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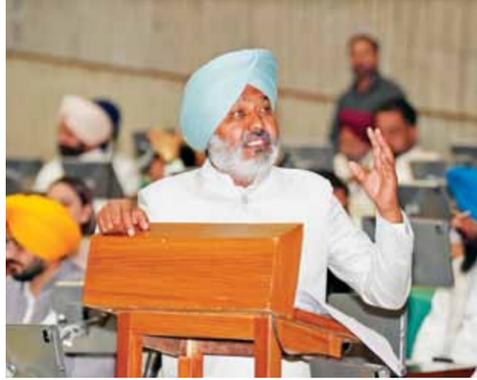
Punjab Budget-2025: First-ever drug census to cover every household

Punjab Budget with no new taxes in 2025-26, but silent on giving monthly Rs 1,000 per month to women , the AAP government in Punjab on March 26 presented a Rs 2.36-lakh crore budget.

CHANDIGARH: Taking the war on eradicating drug addiction to the next level, Punjab Finance Minister Harpal Cheema on Wednesday informed the Assembly that a first-ever drug census will be carried out in the state that will cover every household to understand the prevalence of drugs, usage of de-addiction centres, etc.

It will collect data on the socio-economic status of people.

"This will help create an effective and scientific strategy to eradicate the problem of drugs," Cheema said in his Budget speech with a thrust to



strengthen the government's 'Yudh Nasheyana Virudh' campaign.

Besides the drugs, the emphasis of the AAP government's Budget is on education, healthcare, fiscal prudence, and the welfare of farmers.

Laying a Budget for Rs 2.36 lakh crore, Cheema, in his speech, said, "This is a futur-

istic budget and is a Badalda Punjab Roadmap for 2025-26."

"We are moving towards fiscal consolidation. This year, the revenue and fiscal deficit will be 2.51 per cent and 3.84 per cent by the end of 2025-26," he said.

In a first, the government proposed to establish the second line of defence along

the India-Pakistan border by deploying 5,000 home guards alongside the Border Security Force (BSF).

For the industry, whose share to the state's economy is 27 per cent, Finance Minister Cheema said, "Industry will get additional incentives of Rs 250 crore."

He proposed to set up playgrounds and indoor gyms in every village for the youth to shun drugs. "Facilities to be provided in villages for locally popular sports. On a pilot basis, 87 playgrounds have been already built in Tarn Taran district." He said 3,000 indoor gyms are to be set up.

Responding to the Budget, state Education Minister Harjot Bains said it "gives a historic boost by allocating Rs 979 crore to sports, the highest ever in Punjab's history".

He said the allocation is more than what the Akali-BJP and the Congress spent in 10 years combined.

India's Forex Reserves Surge by \$4.5 Billion to \$658.8 Billion

MUMBAI: India's foreign exchange reserves surged by \$4.5 billion to scale a 4-month high of \$658.8 billion in the week ended March 28, 2025, according to data released by the Reserve Bank of India on Friday.

According to the Weekly Statistical Supplement released by the RBI, Foreign currency assets (FCAs) were down by \$1.6 billion to \$558.86 billion. Expressed in dollar terms, the FCAs include the effect of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units like the euro, pound and yen held in the foreign exchange reserves.

Gold reserves saw a surge of \$2.8 billion to \$77.2 billion. In the preceding week, that ended on March 14, the country's forex reserves had risen by \$0.305 billion to touch \$654.27 billion.

This is the third consecutive week of rise in the kitty, which has been on a declining trend recently due to revaluation, along



with forex market interventions by the RBI to help reduce volatilities in the rupee. The forex reserves had increased to an all-time high of \$704.885 billion in September 2024.

Any strengthening of the country's foreign exchange kitty also helps bolster the rupee vis-a-vis the rupee which is good for the economy. With the recent increase in foreign exchange reserves the rupee has also emerged stronger.

An increase in foreign exchange reserves reflects the strong fundamentals of the economy and gives the RBI more headroom to stabilise the rupee when it turns volatile.

A strong forex kitty enables the RBI to intervene in the spot and forward currency markets

by releasing more dollars to prevent the rupee from going into a free fall.

Conversely, a declining forex kitty leaves the RBI less space to intervene in the market to prop up the rupee.

Meanwhile, India's merchandise trade deficit has narrowed to an over 3-year low at \$14.05 billion in February as exports held steady during the month while imports declined, according to the latest data compiled by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

This reflects a strengthening of the external sector of the economy despite geopolitical tensions triggering economic uncertainty in the world market.

The country's merchandise exports increased by 1.3 per cent to \$36.91 billion in February, as compared to \$36.43 billion in January, while imports fell by 16.3 per cent to \$50.96 billion compared with \$59.42 billion in the previous month.

Punjab Government legalises transfer of prisoners to other states



CHANDIGARH: The Punjab government has legalised the transfer of prisoners from its state jails to other states. The Transfer of Prisoners (Punjab Amendment) Bill 2025, introduced by Jails Minister Laljit Singh Bhullar, was unanimously passed by the legislative assembly on Friday.

"Punjab being a border state is confronting severe internal security challenges and various jails currently house high-risk inmates, including those involved in anti-national activities, individuals linked with international agencies, terrorists, category 'A' gangsters, smugglers and dangerous criminals who attempt to operate their criminal networks from within prisons," he said.

Bhullar said amending the Prisoners Transfer Act of 1950 had become imperative to establish a legal mechanism for transferring undertrial prisoners between states.

"The existing legislation lacked provisions allowing Punjab's imprisoned undertrials to be relocated to jails in other states," he said.

The Jail Minister further said that these amendments were crucial, considering the potential threats to law and order and the state's security and to ensure the smooth functioning of the prison system.

The Bill's core purpose was to provide legal authorization for transferring undertrial prisoners from Punjab to other states, he added.

Meanwhile, Punjab Police on Friday launched efforts to integrate the four key departments dealing with emergency services -- Police, Health, Fire and Disaster Management -- into a unified response network with the goal of reducing emergency response time from 25 minutes to eight minutes, setting a new national benchmark.

During the 'Badalda Punjab' Budget for 2025-26, the government has allocated Rs 125 crore for expansion of Emergency Response Vehicles fleet and upgradation of district control rooms, while Rs 53 crore was allocated for construction of new 'Dial 112' headquarters. Director General of Police (DGP) Gaurav Yadav told the media that the comprehensive overhaul, being implemented on war footing by the police, focuses on three critical areas with first being establishing a seamless coordination between departments through technological integration, where all emergency calls to Dial 112 will be automatically routed to the relevant services.

PM Modi to Unveil Multiple Projects worth Rs 33,700 Crore in Chhattisgarh



BHOPAL: Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to unveil a transformative wave of development in Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, with projects worth over Rs 33,700 crore spanning power, energy, transportation, education, and housing.

He is visiting the state on Sunday (March 30). Prime Minister Modi will embark on his daylong tour to Maharashtra and then will reach Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, in the afternoon.

In the energy sector, the spotlight will be on NTPC's Sipat Super Thermal Power Project Stage-III, a cutting-edge initiative worth Rs 9,790 crore and Chhattisgarh's first Super Critical Thermal Power Project. This pit head project is based on the latest state of the art Ultra-Supercritical Technology with high power generation efficiency.

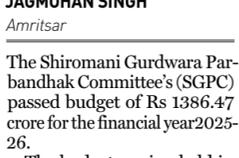
He will initiate the commencement of work of the First Super Critical Thermal Power Project (2X660MW) of Chhattisgarh State Power Generation Company Limited (CSPGCL) worth over Rs 15,800 crore, an official statement said.

PM Modi will also dedicate to the nation three Power Transmission projects of the power grid under the Western Region Expansion Scheme (WRES) worth over Rs 560 crore, said the statement. Aligning with India's net-zero emission goals, reducing air pollution and providing cleaner energy solutions, the Prime Minister will lay the foundation stone of the City Gas Distribution (CGD) project of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) in Korea, Surajpur, Balrampur and Surguja districts, the statement said. It includes over 200 km high high-pressure pipeline and over 800 km of MDPE (medium-density polyethylene) pipeline, and multiple CNG (compressed natural gas) dispensing outlets worth over Rs 1,285 crore.

Prime Minister Modi will also lay the foundation stone of the Visakh-Raipur Pipeline (VRPL) Project of Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL), spanning 540 km with the third year and will be spread over the next five years.

LCH is India's first indigenously designed and developed combat helicopter having a capability of operating at an

SGPC passes budget of Rs 1386.47 crore for financial year 2025-26



JAGMOHAN SINGH Amritsar

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee's (SGPC) passed budget of Rs 1386.47 crore for the financial year 2025-26.

The budget session held in the presence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib at the Teja Singh Samundri Hall located at the SGPC office was presided over by Harjinder Singh Dhami, while General Secretary Sher Singh Mandwala presented the budget. Additional Head Granthi of Sachkhand Sri Harmandar Sahib Giani Amarjit Singh and Granthi Giani Keval Singh were present during the session.

The budget of Rs 1386.47 crore passed by the SGPC this year has recorded an increase of 9.95% over the previous year. While presenting the budget, General Secretary Sher Singh Mandwala shared the details of the income to be received by various departments and institutions and disclosed the amount kept for future works. He also shared the details of the Panthic, educational, religious campaign and public welfare works carried out by the SGPC in the past period.

Talking to reporters after the budget session, Dhami said



that the budget presented by General Secretary Sher Singh Mandwala is a reflection of the feelings of the Sangat and special care has been taken for the facilities for the Sangat. Under this, efforts will be made to achieve better results by effectively increasing new Sarais (inns), health and education services and introducing new reforms and guidelines in the field of religious preaching and campaign. Sharing details, he said that this year the budget of the Dharam Prachar Committee is Rs 110 crore, while the budget of Gurdwara Sahibs is Rs 1062 crore. Similarly, special funds have been arranged for General Board Fund, Trust Fund, Education Fund, Sports, Printing Presses and Educational Institutions. He said that

Rs 4.95 crore has been kept for Panthic welfare works, Rs 8.40 crore for free education to Sikh children, Rs 3.09 crore for sports, Rs 1.50 crore for natural disasters, Rs 44 lakh for free dispensaries established in various Gurdwaras. He said that Rs 2.63 crore has been reserved for the ongoing Nishchai Academy to prepare Sikh youth for administrative and judicial services related competitive exams, Rs 1.95 crore for giving free kakaars (symbols of faith) for Amrit Sanchar. Similarly, Rs 1.14 crore has been reserved for spreading the religious preaching campaign, Rs 60 lakh for the affairs of the Sikh prisoners, Rs 60 lakh for Sikligar Sikhs, Rs 2.50 crore for fees of Amritdhari students, Rs 2 crore for free education to Amritdhari

girls, Rs 8 crore for Miri Piri Medical College, Haryana, and Rs 8 crore for Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University.

Dhami said that the main source of the SGPC budget is the amount donated by the Sangat and Daswandh. He said that for the last two-three years, an increase has been recorded from the estimated amount of the budget, which is the result of adjusting the expenses according to the need and regularizing them. He expressed his commitment that the work of the Sikh organization will be continued in accordance with the spirit of the Sangat and especially the facilities provided to the community will be given priority. He specifically mentioned that when the governments are proving to be unsuccessful in spreading education, the contribution of the SGPC in this field in the society is of great importance, which is why a large amount has been kept in the budget to boost education.

The SGPC President termed the violation of conduct by some members during the budget session as unfortunate and said that such a phenomenon is not right in the presence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

India offers all possible assistance after 7.7 Magnitude Quake hits Myanmar, Thailand



NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday expressed concern over the powerful earthquake that struck Myanmar and Thailand and assured India's readiness to provide all possible assistance to the affected regions.

A massive 7.7 magnitude earthquake hit Myanmar on Friday, followed by an aftershock of 6.4 magnitude just 12 minutes later. Another aftershock measuring 4.9 magnitude was recorded nearly an hour later. Tremors were also felt in Thailand, parts of northeast India, and China.

Taking to X, PM Modi posted, "Concerned by the situation in the wake of the Earthquake in Myanmar and Thailand. Praying for the safety and wellbeing of everyone."

"India stands ready to offer all possible assistance. In this

regard, asked our authorities to be on standby. Also asked the MEA to remain in touch with the Governments of Myanmar and Thailand," he added.

According to the US Geological Survey, the earthquake's epicentre was 16 km northwest of Sagaing, Myanmar, at a depth of 10 km. The German Research Centre for Geosciences (GFZ) also confirmed the depth, placing the epicentre near Mandalay.

While no casualties have been reported so far, reports indicate that some buildings in the Mandalay Region have collapsed, and several roads between Mandalay and Yangon have been severely damaged. In Bangkok, the tremors led to panic, with people rushing out of buildings onto the streets.

Centre Inks Contracts worth Rs 62,700 Crore with HAL for supply of 156 LCH



NEW DELHI: The government on Friday signed two contracts worth Rs 62,700 crore with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) for the supply of 156 Light Combat Helicopters (LCH) — Prachand.

The first contract is for supply of 66 LCHs to the Indian Air Force (IAF) and second is for supply of 90 LCHs to the Indian Army, according to the Ministry of Defence.

The supply of these Helicopters will commence from the third year and will be spread over the next five years.

LCH is India's first indigenously designed and developed combat helicopter having a capability of operating at an

Powerful quake rocks Myanmar and Thailand, kills more than 150 people

NEW DELHI: A powerful earthquake rocked Myanmar and neighbouring Thailand on Friday, destroying buildings, a bridge and a dam. At least 144 people were killed in Myanmar, where photos and video from two hard-hit cities showed extensive damage. At least 10 died in the Thai capital, where a high-rise under construction collapsed.

The full extent of death, injury and destruction was not immediately clear — particularly in Myanmar, one of the world's poorest countries. It is embroiled in a civil war, and



information is tightly controlled. "The death toll and injuries are expected to rise," the head of Myanmar's military govern-

ment, Senior Gen Min Aung Hlaing said as he announced on television that at least 144 people were killed and 730 others injured in his country.

In Thailand, Bangkok city authorities said 10 people were killed, 16 injured and 101 missing from three construction sites, including the high-rise.

The 7.7 magnitude quake struck at midday, with an epicentre near Mandalay, Myanmar's second-largest city. Aftershocks followed, one of them measuring a strong 6.4 magnitude.

Photos from Myanmar's capital, Naypyidaw, showed rescue crews pulling victims from the rubble of multiple buildings used to house civil servants.

Union cabinet approves 2% DA hike for central government employees

OUR CORRESPONDENT New Delhi

The Union Cabinet on Friday approved a 2% increase in Dearness Allowance (DA) for central government employees, benefiting over one crore employees and pensioners. The revision raises DA from 53% to 55%, providing a salary boost ahead of the anticipated 8th Pay Commission.

Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnav announced that



the hike will take effect from January 1, 2025. "The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi,

has approved the release of an additional instalment of Dearness Allowance (DA) to Central Government employees and Dearness Relief (DR) to pensioners, representing a 2% increase over the existing 53% of Basic Pay/Pension to counter inflation," the government stated in an official release.

This revision will benefit approximately 48.66 lakh central government employees and 66.55 lakh pensioners. The

last DA revision took place on July 1, 2024, following a 4-percentage-point hike to 50% in March 2024, which was implemented from January 1, 2024.

The DA hike follows the formula established by the 7th Central Pay Commission and is intended to help employees cope with inflation. The combined financial impact of the increase in DA and DR on the exchequer is estimated at ₹6,614.04 crore per annum.

Punjab Govt goes extra mile ; historic decision to check illegal mining

CHANDIGARH: Taking a historic decision to check the illegal mining in state, the Punjab Cabinet led by Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann on Wednesday nod for the enactment of the Punjab Regulation of Crusher Units Act 2025.

A decision to this effect was taken in the meeting of the Council of Ministers held here under the chairmanship of the Chief Minister here at his official residence.

The Cabinet have approved to bring this act in the ongoing session of the state assembly. This will strengthen the Department in regulating the



activities of Crusher Units and Screening Plants which are engaged in processing of sand and gravel. This will in turn help in checking illegal

mining operations in the state by promoting legal mining in the state.

Gives consent to amend the Indian Stamp Act, 1899-

The Cabinet also gave consent to amend the Indian Stamp Act, 1899, to promote a business-friendly environment in the state. This amendment aims to reduce business costs and boost economic growth in Punjab. It stipulates that if a person has already paid stamp duty on a loan and later transfers it to another bank or financial institution without changing the mortgaged property, no additional stamp duty will be charged—unless the new loan amount exceeds the previous one, in which case duty will be charged only on the excess.

State government listened to suggestions of Laghu Udyog Bharati members in a seminar held in Ambala

SATISH HANDA
Ambala

In a seminar held here in Haryana Tourism complex Kingfisher organized by the northern region of Laghu Udyog Bharati led by the cabinet minister for pollution and industry Rao Narbir Singh, he listened to the grievances and suggestions by large number of industrial entrepreneurs of region present in the seminar organized to review India to develop as the third biggest country in the world in economic condition sector with the help of industrialists in the country.

While addressing a large gathering the regional president of Laghu Udyog Bharati Shubh Adesh assured the chief guest to extend every help for the success in this mission as required by the government.

He said, there are nearly 2.5 lakh MSME (Micro, Small and Medium industrial Enterprise) in Haryana at present, which need full government support, since most of these units are situated in undeveloped areas deprived of basic amenities, which include Madhaur



and Dhulkot in Ambala City where large number of small scale units are mushrooming without basic facilities provided by the government.

The proposal for setting up an IMT at Ambala City has been lying pending since the past over a decade, allegedly due to many political and public reasons and action on the part of farmers refusing to provide land and also due lack of support by the government, as such this highly beneficial project is hanging on fire since years.

An exhibition was also inaugurated in the complex by CSR in the presence by the cabinet minister Rao Narbir Singh in

the presence of newly elected Mayor of Ambala Municipal Corporation Shelja Sachdeva, former minister and Ambala City MLA Aseem Goel and BJP district president Mandeel Rana.

During the address, chief guest Rao Narbir Singh highly appreciated the performance of present Chief Minister Nayab Saini in a short period after holding the 11th chair of CM in the state. He said that he has been in association with as many as seven CMs in Haryana while elected MLA in the state seven times, but has never seen any CM working so sincerely as well as hard, when nothing is im-

possible as long as he is on this chair. Rao said that in 100 days only after holding charge as CM Saini has fulfilled all assurances made by him, winning the heart of every resident in the state as well as his superiors.

Cabinet Minister Rao Narbir Singh said that there is need of industry support to maintain pollution control, since increasing pollution the the environments in Haryana is a serious issue at present for the health of every resident across the state is a burning issue, which have to be solved on priority, especially by those running a industry in the state. Rao said, we should ban use of polythene in the industries completely during packing looking for an alternate in this regard.

The National General Secretary of Laghu Udyog Bharti Om Parkash Gupta after addressing a large gathering while talking to media persons said that Laghu Udyog Bharti has a strength of 52,688 members in the country which include 4,090 female entrepreneurs, and have nearly 2,000 service sectors with presence in 27 states with 998 units functioning in India.

Some people are engaged in glorifying Aurangzeb, who destroyed the symbols of our faith says Anil Vij



PARVESH HANDA
Chandigarh

Addressing media persons Haryana's Energy, Transport & Labor Minister, Anil Vij expressed strong displeasure over those glorifying Aurangzeb, and said that some people are engaged in glorifying Aurangzeb, whereas Aurangzeb destroyed the symbols of our faith. He can never be a center of trust for us. He further added that anyone who is a devotee of Bharat Mata, a patriot, or a true lover of this country should never have Aurangzeb's name on their lips. Taking a tough stance, Vij said, "Whoever wants to glorify Aurangzeb should first follow his footsteps: imprison his father at home and murder his own brother, then they may glorify him. The name of Aurangzeb should never be spoken by a patriot or someone who loves this nation.

When asked about Arvind Kejriwal's statement comparing the current government to a dictatorship worse than the British rule, Vij responded sharply, said that defeated and disgraced figures often have such thoughts. The people have rejected him (Kejriwal), cut his kite, and now he is blaming the golden era ushered in under Narendra Modi Ji's leadership, which is completely wrong. Referring to Kejriwal's claim that AAP aims to fulfill the dreams of Shaheed Bhagat Singh and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Vij sarcastically remarked that just putting up pictures doesn't mean you embody their ideals.

Haryana Government will take strict action against schools running without recognition

PARVESH HANDA
Ambala

The education department has prepared to take strict action against hundreds of schools running without recognition in Haryana. The list of large numbers of such schools mushrooming without having recognition from the government in Ambala district, too, is being prepared by the education department to take necessary action against such schools has been prepared by the education department. According to information, there are some educational schools recognized up to primary or middle classes but are teaching students of classes X and XII and manage to get them examined in Board examination through illegal ways. According to an officer of the education department, once the list of such illegal schools is ready, the names of all the schools running without recognition will be published in the newspapers.

Information reveals that 282 schools have been found so far which are running without obtaining recognition from the government in Ambala. Director Secondary has issued a letter to all DEOs regarding the orders of the High Court. It has been asked to take action against such private schools illegally running without recognition within three days.

A PIL was filed in the High Court regarding private



schools running without recognition in the state, in which the petitioner requested to initiate action against schools running illegally in violation of the provisions of Haryana School Education Rules and to ban the expansion of illegal, unrecognized, unauthorized schools. On this, the High Court, while providing the last opportunity under the order, directed to submit an affidavit before 26 February 2024 regarding what action has been taken against these schools.

action, which can be done and should be done and take further action accordingly. Vij said that there are some steps taken by the state government. He said that total 27 traffic police stations and 7 traffic police posts have been established in Haryana with the facilities for road safety, in which total 3,379 e-challenging machines have been provided and 53 challenging branches are functioning in Haryana, and all challenging branches and e-challenging machines are connected with E-chal-

laning Software developed by MORTH. The Transport Minister said that total 1302 alcohol-sensors are used for traffic challans apart from total 25 big Cranes, 22 small cranes and 84 Ambulances are used for the purpose. Vij said, Intelligent Traffic Management System has been implemented, wherein CCTV Cameras have been installed to monitor the traffic system in 12 districts Panchkula, Yamunanagar, Kurukshetra, Ambala, Karnal, Panipat, Sonapat, Rohtak, Kaithal, Mewat, Gurugram and Faridabad. Apart from this, National Highway No. 152-D (Delhi-Mumbai Expressway) and NH-44 of Haryana are also covered under ITMS/ANPR cameras. He said that a total 2366 road safety awareness campaigns in various schools, colleges, unions, workshops, hotels, dhabas etc. have been organized in the state.

Dhami criticizes Government's ignorance towards Sikh prisoners

Prime Minister's denial of meeting with Sri Akal Takht Sahib's five-member panel is unjust— Advocate Dhami

JAGMOHAN SINGH
Amritsar

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) President, Harjinder Singh Dhami, has criticized the Indian government's ignorance on the release of Bandi Singhs (Sikh prisoners), calling it a violation of human rights, an insult to the principles of justice, and an injustice to the Sikh community.

Speaking at the SGPC office today, Dhami stated that the SGPC has been making continuous efforts for a long time regarding this serious issue concerning Sikhs. However, the Centre government's negative approach has been a major obstacle. He recalled that Sri Akal Takht Sahib had constituted a five-member committee to address the cases of Balwant Singh Rajoana and other Sikh prisoners. Unfortunately, it is



disappointing that the Prime Minister did not even consider granting time to meet with this committee representing the highest Sikh religious authority, Sri Akal Takht Sahib.

He further stated that several attempts were made to arrange a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi regarding this matter. However, even after more than one-and-a-half years, the government's response has been discouraging. He said that the five-member committee of Sri Akal Takht Sahib had requested a meeting with the Prime Minister in December 2023 to discuss the issue of Rajoana and Sikh prisoners. He revealed that according to a recent communication from the Centre government, on March 21, 2025, the request

was officially declined with the justification that the matter is under consideration with the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Dhami questioned why the government has not taken any decision on Balwant Singh Rajoana's case, despite Supreme Court orders. He pointed out that earlier, the Prime Minister's office had suggested discussing the matter with the Home Minister, but even the Ministry of Home Affairs has not given a positive response.

He emphasized that the cases of Rajoana and other Sikh prisoners are deeply connected to Sikh sentiments, and they have already served long sentences. Therefore, the Indian government must take immediate action without any further delay. He stressed that the rule of justice should be applied uniformly to everyone, and political considerations should not interfere in such matters. The government must fulfill its responsibility by ensuring justice for Sikh prisoners to prevent any sense of distrust among Sikhs.

District Administration Amritsar Demolishes House of Drug Smugglers Anwar Gill & Abhi



JAGMOHAN SINGH
Amritsar

The District Administration Amritsar demolished the house of Anwar Gill and Abhi, alleged notorious drug smugglers, in Village Gumtala, Police Station Cantonment. The demolition was carried out using a JCB machine and laborers. Police Commissioner Gurpreet Singh Bhullar, who oversaw the operation, in a statement issued here today warned drug smugglers that anyone involved in illegal activities will face strict action. He emphasized that the administration will continue to take action until those involved in wrongdoing either reform or leave Punjab. According to Police Commissioner Bhullar, five cases have been registered against Anwar Gill, including one under the NDPS Act and the Arms Act. Abhi also has cases registered against him under the NDPS Act and the Arms Act. Both Anwar Gill and Abhi are cousins and reside in the same house.

Punjab Police busts cross-border drug cartel



JAGMOHAN SINGH
Amritsar

Commissionerate Police has busted a cross-border drug cartel with the arrest of a woman kingly identified as Mandeep Kaur (27) of village Ibban Kalan in Amritsar and her three operatives after recovering 5.2 kg heroin from their possession, said Director General of Police (DGP) Punjab Gaurav Yadav here on Sunday.

The other arrested operatives have been identified as Alam Arora (21) and Manmeet alias Golu (23), both residents of Janta Colony in Chheharta, Amritsar; and 18-years-old boy (name withheld) of Tarn Taran.

DGP said that preliminary investigations have revealed that accused Mandeep Kaur was in a relationship with a person, who introduced her to Pakistan-based smugglers. Accused Mandeep's ancestral house is located in border village Khalra in Tarn Taran, which is approximately 2 kilometres from the fencing of the Indo-Pak border, he said.

The DGP said that the probe has also uncovered evidence that the accused Mandeep, occasionally don a police uniform to impersonate a police officer to carry out nefarious activities. Further investigations are on to establish backward and forward linkages in this case, he added.

Haryana to open 46 new de-addiction centers to meet increasing drug-addiction among youths: Health Minister

SATISH HANDA

Haryana government will open 46 new de-addiction centres to save the youth from drug addiction, of these, 12 centres will be opened at district hospitals and 34 at subdivision level. Haryana Health Minister Arti Singh Rao said that she will personally monitor the de-addiction centres. At present, there are 130 de-addiction centres operating in the state. She said along with this, services of psychiatrists will be taken to strengthen de-addiction services. Expressing deep concern Health Minister Arti Singh Rao during Question Hour in Vidhan Sabha session on Thursday said that she would personally monitor the de-addiction centres so that all facilities could be made available as per the requirement. In reply to a question she said that at present 130 de-addiction centres are operating in the state including private, government and semi-government centres.

Health Minister said the district hospitals in which de-addiction centres are proposed include Bhiwani, Charkhi Dabri, Faridabad, Jhajjar, Jind, Palwal, Panipat, Nuh, Rewari, Rohtak, Sonapat and Yamunanagar. Similarly, de-addiction centres will be opened in Ambala Cantt, Narayanganj, Loharu, Bawani Khera, Tosham, Siwani, Tohana, Ratia, Ballabhgarh, Patauda, Sohna, Hansi, Adampur, Narnaund, Barwala, Nilokheri, Assandh, Indri, Samalkha, Shahabad, Gohana, Kalayat, Gubla, Narwana, Safidon, Jagadhri, Meham, Dabwali, Ellenabad, Kalka, Bahadurgarh, Beri, Kosli and Mahendragarh.

The Health Minister informed that there are a total of 20 regular and five contractual psychiatrists in the department. To overcome the shortage of psychiatrists, 38 medical officers have successfully completed six



months of online de-addiction training from the Department of Psychiatry, PGIMER Chandigarh. She said the services of these medical officers will be taken to strengthen de-addiction services. The second batch of 50 medical officers started in December in the series of six-month online de-addiction training.

Haryana Health Minister further said that urine drug detection kits are being made available in hospitals for early detection of drug abuse, since these kits rapidly detect the consumption of a variety of drugs such as opioids, cocaine, cannabis, benzodiazepines, amphetamines, barbiturates in urine samples. She said, detecting drug abuse through these kits helps the doctor to provide proper and early treatment to the drug addict. According to information, the AIDS Control Society runs 18 Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST) centers in the state and in these centers drug addicts are encouraged to get rid of the drug.

Growing drug addiction among youth in Haryana is a matter of concern for people and government in the state. Information reveals, Haryana authorities seized drugs and liquor worth Rs.14 crore during the assembly elections in the recent past, highlighting ongoing concerns about drug-related issues in the state. Information

reveals that Haryana Police registered 3,757 FIRs and arrested 5,350 people under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (NDPS), 1985 till December 2023. The haul included 590 kg charas, 4,950 kg ganja, 34 kg heroin, 310 kg opium, and 33,602 kg poppy husk with Sirsa leading in cases and arrests (582 cases and 766 arrests). According to the Haryana Narcotics Control Bureau, top 10 districts in Haryana for drug cases are Sirsa, Faridabad, Gurgaon, Kurukshetra, Fatehabad, Ambala, Panchkula, Yamunanagar, Hisar and Rohtak.

Studies by the Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development and Indian Council for Social Science Research link the drug problem to youth unemployment and frustration. Urban unemployment rate for the 15-29 age group increased to 11.2% in the April-June 2024 quarter, up from 9.5% in the January-March 2024 quarter according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) April-June 2024 Report. For women in the 15-29 age group in urban areas, the unemployment rate rose to 17.2% in April-June, compared to 13.9% in the previous quarter. Sources reveal, Haryana State Narcotics Control Bureau (HSNCB) has launched a pioneering project called 'Chakravayuh: The escape room' which aims to keep teenagers away from narcotics addiction.

HRSP Report: 1106 persons died, 3793 injured in 3213 road mishaps in past 15 months in Haryana



SATISH HANDA
Chandigarh

Haryana Transport Minister Anil Vij while speaking in regard to 'Sanklap Pater' said that I myself and my government are very much concerned about the issue to find a solution to avoid casualties and disabilities of Human Resources caused due to road accidents in the State. He said that without rules, we cannot achieve our freedom of our rights. He said that we are working on identifying the black spots, for conducting road ac-

idents, over and long size vehicles, facilities for drivers and duty hours for drivers of the transport etc. He said that we are taking all necessary action, which can be done and should be done and take further action accordingly. Vij said that there are some steps taken by the state government. He said that total 27 traffic police stations and 7 traffic police posts have been established in Haryana with the facilities for road safety, in which total 3,379 e-challenging machines have been provided and 53 challenging branches are functioning in Haryana, and all challenging branches and e-challenging machines are connected with E-chal-

laning Software developed by MORTH. The Transport Minister said that total 1302 alcohol-sensors are used for traffic challans apart from total 25 big Cranes, 22 small cranes and 84 Ambulances are used for the purpose. Vij said, Intelligent Traffic Management System has been implemented, wherein CCTV Cameras have been installed to monitor the traffic system in 12 districts Panchkula, Yamunanagar, Kurukshetra, Ambala, Karnal, Panipat, Sonapat, Rohtak, Kaithal, Mewat, Gurugram and Faridabad. Apart from this, National Highway No. 152-D (Delhi-Mumbai Expressway) and NH-44 of Haryana are also covered under ITMS/ANPR cameras. He said that a total 2366 road safety awareness campaigns in various schools, colleges, unions, workshops, hotels, dhabas etc. have been organized in the state.

10262 cases of rape & 6338 murder cases registered from 2019 to 2024 in Haryana

Number of incidences of crime against women is the cruelty and violence by the husband and other family members, followed by sexual assault including rape and outraging of modesty.

SATISH HANDA
Chandigarh

According to police record, as regard cases of crime against women in five years, 10262 cases of rape and 6338 cases of murder were registered by the police in Haryana state in five with effect from 2019 to 2024, of these 9894 rape cases and 4035 cases of murder were investigated by the police and 5304 cases of rape over 5304 cases of murder are undertrial in courts in the state. Information also reveals that 68,030 cases of crime against women were registered by the police from

2019 to 2024 and 66,806 were worked out during investigations. A total of 38,485 cases were put to courts.

Sources reveal, domestic violence within the four walls of homes as well as the violence against women outside the four walls, too is quite high. However, domestic violence against women is widely prevalent, but has remained largely invisible. Statistics reveal that 45% of Indian women are slapped, kicked or beaten by their husbands. Sources also reveal that even in nearly 32% cases acts of violence reported by the male partners against their pregnant wives. Every 60 minutes a woman dies in India due to domestic violence. Women accept violence because social norms sanction them. At the same time, cultural conditioning and economic dependence prevent the vast majority of women leaving their



marital homes. Though there is criminal law to prevent domestic violence, the recent civil law 'Protection of women from Domestic Violence' is aimed at providing relief, compensation and support to a woman. The domestic violence is usually due to verbal and emotional reasons including insulting behaviour by female partner, not attractive in look, not smart, doesn't respect his (Husband) or his parents, accusations on the character or conduct etc, for not having a male child, for not bringing sufficient dowry etc a

job, preventing from meeting any person in the normal course of events, threats to commit suicide, economic violence, for not providing money for maintaining you or your children, not providing proper food, clothes, medicines etc, stopping from carrying on employment, not allowing to take up employment, having relationship with some one in opposite sex and physical violence by slapping, beating, hitting, biting, kicking, punching, pushing, shoving or causing bodily pain or injury in any manner, sexual violence (such as forced sexual intercourse, forcing to look at pornography or any other obscene pictures or material and any act of sexual nature to abuse humiliates or degrade or violating dignity or any other unwelcome conduct or sexual nature) is also one of the major reason for domestic violence in many cases.

Number of AIIMS Rose to 22 under Modi Govt But there is No Room for Laxity on Health Services: Nadda

NEW DELHI: Union Health Minister JP Nadda on Friday acknowledged certain 'shortcomings' in the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) institutes across the country but categorically stated that there will be no compromise on the quality of health services in the country's most premier health institution.

Replying to SP MP Dharmendra Yadav's charges of crumbling infrastructure of health centres including AIIMS, the Health Minister admitted that there were certain deficiencies and also cited some 'valid' reasons for it.

"During Jawaharlal Nehru regime, only 1 AIIMS was there. Atal Behari Vajpayee government inaugurated 6 more AIIMS and now under



Modi government, the total number of AIIMS has gone up to 22. This is a remarkable achievement. There have been some shortages due to sudden rise in health infrastructure but that will be addressed soon," Nadda told the Lok Sabha.

The Health Minister, further asserted that there won't be any compromise with the quality of health services provided at AIIMS centres across the country even if it is deluged by a rush of patients.

"There is no compromise on the quality of health care

in AIIMS. AIIMS is a brand and that has to be maintained," he stressed.

The Health Minister also elaborated on the regular 'quality enhancement' programs undertaken at AIIMS to keep the medical faculty and staff abreast with latest technical developments and innovations. He informed that AIIMS staff are regularly trained under the National Training Mission while nurses and other support staff are also trained twice a year.

He further stated that more than 62 crore people of the country have been brought under the ambit of Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY), under which health insurance cover of Rs 5 lakh is provided to every family per year.

PM Modi to Inaugurate Pamban Railway Bridge In Rameswaram on April 6



CHENNAI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will inaugurate the newly constructed Pamban railway bridge in Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu, on April 6, coinciding with the auspicious occasion of Ram Navami.

In a statement released on Wednesday, R.N. Singh, General Manager of Southern Railway, confirmed that senior railway officials have been conducting extensive inspections of the bridge and Rameswaram railway station in preparation for the event.

April 6, which falls on a Sunday this year, is celebrated across the country as Ram Navami, marking the birth of Lord Rama. The occasion adds a spiritual dimension to the Prime Minister's visit, as he is also expected to visit the renowned Ramanathaswamy Temple in Rameswaram.

According to sources in Southern Railway, the ceremony will be attended by a

host of dignitaries, including Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, Governor R.N. Ravi, Union Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, Members of Parliament and Legislative Assembly from Tamil Nadu, senior BJP leaders, and party workers. Later in the day, Prime Minister Modi is expected to address a public gathering before departing for Delhi from Madurai Airport. To ensure the smooth execution of the high-profile event, authorities have already conducted three full-scale rehearsals.

On March 22, a high-level team led by Additional General Manager Kaushal Kishore conducted a comprehensive assessment of key locations in Rameswaram and Pamban, evaluating both logistical and security arrangements.

The team, which included Madurai Divisional Railway

Manager Sharad Srivastava and other top officials, inspected various critical locations, such as the Rameswaram temple premises, Mandapam camp helipad, Kunthukal, Mandapam railway station, and the Pamban Road bridge.

The inspections were aimed at ensuring that all arrangements were in place for a seamless inauguration.

Following the site visits, Kishore chaired a high-level review meeting with senior railway officials, law enforcement agencies, and state and central intelligence personnel.

The meeting focused on finalising security protocols, crowd management strategies, and event logistics to ensure a safe and successful inauguration.

The new Pamban railway bridge stretches 2.1 km in length and is a remarkable feat of engineering. Originally commissioned in February 2019, construction was completed in November 2024.

One of the key features of the bridge is its vertical lift span, which weighs 660 metric tons and is capable of rising vertically to allow ship passage — an innovation developed entirely through indigenous technology.

The bridge stands as a symbol of India's growing infrastructure prowess and will enhance connectivity to the sacred island of Rameswaram, making travel more efficient for thousands of pilgrims and tourists.

Mayawati slams Samajwadi Party's 'dirty politics' over controversial remarks on Rana Sanga



LUCKNOW: In the wake of controversial remarks made by Samajwadi Party (SP) MP Ramji Lal Suman about 16th-century Rajput king Rana Sanga, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) Chief Mayawati has condemned the SP for its "dirty politics" and added that it is wrong to insult any community for the sake of political gains.

In a post on Thursday on social media platform X, she wrote, "The dirty politics that SP is doing by putting forward its Dalit leaders for its political gains, that is, it is trying to harm them, is not right. Dalits should be cautious of all their tactics. The incident that happened in Agra is very worrying." "It is not right for SP to demean any community to serve its own interests. They create a negative image of one community while favouring another. This behaviour will disrupt the peace and harmony in society, which is not acceptable," she added on X.

Mayawati's remarks came after Samajwadi Party MP Ramji Lal Suman sparked controversy with his statement on Rana Sanga, a 16th-century Rajput king, calling him a "traitor" for allegedly bringing Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, to defeat Ibrahim Lodi. Following SP leader Suman's statement, violence erupted at his residence in Agra on Wednesday as unidentified individuals resorted to stone-pelting, smashing window panes, and vandalising vehicles parked outside. Agra Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) Sanjeev Tyagi said that the people resorted to pelting stones, breaking window panes and vandalising vehicles parked outside of the MP's house, following Ramji Lal Suman's statement. "Some people belonging to Karni Sena got angry after a statement of Samajwadi Party MP Ramji Lal Suman. They went to his residence, pelted stones and broke glasses. Several people have been taken into custody. The entire incident is being investigated. Some police officials were also injured in the incident," ACP Tyagi added.

INDIA Bloc to Fight Bihar Elections Together: Congress

KAVITA SHARMA
New Delhi

The Congress party has clearly said that the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) will contest the Bihar elections jointly to defeat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

A meeting of Bihar Congress leaders was held at AICC Headquarters here today, which was presided over by Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and



attended by Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, General Secretary (Organisation) KC Venugopal, Bihar in-charge

Krishna Allavaru, Bihar Congress president Rajesh Ram, CLP leader Shakeel Ahmad Khan, and all other senior Bihar Congress

leaders. Addressing the meeting, Kharge said that winds of change are being felt in Bihar. He stated that the people of Bihar are concerned about their welfare, social justice, and progress. Highlighting growing public resentment against unemployment, irregularities in the recruitment process, and paper leaks, he expressed confidence that the current government will be ousted and a people-friendly government will be formed in Bihar.

Rajya Sabha Chairman dismisses Privilege Motion Notice by Congress against Amit Shah

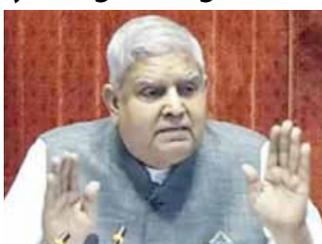
NEW DELHI: Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar on Thursday rejected the notice of privilege motion given by Congress member Jairam Ramesh against Union Home Minister Amit Shah. The motion was moved by the Congress MP on March 26 for "casting aspersions" on senior party leader Sonia Gandhi.

While dismissing the notice, the Rajya Sabha Chairman said that he had "carefully gone through" the matter and found that there was nothing wrong. He said that he had done his homework properly and cited records.

While dismissing the notice, Chairman Dhankhar said he was anguished at the rampant use of the sensitive parliamentary practice of breach of privilege.

"Breach of privilege is a serious matter. I have declined with a deep sense of anguish and pain that we rush to invoke a breach of privilege, we rush to the media... and give it traction and try to tarnish image... I have said on a number of occasions that this House will not be a platform to ruin the reputations of members... we have to protect..."

Congress member Jairam Ramesh on Wednesday gave a notice of question of privilege in terms of Rule 188 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the



Council of States (Rajya Sabha) against Amit Shah, Minister of Home Affairs, for casting aspersions on Sonia Gandhi, Member of Rajya Sabha and Chairperson of Congress Parliamentary Party.

In the notice, Ramesh had mentioned that during his reply on the Disaster Management Bill, 2024 on March 25, Amit Shah made unfounded allegations against Sonia Gandhi with a premeditated motive to malign her reputation.

In the notice, he said, "... even though the Home Minister didn't take the name of Smt. Sonia Gandhi but he had categorically by implication referred to her and imputed motives to her vis-a-vis the functioning of the National Prime Minister's Relief Fund (NPMRF)."

He said it was well established that it is a breach of privilege and contempt of the House to cast reflections or make derogatory references to any member of the House.

"In the instant case, the Home Minister had made unfounded allegations against Smt. Sonia Gandhi with a premeditated motive to malign her reputation. The Home Minister's statement is blatantly false and is defamatory. This tantamounts to breach of privilege of Smt. Sonia Gandhi. Hence, this matter constitutes a breach of privilege and the contempt of the House as well."

On Tuesday, during the discussion in the Rajya Sabha on the amendment to the Disaster Management Bill, HM Amit Shah launched a sharp attack on the Congress' management of the Prime Minister's Relief Fund during the UPA era, accusing the opposition of lacking accountability and transparency.

"It has become a culture to make accusations and then run away. But this is Parliament, not a street. If you level allegations, you will have to listen to the response. Under the Congress regime, only one family had control over the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. The Congress party president used to be a member of the Prime Minister's Relief Fund," he said.

PM Modi to flag off train from Katra to Valley on April 19

JAMMU: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will flag off the first train from Katra to the Valley on April 19 fulfilling the over 70-year-old dream of rail connectivity to Kashmir.

The train will chug off from Katra town in Reasi district and will cross the Pir Panjal mountain range to reach Srinagar and then its final destination at Baramulla in north Kashmir.

PM Modi will flag off the train from Katra in the presence of Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, Union Minister of State Dr Jitendra Singh, Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor, Manoj Sinha and Chief Minister Omar Abdullah.

At present, the train operates from Sangaldan to Baramulla. The Prime Minister is scheduled to land at Udhampur Army airport from New Delhi on the



morning of April 19 and then fly to the world's highest railway bridge over Chenab river in Reasi district.

PM Modi will be briefed about the construction of the bridge, which is considered to be an engineering marvel.

The Prime Minister will then reach the Mata Vaishno Devi base camp, Katra from where he will flag off the Vande Bharat

train to the Valley.

PM Modi will address a public rally at Katra before returning to Delhi in the afternoon.

Railway officials said after completion of expansion work at Jammu Railway Station, including increase in the number of platforms, the train to the Valley will start operations from Jammu, expectedly by July-August this year.

"There will be no direct train from Delhi or any other part to Kashmir. The passengers will have to de-board at Katra and change the train. Later, the same process will shift to Jammu", officials said. Several trials of the train from Katra to Baramulla including that of Vande Bharat Express have been successful and the security issues have also been addressed.

Out of the total 272 kms of the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail Link (USBRL) project, 209 kms was commissioned in phases with the first phase of the 118 km Qazigund-Baramulla section commissioned in October 2009, followed by the 18 km Banihal-Qazigund link in June 2013, 25 kms of the Udhampur-Katra stretch in July 2014 and the 48.1 km Banihal-Sangaldan section in February, last year.

Is it fit for Crime branch or CBI probe to do justice for late lamented Naba Das

ARABINDA MOHAPATRA
Bhubaneswar

The BJP government of Odisha has reopened the Naba Das murder case with a Crime Branch team led by an additional SP visiting Jharsuguda to record the statements of over 15 individuals. Though a fresh probe into the case has begun at the instance of the new government and is also wanted by the family of Das, who was shot dead by an ASI of police on January 29, 2023 in Brajraj Nagar, questions



are being asked if the new Crime Branch team would be able to ask the right kind of questions of senior IPS officer Arun Bothra

was who had investigated the case earlier. Senior BJP leader and Sambalpur MLA Jaynarayan Mishra has been critical

of Bothra and demanded a CBI inquiry into the murder case.

Bothra, a former Additional Director General of Police (ADGP) of Odisha Crime Branch (CID-CB) and a senior Indian Police Service (IPS) officer is currently at the centre of a controversy following his post on 'X' about a court giving 'clean chit' to actress Rhea Chakraborty in connection with the suspicious death of Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput.

The Odisha-cadre IPS officer was emphatic that despite

criticism Mumbai Police had conducted a professional investigation into Rajput's case. Taking into his personal 'X' handle, Bothra wrote "The #SushantSinghRajput case highlights the perils of social media vigilantes meddling in criminal investigations." He said that four years ago, countless social media accounts, egged on by TV anchors, had vilified the Mumbai Police with baseless accusations but now it's clear that the police conducted a solid, professional probe.

India's nuclear energy capacity doubled in last decade: Jitendra Singh



NEW DELHI: Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Atomic Energy, Dr Jitendra Singh, on Wednesday said that India's nuclear power generation capacity has increased from 22, 480 MW in 2014 to 35, 333 MW currently, while installed capacity has doubled from 4, 780 MW to 8, 880 MW.

Responding to a discussion on nuclear power plants in the Lok Sabha, he emphasised the unprecedented growth in reactor installations and advancements in nuclear energy generation over the past decade.

"Before 2014, the total budget of the Department of Atomic Energy stood at Rs 13, 889 crore. This year, it has expanded to Rs 23, 604 crore, marking a 170 per cent increase," he said in the Lok

Sabha, underscoring the government's focus on nuclear energy growth.

He also pointed to the 2017 decision by the Union Cabinet, which granted bulk approval for 10 new reactors in a single sitting - an unprecedented move in India's nuclear history. The recent Union Budget has further bolstered the nuclear sector with the announcement of a dedicated nuclear mission, which includes significant budgetary allocations.

Dr Singh highlighted Rajasthan's significant contribution to India's nuclear energy sector, stating that the state houses seven of the country's 25 operational reactors. He noted that a previously non-functional unit has been revived, further strengthening the state's nuclear output.

Additionally, he announced the establishment of a new reactor in Gorakhpur, Haryana, marking a geographical expansion of India's nuclear infrastructure beyond its traditional strongholds in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat.

BJP Expels Hindutva Hardliner Basanagouda Patil Yatnal Amid Growing Internal Rifts



ARUNKUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

In a decisive move signaling the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) tightening grip on party discipline, the central leadership expelled Vijayapura MLA Basanagouda Patil Yatnal from the party for six years. The decision, announced on Wednesday, comes after months of public spat and internal tensions, with Yatnal repeatedly targeting key figures within the party, particularly former Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa and his son, Karnataka BJP President B.Y. Vijayendra.

The expulsion follows a February 10 show-cause notice issued to Yatnal, warning him against his continued public criticism of the party leadership. Om Pathak, member secretary of the BJP's central disciplinary committee, stated in an official letter that Yatnal's response was reviewed but found unsatisfactory. The letter underscored that despite previous assurances of good conduct, Yatnal continued to breach party discipline, leaving the leadership with no choice but to expel him.

"It has accordingly been decided to expel you for a period of six years with immediate effect

from the primary membership of the party, and you stand removed from any party position that you may have held until now," the letter stated firmly.

Persistent Defiance Leads to Expulsion: Yatnal's dismissal did not come as a surprise to many within Karnataka's political circles. He had been vocal about his dissatisfaction with the BJP's state leadership, often blaming Vijayendra for the party's declining influence. Hours before his expulsion, Yatnal lashed out once again, stating that both Vijayendra and Yediyurappa had failed to unify the party and were responsible for its poor performance in the recent Lok Sabha elections.

"The perception that Vijayendra or even Yediyurappa is not truly BJP has gained traction among MPs. This sentiment is echoed by many within the Bharatiya Janata Party and senior leaders in Karnataka over the years. Vijayendra has struggled to carry all leaders along with him," Yatnal told reporters.

Congress-Trinamool discuss to increase coordination in Parliament, Sonia holds talks with Derek

MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA
New Delhi

On Wednesday, Sonia Gandhi listened intently as Union Home Minister Amit Shah discussed his disagreements with the Trinamool Congress. The partnership between the Congress and the Trinamool Congress in Parliament has grown stronger. While seated with Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha leaders Derek O'Brien, Sonia Gandhi engaged in a conversation over coffee, during which Amit Shah recounted the altercation with the Trinamool Congress that took place during the Rajya Sabha session. The meeting went on for quite some time at the Office of the Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge.

Sources indicate that Sonia and Derek engaged in discussions regarding the collaboration between the Trinamool Congress and the Congress in Parliament. They also addressed the impending criticism from another Trinamool MP, Dola Sen, directed at Shah in the



Rajya Sabha. Notably, when Amit Shah had a confrontation with Trinamool MP Saket Gokhale on Wednesday, Sonia was absent from Parliament. Consequently, she reached out to Derek to gather details about the incident. Additionally, they explored strategies for enhancing coordination at both the national level and within Parliament in the near future.

This conversation was not a standard meeting organized by Mallikarjun Kharge. The Rajya Sabha leader typically convenes

with leaders from other parties in his office nearly every morning before the session to facilitate coordination. However, the Trinamool Congress generally does not participate in these gatherings. Sources from Trinamool indicate that this was not an official meeting initiated by Kharge. Following a confrontation between Shah and Saket in the Rajya Sabha, Derek, serving as the Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, approached Kharge to discuss the matter, that's where he met Sonia.



NIKHIL DEY & RAKSHITA SWAMY SAY STARTUPS PROMOTE RIGHTS PUBLICLY, OPPOSE PROTECTIONS PRIVATELY

Gig slavery goes digital



ing a service at the mere click of a button.

The consumer sees a worker, who has driven through pollution, rushed up the stairs, and is dripping from sweat or wet with rain, only for a brief moment. The worker's indignity is compounded when he is forced to desperately seek a five-star rating. The distressing story of exploitation has now reached a new high, with the introduction of 'Insta Maids'. This service offers a house help within 15 minutes to clean utensils and sweep the house for "49 an hour". Workers understand what is happening and are fighting back. Some of their slogans point to the poignancy of the situation — "rating nahi, haq chaahiye (we don't want ratings, we want rights)!" and "insaaniyat hai hum, ghulam nahi (we are human beings, not slaves)!"

Bill in cold storage

In India, beginning with Rajasthan, the workers made an important though limited breakthrough by advocating and pushing for legislation that would give them: i) a framework for social security that would help deal with atomised piece rate work; ii) access to their own data on a real-time basis; iii) a grievance redress mechanism that would allow them some independent platform to raise their grievances, and a tripartite board where issues related to the sector could be discussed by all concerned.

This breakthrough has been stymied with the new BJP government refusing to notify the Act with rules. The Congress government that got it passed promised more progressive legislation in Karnataka

and Telangana, and put up a draft law with a promise to pass it immediately. But the collective power of the aggregators was further aggregated in the form of NASSCOM and CII-led representations to the State governments.

These asserted that gig workers are 'partners' and should not be recognised as employees; cannot have a right to their data including the right to know the break-up of individual bills; cannot be promised protection against arbitrary termination; and should not have access to an independent grievance redress framework.

The Karnataka government has formed a ministerial committee to deliberate further on these inputs, and contrary to assurances that progressive legislation would be passed, has put the Bill in cold storage. It is clear whose voices an elected government listens to.

It is no coincidence that the person who signed on behalf of the CII Unicorn Forum's submission to the Karnataka government is the founder of Urban Company. On LinkedIn he suggests that the Insta Maids service "will bring alive the promise of New India for service partners where financial security, professional recognition and dignity are within reach for all".

The naked double speak is evident when founders indulge in PR to show that they care for the rights of gig workers, and at the same time privately oppose any legislative framework that emerges to protect their rights in a State. This hypocrisy must be exposed and the modern slavery of platform-based gig work must be brought to an end.

Nikhil Dey is Founder of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan while Rakshita Swamy is Founder of Social Accountability Forum for Action and Research. Views are personal.

In various urban centres, we often see a gathering of a range of *mazdoors* (labourers) with their tools early in the morning, waiting for someone to call them to work. When an employer or *thekedaar* turns up, huge numbers of these men and women swarm around him and he begins a negotiation process of getting the best deal for himself. From the point of view of the worker, who is a part of an enormous and growing unemployed work force, the deal is made in desperation. It is a supplier's market.

The *thekedaars* are a creation of managerial facilitation where employers are able to get a 'middleman' to squeeze the greatest possible amount from labour, and offer them the greatest possible profits. Spend an hour in a labour chowk or a *mazdoor mandi* (job market) and you will understand how people's labour is sold in an auction on a daily or piece rate basis, where the lowest wage wins.

Doing dirty work virtually

This lesson has been learnt rapidly and more diabolically by employers of gig and digital platforms. The gig economy relies on a paradigm of piece rate work, offering so-called employment and 'choice' to workers, thereby shedding all responsibility vis-à-vis workers, their wages, their working conditions, and social security. The digital medium has been cunningly used to repurpose the work of the *thekedaar* (the middleman) by creating a platform that would do his dirty work virtually, and outside of the public eye.

Every unemployed worker would now become part of your *mazdoor mandi*, desperately looking for work and supposedly exercising his/her choice by clicking on any option that might help them sur-

vive another day. The advantages of the *mandi* where the auction is a downward bid, with the lowest wage winning, have been multiplied virtually, exponentially, and seamlessly so that you don't see the unfair work practice that the *thekedaar* plays and the anguish on the worker's face. There is also no possibility of collective bargaining because the collective has been atomised into a million desperate workers individually checking their phones in search of employment.

When they 'accept' a ride, delivery, or a service, the aggregator (*thekedaar*) holds it up as their great benevolent service to the nation of creating employment. The magic is all too real for them to know because they control it all through a disembodied app. They know how much to offer, on what terms, and under what conditions. Their algorithms help them maximise profits in a way that the worker can either choose to say yes to or perish in a market that is dominated by a consumer class that only sees the convenience of someone provid-



ANSHUL TRIVEDI EXPLAINS HOW CLOSING MAHARASHTRA'S GONDI SCHOOL DEFIES CONSTITUTIONAL PROTECTIONS

Saving Adivasi schools a Constitutional duty

The order to close down the only Gondhi-medium school in a village of Maharashtra raises important questions. The school was started in Mohgaon village in the Fifth Schedule area of the Gadchiroli district, in 2019, as a result of a resolution by the gram panchayat, for tribal students to achieve better learning outcomes by imparting primary education in their mother tongue.

This initiative was in consonance with Article 29 of the Constitution, which provides minorities the right to preserve distinct languages, scripts and cultures, and Article 350(a) which mandates that the state should make adequate provisions so that children of minority groups may receive instruction in their mother tongue.

However, the local administration has argued that as the school is not registered under the Right to Education Act, 2009, its standards cannot be monitored. Non-recognition would also jeopardise the future of students when they transition to higher classes. However, an education officer has said that in case of closure, the students will be 'absorbed' in other schools.

Subordination by bias

While the objection of the administration is couched in bureaucratic language, it must be emphasised that the question of recognition is fundamentally a question of power, and only derivatively that of procedure. Non-recognition of the school is linked to the structural and socio-political subordination of the Adivasi communities owing to the normative bias of the state against their language and culture. Therefore, spotlighting the moral and political context of this 'bureaucratic' refusal by the



local administration becomes important.

Jawaharlal Nehru was of the firm view that the Adivasi communities must grow according to their own genius. His view was informed by the historical experience of the past two centuries which saw many tribal communities being driven to the verge of extinction as a result of the vicious violence unleashed by the colonial state across the world.

Therefore, the Constitution has provisions to preserve and protect the tribal way of life — rights over land, language, culture and customs. These provisions are intended to enable tribal communities to participate in the process of nation-building while guarding against the loss of their identity.

Forces of absorption

However, the forces of absorption, which operate in the secular and religious realms,

have had an immensely deleterious impact on the tribal communities since Independence. In the secular realm, absorption is carried out by the state and the market, while in the religious realm, absorption is carried out through the denigration, distortion and erasure of tribal religious beliefs. Both these forces of absorption complement each other.

This particular case, of the school's possible closure, is one of absorption through the state which is operationalised through the non-recognition of the elements of tribal culture. This is reflected most clearly in the current status of Adivasi languages in the Constitution. Out of the 22 languages included in the Eighth Schedule, major tribal languages such as Gondhi and Bhili are absent.

Gondhi, which according to the 2011 Census, is spoken by more than 29 lakh people primarily across six States, is not included within the Eighth Schedule. Therefore, the state has no obligation to promote it at the national level.

On the contrary, Sanskrit, which is considered the Devbhasha or the language of the gods, is spoken by less than 25,000 people across the country, is listed in the Eighth Schedule. The contrast between Sanskrit and Gondhi is necessary in this context because both are minority languages. Both are unlikely to be amplified

by the market nor can they be considered necessary in getting employment. However, both these minority languages have contrasting fates due to the socio-political power wielded by the community which seeks to promote them — one is recognised by the state while the other is neglected.

Specificity of Adivasi languages

The need to confer state recognition becomes all the more important in the case of Adivasi communities because their culture has an oral tradition which includes their originary myths, religious beliefs and tales of the past. In the present context, given the rapid erosion of the Adivasi identity due to the clearing of forests, increasing urbanisation and rampant marketisation of society, the primary site of the construction of the Adivasi identity (historical memory which is transmitted orally) may face danger. The extinction of an Adivasi language might cause irreparable loss to that identity. Therefore, Adivasi languages must be accorded special status to ensure their protection.

It is ironic that those who claim to follow the Constitution, which derives its legitimacy from 'we, the people', recognise and promote the Devbhasha but neglect the Janbhasha (language of the people) of the Adivasi people. This gross moral failure must be addressed. It can be remedied, with the first step being the recognition of the Gondhi-speaking school in focus and then expanding such schools. This would be in line with the spirit of the Constitution as well.

Anshul Trivedi is a member of the Indian National Congress. Views are personal.

LETTERBOX

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When a storm attacks,
all big trees get uprooted,
but simple grass always survives...

Being Simple and Egoless
makes us more
Powerful and Stable...

THE FINANCIAL WORLD

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BOOKS: REVIEW

New book offers a nuanced take on revolutionary Cuba

Travel writing often leans towards personal anecdotes, but Ullekh N.P.'s *Mad About Cuba: A Malayali Revisits the Revolution* strikes a rare balance between individual experiences, historical depth, and socio-political analysis. The book seamlessly blends a traveler's observations with Cuba's revolutionary legacy, the contemporary struggles of its people, and the country's global significance.

On the streets of Havana, Ullekh encounters vintage cars held together by necessity-driven ingenuity, smokes Cuban cigars, enjoys the island's rhythmic music, and indulges in rum-drenched reflections at famous haunts of literary and political legends. His journalist visa grants him access to prominent leaders, scientists, and thinkers, making his account more insightful than the usual tourist's narrative.

Through his encounters with Cubans across generations, Ullekh crafts a textured, nuanced perspective on Cuba—one that sharply

diverges from the often oversimplified portrayals in Western media.

A significant strength of *Mad About Cuba* is its candid examination of how U.S. sanctions have stifled Cuba's economy. Ullekh highlights how the American embargo not only restricts trade and aid from the U.S. but also discourages other countries from engaging with Cuba. His argument is clear: allowing a socialist experiment to flourish is not in Washington's interest. By documenting the everyday hardships of the Cuban people, the book exposes the egregious impact of these sanctions while also recognizing the resilience of the island nation.

For Ullekh, this analysis is personal. Growing up in a Marxist household in Kerala, he was exposed early to the revolutionary narratives of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. He recalls the Malayali inflection of Che's name and draws striking parallels between Cuba and Kerala. In 1957, Kerala became the first region in the world to

democratically elect a Communist government, just two years before the Cuban revolution toppled the U.S.-backed Batista regime. These historical echoes are not just coincidental; they reflect shared ideals of social justice, high literacy rates, and accessible healthcare.

Ullekh delves into fascinating links between Kerala and Cuba, including a now-defunct practice in both regions where young students were hired to read books and newspapers aloud to workers in beedi and cigar factories. Another captivating connection is the Cuban government's extensive research on *moringa*, a superfood whose seeds were sourced from across the world, including Kerala. These small but striking cultural and economic links make the book even more engaging.

The author provides keen observations on the generational divide within Cuban society. While the older population remains steadfastly loyal to the revolutionary ideals that granted them free edu-



Mad About Cuba: A Malayali Revisits the Revolution
By Ullekh N.P.
Penguin Books
256 pages; Rs 399.

cation and healthcare, the younger generation—more connected to the outside world through social media—is restless. They aspire for more economic freedom and consumer choices, often feeling constrained by the nation's socialist framework. However, Ullekh emphasizes that despite Cuba's economic challenges, its lower-income citizens fare much better than their counterparts in capitalist nations, thanks to strong government subsidies and social welfare programs.

Another crucial aspect of the book is its examination of Cuban exiles, particularly those in Miami, who dominate the international discourse on Cuba's politics. Ullekh critically assesses their role in violent counter-revolutionary activities, such as the failed Bay of Pigs invasion (1961) and the 1976 bomb-

ing of a Cuban civilian flight that killed 73 people. While acknowledging Cuba's political restrictions, he challenges the one-sided Western portrayal of Cuba as an oppressive state while glossing over the aggressive tactics of anti-Castro exiles.

Despite economic hardships, Cuba's resilience shines through in its scientific and medical advancements. Ullekh highlights Cuba's pioneering work in biotechnology and pharmaceuticals, including the development of interferons for treating viral infections, breakthroughs in lung cancer prevention, and innovations in Alzheimer's treatment. The COVID-19 pandemic showcased Cuba's ability to develop indigenous vaccines despite facing economic isolation. This scientific self-reliance is a testament to the country's ability to adapt and thrive under external pressures.

Mad About Cuba is more than just a travel memoir—it is a powerful critique of global politics, an exploration of socialist resilience, and a window into the everyday lives of Cubans. Ullekh N.P. manages to weave together personal nostalgia, investigative journalism, and a compelling narrative that challenges dominant media narratives.

Indian Companies Raise Record Funds Through Equity and Debt in FY25: Report

NEW DELHI: Indian corporates raised record-high funds through equity and debt in the financial year 2024-25, despite market fluctuations, a new report said on Thursday.

A report by PRIME Database showed that the public equity fundraising surged by 92 per cent to Rs 3.71 lakh crore.

When rights issues were included, the total amount reached nearly Rs 3.88 lakh crore. Debt fundraising also set a new record, touching Rs 11.12 lakh crore, mainly through private placements. The IPO market remained strong, with 78 companies raising Rs 1.62 lakh crore through mainboard IPOs, the highest-ever annual fundraising. This was more than 2.5 times the Rs 61,922 crore raised in the previous year. Hyundai Motor India Limited led with the largest IPO of Rs 27,859 crore, followed by Swiggy at Rs 11,327 crore, and NTPC Green Energy at Rs 10,000 crore.

The IPO pipeline remains strong, with 49 companies al-



ready having the SEBI approval to raise Rs 84,000 crore, while 67 more await clearance for Rs 1.02 lakh crore. New-age technology companies made a strong comeback, with eight firms collectively raising Rs 21,438 crore. This was a significant jump from Rs 3,040 crore in 2022-23 and Rs 5,544 crore in 2021-22. Investor enthusiasm remained high, with 56 IPOs receiving subscriptions of over 10 times, and 33 of them exceeding 50 times.

Retail investor interest also surged, with the average number of applications rising to 21.33 lakh in 2024-25, compared to 13.15 lakh last year. IPO listings delivered strong returns, with the average listing gain increasing to 30 per cent from 29 per cent in the previous year.

Nearly 46 IPOs continue to trade above their issue price, offering an average return of 15 per cent despite market corrections in the latter half of the year. Foreign portfolio investors

played a key role in IPO allocations, accounting for 16 per cent through anchor investments, while mutual funds took up 13 per cent. Overall, Qualified Institutional Buyers (QIBs) secured 67 per cent of the total public issue amount.

The SME IPO segment also saw strong growth, with 235 small and medium enterprises raising Rs 9,133 crore, a 53 per cent increase from last year. Retail investors showed high interest in SME IPOs, with average oversubscription reaching 233 times. Offer-for-sale (OFS) transactions increased by 29 per cent to Rs 30,741 crore, with government divestments contributing Rs 4,359 crore.

Qualified institutional placements (QIPs) more than doubled, with 91 companies raising Rs 1.43 lakh crore. Debt fundraising remained strong, with Rs 8,044 crore raised through public bonds, while the majority of debt issuances were done through private placements.

India's Chip Market to surpass \$100 Billion by 2030: Union Government



NEW DELHI: About 20 per cent of the workforce in semiconductor design is in India and the country's chip demand, currently at \$45-50 billion, is expected to reach \$100-110 billion by 2030, the government has said.

S. Krishnan, Secretary, MeitY, underscored the critical role of Nano Centres in fostering innovation and talent development to build a semiconductor-ready workforce of 85,000 professionals to achieve the goal.

Speaking at the first 'Nano Electronics Roadshow' at the National Science Seminar Complex, IISc Bengaluru, he emphasised that the event represents a significant initiative

by the ministry and the government, symbolising convergence and fostering industry-academia collaboration, with the government playing a

catalytic role in shaping India's technological and industrial future.

"A key focus of the ministry is aligning various efforts to advance the India Semiconductor Mission, one of the world's most extensive subsidy and grant programs. With nearly 70-75 per cent of investments in major semiconductor facilities coming from taxpayer money, every Indian is a stakeholder in this mission," Krishnan told the gathering.

The roadshow showcased over 100 intellectual properties (IPs), more than 50 groundbreaking technologies, and the innovation of over 35 promising startups — all

backed by six state-of-the-art nanoelectronics centres across the country.

The roadshow served as a platform for over 700 industry leaders, policymakers, and academics to explore areas of collaboration around strategies for strengthening India's nanoelectronics ecosystem.

Abhishek Singh, Additional Secretary, MeitY, highlighted the revolution technology has been bringing in all our lives and how the whole world of technology is shrinking.

Commenting on the industry-academia collaboration, he added, "Under the India AI mission, through the INUP programme and other initiatives, startups, entrepreneurs, and researchers are solving real-world problems, driving India to the forefront of cutting-edge technology".

"Together, with the pioneering efforts of institutions like IISc, IIT Bombay, IIT Delhi, and others, we are building an ecosystem that ensures India remains a leader in this revolution," he mentioned.

Government working to formalise all MSMEs, Registration to touch 9 Crore by 2029 says Mercy Epao



TANVIR KAUR
New Delhi

"More than 6 crore MSMEs are currently registered under Udyam and Udyam Assist (UA) portals. We are trying to formalize all the MSMEs in the country and hopefully by 2029 we will reach 9 crore. MSME sector contributes more than 30% of GDP, 36% of manufacturing output and also more than 45% of exports. The sector is the second largest employer in the country with more than 26 crore employment opportunities and generates more than 5 lakh crore GST contributions." Said Mercy Epao, Joint Secretary-SME, Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Government of India at the 11th MSME Excellence Awards and Conference organised by ASSOCHAM.

"The government is working towards its vision of sustainable development of globally competitive micro, small and medium enterprises as an engine of growth for Indian economy. The various schemes, programs and initiatives are designed to address the challenges faced by the MSME sector. The government is also focussed on uplifting women, SC/ST and persons with disabilities through special schemes and drives for them. Bank credit to MSMEs have been growing faster than credit dispersal to large enterprises. As per the economic survey 24-25, credit to MSMEs registered a year-on-year growth of 13%, whereas it stood at 6.1% for large enterprises," she said.

Highlighting recent steps taken by the government, she said "The government has infused an additional 9000 crore for the revamped credit guarantee scheme for MSMEs to enable an additional credit of rupees 2 lakh crore. Guarantee fee has been reduced to as low as 0.37 per annum and guarantee ceiling under digital footprint model has been hiked to 10 Crore. Guarantee coverage for women owned enterprises has been enhanced from existing 85% to 90% vis-a-vis 75% coverage for others. Criteria for MSME has been revised to 2.5 crore in investment and turnover up to 10 crore."

Sagtec Global Enters Indonesia with Master Dealership for Cloud-Based Smart Ordering System, Targeting US\$30 Million in Revenue

FW DESK
Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia)

Sagtec Global Limited a leading provider of customizable software solutions, proudly announced its expansion to Indonesia through a Master Dealership Agreement with PT Kiwari Asih Solusi ("Kiwari"), appointing Kiwari as the exclusive master dealer for Sagtec's Speed+ Cloud Base Smart Ordering System ("Speed+").

Kiwari has committed to a minimum annual purchase of 10,000 licenses, generating an estimated revenue of at least US\$30 million over the next five years.

BEML Ltd. Poised for Strategic Expansion in Chhattisgarh's Mining Sector

ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

In a landmark initiative to boost industrial expansion and job creation, the Department of Commerce & Industries, Government of Chhattisgarh, has extended a formal invitation to BEML Ltd. to establish a world-class mining equipment manufacturing facility in the state. The proposed plant is expected to cater to the rising demand in the mining and infrastructure sectors by manufacturing high-performance dump trucks, water sprinklers, and motor graders.

The invitation was officially extended by the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, Shri Vishnu Deo Sai, to Shri Shan-tanu Roy, Chairman & Managing Director of BEML Ltd., at



the prestigious Investor Connect event held in Bangalore. Accompanying Shri Roy at the event were BEML's Functional Directors—Shri Anil Jerath, Director-Finance, Shri Sanjay Som, Director - Mining & Construction and Defence, and Shri Debi Prasad Satpathy, Director-Human Resources. The event also saw partici-

ation from key government ministers and senior officials, reinforcing the state's commitment to attracting significant industrial investments.

Chhattisgarh has rapidly emerged as a prime destination for industrial investments, owing to its pro-business policies, abundant natural resources, and investor-friendly

ecosystem. With streamlined single-window clearances, zero-paper processing, and a robust ease-of-doing-business framework, the state ensures a seamless execution process for new investments.

For BEML Ltd., a global leader in mining and construction equipment manufacturing, this expansion aligns strategically with its vision to enhance its footprint in India's growing infrastructure sector. The company is continuously advancing its product portfolio, introducing high-capacity motor graders, tyre handlers, and loaders to reinforce its leadership in the high-capacity mining segment. Chhattisgarh's vast mineral reserves and rich geological landscape present a significant opportunity for the deployment of cutting-edge mining technology.

India's Direct Selling Industry Surpasses 22,000 Cr, Direct Sellers Rise to 88 Lakh: Survey

FW DESK
New Delhi

Marching ahead with sustained growth, India's direct selling industry has achieved an all-time high with a turnover of Rs. 22,142 crores in FY 2023-24, marking a 4.4% year-on-year (YOY) growth from Rs. 21,282 crore in the previous fiscal year, according to an Annual Survey Report released by the Indian Direct Selling Association (IDSA) here on Tuesday.

The survey, conducted by IP-SOS, the knowledge partner of



the IDSA, an apex association of direct selling industry in India, was unveiled by Chirag Paswan, Union Minister for Food Processing Industry, during an event highlighting the growth of the direct selling sector and sustained expansion, with a CAGR

of 7.15% over the past five years, growing from ₹16,800 crore in FY 2019-20 to ₹22,142 crore in FY 2023-24.

The Country's northern region leads with 29.8% of gross sales, followed by the East (24.2%), West (22.4%),

South (15.3%), and Northeast (8.3%). Among states, Maharashtra holds the highest share at 13%, followed by West Bengal (11.3%), Uttar Pradesh (10%), Bihar (6.2%) and Karnataka (5.7%). Wellness & Nutraceuticals reign supreme, accounting for a staggering 64.15% of total sales, while Cosmetics & Personal Care contribute 23.75% and Household Goods 3.1%. Together, these three segments drive a remarkable 91% of all direct sales, according to the survey.

The report indicates a sig-

nificant increase in the number of active direct sellers, rising to 88 lakh from 86 lakh in the previous year. Notably, women now constitute 44% of the total direct seller workforce, up from 37% in FY 2022-23, showcasing a growing role of women entrepreneurs in the industry.

Chirag Paswan, while addressing the gathering on the occasion, lauded the direct selling industry for its significant role in providing self-employment opportunities, aligning seamlessly with the government's vision of more job creation.

Asset Swapping or Asset Trade in Pharmaceutical Industry



DR. ANIL KUMAR ANGRISH

A deal involving Asset Swapping is an alternative to Merger & Acquisition deal. Asset Swapping or Asset Trade by pharma companies involves exchange of assets such as product portfolio, manufacturing facilities, etc. Key drivers of an Asset Swapping deal are size and scale for companies involved in the deal in their respective strategic areas. M&A deal becomes a preferred option in the background that top pharma MNCs are cash-rich companies. A Goldman Sachs report (2023, July 6) cited that the global pharmaceutical sector had around \$700 billion at its disposal. Due to deeper pockets, many pharmaceutical companies especially pharma MNCs are well-positioned to opt for M&A deals.

Widely publicized transaction was of Novartis and GSK in April 2014. Three-part transaction was completed on March 02, 2015. In that transaction, GSK had acquired Novartis's global vaccines business (excluding influenza vaccines) for an initial cash consideration of US \$5.25 billion. In that transaction, Novartis bought oncology portfolio from GSK as GSK divested its Oncology business for cash consideration of US \$16 billion.

"Who" aspect requires careful consideration as it can become a hurdle too as competitors have to come together. Continuing with earlier example, the transaction between Novartis and GSK is an interesting example of Co-opetition or Coopetition, a business strategy coined to describe cooperative competition, (popularized by Adam N. Brandenburger and Barry J. Nalebuff in their book with title - 'Co-Opetition') too as both companies came together by forming a joint venture (JV) to create an US \$11 bn-a-year non-prescription Consumer Healthcare (CHC) business too. Novartis and GSK were leading players and remain formidable players in biopharmaceutical business. In newly created Consumer Healthcare Joint Venture (JV), GSK held majority stake of 63.5 per cent. Four out of eleven Joint Venture Board used to be appointed by Novartis.

On March 27, 2018, GSK announced the agreement with Novartis to buyout Novartis' 36.5 per cent stake in the CHC JV for \$13 billion (\$9.2 billion). In 2017, CHC business of GSK had sales of \$7.8 billion. From 2015 onwards, sales grew 4.0 per cent on a three-year CAGR basis. Operating margins also went up from 11.3 per cent in 2015 to 17.7 per cent in 2017. Under the terms & conditions of transaction in 2014, GSK had the right to purchase No-

vartis' stake or part of it in the Joint Venture anytime between March 2, 2018, to March 2, 2035. Novartis considered minority stake as a non-core asset, and the stake sale enabled the company to focus on the development and growth of its core businesses.

Swap transactions are also difficult to execute. Prior to the deal with GSK, Novartis AG was in discussion for swapping its animal health and human vaccines business against Over-the-Counter products unit of Merck & Co. Inc. But it did not work out. Hard to execute, difficulty in comparing the relative attraction of different businesses were cited as reasons cited behind failure. Finally, Eli Lilly & Company acquired Novartis Animal Health on April 22, 2014, in an all-cash transaction of \$5.4 billion. Eli Lilly had decided to invest in Animal Health in 2007, and by the end of 2013, the company had a portfolio of 600 products with the presence in about 40 countries.

"Why" aspect of Asset Swapping provides interesting insights. Companies involved in the transaction can manage this transaction and are not required to approach capital markets or Private Equity firms. In GSK-Novartis transaction, GSK had announced on March 2, 2015, its plan to use the transaction proceeds to fund 'capital return' of \$4 billion to

its shareholders. The transaction also strengthened GSK in Pharmaceuticals, Vaccines, and Consumer Healthcare. The transaction enabled Novartis to focus on growing segments of innovative pharmaceuticals, eye care and generics. In addition to this, Oncology portfolio of GSK and two pipeline compounds were expected to strengthen Novartis' position in targeted therapies and small molecules.

Boehringer Ingelheim and Sanofi had a similar transaction in June 2016 in which both companies agreed for swap of businesses. This deal was the second largest asset swap deal after the GSK-Novartis deal of 2014. Exclusive negotiations were initiated in December 2015. Consumer Healthcare business of Boehringer Ingelheim was exchanged with Animal Health Business (Merial) and the transaction was closed on January 1, 2017. Through this transaction, Sanofi built a strong and innovative CHC Global Business Unit. Skilled CHC team of Boehringer Ingelheim (BI) and well-established products of BI also strengthened Sanofi's position in core strategic categories in CHC market. Identification of assets which are identical in terms of value is a complex issue, e.g., Merial, Animal Health Arm of Sanofi was valued at €11.4 bn, and CHC business of Boehringer was valued at €6.7 bn. Hence, Boehringer had to pay



Sanofi €4.7 bn in cash to make the difference.

Gains accrue as respective pharmaceutical companies can build their strength and at the same time, those companies can avoid drawbacks of large-scale merger and acquisitions. Asset swapping also helps respective companies to divest part of their portfolio. This offers an opportunity for those pharmaceutical companies which had large global business and had presence in several geographies, and therapeutic categories. The combined strength improves competitiveness in respective business segments.

Pharma MNCs operate in various countries so market-specific challenges are also present in such deals. Three companies namely Novartis, GSK and Eli Lilly had subsidiaries in India. For FY2012-13, Novartis had a revenue of just Rs. 903.36 Crore. Novartis operated in India through four subsidiaries namely Novartis

India, Novartis Healthcare, Sandoz, and Chiron-Behring Vaccine Private Limited. GSK operated in India through two subsidiaries namely GlaxoSmithKline Pharmaceuticals and GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare. GSK Pharma and GSK CHC had a revenue of Rs. 2,546.15 Crore for the year ending December 31, 2013, and Rs. 3,187.70 Crore for the year ending December 31, 2012, respectively. In contrast to these companies, Eli Lilly was very small in India at that point of time.

Second major difference in these companies was regarding their presence in different therapeutic categories. GSK India was mainly an acute therapy company, which was known primarily for cough and cold medicines. Novartis had products in acute therapy, but it had certain offerings in chronic therapy as well.

In each market, pharma MNCs must deal with anti-

trust regulators. For example, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) approved the deal between GSK Plc. And Novartis. While clearing the deal, the CCI observed that it did not find the transaction to be anti-competitive in India. In different markets, anti-trust regulators have to see that any combination is likely or not likely to have appreciable adverse effect on competition. In Indian context, the CCI had observed that the presence of GSK and Novartis was negligible in Vaccines. There was presence of significant competitors in Vaccines. Similarly, the CCI approved Sanofi-Boehringer asset swap in September 2016.

The Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Government of India has prescribed threshold values for M&A and Asset Swap as a combination which needs approval of the Competition Commission of India (CCI). These threshold values are based on the "value of assets" and "turnover" of the parties to the combination. Further, these are "enterprise-level threshold" and "group-level threshold" to which the target would belong after the M&A deal. From March 7, 2024, onwards, threshold limits are - the value of assets within India at the enterprise level exceeds Rs. 2,500 Crore or turnover at the enterprise level exceeds Rs. 7,500 Crore (at group level,

value of assets exceeding Rs. 10,000 Crore or turnover exceeding Rs. 30,000 Crore respectively). If at enterprise level, the enterprise has assets or turnover in India as well as outside India then threshold limit of assets is more than US \$1.25 bn with at least Rs. 1,250 Crore worth assets in India (at Group Level, assets exceeding US \$5 bn with at least Rs. 1,250 Crore in India) or at the enterprise level, turnover is more than US \$3.75 bn with at least Rs. 3,750 Crore turnover in India (at Group Level, threshold limit is turnover of US \$15 bn with at least Rs. 3,750 Crore turnover in India).

A recent issue of European Pharmaceutical Manufacturer (2025, January 3) while listing top 4 trends shaping life sciences operations in 2025 highlighted that pharmaceutical companies are embracing incremental growth strategies and listed 'asset swaps' along with M&A deals as part of these incremental growth strategies to deal with geo-political risks. In view of this, asset swapping is likely to find takers in future.

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

Sensex, Nifty ends FY25 with over 5 % Gain amid Volatile Trade

MUMBAI: Indian stock markets ended the last trading session of the current financial year (FY25) on a lower side amid a volatile day. With this, the Sensex and Nifty gained over 5 per cent each in FY25.

Sensex dropped 191.51 points, or 0.25 per cent, to close at 77,414.92, while the Nifty slipped 72.60 points, or 0.31 per cent, to settle at 23,519.35.

Despite the weak intra-day session, both benchmark indices recorded gains for the full financial year. The Sensex gained more than 5.11 per cent while Nifty gained 5.34 per cent this fiscal.

Indian stock markets will remain closed on Monday (March 31), due to Eid festivities and trading will resume on Tuesday (April 1). The midcap and small-cap segments outperformed, with the Nifty Midcap100 rising 5.4 per cent and the Nifty Smallcap100 climbing 7.48 per cent during the fiscal.

"Recent sessions mark a rebound from earlier declines, fuelled by renewed buying from



the FIIs, who have injected over 30,000 crore in the last few trading days, shifting to net buyers," said Krishna Appala of Capitalmind Research.

Appala added that domestic DIIs have also played a role, with a mix of net buying and selling shaping market dynamics. Market sentiment remained weak as more stocks declined than advanced, with 2,399 shares in the red against 1,454 gainers, while 116 stocks remained unchanged.

Wipro, IndusInd Bank, Shriram Finance, Cipla, and M&M were among the top losers in

as the fear index, rose by 4.37 percent to settle at 12.72 points on Friday, indicating increased market volatility.

Indian stock markets will remain closed on Monday (March 31), due to Eid festivities. Trading will resume on Tuesday (April 1).

In the currency market, the Indian rupee showed some strength, ending 32 paise higher at 85.46 per US dollar, compared to Thursday's closing value of 85.78.

"Looking ahead, positive FII cues are likely to sustain the upbeat sentiment for the rupee," said Jateen Trivedi of LKP Securities.

Gold prices continued to trade higher in the spot market as tariff concerns persisted, keeping buying interest intact. The price range for gold remains elevated between Rs 87,500- Rs 89,750, said experts.

Rupee rallied sharply by 0.30rs to 85.45, driven by a strong FII inflow of Rs 11,111 crore, which boosted sentiment and supported rupee buyers.

RBI Governor Sees AI as Key Tool to Combat Money Laundering

MUMBAI: Reserve Bank Governor Sanjay Malhotra on Wednesday said that considering the evolving landscape of money laundering, regulators will need to continuously augment artificial intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) risk assessment framework to make appropriate system enhancements.

Addressing the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Private Sector Collaborative Forum 2025 event here, the RBI Governor pointed out that technology has enabled greater ease of doing business, but at the same time, it has also facilitated and fostered new and very sophisticated means of money laundering and illicit financing. This makes it imperative to refine and improve risk assessment models.

He also urged the central banks to understand the latest trends and developments in the financial world that can be exploited by criminal elements. By understanding this, he said, central banks should develop



rules and frameworks which detect suspicious transactions early, and take pre-emptive action. At the same time he also had a word of caution for policymakers. "While we continue to make our financial systems safe and secure against money laundering and terrorist financing, we as policymakers need to be mindful that our measures are not overzealous and do not stifle legitimate activities and investments," Malhotra observed.

"Therefore, we need to have laws and regulations, which with surgical precision, target only the illegitimate and the illicit, rather than use very broad and blunt tools, which unintentionally hurt even the honest," he

said. He also highlighted the need to improve the quality of data that is received, and the need to harness the evolving technologies that are coming in, whether it is artificial intelligence or blockchain technology or machine learning. "This will help us in improving the screening of transactions and detection of suspicious activities, thereby reducing errors, false positives, false negatives," he added.

Malhotra further stated that the RBI will continue to work towards fulfilling the commitment to effectively implement the next phase of the G20 roadmap towards inclusive cross-border payments by 2027.

"We are all aware that a lot of work needs to be done over there. It's only a matter of time, I think that cross-border payments will also become much easier and cost-effective. To meet the G20 objective of making cross-border payments faster, cheaper, convenient and transparent, it would be desirable to make the travel rules technology neutral," he added.

RBI allows banks to hike ATM charges to Rs 23 per withdrawal from May 1



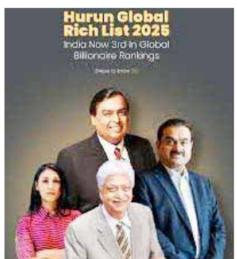
NEW DELHI: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday permitted banks to increase charges on Automated Teller Machines (ATM) cash withdrawals beyond the free monthly usage, raising the fee by Rs 2 to Rs 23 per transaction, effective from May 1, 2025.

Customers will continue to be eligible for five free transactions per month—including financial and non-financial transactions—at their own bank's ATMs.

Additionally, they can avail of free transactions at other banks' ATMs—three in metro centres and five in non-metro centres.

They are also eligible for free transactions (inclusive of financial and non-financial transactions) from other bank ATMs—three transactions in metro centres and five in non-metro centres.

India Has 284 Billionaires with Astounding Rs 98 Lakh Crore Wealth: Hurun List



NEW DELHI: India's billionaire count has grown to 284, with their combined wealth reaching an astounding Rs 98 lakh crore, a new report said on Thursday.

The 'Hurun Global Rich List for 2025' shows that the country's wealthiest individuals have seen a 10 per cent rise in their total fortune over the past year. Mumbai alone has 90 billionaires. India remains strong on the global stage, ranking third in the number of billionaires, behind only the United States and China. The US tops the list with 870 billionaires. The Hurun report also highlights that 175 Indian billionaires have seen their wealth increase, while 109 either experienced a decline or no change in their fortunes. The average wealth of an Indian billionaire now stands at Rs 34,514 crore. Additionally, India is home to seven billionaires under the age of 40, primarily from the cities of Bengaluru and Mumbai. On the global front, Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk recorded the biggest wealth surge, gaining \$189 billion over the past year. The billionaire retained his title as the world's richest person for the fourth time in five years, becoming the first individual to cross the \$400 billion mark.

Govt Outlines Rs 8 Trillion Borrowing Plan for 1st Half of Fiscal Year 2026

NEW DELHI: The government has unveiled its comprehensive borrowing strategy for the first half of fiscal year 2026, planning to raise Rs 8 trillion through dated securities via 26 weekly auctions.

This ambitious plan represents 54 per cent of the full-year borrowing target and includes Rs 10,000 crore in sovereign green bonds, as announced by the finance ministry on Thursday. The borrowing will be strategically distributed across multiple maturity periods, ranging from 3 to 50 years. The allocation spans various durations including 3-year, 5-year, 7-year, 10-year, 15-year, 30-year, 40-year, and 50-year.

This diversified approach allows the government flexibility in managing its debt profile and responding to market dynamics. In a notable provision, the



government has reserved the right to exercise a greenshoe option, enabling additional fund mobilisation of up to Rs 2,000 crore for each security indicated in auction notifications. The ministry also confirmed its intention to conduct securities switching and buyback operations to optimise the redemption profile and manage debt more efficiently.

To address temporary finan-

cial fluctuations, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has set the Ways and Means Advances (WMA) limit for the first half of fiscal year 2025-26 at Rs 1.50 lakh crore. These short-term credit facilities help government entities manage cash flow inconsistencies and maintain financial stability. The borrowing plan is critically important, as it directly influences fiscal management, market liquid-

ity, and interest rates. Aligned with the latest Union budget, the government aims to reduce central government debt to approximately 50 per cent of gross domestic product by March 31, 2031.

Fiscal projections indicate continued progress in deficit management. The fiscal deficit for FY26 is estimated at Rs 15.6 trillion, representing 4.4 per cent of nominal GDP—a marginal improvement from the previously committed 4.5 per cent. In the current fiscal year (FY25), the government expects to limit the fiscal deficit to 4.8 per cent of GDP, slightly better than the original 4.9 per cent estimate. This strategic approach demonstrates the government's commitment to prudent financial management and economic stability in the evolving fiscal landscape.

Finance Ministry Projects 6.5% GDP Growth despite Global Challenges

NEW DELHI: In a comprehensive monthly economic review, India's Finance Ministry projected an accelerated economic growth trajectory for the January-March quarter of the current financial year, signaling a robust recovery after previous sluggish periods.

The ministry highlighted multiple factors contributing to this potential economic momentum, including improved export growth, increased government capital expenditure, and economic activities associated with the Kumbh Mela.

High-frequency economic indicators substantiate the optimistic outlook, with e-way bills showing double-digit growth and Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) remaining in the expansionary zone.

NEW DELHI: IndusInd Bank on Sunday denied media reports suggesting that its Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Sumant Kathpalia may be replaced in the next six months.

The bank issued a statement calling such claims factually incorrect and misleading. Earlier reports suggested that IndusInd Bank's board would need to finalise a new CEO by October and submit potential names to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for approval. However, the bank has dismissed these claims, stating that the information circulating in the media does not reflect the true situation.

"We would like to clarify that the recent media reports regarding the tenure of the Bank's CEO and Deputy CEO are factually incorrect," the bank said. The report also mentioned that the RBI was awaiting the completion of an accountability exercise before taking any action on the matter. This comes amid concerns over discrepancies in the bank's derivatives portfolio. Last week, IndusInd Bank disclosed that it had identified accounting issues in its derivatives transactions, which could impact around 2.35 per cent of its net worth as of December 2024.

Following this, the bank appointed an independent professional firm to conduct a detailed investigation to assess the correctness of the accounting treatment.

This firm will look into the reasons behind the discrepancies, assess the accuracy of the accounting treatment of the derivative contracts, and determine if any lapses occurred.

The RBI is waiting for this investigation to be completed before taking further action. If any serious accounting errors are found, the regulator will hold those responsible accountable.

However, the RBI has assured depositors of IndusInd Bank's financial stability.



After experiencing a seven-quarter low of 5.6% growth in the July-September period, India's gross domestic product (GDP) demonstrated resilience by improving to 6.2% in the subsequent quarter, driven by strong agricultural and service sector performance.

The Finance Ministry estimates the Indian economy will achieve a 6.5% growth in the financial year ending March 2025, despite significant external challenges. However, the report also cautioned about potential risks, including trade policy uncertainties, volatile international commodity prices, and financial market fluctuations that could impact the economic growth outlook for the upcoming financial year.

Emphasising the critical

role of private sector investments, the ministry stressed the importance of recognising the interdependence between investment spending and consumption demand.

The report noted potential positive influences such as proposed changes in personal income tax structures, which are expected to enhance middle-class disposable incomes, and the recent 25-basis point policy rate cut that could further stimulate economic growth.

On the inflation front, the ministry expressed optimism about moderating food inflation, citing expectations of record food grain production in 2024-25.

Recent months have already witnessed easing inflationary pressures, with headline retail inflation declining to a seven-month low in February 2025.

The report also provided insights into recent stock market fluctuations, attributing the decline to factors including profit-taking and reallocation by foreign portfolio investors.

Notably, robust external debt market inflows, partially catalysed by India's inclusion in the Bloomberg Emerging Market Local Currency index, and continued faith from retail investors have helped mitigate the market's volatility.

Special drive led to declaration of foreign assets, income of Rs 30,300 crore: FM Sitharaman

NEW DELHI: Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said that a special campaign carried out by the Income Tax Department has led to the declaration of foreign assets and income to the tune of Rs 30,300 crore after over 30,000 taxpayers revised their income tax returns or filed belated returns for 2024-25.

The Finance Minister said in the Lok Sabha that SMS and e-mails were sent to around 19, 501 taxpayers, asking them to review their income tax returns based on information collected by the Income Tax Department on foreign deposits.

She said the "nudge campaign" resulted in 11,162 taxpayers revising their tax returns and filing the Schedule



Foreign Assets Form, declaring total assets of Rs 11,259.29 crore and disclosing foreign income of Rs 154.42 crore. Another 883 taxpayers revised their ITRs and corrected their status from resident to non-resident in the revised return for 2024-25.

An additional 13,516 taxpayers declared foreign assets of

Rs 7,564 crore and foreign income of approximately Rs 353 crore in their revised ITR for 2024-25.

The Income Tax Department launched a compliance-awareness campaign, aimed at encouraging voluntary disclosures of offshore wealth and income. The drive focused on a data-driven and non-intrusive approach, which led to a 45.17 per cent year-on-year jump in voluntary disclosures in 2024-25 compared to 2023-24. According to sources, tax authorities received financial information from over 108 countries regarding foreign accounts and income in the form of interest and dividends earned outside India by its citizens.

IndusInd Bank denies reports of CEO replacement



NEW DELHI: IndusInd Bank on Sunday denied media reports suggesting that its Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Sumant Kathpalia may be replaced in the next six months.

The bank issued a statement calling such claims factually incorrect and misleading. Earlier reports suggested that IndusInd Bank's board would need to finalise a new CEO by October and submit potential names to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for approval. However, the bank has dismissed these claims, stating that the information circulating in the media does not reflect the true situation.

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Revised RBI's Priority Sector Lending Norms to Further Boost Economy: SBI Report

NEW DELHI: The recent amendments in priority sector lending (PSL) guidelines by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) should further help the economy grow faster and fine tune the building blocks of the factors of productions, mainly the MSMEs, agri and allied sectors, housing and exports, etc, a report by SBI Research said on Wednesday.

The RBI this week issued revised guidelines on PSL to facilitate better targeting of bank credit to the priority sectors of the economy. The new guidelines will come into effect from April 1. According to the report, the revised PSL guidelines cater to enhancement of several loan limits, including housing loans, for enhanced PSL coverage and broadening of the purposes based on which loans may be classified under 'Renewable Energy'.

There is also a revision of the overall PSL target for urban cooperative banks (UCBs) to 60 per cent of Adjusted Net Bank Credit (ANBC) or Credit Equivalent of Off-Balance Sheet Exposures (CEOBSE), which



ever is higher. "The higher limits set in housing segment should give a fillip to low cost/affordable housing across various population cohort, in particular tier-IV/V/VI cities wherein the banks, along with non-bank players, can find their next gold mine given the surge in demand for own/individual housing post pandemic," the report noted.

Explicit recognition and prioritisation of renewable energy within the PSL framework has alleviated credit constraints, thereby escalation in the share of non-conventional energy credit to the overall energy credit, encouraging credit flows to the NCE sector that witnessed sig-

nificant policy interventions too, the SBI report mentioned.

"As big banks continue facing problems in achieving PSL targets, it would be a prudent move to include all infrastructure loans given to Road projects, Port, Railways, Airports, Energy Sector, Highways, etc, either as priority sector status or be exempt from calculation of ANBC for PSL achievement in line with infra bonds raised towards funding of infrastructure and affordable housing," according to the report.

The RBI has also increased the loan limit for the repairs of damaged dwelling units in the revised circular. This opens

new opportunities for credit disbursement for FIs in one of the most secured niche areas, also lessening the burden on home-owners in search of liquidity to carry over the necessary repairs of their dwelling units in need and thus opens up a substantial market for credit off take, the report said. With its 500 GW non-fossil fuel installed capacity target for 2030 and Net Zero target for 2070, India has embarked on one of the most extensive renewable energy expansions in the world.

On July 1, 2015, RBI had expanded the ambit of PSL norms to include loans up to Rs 15 crore to borrowers for purposes like solar-based power generators, biomass-based power generators, continue, micro-hydel plants and for non-conventional energy (NCE) based public utilities. The limit was subsequently raised to Rs 30 crore per borrower on September 4, 2020.

In the recent guidelines, the limit was raised to Rs 35 crore per borrower. For individual households, the loan limit will continue to be Rs 10 lakh per borrower.

Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill is just paper reform: Raghav Chadha

NEW DELHI: Aam Aadmi Party MP Raghav Chadha criticised the 'Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024' during discussion in the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday, terming it a 'paper reform' that failed to address the real issues faced by the common people.

Chadha argued that the bill is limited to procedural changes and does not tackle core problems like banking fraud, loan recovery challenges, and the increasing pressure on bank employees.

"Banks are not just financial institutions; they are the foundation of democracy," he said.

Chadha further said: "From the savings of the common man to farmers' loans, from youth education to elderly pensions -- banks touch every aspect of life. But rising cases of banking fraud and loan frauds are eroding public trust. Today, people are afraid to rely on banks."

He pointed out that home loan interest rates in India range from 8.5 per cent to 9 per cent, while education loans can go up to 13 per cent, making it difficult for young people to pursue higher education.

"Students are drowning in debt even before they start earning. MSME loans carry interest rates of up to 11 per cent, making business expansion challenging for small entrepreneurs," he added.

Chadha suggested that the government should cap interest rates on education and home loans and offer subsi-



“A minimum interest rate of 8 per cent should be guaranteed for senior citizens to protect their savings from inflation”

dised rates for first-time home buyers. He also urged the RBI to promote competition by encouraging small and digital banks to reduce borrowing costs.

Expressing concern for senior citizens, he noted that fixed deposit rates are around 6.5 per cent while inflation stands at 7 per cent, eroding their life savings.

"A minimum interest rate

of 8 per cent should be guaranteed for senior citizens to protect their savings from inflation," he proposed.

On the issue of digital banking fraud, Chadha warned of rising cybercrime. "In the financial year 2024, India recorded 36, 075 cases of banking fraud, with digital payments and loan fraud accounting for the majority. Cyber fraud alone caused a loss of Rs 2, 054.6 crore," he stated, citing official data.

He added that UPI fraud increased by 85 per cent in 2024, further jeopardising public confidence.

"The banking system is the biggest support for the common man. Yet, its falling credibility and lack of transparency are making people feel insecure," Chadha said, urging comprehensive reforms to restore trust and safeguard citizens' interests.

INTERNATIONAL

Russia's top diplomat praises India for adopting balanced approach to Ukraine crisis

NEW DELHI: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Thursday lauded India for adopting a balanced approach to the Ukraine crisis and advocating for resolving the issue through dialogue.

In a video address to a conference titled 'Russia and India: Toward a New Bilateral Agenda' hosted by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), Lavrov reiterated that Russia views strengthening its privileged strategic partnership with India as a foreign policy priority. Lavrov also said that President Vladimir Putin has accepted Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation to visit India and preparations are underway for it. "I would like to extend our gratitude on behalf of Russia for the fact that India, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been following a balanced approach to the Ukraine crisis at all times and called for settling it through dialogue and by addressing its root causes," Lavrov said.

He said Russia fully shares this approach and has been expressing its readiness to hold talks from the moment the crisis started. "These talks must pave the way for settling the conflict and ensuring lasting



peace by removing the conflict's root causes," he added. India has all along been pressing for the resolution of the Ukraine conflict through dialogue and diplomacy. In a podcast with Lex Fridman released on March 16, Prime Minister Modi said that the Russia-Ukraine conflict will only be resolved when both sides join the negotiation table, asserting that there can never be a resolution on the battlefield.

In his summit talks with President Putin on July 9 last year in Moscow, Modi told the Russian leader that a solution to the Ukraine conflict is not possible on the battlefield and peace efforts do not succeed in the midst of bombs and bullets.

Weeks later, Modi travelled to Ukraine, where he told President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that both Ukraine and Russia should sit together without wasting

time to end the ongoing war and India was ready to play an "active role" to restore peace in the region. In his address, Lavrov said the root causes of the conflict primarily include the attempts by the West to draw Ukraine into NATO and the security threats Russia has been facing following the alliance's eastward expansion.

"There is a deep-rooted belief in Russia that addressing these root causes would create a solid foundation for achieving lasting peace and bringing about a political settlement to the security crisis which is unfolding in Eurasia's European part," he said.

Lavrov said Russia views strengthening its privileged strategic partnership with India as a foreign policy priority as per its Foreign Policy Concept. "We have spared no effort in

pursuing this objective. In terms of our practical interactions, we can see that India has been acting along the same lines," he said. "The two countries share long-standing ties. We can even say that these relations have passed the test of time. Today, Russia and India are promoting their cooperation on an equal footing, based on a sincere and shared respect for one another and taking into account each other's interests," he added.

The fact that PM Modi visited Russia as his first overseas visit after his re-election last year sent a powerful message, Lavrov said. "Our relations rely on a solid economic foundation. We have been consistent in expanding our trade and economic ties while also effectively fending off attempts by certain ill-wishers to create impediments for us," he said.

"We will carry on with our efforts to achieve the objectives as set forth by our respective leaders during last year's July summit. These objectives include increasing trade to \$100 billion by 2030," he said. He said the fact that Moscow and New Delhi share close or even converging views on the emergence of a multipolar world order is also a major asset.

Pakistan Rejects 'Democracy Act' Bill by US Lawmakers to Sanction Pak Army Chief



ISLAMABAD: The Pakistan Foreign Office (PFO) has taken a serious note of a bipartisan bill introduced by US lawmakers in the House of Representatives seeking sanctions against the country's state officials, including the Army Chief, over alleged human rights violations. Pakistan dismissed the bill on Thursday, calling it an "isolated act" and the opinion of individuals, which does not represent the bilateral relations between Islamabad and Washington.

Pakistan also condemned the recent sanctions by the United States on various commercial entities of the country, terming them as another unilateral decision taken without any consultation, evidence or

proof.

"We are aware of the bill introduced in the US Congress. It reflects the opinion of an individual and not the broader US-Pakistan ties," said Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesperson Shafqat Ali Khan during a weekly press briefing on Thursday.

Pakistan's response comes after two US lawmakers introduced a bill in the House of Representatives, calling for imposition of sanctions against the Pakistani government and the Pakistan Army Chief General Syed Asim Munir for alleged persecution of former Prime Minister Imran Khan and the alleged human rights violations. The bill proposes imposition of sanctions within

180 days if the country fails to take steps to improve its human rights situation.

The bill titled 'The Pakistan Democracy Act' was introduced by Republican Congressman Joe Wilson and Democratic Congressman Jimmy Panetta. It was later referred to the House Foreign Affairs and Judiciary Committee for review.

The bill also seeks to invoke the US Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, allowing the United States to deny visas and entry to individuals accused of committing human rights violations.

The bill must be passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate and then signed by US President Donald Trump to become law.

Experts say that while the bill may not go through with approval from the review, it certainly asserts pressure on the government and the military establishment in the country to give more space and leverage to former premier Imran Khan, who has been imprisoned on charges of corruption, sedition and incitement to violence. All charges have been termed as concocted and fake by the Khan and his party.

US, Ukraine conclude 'productive' talks in Riyadh: Ukrainian Defence Minister



RIYADH: Ukrainian Defence Minister Rustem Umerov has said that the talks between US and Ukrainian delegations have concluded in Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh, saying the discussion was "productive and focused", with "key points including energy" addressed.

In a post on Sunday on social media platform X, Umerov, who led the Ukrainian delegation, emphasised that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's goal is "to secure a just and lasting peace" for Ukraine and Europe at large, claiming, "We are working to make that goal a reality."

The Ukrainian and US teams met earlier in the day in Riyadh, Xinhua news agency reported.

According to the Ukrinform news agency, the Ukrainian delegation also included State Secretary of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry Oleksandr Karasevych, deputy heads of the President's Office, Pavlo Palisa and Ihor Zhovkva, as well as Deputy Energy Minister Mykola Kolisnyk.

The talks came almost two weeks after a previous meeting between the two sides in the Saudi port city of Jeddah saw Ukraine okay a US-proposed 30-day ceasefire plan in exchange for Washington lifting its pause on military aid to and intelligence sharing with Ukraine.

Notably, the meeting precedes the talks between US and Russian delegations scheduled for Monday.

Media reported late Sunday that the Russian delegation has arrived in Riyadh. The delegation includes Grigory Karasin, chairman of the committee on international affairs in Russia's Upper House, and Sergey Beseda, Adviser to the head of Russia's Federal Security Service, Russian presidential aide Yuri Ushakov said earlier.

Originally scheduled to take place simultaneously to enable shuttle diplomacy -- with the US going back and forth between the delegations -- the technical-level talks on a partial truce are now taking place separately, one after the other.

In an evening address, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that "Russia is the only one who is dragging this war out".

"No matter what we talk about with our partners, we need to push Putin to give a real order to stop the strikes: the one who brought this war must take it away," he said.

Discussions between the United States and Russia were set for Monday, with Russian state media reporting Moscow's delegation had arrived in Riyadh on Sunday.

Trump envoy Steve Witkoff voiced optimism that any agreement struck would pave the way to a "full-on" ceasefire. "I think you're going to see in Saudi Arabia on Monday some real progress, particularly as it affects a Black Sea ceasefire on ships between both countries. And from that you'll naturally gravitate to a full-on shooting ceasefire," he told Fox News.

Trump's 25 per cent tariff threat over Venezuela oil imports would hit India



NEW YORK: US President Donald Trump's threat to impose a 25 per cent tariff on exports from countries that buy oil from Venezuela would hit India which already fears reciprocal US taxes next month. Trump announced on Truth Social on Monday that any country "that purchases Oil and/or Gas from Venezuela will be forced to pay a Tariff of 25 per cent to the United States on any Trade they do with our Country".

India imported 63, 115 barrels per day (bpd) in 2024, according to reports. It will also hit New Delhi's plans to increase cooperation in the petroleum field with Venezuela. Trump said that the

25 per cent tariffs will come into force on April 2, when he plans to impose reciprocal tariffs on all countries. The new threat came amid reports that the reciprocal tariffs may be less drastic and directed at certain sectors.

Trump linked the levy to his battle with Venezuela over the members of the gang, Tren de Aragua (TdA), which he designated as a "foreign terrorist organisation". He accused the Venezuelan government of "purposefully and deceitfully" sending over the members of the gang linked to murders and other crimes across the country and made it a part of his campaign against terrorism.

Submarine Accident In Red Sea Kills Six Russians

CAIRO: Six people, including two minors, of Russian nationality were killed after a tourist submarine sank in the Red Sea off the coast of Egypt. The accident occurred on Thursday in the resort city of Hurghada. The vessel was carrying out an underwater tour with a coral reef inspection, according to media reports.

Russian news agency RIA Novosti quoted a statement from the Russian Consulate General in Hurghada revealing that all the tourists on board were Russians.

"There were 45 tourists on board, including minors, as well as crew members. All of them were Russian citizens, tourists of the company Biblio Globus," the consulate's statement read.

The diplomatic mission told RIA Novosti that after the crash of the bathyscaphe, 38 Russians were rescued, while the fate of the remaining is not yet known. The Consulate General noted that 24 people were transported to hotels, and the remaining 14 are in



hospitals.

The cause of the incident is still under investigation, with the Russian Embassy stating that consular staff were dispatched to the pier of the Sindbad Hotel, which owns the submarine.

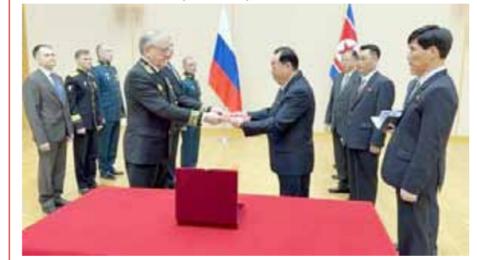
Egyptian media outlet Youm7 reported that the victims were taken to the nearest hospital in the Al-Kawthar area in Hurghada and some of them remain in critical condition.

According to preliminary information, the accident occurred due to an error by the

captain of the ship. He could not cope with the control and flew to the reef. As a result, the salon depressurized. The company Sharm Hurghada Excursions, which organised the tour, told Russian newspaper Izvestia that the sunken bathyscaphe has worked for more than 10 years and is the only submarine at the disposal of the company.

Hurghada, a popular tourist city located about 460 kilometers (285 miles) southeast of Cairo, is known for its Red Sea coral reefs and islands, which attract international visitors.

Russia Awards Medal to North Korean Leader Kim Ahead of 80th Victory Day Celebrations



SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has been awarded a medal commemorating the 80th anniversary of Victory Day by the Russian government on Thursday, Moscow's embassy in Pyongyang said.

According to the embassy's social media post, the medal marking the Soviet Union's World War II victory over Nazi Germany was conferred on Kim on the directive of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

An award ceremony was held at Pyongyang's Mansudae Assembly Hall, where Russian Ambassador Alexander Matsegora presented the medal and certificate to Kang Yun-sok, Vice Chairman of North Korea's Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly.

The certificate stated that Kim received the medal in recognition of his contributions to honoring the memory of Soviet soldiers who died and are buried in North Korea, Yonhap news agency reported.

The medal was awarded more than a month ahead of Victory Day, which falls on May 9. Russia had previously conferred similar medals on Kim in May 2015 and May 2020 to mark the 70th and 75th anniversaries.

This comes after a Russian

Minister said that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's visit to Russia is expected this year, and the preparations are underway for it.

Speaking to journalists in Moscow, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko said Russia is preparing for Kim's visit to the country, Russian news agencies TASS and RIA Novosti reported, though they did not specify the exact timing of the visit.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is also planning to visit Pyongyang, North Korea's capital, to continue the strategic dialogue with North Korea, according to the reports.

The news came amid growing speculation about Kim's potential visit to Russia on the occasion of Russia's 80th Victory Day anniversary on May 9, potentially as a reciprocation for Russian President Putin's visit to North Korea in June last year.

At that time, Putin invited Kim to Moscow for summit talks.

Earlier this month, Rudenko traveled to Pyongyang, where he met North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui and Vice Foreign Minister Kim Jong-gyu and discussed arranging "political contacts at the high and top levels," TASS previously reported.

OPEN SESAME

India-Russia Trade to Reach USD 100 billion before 2030

GOPAL MISRA

With the relaxation of the US sanctions against Russia, the ongoing exchange of goods, popularly called 'hush-hush' trade between India and Russia, is expected to end soon. It appears that the target of achieving USD 100 billion trade between India and Russia export and imports of goods scheduled to be attained by 2030 might be achieved much before the end of the current decade.

The process of the relaxation of the US sanctions against Russia has already begun. It may just be a matter of a few hours, if not weeks, huge trade opportunities will be knocking at the doors of India.

The end of US sanctions are now opening unprecedented short-term as well as long-term opportunities for the Indian industry and agriculture. These developments may also be offering an Indian role to the war-torn Eastern Europe. India enjoys the confidence of the US as well as of Russia, which may further strengthen her alliance with them influencing global trade.

It, however, needs a well thought out strategy to be accompanied by an immaculate implementation with rigorous quality controls accompanied by strict adherence to the time schedules

In this context, a top business man has shared the story of the Arabian Nights with this author about the magic words, "Open Sesame" or in

Hindi, 'Khol ja Sim Sim'. He repeated the story in the Indian context. Further, he compares the plight of the Indian businessmen with the story of a poor woodcutter, Ali Baba, who was being cheated by his cunning brother, Kasim, but the diplomacy of a slave girl, Morgiana, not only destroys the thieves, but enables her master to access the immense wealth locked in the cave.

A similar opportunity may be waiting India, but it is to be ascertained yet whether the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi would be able to get a perceptive team having the intelligence of the slave girl, or this rare opportunity is buried in the corridors of the country's well protected enclave of the

External Affairs Ministry, mostly dominated by the carrier diplomats. The experience so far has been that they need to be thoroughly oriented for this task. At present, they take up serious trade issues in tit-bits without focusing on the specific goals. It cannot be denied that in recent years, the induction of some unnecessary elements, mostly considered irrelevant, but believed to be close to the Modi establishment, have already weakened the country's trade diplomacy. Many of these external elements are also not known for honesty and having any specific agenda.

During the past three months, they have already complicated, if not compromised the country's interests, especially in the context of the US. The credit of the recent understanding and breakthrough between America and



Russia goes to the special envoy of the White House, Sieve Witkoff. He has worked out a thorough plan for removing broad-spectrum sanctions against Russia from 2022.

It also reveals that he has succeeded in implementing President Donald Trump's agenda prioritising trade and business over the stereotyped approach towards diplomacy only focussing on strategic and power games.

Trump's decision to assign a specific task to a special envoy appears to be effective. Instead of deploying career diplomats engaged in conventional exchanges in world politics, he has specific policy towards peace and cooperation.

The Setback- It is high time that the Modi regime should reposition the current focus of its foreign policy from personal image-making to the country's interests. He has to learn the hard way like Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1971, who finally succeeded in fragmenting Pakistan, and also made India self-sufficient in food grains.

"It is high time that his kitchen cabinet, comprising some superannuated civil ser-

restored, the Russians can import huge agricultural equipment from the US.

Opportunity for India- There are reports that the US has accepted the proposal to set up a huge aluminium plant in Russia in principle. It may look a little worrisome for the Indian aluminium industry, but it could be turned into a huge opportunity for the country to be engaged in this task in Russia also.

Similarly, in the food and agriculture business, India could also explore opportunities, but for it she has to reinvent a new policy by co-opting the captains of business as well as experienced bureaucrats in the agriculture and commerce ministries.

Apart from these sectors, the Russians will be able to access lower maritime insurance costs, improved access to ports and also allowing them to be a part of the global banking system.

It is being stated that unless the Modi government sheds off its stereotype approach, India may lose the forthcoming opportunity. Like in the fields of nuclear science and space technologies, India was ahead of China, but our narrow approach and the rhetoric of becoming a 'Vishva Guru' has finally dwarfed India in these key areas. India's peace initiative may serve the country, but the bureaucratic approach would not work.

Paradigm Changes- The details of the US-Russian agreement are being awaited, but the indications are that the Russian banking system would soon be enjoying the facilities of the global banking system, including Swift. Meanwhile, efforts are also being made to restore the Russian gas supply lines to Europe. With the security protocols in the Black Sea

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

Australian govt unveils federal budget ahead of election

CANBERRA: The Australian Labor government unveiled the federal budget on Tuesday ahead of the upcoming election, focusing on cost-of-living relief and economic growth.

Delivering his budget speech to the parliament, Treasurer Jim Chalmers outlined five key priorities of the 2025-26 budget: easing cost-of-living pressures, strengthening medicare, expanding housing, investing in education, and boosting economic resilience.

Chalmers emphasised the government's commitment to supporting Australians, with new tax cuts for all taxpayers rolling out through 2026-27, additional energy bill relief extending to the end of 2025, and further reductions in student debt and medicine costs. Healthcare remains a central



focus, with increased investment in Medicare Urgent Care Clinics, hospitals, and workforce development, along with targeted improvements in women's healthcare, Chalmers said.

The 2025-26 budget also aims to tackle the housing crisis by expanding construction efforts and workforce capacity, he said, adding in education, funding will go toward early learning, schools, universities, and permanent free technical and further education to en-

hance skills and opportunities. To drive economic growth, the government is investing in small businesses, infrastructure, and initiatives under the 'Future Made in Australia' strategy to support domestic industries and regional development, Chalmers said.

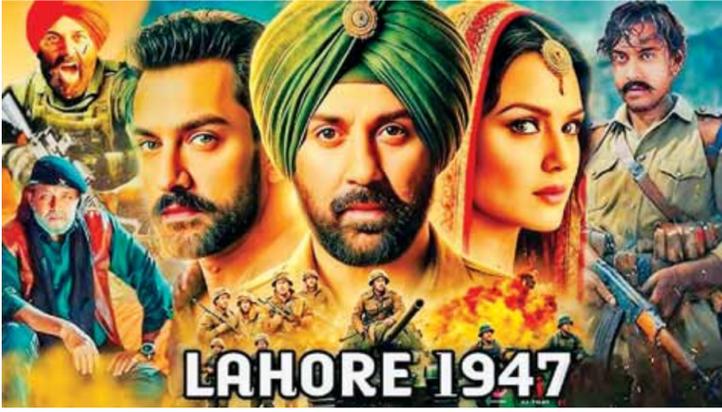
He said Australia's economy is set to grow from 1.5 per cent this year to 2.5 per cent by 2026-27, driven by a rebound in private sector demand, Xinhua news agency reported.

Sunny Deol: Aamir Khan Productions' 'LAHORE 1947' a 'big film' of his career

MUMBAI: Sunny Deol recently opened up about his upcoming project, "Lahore 1947," expressing his excitement for his role in the much-anticipated film.

Speaking at the trailer launch of his next film, "Jaat," the actor described the Aamir Khan-backed project as a "big film," emphasizing its grand scale and powerful narrative. Sunny stated, "I was hoping to do big films, and it's happening now. Lahore 1947 is coming this year."

Produced under the banner of Aamir Khan Productions, "Lahore 1947" is one of the most anticipated films of this year. The movie brings together Sunny Deol, Rajkumar Santoshi, and Aamir Khan collaborating for the first time. For Lahore 1947, Aamir takes on the role of producer, while Rajkumar Santoshi, known for his masterful storytelling,



is directing the period drama. The film, set against the backdrop of the partition of India in 1947, also stars Preity Zinta, Shabana Azmi, Abhimanyu Singh, and Ali Fazal in key roles.

This project will mark Zinta's much-anticipated return to the screen after a 7-year break. "Lahore 1947" had been shot over a single 70-day production. A source close to the production had earlier revealed, "The

shooting for 'Lahore 1947' has concluded after an intensive 70-day schedule. The schedule has been completed without taking any breaks. It's been a superb experience to see stalwart actors bring a magical

quality to the film."

Meanwhile, Sunny Deol is gearing up for the release of his next actioner, "Jaat," which also stars Randeep Hooda, Vineet Kumar Singh, Saiyami Kher, and Regina Cassandra. Directed by Gopichand Malineni, the film will release in theatres on April 10.

Speaking about the movie, Sunny, who plays the titular role of Jaat, said, "This journey of this film had begun during Gadar 2. We all were very excited about it, we were about to start a beautiful film, and after following many directors, Gopi agreed to do the film. We met in Goa, and he said he would direct the film and had another story to narrate. He narrated to me the story of 'Sorry Bol' (laughs). And with 'sorry, sorry, sorry,' he pulled me into the entire film and story, and this is how we made 'Jaat."



Members of the Sikh organisation Dandami Takhsal along with members of various Sikh bodies stage a protest march to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) headquarter, in Amritsar on Friday. The sit-in protest outside the SGPC office is held against the SGPC for allegedly removing Jathedars from their posts, in Amritsar, on Friday, March 28, 2025.



PHOTOS-PRABHJOT GILL

India Must Leverage its Strengths in Education, Not Imitate the West says Temjen Inna Along

TANVIR KAUR
New Delhi

17th National Education Leadership and Skill Development conference 2024 at the ASSOCHAM, Temjen Inna Along, Minister of Higher Education and Tourism, Government of Nagaland in his chief guest address commended the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, as laid out by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is not just ambitious—it is transformative. We must harness our strengths in education and skill development rather than imitate Western models. This platform by ASSOCHAM fosters the vital dialogue needed to empower every corner of India, especially our villages and underserved institutions. Education must serve society, not become a business. With the progress in the Northeast and the potential of Naga youth, I am confident India will emerge as a global resource for growth and harmony. Guided by the spirit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, our development will uplift not only Bharat, but the world."

Guest of Honor Dr Lata Wankhede Member of Parliament Lok Sabha talked about inclusivity and equal opportunities for all regardless of gender. No vision of a developed India is complete without inclusive education. Equity in access,



quality, and outcomes must be at the core of every policy and institution. We must ensure that no student—regardless of geography or background—is left behind, she added.

"Interacting with inspiring young leaders like Temjen Inna Along gives me great hope for the future of our nation. With platforms like ASSOCHAM's Education Leadership Conference, we are not only exchanging ideas but also shaping the road to Viksit Bharat 2047. I believe we are on the right path to creating a future-ready India," said Dr. Madhu Chitkara, Co-Chair, ASSOCHAM National Council on Education in her welcome address.

Dhruv Galgotia CEO Galgotia's University shared his insights on Innovation in education which is no longer optional—it is foundational. As we

move toward Viksit Bharat 2047, we must empower institutions to embrace new pedagogies, digital tools, and interdisciplinary learning that equip students for a fast-evolving world.

Ravin Nair MD QSI- Guage focused on bridging the gap between academia and industry, which is key to creating job-ready talent. This summit marks a significant step forward in building frameworks where education and enterprise co-create opportunities for Bharat's youth.

Kunwar Shekhar Vijendra Chairman of ASSOCHAM National Council on education, said India has the potential to become a global hub for education and talent. With our demographic dividend, cultural legacy, and tech innovation, we must aim not just to meet global standards but to set them.

Akal Academies introduce AI Skills for children in rural Punjab

FW DESK
Ferozepur

In a groundbreaking initiative, Akal Academy, a chain of 130 schools in rural Punjab, delivering value based education, has teamed up with renowned US-retained AI expert, Dr. Sandeep Singh Sandha, to impart Artificial Intelligence (AI) skills to its students. This new age program was blessed by Dr. Davinder Singh, President Kalgidhar trust at village Jiwan Arian

From the new academic year 2025-26, students of grade VII to XII across over 100 Akal Academies in Punjab, will have the opportunity to learn from Dr. Sandha, an IIT Roorkee alumnus who did his doctorate in AI from the University of California, Los Angeles. "We are grateful to Dr. Sandha for



agreeing to mentor and skill our students in AI, ML, Robotics, Drones, and 3D Printing," said a spokesperson, of Akal Academies, Dr Neelam Kaur, Advisor Education and Health, Kalgidhar Trust, Baru Sahib. "This shall benefit over 15,000 students and aligns with our mission of providing value-

based education," she said.

Having led AI research at Abacus.AI, Amazon, ARM, Teradata, IBM, and Oracle, Dr. Sandha's expertise in AI has been recognized globally, with his research being implemented in production, ranging from controlling robots to designing precision agriculture strate-

gies. It was at California that his research work on Artificial Intelligence (AI), specifically the Mango library, is used in designing commercial CPUs powering billions of devices, including Samsung and iPhone smartphones. Dr Sandha serves as a program committee member for top AI conferences and as a reviewer for leading journals in the field, and has over 50 research papers and articles in prestigious computer science journals.

He has devoted himself to giving-back to his motherland and has returned from US in January this year to settle in his village home in Punjab, and has initiated Punjab AI-Excellence Programme and is not only mentoring school students but also guiding the IITs across the country on AI.

In his meeting with Dr. Da-

vinder Singh, President Kalgidhar Trust, at his residence Dr Sandha shared that it's time that we bring the advancements in AI to our middle and senior school students for making them and the state of Punjab future ready. World wide AI is now a routine may it be agriculture, healthcare, education, industry and research. It is time that we gear-up to reap its benefits

Both, Dr. Sandha and his life partner, Dr. Inderjot Kaur, who did her Masters from North Carolina State University and Ph.D. and post-doctoral from Mississippi State University, who also empowers the students of Punjab for acquiring higher education in Universities abroad, have left their well paying jobs in USA to give back to their birthplace, Punjab, and the country.

Build new Vidhan Sabha building in the middle of Haryana, not in Chandigarh: Randeep Lohchab

FW DESK
Chandigarh

Present in the press conference former minister Attar Singh Saini, Swami Nityanand President Arya Samaj Manch, former MLA Meham Umed Singh, former MLA Beri Ajit Singh Kadian, Master Hari Singh who was political advisor to many Chief Ministers, former Chief Minister Hukam Singh's nephew Dalip Sarpanch Saman, Meham Chaubisi Khap's head Subhash Nambardar, Rod Samaj's head mahendra Rod Pundri, social leader Rajendra Farmana, Phool Kumar Petwad President Teachers Association, former MP Jagveer's son Kamal Singh Speaking at a press conference organized today at the Press Club of Chandigarh by Nyay Paksha President Randeep Lohchab with the leaders of the Swabhiman move-



ment being run in Haryana state on the issue of making Haryana's new capital in the middle of Haryana, he said, even after 58 years of Haryana state coming into existence, we are deprived of our new capital and a separate High Court, this is hurtful to the self-respect of the three crore people of the state. At present, the Haryana State Government plans to build a new Haryana Vidhan Sabha building near the Panchkula border in Chandigarh.

The construction of a big

new Haryana Vidhan Sabha building in Chandigarh for the increased seats of the new Vidhan Sabha in 2029 shows that the current Haryana Government and the Opposition have no interest in building a new capital and a separate High Court in the middle of the state. Their thinking is that if a new capital is ever built after the passage of time, it should be built in Panchkula. The head offices of many departments have been being built in Panchkula for the last two decades.

Mann Kaur shines as Jasmine Nanda in new show 'Kashni'



KULBIR SINGH KALSI
Chandigarh

Mann Kaur, a name that has resonated across the Punjabi entertainment industry, is once again ready to captivate audiences with her powerful performance. This time, she steps into the shoes of Jasmine Nanda, a determined and disciplined businesswoman, in Zee Punjab's latest show, 'Kashni'. Mann Kaur has already made a special place in the hearts of Punjabi audiences with her memorable roles in 'Dilan De Rishte' as Prabhjot and 'Dildaariyan'. Alongside television, she has showcased her versatility in Punjabi films, web series, and music videos. Recently, her Punjabi religious song 'Sirhand Diye Kande' was well received by audiences, further solidifying her connection with fans.

Kandhari Drops "9 Outta 10" – A Power Anthem You Can't Miss!

KULBIR SINGH KALSI
Chandigarh

Punjabi music sensation Kandhari is back with yet another electrifying track, "9 Outta 10," which is now officially out! After delivering chart-busters like "Steering" and "Tu Ta Meri Si Na," Kandhari continues to impress with his unique style and hard-hitting lyrics.

The song features lyrics penned by Kandhari himself, music composed by Avy, and a striking performance by Geet Goraya as the female lead. The track brings together a perfect blend of energetic beats and compelling storytelling, making it an instant favorite among fans.

Hrithik Roshan Gushes over Girlfriend Saba Azad's Latest Glamorous Shoot

MUMBAI: The actor took to the comments section of Saba's post and praised her stunning look. Hrithik commented, "Beautiful," followed by a red heart emoji. On Sunday, Saba took to her Instagram handle and shared a series of her alluring photos in a stylish white outfit. In the photos, she could be seen exuding glamour as she strikes different poses. Saba looked so hot in a white monokini paired with a chic frill jacket and long socks.

Notably, Hrithik Roshan often shows his support for Saba Azad by cheering her on and leaving sweet comments on her social media posts. Whether it's praising her work or simply showing admiration, the 'War' actor never misses an oppor-



tunity to express his love and appreciation for Saba.

A few days ago, Saba dropped her photos in a black outfit, captioning, "studio day!!" Hrithik's cousin Pashmina Roshan commented, "Wow."

For the unversed, Hrithik Roshan and Saba Azad's romance

began to bloom in 2022. As per reports, their connection started on Twitter when the actor liked and shared a video of Saba collaborating with a rapper. In response, Saba thanked Hrithik, which led to them striking up a conversation. Their exchange marked the beginning of their

love story.

The couple, often seen together at various events such as birthday parties, weddings, family brunches, and vacations, have become a regular sight in each other's lives. Recently, they celebrated their third anniversary, marking another milestone in their relationship.

The Krishi actor took to his Instagram and shared a picture of himself with the actress-singer as the two celebrated their third anniversary. The actor wrote in the caption, "Happy anniversary partner 1.10.2024 @sabazad." Hrithik publicly confirmed his relationship with Saba Azad in 2022 at a birthday party, where the couple made their first public appearance hand in hand.

Two Hong Kong Restaurants achieve top 3 status in Asia's 50 Best Restaurants 2025

Together with No. 1 Ranking at Asia's 50 Best Bars, Hong Kong Shines as a Culinary Powerhouse

FW DESK
Hong Kong

Hong Kong has solidified its position as a culinary powerhouse in Asia, boasting three spots in the top three of both Asia's 50 Best Restaurants 2025 and Asia's 50 Best Bars 2024. Asia's 50 Best Restaurants 2025 were revealed at a ceremony in Seoul last night, Gaggan in Bangkok was named the best restaurant, while Hong Kong's The Chairman and WING secured second and third places, respectively, each improving their standings from last year. Vicky Cheng, Chef and Owner of WING, also secured the coveted peer-voted Inedit Damm Chefs' Choice Award. The achievement caps a remarkable 12 months for Hong Kong's gastronomy scene, which began when Hong Kong's Bar Leone stunned the hospitality world by debuting at number 1 on Asia's 50 Best Bars 2024, the first ever bar to do so.

Danny Yip, owner of The Chairman, said: "I would like to dedicate this recognition to everyone in Chinese restaurants who harness the beauty of Chinese cuisine to connect



with friends from all corners of the globe. We're thrilled to share our culinary journey on the international stage, inspiring others to explore the richness of our cuisine and the vibrant essence of Hong Kong's dining scene."

Vicky Cheng, Chef and Owner of WING, said: "Being recognised among the best restaurants in Asia is an incredible honour for our team and a reflection of our commitment to pushing culinary boundaries, and we are proud to contribute to Hong Kong's rich culinary tapestry. We are excited to share our culinary story on such a prestigious stage, and this recognition fuels our passion to explore

new gastronomic horizons."

Hong Kong has long been renowned by global gourmands and culinary tastemakers as one of the world's great gastronomic cities, known for its incredible breadth and depth of restaurants and cuisines. This latest recognition underscores Hong Kong's position as one of the world's best cities for food and drink enthusiasts, with a hospitality scene that continues to go from strength to strength and that remains at the forefront of creativity and innovation.

Hong Kong's success at Asia's 50 Best Restaurants and Bars firmly establishes the city as a premier destination for gastronomic excellence. With The Chairman, WING and Bar Leone leading the way, the city showcases an unparalleled richness in culinary artistry and innovation. Food and beverage enthusiasts from around the world are encouraged to immerse themselves in the city's vibrant dining scene, exploring the celebrated establishments that make Hong Kong a true gastronomic haven.

Looking ahead, Hong Kong will also host the World's 50 Best Bars 2025 for the first time on 8 October, at the iconic Kai Tak Cruise Terminal, ensuring that this extraordinary year will further elevate the city's reputation in the hospitality world.

Kashmir's tulip garden opens to public, draws thousands on first day

FW DESK

Asia's largest Tulip Garden in Srinagar was officially opened to visitors on Wednesday, with thousands flocking to witness the vibrant floral spectacle. Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah inaugurated the garden, which showcases over 1.75 million tulips across 74 varieties, many already in full bloom.

Dressed in a traditional white Pheran, Omar Abdullah toured the garden, clicked pictures, and interacted with visitors. Taking to social media platform X after his visit, he expressed his excite-



ment: "After more than a decade, I was back at the Tulip Garden in Srinagar to officially throw it open to visitors. Over the next few weeks, thousands are expected to visit Asia's largest tulip garden and enjoy the riot of color."

Agriculture Minister Javid Ahmad Dar, who accompanied

the Chief Minister, was optimistic about the tourist season. "The beginning is promising, and we hope tourism flourishes just like these tulips," he said.

The 4,500-kanal terraced garden, nestled at the foothills of the Zabarwan mountain range overlooking Dal Lake, remains open for about four weeks each year. Visitors are treated to a breathtaking display of not just tulips but also daffodils, hyacinths, roses, ranunculi, muscaria, and iris, creating a stunning tapestry of colors.

