

REGION

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JAILED LOK SABHA MP AMRITPAL SINGH LAUNCHES NEW POLITICAL PARTY IN PUNJAB

CORPORATES & INDUSTRY

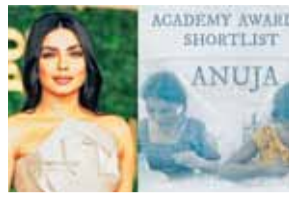
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UNITED STATE AI CHIP EXPORT RESTRICTIONS THREATEN INDIA'S AI & TECH GROWTH

POTPOURRI

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PRIYANKA CHOPRA SAYS SHE'S PROUD OF BEAUTIFUL FILM 'ANUJA'

Punjab to establish security operations centre for protection of IT infrastructure

CHANDIGARH: The Punjab government on Thursday announced the establishment of a security operations centre to ensure the protection of critical IT infrastructure, including applications and websites of the government.

This significant decision was taken in the 19th meeting of the Board of Governors of Punjab State e-Governance Society chaired by Minister of Governance Reforms Aman Arora here.

With the implementation of a security operations centre, to be established with an outlay of Rs 42.07 crore, Punjab will become one of the foremost states in northern India with high-level cyber security capabilities.

In the digital age, cyber threats are becoming more sophisticated and pervasive so the need to establish a security operations centre is increasing.



It will enable monitoring, detecting and responding to cyber security incidents in real-time for the protection of the critical IT infrastructure.

After this meeting, the minister held a video conference meeting with all Deputy Commissioners to discuss and review the key governance reforms and strategies to further improve citizen service delivery.

He said Punjab has 538 Sewa

Kendras and 438 Government to Citizens (G2C) services are being delivered seamlessly. The state has successfully brought down the pendency in citizen service delivery from 27 per cent to less than 0.17 per cent. He also lauded the Deputy Commissioners of Amritsar, Jalandhar and Pathankot for maintaining a low pendency level in citizen service delivery, while asking all the DCs

to ensure regular monitoring and review of district-level pendency to identify and resolve bottlenecks.

Arora directed the DCs to identify and pull up the habitual delayers, who are sending applications back without solid reasons and putting unnecessary objections while emphasising the importance of providing clear objection remarks on pending applications to enhance transparency and accountability.

While taking stock of the project of the online verification of applications by sarpanches, nambardars and municipal Councillors, the directed the Deputy Commissioners to ensure that all of them are on board on the eSewa portal by this month to eliminate the need for residents to make multiple visits for document verification.

India's Forex reserves drop by \$8.714 bn to \$625.871 bn



NEW DELHI: India's forex reserves dropped by USD 8.714 billion to USD 625.871 billion in the week ended January 10, the RBI said on Friday. Earlier, the overall kitty dropped by USD 5.693 billion to USD 634.585 billion in the week ended January 3, the RBI said.

The reserves have been on a declining trend for the last few weeks, and the drop has been attributed to revaluation along with forex market interventions by RBI to help reduce volatilities in the rupee. The forex reserves had increased to an all-time high of USD 704.885 billion in end-September.

GST Officials Must Now Provide Written Reasons for Arrests



NEW DELHI: In a significant move to ensure greater accountability, the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) has issued new guidelines requiring GST officials to provide a clear and written basis for arrests under the GST Act.

These directives were issued on Monday in compliance with a Delhi High Court order in the case of Khrityj Chhiliar v. GST Directorate General of Intelligence, Delhi. According to the revised guidelines, officials are now obligated to inform the accused about the specific grounds of arrest and issue a

written arrest memo. Additionally, they must obtain a signed acknowledgment or receipt from the arrested individual as proof of compliance with the procedural requirement.

The CBIC emphasised that the reforms align with the legal framework of the GST Act concerning offenses punishable under the law. The arrest process, as detailed in the guidelines, ensures that officials remain transparent and that individuals' rights are upheld. "The arrested person must be informed of the reasons for their arrest, and the arrest memo must clearly

outline these reasons in writing," CBIC stated. "At the time of executing the arrest, it is mandatory to obtain a receipt from the individual in question."

This new protocol aims to address concerns about misuse of arrest powers and arbitrary detention in GST-related cases. It comes in response to growing scrutiny over the functioning of GST officials and the need to uphold judicial standards.

The Delhi High Court's directives in the aforementioned case played a crucial role in shaping these changes.

Legal experts have welcomed the move, stating that it is a step forward in safeguarding the rights of individuals while maintaining the integrity of the GST system.

The guidelines are expected to bring more clarity and fairness to enforcement actions under the GST Act, ultimately boosting confidence in the tax administration framework.

RBI Simplifies FEMA Rules to Promote Indian Rupee in Global Trade



NEW DELHI: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Thursday announced liberalised norms to encourage the use of Indian Rupee and local/national currencies to settle cross-border transactions.

The decision comes at a time when the domestic currency is sliding and touched an all-time low of 86.70 per US dollar on Monday. The Reserve Bank has already signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the central banks of the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia and Maldives to encourage cross-border transactions in local currencies, including Indian Rupee.

To encourage greater use of Indian Rupee (INR) for trade transactions, in July 2022, an additional arrangement in the form of Special Rupee Vostro Account (SRVA) was introduced. Several foreign banks have since opened SRVAs with banks in India. "Overseas branches of Authorized Dealer banks will be able to open INR accounts for a person resident outside India for settlement of all permissible current account and capital account transactions with a person resident in India," the RBI on Thursday said, while announcing the changes made in the extant FEMA regulations.

Mission SCOT's Success Important to Growing Indian Space Industry: PM Modi

NEW DELHI: The success of Indian space startup Digantara's Space Camera for Object Tracking (SCOT) mission is important to the growing space industry in India, said Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday.

Digantara launched its SCOT satellite aboard Space X's Transporter-12 mission on Wednesday to enhance space safety and track Resident Space Objects (RSOs). On Thursday, the company announced the success of the mission. "Kudos to Indian space startup Digantara at the success of Mission SCOT," said PM Modi in a post on social media platform X on Friday. "This is an important contribution of the growing Indian space industry towards enhancing space situational awareness," he added. Mission SCOT is the world's first commercial Space Situational Awareness (SSA) satellite. It will monitor Low Earth Orbit (LEO) with improved efficiency.

SGPC protest outside the Cinema halls, Movie Shows cancelled

JAGMOHAN SINGH
Amritsar

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) expressing strong objection to 'Emergency' film made by BJP MP Kangana Ranaut, today organized a gathering in protest outside the cinema hall where the movie was scheduled to display. Protesters were also carrying black flags.

However, all the theatres, where the movies were scheduled to display, were cancelled by the owner of the cinema halls and SGPC was informed accordingly. SGPC spokesperson secretary Mr. Partap Singh said that a large gathering was held outside the "Amritsar Mall" where the



movie was scheduled to display on screen. He said there was low response to the movies across the Punjab as majority of the cinema halls declined to play this controversial movie.

Yesterday, SGPC President

wrote a letter to Punjab Chief Minister (CM) Bhagwant Mann asking him to completely ban the film in Punjab, as this film is being released on January 17, 2025.

In a letter written to the

Punjab CM by SGPC President Harjinder Singh Dhami, it has been said that the SGPC, while expressing its protest regarding this film, has already registered objections by sending letter no. 22211 dated November 14, 2024 to the Chief Secretary of the Punjab Government and SGPC executive committee resolution no. 798 dated September 28, 2024, through which it was clearly stated that 'Emergency' film will not be allowed to be screened in Punjab, because this film has been made in a conspiratorial manner with the aim of defaming Sikhs. Through the resolution, a demand was made from the state government to ban the release of this film in Punjab. Dhami said that it

is unfortunate that the Punjab government has not taken any step to stop the film till now. He said that if this film is released on January 17, 2025, then it is natural that this will create anger and resentment in the Sikh world.

However, in this film suppresses the 1984 deadly attack on the holy shrine of Sikhs, Sri Harmandar Sahib, Sri Akal Takht Sahib and many other places, Sikh massacre and genocide and the anti-Sikh agenda has been worked with the spirit of spewing venom against the community. Along with this, the character assassination of the community's martyr, Sant Jarnail Singh Khalsa Bhindranwale, has also been done in the film, he said.

Getting Khel Ratna Award is an "Unforgettable Moment", says India Hockey Captain Harmanpreet Singh



NEW DELHI: India men's hockey team captain Harmanpreet Singh termed it as an "unforgettable moment", receiving the prestigious Major Dhyani Chand Khel Ratna Award from the Honourable President of India Droupadi Murmu at the Rashtrapati Bhavan here on Friday.

Harmanpreet, who led the Indian men's team to a second successive bronze medal in the Olympics in Paris last year, said it was a dream come true for him to get the award because it is named after the greatest hockey player, the legendary Major Dhyani Chand, who won gold medals in three successive Olympic Games from 1928 to 1936.

"An unforgettable moment at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, receiving the prestigious Major Dhyani Chand Khel Ratna Award from the Honourable President of India. To be honoured with an award named after the greatest hockey legend is a dream come true," said Harmanpreet in a post on X, formerly Twitter.

"This one is for the team, the fans, my family, and Indian hockey!" he said.

The 29-year-old Harmanpreet

received the highest sports award in the country along with shooter Manu Bhaker, para-athlete and Paralympic Games gold medalist Praveen Kumar, and World Chess Champion Dommaraju Gukesh. Harmanpreet Singh was part of the Indian team that broke a four-decade-long drought at the Olympics by winning the bronze medal in the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. He later led the Indian team to another bronze medal in the Paris Olympic Games in 2024 as India won medals in successive Olympic Games after 1972 at Munich. India beat Spain 2-1 in the bronze medal match in Paris, coming back from a goal down.

Harmanpreet Singh's teammate and fellow defender Jarmanpreet Singh received the Arjuna Award.

Apart from Jarmanpreet, 31 athletes including 17 para-athletes were conferred with the Arjuna Award. Paris Olympics bronze medalist rifle shooter Swapnil Kusale was among the recipients. He became the first Indian shooter to bag a medal in the 50m Rifle 3 Position (3P) men's event at the Olympics.

Expressing solidarity with Dallewal, 111 farmers begin fast at Khanauri

CHANDIGARH: Expressing solidarity with their leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, whose indefinite strike entered day 51st day on Wednesday, a group of 111 farmers, donning black shawls, began a fast-unto-death at Khanauri, the border point between Punjab and Haryana.

The farmers under the banner of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha have been staging protests at the Shambhu and Khanauri borders since February 13 last year against the Centre in support of their demands, including a legally guaranteed minimum support price (MSP) for their crops.

The 111 farmers squatted near the police barricading under the open sky in chilly weather.

They claimed that they would even spend the night under the sky without having even basic amenities and would sacrifice themselves before Dallewal.

The protesting farmers have expressed concern over Dalle-



wal's "deteriorating health", saying the 70-year-old risks "multiple organ failure" owing to the prolonged fasting.

Dallewal, who has refused any medical aid, has been on a hunger strike since November 26 last year.

Doctors attending to him said his health is "deteriorating" every day.

His ketone level is on the higher side and muscle mass has decreased. However, farmer leader Kaka Singh Kotra claimed the protest started in Haryana, not in Punjab.

He said the fasting farmers were not heading to Delhi. "We are sitting on a peaceful hunger strike near the protest site. The administration is free to use force. They can lob tear gas, use cane charge or arrest the farmers but they will continue with the protest at the site."

Haryana Deputy Superintendent of Police Amit Bhatia said talks were on with farmer leaders and they had been told about the imposition of Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) at the protest site.

India's digital transactions hit a new monthly high...!

RAJU WILLIAM
New Delhi

Unified Payments Interface (UPI) scored a record hit of 16.73 billion transactions with a staggering value of Rs. 23.25 crore in December 2024 marking a significant milestone in India's journey in recent years towards becoming a cashless society.

Undoubtedly, UPI is at the forefront of this ongoing digital payment revolution.

In addition, Immediate Payment Service (IMPS), and National Electronic Toll Collection (NETC) FASTag have emerged as pivotal players, making finan-

cial transactions faster, more accessible, and secure.

UPI is a system that powers multiple bank accounts into a single mobile application (of any participating bank), merging several banking features, seamless fund routing & merchant payments into one hood. It has not only made financial transactions fast, secure, and effortless, but also empowered individuals, small businesses, and merchants, driving the country's shift toward a cashless economy.

As of recent data from the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), UPI has set a new record by processing



over 16.73 billion transactions, with a staggering transaction value of Rs 23.25 lakh crore. This is a notable jump from Rs. 21.55 lakh crore in November.

In 2024, UPI processed around 172 billion transactions, marking a 46% increase from 117.64 billion in 2023. This rise underscores a broader cultural shift toward financial inclusivity, with UPI being a central pillar.

While UPI has dominated the mobile transaction space, IMPS has long been a trusted service for instant payments between accounts. Launched in 2010, IMPS is a real-time, 24x7 electronic funds transfer service that facilitates quick transactions across banks and financial institutions. Its versatility in supporting transactions through multiple channels, including mobile, ATM, SMS, and the internet, has made it an essential tool for businesses and individuals alike.

Recent data indicates that IMPS transactions have surged, with 441 million transactions recorded in December 2024, com-

pared to 407.92 million in November 2024. The transaction value also saw a notable increase, touching Rs 6.01 lakh crore in December, up from Rs 5.58 lakh crore the previous month.

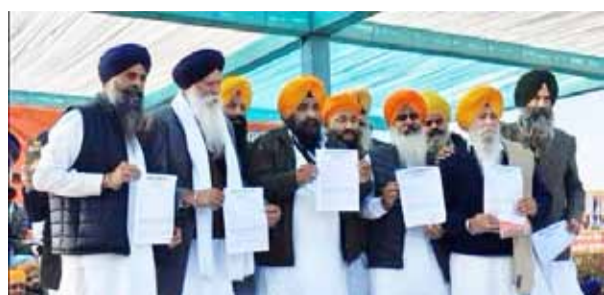
Another important digital payment method that has grown in significance is the NETC FASTag that offers a seamless, cashless way to pay for tolls on national highways, eliminating the need for vehicles to stop at toll plazas. FASTag transactions grew in volume to 381.98 million in December, against 358.84 million in November. The value also increased to Rs 6,642 crore against Rs 6,070 crore in November.

Jailed Lok Sabha MP Amritpal Singh launches new political party in Punjab

FW DESK
Sri Mukatsar Sahib

Lok Sabha MP and jailed Khalistani separatist Amritpal Singh on January 14 launched a new political party in Punjab called Akali Dal-Waris Punjab De.

The party was launched by his supporters at the Maghi Mela in Muktsar. A statement attributed to Amritpal Singh during the event said that the formation of the party was "the first step towards the resurgence of Akali politics". Amritpal Singh, who was winner of Lok Sabha seat from Punjab's Khadoor Sahib constituency as an independent candidate in June 2024. He is currently in Assam's Dibrugarh jail under the National Security Act. He is the leader of Waris Punjab De, or heirs of Punjab. At the launch on the occasion of Maghi Mela, MP's father, Tarsem Singh, said that his son would serve as the president of Akali Dal -Waris Punjab De and added that a membership drive had begun for the party. "Let us come together to save



Punjab and protect the Panth (community) quoted Tarsem Singh as saying, "Anyone can join by the party and become a member by filling out the form."

A 15-point resolution was also passed, which appointed Amritpal Singh, 31, as the "Mukh sewadar", or chief attendant of the organisation. Apart from Tarsem Singh, Faridkot Lok Sabha MP Sarabjit Singh Khalsa was present at the launch of Akali Dal -Waris Punjab De. Khalsa, an Independent legislator, is the son of one of the assassins of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. "The state needs an Akali Dal to represent the Sikhs," Khalsa was quoted

as saying. "The previous Akali Dal lost the trust of the people as their leaders had confessed their crimes before the Akal Takht, so they cannot face the people now." The Akal Takht the supreme temporal body of the Sikhs. He added: "So this Akali Dal has been formed and is the new hope for the Sikh community. People should support the new party and make it successful." The party was launched days after the working committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal on January 10 accepted the resignation of Sukhbir Singh Badal from the post of party president after he was declared guilty of religious misconduct

by the Akal Takht.

In December, the Sri Akal Takht ordered Sukhbir Badal and other leaders of the party to clean washrooms and kitchens of Amritsar's Dri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) as punishment for religious misconduct. It also directed the party to accept Badal's resignation and constitute a committee for the reorganisation of the party. Sukhbir Singh Badal was the deputy chief minister of Punjab between 2007 and 2017.

Amritpal Singh was arrested on April 23, 2023, from Punjab's Moga after he had been on the run for more than a month. He was flown to Assam on a special flight and sent to the Dibrugarh Central Jail.

The Punjab Police began cracking down on members of Waris Punjab De days after Amritpal Singh and his supporters stormed a police station in Amritsar on February 23, 2023. This came after one of Singh's aides was arrested for alleged assault and attempted kidnapping.

Haryana Chief Minister directs DCs and SPs to conduct Joint Operations to curb Drug Abuse

GULSHAN KUMAR
Chandigarh

Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini today chaired a joint meeting with all the Deputy Commissioners and Superintendents of Police of the state and directed them to work with mutual coordination to address critical issues such as law and order, crime against women, drug addiction, child labour, and illegal mining.

Haryana Vidhan Sabha Speaker Harvinder Kalyan also attended the meeting, which took place at the Madhuban Police Complex in Karnal.

Prior to the meeting, the Chief Minister led the officers in reading the Preamble of the Constitution as part of the Hamara Samvidhan Hamara Swabhiman Abhiyan.

Haryana Chief Minister highlighted that the Deputy Commissioners and Superintendents of Police serve as the face of the government at the grassroots level and that the people of the state have high expectations from them. He urged all officers



to work in close coordination to meet these expectations and ensure the efficient implementation of government policies. He also directed them to promote administrative efficiency, ensuring that the benefits of various welfare programs reach the public at the grassroots level.

Chief Minister, while directing officials to effectively implement the three new criminal laws in the state, emphasized the need for their full enforcement by March 31. He instructed that, in addition to other provisions, video conferencing facilities should be made available in all courts across the state. Furthermore, he stressed the implementation of e-summons and e-challans, which will spare

witnesses from having to appear in court to record their statements.

Haryana CM also reaffirmed the state government's commitment to the safety of women and girls across Haryana. He directed the officers to ensure that the committee formed at the district level effectively monitors crimes against women and takes appropriate action in each case.

Chief Minister directed the Deputy Commissioners and Superintendents of Police to jointly carry out operations against drug abuse in their respective districts. He emphasized that eradicating the illegal drug trade is a top priority for the state government.

GST Fraud in Haryana: Amount Rs 1118 cr recovered as fine from 568 Science City Ambala entrepreneurs

SATISH HANDA

GST was implemented across the country by the central government in the year 2017. After its implementation, large numbers of cases of fake input credit tax were reported in various states from time to time. If we talk about Haryana, earlier an Input Tax Credit (ITC) scam of about Rs 1,182 crore had been exposed, while some recovery was also made from it. Later, a campaign was launched by the Additional Commissioner Office at Panchkula in which physical verification was conducted in a list of firms in three categories suspected involved in embezzlements. These lists were shared with other states, while they were also checked physically to crack down on those who take ITC by creating fake firms that allegedly raised fake purchase and sale bills without having any transaction. Earlier, the GST number was issued on the basis of documents, but now such cases started coming up where these firms did not even exist. These firms remained alive only on paper. The documents in these were also used by other people. After this, a rule was made that other verifications including the office of the person applying for the GST number have to be physically verified.

The illegal activities of many reputed firms have come to light in the Goods and Service Tax (GST) scam. The GST department had issued notices to 568 businessmen and being dissatisfied with their replies, fines worth billions of rupees have been imposed on all of them used to cheat the government in a fraudulent manner. A GST scam has been exposed in Ambala, Haryana, in which several reputed firms have been fined crores of rupees. These firms took advantage of input tax credit (ITC) from the government by making fake purchases and sales. The GST department had issued notices to 568 firms and imposed fines after being dissatisfied with their answers. According to spokespersons of the Additional Commissioner from the GST office in Panchkula, large number of cases were detected in which most of the firms did not buy the goods and got input tax credit from the government by taking the bill and dissatisfied with the answers of the traders, Additional Commissioner GST gave the decision with a fine of up to Rs 14 crore imposed on each firm have taken input tax credit (ITC) worth crores of rupees from the government by merely doing the purchase and sale on papers.

Rape allegations on BJP senior leader Badauli: sexual abuse & rape allegations are not new in Haryana politics



SATISH HANDA

The Himachal Pradesh Police registered an FIR on 13th December 2024 against Haryana BJP chief Mohan Lal Badauli and 'Hariyanvi' singer Rocky alias Jai Bhagwan on the complaints of a woman allegedly both forced her to drink alcohol in the room of a hotel at Kasauli in Solan on 3rd July 2023 and she was forcibly gang-raped by both when she was under the influence of liquor, not only this they clicked her nude photographs and also prepared a nude video of assault. The complainant in a report to police also alleged that both accused had threatened to kill if she disclosed the incident to any one. According to the complainant woman, she along with her Delhi friend her boss met Badauli and the singer Rocky a resident of Panchkula at the Kasauli hotel when Badauli introduced himself as a political leader, while Rocky claimed to be a singer had promised her assistance in securing a government job in Haryana state, whereas singer Rocky assured her featuring in a music video being released shortly.

The FIR further stated that two months ago, the woman was called to Rocky's house in Panchkula, where she was threatened to be implicated in a false case if she revealed the incident of gag rape to any one.

Central Govt should resolve farmers' issues through dialogue with their organizations: Selja

PARVESH HANDA
Chandigarh

The General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee, former Union Minister, and MP from Sirsa Kumari Selja has said that the central government is not taking the farmers movement and their demands seriously. The worsening health of farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal and the rising anger among farmers serve as a warning sign for the government. There is still time for the government to find a way to negotiate with farmer organizations and resolve their issues. If a solution is not found soon, the scope of the farmers' movement could expand across the country.

In a statement released to the media, Kumari Selja expressed concern over the health of farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, who is on a hunger strike at the Khanauri border. Despite his deteriorating condition, the government is ignoring the movement and not taking it seriously. In the past one and a half months, three farmers have lost their lives in this movement, which is a direct warning to the central government. Farmers are determined that if anything happens to Dallewal, the situation will spiral out of control.

It is high time for the government to listen to the farmer's demands and address them seriously. If the movement becomes more



violent due to the government's obstinacy, it will cause distress to the common people. To put pressure on the government, farmers are organizing small-scale protests to wake the government from its slumber. The government must acknowledge that providing legal guarantees for MSP (Minimum Support Price) will secure their future. Kumari Selja said that farmers are demanding legal guarantees for MSP, the waiver of agricultural loans for small and

marginal farmers, and pension schemes for small farmers and landless labourers. The government has not even made an effort to open dialogue with the farmers. Kumari Selja said that the government does not need intermediaries to engage with the farmers it can directly resolve their issues. The government must not attempt to sideline the farmers issues. Kumari Selja asserted that every problem can be resolved through dialogue, yet the government is shying away from engaging with the farmers.

Selja said, the Government should promptly compensate farmers for crop damage. She said that the significant damage caused to crops in various parts of the state due to hailstorms. Previously, hailstorms had heavily damaged crops in districts like Fatehabad. The government must quickly compensate farmers for the damaged crops. Hailstorms and rain have caused extensive harm to standing crops of wheat, mustard, and vegetables.

legally misrepresents the character and history of Sikhs, and asked them to remove the objectionable scenes presenting anti-Sikh sentiments. In the notice sent by Advocate Amanbir Singh Sial, legal adviser of SGPC, the producers of the film, including Kangana Ranaut, were asked to remove the trailer released on August 14, 2024, from public and social media platforms and seek a written apology from the Sikh community.

Earlier SGPC had expressed objection to this film, in separate letters written to the Government of India's Minister of Information and Broadcasting Mr. Ashwini Vaishnaw, and Central Board of Film Certification's Chairperson Mr. Praseon Joshi to ban this film. SGPC President Harjinder Singh Dhami, a legal notice has been sent to the producers of this film including Kangana Ranaut, e said that after the release of the trailer of the Emergency film, many anti-Sikh scenes had come to light, which have deeply hurt the sentiments of the Sikh community.

SGPC ask Punjab Government to impose ban on Movie 'Emergency'

JAGMOHAN SINGH
Amritsar

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) has urged the Punjab Government to impose a ban forthwith on the movie 'Emergency' in all the cinema halls in the state of Punjab.

In a statement issued here by the SGPC has asked the Punjab Government to impose an immediate ban on the movie which was going to release on January 17 as tickets were being sold in advance in the State. SGPC president Harjinder Singh Dhami in a letter to Punjab CM Bhagwant Singh Mann said that many concocted and distorted facts have been depicted in the controversial movie by sitting BJP MP Kangana Ranaut. He said that if the movie was released it would hurt the sentiments and emotions of the Sikh community.

Adding further Dhami said that SGPC was going to submit letter to all the deputy commissioners in Punjab in this regard to stop the release of this movie in any of the theater in Punjab as it would disturb the peaceful situation of the State and SGPC would lodge strong protest over the release of this movie in the State. Earlier last year in the month of August, SGPC had sent a legal notice to the producers of Kangana Ranaut's 'Emergency' film, which al-



legally misrepresents the character and history of Sikhs, and asked them to remove the objectionable scenes presenting anti-Sikh sentiments. In the notice sent by Advocate Amanbir Singh Sial, legal adviser of SGPC, the producers of the film, including Kangana Ranaut, were asked to remove the trailer released on August 14, 2024, from public and social media platforms and seek a written apology from the Sikh community.

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Haryana Govt to introduce Law on Illegal Immigration in upcoming Budget Session, says Nayab Saini CM

SATISH HANDA
Panchkula

Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini while having a review meeting with senior home department and police officers in the state said that the state government will introduce a law aimed at strictly controlling illegal immigration. He said proposed legislation will be presented in the upcoming budget session, in addition the state government will soon unveil an ORP policy to reward police personnel for their exceptional service. This policy will not only recognize and encourage good work but will also the provision of strict action against any lapses in crime prevention.

The Chief Minister shared



this information while interacting with media persons shortly after the state-level review meeting in Panchkula, which was held with senior police officers to assess crime and law and order in the state. He mentioned that a detailed review of crime trends was conducted during the meeting. Notably, Haryana has witnessed a significant reduction in crime rates. In particular, incidents of crime

against women have much decreased in 2024 as compared to the previous year, and the state has made commendable progress in addressing cybercrime, he added that police officers have been instructed to take stringent action against crime and criminals. He assured that officers and personnel demonstrating excellence will be recognized, while those showing negligence will face strict disciplinary measures against them. He directed the police officers to be sensitive towards the public and work quickly to resolve their concerns.

The Chief Minister said that Haryana Police has been given a free hand to take strong action against crime and criminals. A target has also been given to

further the de-addiction campaign, with the goal of making 70 percent of the villages drug-free by the end of 2025. Besides, instructions have been given to take strict action against those involved in the illegal drug trade. Saini further said that instructions have been given to the police to launch a campaign targeting criminals involved in activities such as extortion calls made from abroad as well as within the country. The Chief Minister assured that the state government will provide the necessary resources to the police to support these efforts. Saini said that a battalion of Haryana Police will be established to strengthen law and order in Nuh district for which the concerned officer has also been directed to identify land.

Haryana strengthens efforts to combat drug trafficking and addiction: CM Saini

Conviction rate in drug cases increased from 48 % to 54 % in 2024

SATISH HANDA

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday chaired a regional conference on 'Drug Trafficking and National Security' at Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi. He also launched the Drug Disposal Fortnight, inaugurated extension of MANNAS-2 helpline to 28 states and 8 Union Territories in order to strengthen India's fight against the drugs menace, Shah highlighted that in 2024, the NCB and police forces had seized drugs valued at Rs.16,914 crores, which was the highest seizure of narcotics since independence. Laying stress on the importance of introducing timely policies, ensuring enhanced intensity, meticulous micro-planning, and consistent monitoring, Shah underscored the need for achieving a drug-free India to realise Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of a fully developed India by 2047. He urged the Centre and state governments, besides all relevant departments, to work collaboratively with dedication and commitment to eradicate this evil. Shah said, "We are determined to destroy the entire ecosystem of narco terror... We have



made several changes in investigations, not only exposing drugs but also uncovering the terrorism networks associated with them. The local police of Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh, along with central agencies, have uncovered several cases of narco-terrorism. " Home Minister said that we need to work with even more speed and enthusiasm for a drug-free India by stopping drug trafficking through the dark web, crypto-currency and drones. He said, "We need to increase the use of PIT-NDPS (Prevention of Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act) and cautiously expand the use of legal provisions for asset confiscation."

Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini said that in line with the vision of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, the state has made significant progress in combating drug trafficking as such the conviction rate in drug cases has increased from 48 % to 54 % during year 2024 reflecting

the state's enhanced efforts to address drug-related crimes. He said that the conviction rate in cases under NDPS Act has increased due to efforts by the state government witnessing 6% hike as compared to previous year 2023. The Chief Minister shared this information while virtually attending a meeting chaired by Union Home Minister, Amit Shah on drug trafficking and national security at New Delhi on Saturday.

The Chief Minister further informed that 3,445 villages and 774 wards have been declared drug-free in Haryana state, since there are no active drug dealers in these areas and drug addicts are receiving treatment at addiction centers across the state. He said, over the past five years the state has made significant strides in curbing drug trafficking with nearly 26,000 drug peddlers arrested and sent to jails. He further disclosed that last year, nearly 5,000 individuals were arrested for drug-related crimes including 1,000 identified as major drug traffickers, with a large quantity of drugs seized from them. He said that over rupees 50 Crore Rupees was seized in drug money and 161 Nasha Mukti Kendras (de-addiction centers) were established for the recovery of drug addicts.

Haryana Chief Minister meets Japanese delegation

GULSHAN KUMAR
Chandigarh

Haryana Chief Minister, Nayab Singh Saini met with a Japanese delegation today to discuss various projects being set up in the State. The Japanese delegation included Chairman, Fumio Sashida, General Manager, ATL, Guan Zemin, and Sumit. Principal Secretary to Chief Minister, Arun Gupta, Advisor, Foreign Cooperation Department, Pawan Choudhary were also present during the meeting.

Haryana Chief Minister said that Foreign Department has been established to attract and assist foreign investors. Many major companies are interested in setting up projects in Haryana. The government has provided robust infrastructure and connectivity, making regions like Gurugram and the



NCR a hub for reputed companies looking to invest. He emphasised that all necessary facilities for starting projects are now available under one roof, making Haryana the top choice for investors.

The Japanese delegation

said that TDK, a renowned Japanese company, is setting up a huge plant in Sohna. This initiative will not only create job opportunities for the youth but will also contribute significantly to the state's economic growth.

Haryana tops in recoveries of cheated amount in cyber crimes during 2024: DGP Haryana

SATISH HANDA
Panchkula

While talking to media persons Shatruijit Kapoor Director General Police said that the state police saved amount worth Rs 268 crore cheated by cyber 'thugs' during year 2024 and has topped in recoveries in the country, whereas during the previous year 2023 amount worth Rs 77 crore was recovered. DGP Kapoor said that during 2024 Haryana police arrested 5156 cyber criminals in 5511 cases registered in the year, which included 3555, nearly 70 per cent, cyber criminals residing in other states, on an average 14 cyber 'thugs' were arrested everyday by Haryana cyber crime police.

DGP Kapoor disclosed that during the year 2022, Haryana state police had arrested 1078 cyber criminals in 2165 cases registered in the state during the year, while 1909 cyber criminals were arrested in 2747



cases registered in 29 cyber police stations in the state during the year 2023. DGP disclosed that decision has been taken for the refund of amount cheated by cyber 'thugs' at an early, enabling victims not to waste time in registering FIRs with police station and visiting courts for a long time for the recovery of cheated amount, since such cases will be dealt with 'Lok Adalats' quickly. DGP Kapoor advised people not to pick up telephone or mobile phone call arriving from abroad and at the same time also ignore threatening calls received from the caller identifying himself a police, CBI or Enforcement Department officer threatening for digital arrest, since none of the agency as well as a police officer is liable to make such threats on the telephone.

Parliament session to begin on Jan 31, budget on Feb 1

NEW DELHI: The first part of Parliament's Budget Session will be held between January 31 and February 13, with Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman set to table her eighth straight budget on February 1.

In line with the convention, the session will start with President Droupadi Murmu's address to a joint sitting of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha on January 31, followed by the tabling of the economic survey. The second part of the session will be held from March 10 to April 4.

The first part is marked by a debate in both Houses on the Motion of Thanks on the President's address and ends with



the prime minister's reply in the two Houses of Parliament.

"The fourth session of the 18th Lok Sabha will commence on Friday, January 31. Subject to exigencies of Government Business, the session is likely to conclude on Friday, April

4. The President will address both Houses of Parliament assembled together in the Lok Sabha Chamber, Parliament House, at 11 am on Friday, January 31," a press statement issued by the Lok Sabha secretariat said.

ED Attaches Rs 300 Cr Assets in MUDA Scam 'Involving' K'taka CM Siddaramaiah

NEW DELHI: The Directorate of Enforcement (ED), Bangalore Zonal Office, has provisionally attached 142 immovable properties valued at approximately Rs. 300 crore under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002, in connection with an ongoing investigation involving Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and others.

These properties are registered in the names of various individuals involved in real estate businesses and agencies. Reports indicate that the seized properties were allocated to Siddaramaiah's wife, B.M. Parvathi.

The ED launched the investigation following an FIR filed by the Lokayuktha Police in Mysore under various sections of the IPC (1860) and the Prevention of Corruption Act (1988) against Siddaramaiah and others.



Allegations suggest that Siddaramaiah leveraged his political influence to secure compensation for 14 plots of land in his wife's name, B.M. Parvathi, in exchange for 3 acres and 16 guntas of land acquired by MUDA. The land was originally acquired for Rs. 3,24,700, while the 14 compensation sites in a prime locality are valued at around Rs. 56 crore.

The investigation has also uncovered the role of former MUDA commissioner D.B. Natesh, who is believed to have played a key role in the illegal allotment of these compensation sites to B.M. Parvathi.

Further searches revealed that MUDA had illegally allocated numerous other sites as compensation to real estate businessmen, who later sold

these sites at significant profit, generating large amounts of unaccounted cash. This illicit profit was laundered and presented as legitimate income.

The searches identified sites allocated to benami or dummy persons acting on behalf of influential individuals and real estate businessmen. Incriminating evidence has been recovered, pointing to illegal bribes paid to the then MUDA Chairman and Commissioner in the form of property, MUDA sites, and cash. This illegal gratification was subsequently laundered and masked as legitimate funds.

The investigation also revealed that money was channelled through a cooperative society for purchasing properties and luxury vehicles in the names of relatives of G.T. Dinesh Kumar, the former MUDA commissioner.

HM Amit Shah Seeks Trial in Absentia Against Fugitives Threatening National Security



NEW DELHI: Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Friday that in cases related to national security, trial in absentia should be initiated against fugitives who have been absconding from the country for a long time.

During a meeting in the national capital with Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav to assess the implementation of three new criminal laws in the state, HM Shah said that the Indian Civil Security Code includes provisions for trial in absentia, enabling action against such fugitive offenders.

HM Shah said that the essence of the three new criminal laws introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi lies in the provision of delivering justice within three years, from the filing of an FIR till the verdict comes from Supreme Court.

Appreciating the efforts made so far by the Madhya Pradesh government in implementing the new criminal laws, the Home Minister emphasised the need for their 100 per cent implementation in the state at the earliest.

HM Shah mentioned that before registering cases under sections related to terrorism and organised crime, senior police officials should examine whether the case qualifies for the application of those sections.

He emphasised that any misuse of these legal provisions would undermine the sanctity of the new criminal laws.

HM Shah emphasised the need for continuous monitoring of the conversion of ZERO FIRs into regular FIRs. He also suggested establishing a system to enable the transfer of FIRs between two states through CCTNS (Crime and Criminal Tracking Network & Systems).

The Home Minister also stressed ensuring the availability of more than one forensic science mobile van in every district. Additionally, he underlined the importance of constructing an adequate number of cubicles in hospitals and jails to facilitate evidence recording through video conferencing.

He also urged the state government to ensure that funds allocated under ICJS (Interoperable Criminal Justice System) are utilized strictly in accordance with the standards set by the Central government.

The meeting reviewed the implementation and status of various new provisions related to police, prisons, courts, prosecution, and forensics in Madhya Pradesh.

The Union Home Secretary, Chief Secretary and Director General of Police from Madhya Pradesh, Director General of BPR&D, the Director General of NCRB, and several senior officials from the Union Home Ministry and the state government attended the meeting.

PM Inaugurates Z Morh Tunnel in Ganderbal, Boosting Connectivity to Ladakh



FW DESK
New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the much-awaited Z Morh Tunnel in the Sonamarg area of central Kashmir's Ganderbal district. The 6.5-kilometer tunnel, a crucial part of the Srinagar-Leh Highway, was dedicated to the nation in a grand ceremony attended by Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, and several Union Ministers.

The Z Morh Tunnel, which will ensure year-round connectivity between Kashmir and Ladakh, marks a significant milestone in the region's infrastructure development. The tunnel will enhance access to the popular tourist destination of Sonamarg and improve strategic connectivity.

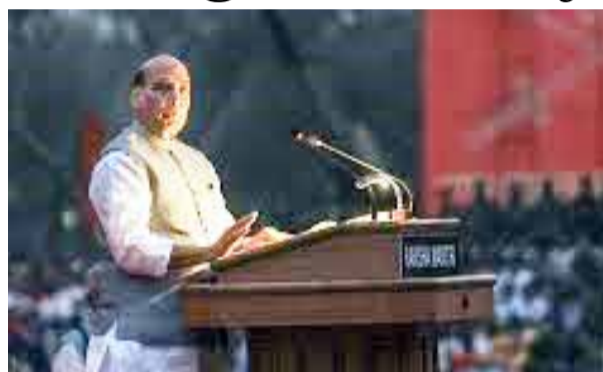
India's Offensive, Defensive Responses Need to Be Strengthened: Rajnath Singh

NEW DELHI: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Friday underlined the need to strengthen India's offensive and defensive responses in view of the turmoil being witnessed in the rule-based international order.

Addressing an event, organised to commemorate 2024 as the Year of Naval Civilians, the Defence Minister highlighted the increasing complexities for the Armed Forces due to the tense geopolitical security scenario and pitched to increase the critical capability of the country at the earliest.

"If we assess the entire decade from a defence and security perspective, we can say that it has been a volatile decade. We are witnessing conflicts and wars in different regions across the world. Keeping these things in mind, we need planning, resourcing and budgeting for our security," he said.

"There is a need to adopt a consultative approach. We need to take inputs from all the stakeholders on how to face future challenges. Our forces should be equipped and ready according to the changing times," Rajnath Singh said.



He emphasised that the civilian workforce, an integral part of the Armed Forces, will play a crucial role in the planning process. The Defence Minister stressed that the military is surging forward with a big mandate and complex structure and the civilian workforce "soldiers without uniforms" play a pivotal role as they work behind-the-scenes to provide significant strength to the troops.

He asserted that patriotism, valour and discipline help soldiers fulfill their responsibility of protecting the country from threats and challenges and the civilian workforce should imbibe these values to further bolster the security infrastructure.

"In the broader perspective of national service, every responsible civilian is a soldier without uniform and every soldier is a civilian in uniform," he said.

In view of India's strategic location and its geopolitical situation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reiterated the resolve of Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government to strengthen the Navy, terming it as a necessity in today's times.

He referred to the recent commissioning of three world-class warships — INS Surat, INS Nilgiri & INS Vaghsheer — built in India by Mazagon Dock

Limited, stating that it was a result of concerted efforts of all stakeholders.

Rajnath Singh termed the ships as a symbol of India's empowerment.

"India's economic prosperity is linked to maritime security. It is, therefore, necessary to protect our territorial waters, ensure freedom of navigation, and keep sea routes, which are our maritime highways, safe. In recent years, major naval powers have reduced their presence in IOR, while the Indian Navy has increased it," he said.

"There is a possibility of an increase in threats in the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea and the sea areas adjacent to East African countries. In view of this, the Indian Navy is working towards increasing its presence further," said the Defence Minister.

Rajnath Singh described cyber-security as an important aspect of maritime security in today's times, stating that ignoring cyber-attacks can prove to be detrimental/fatal.

He laid stress on the need to run a special awareness campaign on cyber-security in the Armed Forces.

Maha Kumbh a symbol of rise of great Sanatan culture: JP Nadda

NEW DELHI: Union Minister and BJP President J.P. Nadda extended greetings to the devotees participating in Maha Kumbh 2025, as the revered Hindu festival commenced on Monday.

One of the most revered Hindu festivals, Maha Kumbh, commenced on Monday with the auspicious 'Shahi Snan' at the Sangam in Prayagraj, marking the confluence of the sacred rivers Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati.

This spiritual event, occurring once every 144 years due to a rare celestial alignment, began on 'Paus Purnima,' attracting over 4 million devotees on the first day.

Taking to X, Nadda wrote, "The Maha Kumbh has started today with the holy bath on the auspicious occasion of Paus Purnima in the holy pilgrimage city of Prayagraj."

"Maha Kumbh has been keeping our ancient cultural heritage alive since time immemorial. May this great festival fill everyone's life with new energy and vigour," he further said.

"I extend my heartfelt greetings to all devotees participating in the Maha Kumbh festival,



which is the centre of faith and devotion of innumerable devotees and a symbol of the rise of the great Sanatan culture, and my salutations to all saints," Nadda added. Meanwhile, Prayagraj transformed into a spiritual hub and welcomed saints, seers, pilgrims, and devotees from across India and the world. The massive gathering witnessed people performing the sacred ritual of taking a holy dip in the Sangam, symbolising the cleansing of sins and the attainment of spiritual merit.

The Maha Kumbh, spanning from January 13 to February 26, is expected to host an unprecedented 45 crore people, showcasing India's rich cultural heritage and spiritual traditions.

Elaborate security arrangements have been implemented by the Uttar Pradesh government to ensure the safety and convenience of the attendees.

PM Modi greets to all Countrymen on Makar Sankranti, Magh Bihu

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted the nation on the various festivals, including Makar Sankranti and Magh Bihu, being celebrated across the country on Tuesday.

On the occasion of Makar Sankranti, PM Modi wished people, hoping it would bring new energy and enthusiasm. In a post on social media X, he said (in Hindi), "Many best wishes to all countrymen on Makar Sankranti. May this holy festival dedicated to the Uttaran Sun bring new energy and enthusiasm into your life."

Along with Makar Sankranti, the people are also celebrat-



ing the 'Uttaran', which is an astronomical event of the sun's transition from the southern hemisphere to the northern hemisphere. It is considered an auspicious period in Hindu cosmology. The sun's movement from Dakshinayana to Uttaranayana is significant as per ancient Vedic beliefs. Greet-

ing the nation on this occasion, PM Modi wrote on X, "Have a wonderful Uttaran! May this festival bring success and happiness in everyone's lives."

Magh Bihu, also known as Bhogali Bihu or Maghor Bihu, is also being celebrated today. It is one of Assam's most anticipated festivals, a vibrant celebration of the harvest season that marks the transition into the new year. It is a festival to express gratitude for a bountiful harvest and celebrate the rich agricultural heritage of Assam. Wishing the best on the day, PM Modi said, "Best Wishes on Magh Bihu! We celebrate the abundance

of nature, the joy of harvest and the spirit of togetherness. May this festival further the spirit of happiness and togetherness."

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath also extended his heartfelt greetings to devotees on the occasion of Makar Sankranti. Coinciding with the Maha Kumbh festival, which commenced on Monday with the 'Pavitra Snan,' Makar Sankranti marked the second day of the celebrations. Devotees thronged the 'Triveni Sangam in Prayagraj to take the 'Amrit Snan' at the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati.

Bengaluru welcomes its first US Consulate: A Landmark in India-US ties and Global Connectivity

ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

Bengaluru, often celebrated as the powerhouse of India's innovation and technology, has reached a transformative milestone with the inauguration of its first US Consulate. This momentous event marks a significant new chapter in India-US relations, streamlining access to visa services for millions and strengthening global partnerships. It is a landmark achievement, brought to fruition by the visionary leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, the steadfast support of External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, and the determined advocacy of MP Shri Tejasvi Surya.

For years, the absence of a US Consulate in Bengaluru posed challenges for students, professionals, and businesses in the region. Despite the city's pivotal role as a global hub for innovation and entrepreneurship, its residents were compelled to travel to other cities for essential consular



services. Today, this hurdle has been removed, bringing immense relief to millions across Karnataka and beyond. The establishment of the consulate signifies a significant leap forward for the state and underscores Bengaluru's growing stature as a global city.

The opening of the US Consulate is a culmination of strategic advocacy and perseverance. Shortly after his election as the Member of Parliament for Bengaluru South in November 2019, Shri

Tejasvi Surya held discussions with Hon'ble External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, strongly advocating for the establishment of a US Consulate in Bengaluru. These efforts included engaging with US Ambassador Kenneth Juster to emphasize the necessity of such a facility. The proposal gained further momentum during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the United States in 2023, where the decision to establish the consulate in Bengaluru was cemented.

Vizag Steel Plant Has Special Place for People of Andhra Pradesh: PM Modi

AMARAVATI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Friday that the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant has a special place in the hearts and minds of the people of Andhra Pradesh.

The Prime Minister posted on X that during the Cabinet meeting, it was decided to provide equity support of over Rs 10,000 crore for the plant.

"This has been done understanding the importance of the steel sector in building an Aatmanirbhar Bharat," he said.

Earlier, Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw announced that the Prime Minister approved a revival package worth Rs 11,440 crore for Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd (RINL), the corporate entity of Visakhapatnam Steel Plant. In the overall package of Rs 11,440, fresh equity infusion would be worth Rs 10,300 crore and the conversion of working capital loan into preferred share capital of Rs 1,140 crore.

The Union Minister told reporters in Delhi that the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant is a very important steel company in the overall steel sector of the country.

He hoped that with this revival package, many of the historical legacy problems that



RINL used to face would be resolved.

Andhra Pradesh's Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan thanked Prime Minister Modi for the financial package.

"The sacrifice of Amruta Rao garu and countless others who gave their lives for the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant in 1966 burns eternal in our hearts. Their blood and tears laid the foundation for what stands today not just as a factory, but as the pride and identity of Telugu people," Pawan Kalyan said in his post on X.

"Today, the NDA government's decision of providing a financial package of Rs 11,440 crores for the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant isn't merely a number — it represents renewed hope for thousands of fami-

lies; every worker whose hands have shaped steel, every employee who has dedicated years of service, and every contractor who has stood by this plant through its challenges," said the actor-politician.

The Jana Sena leader thanked the Prime Minister on behalf of the people of the state for 'steadfast commitment to our state's development, your vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat finds one of its strongest pillars in our Visakhapatnam Steel Plant.'

Pawan Kalyan also thanked Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and Union Steel Minister H. D. Kumaraswamy for their 'unwavering support strengthens not just a plant, but the dreams of millions of Telugu people'.

"We assure the people of the country that our government in the State led by our Hon'ble Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu garu shall ensure that Visakhapatnam Steel Plant will not just survive — it will thrive and stand as a testament to Telugu pride in building Viksit Bharat 2047. This is not just a financial revival — but the fulfilment of a promise written in the sacrifices of 1966. The spirit of Visakhapatnam Steel lives on!," the Deputy Chief Minister added.

Meanwhile, Civil Aviation Minister K. Ram Mohan Naidu thanked Prime Minister Modi and Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu for the revival package.

The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) leader said this fulfilled their election promise. He thanked the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister for their 'unwavering support in halting the privatisation of Visakhapatnam Steel Plant and ensuring it resumes full-fledged production.'

"Under your visionary leadership, Andhra Pradesh is set to achieve greater heights of progress and prosperity," he said.

Rajasthan HC Grants Interim Bail to Asaram in 2013 Rape Case

JAIPUR: The Rajasthan High Court on Tuesday granted interim bail till March 31 to self-styled Godman Asaram, who is serving life imprisonment in a 2013 rape case.

This comes a week after the Supreme Court granted him bail till March 31 in another rape case, to avail medical treatment.

The petition in the HC filed by Asaram for suspension of sentence and bail was heard on Monday.

Asaram's lawyer R.S. Saluja said to the media persons that while hearing the petition the court granted interim bail to Asaram till March 31.

He was arrested by Jodhpur police from his ashram in Madhya Pradesh's Indore in 2013. Since then, he has



been in jail.

After a trial of five years, on April 25, 2018, the court sentenced Asaram to life imprisonment. Now, after 11 years, he will be out of jail on interim bail.

The terms and conditions set by the court include that Asaram cannot meet his followers and will not try to

tamper with the evidence in the case.

Three guards will accompany him, whose expenses will have to be borne by Asaram.

Earlier on January 7, the Supreme Court had granted medical bail to Asaram till March 31, 2025, in the case of the rape of a female follower in the Surat ashram. While giving the verdict on the bail, the Supreme Court had said that Asaram could not meet his followers. The

court had clarified that the relief was granted solely on humanitarian grounds and directed compliance with conditions imposed during the bail period.

Asaram did not get relief in the Jodhpur rape case. After this, his lawyer filed a petition in the High Court which gave him relief.

The self-styled godman has been held guilty in two cases in Jodhpur Court and Gandhinagar Court.

He was arrested by Jodhpur Police from the Indore ashram on September 2, 2013. A woman from the ashram in Gandhinagar, Gujarat had filed a rape case against him. On January 31, 2023, the court sentenced him to life imprisonment in this case.



Challenges faced by diaspora grow in complexity

At the inauguration of the 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD), Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the Indian diaspora as “ambassadors to the world,” highlighting their seamless integration into local societies, contributions to global communities, and their pivotal role in India’s growth. With over 35 million people of Indian origin worldwide — including NRIs and PIOs — the diaspora’s achievements in diverse fields, from politics to business, are a source of immense pride. Indian-origin leaders helm more than 30 countries, exemplifying the global reach and influence of the community. PBD, first celebrated in 2003, commemorates Mahatma Gandhi’s return to India from South Africa and serves as a platform to honour the diaspora’s contributions. The 2023 event in Bhubaneswar saw over 3,000 delegates from 70 countries, with discussions centred on India’s development through the Viksit Bharat programme. While celebrating the diaspora’s success is important, PBD must go beyond being a ceremonial exercise. Challenges faced by the diaspora, particularly NRIs, are growing in complexity. Increasing barriers from far-right populist governments in the West have made visa regulations stricter, demanding proactive engagement from the Indian government. Additionally, the ongoing conflicts in West Asia, home to over nine million Indians, endanger their safety, necessitating strategies to raise awareness and bolster protections. India’s approach to its diaspora must be inclusive and apolitical. Reports of revoking OCI cards over political criticisms undermine this principle. Furthermore, the diaspora’s successes should prompt reflection on the conditions that drive skilled Indians abroad. Addressing these economic and systemic issues is crucial for India’s long-term growth. The diaspora’s triumphs are a testament to India’s potential. Yet, for the PBD to remain relevant, it must evolve into a forum that not only celebrates but also addresses the complex realities of the global Indian community.

LETTERBOX

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My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive.

— MAYA ANGELOU

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APAR GUPTA EXPLAINS HOW DIGITAL LEASH CONNECTS TO DATA PROTECTION ACT 2023.

Authoritarianism through data



In August 2024, as India marked six years since the K.S. Puttaswamy judgment reaffirmed privacy as a fundamental right, the Internet Freedom Foundation hosted its annual “Privacy Supreme” event — not as a celebration, but as a sombre reflection on its unfulfilled promise. Social activist Nikhil Dey shared chilling accounts, from Ajmer in Rajasthan, on how Aadhaar, heralded for efficiency, has excluded vulnerable residents from pensions and rations. This grim reality must be central to tech policy discussions, including the Draft Digital Data Protection Rules, 2025.

Rulemaking typically fleshes out legislation, ensuring laws passed by Parliament are enforceable while maintaining administrative flexibility. Yet, the draft Data Protection Rules provoke concern on questions of executive overreach and vague governance. Some earlier analysis here bears repetition for these rules are a conscientious pupil in obedience of its master. Here, its parent is the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, that was rammed through Parliament as “a product of the subversion of the democratic process”. There is more than a mere lack of trust in how the law was created, for its substantive provisions advance a broader policy of “total state control — a digital leash to yank us and make us stand in line than to serve the preambular objectives of the Constitution of India”. Its provisions are deliberately vague, granting broad discretion under the nebulous phrase “as may be prescribed”.

Despite the Act’s swift passage on August 9, 2023, its implementation remains in limbo. Sixteen months later, the draft Rules have been unveiled for consultation. But are they truly “public”? Published as a 51-page pdf (in Hindi/English as a gazette notification), with a three-page explanatory

note that reads as AI glop, a simplistic and vague summary offers little insight into the policy choices during drafting. Comments can only be submitted through the MyGov platform that might encourage expert input but restricts broader participation. Transparency is undermined by the government’s decision to treat submissions as fiduciary, precluding public disclosure and counter-comments. This controlled feedback process resembles a “corporate consultation” rather than a public one.

Substantively, the Data Protection Rules build on a framework of intentional vagueness and executive dominance. Many compliance obligations are either self-determined by companies handling personal data or left to government discretion. Consider Rule 3, which governs consent notices. It mandates “clear and plain language” but fails to define these terms, leaving interpretation subject to India’s vast linguistic and comprehension diversity. Without specific standards, notices risk being overly generic or oversimplified, omitting critical details. Similarly, while the Rules require an “itemized description” of data, they do not clarify whether

the disclosure is for categories such as financial or health data; or to specific data points such as account numbers, or even metadata and inferred data. Nor do they define timelines for data breach notifications to users, raising risks for individuals in urgent situations. Such ambiguities, if purely administrative, should have been resolved by the standard setting powers of an independent regulatory authority that does not exist.

No independence for Data Protection Board

The vagueness reflects deeper structural flaws. The Act eschews the creation of an independent regulatory body, instead, consolidating power within the Union Government. Through informal interactions and gazette notifications, the government wields unchecked authority over citizens and the digital marketplace. Even the Data Protection Board (DPB), which has a limited ambit of jurisdiction to adjudicate on breaches, lacks independence. The Board’s chairperson is selected based on recommendations of a search and selection committee chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, raising critical concerns. How will the committee address the critiques of political control that plague similar appointment processes? What value does the search committee offer when it has advance knowledge that its recommendations are not binding on the Union Government?

Even after its formation, the DPB is hamstrung. Its authority is largely limited to determining data breaches, and its independence is compromised by ser-

vice conditions of its members to central government employees. This contravenes long-standing recommendations, such as the 2006 Planning Commission consultation paper on regulation, which emphasised that “the selection, appointment, and removal of chairpersons and members should be insulated against any perceived interference or manipulation that may influence the outcome”. How will a subservient DPB apply data protection effectively? Rule 5 exempts data processing for subsidies from consent requirements. In such cases, can there be any meaningful accountability? It is not unreasonable to foresee scenarios where the DPB may fail to act promptly or effectively, particularly when complaints involve powerful government entities such as the UIDAI that handles Aadhaar. It raises fundamental doubts about what it means for community organisations that may approach it for redress on user rights for things as simple as getting a data record corrected to receive rations.

Finally, regarding Rule 22, which contains the power of the government to requisition information, there is an absence of limitations and safeguards. As many may read this column, they may still wonder why the data protection rules are too late, too little, too vague? The answer may be provided by Mr. Dey who framed his characterisation of the digital policies of the Indian state with a reference to Through the Looking-Glass. When Alice probes Humpty Dumpty on how the same word can have different meanings, his reply captures the core of India’s data protection regime: “The question is... which is to be master — that’s all”.

Apar Gupta is an advocate and the founder-director of the Internet Freedom Foundation. Views are personal.



COL RAJEEV AGARWAL (RETIRED) SAYS DIPLOMACY MUST ADAPT SWIFTLY AS INDIA RISES GLOBALLY

Ministry of External Affairs needs reforms

India is on the rise, thanks to its consistent economic growth, political stability, and a bold, autonomous foreign policy. Whether it is the success of its G20 presidency, its strategic autonomy during the Russia-Ukraine conflict, its leadership in vaccine diplomacy during COVID-19, or its initiative in voicing the concerns of the Global South, India has established itself as a major player in global affairs.

However, with this increased global stature comes the need for an organisational framework that supports and sustains such ambitions. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) needs to keep pace with the demands of this new era and evolve to meet them. A critical examination of its staffing, structure, and operational approach reveals significant gaps that must be addressed urgently.

The MEA is staffed with about 850 Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officers tasked with formulating and executing foreign policy across 193 embassies and consulates worldwide. While the annual intake of IFS officers has increased from 12-14 to 32-35 in recent years, it remains grossly inadequate. Comparatively, the U.S. has around 14,500 foreign service officers; the U.K., 4,600; and Russia around 4,500 officers.

Given the current intake rate, India would require decades to reach an optimal workforce of 1,500 officers. To address this challenge, the Ministry should consider lateral hiring and absorbing officers from other government services, including defence personnel with experience as defence attachés and academics specialising in international relations. Such recruitment should be subject to stringent selection criteria and probation periods to ensure quality. Additionally,



consultants could be engaged for specialised roles. The current perception is that they are stop-gap appointees.

The MEA’s internal structure requires reorganisation to reduce fragmentation and improve coordination. It has many small divisions, especially territorial ones, which often result in inefficiencies. For instance, India’s immediate neighbourhood, a declared priority in its foreign policy, is managed by four separate divisions: the PAI Division (Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran), the BM Division (Bangladesh and Myanmar), the Northern Division (Nepal and Bhutan) and the IOR Division (Sri Lanka, Maldives, and other nations in the Indian Ocean Region). While inputs from these are collated at higher levels, such fragmentation increases the risk of oversight and hinders cohesive regional engagement.

Similarly, the Gulf Division oversees eight Gulf countries, and the WANA Division handles the rest of West Asia and North Africa. Surprisingly, Iran and Türkiye, two pivotal nations in the region, do not fall under

either division. Instead, Türkiye is managed by the Central Europe Division, while Iran falls under the PAI Division. Many similar misalignments highlight the need for restructuring and consolidating divisions to create a more efficient and integrated approach.

While officers posted abroad enjoy substantial financial and administrative support, their counterparts in Delhi face significant challenges. Housing facilities have improved, but are still inadequate to accommodate the growing cadre. Furthermore, financial incentives and allowances for officers posted in India are limited, making domestic postings less appealing than foreign assignments. Providing better housing, medical coverage, and educational facilities for their families could work wonders for the morale of these officers. Also, offering financial incentives for Delhi postings could help. After all, this is where critical assessments are made, and key policies are formulated before being executed abroad.

The MEA has long debated the balance between generalist and specialist roles within the IFS. Language skills, a key aspect of diplomatic expertise, often fall victim to the rotational posting system. Officers undergo rigorous training in one foreign language during their initial years and are typically posted in countries where that language is spoken. However, subsequent postings often do not align with their linguistic expertise, reducing the long-term benefits of this training.

To address this, at least one language-trained officer should be posted in each embassy to reduce dependence on interpreters. Often, in tricky negotiations, language skills have proved to be a game changer, and the Ministry could leverage this aspect. Moreover, as officers progress in their careers, they should be encouraged to become specialists or subject matter experts.

As technology increasingly influences foreign policy, the MEA must build capacity in fields such as cybersecurity, space policy, and artificial intelligence. Expecting all IFS officers to master these highly technical areas alongside their core responsibilities is unrealistic. Instead, the Ministry should hire and retain domain specialists who can focus exclusively on these issues throughout their careers.

Steps in the right direction

Despite these challenges, the MEA has made significant efforts to evolve. The establishment of divisions such as Policy, Planning and Research, and the Centre for Contemporary China Studies, reflects its intent to adapt to emerging global trends. The dynamic leadership of Dr. S. Jaishankar has been instrumental in the display of innovation and greater assertiveness in foreign policy and also, as he emphasises, in aligning foreign policy with India’s aspirations to become a ‘Viksit Bharat’ (Developed India).

As India moves towards its 100 years of independence in 2047, its foreign policy must evolve in tandem with its global ambitions.

Col Rajeev Agarwal (retired) is former Director at Ministry of External affairs, New Delhi



BOOKS: REVIEW

New book delves into Tamil identity through the ages

Nirmala Lakshman’s *The Tamils: A Portrait of a Community* is a sweeping, nuanced exploration of the Tamil people, their history, culture, and identity. The book begins with a striking and unconventional opening: a dive into prehistory at the archaeological site of Attirampakkam. While this might seem tangential at first, it lays the groundwork for understanding the Tamil people’s deep connection to their geography and the ancient roots of their culture. This introduction signals the expansive scope of the book and Lakshman’s intent to situate the Tamils within a rich and layered historical context.

A Broad Chronological Canvas

The narrative follows a broad chronological structure, starting from the ancient tinai — the five natural regions of Tamilakam, which shaped the lives and cultures of its people — and moving through the eras of the Pallavas,

Pandyas, Cholas, and Cheras. Lakshman devotes significant attention to these dynasties, bringing their contributions to art, architecture, and governance vividly to life. The book then transitions into the colonial period, India’s struggle for independence, and the emergence of modern Tamil Nadu, described as a “progressive and paradoxical” state.

Despite the scope of the book, Lakshman manages to move beyond a straightforward political history. Her narrative seamlessly integrates insights from archaeology, linguistics, numismatics, epigraphy, and literature, offering readers a multidimensional understanding of Tamil heritage.

A Genre-Bending Approach

Lakshman’s background as a journalist adds another layer to the book. She employs a mix of narrative history, travel writing, and personal reflection, often peppered with one-on-one interviews. This approach allows

her to present multiple perspectives, making the book accessible to a broad audience while remaining intellectually rigorous. For instance, she delves into the enduring mystery surrounding the murder of Aditya Karikala, presenting competing theories without imposing a definitive conclusion. This neutrality enriches the narrative, though some readers might wish for a more authoritative stance in certain sections.

Rich Narrative and Personal Touches

Lakshman’s storytelling shines in her choice of vivid anecdotes. One such moment recounts the discovery of ancient frescoes in the Brihadeeswara Temple by S.K. Govindaswami in 1931. Armed with a baby petromax lamp, Govindaswami’s awe and excitement are palpable, likened to Howard Carter’s discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb. This emphasis on personal stories makes the history



The Tamils: A Portrait of a Community by Nirmala Lakshman; Aleph; 464 pages; Rs 999

feel immediate and alive.

Similarly, Lakshman’s description of the lesser-known Alanthurai temple is a gem in itself. Her admiration for this small Chola temple, with its intricate sculptures and unique architectural details, reveals her deep personal engagement with the subject matter.

What It Means to Be Tamil

In the final chapter, Lakshman grapples with the question: “What does it mean to be Tamil?” Through interviews and reflections, she presents varied responses rooted in language, culture, and a sense of history. While acknowledging the pride many Tamils take in their heritage, she also cautions against a narrow sense of Tamil exceptionalism, encouraging readers to appreciate

the interconnections that make Tamil identity both distinct and universal.

The Tamils: A Portrait of a Community is an erudite and engaging work that celebrates the richness of Tamil history and culture while addressing its complexities. Lakshman’s ability to blend rigorous research with compelling storytelling makes this book both an enlightening and enjoyable read. It is a valuable addition to the growing body of literature on Indian communities and a must-read for anyone interested in understanding the roots and evolution of Tamil identity. Through its breadth and depth, the book not only pays homage to the Tamils but also invites readers to reflect on the broader question of cultural and historical identity in a rapidly globalising world.

Lakshman also explores the role of Tamil women in shaping the cultural and social fabric of Tamilakam. She brings to light forgotten stories of female poets, queens, and activists whose contributions remain underappreciated. This focus provides a refreshing perspective, offering a fuller picture of Tamil society across different epochs.

U.S. AI Chip Export Restrictions Threaten India's AI & Tech Growth

NEW DELHI: Indian technology leaders have voiced concerns over new U.S. regulations restricting AI chip exports, warning of potential setbacks to India's artificial intelligence development ambitions. Industry experts suggest the restrictions could impede access to crucial GPUs and drive up procurement costs for Indian enterprises. Ashok Chandak, president of the India Electronics and Semiconductor Association (IESA), emphasised that the regulations could particularly impact large-scale AI data centers requiring hundreds of thousands of GPUs, potentially putting Indian companies at a competitive disadvantage globally. This comes at a crucial time when India's National AI Mission is working to establish infrastructure with over 10,000



GPUs through public-private partnerships, backed by a Rs 10,000 crore investment spread across five years. HCL founder and EPIC Foundation chairman Ajai Chowdhry advocates for India to develop indigenous chip technology as a strategic response. He highlighted India's progress with RISC-V technology at IIT Madras, suggesting an expansion of the Design

Linked Incentive policy under the India Semiconductor Mission to support domestic chip development. Chowdhry proposed increasing funding from Rs 30 crore to between Rs 50-150 crore, expressing optimism about India's potential to create its own equivalents of NVIDIA or AMD within a decade. While the regulations are set to take effect in 120 days, their

long-term impact remains uncertain with the incoming Trump administration having the authority to modify them. IESA's Chandak noted that while immediate effects on India might be limited, the quantity caps could pose challenges for Indian conglomerates' scaling plans in the future. Despite these concerns, major technology companies continue to show confidence in India's AI potential. Microsoft's recent announcement of a USD 3 billion investment in Indian cloud and AI infrastructure, including plans for a fourth datacenter region by 2026, demonstrates ongoing international commitment to developing India's AI computing ecosystem and supporting its growing community of AI startups and researchers.

Government Seeks Industry Suggestions on Reducing Compliance Burden for MSMEs

NEW DELHI: In a major boost to India's Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), the Centre has initiated talks on reforms aimed at reducing the regulatory load on these businesses. The discussions, which involve key ministries such as MSME, Corporate Affairs, and Law and Justice, focus on simplifying processes related to registration, mergers, acquisitions, and business closures. The aim is to make it easier for MSMEs to thrive while addressing the sector's significant challenges, including financing difficulties. The MSME sector, which includes over 50 million businesses, contributes around a third of India's annual gross value added (GVA) and provides employment to over 216 million people. With such a large and vital footprint, any efforts to ease



operational difficulties are of immense significance. One of the key areas of focus is aligning the Companies Act, 2013, with the MSMED Act, 2006. Currently, there is a disparity in how small companies are defined under the two legislations. While the Companies Act defines small companies based on their paid-up capital and turnover, the MSME Development Act uses investment in plant and machinery as a criterion. The government is also ex-

ploring the possibility of decriminalising certain offences for MSMEs, particularly those related to the conduct of independent directors, and reducing compliance costs associated with financial filings. Industry associations have suggested further amendments to make the regulatory environment more MSME-friendly, including relaxing e-form requirements and decriminalising additional offences. Federation of Indian Micro & Small and Medium Enterprises (FISME) have also recommended simplifying compliance requirements related to the appointment of independent directors, women directors, and provisions pertaining to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) under the Companies Act.

Viksit Bharat: PHDCCI's 5-point strategy for job creation



RAJU WILLIAM
New Delhi
PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PHDCCI) has proposed a comprehensive five-pronged strategy aimed at creating employment and fostering economic growth and development in the country. At the top of the five pronged strategy, PHDCCI suggests prioritizing the Manufacturing Sector which contributes approximately 16% to India's GDP; the target should be to increase this share to 25% by 2030. Achieving this target will require a focused approach to improve productivity and reduce the cost of key manufacturing inputs including the cost of capital, power, logistics, compliances, and land, said Hemant Jain, President, PHDCCI in a press statement. Over the last few years, the government has made commendable strides by removing over 42,000 compliances, thus creating a more conducive environment for businesses. Further, more needs to be done for the ease of doing business at the factory level so that entrepreneurs are able to deploy more and more workforce in their respective premises. The second crucial strategy is to strengthen the MSMEs. As these are the backbone of India's economy with over 60 million MSMEs that contribute approximately 30% to the nation's GDP and employ over 110 million people. This sector plays a central role in both job creation and innovation. Globally, the role of MSMEs in job creation is immense. Countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan owe much of their economic resilience and job growth to small and medium enterprises.

National Committee on Trade Facilitation Reorganizes Working Groups

NEW DELHI: Working Groups under National Committee on Trade Facilitation (NCTF) have been reorganized by the Central Board of Indirect Taxes & Customs, Department of Revenue, Ministry of Finance. NCTF is outcome of multilateral Trade Facilitation Agreement under World Trade Organization (WTO) which has been ratified by India in 2016. The reorganization follows the meeting of the Steering Committee Chaired by the Cabinet Secretary recently. There were five Working groups operating earlier under the NCTF which have now been merged into four. The reconstituted groups are: Working Group on Compliance and Regulations to be headed jointly by Member (Customs), CBIC and DG (DGT); Working Group on Infrastructure Up-gradation to be headed jointly by Special Secretary (Logistics), DPIIT and Special Secretary & Member (Customs), CBIC; Working Group on Time Release Study and Enhancing Efficiency to be headed jointly by Joint Secretary (Customs) and Joint Secretary (Ports)

HCLTech posts 5.5 pc net income growth at Rs 4,591 crore in Q3

MUMBAI: Global technology company HCLTech on Monday posted 5.5 per cent growth (year-on-year) in net income at Rs 4,591 crore for Q3 FY25, as revenue grew 5.1 per cent at Rs 29,890 crore on an annual basis. The EBIT margin was 19.5 per cent in Q3, up from 18.58 in Q2 FY25. EBIT margin was up 90 bps (on-quarter), beating analysts' estimates of 19.3 per cent. The company added 2,134 employees in Q3 and now has a workforce of 220,755. The attrition rate was at 13.2 per cent, up from 12.8 per cent in Q3 of last year. "HCLTech delivers another quarter of solid growth at 3.8 per cent QoQ in constant currency and EBIT at 19.5 per



cent. I am pleased that this growth is powered by broad-based performance across business lines as our clients across verticals and geos reaffirm their confidence in our digital and AI offerings," said C Vijayakumar, CEO and Managing Director, HCLTech. The new deal bookings were

healthy during the quarter at \$2.1 billion with wins across services and software. The company also announced dividend of Rs 18 per share, including special dividend of Rs 6 per share. "We are positioning ourselves for a future that is transformative, with AI empowering businesses and employees. We continue to see growing demand for our AI led propositions across services and software offerings," said Vijayakumar. The top-line growth with healthy margins is reflected in highest ever EBIT of Rs 5,821 crore and net profit of Rs 4,591 crore this quarter. "Cash conversion (on LTM basis) continues to outpace our 5-year FCF/NI average of 126 per cent with FCF/NI of 134 per cent this quarter. This has further strengthened our balance sheet, helping us end the quarter with our highest ever cash balance of Rs 27,707 crore," said Shiv Walia, Chief Financial Officer, HCLTech. According to analysts, the Q3 performance and revised guidance reflects that the company is on track to deliver industry leading growth among tier 1 IT companies for FY25.

EMA Partners India Limited has Rs 76 crores IPO

DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai

EMA Partners India Limited is coming out with its Initial Public Offering (IPO) priced at Rs 117 and Rs 124 per equity share - aggregating Rs 76 crores - which will open on January 17, 2025 and close on January 21, 2025. The IPO is scheduled to be listed on the EMERGE platform of NSE. EMA Partners India Limited is a leading executive search firm delivering customized leadership hiring solutions to clients from diverse sectors in India and abroad. Headquartered in Mumbai, the Company mainly focuses on hiring for C-Suite and Board-level positions across India, Middle East and Singapore.



"We are strategically positioned in India, UAE and Singapore as these are the fastest-growing recruitment markets with Singapore and UAE bringing in 32% business," said Krishnan Sudarshan, Chairman & Managing Director, EMA Partners India Limited, while highlighting the IPO funds usage towards team growth (37%), general corporate purposes and unidentified acquisitions (33%), repayment of loan for office purposes (8%), capital expenditure for upgrading existing IT infrastructure (9%) and OFS (13%).

FY24 REVIEW

Product Portfolio of Top Indian Pharmaceutical Companies



DR. ANIL KUMAR ANGRISH

Indian pharmaceutical companies have done exceptionally well in the domestic as well as in international markets, with their therapeutic coverage, e.g., Sun Pharma is the largest pharmaceutical company in India with a market share of 8.5% during FY24 as per AIOCD AWACS March 2024 data, and the 13th largest generic pharmaceutical company in the US. The company is ranked number 1 by prescription across 12 different classes of doctors, and 32 brands of the company figure among India's top 300 brands. Cipla is the third-largest pharmaceutical company in India, first in the pharma prescription market of South Africa, the sixth largest Indian exporter to Europe and the fourth largest by prescription in the US Gx inhalation products. Mankind Pharma claims that "India is the pharmacy of the world. Mankind is the pharmacy for Bharat" as it has the highest contribution from Tier 2 to Tier 6 Cities and Rural amongst Top 10 in Indian Pharmaceutical Market (IPM). Despite being one of the youngest companies in India, Mankind is the 3rd largest in terms of Volume, and the 4th largest Company by Value in the IPM. Torrent Pharma is the first among Indian pharma companies in Brazil. In generic pharma market of Germany, Torrent has 5th rank overall and is first among Indian pharmaceutical companies. Torrent has 11th rank among Indian players in the USA market. Alkem Laboratories is the fifth largest player in the domestic market (Annual Report 2023-24, p.12). Based on IQVIA MAT 2023 data, the company held number 1 position in Anti-infectives, number 2 position in Vitamins/Minerals/Nutrients segment, and number 3 in gastrointestinal, Pain/Anal-

Table 1: Product Launches by Cipla Limited - Geography-wise (2023-24)

Financial Year	Product Launches
India	14
USA	13
Europe	20
South Africa and Global Access	10
Emerging Markets	44
Total	101

Source: Compiled from Annual Report of Cipla Limited for FY2023-24 (p.65)

Table 2: Percentage of revenue generated by the different product types and by the different types of product innovations launched by Lupin (2023-24)

India		Global	
Product optimizations launched in the previous 5 years	12%	Product optimizations launched in the previous 5 years	27%
Unchanged or minimally changed product or services	88%	Unchanged or minimally changed product or services	73%
Total (=100% only)	100%	Total (=100% only)	100%

Source: Integrated Annual Report 2023-24, Lupin Limited (p.172)

1,211 products, DRL had a total of 391



branded products in India. Cipla's product portfolio had 1,500 products in 50+ dosage forms and 65 therapeutic categories. Torrent Pharma has earned the title of 'The Company with the Most First Launches', and the company has 2,000+ registered products. Product portfolio of Zydus Lifesciences consists of more than 5,000 products from all their business verticals. Alkem Labs had a portfolio comprising 800+ brands and 1,500+ Stock-keeping Units (SKUs). Alkem had 1,100+ product registrations in various international markets. Key product portfolio of Alkem included 44 products ranked in the Top 3 by market share, with 13 products having a market share greater than 30%. Robust new product pipeline, including first-to-market products, puts a pharmaceutical company in a position of strength for future growth. In FY24, DRL expressed its Sustainability Goal that 25% of new-launches by the company to be first-to-market by 2027. Pharma companies introduce new products which bring affordable healthcare solutions to patients, e.g., for product accessibility and affordability, Lupin Limited had secured over 80+ registrations of anti-TB and ARV medicines across various nations in FY24 alone. Pharmaceutical companies focus on developing medical products for a wide range of therapeutic areas and dosage forms, e.g., product portfolio of Sun Pharma spans diverse therapeutic segments, and India Business therapeutic revenue break-up for FY24 showed top contributors - Cardiology (17%), Neuropsychiatry (16%), Gastroenterology

(12%), Anti-infectives (11%), Pain/analgesics (8%), Diabetology (7%), Dermatology (6%) etc. These companies actively engage in addressing all stages of the healthcare cycle, from prevention to diagnosis and rehabilitation. With emphasis on Environment, top pharmaceutical companies are creating sustainable products these days, e.g., by replacing standard propellants with green propellants in inhaler products. Top Indian pharmaceutical companies are also improving their 'product-mix' by focusing on new product launches and by enhancing their offerings in their respective segments across various geographies, e.g., DRL launched 181 new products in FY24, out of which 20 new products were launched in the U.S., 43 in Europe and 106 in Emerging markets and 13 in India. During this period, Sun Pharma launched 52 products in India and Mankind Pharma launched 42 products. Cipla launched 101 products in 2023-24 as compared to 78 in 2022-23, 93 in 2021-22, and 81 in 2020-21. Top Indian pharmaceutical companies are enhancing their product portfolio through products acquired from other companies in different categories, e.g., DRL's acquisition of Generics prescription product portfolio in the U.S. from Mayne Pharma Group Limited included 44 commercial products, 42 approved

50% of their R&D spend in 2023-24 in complex products especially inhalation and complex injectables. Further, this was to maintain the lead on the respiratory front by being the first to bring products on key platforms to developed markets. For Lupin, complex products constituted around 40% of the company's U.S. portfolio with an expected growth of more than 50% in next few years. In FY24, more than 80 per cent of the company's new product sales in the U.S. came from non oral-solid products. Lupin also acquired Medisol S.A.S. and Lymed S.A.S. in France which is the second-largest injectable market in Europe. This added to the company's complex generics portfolio through its injectable products. The company's stated goal for 2024 was that product portfolio should be more than 70% in complex dosage forms, and the company could achieve the goal to the extent of 74%. Aurobindo Pharma also focused on filing of complex products and launched 62 new products within the US formulations segment, including 14 specialty products. Top Indian pharmaceutical companies are paying attention to biologics, biosimilars, and vaccines, e.g., DRL has developed biosimilar business into a fully integrated organisation, with capabilities across development, manufacturing, and commercialisation of a range of biosimilar products in oncology and immunology over the last 25 years. DRL became the second largest vaccines player in India in FY24, through an exclusive partnership with Sanofi to distribute their vaccine brands in India. In FY24, Aurobindo Pharma had 14 biosimilars in its product pipeline. Aurobindo Pharma has a subsidiary CuraTeQ Biologics

that focuses on development of biosimilars. Pharmaceutical companies in India are also coming up digital healthcare solutions including digital therapeutic products which offer drug-free treatment and disease management platforms that enable patients to better manage their condition. A notable case is of DRL that launched Nervivo, a digital therapeutics product, for migraine management and a digital platform DailyBloom, for IBS condition management. Top pharmaceutical companies also observe the standing of their products in terms of their ranking as the top products in their respective categories across different markets, e.g., Lupin has 25 products ranked as the top products in their respective categories and 16 products in the second position across various Anatomical Therapeutic Chemical (ATC) classifications in South Africa. Top Indian pharmaceutical companies also anticipate market erosion in their top products due to new entrants, so these companies remain prepared to counter this with a robust pipeline as well as strategic marketing programs. Various factors such as cost and price pressures from payers, pricing pressures due to government initiatives to lower prescription drug costs, government expenditure on health, price control, the loss of exclusivity, adoption of new technologies had implications for product portfolio of pharma companies. Some of these pharmaceutical companies also attempted to develop products internally to lower their reliance on licensed products. Inherent challenges are associated with managing a portfolio of drug products across multiple international markets. Success of product in these markets depends on multiple factors such as timely identification, selection, and development of viable molecules, as well as being among the first companies to launch or file for regulatory approvals. Pharma companies focus on launching products which

face patent expiry in international markets. In the USA, generic drugs accounted for a substantial around 91% of prescriptions. Prominent Indian companies focus on this market, e.g., Torrent that is ranked 11th amongst the US generic Indian companies has 103 ANDA approvals (including 4 tentative approvals) and its pipeline consists of 34 pending approvals and 28 products under development to be filed over the next 3 years. During 2023-24, the company filed 2 ANDAs. Sun Pharma has 635 cumulative filed ANDAs and 531 approved ANDAs till March 31, 2024. Top Indian pharmaceutical companies are also engaging Contract Manufacturing Organisations (CMOs) for high-volume products, e.g., Torrent Pharma reported engaging CMOs for products such as Escitalopram, Citalopram, and Zolpidem. Besides this, top Indian pharmaceutical companies are increasing focus on Consumer Healthcare (CHC) Market too that includes personal healthcare products available without a prescription. CHC market includes over-the-counter (OTC) drugs, health supplements, disinfectants, cosmetics, and consumer medical devices. Risk Treatment Plan can vary from company to company regarding product portfolio, e.g., Lupin implemented Integrated Business Planning in FY24 to identify its product portfolio in advance and mitigate risks effectively. The company reviews the performance of their portfolio of products and services. In a way, product portfolio of progressive pharmaceutical companies aligns with industry trends and it is the Intellectual Capital of a pharmaceutical company that powers ability to consistently expand its product portfolio.

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RBI Governor to Lead Pre-Monetary Policy Consultations with Bank Leaders

NEW DELHI: Newly appointed Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Sanjay Malhotra is set to hold his first interaction with bank leaders on Thursday as part of pre-monetary policy consultations.

The meetings, scheduled ahead of the February 5-7 policy review, will see Malhotra and senior RBI officials engaging with public sector bank chiefs in the morning followed by private sector bank leaders in the afternoon, according to Business Standard sources.

The February policy review comes at a critical juncture, with India's economic indicators showing mixed signals. The country's GDP growth has decelerated to a two-year low of 5.4 percent during July-Sept, while inflation remains elevated at 5.48 percent in November.

The central bank has maintained the policy repo rate at 6.5



percent since February 2023, following a cumulative increase of 250 basis points that began in May 2022.

While the policy stance was shifted to neutral in October, some market participants anticipate the initiation of a rate-cutting cycle in the upcoming February review.

Banking sector dynamics are expected to dominate the dis-

gap.

The banking system is currently experiencing tight liquidity conditions, with the deficit reaching Rs 2 trillion. The RBI's intervention in the foreign exchange market, selling dollars to support the rupee, has contributed to this situation. The Indian rupee recently touched a new low of 85.97 against the US dollar, marking a nearly 3 percent decline in 2024, contrasting with its relatively stable performance in 2023.

Following the December policy review's 50 basis point reduction in Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) to 4 percent, which released Rs 1.16 trillion in primary liquidity, there are calls for further CRR cuts. The banking sector is seeking additional measures to address the ongoing liquidity constraints.

ussions, with particular focus on growth, liquidity, and deposit mobilisation.

The industry has witnessed a significant slowdown in credit growth, dropping to 11.4 percent in the fortnight ended December 27 from 20.2 percent in the previous financial year. Deposit growth has now converged with loan growth, addressing earlier concerns about the widening

RBI Eases FEMA Rules to Boost Rupee Payments in Cross-Border Deals



MUMBAI: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Thursday announced the issuing of revised Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) regulations to permit more liberal use of INR accounts held by NRIs to make payments, in order to promote cross border transactions in the Indian rupee and national currencies of trading partner countries.

According to new regulations, overseas branches of Authorised Dealer banks will be able to open INR accounts for a person resident outside India for settlement of all permissible current account and capital account transactions with a person resident in India. "Persons resi-

dent outside India will also be able to settle bona fide transactions with other persons resident outside India

the RBI statement said. According to the RBI statement, these changes have been made in the extant FEMA regulations after holding consultations with the Central Government.

To encourage greater use of Indian Rupee (INR) for trade transactions, in July 2022, an additional arrangement in the form of Special Rupee Vostro Account (SRVA) was introduced. Several foreign banks have since opened SRVAs with banks in India. The Central Bank has also signed memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the central banks of the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia and Maldives, to encourage cross-border transactions in local currencies. Further, in December 2023 the Foreign Exchange Management (Manner of Receipt and Payment) Regulations were revised to enable cross border transactions in all foreign currencies (including local currencies of trading partner countries) and INR.

The new rules further allow persons resident outside India to be able to use their balances held in repatriable INR accounts for foreign investment, including FDI, in non-debt instruments. Besides, Indian exporters will be able to open accounts in any foreign currency overseas for settlement of trade transactions, including receiving export proceeds and using these proceeds to pay for imports. The revised regulations and directions to effect these changes have been issued,

Government Plans Second TReDS Window to Empower Small MSMEs

NEW DELHI: In a bid to enhance financial inclusion for India's micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), the government is exploring the introduction of a second Trade Receivables Discounting System (TReDS) window for transactions ranging from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 10 lakh, officials said.

The move aims to address challenges faced by smaller enterprises in accessing timely working capital while fostering business growth. The new TReDS window will enable banks to access digital data of MSME suppliers, including their names, GST details, and transactional history over the past 2-5 years. This will mitigate banks' concerns about discounting smaller invoices, which are often deemed cost-intensive. The inclusion of a credit guarantee scheme is also under consideration to further reduce risks for financiers.

TReDS, an online platform facilitating invoice financing, allows MSMEs to receive faster payments by selling unpaid invoices at a discounted rate. Despite its potential, many MSMEs face hurdles such as high onboarding fees, unregistered buyers, and dependency on buyer approvals for bill discounting. "The second window will address these gaps by targeting smaller transactions and offering an unsecured facility with calculated risks," an official said. "It is crucial to empower MSMEs to upload proof of supply and invoices without awaiting buyer approval", reported mint.

MSMEs form the backbone of the Indian economy, contributing significantly to employment and entrepreneurship. However, delayed payments from large buyers often hamper their growth, as some companies use MSMEs' credit as working capital instead of relying on banks. The integration of GST data with the TReDS platform is expected to streamline operations, offering transparency on payment timelines and buyer behaviour. This data can be leveraged through AI for monitoring and automation, ensuring timely payments. Industry experts, however, stress the need for policy reforms to make TReDS more accessible. Anil Bhardwaj, Secretary General of FISME, suggested waiving registration fees and expanding buyer participation to maximize impact.

Govt Moves to Boost FDI, Holds Consultations with Pension Funds and Investment Firms



NEW DELHI: The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) convened its second round of stakeholder consultations on Wednesday, meeting with pension funds and investment firms to explore strategies for enhancing foreign direct investment (FDI) into India. This follows last week's discussions with law firms and industry chambers, where several policy modifications were proposed.

During the earlier meeting, stakeholders suggested various reforms, including allowing e-commerce companies to utilise FDI in inventory-based models specifically for export purposes.

Additional recommendations focused on clarifying beneficial ownership definitions under press note three, which currently requires government approval for investments from countries sharing land borders with India, and refining single-brand retail trading policies.

Small Finance Banks in Slower Growth Lane in FY2025 amid Asset Quality Challenges

NEWDELHI: Small finance banks (SFBs) in India are bracing for a slowdown, with growth rates expected to moderate to 18-20 percent in FY2025, according to a recent analysis by credit rating agency ICRA.

This marks a notable deceleration from the sector's robust 24 percent expansion in FY2024, reflecting mounting challenges in both growth and profitability metrics.

The microfinance segment appears particularly vulnerable, with ICRA projecting the gross non-performing asset (GNPA) ratio to reach 2.6-2.8 percent by



March 2025, an increase from 2.1 percent in FY2024.

This deterioration in asset quality is expected to impact profitability, with return on assets (RoA) forecast to decline to 1.4-1.6 percent in FY2025 from 2.1 percent in the previous fiscal year, though a modest recovery

to 1.6-1.8 percent is anticipated in FY2026.

In response to these challenges, SFBs are actively diversifying their portfolios, according to Manushree Saggur, Senior Vice President and Sector Head of Financial Sector Ratings, ICRA.

The banks are increasingly focusing on secured asset classes, including vehicle loans, business loans, LAP, gold loans, and housing finance, reducing their exposure to unsecured lending. This strategic shift is expect-

ed to drive growth in FY2026, particularly as pressures in the microfinance sector persist.

Asset quality trends have already shown signs of stress, with the GNPA ratio increasing by 0.5 percent to 2.8 percent by September 2024, primarily due to defaults in microfinance loans.

ICRA anticipates further deterioration in FY2025, with potential ripple effects impacting secured asset classes as well. The combination of loan seasoning and stressed microfinance operations is expected to maintain volatility in asset quality metrics.

Net direct tax collections surge 16 pc to Rs 16.90 lakh crore so far in FY25

NEW DELHI: India's net direct tax collections recorded a robust 15.88 per cent jump to Rs 16.90 lakh crore during April 1, 2024-January 12, 2025 of the current financial year compared to the same period of the previous financial year, according to latest figures compiled by the Income Tax Department.

The gross direct tax collections, before refunds, shot up by 19.94 per cent to Rs 20.64



crore during this period compared to the corresponding figure of Rs 17.21 lakh crore in the same period of the previous year.

Personal income tax collections during the period surged

21.6 per cent to Rs 8.74 lakh crore compared to Rs 7.2 lakh crore in the previous year while corporate tax collection rose by 8.12 per cent to Rs 7.7 lakh crore compared to Rs 7.10 lakh crore in the same period of 2023-24.

Securities Transaction Tax (STT) collection, which is also a component of direct tax, surged by as much as 75 per cent to Rs 44,500 crore during this period compared to Rs 25,415 crore in the corresponding period of the

previous year. Refunds to the tune of Rs 3.74 lakh crore were also issued during this period which is 42.5 per cent higher year-on-year.

The buoyancy in tax collections reflects a strong macroeconomic financial position with the government raising more funds to undertake investments in large infrastructure projects to spur economic growth and take up welfare schemes for the poor.

No likelihood of recession in India



SATISH SINGH
The National Statistical Office (NSO) released the first advance estimate of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the financial year 2024-25 on January 7 and projected the real GDP growth rate to be 6.4 percent during this period, which was 8.2 percent during the previous financial year. At the same time, the Reserve Bank of India has projected real GDP to grow at the rate of 6.6 percent during the financial year 2024-25.

According to the NSO, nominal GDP may grow at the rate of 9.7 percent during the financial year 2024-25. This is also one of the methods to calculate GDP. However, GDP calculation and its accounting in India is done in terms of real GDP.

The GDP growth rate was minus 6.60 percent during the financial year 2020-21. Thereafter, during FY 2021-22, FY 2022-23 and FY 2023-24, the GDP growth rate was 8.70 percent, 7.2 percent and 8.2 percent respectively, while it was 6.7 percent in the first quarter of FY 2024-25 and 5.4 percent in the second quarter and in the first advance estimate of the current financial year, GDP growth rate during FY 2024-25 has been estimated to be 6.4, which is lower than the last 3 financial years.

Here, according to a report of Forbes dated 4 November 2024, US is the world's largest economy with a GDP of \$29.17 trillion. In this order, China with a GDP of \$18.27 trillion, Germany with a GDP of \$4.71 trillion, Japan with a GDP of \$4.07 trillion and India with a GDP of \$3.89

trillion is at second, third, fourth and fifth place correspondingly and on the current pace of growth India is likely to reach the fourth position by FY 2025-26.

According to the NSO, since the production of Kharif crop has been good, the growth rate of the agriculture sector may be 3.8 percent during the financial year 2024-25, whereas the growth rate of the agriculture sector was 1.4 percent during the financial year 2023-24, but the GDP growth rate in other sectors is expected to be low.

For example, the growth rate of the mining sector was 7.1 percent in the financial year 2023-24, which is estimated to decline to 2.9 percent in the financial year 2024-25. The manufacturing sector grew at a rate of 9.9 percent in the financial year 2023-24, which is estimated to be 5.3 percent during the financial year 2024-25. The power sector grew at a rate of 7.5 percent during the period of FY 2023-24, which is estimated to grow at a rate of 6.8 percent during the FY 2024-25. The construction sector grew at a rate of 9.9 percent in the last financial year, which is estimated to grow at 8.6 percent in the current financial year. Trade and hotels grew at a rate of 6.4 percent in the FY 2023-24, which is estimated to grow at a rate of 5.8 percent in the current financial year. Real estate grew at a rate of 8.4 percent in the FY 2023-24, which is estimated to grow at a rate of 7.3 percent in the current financial year.

India's economy is basically consumption centric, but consumption has decreased significantly in the last few months. Due to inflation, the purchasing power of consumers has decreased. Inflation plays an important role in



determining one's purchasing power. When it increases, the prices of both goods and services increase, which reduces the purchasing power of a person and the demand for goods and services decreases.

Then, their sales decrease, their production decreases, workers are laid off, employment generation decreases, etc. Meanwhile, geopolitical crisis, presence of Houthi rebels in the Red Sea, etc. are also having a negative impact on import-export and supply chain and due to the decrease in economic activities, the quarterly profits of companies are decreasing. As a result, foreign investors are selling their stake in India in the hope of higher returns.

The repo rate has remained at 6.5 percent since February 2023, due to which the lending rate also remains at a high level. The loan uptake fell to 11.1 percent till November 15, 2024, from 20.6 percent in the corresponding period last year. The deposit growth rate has also declined significantly during this period and its average growth rate is just 6.7 percent since March.

To compensate for the reduction in bank deposits, banks are redeeming government bonds before the maturity date. Due to the shortage of capital, the borrowing rate

has also decreased significantly, as the bank is facing difficulty in lending due to lack of capital. The loan rate of banks remains at a high level and the loan uptake is low due to getting loans at expensive rates.

Companies lack capital, due to which they are not able to produce at full capacity. At present, GDP growth rate has declined due to inflation. However, inflation is expected to remain within the tolerance limit set by the Reserve Bank of India in FY 2025 and FY 2026, but keeping in view its many adverse effects, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) and the Central Bank are refraining from cutting the repo rate.

If we compare the Indian economy with the growth rate of the global economy, then our economy is much above the global level. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the global GDP growth rate was 3.2 percent in 2024 and may be 3.3 percent in 2025, whereas, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the global economy can grow at the rate of 3.1 percent in 2024 and 3.2 percent in 2025. China's GDP growth rate in the second quarter of the current financial year was 4.6 percent, while in Japan

this growth rate was 0.9 percent. According to the IMF, the growth rate in England is estimated to be 1.1 percent in the financial year 2024 and 1.5 percent in the financial year 2025, while in Germany the growth rate is estimated to be minus 0.1 percent in the financial year 2024 and 0.7 percent in the financial year 2025. The Indian economy is in a better condition than even the world's most powerful country, US, and it is expected to remain strong in the coming years as well. The growth rate in US is estimated to be 2.7 percent during the financial year 2024 and 2.0 percent in the FY 2025.

Of course, the GDP growth rate is estimated to fall to 6.4 percent in the current financial year and this is less than the last 3 financial years, but on this basis, it cannot be said that recession is about to come in India. This happens when economic activities remain sluggish for a long time, but such is not the situation in India.

A major reason for the slowdown in economic activities right now is inflation. The repo rate has not been cut for a long time, but after the change in the Governor of the Reserve Bank, there is a possibility of a cut in the repo rate in the upcoming monetary review. Thereafter, both borrowing and economic activities will accelerate. Apart from this, India's GDP growth rate is still higher than the major countries of the world and the average global growth rate. Therefore, it would be hasty to say that the Indian economy is about to fall into recession.

Satish Singh, Ahmedabad Based Senior Columnist, views are personal.

World Bank projects India's growth to be 6.7 pc in next two fiscal years

UNITED NATIONS:

The World Bank projects India's economy to grow by 6.7 percent in the next fiscal year starting in April, slightly higher than in the current fiscal year, and continuing to top the growth tally.

The World Bank's Global Economic Prospects released on Thursday estimated the current fiscal year's growth rate at 6.5 per cent, down from the 8.2 per cent in the previous period.

But it said that "the services sector is expected to enjoy sustained expansion, and manufacturing activity will strengthen, supported by government initiatives to improve the business environment", buoying the growth projections of 6.7 per cent for the next two fiscal years.

With global gross domestic product growth rate stuck at 2.7 per cent since 2023 and into the projections till 2026 according to the Bank, India is the world's fastest growing large economy.

China follows it with a projected growth of 4.5 per cent this calendar year, and slowing down to 4 per cent next year.



The world's largest economy, the US, was estimated to have grown by 2.8 last year with the projected growth slowing down to 2.3 per cent this year and 2 per cent next year.

The report warned about the risks to the world economy from trade tensions and tariff hikes without naming the US President-elect Donald Trump, who has threatened to upend world trade. "Adverse trade policy shifts in major economies" could pose a risk for India, the report said. The World Bank projections for India's GDP growth hew closely to the United Nations projections released last week -- 6.6 per cent for this calendar year and 6.8 per cent for next year.

The World Bank attributed the drop in India's growth rate from 8.2 per cent in 2023-24 to 6.5 per cent in the current fiscal year to "a slowdown in investment and weak manufacturing growth".

Wipro's Q3 net profit rises 4.5 pc to Rs 3,254 crore

BENGALURU: IT software major Wipro Ltd reported a 4.5 per cent sequential increase in consolidated net profit to Rs 3,354 crore for the October-December quarter of the current financial year compared to the preceding quarter.

The company has declared an interim dividend of Rs 6 per share.

The total revenue of the company remained flat at Rs 22,319 crore during the third quarter while the IT services revenue for the quarter declined 1.2 per cent sequentially to \$2.63 billion.

Wipro's operating margin



improved by 0.7 per cent to a 3-year high of 17.5 per cent. The company also recorded a decline in its voluntary attrition rate to 15.3 per cent on a trailing 12-month basis, reflecting better employee

retention.

The IT major's large deal bookings rose 6 per cent year-on-year to \$961 million. The new deals bagged by the company were healthcare, financial services, media, and telecommunications. One major deal involved partnering with a US-based health insurer to implement AI-powered platforms aimed at improving operational efficiency and customer experience. Another notable win saw Wipro transform the core banking system of an Indian private bank, leveraging its expertise to build a scalable digital platform.

Bajaj Broking & Tamilnad Mercantile Bank partner to offer unified banking & investment services



NEW DELHI: Bajaj Broking, the broking subsidiary of Bajaj Finance Ltd., today announced a strategic partnership with Tamilnad Mercantile Bank (TMB), to offer a comprehensive 3-in-1 account solution that seamlessly integrates banking, broking and investment services.

The partnership will enable customers of Tamilnad Mercantile Bank to trade online with Bajaj Broking and access its extensive suite of products and services. The cross-func-

tional platform facilitates fund transfers, minimizes paperwork, and provides a unique tech-driven interface for investing in various products.

Commenting on the partnership, Manish Jain, Managing Director, Bajaj Broking said, "We are excited to extend our comprehensive investment solutions to Tamilnad Mercantile Bank customers. Our advanced trading platform aims to deliver transparency and ease in trading across exchanges. We seek to bring the benefits of our technology-driven services and research insights to a wider investor base. This partnership will empower investors with informed decision-making tools and expand our pan-India presence."

Salee S.Nair, Managing Director & CEO, Tamilnad Mercantile Bank said, "We are delighted to partner with one of India's leading broking houses backed by one of the most reputed business groups in the country. This collaboration with Bajaj Broking enables us to offer our customers a comprehensive suite of investment products through a seamless digital platform. As a bank with a 100-year legacy of trust, we reckon the partnership will add significant value to our customers' financial journey and provide access to professional trading and investment services. This integration of banking and broking and investment services is backed by our commitment to evolving with our customers' needs while maintaining our core values of service excellence."

INTERNATIONAL

Twenty seven Killed in Los Angeles Wildfires

LOS ANGELES: The fierce wildfires across the Los Angeles area in Southern California of the US have killed at least 27 people and destroyed more than 12,300 structures in more than a week, local authorities confirmed.

Firefighters continued to make progress on Thursday against two major wildfires in Los Angeles as winds died down in the area, Xinhua news agency reported.

The Palisades Fire, one of the largest active wildfires in the Los Angeles region, has scorched 23,713 acres (95.96 sq km) so far. The fire, which broke out on January 7, is 22 per cent contained, up from 17 per cent a day earlier.

"Weather conditions return to seasonally normal, and fire is expected to remain within the current perimeter with no



additional growth anticipated," said the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) in an update Thursday.

"Crews continue to establish and improve the fire line, seek out and extinguish hot spots and construct containment lines to limit further structural

damage within the areas still at risk," said Cal Fire.

Another major active fire, the Eaton Fire, has scorched 14,117 acres (57.1 sq km) near Altadena and Pasadena. The fire's containment jumped to 55 per cent, up from 45 per cent a day earlier.

Calmer overnight and early

morning winds reduced the fire's activity, allowing firefighters to make good progress in securing containment lines, according to Cal Fire.

But the agency pointed out that with the returning Santa Ana winds Monday, widespread critical fire weather conditions remain present in parts of Southern California.

"We are expecting a much-needed break from the fire weather concerns to close this week," noted the US National Weather Service, which had issued a rare "particularly dangerous situation" warning earlier this week.

"Next week is a concern. While confident that we will not see a repeat of last week, dangerous fire weather conditions are expected," said the agency.

Pakistan's Former PM Imran Khan, Wife Bushra Bibi Sentenced to Jail in Corruption Case

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his wife, Bushra Bibi, were convicted in the £190m Al-Qadir University Project Trust case on Friday. Imran Khan was sentenced to 14 years in prison, while Bushra Bibi received a seven-year jail term.

Judge Nasir Javed Rana delivered the verdict, which had been delayed three times, in a makeshift courtroom at Adiala Jail. The court also imposed fines of Rs 1 million on Imran and Rs 500,000 on Bushra.

If they fail to pay the fines, they will face an additional six months in jail. The verdict was announced amid tight security outside Adiala Jail, and Bushra Bibi was arrested from the courtroom following the ruling. The couple was formally



indicted in the case on February 27, 2024, shortly after the general elections.

Speaking to the media outside Adiala Jail before the hearing, PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan stated, "You can guess the injustice that has occurred over the last two years. If a fair decision is made, Imran and Bushra will be acquitted."

The case alleges that Imran and Bushra Bibi received billions of rupees and land worth hundreds of kanals from Bahria

Town Ltd in exchange for legalising Rs 50 billion, which had been identified and returned to Pakistan by the United Kingdom during the previous PTI government, Dawn reported.

The verdict, initially scheduled for December 23, was postponed due to winter vacations and rescheduled for January 6. However, it was delayed again as Judge Nasir Javed Rana was on leave, and on January 13, the hearing was further delayed because Imran and Bushra failed to appear in the courtroom at Adiala Jail. Imran Khan has been imprisoned since August 2023 in connection with various legal cases, which he maintains are politically motivated. Last year, he was acquitted in the cipher and Iddat cases but faces new charges in the Toshakhana 2 case.

Indian-Origin MP Chandra Arya Files Nomination for Canadian PM's Race



NEW DELHI: Chandra Arya, India-origin Member of Parliament for Nepean, has officially entered the race for Prime Minister of Canada after filing nomination and addressing the House in Kannada.

Arya, a native of Tumkur district in Karnataka, did his MBA from Dharwad before moving to Canada.

Earlier this week, he announced that he was running for the position of Prime Minister of Canada.

Recently Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced to step down but assured to remain in the post till a new leader is selected.

"Our nation faces structural challenges that require tough solutions. We must make bold political decisions to secure prosperity for our children and grandchildren," he wrote on the social media platform X on January 13.

Arya, who is slamming Khalistan supporters for celebrating the assassination of late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and condemning the defacing of Hindu temples in Canada, has already announced that he will run for the Liberal leadership with a campaign promising to make the country "a sovereign republic" with bold political decisions, not optional but a necessity now.

"I am running to be the next Prime Minister of Canada to lead a small, more efficient government to rebuild our nation and secure prosperity for future generations," Arya, who was described by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar as a genuine advocate of India, wrote on X.

"We are facing significant structural problems that haven't been seen for generations and solving them will require tough choices. I have always worked hard for what is best for Canadians, and for the sake of our children and grandchildren, we must make bold decisions that are absolutely necessary. If elected as the next Leader of the Liberal Party I offer my knowledge and expertise to do so," his post read.

Admitting that the nation is facing a "perfect storm", Arya, who met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi in August last year, said, "Many Canadians, especially younger generations, face significant affordability issues. The working middle class is struggling today, and many working families are retiring directly into poverty."

EAM Jaishankar to attend Trump's swearing-in ceremony on Jan 20

NEW DELHI: External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar will represent India at the swearing-in ceremony of US



President-elect Donald Trump in Washington on January 20, according to a statement from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). The ministry further stated that Jaishankar will also engage with representatives from the incoming administration and other dignitaries during his visit.

Indian-origin MP bows out of Canada PM race, won't seek re-election

OTTAWA: Anita Anand has bowed out of Canada's prime ministerial race and announced that she won't seek re-election to parliament either. Transport Minister



Anand said on Saturday afternoon that she was following Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's example and will start her career's next chapter by returning to academia. With the Liberal Party leadership and the prime ministership heading to a dead end in an election that favours the opposition Conservative Party and its leader Pierre Marcel Poilievre, two other prominent politicians, Foreign Minister Melanie Joly and Finance Minister Dominic LeBlanc, have also quit the race to succeed Trudeau who announced last week his decision to resign. In the announcement on X, Anand, who has previously held the powerful defence portfolio.

Australian PM Albanese lauds Middle East ceasefire as constructive step towards peace

CANBERRA: Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on Thursday welcomed the ceasefire in the Middle East as a constructive step towards peace and stability.

Albanese said that the six-week ceasefire between Israel and Hamas marks the beginning of a "new chapter" for the Israeli and Palestinian people, Xinhua news agency reported.

"This agreement is a constructive step towards peace and stability in the region," he told reporters in Canberra. He said that Australia's thoughts are with all the civilians killed, displaced and taken hostage in the conflict and the many humanitarian workers who lost their lives. Albanese said that the Australian government would continue working with the international community towards



a two-state solution with Israel and Palestine "living side by side in peace and security within internationally recognised borders" and continue supporting the urgent humanitarian needs of the people in Gaza. The ceasefire agreement was brokered through weeks of negotiations in Doha by Qatar, Egypt, and the US.

Qatar's Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani announced

that 33 Israeli hostages would be released in the first 42-day phase, which could potentially evolve into a permanent ceasefire. The initial release prioritises women, children, elderly individuals, and

those who are ill or injured. US President Joe Biden confirmed the crucial development on Wednesday at a briefing, saying "it is a very good afternoon now". He said: "Soon, the hostages will return home to their families." Biden said that Israel would release Palestinian prisoners in return. The US President said that during the first phase of the ceasefire deal, "Palestinians can return home to their neigh-

bourhoods and humanitarian assistance in the Gaza Strip will increase".

During the ceasefire, Israeli forces are expected to withdraw from densely populated areas of Gaza to facilitate prisoner exchanges, the return of displaced individuals, and the retrieval of remains. The conflict, which began on October 7, 2023, has resulted in devastating casualties. Hamas' attack on southern Israel killed about 1,200 people and led to the abduction of approximately 250 individuals. Israel's subsequent offensive in Gaza has caused over 46,000 Palestinian deaths, as reported by the Hamas-run Health Ministry. The ceasefire is scheduled to take effect on Sunday at 12:15 pm local time, subject to approval by Israel's Cabinet and Supreme Court.

UN Chief shows confidence in South Korea's democratic resilience



SEOUL: UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday that he has complete confidence in South Korea's democratic resilience, according to the Seoul government.

Guterres made the remarks during a phone conversation with acting President Choi Sang-mok, the finance ministry said, as the country faces political uncertainty stemming from President Yoon Suk Yeol's botched attempt at imposing martial law and his subsequent impeachment last month. The ministry quoted Guterres as saying that he fully trusts South Korea's robust democratic system and its ability to recover from crises.

The UN Chief also expressed expectations for South Korea's continued role in revitalising UN-centered multilateralism.

In response, Choi emphasized that South Korea will continue to contribute to global peace and prosperity through active engagement as a member of the United Nations and a rotating member of its Security Council. Yonhap news agency reported.

Choi assumed the interim leadership role after the National Assembly voted to impeach Yoon on December 14, and then acting President and Prime Minister Han Duck-soo two weeks later.

Earlier in the day, the head of the South Korea's Presidential Security Service (PSS) said

that any clashes or bloodshed should not take place when investigators attempt to detain impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol over his botched martial law bid.

Park Chong-jun, chief of the PSS, made the remarks as he appeared before police for questioning over allegations that he has ordered presidential security officials to block the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO), ranked by police, from executing a warrant to detain Yoon.

"I believe many people must be deeply concerned about the current situation, whether government agencies are clashing and confronting each other," Park said. "There should be no physical clashes and bloodshed under any circumstances." Park addressed public concerns over the confrontation between investigators and Yoon's presidential security service. "I think the investigation should proceed in a manner befitting the status of a sitting president," Park told reporters as he entered the Joint Investigation Headquarters in western Seoul. Yoon has refused to cooperate with the CIO's summonses for questioning or warrant execution as the agency is not technically authorised to investigate charges of insurrection that he faces over his brief imposition of martial law on December 3.

Foreign Investors in Addison Row Project Obtain Conditional Green Card Approvals

WASHINGTON: EB5 Capital is pleased to announce the first individual I-526E petition approval for an investor in its Addison Row (JF32) project. An I-526E approval is a significant step in the EB-5 immigration process as it qualifies the investor and their eligible immediate family members for conditional permanent residency in the United States. The approved petition was filed in November 2022 and was pending for 25.6 months.

Addison Row (JF32) is a 327-unit apartment building in Capitol Heights, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, DC. The \$105.6 million development was completed in 2024 and features nearly 400,000 gross square feet including a clubhouse, fitness center, swimming pool, picnic area, dog park, and approximately 500 parking spaces. EB5 Capital raised foreign investor funds across over 40 EB-5 projects



throughout the United States. Addison Row (JF32) is EB5 Capital's 32nd project which has reached the conditional green card stage for foreign investors going through the EB-5 immigration process.

Now that the first petition has been approved, additional I-526E petition adjudications for this project are expected in the near future.

About EB5 Capital- EB5 Capital provides qualified foreign investors with opportunities to invest in job-creating commercial real estate projects under the United States Immigrant Investor Program (EB-5 Visa Program). Headquartered in Washington, DC, EB5 Capital's distinguished track record and leadership in the industry has attracted investors from over 75 countries.

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STACK Infrastructure Announces 220MW Campus in Malaysia

SINGAPORE: STACK Infrastructure, the digital infrastructure partner to the world's most innovative companies and a leading global developer and operator of data centers, today announced its entry into Malaysia, recognized as the fastest-growing data center market in Asia-Pacific. The new 220MW campus in Johor Bahru's Iskandar Puteri expands STACK's footprint to the largest market in Southeast Asia, addressing the region's increasing demand for hyperscale digital infrastructure.

Johor's data center market is a premier destination for hyperscalers, offering scalable power, strategic Southeast Asian connectivity, government-backed incentives, and competitive operating costs. STACK's 220MW flagship Johor Bahru campus spans 10.8 hectares and will feature two facilities totaling 1 million square feet, designed to support cloud and AI/ML workloads.

Don't be too Optimistic & Expect Much from the Trump's New Inning; Cautions Alok, a US-based Investor

GOPAL MISRA

The Indian policy makers, both in the Opposition and in the ruling party, need to reorient their current perception of the US as the World's only super power and they should not expect much difference in the American with Policies towards India with the inauguration of the President Donald Trump in the White House on January 20.

It was an advice of Alok Jagdhari, a US-based investor who manages billions of US dollars in the international money markets, who gave an in-depth, almost 90-minute, presentation at the Press Club of India before a select gathering comprising veterans in media, senior executives of corporate, political and social activists, just a few hours before he flew to New York on the evening, Tuesday, January 14, 2025. He, perhaps, was in rush to return to Washington before the historic inauguration of Trump in White House.

It, indeed, was a delight for the listeners, which included Shivaji Sarkar, an economist

of the Financial Express fame, Dr. Satish Mishra, a well-known ideologue of the left political views, Shikha Tyagi, a former CEO of Pepsi, Roma Misra, a social activist and author from Mumbai and Ahemdabad and K.B. Mathur, an eminent journalist and a top corporate executive from Toronto, Canada. It was conducted by Pradeep Mathur, editor, Media Map, who had also authored and a book on non-alignment

Asked whether New Delhi should expect a quantum change in India's growing relationship with the West, especially the US, he clarified that the American system does not allow any president to deviate much from the established policies of the American state, and the Indians irrespective of the political spectrum they belong must realize that during his four-year term, the outgoing President Joe Biden, had allowed the Narendra Modi government optimum concessions despite the reservations of the establishment in Washington. He cautioned that the image of Modi as an individual as well as his government's attitude towards the civil liberties and the minority rights need to



be revisited; also the Indian policy makers irrespective of the political spectrum they represent have to understand and reorient their approach towards the political and economic forces, which determine the super power's global agenda. He also recalled the higher tariff were introduced during the early thirties in the twentieth century, but the experience has always been that these measures might have political overtones, but they seldom help the concerned economies.

Alok Jagdhari has also ruled out any possibility of containing the influence of the military-industrial complex under the President Trump; he further cautioned that Trump like other politicians indulges in political

rhetoric, and like others he too is intensely engaged in the power game. Asked whether, he would genuinely be ending the ongoing war in Europe between Russia and Ukraine, he clarified that the conflict has many dimensions, including the role of the European Union. He does not expect any spectacular political developments in Europe as well as in West Asia.

In reply to a question about the US approach towards China, he stated that during recent years, Beijing has revised its approach towards Taiwan that if an opportunity comes, it would not hesitate to annex the island nation. He also explained that if Taiwan declares itself as an independent, the US would have no responsibility to protect its annexation by

China. He, however, admitted that the Chinese penetration in the Central American regions, especially in manning the Panama Canal, has caused anxiety among the members of the establishment comprising Pentagon and Capitol.

According to him, during his second inning Trump is expected to be more cautious. Asked whether Modi was deliberately ignored by denying him the invitation to attend Trump's inauguration, while the Chinese President Xi Jinping was officially requested to be present at the ceremony, his view was that while Modi was seen too much aligned with the Democratic Party, and his reluctance to communicate with Trump might have also caused this sudden cooling off in their otherwise warm relationship; on the other hand, Jinping, perhaps, was apprehensive of the protocol, he might receive in Washington not befitting to his status as a world leader, decided to avoid the inaugural function.

Impact on India - Alok has cautioned that the impact of the stagflation in the US economy is expected to impact the economies worldwide; and the Indian economy might also face its consequences. He also

reminded that in the South-Asian region, India is yet to be recognized as a partner like Japan, South Korea and Australia. It is just an ally, but for obtaining the state-of-the-art technologies, India has to work much harder for further improving her ties with the US.

He also ruled out any possibility of the revival of the industrial units in the US, but he suggested that India might be one of the new coveted destinations for the American corporations. They might decide to set up their manufacturing plants, but for luring the American capital, he suggested that for this Indian technology have to be really made world class.

Asked whether the gender issues might be dominating in the contemporary American society, he stated that these aberrations have led to social decay in a society, which is considered a developed one; further according to him, it might not have much impact in the global play of forces.

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

Australia's Prime Minister has promised a funding injection to "finish"

CANBERRA: Australia's Prime Minister has promised a funding injection to "finish" the country's National Broadband Network (NBN) and boost internet speeds.

Anthony Albanese on Monday promised a three billion Australian dollar (1.84 billion US dollar) equity injection in the NBN to improve access to fibre internet connections. He said the additional funding would deliver new fibre connections to 622,000 premises, with over half in regional rural areas.

When the upgrade is completed by 2030, Albanese said that over 11 million homes and businesses will have access to internet speeds exceeding one Gigabit per second (Gbps) compared to the current average NBN speed of 76.64 Megabits per second (Mbps). "Families and businesses deserve high-speed Internet at an affordable price," Albanese said at a press conference in Canberra alongside Ellie Sweeney, Chief Executive of the state-owned NBN Co, and Communications Minister Michelle Rowland.

According to News Corp Australia newspapers, the additional funding would take the total government investment in the NBN since its launch in 2008 to over 35 billion AUD (21.5 billion USD). Sweeney



described the new project as the "final piece of the puzzle" for the network, Xinhua news agency reported. Modelling commissioned by the government found that the upgrade could deliver a 10.4 billion AUD (6.39 billion USD) cumulative economic uplift over the next decade. Earlier on Monday, Albanese met with his Cabinet for the first time in 2025.

In opening remarks to the meeting released by his office, Albanese said he is focused on putting forward a positive and optimistic vision for Australia ahead of the general election, which must be held by May. Last week, Albanese had reiterated social media's social responsibility following Meta's announcement to abandon its fact-checking programme. "Social media has a social responsibility," Albanese told a press conference held in Mount Isa of the country's northeastern state of Queensland on Wednesday, when responding to Meta's decision not to do fact-checking.

Priyanka Chopra says she's proud of beautiful film 'Anuja'

MUMBAI: Actress Priyanka Chopra says she is proud of the "beautiful film" "Anuja", in which she serves as an executive producer.

Priyanka took to her Instagram stories, where she shared a snapshot of a news article from variety.com, which had the title "Netflix Acquires 'Anuja,' Oscar-Shortlisted Short Film Backed by Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Mindy Kaling and Guneet Monga Kapoor among its backers."

shortlisted live-action short that counts Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Mindy Kaling and Academy Award winner Guneet Monga Kapoor among its backers.

Directed by Adam J. Graves "Anuja" tells the tale of a 9-year-old title character, who works in a back-alley garment factory with her older sister Palak. The narrative follows the young protagonist as she faces a decision that will impact both her future and her family. The short, developed in partnership with Mira Nair's Salaam Baalak Trust, features Sajda Pathan, in a leading role. The production team spans Graves Films, Shine Global Inc (Oscar win-



ners "War/Dance" and "Inocent"), Krushan Naik Films and Salaam Baalak Trust. Guneet said of "Anuja" that it is a story of unparalleled courage, a film made with a lot of heart. Director Adam J. Graves

delivers a message through an empowered and entertaining lens. "I'm honoured to be part of the journey ahead, alongside producers Mindy Kaling, Suchitra Mattai and Krushan Naik, and now one of the most power-

ful Brown voices to champion our story — Priyanka Chopra Jonas." Mindy Kaling added: "Anuja" is a story that means so much to me — it's powerful, hopeful, and full of life, just like the incredible young girls it represents. I'm deeply passionate about this film and grateful to have had the opportunity to work with Suchitra Mattai and Adam Graves to bring this important narrative to life.

"The film brings attention to crucial issues while celebrating resilience, humor, and hope. I'm delighted that, with Netflix joining the team, the conversation will expand as it reaches audiences far and wide."



Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann released the latest book by Amarjit Grewal at the Surjit Patar Yaadgari event held at Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar on Tuesday, January 14, 2025. PHOTO-PRABHJOT GILL

Farmers must adopt natural farming techniques: Minister Shyam Singh Rana



GULSHAN KUMAR Chandigarh

Haryana Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare Minister Shyam Singh Rana said excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides is adversely affecting the land and the environment is also getting polluted. He said by adopting natural farming, we can improve the quality of the land. Naturally grown crops are more healthy and also fetch higher prices in the market.

Shyam Singh Rana was addressing a district-level workshop organized by the Agriculture Department in Radaur town of Yamunanagar district to make farmers aware about natural farming. The Cabinet Minister also visited an exhibition related to agricultural equipment at the venue.

Haryana Agriculture Minister said natural farming means cultivation of microbes. Our natural resources are being overexploited due to chemical farming and along with the increase in the cost of the crop, there has been a stagnation in the yield as well. Agriculture minister also honoured progressive farmers of the area. He also made farmers aware about not burning crop residue. On this occasion, experts gave detailed information to farmers about various schemes related to agriculture and natural farming. The schemes being run by the departments for farmers and the documents required to avail those schemes were also explained in detail.

Saif Ali Khan stabbing: Mumbai police recovers old sword from actor's house

MUMBAI: Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan continues to recover from his stab wounds, new developments seem to take place in parallel. The Mumbai police have recovered another melee weapon from the actor's residence in the Bandra area of Mumbai.

The cops recovered an old sword from the actor's house, it is unclear if it is a part of the actor's ancestral property. Saif, who belongs to the lineage of Nawabs, is the owner of many antique and priced possessions including the Pataudi Palace in Haryana.

Saif was reportedly attacked with a 2.5 inch knife by an assailant who barged into his Bandra house through his youngest son, Jeh's room.

As per media reports, doctors removed the 2.5 inches of knife from his wound. The actor, who underwent a surgery, has now been shifted to the ICU and is said to be out of danger.



The actor was stabbed multiple times in an attempt to fight off a burglar during the few hours of Thursday. The actor sustained six stab wounds, two of which are said to be serious as they are closer to his spine. The incident took place at 2:15 am when the burglar allegedly barged into their Bandra home, and attacked their house help and then Saif when he intervened.

At the time of the incident,



his wife Kareena Kapoor Khan was present at home along with other members of the family as they all were sleeping. Saif was woken up by the commotion in his son Jeh's room. He went inside the room to see the culprit arguing with their house help, looking at this, Saif intervened to save the house help with bare hands to fight off the intruder.

The actor is currently said to be stable and recovering well.

Release of Kangana's 'Emergency' halted across Punjab amid fear of protests

MUMBAI: Filmmaker-actress Kangana Ranaut's latest release "Emergency" has once again faced a road-block as it has been halted in Patiala, Amritsar and Bathinda amid fear of protests.

Protests are taking place across Punjab. Different leaders of Sikh organizations including The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) have asked for ban on "Emergency" as they claim the film "tarnishes the image of Sikhs and distorts history". A tweet by SGPC also stated that it demands a ban on the film in Punjab, which is scheduled to release on January 17, 2025.

The film is touted to be controversial due to its subject matter, which revisits the tumultuous period of the 1975 Emergency declared by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The film delves deep into the historical and political upheaval of the time, shedding light on a chapter that continues to evoke polarising reactions across the



Emergency

nation. Local administrations in the three Punjab cities have taken a preemptive stance, suggesting that the film's narrative might provoke unrest among certain groups. The authorities have emphasised maintaining peace and order, especially given the heightened sensitivity surrounding the film's content.

Sukhpal Singh Khaira, Congress leader, had re-shared the letter by SGPC on X, formerly called Twitter, and then wrote: "I support the demand of @SGPCAmritsar to ban the film Emergency directed by @KanganaTeam a known critic of

farmers and Sikhs without knowing their contribution towards our country."

"SGPC is our elected representative body and @BhagwantMann should take immediate steps to ban the film that depicts Sikhs in bad light and brings defamation to our state of Punjab and its people-Khaira," Khaira added.

Replying to him, Kangana replied: "This is complete harassment of art and the artist, from Punjab many cities are reporting that these people are not allowing Emergency to be screened. I have utmost respect for all religions and after studying and growing up in Chandigarh I have closely observed and followed Sikh religion. This is a complete lie and propaganda to tarnish my image and harm my film #Emergency".

Abhishek Banerjee has penned two episodes from 'Paatal Lok 2'



MUMBAI: Actor Abhishek Banerjee, who is known for 'Stree', 'Bhediya', 'Stree 2', and is gearing up for the release of the upcoming edition of his OTT show 'Paatal Lok', has penned two episodes from the show's latest season.

However, Abhishek hasn't contributed to the show this time as an actor. Season 2 of 'Paatal Lok' packs a punch promising a gripping crime thriller. It is set in the northeastern state of Nagaland, and sees the lead character of Hathi Ram Chaudhary (played by Jaideep Ahlawat) teaming up with his ally Imran Ansari (played by Ishwak Singh) to investigate the mysterious disappearance of a migrant worker tied to a perilous drug syndicate. As the case deepens, he unravels a web of secrets, battling systemic corruption and powerful adversaries while confronting his own inner demons.

The investigation takes a toll on Hathi Ram's personal relationships, testing his resilience. With the truth elusive and stakes higher than ever, Season 2 promises an intense, edge-of-the-seat experience.

The show also stars Gul Panag, Tillotama Shome and Nagesh Kukunoor. Earlier, Sudip Sharma, the creator and showrunner of the show spoke with IANS, and said that the lead character of Hathi Ram Chaudhary is a very spiritually evolved character.

He told IANS, "Hathi Ram Chaudhary is a very spiritually evolved man. But you don't see him like that. When we talk of spiritually evolved characters, we think of characters who have very complex philosophies. Hathi Ram is not that. He is very clear about his right and wrong. He has a very strong moral compass, and he sticks to that. No force in the world can ever make him change his stance on that. If this is right, then it is right. If this is wrong, then it is wrong".

He further mentioned, "No matter who you are, standing in front of him, telling him to do the other thing or to look the other way, he is not going to do that. And that's what I really like about him. So when someone says that Hathi Ram looks exactly the same, he hasn't changed or he behaves the same, he has already reached that place in life. He has already found this zen space that we all hope to find in our lives. He doesn't have restlessness in him. Hathi Ram has a firmness in him".

The second season of the show is set to drop on Prime Video on January 17.

Pahalgam shivers at minus 11.8°C amid freezing cold across Kashmir

FW DESK Pahalgam

The winter chill has intensified across Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh, with several areas reporting freezing temperatures as the region endures the annual Chillai-Kalan season.

In Kashmir, Pahalgam recorded the lowest temperature at -11.8°C, followed by Larnoo at -7.9°C and Gulmarg at -7.0°C. Srinagar, the summer capital, saw a relatively milder low of -2.0°C. Other areas in Kashmir, including Qazigund, Koker-



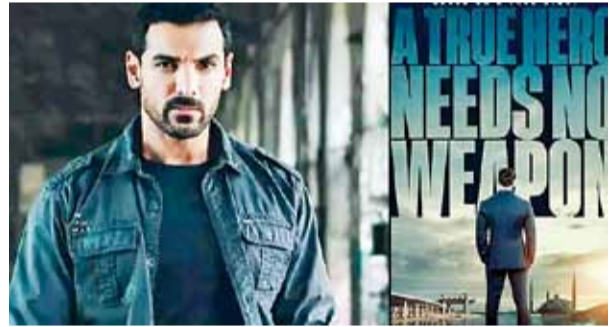
nag, Bandipora, Ganderbal, and Shopian, experienced temperatures ranging from -2.4°C to -4.1°C. In Jammu, Padder was the coldest location at -8.8°C, with Baderwah

reporting -4.0°C. Banihal and Batote experienced lows of -1.2°C and -0.3°C, respectively, while warmer locations such as Jammu city and Katra had temperatures of around 5°C. Other areas like Udhampur and Samba had lows of 1.3°C.

In Ladakh, Drass was the coldest at a frigid -22.9°C, while Sonamarg in Kashmir recorded -12.8°C. Leh and Kar-gil reported temperatures of -13.0°C and -13.8°C, respectively.

Authorities have urged residents to take necessary precautions as the region endures the biting cold.

John Abraham-starrer thriller 'The Diplomat' to release March 7



MUMBAI: Action star John Abraham-starrer "The Diplomat", which is inspired by real events, is all set to release on March 7.

"The Diplomat" is inspired by a true story that shook the nation, the film promises a gripping tale of power, patriotism. Stepping into the shoes of a high-ranking government official, John will be seen taking the audiences on an edge-of-the-seat journey filled with intense drama and high-octane moments.

Directed by the acclaimed Shivam Nair and written by Ritesh Shah, 'The Diplomat' is set to deliver an unforgettable cinematic experience. The film is produced by T-Series, Bhushan Kumar & Krishan Kumar; John Abraham of JA Entertainment; Vipul D Shah, Ashwin Varde, Rajesh Bahl of Wakao Films, Sameer Dixit and Jatish Varma of Fortune Pictures, Rakesh Dang of Seeta Films.

The actor was last seen on screen in "Vedaa", an action drama film directed by Nikhil Advani and written by Aseem Arora. The film, inspired by true events, stars John Abraham and Sharvari as the title character, alongside Abhishek Banerjee, Ashish

Vidarthi, Kumud Mishra, Rajendra Chawla, Tanvi Malhara, Anurag Thakur and Urvasi Dubey.

It followed the story of a young woman, who embarks on a journey of resistance, challenging a repressive system while confronting an antagonist determined to uphold it. Apart from "The Diplomat", the actor will also be seen in "Tehran", directed by Arun Gopalan and produced by Dinesh Vijan. She will be seen starring opposite actress Manushi Chhillar in the geopolitical film.

Earlier this month, actor Rohit Roy revealed magic dieting advice he received from John.

In an old video, Rohit can be seen talking to Cyrus Broacha on the latter's podcast. He said, "I'll tell you a story about John. We were shooting for 'Mumbai Saga'. Another actor, Shaad Randhawa, he's the owner of Bayroute, an upmarket Mumbai restaurant. Outstanding food, and we were shooting in South Mumbai. So he'd say, 'come, let's call food from Bayroute'. So now Shaad would call a spread. Obviously, if John Abraham has called for Lunch, full kebabs and all, excellent food".

Diljit Dosanjh shares pictures from upcoming movie 'Punjab '95'

The actor took to his Instagram on Wednesday, and shared a series of pictures in which he could be seen in his character at different timelines of the story.

MUMBAI: Punjabi superstar Diljit Dosanjh, whose Dil-Limnati tour has become a massive rage in India and globally, has shared pictures from his upcoming movie 'Punjab '95'.

The actor took to his Instagram on Wednesday, and shared a series of pictures in which he could be seen in his character at different timelines of the story.

The first picture shows him inside a prison with his eyes closed as he sits amidst harsh lighting. The other pictures show him outside the prison reading newspapers and cer-



tain documents.

The actor-singer also shared that the teaser of the film will be released on January 17, the day when the Kangana Ranaut directorial 'Emergency' releases. Interestingly, both the films are connected by the common theme of the former Indian Prime Minister Indira



Gandhi. It was Indira Gandhi on whose behest the Operation Blue Star was executed to drive out Khalistani terrorists from the Golden Temple in Amritsar. This led to her assassination and subsequent hunt of Khalistani terrorists in Punjab trickling into the Punjab of 95.

'Punjab '95' is based on the life of human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalra.

Another photo gives a glimpse into Khalra's personal life, showing Diljit as Khalra, posing with two children, offering a heartfelt preview of the activist's real-life journey.

Jaswant Singh Khalra was the director of a bank in the city of Amritsar in Punjab during the militancy period in Punjab. Following Operation Blue Star, the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and the 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots, the police were empowered to detain suspects for any reason, ostensibly as suspected terrorists.

The police were accused of killing unarmed suspects in staged shootouts and burning thousands of dead bodies to

cover up the murders. Khalra was investigating four major cases at one time and continued to collect evidence and witnesses.

The Central Board of Film Certification in India had proposed 120 cuts in the film to the makers. There was no certainty over the exhibition of the film given its sensitive subject matter. However, following Diljit's meteoric rise and global attention, it seems that the film will be finally able to see the light of day.

Meanwhile, Diljit recently met the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi in the national capital.

Sharing his excitement on X, Diljit described the meeting as a great start to 2025. The singer revealed their conversation spanned a variety of topics, including music.

Manjot Singh (P) and his team lift the Pro Amateur Silver Jubilee CGA Golf Cup in professional category at Chandigarh Golf Club

KULBIR SINGH KALSI Chandigarh

In a thrilling contest, Manjot Singh (P), Brig. HPS Dhillon, Col. Amardeep Bajwa, and Jagmohan Singh emerged victorious in the professional category of the Pro Amateur Silver Jubilee CGA Golf Cup, held to mark 25 glorious years of establishment of the Chandigarh Golf Association (CGA) Range. The tourney was played in a four-ball format at the Chandigarh Golf Club.

Demonstrating exceptional skill and precision on the lush

greens of the 72-par course, the winning team claimed the top spot with an impressive score of -42, narrowly defeating their opponents by one stroke.

Saanya Sharma (P), Rajiv Modgill, Sarguna Jain, and Guntas Sandhu secured the first runners-up position with a score of -41, while the team of Akshay Sharma (P), Ravi Verma, Jagpal S. Sandhu, and Vipul Dua finished as second runners-up with a score of -30.

In the amateur category, also played in a four-ball format, Raghav Bhandari, Naunihal Singh, Sanjam, and Varinder



Kalsi emerged victorious with an impressive score of -45. Hazel Chauhan, Bhupinder S. Senior, Dashmeet Singh, and Davinder Dhuri secured the first runner-up position with a score of -40, while the team of H.S. Kang, Amandeep

Singh, Sanjeev Dhingra, and G.S. Lehal claimed the second runner-up spot with a score of -33.

Special prizes were also awarded in various categories. Ceerat Kang won the Longest Drive prize with an impressive shot of 280 yards. The Nearest to Pin award was claimed by Sagar Diwan, whose shot landed just 8'2" from the pin. Meanwhile, the Straightest Drive prize went to Navjot Mann for his remarkable drive, which was just 1'2" off the center line.

S.K. Sharma, IPS (Retd.),

President of CGA, and Hon. Secretary of the Governing Council of the Indian Golf Union (IGU), congratulated all the winners and participants for making the tournament a success. He underscored that the overwhelming response from participants would help promote the golfing culture in the region.

Sharma shared that the tournament was played in a four scramble format and saw 22 four-ball teams and a total of 88 players, including eminent dignitaries and administrators from the golfing world. The event was inaugurated by professional golfer Gaganjeet Bhullar, and the tee-off started at 8 a.m. at Chandigarh Golf Club.

Apart from S.K. Sharma, IPS (Retd.), President of CGA, other office bearers of CGA who were present included Er. Harpuneet Singh Sandhu, General Secretary, CGA, who is also a Member of the Governing Council of IGU and Chairman of the National Golf Squad for the State of India; Sanjiv D.P. Azad, IRS, Vice President, CGA and Monish D.P. Azad, Treasurer, CGA.