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**WITH PUNJAB'S DEBT AT RS 3.12 LAKH CRORE, MANN'S OPS PROMISE FACES UPHILL CHALLENGE**

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**FOOD-TECH STARTUP PLUCK ACQUIRES 100 PER CENT STAKE IN MEAL KIT BRAND KOOK**

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**LUDHIANA COURT HAS STAYED THE RELEASE OF THE PUNJABI FILM 'JODI TERI MERI'**

## Punjab CM Mann and Kejriwal dedicate 580 Aam Aadmi Clinics

80 NEW CLINICS DEDICATE ON FRIDAY WITH AN AIM TO CARVE OUT A HEALTHY, PROGRESSIVE AND PROSPEROUS STATE

**LUDHIANA:** Taking a leap forward towards carving out a healthy, progressive and prosperous state, the Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Friday dedicated 80 more Aam Aadmi Clinics to people thereby bringing total tally of such operational clinics go 580.



Addressing the gathering, the Chief Minister said that with this around 580 Aam Aadmi Clinics are now operational in the state to offer free healthcare services to people. He said that 580 clinics have been dedicated to the people of state in three phases. Bhagwant Mann said that these clinics have already proved to be a cornerstone in imparting quality health services to people.

patients from across the state have benefited from these Aam Aadmi clinics by their visit. Similarly, Bhagwant Mann said that total 41 type of diagnostics tests are being provided at these clinics free of cost and till April 30, 1.78 lakh patients have undergone these tests.

people had ousted them from the state. Bhagwant Mann said that these leaders are always fooled the common man due to which they were rejected by the people. Describing quality education as panacea of all ills faced by the poor, the Chief Minister said that it enables the poverty stricken families to enhance their living standard. He said that due to this the state government is laying special thrust on the improvement of education sector in the state. Bhagwant Mann said that no stone will be left unturned for providing quality education to the students.

The Chief Minister said that due to strenuous efforts of the state government, Punjab is today a power surplus state. He said that the state is having stock of coal for 37 days to generate the power as compared to past when threat of darkness loomed in the state. Bhagwant Mann said that today every sector of the state whether it is agriculture, industry

or domestic sector are getting uninterrupted power.

The Chief Minister said that the corrupt leaders are suffering from mental sickness due to which they are being sent to jail. He said that these leaders have mercilessly plundered the wealth of the state for which they can't be spared. Bhagwant Mann said that every penny looted from people will be recovered from the corrupt leaders and they will be put behind the jails.

The Chief Minister said that the state government has passed the 'One MLA, One Pension' bill which stipulates that each MLA will get only a single pension, instead of the earlier provision of permitting multiple pensions for every term. He said that this pension system was the open loot of public money which has been stopped now. Bhagwant Mann said that this historic initiative is aimed at saving the tax payer's money to ensure that well being of the society.

## Nirmala Sitharaman congratulates Ajay Singh Banga on becoming World Bank president



**NEW DELHI:** Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday congratulated Ajay Banga, the former Indian-American head of Mastercard, on becoming the World Bank president.

"Hearty congratulations Ajay Banga on being selected as the President of @WorldBank. I am confident that you'll bring your wide experience in the corporate world for meeting the goals of the bank," she said in a tweet. Banga, who was selected as the new World Bank president on Wednesday, had

most recently served as vice chairman at General Atlantic. In a statement, the World Bank said that its "board looks forward to working with Banga on the World Bank Group Evolution process, as discussed at the April 2023 Spring Meetings, and on all the World Bank Group's ambitions and efforts aimed at tackling the toughest development challenges facing developing countries". The president of the World Bank Group is also the Chair of the Board of the Executive Directors of the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID).

The president is also the ex-officio chair of the Board of Directors of the International Development Association (IDA), International Finance Corporation (IFC), the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA), and of the Administrative Council of the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID).

K'TAKA POLLS

### PM Modi rakes up 'love jihad', refers to 'The Kerala Story'



Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday raked up the issue of 'love jihad' in the run up to the May 10 Assembly elections in Karnataka, as he accused the Congress of siding with the conspirators in this regard.

Indirectly referring to the just-released controversial film 'The Kerala Story' while addressing a massive rally in Ballary, Modi said a film has been made on the new form of terrorism based on incidents in Kerala. "The people of the beautiful land of Kerala are hardworking and talented. But a new form of terrorism has been unleashed, and the Congress is siding with the conspirators of this new form of terrorism. Not only this, it is forging political ties behind doors with the conspirators. The people of Karnataka should be careful about the Congress," Modi said.

"The Congress has always pursued vote-bank politics. As a result, there has been a spurt in terrorism. In the last few years, the forms of terrorism have changed. In present times, acts of terror are not only carried out using guns and bombs. Certain people in the society are quietly pursuing new forms of terrorism. 'The Kerala Story' has a similar storyline and it is being discussed," Modi said.

### Excise policy case: Delhi HC adjourns hearing on Sisodia's interim bail plea to May 10

**NEW DELHI:** The Delhi High Court on Thursday adjourned the hearing on former Delhi Deputy CM Manish Sisodia's interim bail plea in the 2021-22 excise policy case being probed by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to May 10.



Appearing for the probe agency, Additional Solicitor General (ASG) S.V. Raju submitted before the bench of Justice Dinesh Kumar Sharma that "the change from 5 per cent to 12 per cent in the interest rate was made to get the kickback money. He (Sisodia) made the policy in such a way that guaranteed return in form of kickbacks came".

"Sisodia concealed legal experts' opinion given by emi-

named Rahul Singh on the instance of Manish Sisodia, which can be proved from their WhatsApp chats. "The original is missing. Only a part of the draft has been retrieved from the phones," he said.

Taking note of the submission, the judge adjourned the matter for further submissions to May 10.

Notably, Sisodia had moved the high court on Wednesday seeking interim bail in the case on the ground of his wife's illness.

Earlier on Thursday, the high court had sought the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) response on Sisodia's bail plea in the same case.

Last week, Special Judge M.K. Nagpal of the Rouse Avenue Court had extended Sisodia's judicial custody till May 12.

The court had also directed the CBI to supply an e-copy of the supplementary charge sheet to Sisodia.

### Hang me the day you find my involvement in corruption of single paise: Arvind Kejriwal to PM Modi

FW CORRESPONDENT  
Ludhiana

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Friday claimed that central probe agencies are trying to prove by "any means" that he is a "thief", and told the prime minister that he can hang him publicly if corruption of even a paise is found against him.

Kejriwal was on April 16 questioned by the CBI in connection with the excise policy case in which his former deputy Manish Sisodia is already in jail. The agency had summoned



Kejriwal as a witness. "They put the CBI, ED, Income Tax and police after me. Why? There is only one purpose — which is to prove by any means that 'Kejriwal chor hai (Kejriwal

is a thief)' and prove that he has indulged in corruption," he said. Kejriwal was speaking after dedicating 80 'Aam Aadmi Clinics' to the people of Punjab at an event here.

"I want tell Modi ji," the Delhi CM said, "Prime Minister ji, if Kejriwal is corrupt, there is no one honest in this world. I want to tell him that the day you find corruption of a single paise against Kejriwal, hang me publicly." "But stop this 'roz-roz ki nautanki and tamasha (drama)," Kejriwal said, attacking the Modi government.

### DCW chief at Jantar Mantar again to meet wrestlers



**NEW DELHI:** The Delhi Commission for Women (DCW) chief Swati Maliwal on Thursday morning again reached Jantar Mantar to meet with the protesting wrestlers, after a scuffle broke out between the wrestlers and Delhi Police

personnel last night. According to Maliwal, wrestlers Vinesh Phogat and Sakshi Malik had told her that they were being tortured and harassed by police officers who were drunk and misbehaving with them.

However, the Deputy Commissioner of Police (New Delhi) Pranav Tayal said that the DCW Chairperson was stopped at the barricade by an officer and allowed immediately.

"She is presently inside at the protest site. There is no restriction on individual entry to Jantar Mantar," said the DCP. Last night, Maliwal was forcefully taken away from the protest site by Delhi Police when she had arrived at Jantar Mantar after the alleged scuffle.

### Encounter breaks out in Rajouri of Jammu & Kashmir

**SRINAGAR:** An encounter broke out between security forces and terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir's Rajouri district on Friday morning, officials said. According to sources, the exchange of fire was going on at Doke in the Banyari Hills of Rajouri district. Additional Director General of Police (ADGP) Jammu Zone, Mukesh Singh confirmed that the encounter has begun in the Kandi forest belt. The terrorists hiding in the area opened fire on the security forces who retaliated, leading to a gunfight. A heavy exchange of gunfire was on when this report was being filed. On April 21, five Army soldiers were killed Thursday afternoon in the neighbouring district of Poonch of J&K when their vehicle was fired upon by terrorists.

### Third birth centenary of Sardar Jassa Singh Ramgarhia celebrated



JAGMOHAN SINGH  
Amritsar

During the centenary congregation organized by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) on the occasion of the 300th birth anniversary of the 18th century Sikh General Sardar Jassa Singh Ramgarhia, several speakers emphasized the need for Panthic unity. The congregation was held at the Gurdwara Sri Manji Sahib Diwan Hall, Amritsar.

Speaking during the congregation, Jathedar of Sri Akal Takht Sahib Giani Harpreet Singh said that Jassa Singh Ramgarhia was a great hero of the Sikh community, who set an example of dedication to the Panth. He said that Sardar Jassa Singh has an eminent place in Sikh history and his life is a source of inspiration for the Panth even in the present. He said that today when the Sikh community is facing big challenges, there is a need to take guidance from the pages of history.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Necessary for different Sikh factions & organizations to unite on one platform: Giani Harpreet Singh
- Power of Panthic organizations is power of Sikhs in country & world over: Sukhbir Singh Badal

congregation, SGPC President Harjinder Singh Dhami said that the Sikh community has always been the guardian of right and truth and the life of ancient Sikh warriors is also a guide for the next generations.

On this occasion, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) President Sukhbir Singh Badal said that today many forces are engaged to divide the Sikh power, to counter them strengthening the Panthic (community's) organizations is the great need of the hour. He said that the power of the Panthic organizations is the power of the Sikhs in the country and the world over. If the institutions are strong, then the issues of Sikhs can be solved easily, said Sukhbir Singh Badal. He said that while celebrating centenaries, we get an opportunity to be inspired by the history of our community and elders and these days prove to be a source of inspiration in the next stages of Sikh life.

### A day after 5 jawans were killed, terrorist killed in fresh Rajouri encounter



FW DESK

In a fresh encounter that broke out in the woods of Rajouri district in Jammu, one militant has been killed while another is suspected to have been injured.

This follows the killing of five army personnel on Friday morning in the Kandi forest area of the district. The Indian Army, in coordination with JKP & CRPF, had launched a joint operation to track down the militants. "In the ongoing joint operation in Kandi Forest, Rajouri sector by Indian Army in coordination with JKP & CRPF, at 7:am hours the cordon while closing in spotted and pinned down the terrorists," Defence spokesman Lt. Colonel Devender Anand said. "In the ensuing gunbattle, one terrorist has been neutralized and one terrorist is likely to be injured"

The operation has so far resulted in huge recoveries, including one AK56, four magazines of AK, 56 rounds of AK, 1 x 9mm pistol with a mag, three grenades one ammunition pouch. The identity of the neutralized militant is yet to be ascertained. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, along with Army Chief General Manoj Pandey, is expected to visit Rajouri to assess the ground situation.

The officials said that he is likely to chair a high-level security meeting in Jammu before flying back to Delhi. In the meantime, Northern Army Commander Lt Gen Upendra Dwivedi has reached Rajouri to review the ongoing operation.

### Government should immediately take decision in case of Balwant Singh Rajoana: Dhami

After Supreme Court order, now Government of India should fulfill its responsibility



JAGMOHAN SINGH  
Amritsar

Reacting to the Supreme Court order in the case of Balwant Singh Rajoana, imprisoned in jail for the last 28 years, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) President Harjinder Singh Dhami has said that now it is the responsibility of the Centre government to commute the sentence and announce release Bhai Rajoana. In a statement issued here

take an immediate decision. By implementing this notification of 2019, the government should also decide to release Rajoana, as he has served more than life imprisonment and was deprived of parole during his imprisonment in jail.

SGPC President said that the Sikh leaders in BJP, he said. He said that the case of Rajoana was also time for Iqbal Singh Lalpura, Chairman of the National Commission for Minorities, to fulfill his responsibility.

### India's merchandise exports likely to touch \$500 billion by March 2024: FIEO

**NEW DELHI:** India's merchandise exports are expected to touch USD 500 billion, while services exports could expand to USD 400 billion in the year ending March 2024, said Ajay Sahai, director general of the Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO) on Wednesday.

"The primary reason for the expected export growth is the strong overseas demand in many markets," sahai said. The exporters association highlighted that despite global headwinds, the exports of goods and services might reach USD 900 billion in the current financial year, up from USD 770 billion in the previous year. While addressing FIEO's Niryat Shree and Niryat Bandhu Awards, union minis-



ter for commerce and industry Piyush Goyal urged exporters to explore new markets, however, in view of the possible impact of war in Ukraine and a global slowdown. "The times ahead are going to be very, very tough. The situation is only deteriorating from what we saw as happened today in the Ukraine-Russia war, it's going to be very, very challenging in the months and years ahead of us.

# With Punjab's debt at Rs 3.12 lakh crore, Mann's OPS promise faces uphill challenge

With Punjab's current debt of whopping Rs 3.12 lakh crore, the 13-month-old AAP government seems further pushing the state into a debt trap through increased borrowings and offering freebies promised in the run-up to the Assembly elections like free water and electricity up to a limit.

With its liquor policy already under the scanner with those in the trade accusing the government of monopolising the industry in favour of a 'handful of entities', the government is currently facing criticism for the abnormal delay in implementing its major poll promise of restoring the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) for government employees who joined service



after 2004. Agitating employees hit the streets several times in the recent past over the delay in specifying the date from which the OPS is going to be implemented.

With an eye on the Gujarat Assembly elections, the Bhag-

want Mann-led Aam Aadmi Party government in November last year hurriedly notified the implementation of the OPS in Punjab that aims to benefit over 1.75 lakh employees, currently covered under the National Pension System (NPS).

In addition, 1.26 lakh employees are already covered under the existing OPS. The government says the OPS scheme is expected to benefit more than 4, 100 employees in the next five years alone. In order to ensure that the scheme being introduced is financially sustainable for the exchequer, the government will be contributing proactively to the pension corpus.

A contribution to the corpus will be Rs 1, 000 crore per annum initially and will gradually increase. In addition, the current accumulated corpus with the NPS is Rs 16, 746 crore, which the government has requested the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) to refund

but the Centre declined.

Amid the tighter financial conditions and a worse-than-anticipated slowdown, the state Finance Department officials are skeptical over the implementation of the OPS, saying it would put additional stress on finances as the state debt is close to 180 per cent of its annual budget. They say the state is facing the daunting task to usher in much-needed economic reforms as a major component of government earning and borrowing is meant for servicing debt rather than capital expenditure.

As per the state Budget, the effective outstanding debt to the GSDP has been estimated to be 46.81 per cent in 2023-24.

# AIFWL & Bar Council of Punjab and Haryana launch the Northern Chapter



ADITICHAHAR Chandigarh

The Punjab and Haryana Bar Council and the All India Federation of Women Lawyers (AIFWL) jointly established the northern branch of the Punjab and Haryana Federation of Women Lawyers yesterday, with Ritu Punj Advocate as President and Dr. Kanu Sharma as Secretary.

The All India Federation of Women Lawyers is India's largest association of female lawyers. The federation was founded in 2007 and is linked with the International Federation of Women Lawyers

(FIDA), a 1944 international NGO that is the largest group of women lawyers in the world, with a presence in over 94 countries.

The inaugural ceremony and seminar on the topic "Role of Women in the Dispensation of Justice" took place on Sunday, April 30th at 10:00 a.m. at Law Bhawan, Sector 37A, Chandigarh.

The two-hour event was presided over by Hon'ble Justice Manjari Nehru Kaul Judge PHHC and held in the august presence of Hon'ble Justice Arun Palli Judge Punjab & Haryana High Court. Hon'ble Justice Rajesh Bhardwaj,

Hon'ble Justice Nidhi Gupta, Hon'ble Justice Sanjay Vashishth, Dr. AmeeYajnik Adv MP Rajya Sabha, and Suvir Sidhu Chairman of Bar Council were among the honorees.

Hemlata Adv President All India Federation of Women Lawyers and K. Sheela Anish Adv Founder President of All India Federation of Women Lawyers were present from the national executive.

Justice Kaul emphasised the importance of recognising women in law and their unique achievements. Other dignitaries spoke on the topic and shared their personal experiences. Many retired judges, Senior Advocates, women lawyers from the region, young lawyers, and academicians were in the audience.

This federation's aim is to promote women lawyers in the legal profession and to establish venues for growth. The Federation's northern section will collaborate with other state units on national and international levels, and it plans to host the first international Women in Law Conference in Chandigarh later this year.

## Situation worsening in Haryana in BJP government rule due to rising unemployment, prices and law & order; Shelja



SATISH HANDA Ambala

Senior Congress leader Kumari Shelja former Union Minister, Rajya Sabha member and HPC President had a get-together at her Ambala Cantt residence in which large number of local Congress leaders, senior Congress leaders from adjoining districts including former Deputy CM Chandar Mohan, Pradesh Congress Committee President Ramkishan Gurjar and Naraingarh M.L.A. Shelly Choudhary as well as media persons were present.

When questioned about the Chief Minister face in Haryana in case Congress comes to power in Haryana state after 2024 Vidhan Sabha polls Shelja said that several senior Congress leaders claim themselves next Chief Minister in the state in case Congress wins majority in coming polls but the decision in this regard will be taken only by Congress high command, New Delhi. When asked if she is going to contest in coming Lok Sabha polls from Ambala-Yamunanagar constituency she smilingly changed the topic.

While interacting with media persons Shelja strongly condemned over fast increasing unemployment among youths in Haryana state ranking top position in the country. She also expressed deep concern over several important developmental projects announced by ruling government in past years which are yet hanging over on fire lying incomplete and caused huge financial loss to the government as well as inconvenience to people in the state. She expressed concern over the projects announced by Congress government when ruling in Haryana which included construction of Tool Room Centre at Saha which have been neglected in past nine years.

# Goldy Brar among Canada's 25 most wanted fugitives

FW DESK Chandigarh

The BOLO Program in Canada announced an update to its list of Canada's 25 most wanted fugitives on May 01, 2023. The Program is a Canadian not-for-profit organization that amplifies police fugitive cases to increase public awareness. INTERPOL-Ottawa's Fugitive Apprehension Support Team (FAST) has added fugitive Satinderjit Singh 'Goldy' Brar as the latest addition to the Top 25 list.

Brar is the subject of a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) investigation into the allegations originating from India. The offences committed in India are very serious in nature and merit the interest of police in Canada.

Brar is believed to be in Canada and represents a risk to public safety. He is currently under investigation but is not

charged with any criminal offences in Canada.

Brar is accused of orchestrating the murders of Rajat Kumar, of Gurlal Singh, and is also suspected of ordering the murder of Indian rapper, singer, songwriter Shubhdeep Singh aka "Sidhu Moose Wala" on May 29, 2022 in India. India obtained an INTERPOL Red Notice for Brar in June 2022.

The RCMP is dedicated to supporting its international policing partners and is working closely with Indian law enforcement to ensure that justice is provided to the victims.

Satinderjit Singh 'Goldy' Brar is accused of murder, attempted murder, conspiracy to commit murder, and weapons trafficking. Brar is accused of committing these crimes while being in Can-

ada and is believed to be in Canada. He represents a risk to public safety and is currently under investigation, but is not charged with any criminal offences in Canada.

The BOLO Program is a breakthrough initiative leveraging social media, technology, and innovative engagement to encourage citizens to be on the lookout for Canada's most wanted, so they can keep their communities safe. The term 'BOLO' which stands for 'Be On The Lookout', is commonly used to designate actively wanted suspects. The Program acts as a force multiplier and an "amplifier" to the RCMP's current approach for locating, apprehending and returning wanted individuals.

The RCMP recently created its own Fugitive Apprehension

Support Team (FAST). The FAST is dedicated to locating, apprehending and returning fugitives of the highest value to Canada. High value fugitives can be described as individuals that have been charged with serious offences, who present a significant public safety risk, and who are likely continuing to commit serious criminal offences to facilitate their flight from justice.

The RCMP works closely with international partners and maintains strong relationships with law enforcement agencies around the world. These relationships are fundamental to the RCMP's ability to ensure Canada responds to globalized criminal threats.

Through the INTERPOL-Ottawa Office and RCMP Liaison Officer Program, the RCMP works with foreign law enforcement agencies to facilitate the international aspects of investigations.

# Inter-state racket got prepared over 110 fake passports for gangsters, criminals busted

SATISH HANDA

Haryana state police has recently busted a gang with the arrest of three persons having a network spread across Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Kolkata states allegedly involved in getting prepared more than 110 fake passports on the basis of fake documents for the gangsters and hard core criminals left the country after several criminal activities. They were alleged operating with the help of immigration agents and staff working in passport offices. Those arrested by the police were identified as Sukhjinder alias Sharpi Ghuman, Onkar a resident of village Kaki in Ja-



landhar district and Prabhjot a resident of Bareilly in U.P. According to police information, as many as 10 persons have been taken into custody by STF so far investigating the case. Information also reveals that the racket had also prepared

fake passports of Amol brother and Sachin nephew of gangster Lawrence Bishnoi.

Meanwhile Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khatter has announced several hard campaigns against gangsters and hard core criminals in the state

which include Operation Prahar, Operation Durga and Operation Clean to wipe out crimes from the state following U.P Chief Minister Yogi Aditya Nath and demolished their properties with bulldozers in the state which according to him would continue till Haryana becomes crime free state. Khatter said that he had to take this decision in view of increasing criminal activities by anti-social elements in the state involved in drug smuggling, ransom demand by gangsters from jails. Information reveals that there are nearly hundred hardcore criminals in Haryana state spreading terror, of them nearly 50% have been arrested in past sometime.

# Three clerks suspended for embezzlement of Rs 2.32 crore

SATISH HANDA

Deputy Commissioner Sirsa, Parth Gupta suspended three clerks of the Sub-Divisional office in Ellenabad sub division on the charge of embezzlements of government funds worth Rs 2.32 crore during year 2022-23. Ellenabad police registered FIR against three clerks in vehicle registration and licensing department on the complaint of Ellenabad

SDM Dr. Ved Beniwal. The alleged accused working in SDM were identified as Jitender Kumar registration clerk, Vikramdeep Singh resident of Dholpalika and Kuldeep Mothsara working as licensing clerk all booked by the police under sections 406, 409 and 420 of the IPC. Police has already arrested Vikramjit who was produced in the court and remanded to police custody on Sunday. Police hopes to arrest



the remaining two accused any moment.

The SDM, during an inspection had found that the

three clerks had not deposited an short amount worth Rs 2.32 crore charged as fee for vehicle registration and driving licenses with the state exchequer from April 2022 till March 2023 and lesser amount was deposited in treasury on the basis of fake documents and stamps by them under a conspiracy between three. An SIT has been constituted by the police to investigate the fraud.

# 2165 cyber crime cases registered in Haryana in past 4 months

SATISH HANDA

Mewat area in Haryana state comprising of nearly 40 nearly 40 villages is functioning as a hub for cyber crimes since past few years where several rackets involved in criminal activities are having links with other states in the country. According to Haryana state police information, nearly five lakh mobile phone sim have been blocked which were being used for criminal activities in Haryana state which cheated 66784 innocent people in the state amount worth Rs 300 crore in past some time. Information reveals that recently Union Home Minister Amit Shah had a meeting with senior police officers in Haryana state on February this year on this vital issue when state police told that they have already identified 402 criminals



involved in cyber crimes in the state cheating large number of people across the country while sitting in a room.

According to Haryana police information as many as 2165 cases related to cyber crimes have been registered this year with effect from January 2023 so far in which 1065 cheats have been arrested by the cyber cell police in the state with

the recovery of amount worth Rs 47 crore. Information also reveals that decision has been taken to set up a cyber cell in the state to take immediate action against those involved in cyber crimes. Information also reveals that most of the persons mostly living in rural areas usually do n take action after being cheated.

According to a cyber crime

accuse arrested in Mewat area told that cyber criminals usually keep large number of mobile sim and after committing a crime change sim card immediately from the mobile phone. Police investigation in few cases also revealed that a cyber crime cheat possesses over a dozen or more sim on a single mobile phone illegally, whereas not more than six sim are permissible on a mobile phone. Meanwhile, Arun Singla SP Nuh in Mewat told that a massive search for cyber criminals in the area is going on since past about a month which proved beneficial to locate few cyber criminals as well as illegal sim being used in the area and action is being taken to verify the same with the help of International Mobile Equipment Identity Number to identify cyber criminals mushrooming in the area.

# Congress wrests Shimla civic body from BJP, gets absolute majority

SHIMLA: The less than five-month-old Congress government in Himachal Pradesh on Thursday wrested control of one of India's oldest civic bodies, the Shimla Municipal Corporation, from the BJP, winning 24 out of 34 wards and reducing the opposition councilors to nine from the previous 17.

Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh, who started his political career as a councillor from Shimla, aggressively campaigned for the civic body that was won by the BJP for the first time in 2017 in 32 years.

"I thank the people of Himachal for their historical mandate to the Congress in the Shimla Municipal Corporation where elections were held on the party symbol after 10 years. This mandate affirms the trust of people of Himachal Pradesh in our government and developmental politics," he said.



Amidst a bipolar contest between the archrivals, the Congress and the BJP, the CPI-M won a lone seat. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) failed to open an account.

The CPI-M won the Summer Hill ward, the stronghold of its student wing the Students' Federation of India (SFI). The CPI-M had won the seat last time as well, but the candidate had joined the BJP towards the

State Congress chief Pratibha Singh expressed gratitude to the voters for the party's decisive victory. She said the party would maintain the victory momentum in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections too. The Congress was out of power in the municipal corporation from 2012 to 2017 as the CPI-M had its Mayor and Deputy and from 2017 to 2022, it was the BJP.

Fifty-nine per cent voter turnout was registered when the civic

body went for polling on May 2. The BJP had fielded women candidates from 23 wards, while the Congress from 18. Both parties were contesting from all 34 wards. The AAP and the CPI-M had fielded candidates from 21 and four seats, respectively. While the Congress had promised to introduce policies for a uniform tax regime for both old and merged areas, the BJP promised to provide 40, 000 litres of free water to every household a month, besides a 50 per cent garbage bill waiver. The five-year term of the Municipal Corporation ended in June 2022 but the election could not be held due to a court case which challenged delimitation of wards. The previous BJP government had increased the number of wards from 34 to 41. After coming to power, the Congress government in December abolished the seven new wards.

Founder and Chairperson of Reliance Foundation Nita Ambani visits the Harmandir Sahib on Wednesday. PHOTO: PRABHJOT GILL

# OBC survey triggers political storm “Mann ki Baat” reaches 100

ARAVIND MOHAPATRA  
Bhubaneswar

Politics in Odisha has heated up with Naveen Patnaik government launching a survey to assess the socio-economic status of Other Backward Castes (OBC) in the state. Odisha is the second state in the country after Bihar to undertake this survey but opposition parties are already seeing red. Opposition parties like BJP and Congress have questioned the timing and intention of the government behind the survey. They have accused the government of trying to hoodwink the OBCs to win their support in the 2024 elections. The government, however, insists that the survey was necessary to obtain the exact data on the OBCs so that steps can be taken to ensure their welfare.

“The timing of the survey makes the exercise suspect. They are not bothered about the welfare of OBCs. They never were. Now that the general elections are only an year away they have launched this exercise as they want to create an impression that they actually



care for this class. They playing the caste card as they are desperate to win the elections but they will not succeed,” said a senior Congress leader.

Some other opposition leaders like former union minister Srikanth Jena have demanded that government should first grant the OBCs their constitutional rights. As long as that does not happen people won't have faith in government's exercise. The survey that began on May 1 will conclude on May 27. Being conducted by the Odisha State Commission for Backward Classes in both online and offline modes it will cover OBCs residing in

314 blocks and 114 urban local body (ULB) areas of the state. It will cover a number of backwardness indicators including educational qualification, occupation of the person, livelihood sources, access to hospitals and schools and the kind of houses the person lives in.

The Commission has opened centres for submission of filled up survey forms in all Anganwadi kendras and even public distribution system (PDS) outlets. The families under survey would be required to provide details of their ration cards and Aadhar cards or voter I

cards. The survey will cover 210 OBC communities in the state.

What makes the survey politically important is the fact that OBCs account for 54 percent of Odisha's population and constitute a huge vote-bank. Though unlike UP and Bihar, politics in Odisha has never been dominated by the caste factor there is no denying the political clout of the OBCs. Political parties have been trying to cultivate them for several decades.

The minister for SC&ST, minorities and Backward Classes welfare Jagannath Saraka dismisses the allegations of the opposition as politically motivated. “The opposition may say anything but there is no politics in this. This is an attempt to assess the socio-economic status of the OBCs” he asserted.

The fact is that no formal census including the caste details of the population has been carried out in the state since 1931. The state, thus, lacks reliable data on OBCs who currently enjoys only

11.25 percent reservation in government jobs. This, however, is considered completely disproportionate to their population in the state. The government has not been able to raise this quota because of a cap of 50 percent on reservations mandated by courts.

However, the Naveen Patnaik-led Biju Janata Dal (BJD) has been demanding removal of 50 percent cap on reservation for quite sometime. In 2021 the party not only reiterated this demand but also demanded a caste-based census. Ruling party leaders say they want the cap to be removed so that the government can provide 27 percent reservation to OBCs who constitute the largest chunk of state's population. “Our demand for removal of the cap on reservations stands. At the same time now we have launched a survey to collect authentic data on OBCs. There is no politics in this. This concerns the welfare of the OBCs. We have a duty towards them,” said a senior BJD leader.



MAHIE JK

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popular program reaches at 100th episode today. The 100th episode of 'Mann Ki Baat' was broadcast today at 11 am in Radio and in Door-darshan. The program has provided a platform for the expression of the country's positive energy and creative power. PM Modi has brought the mantra of democracy to the grassroots through 99 episodes of 'Mann Ki Baat'. The Vice President Jagdeep Dhankar said that 'Mann Ki Baat' completes its 100th episode, it will be the foundation to 'India @ 100'. He said that

India will be at the top of the world when it will celebrate the centenary of Independence in 2047.

According to the reports at least 23 Crores are regular listeners of the show. The program has five main themes cleanliness and sanitation, health, wellness, water conservation, and sustainability. The BJP also properly planned to organize facilities in every Assembly constituency of the country for people to listen to the program. The program was telecast live by Door-darshan today.

The 100th episode was also broadcasted live in the United Nations headquarters in New

York. A historic moment for Indians. Mann ki Baat is broadcasted in All India Radio with a motive to connect it with the young generation. Home Minister Amit Shah said that people had almost forgotten All India Radio due to different mediums of communication, but Prime Minister connected the young generation through 'Mann Ki Baat' and gave a new lease of life to All India Radio. He said that PM Modi took All India Radio to every home and village of the country.

Tourism Ministry has also decided to celebrate the 100th Episode of 'Mann Ki Baat' through its Yuva Tourism Clubs. Tourism has been mentioned by Prime Minister Narendra Modi from time to time in the program. Tourism Ministry proposes to undertake a special initiative of '100 Episodes of Mann Ki Baat' - 100 days of Action' through the Yuva Tourism Clubs. According to survey it is said there were 23 crore regular listeners of 'Mann Ki Baat' and 96% of population was aware of the radio program.

## Explosion near Indian Oil fuel station in Jammu and Kashmir



FW DESK

A mysterious blast at a fuel station in Narwal area of Jammu district on Tuesday created panic among people with police saying the blast took place due to short circuit. Quoting an official, a local news agency KNO reported that window panes of office of fuel station were also damaged due to the blast. Soon after the blast, a police team reached to the spot to ascertain the facts. SDPO East Jammu, Syed Zaheer Abbas Jafari said that prima facie it seemed the blast has occurred due to some short circuit. He said that police have evacuated a nearby building and are ascertaining further details.

## Ultrass in J&K's Poonch had active local support: Police



FW DESK

A dozen terrorists are believed to be operating in the Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district, with the police suspecting that they are getting arms supply through drones from Pakistan. A week-long security operation to flush out the terrorists has been going on without much success. The Director General of Jammu and Kashmir Police, Dilbag Singh, visited the area and revealed that the recent attack on the army had been carried out with active local support. However, the arrests have not helped the police to make substantial headway in tracking down the terrorists.

## Two terrorists killed in encounter in Jammu and Kashmir's Baramulla



Two terrorists belonging to the proscribed terror outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba were killed in an encounter with security forces in Jammu and Kashmir's Baramulla district. The encounter broke out in the early hours of Thursday after security forces launched a cordon and search operation acting on specific input about the presence of militants. The terrorists fired upon a search party of the forces, who retaliated, and incriminating materials, arms and ammunition, including an AK 47 rifle and a pistol, were recovered from them, police said.

## Protesting wrestlers stage turns as political stage at Jantar-Mantar

SATISH HANDA  
Chandigarh

President of the Indian Wrestlers Federation Brijbhushan Sharan Singh also MP from Kersarganj Lok Sabha constituency alleged involved in sex exploitation of female wrestlers has now taken political turn with the entry of large number of political opposition leaders making statements against him. Interacting media persons Brijbhushan made an appeal to the protesting wrestlers to discontinue protest immediately which will not only prove harmful for the wrestlers as well as future of the game, but also adversely affect the moral of new wrestlers as well as image of wrestling game. He said that he is prepared to be hanged in case allegations against him prove true.

Meanwhile, Congress MP Deepender Singh Hooda accuse Brijbhushan having criminal



record with nearly 40 cases registered against him in past including sex exploitation of about eight female wrestlers. He said, it is surprising that Brijbhushan making blames against different persons including leaders of political parties in opposition, industrialists and also against him too responsible for present wrestlers protest. Ranjit Chautala, Haryana state electricity & jails minister also strongly condemned Brijbhushan saying

that he himself should have immediately submitted resignation on humanity ground after such a serious, nasty sex exploitation charges against him. Information reveals, there is a long list of political leaders demanding resignation by Brijbhushan and expressed concern raising question over police taken no action so far in spite of the fact sex exploitation cases have been registered against him. Meanwhile, after release from

jail controversial leader Navjot Singh Sidhu too jumped over the protest stage in support of wrestlers demanding immediate resignation by Brijbhushan since fair police investigation will not be possible as long as he was in power. Sidhu said, it is surprising police has not taken any action against the alleged accuse although many days have passed which clearly shows that ruling government sheltering him.

Information reveals that junior wrestling championship was to be held at Delhi but the protesting wrestlers wrote to the Union Sports Minister and Olympic Sangh that female wrestlers are unsafe refusing to participate, as such championship was postponed and this sports contest is now being held at Kazakistan. Moreover, under-15 world championship contest has also been postponed although Brijbhushan assured

not to attend such events for the sake of reputation of sports in the country. Deepender Singh Hooda has now demanded CBI investigation against Brijbhushan in this matter since most of female wrestlers feel themselves unsafe during wrestling tournaments. Hooda blame ruling BJP government sheltering Brijbhushan.

On the other hand, Federation president Brijbhushan denying allegations against him said that its only a conspiracy against him by a handful of political people to tarnish his reputation for their self-vested interest. He said that nearly 90% wrestlers in Haryana state are in his favour and in case he was characterless why action has not been taken against him so far as he is holding the chair since 2013, which clearing indicates that sports stage has become a political stage all of sudden.

## Kharge calls for reviving voice of workers on International Labour Day

BENGALURU: Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge on Monday in a write-up on the occasion of the International Labour Day, stressed reviving the voice of the workers in their "workplaces, in courts and in the government", while criticising the Narendra Modi-led Central government for "rolling the rights of workers backwards".

"International Labour Day marks the contribution and sacrifice of workers in building today's world. Today, we remember the long struggle by workers -- for fair and equal pay, safer working conditions, and the right to organise and have their voices heard in their workplaces, in the courts and in the government."

"Governments since independence have safeguarded and empowered workers, but unfortunately, the Modi government has only rolled workers' rights backwards. The rights of all workers are being weakened, whether they work in agriculture, for public or private organisations, or in the unorganised urban sector. Their voices are going unheard," Kharge noted.

The veteran Congress leader said while it is true that over 40 laws have been introduced since Independence, they need to be updated to meet today's challenges. "However, the Modi government has used this pretext to weaken protections for workers and usurp the Constitutional powers of state governments. There are four fatal flaws in the labour codes which make them anti-worker. "First, the codes do not apply to most workers or establishments. For example, establishments employing less than 300 people can fire workers or close units without permission. Contractors employing fewer than 50 people are exempt from workplace safety laws. Provident Fund, gratuity, insurance and maternity benefits are all unavailable in smaller establishments."



"Second, even if the codes apply to an establishment, governments have enormous flexibility to waive requirements for workplace safety, social security and protection from lay-offs, retrenchment or closure. "Third, the codes significantly weaken the ability of workers to fight for their rights, by making it more difficult to form a union, declaring any strike without two weeks' notice illegal, and penalising those who support such a strike."

"Finally, and most importantly, the codes ignore key challenges facing workers. How can crores of workers with no written contract be helped? How can contract workers' position be improved? A worker struggles when they lose their job or suffer an injury -- how can this struggle be reduced? The codes are silent," Kharge said.

The Congress president said that "clearly, the Modi government thinks of labour laws as an inconvenience to be removed. It does not understand that labour laws, when well-designed and enforced, both protect workers and create certainty for businesses". He further said that "this is why BJP governments in states like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have been unable to attract foreign investors in manufacturing despite waiving key labour laws for three years, citing Covid-19 as an excuse".

The Congress president also said that PM Modi and the BJP think that "re-branding schemes and re-jigging laws will help workers".

## Why is Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh not being arrested despite POCSO Act charges: Sidhu

NEW DELHI: Coming out in support of protesting wrestlers and saying the fight is for honour and dignity of every woman, senior Congress leader Navjot Sidhu on Monday questioned that why accused Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) President Brij Sharan Singh wasn't arrested despite a case was registered against him under the "non-bailable POCSO Act".

Also he sought the BJP MP's custodial interrogation. Two first information reports (FIRs) were registered against him after the intervention of the Supreme Court. "To know what is right and not to do it is the worst cowardice."



Why was the FIR delayed? Not making the FIR public reflects that the FIR is mild and not corroborative to the complainant's complaint," he told the media after meeting the protesting wrestlers at Jantar Mantar here. Sidhu also questioned the "motive" behind

protecting Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. "Intent is questionable and motive is to protect the accused. Are things being swept under the carpet? Why is the officer who delayed the FIR not being tried under Section 166 of the IPC as he was duty bound to register an FIR which is mandatory in case of a cognizable offence?" The first FIR against Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh pertains to allegations levelled by a minor, which has been registered under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act along with relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code concerning outraging modesty.

## There is a need revamp Indian bureaucracy

MAHIE JK

India's bureaucratic system is divided into INDIAN ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM IAS GRADE -A and Lower level bureaucracy. There is a need to reform bureaucracy nowadays because our bureaucracy is facing the problem of credibility. Bureaucrats fulfill the important roles like implementing laws, making and enforcing rules, and settling disputes through administration. Bureaucracy is the important pillar of Indian democracy. The function of running administration is to tackle the day to day administration in accordance with the rules, policies, laws, and decisions of the government.

There are various negative aspects of IAS System according to a survey there is a tendency to serve their political masters more than public. Ensured job security have made IAS officers indolent and arrogant. There are negative aspects of lower level bureaucracy also according to the survey there is less concern for wasting public money and work was not done in an efficient and timely manner.

Promotions were based on seniority rather than merit. Some respondent argue that present bureaucratic system had fea-



tures of the British - era legacy and do not touch me attitude.

54%believed that system is a complete failure and needed reform with a zero based approach necessary to improve it. Respondents were critical of present training as lacking in focus on attitude, humanity, and critical thinking and more emphasis on learning rule books, and file management.

No accountability, cost consciousness or consideration for delivery of quality service in Indian bureaucracy. It needs reform to introduce professionalism, accountability and efficiency and effectiveness to enable it to contribute to good governance.

One way to reform bureaucracy is to introduce NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT it breaks the hierarchy and rigidity through debureaucratization and de-centralization of decisions.

Another way to reform bureaucracy is to change the way public officials interact with people which has witnessed a shift in the post of RTI (RIGHT TO INFORMATION) RTI act created a certain level of transparency among public servants. Initially citizens were unable to know the status of public services available to them and reason for their failure to access them. RTI has increased transparency of public officers.

## DEFAMATION CASE

## No interim relief for Rahul Gandhi



AHMEDABAD: The Gujarat High Court on Tuesday reserved its orders in the revision plea filed by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in connection with his conviction in a defamation case that subsequently led to his disqualification as Member of Parliament.

Rahul Gandhi had appealed to the Gujarat High Court for an interim stay of his conviction until the court pronounced its order on his petition. However, the single judge hearing the case, Justice Hemant Prachchhak, has postponed his decision until after the summer vacation, which ends on June 4.

On April 29, Rahul Gandhi's lawyer -- Abhishek Manu Singhvi, also a Congress leader, argued in the court that his client had not committed any heinous crime or

an offence involving moral turpitude, which are the two tests for denying suspension of conviction. The case stems from a 2019 rally in Kolar, Karnataka, where Rahul Gandhi had said: "Nirav Modi, Lalit Modi, Narendra Modi. How come all the thieves have 'Modi' as a common surname?"

This remark led to a criminal defamation case being filed against him by Surat BJP legislator, Purnesh Modi. Gandhi had been sentenced to two years in jail by a Surat court, leading to his disqualification as a Member of Parliament. During the previous hearing, Justice Prachchhak had emphasised that Rahul Gandhi, being an elected representative of the people, should have been more cautious while making statements.

## Maharashtra building crash toll climbs to 8

The death toll in the Bhiwandi building crash in Maharashtra's Thane district rose to eight with two more bodies recovered from the debris, officials said here on Monday. The two bodies were retrieved nearly 48 hours after the tragedy struck. The work of clearing the debris continued for the third day, the officials said.

The ground plus three storied residential-cum-commercial building housed several godowns on the ground and first floors and at least four families on the two upper floors. Constructed in 2014, it suddenly collapsed around 1.45 p.m. on Saturday at Wardhaman Compound of the Mankoli area on the outskirts of the powerloom town. The officials also said that



now nobody is missing in the tragedy in which another six were injured and over a dozen rescued in the first major pre-monsoon building disaster in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region area. Chief Minister Eknath Shinde has announced an ex-gratia of Rs 5 lakhs to the kin of each deceased and full free treatment for all the injured victims.

## Community-level education, genetic counselling, secondary prevention are crucial for preventing hemoglobinopathies: Dr Anil Kumar

NEW DELHI: At the ASSO-CHAM Roundtable Discussion on Prevention of Hemoglobinopathies, Sickle Cell Disease, and Thalassemia, Dr Anil Kumar, Additional Deputy Director General, Directorate General of Health Service, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India, stated that they are working on a National level thalassemia control programme on the lines of SCD eradication programme. He further commented on the need to manage thalassemia by encouraging NAT testing (in a phased manner), voluntary blood donation and other support required for thalassemia. He said that the government is gathering data for blood centers across India that have NAT testing facilities including the most remote of the state

to have blood testing facilities. The idea is to have one centre in each district. Safe of blood must be ensured for the recipient, he said. Welcoming Dr. Kumar's announcement, Anubha Taneja-Mukherjee from Thalassemia Patients Advocacy Group (TPAG) proposed that patients be included in such efforts.

The rights of the people who are receiving the blood should be monitored. Ensuring that blood centers meet the national standards for blood transfusion services. Technical and manual criteria for voluntary blood donation are being created in preparation for World Blood Donor Day on June 14th, 2023. The private sector's involvement should complement government measures.

## India's slipping press freedom ranking raises concerns

The latest World Press Freedom Index by global media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) paints a concerning picture for India's media landscape. The country's ranking has slipped to 161 out of 180 countries, a worrying decline from the previous year's position of 150. This downward trend raises significant concerns about the state of press freedom in the world's largest democracy. In contrast, neighbouring Pakistan has shown some improvement, securing the 150th rank, a slight advancement from its previous position of 157. Sri Lanka has also made strides, moving up to the 135th position from its previous rank of 146. These developments highlight the importance of safeguarding media freedom and the critical role it plays in democratic societies. Norway, Ireland, and Denmark occupy the top three positions in press freedom, reflecting their commitment to upholding the principles of free expression and an independent media. On the other end of the spectrum, Vietnam, China, and North Korea find themselves in the bottom three, underscoring the significant challenges faced by journalists in these countries. India's slipping press freedom ranking is a cause for concern. A vibrant and independent media is vital for a robust democracy. It plays a critical role in holding those in power accountable, providing citizens with reliable information, and fostering public debate. A decline in press freedom undermines these fundamental pillars of democracy and poses a threat to transparency, good governance, and the public's right to know. It is essential for the Indian government to recognize the significance of a free and independent media and take necessary steps to protect and promote press freedom. This includes ensuring the safety and security of journalists, creating an environment that fosters investigative journalism, and addressing any undue political, economic, or social pressures that hinder media freedom. A free press is not just a privilege for journalists; it is a right for every citizen.

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IF YOU DON'T BUILD  
YOUR DREAM,  
SOMEONE WILL HIRE  
YOU TO BUILD THEIRS

**THE FINANCIAL WORLD**  
RNI NO. CHAENG/2001/03736  
PRINTED & PUBLISHED BY SWINDER BAJWA  
ON BEHALF OF FW MEDIA  
PRINTED AT JAGJIT PUBLISHING CO. PVT LTD  
D-12, INDUSTRIAL AREA, PHASE-1, MOHALI,  
PUNJAB 160059  
PRINTER & PUBLISHER SWINDER BAJWA  
OWNER\* : FW MEDIA  
PUBLISHED AT: PLOT NO-F5, IT PARK, CHANDIGARH  
CHANDIGARH 160101; PHONE: 9888040061  
EDITOR\* ABDUL WASEY  
(\*RESPONSIBLE FOR SELECTION OF NEWS UNDER THE PRB ACT)



DR. SRIDHAR KUNDU SAYS INDIAN ECONOMY IS NOT IMMUNE FROM THE GLOBAL SLOWDOWN

## Towards providing decent employment!!

DR. SRIDHAR KUNDU

Are we closer to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-8) of providing decent and productive employment to all job seekers in the country by 2030? The recent trend of economic growth and unemployment statistics show that we are probably not. To achieve this, there is a need of a quantum jump in the overall economic growth and growth in job generating sectors, in the next few years.

Indian economy has not recovered from the covid-19 pandemic crisis yet. The post pandemic period witnessed a relatively higher growth of 9 percent in 2021-22 (at 2011-12 constant prices) owing to a lower GDP base in 2020-21. But the growth failed to keep this momentum as Russia-Ukraine military conflict started in early 2022 disrupted the global supply chain. The oil economy has been badly affected, which spills over to the sectors of the economy.

Indian economy is not free from the global slowdown. Its growth has come down to 6.7 percent in 2022-23. The current year i.e., 2023-24 is expected to witness a further slowdown of the economy. As projected by the Reserve Bank of India and the Economic Survey, 2022-23, the economic growth is likely to be around 6 percent in 2023-24. Economic growth is essential for job creation. Employment further generates consumption and investment demand which further accelerates growth, and the cycle continues. The impact of gradual slowdown in the economy in the previous two years and the expected slowdown in the current year has been felt in the job market.

According to the latest round of Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2023, the third quarter i.e., October to December of 2022, unemployment rate was 7.2 percent. The unemployment rate continues to rise in 2023. The updated figure received from CMIE shows that the unemployment rate stands at 8.1 percent as on April, this year. According to the CMIE sources, the



unemployment curve has been witnessing an upward trend since January.

A group of economists and public policy enthusiasts opine that the recent rise in the rate of unemployment is due to a rise in Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR). During 2021 and 2022, India's LFPR in the age group of 15 and above in the urban areas has increased from 47.3 percent to 48.2 percent, as reported by the PLFS quarterly report released in February 2023. The urban female LFPR has increased from 20 percent to 22.3 percent whereas, the urban male LFPR has declined from 73.9 percent to 73.3 percent during the same period.

Globally, India stands as one among the countries having a lower LFPR. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimate shows that India's LFPR is 49 percent compared to the world average LFPR of 59 percent as in 2021. The LFPR in Europe and United States is 61 percent and 57 percent respectively. Even in the neighbouring countries such as, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the LFPR stands at 53 percent and 58 percent respectively in the same year.

At the state level in India, the LFPR in the age group of 15 and above follows a skewed distribution with no sign of any

match with state's economic status. In the states such as Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Himachal Pradesh, the LFPR in the urban area is above 60 percent. In the relatively developed states such as Delhi and Goa, the LFPR in the urban area is 47 percent and 43 percent respectively. Bihar as a lower per capita income state falls in this group with a lower LFPR of 41 percent. Surprisingly, the urban female LFPR in Delhi is 12 percent as in 2021.

The rise in LFPR is a symbol of economic progress as it presents rising interest among the youth to participate in economic activity. This interest helps to bring quality and diversity to the labour force and thus enhances its strength. It also helps to reduce the productivity gap in the economy.

The recent rise in India's LFPR and particularly, the female LFPR in recent times as reported by the PLFS and CMIE is a challenge for the country. The demographic structure of India shows that even a smaller rise in LFPR would release a large labour force and would shift the supply curve to the right. At this stage if the economy is not in shape of expansion, the additional labour force would badly impact the wage rate and disrupt the atmosphere of decent job market by pushing the wage

down below the minimum. Therefore, the recent slowdown in economic growth as mentioned above is a concern for job market. However, the recovery in the sectors such as tourism and manufacturing and their growth momentum during the post pandemic period is a sign of hope of creating employment opportunities in a decent way.

The tourism sector has witnessed relatively higher growth as per the expectations. The trade, hotels and restaurants which contribute to the growth in tourism sector was down by over 23 percent in 2020-21 and but, has recovered with a relatively higher growth rate of 13 percent in 2021-22. The growth rate in the sector in the last three quarters in 2022-23 is estimated to be 25 percent, 15 percent and 9 percent respectively.

The manufacturing sector witnessed a growth rate of 2.9 percent in 2020-21 when the overall economic growth was down by 5.8 percent. In 2021-22, the growth in the manufacturing sector rose to 11 percent. However, after registering a growth rate of 6 percent in the first quarter of 2022-23, the manufacturing sector slid by over 3 percent in its second and the third quarter.

Economic growth and its diversity are essential to provide decent jobs to the people of the country. No doubt, the economy has shown adequate resilience to maintain its growth momentum amid various global headwinds. India stands as one of the fastest growing economies during the post-covid 19 pandemics according to the report by IMF World Economic Outlook, released in April, 2023. The external world is optimistic about India. The larger domestic consumer base has supported the economy to defend against any global recession. With this optimism if the economy grows with double digit growth, we can create opportunity for every job seeker of the country and reach the SDG-8 target before the scheduled time.

Dr. Sridhar Kundu, Indian School of Business, Mohali. Views are personal



OMPRAKASH MUPPURALA EXPLAINS HOW NEW TECHNOLOGY STREAMLINES AND ENHANCES THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

## Conversational AI boosts HR excellence, helps achieve excellence

Human Resource teams and recruiters need to adapt their recruitment methods to the growing trend of remote interviews if they want to attract and hire the most suitable candidates effectively. In this age of remote hiring, businesses are placing increased importance on technology that supports intelligent automation, particularly interview platforms powered by conversational artificial intelligence (AI), to streamline and enhance the recruitment and interview process. Conversational AI is transforming how hiring teams communicate, understand, and assess potential candidates.

This technology simplifies the application process for candidates by offering mobile-first features like WhatsApp/SMS capabilities, automated data collection, real-time discussions, and easy interview scheduling. The accuracy of chatbot and language model technology has significantly improved, leading to an exponential acceleration of corporate operations as more companies adopt these advancements.

ChatGPT, an interactive AI chatbot, has numerous applications in the HR sector. It provides top-notch employee assistance, addressing common queries and relieving HR teams from continuously handling the same issues. Moreover, ChatGPT serves as an AI-based analytical tool, deriving insights from employee data to pinpoint primary business



challenges and offer workable solutions that boost employee engagement.

By using ChatGPT to respond to inquiries, HR departments can reduce the cost, time, and effort required to sustain employee engagement. The AI chatbot delivers timely and efficient answers and can even provide original ideas to increase business productivity. Its adaptability allows for versatile usage scenarios, enabling comprehensive employee engagement programs. Consequently, ChatGPT becomes a valuable resource for HR departments in various situations.

Conversational AI-powered chatbots are increasingly employed for communication and screening throughout the hiring, scheduling, and onboarding processes. Developments in conversational AI and natural language processing enable more personalized and personable interactions, especially during interviews.

Conversational AI has immense potential beyond hiring. Consider its application in

increasing employee satisfaction, such as in the onboarding process. Conversational AI can expedite data collection and address inquiries from new hires, significantly speeding up administrative tasks typically handled by HR staff. It automates the majority of administrative chores, such as sending documents, answering questions, and organizing paperwork.

Utilizing ChatGPT to create job posts ensures uniformity, presentability, and comprehensive explanations of position requirements, saving time and effort for HR staff while attracting higher caliber candidates.

AI-powered applicant tracking tools expedite and enhance the hiring process while enhancing the candidate experience, crucial for company branding and candidate selection.

The job landscape is poised for transformation with the advent of Conversational AI systems like ChatGPT and GPT-4. These technologies enable personalized and engaging interactions with job applicants, improving the overall candidate experience and simplifying candidate selection for companies. By analyzing data from successful recruiting and application processes, these technologies create comprehensive applicant profiles, including education, employment history, abilities, and personality traits. This enables HR teams to refine job descriptions, recruitment strategies, and focus on employ-

ees best suited for specific roles.

According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), by the end of 2023, 75% of HR inquiries will be made through conversational AI platforms, emphasizing the importance for businesses of all sizes to seize the opportunities presented by AI to enhance their recruitment procedures.

To effectively integrate AI into recruitment processes, businesses should assess the comprehensiveness of the solution, ensure seamless integration with existing tools, explore ways to incorporate their brand into the process, start small, and prioritize security. By considering these elements, businesses can successfully integrate AI technology into their recruitment procedures and benefit from this fascinating and cutting-edge technology.

### Conclusion

Chatbots and machine learning will undoubtedly play a pivotal role in the future of artificial intelligence in HR services, particularly in employee engagement.

AI has already revolutionized routine tasks and enhanced efficiency, and further advancements may enable it to handle more complex duties like employee selection and performance evaluations.

OmPrakash Muppurala is the Head of Fountain, India which is a platform for high-volume hiring. Views are personal

### BOOKS: REVIEW

## From Bongram to Calcutta: A Bengali writer's memoir

In the captivating memoir, "Dear Reader," renowned Bengali novelist Sankar takes readers on a whimsical journey through his life and literary career spanning seven decades. Originally published in Bengali in 2015, this translated English edition by Arunava Sinha opens the doors to a wider audience, allowing them to explore the memories that have illuminated all of Sankar's works, from novels and short stories to travelogues and even his inquiries into Vivekananda.

The book is an eclectic collection of stories that do not follow a chronological order. Sankar admits that they jump back and forth in time. However, it is precisely this non-linear narrative that makes "Dear Reader" a fascinating read. Through his writing, Sankar offers glimpses into the vibrant city of Calcutta and its people, with a particular focus on strong women such as his mother and grandmother. He also explores the pre and post-

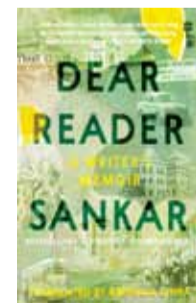
partition Bengal, delving into the cultural nuances and the friendly rivalries between the Bangaals and the Ghotis.

Sankar's own upbringing in the tumultuous years surrounding the partition serves as a backdrop to many of his stories. Born in Bongram, Jessore district, in 1933, Sankar shares a remarkable tale of how Bongram briefly became a part of Pakistan after the partition. He recalls the moment when a flag was raised, only to be reversed shortly after due to mistakes in Radcliffe's map. This incident left a lasting impression on him and became a significant part of his identity as a Bangaal from Bongram.

The loss of his father in 1947 forced Sankar to navigate the streets of Calcutta in search of work. It was during this time that he found employment as a stenographer and typist for barrister Noel Barwell. While working in Barwell's office, Sankar immersed himself in the books lining the shelves, further fueling

**The book is an eclectic collection of stories that do not follow a chronological order. Sankar admits that they jump back and forth in time**

his passion for literature. However, Barwell's sudden absence, as he went to Madras for a case and never returned, left Sankar feeling adrift. Determined to pay tribute to his mentor, Sankar embarked on writing his debut novel, "Kato Ajanare" (The Great Unknown).



Dear Reader: A Writer's Memoir  
Written by Sankar;  
Translated by Arunava Sinha;  
HarperCollins, 320 pages; Rs 499

cluding his mother, grandmother, teachers, and admired writers such as Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, Shibram Chakraborty, and Sunil Gangopadhyay.

Sankar's insatiable thirst for knowledge and his openness to stories allowed him to draw inspiration from various sources. For instance, he discovered the secret of the word "Writers" in the canteen of a famous British-era red building that once served as the government's headquarters. In pursuit of material for "Chowringhee," he frequented bars to absorb the atmosphere and gather insights. Sankar's candidness shines through as he fearlessly voices his opinions. In "Salaam Calcutta," he dismantles the façade of false praise heaped upon a city bursting at the seams, urging Calcuttans to confront their own reality for

progress to occur.

For a new generation of readers, "Dear Reader" serves as a captivating introduction to Sankar's literary prowess. His ability to capture the essence of Calcutta and its people, combined with his sharp observations and unfiltered commentary, make this memoir a remarkable exploration of both life and literature.

Through the pages of "Dear Reader," Sankar invites readers to embark on a journey of self-discovery and reflection. His stories not only entertain but also offer valuable insights into the human condition, the complexities of society, and the power of storytelling itself. It is a testament to Sankar's skill as a writer that his words continue to resonate with readers, transcending time and cultural boundaries.

The translation by Arunava Sinha ensures that the essence and authenticity of Sankar's voice are preserved, allowing readers who are not familiar with the Bengali language to fully appreciate the depth and richness of his storytelling. Sinha's translation captures the nuances of Sankar's prose, making the reading experience seamless and immersive.

# Food-tech startup Pluckk acquires 100% stake in Meal Kit brand KOOK

Pluckk, a first-of-its-kind digital lifestyle-oriented fresh food brand in the Fruits and Vegetables (F&V) space, has announced the acquisition of KOOK, an Indian food-tech startup that offers a range of DIY Meal Kits for consumers, at a deal value of \$ 1.3 million through a combination of cash and equity.

KOOK offers DIY Meal Kits that make cooking easier for everyone by providing pre-portioned ingredients and easy-to-follow recipes. With a reputation for catering to various dietary preferences and cooking skills, KOOK has a strong presence in Delhi and Mumbai.

Pluckk's acquisition of KOOK is a strategic move to tap into the enormous growth potential of the meal kit market and presents significant opportunities for Pluckk. The global market is projected to grow from 15.21 USD billion in 2021 to 31.5 USD billion by 2025, representing a 20

per cent CAGR. With KOOK's strong target audience and expertise in meal kits, Pluckk is well-positioned to deliver the best quality fresh food to its end consumers in this thriving \$15 billion market.

Speaking on the acquisition, Nelson D'Souza, CFO, Pluckk, said, "We are thrilled to welcome the young team of KOOK to the Pluckk family. Their demonstrated expertise in building a world-class product in the meal-kit space, coupled with our commitment to provide safe and chemical-free produce, will enable us to offer an unbeatable farm-to-fork experience to customers across India. In the post-Covid world, Ready to Cook Meal Kits have emerged as a sought after cooking trend with customers preferring to control the quality of food consumed while having more dining options which we look to leverage by offering this differentiator to our customer experience. Further, from a

unit economics point-of-view, this is a welcome addition to our portfolio and will help us accelerate our journey towards building a profitable business. KOOK, Co-Founder, Arpita Jerath said, "We are thrilled to be joining forces with Pluckk and becoming a part of their innovative fresh food ecosystem. The synergies between what we are building at KOOK and the lifestyle first approach



that Pluckk brings to the Fruits & Vegetables category seems very compelling. Our range of DIY Meal Kits, combined with Pluckk's digital lifestyle-oriented brand, will allow us to offer even more convenience and healthy meal options to the discerning customers in the ever-growing markets Pluckk operates in."

KOOK, Co-Founder, Nikhil Thatai said, "At KOOK, we are committed to making

cooking easy and convenient for our customers and we are excited to bring our range of DIY Meal Kits to even more people through our synergies with Pluckk. We estimate the market size of meal kits to be around 1B USD by 2025 in India and we look forward to leveraging our expertise in meal kit delivery to offer healthy and delicious meal options to cater to this booming market in our country."

Pluckk offers a farm-to-fork product line for health-conscious consumers, featuring safe and chemical-free produce through their ozone wash and traceability program. Customers can shop based on food trends such as gut health, heart health, and diabetes, and access a wide range of products beyond the basics, including organic and exotic produce. Pluckk's products are available on their own D2C platform and partner platforms like Blinkit, Swiggy, Zepto, Dunzo, and Amazon.

# Go First cancels all flights on May 3-4 amid financial crunch

The sudden announcement has left many fliers disappointed and it remains to be seen what steps Go First takes to address its financial issues and how it compensates its passengers for the sudden cancellation of flights



In a major blow to its passengers, low-cost airline Go First has announced that all its flights will remain cancelled on May 3-4. The decision was communicated to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) by the airlines and as per sources, a detailed report will be submitted soon to the civil aviation regulator.

Adding to the uncertainty, the Mumbai-based airline has also stopped taking bookings for the next two days.

The move came after Go First, which has around 5,000 employees, filed an ap-

plication for voluntary insolvency resolution proceedings before the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), as confirmed by its CEO Kaushik Khona.

The airline is currently facing financial difficulties due to non-supply of engines by Pratt & Whitney (P&W), which has led to the grounding of 28 planes.

In a statement, the airline said, "Go First is facing a financial crunch due to non-supply of engines by P&W that has forced grounding of planes.

The CEO has filed an application for voluntary insolvency resolution proceedings before the NCLT."

The sudden announcement has left many fliers disappointed and it remains to be seen what steps Go First takes to address its financial issues and how it compensates its passengers for the sudden cancellation of flights.

The passengers who had already booked their tickets with Go First have been expressing their outrage on different social media platforms.

## Meesho lays off 251 employees to 'achieve sustained profitability'



Homegrown social commerce platform Meesho on Friday said it has laid off 251 employees, constituting 15 per cent of the workforce, in order to "achieve sustained profitability". In a statement, the company said that it has taken a difficult decision to "part ways with 251 Meeshoites constituting 15 per cent of the employee base, as we look to work with a leaner organisational structure to achieve sustained profitability". The company said that it is committed to ensuring all those impacted "have our full support and will be provided a separation package that includes a one-time severance payment of 2.5 to 9 months (depending on tenor and designation), continued insurance benefits, job placement support and accelerated vesting of ESOPs". "We remain grateful for their contributions in building Meesho," a company spokesperson said. Meesho last year shut down its grocery business called Superstore in more than 90 per cent of cities in India, resulting in several job losses.

## Commercial LPG cylinder price cut by Rs 171.50, cooking gas price kept unchanged

**NEW DELHI:** Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs) cut the prices of commercial LPG cylinders with immediate effect by Rs 171.50, while prices of domestic cooking gas have been kept unchanged. The retail price of a 19 kg commercial LPG cylinder in Delhi will now be Rs 1856.50. On April 1, commercial LPG cylinder prices were slashed by Rs 92, while in March, their rates were hiked by Rs 350.50 per bottle and those of domestic LPG cylinders were raised by Rs 50 per bottle.

## SPARSH Group of Hospitals on expansion mode, unveils three new specialities

FW DESK  
Bangalore

The SPARSH Group of hospitals, one of the largest multi-speciality healthcare providers in Karnataka, has announced the launch of three new state-of-the-art medical centres - The Institute of IVF & Reproductive Medicine, The Institute of Cosmetology & Cosmetic Surgery and The Da Vinci X Robotic Programme. The new specialities of the hospital chain were unveiled on the occasion of 17th Hospital Day anniversary and will further diversify the Group's multi and super speciality approach in continuation of its pursuit of delivering life-transforming medical intervention. SPARSH is on the



cus of exponential growth as it plans to almost double capacity in the next two years - touching 1400 bed capacity by 2025 from its 800 beds currently. As part of these aggressive expansion

plans, the group will also launch two new hospitals soon in Bangalore in Yelahanka and Hennur with an investment of over Rs 250 crores. The hospital has also invested over Rs 15 crores

in these three new specialities to consolidate the momentum of its expansion.

The new Launches are designed to reach out to patients across a spectrum of medical disciplines. The IVF Institute at SPARSH is one of the few centres in the country to have attained the License under ART (Assisted Reproductive Technology) Act 2022. The facility houses world-class equipment & protocols and patients are thoroughly evaluated and tailored treatments ensure the best in assisted reproduction solutions. The IVF centre offers services like controlled ovarian stimulation, intra uterine insemination, sperm-embryo freezing, testicular

sperm aspiration, genetic screening, psychological support and counselling, endometrial receptivity array amongst other treatments. Dr Deepthi Bawa is the lead Consultant on this initiative and her team is proud to include Dr Joshua Peter, one of the country's finest embryologist - affectionately termed the "Father of Embryology" in India.

India's population is evolving towards greater understanding and acceptance of body types and empowering people to make their own choices without fear of bias or judgment. Keeping this vision in view, the SPARSH group has brought together several specialists to unveil a new Institute that offers multiple body positive services to patients.

## Garmin unveils new Forerunner smartwatches with 23-days battery backup



ARUN KUMAR RAO  
Bengaluru

To celebrate Garmin's legacy as the first running smart watch brand and commemorate 20 years of the Forerunner series, world's first GPS running smart watch, Garmin India, a unit of Garmin Ltd. (NASDAQ: GRMN), today launched world's longest battery life AMOLED Running GPS Smart watch, "Forerunner 965 and Forerunner 265" series in India. Designed for triathletes, passionate and elite runners, the new GPS running smart watches which now come with a high-res AMOLED display are fully equipped with an array of training features like stress, sleep, maximal oxygen consumption (VO2 Max), training status/load, training effectiveness, and respiration rate.

As part of the 20th anniversary celebrations, Garmin India along with Indian Sprinter- Hima Das unveiled the new Forerunner series in Bengaluru. To further commemorate this 20 years milestone the brand organised a 10K run in Bengaluru. The event was open to all the passionate runners and seasoned athletes, and showcased the capabilities of the Forerunner series, with a strong participation of over 500 people from across the city.

Commenting on the announcement, Missy Yang, Marketing Head, Garmin ASIA & SEA "At Garmin, we have always strived to keep health and fitness in check. As we celebrate the 20th anniversary of world's first GPS running smart watch-Forerunner series in India, Our vision has been to provide high-end training features and performance metrics for athletes and fitness enthusiast around the world. We are excited to have one of the most credible runners from India- Hima Das for the launch of the most powerful Forerunner smart watches.

Hima Das, Indian Sprinter as part of launch event addressing Media said, "I am thrilled to be part of Garmin's Forerunner 20th Anniversary celebration and the launch of Forerunner 965 and 265 series in India. As a professional athlete, I understand the importance of data accuracy while training and competing, and Garmin's diverse range of products provides that reliability. It's amazing to see people turn out in huge numbers for the 20th anniversary run and I am confident that the new launch will empower passionate Indian runners, women athletes, and triathletes to track and improve their performance and help them achieve their fitness goals," She added.

## As the world moves forward, Digital transformation will be a critical driver of growth: Amitabh Kant

**NEW DELHI:** Tourism will be a key driver of growth. India is the 5th largest economy in the world and is expanding to be the 3rd largest. Digital transformation has been one of the key drivers of India's economic growth. Every Indian has a digital identity, from 2015 to 2017 about 500 million bank accounts have been opened or 55% of all the bank accounts opened in the world. The seeding of these bank accounts with the digital identities has made the mobile a virtual bank. India's digital payments is about 11 times of Europe & America and 4 times of China. We do 46% of the real time digital payments in the world. India has the opportunity to take its learnings to the world as digital transformation will be a critical driver of growth going forward. Tourism is not only a driver of growth, it is also a drive of job creation. When India turn 100 in 2047, it will still be the youngest country in the world with the average age of the population at around 30. We will be the provider of almost 25% of the workforce in the world. said Amitabh Kant, G20 Sherpa, at



the India Tourism Conference organised by ASSOCHAM.

"Nature of travel and tourism has changed, from the British and American in the 50's to the Japanese in the 70's, Koreans in the 90's and the Chinese in the 2000's. The 2030's and 40's will be the era of Indian travellers which will redefine the world. It is also important for India to build unique experiences around the country so that Indians can re-discover India. From Bali to NY to Switzerland, Indians are becoming the key drivers of hospitality in many ways. There cannot be a better sector to create jobs than travel and tourism. It has a massive direct and indirect multiplier impact, along with job creation, handloom, handicraft and culture all benefits. India is unique and should be positioned

as an experiential, sustainable and green destination." He reiterates.

"We are passing through turbulent times in the post-covid era with almost 200 million people having gone below the poverty lines and about 100 million people losing jobs. One-third of the world is in recession according to IMF and 75 countries are facing a global debt crisis. Then there is the need for climate action and climate finance and if we are to miss the 1.5 degrees centigrade target by 2050, the earth may survive but humans will go extinct. We are midway through the Sustainability development goals and the world has regressed instead of progressing. But every challenge is an opportunity to do radical things and restructure the world and take it forward. Despite various differences we all come from one cosmic web and poverty in one part of the world has an implication on another part of the world. It is important that when leaders of the world meet, India sends out a message of peace and progress with humanity at the center stage." He added.

## Govt to meet stakeholders again to make Digital India Act more inclusive

The government will meet policy experts and other stakeholders for the second round of consultations on May 3 to draft the much-anticipated Digital India Act (DIA) which is expected in the next 2-3 months.

In March, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) held the first round of pre-drafting consultations with stakeholders on the Digital India Act that aims to catalyse India's ambition of being in the leading pack of nations that would shape the future technologies.

According to sources, since the first meeting, the IT ministry received few suggestions and now aims to again meet industry representatives, lawyers, social media intermediaries, consumer groups among others and receive more suggestions to make the DIA more inclusive. For the first time, design, architecture and goals of a Bill are being discussed with stakeholders at its pre-introduction stage as part of the Digital India Dialogues. According to Rajeev Chandrasekhar, Union Minister of State for Electronics

and IT, the proposed Bill aims to help India achieve the goal of becoming a trillion-dollar digital economy and be a significant trusted player in the Global Value Chains for digital products, devices, platforms and solutions.

The tech ecosystem in general and Internet in particular has evolved significantly after the Information Technology Act (IT Act) came into being in 2000, and the new law has to be evolvable and consistent with changing market trends, disruption in technologies, and keep in mind protection of digital nagriks from user harm. "Internet that began as a force of good has today become vulnerable to various types of complex user harms like catfishing, cyber stalking, cyber trolling, gaslighting, phishing, revenge porn, cyber-flashing, dark web, women and children, defamation, cyber-bullying, doxing, salami slicing, etc and there is an urgent need for a specialised and dedicated adjudicatory mechanism for online civil and criminal offences," the Minister had said in March.

## Turbulence in the Indian aviation industry

voluntary insolvency resolution proceedings, and meanwhile cancelling all operations for some time. The airline has been grappling with engine issues with Pratt & Whitney since January 2020. Now the airline is on the verge of collapse.

There have been 27 private airlines that either shut operations or merged with other airlines in the past 29 years. Some of the notable ones, including Modiluft, Damania, East West, Kingfisher, Jet Airways, Indian Airlines, Sahara Airlines, Air Deccan, etc. do not exist anymore. Among these, Kingfisher Airlines was founded by Vijay Mallya in 2005 and operated until 2012. The airline faced financial difficulties and was eventually shut down due to mounting debt and unpaid bills. Jet Airways was founded in 1992 and operated until 2019. The airline faced financial difficulties and was eventually



grounded due to mounting debt and unpaid bills. Indian Airlines was founded in 1953 and was merged with Air India in 2007.

These are just a few examples of airlines that have faced financial difficulties in India over the years. There are a few reasons why there has been turbulence in the Indian aviation industry. One of the primary reasons for turbulence in the Indian

led to a price war, with airlines lowering fares to attract passengers. However, this has put a strain on airlines.

The Indian aviation industry is heavily regulated, and airlines must comply with a variety of rules and regulations. This can be a challenge for airlines, particularly those that are new to the market. They may struggle to navigate the complex regulatory environment, leading to delays and higher costs. India's airports and air traffic control systems are struggling to keep up with the rapid growth of the aviation industry. This has led to congestion at airports and delays in flights. Infrastructure problems have also led to safety concerns, with some airports lacking the necessary facilities and equipment to handle large aircraft safely.

The author is a senior journalist and columnist, views are personal.

## India's coal production rises 15% to 893 mn tonnes in 2022-23



India's overall coal production stood at 893.08 million tonnes in 2022-23 as compared to 778.19 in 2021-22, showing a growth of 14.78 per cent. Government aims to enhance production to 1,012 million tonnes in the current fiscal. In the last five years, the output of Coal India Limited (CIL) has increased by 703.21 million tonnes as compared to 606.89 million tonnes in 2018-2019 with a growth of 15.9 per cent, official data said.

Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL) has shown a growth at 67.14 million tonnes in 2022-23 from 64.40 million tonnes in 2018-19 with a growth of 4.3 per cent. Captive and other mines have also taken a lead in coal production by 122.72 million tonnes in 2022-23 from 57.43 million tonnes in 2018-19 with a growth of 113.7 per cent

## Talking Points

### Narvijay Yadav



The failure of Go First indicates that the aviation industry is facing challenges that are contributing to its current state of turbulence. These challenges must be addressed if the industry is to continue to grow and thrive.

There was a time in the 90s when I used to see the colourful advertising of Damania Airways, East West Airlines, Modiluft, etc. on the roadside poles in New Delhi's Connaught Place area. That was the beginning of the private airline industry following the open-air policy of the Govt of India. Till then, only Indian Airlines and Air India were running the show. I used to write a weekly column 'Oonchi Udaan' for a national daily in those days. Air travel was considered a costly and luxurious affair. But, the indus-

try has witnessed a sea change since then and has grown like anything. There are currently 1100 aircraft with Indian carriers, which employ over 4 million people.

After braving the pandemic blues, when domestic carriers were busy making some profits out of the growing demand, the Go First crisis came like a shocker to the fliers who had booked their tickets much in advance. The Wadia Group-owned budget carrier has moved the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), seeking

# Sitharaman asks CBIC to begin automated GST return scrutiny



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on April 29 directed the Central Board of Indirect Taxes & Customs (CBIC) to introduce its automated GST return scrutiny by next week, and to implement an action plan to increase the taxpayer base through enhanced use of technology.

In a review meeting of the CBIC, she directed the board to intensify its drive against fake billing and input tax credit (ITC).

Sitharaman desired that the CBIC may undertake a comprehensive root cause analysis by studying the typology of cas-

Taxes & Narcotics (NACIN). Sitharaman emphasised the need for continuously improving taxpayer services. With respect to grievance redressal, Sitharaman desired that in each zone, interaction be organised with the members of trade and industry who are part of the GST ecosystem to know their issues and suggestions, so as to systematically identify matters for working out a redress for them. She also directed to put in place a system to take feedback on grievances redressed so as to improve the quality of redressal.

# Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal asks exporters to eye new markets

NEW DELHI: Union Minister for Commerce and Industry, Piyush Goyal on Wednesday said that times ahead are going to be very challenging and tough with Russia-Ukraine crisis further getting intensified.



Speaking at the 17th Set of Niryat Shree and Niryat Bandhu Awards, he said that the world recognises India for its reliable and quality products. He gave away the awards to the outstanding exporters and service providers based on their excellent export performance and incremental growth in exports.

global challenges, we still have been able to achieve the highest-ever exports of over USD 770 billion. In his welcome address, FIEO President, Dr A Sakthivel congratulated the awardees for their remarkable efforts shown during the turbulent period in global trade.

# While most global equity markets are rising 5-20 pc in 2023, India is flat

MUMBAI: The Nifty, after a weak run in the last four months, bounced back in April with 4.1 per cent MoM gain, Motilal Oswal Financial Services said in a report. Notably, the index was extremely volatile and swung around 776 points before closing 705 points higher. Nifty50 has been underperforming the emerging markets and the world indices in CY23YTD amid varied global macro headwinds viz., inflation, interest rates, and currency, the report said.



India was among the top-performing markets in Apr'23. Among the key global markets, Russia (+9 per cent), India (+4 per cent), the UK (+3 per cent), Japan (+3 per cent), Brazil (+3 per cent), Indonesia (+2 per cent), China (+2 per cent), the US (+1 per cent), and Korea (+1 per cent) closed higher in Apr'23, while Taiwan (-2 per cent), and MSCI EM (-1 per cent) ended lower in local currency terms.

## Online fraud business will stop with blockchain technology, the world will change, digital transactions are getting a boost- Alok

KULBIR SINGH KALSI Chandigarh

Nowadays cyber frauds are adopting new tactics for online fraud. Every day news comes that so-and-so has been cheated online. Lakhs of rupees flew away from the bank account without OTP. Some other person was cheated in the name of EPFO. Don't know how many more ways these cyber frauds harm you. To get rid of this, a special technology is being used. Blockchain technology will break the backbone of these online fraudsters Chandigarh based Chain Code Consulting LLP, pioneer of blockchain technology in Indian Railways, will join hands with Polygon Labs for next generation blockchain technology. Recently, Chaincode Consulting LLP of Chandigarh participated in the National

# Sri Lanka's foreign reserves improve from USD 50 mn last year to USD 2.69 bn this March: Central Bank

Analysts said that the \$2.69 billion, includes a 1.4 billion US dollar currency swap from China with conditions attached to its usage

Debt-ridden Sri Lanka's foreign currency reserves improved to \$2.69 billion in March 2023 from a mere \$50 million in May last year, giving indications of marginal improvement of the island nation's economy, data from the Central Bank said on Friday. Sri Lanka has been in financial turmoil and its total debt is \$83.6 billion, of which foreign debt amounts to \$42.6 billion externally and domestic debt amounts to \$42 billion.



billion dollars in March 2023, an improvement from under \$50 million in May last year. Analysts said that the \$2.69 billion, includes a 1.4 billion US dollar currency swap from China with conditions attached to its usage. Therefore the usable reserves would be just 1.6 billion dollars, the analysts say. By May last year, the country was deeply plunged into its worst-ever economic crisis since 1948. Reserves not sufficient to pay for imports led to shortages of essentials and power cuts. Sri Lanka was then thrown a lifeline with an Indian line of credit worth \$4 billion which paid for the imports of essentials and fuel. This triggered public protests which culminated

# Role of RRBs in upliftment of neglected segment

JAG MOHAN THAKEN



Those were the days when the rural people, especially the farmers and agricultural labourers, were feeling hesitant even to enter the doors of commercial banks despite their nationalization. Smelling the essence of the ground reality, the then Indira Gandhi government decided to set up such banks whose entry doors always remain open for this neglected segment of the society.



only, the low interest earning sector, some of these banks slipped into the red zone and became non-viable. To bring these banks out of the red ditch, the central government in 1991 decided to allow them for financing under non-priority sector umbrella also. Despite this step, some RRBs were still facing the closure risk, so the GOI started merger of small RRBs to make viable big entities and almost all such banks were merged to make state level RRBs, except in some bigger states, reducing their present number to 43 against previous number 196. Now most of these RRBs are not only earning larger profits, but also competing with their counterpart Nationalised banks.

bank is providing services such as ATM, Mobile Banking, RTGS, NEFT etc. to all its customers through 680 branches and 1241 BC Banking Outlets using latest technology like other public and private sector banks so that the customers can transfer funds and pay bills etc. without visiting the bank's branches. He also said that the bank is going to start Internet Banking service very soon.

# Zuckerberg's net worth surges over \$10 bn after strong results, 2 layoff rounds

Meta founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg's net worth surged by \$10.2 billion after the company posted strong quarterly results, leading to its shares rising by nearly 14 per cent, as the company announced two rounds of layoffs impacting 21,000 employees in recent months.



beating Wall Street expectations in its March quarter. At the close of trading on Thursday, Nasdaq-listed Meta jumped 13.93 per cent

better products faster and put ourselves in a stronger position to deliver our long term vision," Zuckerberg said while declaring the March quarter results. However, Meta Reality Labs (AR-VR division) lost nearly \$4 billion in the March quarter and in 2022, it lost \$13.7 billion. "Our vision for AR glasses involves an AI-centric operating system that we think will be the basis for the next generation of computing," Zuckerberg told analysts on the earnings call.

# Current "Business Model" poses no threat to banking and Economy

SATISH SINGH

Reserve Bank of India's Governor Shaktikanta Das recently has said that the central bank is constantly monitoring the "Business Model" of Indian Banks. In fact, after the bankruptcy of two US banks, Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and Signature Bank and Credit Suisse Bank of Switzerland in Europe, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman held discussions with the Bank Chiefs on March 25, 2023, so that banks may stop the incoming danger in front of them if any. In this sequence, the finance minister has asked the Reserve Bank of India to keep a constant eye on the "Business Model" of the banks, so that immediate corrective steps can be taken if there are any risks seen.

banks in all over the world, because the strength of both the banks and the economy is important. For this, it is very important and necessary for the "Business Model" of the banks to be healthy, because due to the incorrect "Business Model", the bank can sink as well as the economy can also be weakened. The Reserve Bank of India believes that the reason for the sinking of two banks in America and Credit Suisse Bank of Switzerland in Europe is the faulty "Business Model". However, India's banking system remains strong, because the "Business Model" of Indian banks is not flawed and that is why global developments have not seen any adverse effect on it and it continues to be strong.

ing norms, SVB had given too many loans to a single sector. A large amount of cash was deposited in this bank after the Corona pandemic. Therefore, the bank had invested excess deposits in long-term bonds, but later due to geo-political crisis, inflation, jump in loan interest rates, etc., the asset-liability balance of the bank deteriorated, and the bank was unable to meet the cash requirements of the customers. Similarly, high cash withdrawals by Signature Bank customers led to a liquidity crunch, as the bank accounted for a quarter of the \$103 billion in deposits held in cryptocurrencies by September 2022, and has had also kept giving more loans to a particular sector. At the same time, Europe's Credit Suisse bank sank due to corruption. Since its sinking could have adversely affected the Swiss economy, Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS), the country's largest bank, took over the bank under the direction of the government.



ment, it is the effort of the Central Government and the Central Bank that the "Business Model" of Indian banks should remain strong even further and due to this, no crisis should arise in the economy. According to Mr. Das, the current "Business Model" of Indian banks may pose a risk to parts of the bank's balance sheet, but it will not lead to a major crisis among Indian banks. Das also believes that Indian banks will be able to meet the minimum requirement of capital adequacy ratio even in times of adversity or crisis. Despite this, Das has

cautioned the bank managements to remain vigilant and regularly assess financial risks while at the same time making constant efforts to maintain capital adequacy and liquidity. Das also said that Indian banks have registered improvement in the recent past on the front of reducing asset pressure, increasing revenue, and increasing profits by reducing gross non-performing assets (NPAs). The NPA ratio of banks to come down to 4.41 per cent in December 2022 from 5.8 per cent in March 2022 and 7.3 per cent as on 31 March 2021.

According to the latest report of Moody's Investors Service, the asset quality of Indian banks and Southeast Asian countries will remain stable in 2023 and Indian banks will benefit from smooth operations of banking. According to Moody's, rising interest rates amid high inflation will lead to a gradual increase in margins, which will boost banks' earnings. Although high debt-servicing costs and weak growth could pose asset risks for banks, Indian banks are currently well equipped to deal with the potential increase in NPAs as they have excess capital and are able to make provisions for NPAs. Moody's also believes that the inflation rate in India will fall further, which is correct, because inflation in India has come down to a 15-month low of 5.66 per cent in March 2023, while inflation is still high in the countries of the world. During the first 9 months of 2022, capital inflows into India have been over 2 per cent of GDP, which is a good sign for both banking

and the economy. Global rating agency Moody's has upgraded the ratings of 9 Indian private and public sector banks to stable from negative outlook. The banks whose ratings have been upgraded by Moody's include private sector Axis Bank, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank and public sector banks Bank of Baroda, Canara Bank, Punjab National Bank, Exim Bank and Union Bank of India. The rating upgrade of Indian banks by Moody's means that the risks associated with the Indian banks are coming down.

the entire deposit amount of the customers for giving loans. In this case, banks have to keep a certain amount with the Reserve Bank as a reserve or cushion. Furthermore, all banks work by maintaining an asset-liability balance, reserve Bank of India; Always works to maintain liquidity in the banking system. Apart from this, the Indian economy has remained strong even amid the Corona pandemic and the global recession. The Indian banking system has remained resilient in the face of all odds. It has not been affected by recent events in the global financial ecosystem. In such a situation, it would be appropriate to say that the "Business Model" of Indian banks is very strong and for this reason the bankruptcy of foreign banks did not affect Indian banks and there is a strong possibility of Indian banks remaining strong in the future.

Satish Singh, Mumbai based Senior Journalist, Views are personal.

# INTERNATIONAL

## Elon Musk settles defamation suit brought by Indian-American Sikh

Tesla CEO Elon Musk has agreed to pay \$10,000 to settle a defamation case brought against him by Indian-American Sikh critic and independent researcher, Randeep Singh Hothi.

Hothi, a doctoral student in Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Michigan, had filed a defamation case against Musk in 2020, alleging that the billionaire businessman falsely accused him of actively harassing and "almost killing" Tesla employees.

Following a lengthy and hard-fought litigation, in March 2023, Musk asked Hothi to settle the case. "This case was about taking a stand, not seeking fame or money. I feel vindicated," said Hothi, announcing that he accepted Musk's settlement offer in a statement. "I brought this case to defend my work, clear my name, and send a message... I believe I've accomplished that, thanks in no small part to Musk, whose own behaviour over the last year has highlighted the



need to scrutinise his every word and deed." D. Gill Sperlein, one of Hothi's lawyers, said: "Last year, Musk famously promised that he would never 'settle an unjust case'. Yet, he has asked Hothi to accommodate him. We welcome Musk's belated acknowledgment that this case was just."

Hothi locked horns with Tesla after he created the @skabooshka Twitter account where he fact-checked Musk and his company's published

claims regarding the electric vehicle manufacturer's automation, technology and production processes. Beginning in 2018, Hothi, donning the role of a social activist, observed Tesla's production at its Fremont, California-based factory.

He also documented the construction of Tesla's Model 3 assembly line tent, sharing photos of his Twitter followers. In April 2019, Tesla sought a restraining order against Hothi, alleging that the latter struck

an employee with his car in a Tesla factory parking lot -- an accusation that Hothi vehemently denied.

When Hothi and his legal team successfully obtained a court order requiring Tesla to hand over video evidence of the alleged encounter, Tesla abruptly dropped its lawsuit in July 2019. Yet the following month, Musk e-mailed a reporter accusing Hothi of "actively harassing" and "almost kill(ing)" Tesla employees. That remark was later published and amplified to hundreds of thousands of people on Twitter.

Musk's accusations prompted an outpouring of public support for Hothi, including from whistleblowers, researchers, journalists, and critics. In August 2020, represented by Sperlein, Hothi filed a defamation lawsuit against Musk based on his remarks. Musk attempted to dispose of the case by arguing that his accusations were protected speech, and hence should be dismissed under California's anti-SLAPP law.

## Canada has summoned Chinese Ambassador Cong Peiwu

Canada has summoned Chinese Ambassador Cong Peiwu over allegations of political interference and intimidation, the media reported.

Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly disclosed the news on Thursday during a heated exchange in Ottawa with opposition lawmaker Michael Chong, now at the centre of the accusations against China, reports CNN.

Chong was allegedly targeted for harassment by Beijing, and has fiercely criticized the slow response of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government.

Joly also told MPs during a foreign affairs committee session that Canada is considering taking retaliatory action against China and that "all options are on the table", including diplomatic expulsions.

However, she admitted Canada's government was carefully weighing the possibility of retaliation by China, which denies interfering in Canadian political affairs.

"Of course China and the



PRC (People's Republic of China) will take action (against) these interests including economic interest, consumer interest and also diplomatic interest, will be affected and therefore, but it's about also the interests of the country so as we are assessing the interest and I know that we are under pressure to go fast we need to make sure as well that we protect our democracy," CNN quoted the Foreign Affairs Minister as saying.

According to a Canadian intelligence report that first emerged in the Globe and Mail newspaper, Chong, a Conservative politician in Canada, was targeted by the Chinese government after he put forward a motion in parliament

in 2021 that declared Beijing's treatment of its ethnic Uyghur minority population a genocide.

China has denied the accusations and sanctioned Chong shortly after in response, reports the BBC.

The Globe and Mail report, published on Monday, suggested that Beijing had sought information about Chong's relatives who may be in Hong Kong in a likely effort to "make an example of this MP and deter others from taking anti-PRC positions".

In a statement to the BBC, China's Foreign Embassy said the Ambassador "protested strongly" during his meeting with Canadian officials about the threat to expel Chinese diplomats. Calling the allegations a "self-directed political farce", the Embassy said: "China has always adhered to the principle of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs."

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Trudeau has said that he only learned about the issue after the Globe and Mail report.

## NHS worker jailed for sending threat letter to ex-Home Secy Priti Patel



**LONDON:** A National Health Service (NHS) worker has been jailed for five months for abusing and threatening to "tear" former Indian-origin Home Secretary Priti Patel "to pieces" in a letter, a media report said.

Pooneeraj Canakiah, 65, from Hackney, sent the letter in January 2022 when Patel was still in charge at the Home Office in the Boris Johnson's government, the Evening Standard newspaper reported.

Canakiah marked the letter "personal", hoping that Patel would open it herself but it was intercepted by security staff before it reached her.

"Your time is coming to an end -- be prepared we will get you," Canakiah wrote in the letter, abusing Patel, "Be prepared, b\*\*\*\*".

"If we don't get you, we will wait and wait and wait," he wrote, threatening to "tear you to pieces".

Prosecutor David Burns said the letter went on to make a series of lewd suggestions about sex between Patel and Johnson, the report said.

Canakiah was identified by his handwriting, and he pleaded guilty to sending the letter during his first court hearing in March, the Westminster magistrates court heard.

Sentencing Canakiah to five months in prison, District Judge Briony Clarke said the letter shocked her every time she read it.

"It's an attack on democracy", The Standard quoted her as saying.

"You sent a letter which was disgusting and threatening in nature, it was addressed to a serving MP who at the time was Home Secretary. It was vile in nature, including threats, it was offensive and vulgar," Clarke said.

## US will end Covid vax requirements for federal employees, int'l travellers



The US administration announced it will end Covid-19 vaccination requirements for federal employees, international air travellers and contractors on May 11 -- the same day that the public health emergency implemented for the pandemic will also end.

In a statement on Monday, the White House said the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) also separately announced that they will start the process to end their vaccination requirements for head start educators, CMS-certified healthcare facilities, and certain non-citizens at the land border.

"The federal government successfully implemented requirements for its workforce in a way that increased vaccination to achieve 98 per cent compliance, reflecting employees who had received at least one dose of a vaccine or had a pending or approved exception or extension request filed by January 2022.

"We also put in place vaccination requirements for certain international travellers to slow the spread of new variants entering the country and to allow our healthcare system time to effectively manage access to care if faced with an increase in cases and hospitalisations," said the statement.

## Canadian poet Rupri Kaur's 'Milk and Honey' was banned in the US classrooms

A Canadian poet, Rupri Kaur whose Twitter account was withheld in India last month over the Khalistan issue, now has her debut work among the 11 most banned books in the US classrooms for the first half of the 2022-23 school year.

Rupri Kaur's 'Milk and Honey', which released in 2014, was banned for exploring issues of sexual assault and violence, according to data provided by non-profit PEN America. The book, banned in multiple districts in Missouri this year, tied in ninth place with Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye', according to the report. Both books were reportedly banned in 10 districts in the first half of this school year alone.

"It deeply concerns me that there is a group of people hell bent on taking away literature that students find refuge in," Punjab-born Kaur wrote in an Instagram post last week.



Apart from violence, the rest of the titles in the list discussed race and racism, LGBTQ+ characters, grief or death, student health and well-being, and teen pregnancy, abortion or sexual assault. "Parents want to ban books to protect their kids but teachers and librarians say that students are old enough to be aware of the topics discussed in these books. Many actually seek these books out because they're going through those experiences themselves," she wrote.

Kaur's work encompasses

love, loss, trauma, healing, femininity, and migration. "I remember sitting in my school library in high school, turning to books about sexual assault because I didn't have anyone else to turn to. This is the reality for many students," she said in her post. "We all find comfort in literature that reflects our experiences. Now that books about sexual assault and other topics are being banned -- I worry for students who rely on school libraries for access to literature."

This isn't the first time Kaur responded to her book being banned. She commented on Instagram about a ban that went into effect in two states last year, according to NBC News. "Over the last few months parts of Texas and Oregon have banned or attempted to ban 'Milk and Honey' from schools and libraries. Why? Because it explores sexual assault and violence ex-

perienced by a young woman," she wrote. The award-winning poet immigrated to Canada at age four with her Sikh parents and grew up in a suburb of Toronto.

The Sun and her Flowers (2017) and Home Body (2020) are among the other titles that Kaur has written. These collections have sold over 11 million copies and have been translated into over 43 languages, with Milk and Honey surpassing Homer's Odyssey as the best-selling poetry of all time, according to Kaur's website.

She was also regarded as "writer of the decade" by the New Republic and recognised on the Forbes 30 under 30 list. In 2022, Kaur released her fourth book, 'Healing Through Word'.

However, there have been plagiarism allegations on Kaur, saying she stole her poetry style and content from Nayyirah Waheed and Pavana Reddy.

## Indian-origin teen charged over online banking scam in UK

London- An Indian-origin teen in the UK has been charged with fraud offences as part of an investigation into a website, which enabled criminals to subvert banking anti-fraud measures.

Vijayasidhuran Vijayanathan, 19, from Buckinghamshire was recently charged along with two others with conspiracy to make and supply articles for use in fraud, and was arrested last month, UK's National Crime Agency (NCA) said. Cyber crime investigators from NCA began probing the paid for subscription website www.OTP.Agency in June 2020.

The site provided a service to criminals by helping them socially engineer bank account holders into disclosing genuine one-time-passcodes, or give other personally identi-



fiable information, allowing multi-factor authentication to be bypassed.

This granted access to a victim's online banking or other accounts, enabling criminals to complete fraudulent online transactions.

"This website was essentially a one-stop-shop which provided tools that made it easy for criminals to access bank accounts of members of the public and steal from them," Anna Smith, Operations Manager from the NCA's National Cyber Crime Unit, said.

## Indian national dies in Pakistan jail



**JAGMOHAN SINGH Attari (Amritsar)**

On May 3 The body of an Indian national identified as Vipan Kumar (38) son of Gurdas Ram who died in the Pakistani jail has been repatriated to India here today.



tally unstable and that time his age was around 27. Immediately after, the missing report was lodged in the police station Una district of Himachal Pradesh by his family members. Protocol officer said that Vipan Kumar was a resident of Nangal Jeetpur

area of Una district of Himachal. The moment he had crossed over to Pakistan was nabbed by the Pakistan Authorities and lodged to Kotlakhpat Rai Jail in Lahore. Officer said that according to his family members who were here at Attari border to receive the body,

Vipan Kumar was mentally unstable and crossed the Indo-Pak border inadvertently.

Officer said that Naib Tehsildar from Una Rajan Sharma along with Chiranji Lal brother of Vipan Kumar were here at Attari border to receive the body. Officer said that the body of Vipan Kumar was dispatched to Una (Nangal) in a special ambulance along with police security besides Pilot Jeep.

Officer said that the cause of death was not yet clear as he was coming sick from the last few weeks and was under treatment in the Jinah hospital of Lahore in Pakistan where he breathed his last on April-2-2023. It took around one month to complete documentation to bring the body from Pakistan to India.

## Biden says US-Korea alliance born out of shared beliefs



US President Joe Biden tweeted that the alliance between the US and South Korea is based on shared beliefs on "democracy, liberty, security, and above all -- freedom," as President Yoon Suk Yeol headed home after a state visit to the US.

"The US and Republic of Korea alliance wasn't born out of shared borders, but shared beliefs: Democracy, liberty, security, and above all -- freedom," Biden wrote on Twitter, referring to South Korea's official name, Yonhap news agency reported.

Biden posted the comment as Yoon was on his way home from a six-day state visit to the US where the two held summit talks at the White House and agreed on measures to strengthen Washington's extended deterrence commitment to South Korea.

"Today, we celebrate the ironclad alliance, shared vision of our future, and the deep friendship that unites the Republic of Korea and the United States. Over the past seven decades, our alliance has grown stronger and more capable," Biden said in a video clip attached to the post. Yoon is set to return home in the afternoon.

## S.Korean President's approval rating rebounds after 4 weeks: Poll

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's approval rating has rebounded for the first time in four weeks, thanks to positive feedback on his recent state visit to the US, a poll revealed on Monday.

In the poll of 2,507 adults aged 18 or older conducted by Realmeter from April 24-28, the positive assessment of the President's performance went up 1.8 percentage points from the previous week to 34.5 per cent, reports Yonhap News Agency.

The result marked Yoon's highest performance in public polls since the 36.7 per cent figure in the last week of March. His disapproval rating was 62.6 per cent, down 2.1 percentage points from the previous week.

According to Bae Cheol-ho, a senior analyst at Realmeter, last week's approval rating can be attributed entirely to Yoon's six-day state visit to the US designed to mark the 70th anniversary of the bilateral alliance this year.

## Donald Trump's nowhere near Republican coronation as donors show strong reservations

Major Republican donors gathered in Nashville to pick and fund a candidate worthy of competing with incumbent President Joe Biden who is also seeking a second term in office. Although former President Donald Trump got top billing, he was nowhere near the dream of achieving the Republican coronation.

Just 24 hours before the Nashville event on Saturday, the Republican National Committee (RNC), which releases funds for the party candidate, gave an opportunity for the loudest of Trump's critics to have their say, media reports said.

Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, who refused to swing with Trump during his interference in the state elections to declare it null and void in 2020, told the donors: "Not months and months of debate over whether the 2020 election was stolen."

Without mentioning Trump's name, Kemp pinned blame on the former Presi-

dent's election loss grievances and warned that "not a single swing voter" will vote for a Republican nominee making such claims, calling 2020 "ancient history".

Kemp was singled out for ire by Trump like he did with his former deputy Mike Pence, for not reversing the 2020 verdict, but they actually represent a sizable section of the Republican Party seeking to resist Trump's stranglehold over the party.

New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu is also refusing to toe Trump's line and so does former Pence. While Trump held his own private meetings out of sight--all three were given prime speaking slots, media outlet Politico reported.

It's interesting to note that while the party recognises the former President as a frontrunner against Biden in 2024, it still invited Trump dissenters and even prospective rivals for next year's race.

This trend evidences the feelings of the party about



Trump, still a heavy weight within the Republicans, has first place in the polls, but still many months of fighting are still ahead of him.

His potential nomination is unlikely to come as a coronation, political strategists from across the aisle on both sides feel as Trump carries a whole lot of legal baggage though most Republicans support him against the odds.

However, the scenario is quite different with the potential -- the party's donors as they are still weighing their options on if there is a more powerful alternative to Trump capable of defeating Biden at the polls. There is still no consensus emerging on Trump or a powerful alternative (Florida Governor Ron DeSantis), reports said.

Governor Sununu talking

in the foyer of the Four Seasons Hotel in Nashville said of Trump: "I don't think he can win in 2024. You don't have to be angry about it. You don't have to be negative about it. I think you just have to be willing to talk about it and bring real solutions to the table."

Meanwhile Trump spokesman Steven Cheung referenced a POLITICO report of Trump's robust first-quarter fundraising and said, "Poll after poll (shows) former President Trump crushing the competition, there is no doubt who ever stands in his way will get eviscerated".

Governor Kemp told the donors the Republican nominee "must" be able to win Georgia's 16 electoral college votes in order to win the White House.

Kemp said the party has to win a general election. He referenced not just to Trump and his legal baggage but also to defeat this fall of Trump-backed and scandal-plagued candidates like Herschel Walker, who lost his race,

even as Kemp defeated a well-funded Democratic challenger by nearly 8 points.

Most Republican donors and supporters felt that the solution to stopping Trump has proved elusive to donors and operatives who have claimed for years they were trying to do just that, reports said.

Other likely primary opponents of Trump, including DeSantis, former UN ambassador Nikki Haley and South Carolina Senator Tim Scott, were also invited to the RNC gathering, but they declined due to prior commitments.

An ardent Trump critic demanding his dropping out of the 2024 presidential race, former Arkansas Governor and presidential candidate Asa Hutchinson, and sunglasses-clad Perry Johnson, a Michigan businessman running for president, also received invitations.

Both Hutchinson and Johnson moved and lobbied around the venue but did not have speaking slots.



PHOTOS: PRABHJOT GILL



**Shreya Poonja Femina Miss India-2023 first runner-up has roots in region**



**KULBIR SINGH KALSI Chandigarh**

Shreya Poonja, the first Runner-Up in Femina Miss India-2023 pageant finale held recently in Imphal, has her roots in the region. Her father Sanjay Poonja takes pride in being a Punjabi. His forefathers hailed from Punjab and had come to Indian Punjab from Pakistani Punjab after partition. Her mother Bharti Poonja is from Himachal. Shreya and her family is settled in Delhi.

Shreya gives credit to her parents for the feat. Shreya added, "My parents have been instrumental in my win. I have not had an easy path to victory. However, my close friends and family members continued to support my vision and gave strength and encouragement to me whenever necessary."

Shreya says that she draws her strength from her 'never-to-be-defeated' spirit. "I believe that a never-to-be-defeated spirit helped me win the Femina Miss India-2023 first runner-up crown. It is a quality I have built into my personality and this certainly is the most crucial aspect that helps me overcome obstacles in life. I believe in constantly working on myself and evolving into the best version every single day and this I focused on religiously," said Shreya. Sharing her feelings on winning the first runner up spot in the coveted national pageant, Shreya said: "The feeling is settling in day by day. There were a lot of efforts that were put in the past few years and to have finally been able to achieve this makes me feel accomplished. The efforts have validated my victory." Reflecting about the Miss India journey so far, Shreya said: "I have evolved every single day of my 40-day journey. Learning new things about myself along the way. There were tight schedules and discipline of the self-played an important part. Each individual had something great that they offered towards my journey and I truly cherish the time now." Talking about her future plans, she said: "I have always been in love with the camera, for as long as I can remember! I am keenly interested in the entertainment and show business and have already been working in the same since I was 17."

**SUKHBIR SINGH BADAL CARRYING ASHES OF HIS FATHER AND FORMER PUNJAB CHIEF MINISTER PARKASH SINGH BADAL LEAVES FOR SHRI KIRATPUR SAHIB GURUDWARA, AT BADAL VILLAGE IN SRI MUKTSAR SAHIB DISTRICT ON WEDNESDAY. SUKHBIR SINGH BADAL AND MP HARSIMRAT KAUR BADAL IMMERSE ASHES OF HIS FATHER AND FORMER PUNJAB CHIEF MINISTER PARKASH SINGH BADAL IN SUTLEJ RIVER, AT KIRATPUR SAHIB IN RUPNAGAR DISTRICT ON WEDNESDAY. UNION HOME MINISTER AMIT SHAH PAYS HIS LAST RESPECTS TO FORMER PUNJAB CHIEF MINISTER AND SHIROMANI AKALI DAL PATRON PARKASH SINGH BADAL DURING HIS 'ANTIM ARDAS' AND 'BHOG' CEREMONY, AT BADAL VILLAGE IN SRI MUKTSAR SAHIB DISTRICT ON THURSDAY. SHIROMANI AKALI DAL (BADAL) PARTY LEADERS AND WORKERS OFFER PRAYERS DURING HIS 'ANTIM ARDAS' AND 'BHOG' CEREMONY, AT BADAL VILLAGE IN SRI MUKTSAR SAHIB DISTRICT ON THURSDAY.**



**Ludhiana court has stayed the release of the Punjabi film 'Jodi Teri Meri'**

**LUDHIANA:** A court in Punjab's Ludhiana has stayed the release of the Punjabi film 'Jodi Teri Meri', a biopic starring Diljit Dosanjh on the late Punjabi singer Amar Singh Chamkila and his second wife Amarjot Kaur. The film is slated for release on May 5. Civil Judge (Junior Division) Karandeep Kaur has ordered to issue summons to Dosanjh, actress Nimrat Khaira, Gurmail Kaur, the wife of Chamkila, Karaj Gill of Rhythm Boyz Entertainment Pvt Ltd and Daljit Thind of Daljit Motions Films returnable by May 8, the next date of hearing. The order on Tuesday came weeks after another court in Ludhiana had stayed the "broadcast, release and stream-



ing" of another biopic on the couple, titled 'Chamkila'. Chamkila and Amarjot Kaur were gunned down on March 8, 1988, during militancy in Punjab. "From the documents, a prima facie case is made out in favour of plaintiff (Ishdeep Randhawa). Balance of convenience is also in his favour and if defendants are not restrained from releasing the film 'Jodi Teri Meri', then an irreparable loss will be caused to the plaintiff, which cannot be compensated with any cost," says the order. "Accordingly, defendants are hereby restrained from releasing the film on May 5 except in due course of law till next date of hearing (May 8)," added the order.

**'Filmmakers invest, actors put in lot of work', SC again declines plea against 'The Kerala Story'**

**NEW DELHI:** The Supreme Court on Thursday rebuffed a fresh attempt by a petitioner seeking a stay on the release of the film 'The Kerala Story', saying that a filmmaker invests a lot of money and time in making a movie and actors also put in a lot of work, and the market will decide if it is not up to the mark. A bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud and comprising Justices P.S. Narasimha and J.B. Pardiwala said: "One, the CBFC has released the film; two, the Kerala High Court declined to stay the film; and three, yesterday we said we are not going to entertain a petition under Article 32. Now, after these steps have been completed and now for us to hear an application like this is not proper." During the hearing on the plea, filed by journalist Qurban Ali, the bench emphasised that before rushing to the court against the



movie, a thought should be given about the filmmaker and actors and how many times will this be challenged?

**Priyanka Chopra sported wearing a diamond necklace worth Rs 204 crore**

Actress Priyanka Chopra, who walked the Met Gala carpet with her husband Nick Jonas, sported a diamond necklace worth Rs 204 crore. The 11.6 carat diamond statement piece from Bulgari has a Laguna Blu diamond - the largest in Bulgari - perfectly complementing her sexy black gown with thigh-high slit from fashion designer, Valentino. Priyanka and Nick Jonas opted for the colour black for their appearance. The theme was 'Karl Lagerfeld: A Line of Beauty', and the dress code was in honour of the late fashion designer, who was the creative mind behind Chanel from 1983 till his death in 2019. The statement piece is said to go to auction at Sotheby's Luxury Week in Geneva on May 12. On the work front, Priyanka has been garnering a lot of accolades for her recently released streaming series 'Citadel' in which she stars opposite Richard Madden.

**MUMBAI:** Actress Sushmita Sen, who is set to play transgender activist Gauri Sawant in the web series 'Taali', took 6 months for the project but she learnt every dialogue by heart. It was Gauri Sawant's PIL (public interest litigation) that led to a landmark Supreme Court judgement in 2014, recognising the transgender community as the third gender. The creative duo behind 'Taali' Arjun Singh Baran and Kartik D. Nishandar revealed that the actress did her homework quite well. The creative duo recalled the passion with which Sushmita immersed herself into Gauri's life. They said: "She took around six months to say okay to the script and she knew it by heart. So in tune with the script she was

by then that during the shoot, if we added or changed a line, she would tell us instantly that it wasn't there originally. She does her homework very well." The duo said that Sushmita had read the script at least four to five times and literally lived with the character till she became one with it. They further mentioned: "Acting coach Atul Mongia helped her to finetune the transformation and director Ravi Jadav guided her to get the nuances of the Marathi diction right."



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