after Urjit Patel's sudden resignation on December 10, 2018, Shaktikanta Das was appointed on December 12, 2018. At that time, there were speculations in the economic sector about whether he could align with the government's rapidly advancing economic agenda. He proved the skeptics wrong. During his tenure, the Indian economy faced the financial crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, marking the first negative GDP growth in 40 years. Under India's presidency of the G20, several positive ideas were turned into tangible results. During this period, India also achieved rapid GDP growth, securing its position as the world's fifth-largest economy.

Sanjay Malhotra takes charge of the RBI during challenging times. Recently, the second quarter results of the current financial year were released, showing a decline in India's growth rate. Consequently, the RBI has revised its growth forecast for the current financial year from 7.2% to 6.6%. Boosting the growth rate is a critical



challenge, with rising inflation being the primary concern. Inflation in October was recorded at 6.2%, exceeding the RBI's upper tolerance limit of 6%. In November, it dropped to 5.5%, which is commendable but still not ideal, as the RBI aims to control inflation at 4%. Additionally, the global increase in oil prices poses a significant risk to domestic inflation. Consequently, the RBI has revised its inflation forecast for the financial year to 4.8%, up from the earlier 4.5%. Thus, controlling inflation will be a major challenge for Governor Sanjay Malhotra. It remains to be seen whether the RBI will prioritize rate cuts in the coming days.

Another critical challenge for the new Governor is stabilizing the rupee against

the dollar. Former Governor Shaktikanta Das intervened in the Indian markets, selling \$130 billion over the past two years to manage the demand for dollars and prevent the rupee from weakening. This strategy was highlighted last month by a prominent economist and former Chief Economic Advisor to the Modi government, sparking discussions in economic circles. With the rupee currently stabilized at 84 to the dollar for over two years, there is speculation about whether it will be maintained at this level or allowed to adjust slightly to support India's exports. Under Shaktikanta Das's policies, Indian exports have grown by only 4.5% since 2019, compared to an average growth rate of 10% in the previous

two decades.

Globally, new challenges are also expected to confront the RBI. The direction of U.S. President Trump's economic policies will be a key factor. Additionally, if the U.S. Federal Reserve cuts rates, it will be interesting to see whether India follows suit or prioritizes long-term economic stability. The RBI's stance on any resulting stock market fluctuations will also be closely watched. Currently, the Modi government is in its third term, and the upcoming February 1 budget will likely introduce new economic policies to spur growth. The RBI's stance on these policies will become clearer in the days leading up to the budget. Another issue is the widespread adoption of UPI for payments in India and the rapid integration of artificial intelligence in banking. However, banking frauds facilitated by technology are also on the rise, which requires stringent action from the RBI to safeguard the interests of common investors.

*Dr. P S Vohra is a Writer, columnist and financial thinker. View are personal.*

# MSMEs Struggle as India's Q2 Growth Slowdown to 5.4 pc



**NEW DELHI:** India's economic growth has decelerated to 5.4 per cent in Q2 FY25, marking a seven-quarter low and a substantial decline from 8.1 per cent in the corresponding period last year and 6.7 per cent in the previous quarter.

This slowdown in the world's fifth-largest economy has particularly impacted the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector, which had previously benefited from post-pandemic demand recovery. The MSME sector, a crucial pillar of India's economy, contributing 40 per cent of manufacturing output and 40 per cent of exports while employing 22 crore people, is grappling with mounting challenges. These businesses face a triple threat of escalating costs, weakening demand, and limited access to affordable financing, leading to a pronounced downturn in their operations.

# Federal Bank boosts its Commercial Rooftop Solar Financing for MSMEs in association with Ecofy

**FW DESK  
New Delhi**

Federal Bank, one of India's leading private sector Bank has announced a partnership with Ecofy, India's first green-only NBFC, backed by Eversource Capital, to offer innovative financing solutions for MSMEs investing in commercial rooftop solar installations. This collaboration marks one of the first comprehensive co-lending partnerships specifically designed to address the unique solar financing needs of the MSME sector.

The program targets financing 3,600 kW of rooftop solar installations annually, benefiting numerous MSMEs while cutting over 2,500 tons of CO2 emissions each year—accelerating decarbonisation and fostering sustainable growth. Most manufacturing MSMEs predominantly use electricity during daylight hours, making rooftop solar an ideal solution. However, financial constraints have traditionally hindered their transition to renewable energy, with many institutions either reluctant to lend or offering loans at prohibitively high interest rates.

Shalini Warriar, Executive



Director at Federal Bank commented, "This collaboration with Ecofy represents our commitment to supporting sustainable business practices. By offering accessible financing for commercial rooftop solar equipment, we are empowering MSMEs to reduce electricity costs while at the same time contributing meaningfully to India's climate goals."

Commenting on this alliance, Rajashree Nambiar, Co-founder, Managing Director & CEO at Ecofy said, "The MSME sector represents a critical segment in India's economic landscape, yet there are significant challenges in adopting sustainable energy solutions. Our partnership with Federal Bank is strategically designed to unlock financing opportunities for solar installations in the 20-200 KW range, which has historically been a challenging lending whitespace for financial institutions."

# INTERNATIONAL

## Sri Lanka lifts vehicles import ban for first time in 4 years

**NEW DELHI:** Sri Lanka has announced that they will lift the vehicles import ban which was put in place in 2020 to ease the pressure on foreign exchange reserves due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Issued on Wednesday, by the gazette, the importation of public transport vehicles has been allowed for the first time since early 2020.

The Ministry of Finance said the policy to ban vehicle imports was implemented with the intention of easing the pressure on foreign exchange reserves due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic downturn of 2022.

President Anura Kumara Dissanayake addressing Parliament on Wednesday said the importing cars for private use will be allowed from February



2025.

However, the decision is subject to rules so as to protect the island nation's effort to build foreign reserves.

All importers must sell their imports within three months, if not, a three per cent fee would be charged.

"These conditions have been imposed with the intention of safeguarding foreign exchange reserves of the country by way of discouraging importation of an excessive number of vehicles and keeping unnecessary stock of motor vehicles by the importers while spending

substantial amounts of foreign exchange," a statement said.

The vehicle importers' association hailed the move, having lobbied the government extensively to lift the import ban.

The IMF bailout conditions dictate that Sri Lanka must build up its forex reserves to prevent a crisis similar to 2022 when shortage of foreign reserves led to the absence of fuel and essentials.

The IMF in recognition of Sri Lanka's recovery from the economic downturn had allowed vehicle imports as a measure of increasing state revenue by way of import duties.

Depleted foreign reserves in April 2022 led to an unprecedented economic crisis in Sri Lanka, forcing the island nation to announce its first-ever sovereign default.

## Israel's Raids on Houthi Sites in Yemen Kill Nine



**SANAA:** At least nine people were killed and several others wounded on early Thursday morning by Israeli airstrikes on Yemen's capital here and the Red Sea ports in the western province of Hodeidah, the Houthi-run al-Masirah TV reported.

"Seven were killed in the port of As-Salif, and two others killed in the port of the Ras Issa oil facility," said the TV broadcaster, adding that at least three others were wounded in the airstrikes.

Residents of Hodeidah posted videos on social media showing

fires burning at several facilities in the ports of Ras Issa and As-Salif, adding that the fires were still burning.

In Sanaa, al-Masirah TV said the Israeli airstrikes had targeted the Hizyaz and Dhabban power stations, south and north of Sanaa, respectively.

The airstrikes on Sanaa shook the entire city and smashed the windows of houses near the power stations, Xinhua news agency reported.

The Houthi group, which controls much of northern Yemen,

uses the ports of Ras Issa and As-Salif to import fuel and cooking gas and sell them to the residents in the areas under their control.

According to al-Masirah TV reports, the Israeli airstrikes came a day after the US Navy launched an airstrike that targeted the Houthi-controlled defence ministry building in downtown Sanaa, causing extensive damage to the building, and a few hours after the Houthi group launched a long-range rocket toward Israel.

Accusing the Houthis of "forcing millions of (Israeli) civilians to take cover in bomb shelters" on Wednesday night, Israeli military spokesperson Daniel Hagari confirmed the airstrikes, saying that the Israeli army had conducted "precise strikes on Houthi military targets in Yemen."

Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz also warned Houthi leaders in a statement that "Israel's long arm will reach you as well" and his country "will not allow the continuation of missile fire and threats."

## UK housing policy sparks debate over development, conservation



**LONDON:** The Labour government's new planning policy has mandated local councils to meet the target of building 370,000 homes a year to fulfill a government promise for 1.5 million new homes in Britain over five years.

The updated National Planning Policy Framework includes guidelines for releasing land from the Green Belt - protected areas surrounding urban regions designed to prevent urban sprawl - under strict criteria, prioritizing brownfield and "grey belt" sites first.

The target of 1.5 million homes includes a focus on affordable housing, but experts like Professor Ben Clifford from University College London's Bartlett School of Planning question whether the policy effectively addresses the actual demand for affordable homes.

"There are places where some demand probably does need to be met through Green Belt review," Clifford told Xinhua news agency, emphasising the challenges of densifying urban areas and regional inequalities in housing demand. However, he warned that the policy could face significant public opposition, as seen in past planning reforms. Rosie Pearson, co-founder of the Community Planning Alliance, described the plan as a "litmus test" for the Labour government, urging it to prioritize environmental protection. "The vast majority of UK voters believe it's important to protect nature and green spaces, which should be a last resort only for housebuilding," she said.

Recent polling by the charity revealed 78 per cent of respondents value green space preservation with strong bipartisan support for a "brownfield-first" policy. Concerns from residents mirror these sentiments. Sid O'Neill from Cheshire lamented the ongoing loss of rural land, saying, "It's not a case of people being NIMBYs (Not In My Backyards); we all need the breathing space of open land." Meanwhile, Beryl Dennett from Liverpool told Xinhua the so-called affordable homes still remain out of reach for many young buyers.

The Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) expressed apprehension about the policy's potential consequences. "The broken housebuilding market is to blame for the painfully slow delivery of much-needed new homes," said CPRE CEO Roger Mortlock.

## Canada Unveils Enhanced Border Security Plan Amid Trump's Tariff Threats



Ottawa has announced a comprehensive plan to strengthen border security and the immigration system following US President-elect Donald Trump's warning of imposing a 25% tariff on Canadian imports. The plan focuses on five key areas: combating fentanyl smuggling, equipping law enforcement with new tools, enhancing operational coordination, increasing information sharing, and reducing border congestion.

Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc, now also Finance Minister, emphasized the importance of reassuring Canadians and the US about Canada's commitment to border integrity. The government has allocated 1.3 billion Canadian dollars over six years for these initiatives.

The announcement comes amid political turmoil in Canada, with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau facing calls for resignation following Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland's exit and dissent within the Liberal Party.

## Turkey, Lebanon Agree to Act Together on Syrian Issues

**ANKARA:** Turkey and Lebanon have agreed to work together on Syrian issues following the downfall of Bashar al-Assad, said Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

"A new era has begun in Syria. As two key neighbors of Syria, we agree that we must act together," Erdogan said during a joint press conference on Wednesday with visiting Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

"The stability of Syria is crucial for the stability of the region," he added, emphasising that rebuilding war-torn Syria would be a top priority for both nations.



Erdogan noted that the Israeli attacks against Lebanon are not new, and the country has been exposed to similar attacks in the past years, Xinhua news agency reported.

Erdogan added that Turkey will stand by Lebanon's side against Israel's attacks, emphasising the need for Is-

rael to commit to the ceasefire agreement.

Mikati, for his part, thanked Erdogan for his country's support for Lebanon during its war with Israel in recent months.

He condemned Israel for exploiting Syria's political upheaval and expanding its occupation of Syrian lands, emphasising that pressure should be exerted on Israel to stop this.

Mikati, heading a Lebanese delegation, arrived in Turkey on Wednesday to discuss with Erdogan and Turkish officials the latest developments in the region and bilateral ties.

## Canada Political Crisis Deepens: Trudeau Faces Fresh Calls for Resignation

**TORONTO:** Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is under increasing pressure to resign following the surprise resignation of Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland. The political crisis escalated as a third of the Liberal Party's MPs demanded a change in leadership, signaling deepening dissent within the government.

Trudeau, facing mounting challenges, has not yet made a decision on whether to step down. Reports indicate that nearly 60 of the 153 Liberal MPs in the House of Commons have openly called for his ouster, posing a significant threat to his leadership.

Freeland's resignation marked a critical turning point, as she cited disagreements with Trudeau over handling US President-elect Donald Trump's tariff threats. Trump's proposed 25% tariffs on Cana-



dian imports have sparked fears of a looming trade war between the two countries.

In her resignation letter shared on X (formerly Twitter), Freeland expressed concern about Canada's economic direction, emphasizing the need for a more cautious fiscal approach. "For the past number of weeks, you and I have found ourselves at odds about the best path forward for Canada," she wrote.

Freeland, who was first

elected to Parliament in 2013 and held key roles in trade and foreign affairs, has been instrumental in leading Canada's negotiations with the EU and United States. Her resignation underlines growing discontent within Trudeau's cabinet and weakens his hold on power.

The crisis comes as Trudeau's popularity plummets, with polls showing him trailing 20 points behind Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre. Poilievre has launched multiple attempts since September to force a snap election and capitalize on Trudeau's weakening position.

Canada's economy remains heavily tied to the United States, its largest trading partner, with 75% of Canadian exports going south. Freeland warned that mishandling Trump's tariffs could escalate tensions and further strain Canada's economy.

## Vanuatu Earthquake: Death Toll Rises to 14 amid Widespread Damage and Aftershocks



The death toll from the devastating 7.3-magnitude earthquake that struck Vanuatu's capital, Port Vila, has risen to 14, with over 200 reported injuries, according to the Red Cross. The earthquake caused extensive damage to infrastructure, including roads, electricity, and communication lines, severely hampering rescue and recovery efforts. Subsequent aftershocks, including one measuring 5.5 magnitude, have added to the challenges. International aid is being mobilized, with Australia pledging support despite limited access to key ports and airports.

**CANBERRA:** The Australian government has updated its travel advisory for Fiji following reports of suspected methanol poisoning at a resort bar. Seven tourists, including four Australians, were hospitalized on Saturday night after consuming alcohol believed to be spiked with methanol at a bar in Fiji's Warwick Resort.

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has cautioned travelers to "be alert to the potential risks around drink spiking and methanol poisoning." The advisory, issued via the Smarttraveller platform, urges anyone suspecting drink tampering to seek immediate medical attention.

The incident comes weeks after six tourists, including two Australians, died from suspected methanol poisoning in Laos. Australian Education Minister Jason Clare

labeled the incident in Fiji as "horrific," urging travelers to exercise extreme caution with their consumption of food and beverages overseas.

According to reports from Fiji's Ministry of Health, the hospitalized individuals, aged between 18 and 56, displayed symptoms including nausea, vomiting, and neurological issues. The affected group includes four Australians, one American, and two foreigners residing in Fiji. Due to the severity of their condition, all were transferred to Lautoka Hospital for further treatment.

Fiji's health officials are investigating the source of the poisoning and are identifying other potential victims who may have consumed the same drink. The ministry has advised locals and tourists to ensure food and beverages are safe during the holiday season.

### TRUMP'S THREATS BOOMERANG

## The BRICS Currency Issue brings Russia, India and China Closer



**GOPAL MISRA** The recent outbursts of the US President-elect about higher tariffs on finished goods, and asking the BRICS countries to continue to trade in American dollars and maintain their foreign exchange reserves in the American currency appears to have boomeranged.

On this sensitive issue Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are on the same page. The other countries, which have joined this forum include Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia and Iran.

Interestingly, the first reaction challenging Trump's policy has come from the Chinese President Xi Jinping. He has politely declined the invitation to the inaugural ceremony. Beijing has stated that Jinping would not be attending President Trump's inaugural function. It must have stunned the Trump camp. The function is scheduled on January 20, 2025, just six weeks before the event the invitation has been declined. Instead, Beijing has stated that its Ambassador would be attending the function with his spouse.

### Canada Reacts

Trump's off-the-cuff statement that if Candians feel the heat of higher tariffs, Canada should federate with the USA. It, perhaps, was just a joke, but it has not been taken kindly by the Canadian authorities. The northern neighbour recently reciprocated by the statement that Canada might discontinue its oil supply to the US. It may be noted that most of the fuel needs of the northern and east-coast states of the US are being met from the fuel imports from Canada. Thus, the issue of Canada's separate existence will now be blended with the sentiments of strong nationalism, perhaps, benefiting Prime Minister Trudeau's election prospects.

### Weaponizing Judiciary

Meanwhile, eminent politicians from the Democratic Party are keen that the cases pending against the President-elect Donald Trump should be pardoned by the present incumbent Joe Biden before he quits his office next month.

Several Congressional Democrats, including a former member of the House Democratic leadership, this week has called for President-elect Donald Trump to be pardoned. Similarly, Rep. Jim Clyburn (D-S.C.), the former House



Democratic majority whip, was seen responding to a question on a media channel recently echoing the same sentiments. He was asked whether Trump should be pardoned by President Joe Biden. His response was "Yes, I do think so, and I think he should pardon all of those people that have been accused and have been targeted so we can clean the slate and have an air of possibilities for the future."

Meanwhile, Senator Chuck Grassley, who will be presiding Senate till a Republican occupies the coveted position in January, has hoped that Kas Patel would finally help the FBI to restore its old respect.

The Senator lamented that current FBI Director Christopher Wray, named by Trump in 2017 to a standard 10-year term, "has failed at fundamental duties" and that anyone who leads the

agency has to "chart a new course" for transparency and accountability.

It is being suggested that Wray should quit following Trump's nomination of Patel. He has either to resign or be fired after Trump takes office on Jan. 20, 2025. It is being observed that so far there has been no indication that Wray is looking to step down from the role.

"Every president wants people that are loyal to themselves," Sen. Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) told a prominent news channel. He also has stated adding that he does not have "any complaints" about how Wray has "done his job right now." Referring to his nominations, Rounds said that the job is normally for 10 years, a length meant to insulate the FBI from the political influence of changing administrations. However, Trump has been critical of the FBI, namely after

agents searched his Mar-a-Lago residence in Florida for classified documents, ultimately resulting in the appointment of a special counsel to bring criminal charges against him.

"We'll see what his process is, and whether he actually makes that nomination," Rounds said. "And then, if he does, just as with anybody who is nominated for one of these positions, once they've been nominated by the president, then the president gets, you know, the benefit of the doubt on the nomination, but we still have to go through a process."

Meanwhile, there are reports that several other Republicans recently have signaled that they would back Patel.

Sen. Bill Hagerty (R-Tenn.) told NBC News on December 15 that Patel "represents the type of change that we need to see in the FBI" and that the agency "needs to be cleaned out." He said "there are serious problems" in the bureau, and the "American public knows it."

It is a well-known fact that Trump has become an admirer of Patel for exposing the FBI's dirty role. Trump promptly reciprocated when he further stated that "I am proud to announce that Kashyap 'Kash' Patel will serve as the next director of the Fed-

eral Bureau of Investigation," Trump posted on Truth Social on Nov. 30. "Kash is a brilliant lawyer, investigator, and 'America First' fighter who has spent his career exposing corruption, defending justice, and protecting the American people."

In a recent interview, Patel said that he wants to close the FBI's headquarters in Washington.

"I'd shut down the FBI Hoover Building on day one and reopen the next day as a museum of the deep state," he said. "And I'd take the 7,000 employees that work in that building and send them across America to chase down criminals." However, according to the FBI, "Every day, the men and women of the FBI continue to work to protect Americans from a growing array of threats," an agency spokesperson told media outlets on Nov. 30. "Director Wray's focus remains on the men and women of the FBI, the people we do the work with, and the people we do the work for."

Gopal Misra has been associated with national and international media. His books on journalism and geo-politics have been well-appreciated. Views are personal.

## India Leads Global Remittance Receipts with \$129 Bn in 2024



**NEW DELHI:** India has emerged as the top recipient of remittances in 2024, with an inflow of \$129 billion, followed by Mexico (\$68 billion), China (\$48 billion), the Philippines (\$40 billion), and Pakistan (\$33 billion), according to World Bank economists.

The global remittance growth rate has reached 5.8% in 2024, a notable increase from 1.2% in 2023. Key drivers include the recovery of job markets in high-income OECD countries, particularly the United States, where foreign-born worker employment has surged 11% above pre-pandemic levels.

Remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries

(LMICs) are projected to reach \$685 billion in 2024, significantly surpassing foreign direct investment (FDI). Over the past decade, remittances have increased by 57%, while FDI declined by 41%, indicating a growing gap expected to widen further.

South Asia is leading regional growth, with an 11.8% increase in remittance inflows driven by robust contributions from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

Experts highlight the importance of leveraging remittance flows for poverty alleviation, financing education and health, promoting financial inclusion, and enhancing access to capital markets.

# Diljit Dosanjh says nothing can stop his shows



**MUMBAI:** Punjabi superstar Diljit Dosanjh, who is set to perform in Mumbai on Thursday, has said that nothing or nobody can stop his shows from being held. On Wednesday, the singer-actor took to his Instagram and shared a video of himself singing and dancing inside a private jet. The video shows him enjoying a

high life with friends having the time of their lives in the aircraft. He wrote in the caption, "Tomorrow Mumbai. Mahalakshmi Race Course. 'Shut down shut down', you just see. DIL-LUMINATI TOUR Year 24". Earlier, Diljit addressed the "conspiracy" that has been alleged against him over the

spelling of the Indian state of Punjab. The actor-singer took to his X and spoke about the same. He penned a long note in which he also spoke about how English is a very tricky language, and can particularly cause trouble to those whose first language is not English. He wrote, "Punjabi. If I mistakenly

didn't put up India's flag after writing 'Panjab' in a tweet then it becomes a conspiracy. In a tweet from Bengaluru, I forgot to mention the Indian flag after writing 'Panjab', it became a conspiracy".

He further mentioned, "If you write 'Panjab' instead of 'Punjab', it will remain 'Punjab'. Panj Aab - 5 Rivers. Bravo, those who create conspiracy around the usage in a language of the Englishmen. You know what, I will write 'Panjab'. How many times do we prove that we LOVE INDIA? Bring something new, or is creating conspiracy is what you get paid for? #Vehley". Prior to that, the actor-singer declared that he won't organise live shows in India until the concert infrastructure in the country is sorted so that it makes it worthwhile for the attendees as well. Several clips of the actor-singer have gone viral on social media in which he could be seen talking about the need to improve the infrastructure for live shows in India.

# Indian Army Panther Division celebrated the momentous occasion of Vijay Diwas



**JAGMOHAN SINGH Amritsar**

Panther Division celebrated the momentous occasion of Vijay Diwas today-marking India's victory over Pakistan in 1971 India Pakistan war. This historic day, observed annually on December 16, commemorates the creation of Bangladesh and the decisive military victory led by the Indian Armed Forces. On this

special occasion, the celebrations were conducted with a stunning display of military equipment and felicitation of the Veer Naris showcasing the Nation's strength and unity. The highlight of the day was an impressive weapon and equipment display as part of "Know Your Army Mela", where military hardware, including Armour tanks, Artillery guns and other New

Generation Weapons under induction were displayed to the common public. This display gave citizens, especially the younger generation, an opportunity to witness firsthand the military technology that has played a significant part and continues to hold a pivotal role in Indian Army's success. The weapon display offered a chance to explore the legacy of India's defense capabilities and the cutting edge technology that continues to safeguard the Nation's security.

The ceremony was the felicitation of Veer Naris, the wives of those who made the ultimate sacrifice during the 1971 war. These women were honored with medals and tokens of gratitude in recognition of their courage and resilience. The emotional moment underscored the Nation's appreciation for the families who sacrificed their loved ones for the country's honor and security.

# Preity Zinta advocates for more harsh punishment for rapists



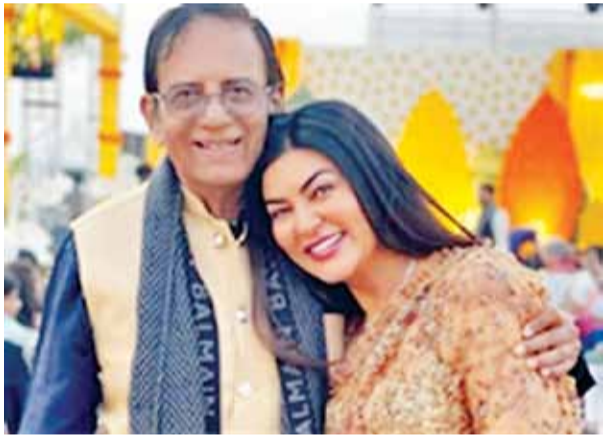
**MUMBAI:** Actress Preity Zinta, who is known for 'Dil Chahta Hai', 'Kal Ho Naa Ho', 'Jhoom Barabar Jhoom' and others, feels that like Italy, India should also have more harsh punishments for the crime of rape. On Wednesday, the actress took to her X, formerly Twitter and re-shared a tweet from the official handle of BRICS News.

The tweet read, "Italy moves toward legalizing chemical castration for rap\*st and pe\*ophiles. Do you agree with this?" Responding to the same, the actress wrote, "What a fantastic move! Hope @mygovindia also does something similar. What do you think folks? It's high time there is zero tolerance for such crimes".

BRICS is an intergovernmental organization comprising nine countries - Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates. Earlier, the actress had shared a post on social media which has caused an uproar on the Internet.

The actress took to her X, formerly Twitter, and wrote, "Support the country you live in or live in the country you support. #ThoughtForTheDay". While the actress didn't take any names, people on the Internet feel that the actress made a snarky remark on Punjabi superstar Diljit Dosanjh or politician Priyanka Gandhi.

# Sushmita Sen sends birthday love to her father, wrote 'nicest human being'



**MUMBAI:** Bollywood actress Sushmita Sen recently took to social media to shower birthday love on her father, Shubeer Sen.

The former Miss Universe shared a heartfelt note accompanied by a sweet picture of them together, calling him the "nicest human being." On Thursday, the actress shared a series of her photos featuring her father and other family members.

In her post, the 'Aarya' actress expressed deep gratitude and admiration for her father, highlighting the values and life lessons he has instilled in her. For the caption, Sen wrote, "Happpppppyyyy Birthday to the nicest human being, I am blessed to call my Father!!! Happy 80th Baba @sensubir Here's to a life filled with glorious milestones & divine grace!! To your health & happiness always #bestbaba #besttata. I love you soooooo much!!! #duggadugga #titan @alisahsen47 @reneesen47 @subhra51 @rajeevsen9 @asopacharu @ziana\_asopa."

Shubeer Sen, a retired officer of the Indian Air Force, shares a deeply cherished bond

with his daughter, Sushmita. Over the years, the actress has frequently expressed her gratitude for her father's steadfast support, especially during pivotal moments in her life. One such defining chapter was her groundbreaking triumph at the Miss Universe pageant in 1994. Sushmita has often reminisced about how her father's unwavering belief in her abilities became her anchor during her journey to making history. At just 18, she became the first Indian woman to claim the coveted Miss Universe crown, a feat she attributes not just to her determination but also to the strength she drew from her father's encouragement.

On the professional front, the 'Main Hoon Na' actress was last seen in the acclaimed series 'Aarya 3'. In the show, Sushmita portrayed a fearless woman who navigates a dangerous world of crime, doing whatever it takes to safeguard her family.

The series first gained international recognition when its debut season was nominated for "Best Drama Series" at the prestigious International Emmy Awards.

# Diljit Dosanjh likens Kashmir to 'sukoon'

**MUMBAI:** Punjabi sensation Diljit Dosanjh is currently enjoying a peaceful break in the breathtaking Kashmir, which is also as "heaven on earth".

Diljit took to Instagram, where he shared a reel featuring his visit. The reel video starts with playing with birds, praying, walking around the beautiful lanes of the picturesque state, striking a conversation with locals, taking pictures with fans and even buying goods from the market.

For the background score, he chose the number "Wohi Khuda Hai" by Sufi musician Milad Raza Qadri.

He wrote the caption as: "KASHMIR&#x26;Sukoon.

(sic)" Recently, Diljit explained why he uses the spelling 'Panjab' instead of 'Punjab'. The singer-actor, who has been hitting it out of the park in his Dil-Luminati tour in India, has addressed the "conspiracy" that has been alleged against him over the spelling of the Indian state of Punjab. On Monday, the actor-singer, penned a long note in which he also spoke about how English is a very tricky language.

He wrote, "Punjabi. If I mistakenly didn't put up India's flag after writing 'Panjab' in a tweet then it becomes a conspiracy. In a tweet from Bengaluru, I forgot to mention the Indian flag after writing 'Panjab', it became a



conspiracy". He further mentioned, "If you write 'Panjab' instead of 'Punjab', it will remain 'Punjab'. Panj Aab - 5 Rivers. Bravo, those who create conspiracy around the usage in a language of the Englishmen. You know what, I will write 'Panjab'. How many times do we prove that we

LOVE INDIA? Bring something new, or is creating conspiracy is what you get paid for? #Vehley". Earlier, the actor-singer performed in Chandigarh. He had then said that he won't organise live shows in India until the concert infrastructure in the country is sorted so that it makes it worthwhile for the attendees as well. He said in one of the clips, "Here we don't have infrastructure for live shows. This is a source of big revenue, many people get work and are able to work here."

"I'll try next time that the stage is at the centre so that you can be around it. Till this happens, I won't do shows in India".

# Annual Chrysanthemum Flower Exhibition 2024 organized at LPU

**PRABHJOT GILL Jalandhar**

In the cold winter air of December, the campus of Lovely Professional University (LPU) blossomed with the vibrant colors of chrysanthemums. The annual Chrysanthemum Flower Exhibition 2024 arrived, transforming the university grounds into a spectacular display of color. The event, hosted by LPU's ICAR-accredited School of Agriculture, highlighted the university's dedication to cultivating these beautiful flowers, reflecting both skill and passion. The exhibition transformed the campus into a colorful display of chrysanthemums, skillfully cultivated by the university's agricultural students. The flowers, with their rich hues of yellow, red, white, pink, and purple, grew



with dedication, showcasing the students' agricultural expertise. One of the major highlights was a stunning flower rangoli, carefully crafted by the students. This beautiful mosaic of petals demonstrated their artistic talent and cultural expression, impressing all attendees.

As part of the university's experiential learning program,

students also set up stalls featuring vermicompost, hand-made jewellery, and organically grown vegetables. These stalls provided hands-on experience in entrepreneurship, offering students insights into product development, marketing, and sales. This initiative highlighted the students' innovative spirit and hard work.

# Punjabi singers repent from performing in Chandigarh

**Punjab government should adopt 'one window' policy says Dr. Satinder Sartaaaj**

**KULBIR SINGH KALSI Chandigarh**

For the past few months, the administration, especially the Chandigarh Police, has been in the news for the music shows being performed by singers in Chandigarh. Recently, Diljit Dosanjh said on stage that there is no structure for performing shows in India, meaning there are no government guidelines. This year, after their show, the Satinder Sartaaaj team had written a letter to the Chandigarh Police DGP and other high-ranking officials to the Chandigarh Administration, mentioning the misbehaviour meted out by the police but got no reply from the administration. Similarly, after



Karan Aujla's show, the Chandigarh Administration imposed a fine of over Rs 1 crore on him for giving advertisements before getting the permit and permission. It is worth mentioning here that most departments keep waiting till the last day to issue the permits to blackmail to get free passes. It has been learnt from reliable sources that 5000 passes were demanded from Diljit Dosanjh. Even after getting the permit from the police, the local SHOs forced their own people to enter the she without tickets or passes. The

most difficult part of this work comes in Satinder Sartaaaj's shows. His shows have seat numbers and the shows are well organised where families can sit and enjoy themselves in peace. Sometimes the people who are forcefully entered by the police sit on the seats of the people and it is not so easy to vacate the seats from them. Talking to Satinder Sartaaaj's team, it was learnt that he will never do a Chandigarh show in the future and similar views have been expressed by Karan Aujla and Diljit Dosanjh teams.

It is worth mentioning here that Mayors and Venues of cities abroad request Punjabi singers to perform in their cities because the show generates tax for the city or state, provides work for the local workers, and generates business for hotels, restaurants or other shopping malls in the city.

# AI Innovations Help Indian Farmers Overcome Climate & Crop Challenges



**NEW DELHI:** The Indian government has increasingly turned to Artificial Intelligence (AI) to address key challenges in agriculture, with a strong emphasis on supporting farmers and enhancing productivity. In a recent statement to the Lok Sabha, Minister of State for Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare Ram Nath Thakur highlighted several initiatives that have employed AI and machine learning to boost the agricultural sector. A major development is the introduction of Kisan e-Mitra, an AI-powered chatbot designed to assist farmers with inquiries regarding the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme.

This initiative, which supports multiple languages, is continuously evolving and is set to expand to address questions about various government programs, making vital information more accessible to farmers. Additionally, the government has embraced the National Pest Surveillance System, which leverages AI and machine learning to tackle crop losses caused by pests and climate change. This system uses AI analytics to analyse field images for crop health assessment and utilises weather, satellite, and soil moisture data for monitoring rice and wheat crops. By detecting issues early, the

system enables farmers to take timely action to prevent crop damage. Another key initiative, the Per Drop More Crop (PDMC) scheme, has been implemented since 2015-16. This centrally sponsored scheme focuses on improving water efficiency at the farm level through micro-irrigation techniques such as drip and sprinkler systems. These systems not only conserve water but also reduce fertilizer consumption and labor costs, boosting the overall income of farmers. To further support farmers, the government offers financial assistance for the installation of these systems, with 55 per cent funding for small and marginal farmers. In another forward-thinking move, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has developed an IoT-based irrigation system, which has been tested on selected crops, showcasing yet another step toward the adoption of modern technologies in Indian agriculture. These AI and technology-driven initiatives reflect the government's commitment to improving the livelihoods of farmers and ensuring more sustainable agricultural practices.

# Over 1500 participate in 'Ek Bharat, Hum Bharat' padyatra



**PRABHJOT GILL Amritsar**

As many as 1500 people participated in 'Ek Bharat, Hum Bharat' padyatra which was organized by MaitriBodh Parivaar at Funland Company Bagh here on Sunday. The participants united to spread the universal message of love and peace. This historic event was not just a journey but a mission to revive the nation's soul, emphasizing the significance of shared cultural heritage in fostering humanity's collective growth. With a vision to unite

the world as one family, the padyatra was aimed to reignite the values of love, unity, and peace deeply woven into India's cultural heritage. Since its inception in 2013, MaitriBodh Parivaar has been at the forefront of offering spiritual programs and social reform projects, transforming lives and nurturing Maitri Bhaav—the spirit of love and friendship. The Ek Bharat, Hum Bharat Padyatra reflects the organization's unwavering commitment to transcending barriers and creating a harmonious and inclusive society.

# Phulkari WOA curates Soirée of Flavours "A Culinary Journey"

**PRABHJOT GILL Amritsar**

Phulkari, Women of Amritsar curated an unforgettable afternoon "The Green Plate 'From Farm to Table' at the most exotic venue 'The Bagh'. Attended by almost 220, enthusiastic women, the event brimmed with energy, fresh ideas, and renewed zeal. The afternoon was nothing short of a culinary journey with none other than Chef Rajesh Thapliyal, who is not only an Indian chef of international repute, but also a nature and wildlife photographer. He has the working experience and apprentice training in five star hotels, top rated restaurants including Michelin restaurants as Ananda in the Himalayas, Hyatt hotels, The Ritz Carlton and Buddha Bar among many others. Rajesh Thapliyal has expertise in Indian, French, Scandinavian, Japanese, Pan Asian, and Ayurvedic cuisines to name a few. He has to his credit many awards in culinary as well as in nature and wildlife photography competitions. The sun poured casting golden rays across the elegantly set tables while the air was filled with the intoxicating scent of fresh herbs and



perfectly roasted ingredients. The venue 'The Bagh' bathed in natural beauty, giving the feel of a serene oasis, its lush surroundings, complimenting the artistry of the dishes being served. Laughter and conversation flowed smoothly as the afternoon unfolded like a culinary symphony, blending flavours and stories in perfect harmony. The great culinary expert with his quiet confidence spoke about the art of growing micro greens, crafting flavoured Himalayan salt and savouring an exquisitely curated organic menu. It was one of its kind

sit down 3 course sumptuous lunch prepared by the great expert. This event saw active participation of Phulkari President Sheetal Sohal, Vice President Minakshi Khanna, Secretaries Vrinda Kapoor & Shivani Ahuja, Treasurer Ruby Batra and Milli Luthra and PR & Marketing Head Snigdha Goel. Many Phulkari executive members were also present. Phulkari Past Presidents Pranet Babbar Sandhya Sikka, Tina Aggarwal were also present. The whole event was meticulously chaired by Abha Mahajan & Mina Singh.