

REGION

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## BANKS IN PUNJAB TOLD TO SPEED UP DISBURSAL OF SELF-EMPLOYMENT LOANS



# Punjab CM takes initiative for 'mourning sounds' during Shaheedi Sabha of younger Sahibzadas

**CHANDIGARH:** In a humble gesture to pay respect to martyrdom of Sahibzada Zorawar Singh, Sahibzada Fateh Singh, and Mata Gujri Ji, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Friday announced that the 'Mourning Notes' will be sounded on December 27 during the Shaheedi Sabha, where the devotees pay homage to the unparalleled sacrifice of the Sahibzadas.

In a meeting with the Fatehgarh Sahib district administration to review arrangements for the Shaheedi Sabha, the Chief Minister emphasized that, as a mark of respect to the younger Sahibzadas, the mourning notes will be sounded from 10 am to 10:10 am on December 27. He said that for the first time mourning notes will be played



for 10 minutes as a mark of respect for the martyrdom of younger sahibzadas. Bhagwant Singh Mann exhorted everyone to stand up and bow to the unparalleled martyrdom, regardless of their location.

Punjab Chief Minister said that this initiative will effectively raise awareness among

the masses, especially the younger generations and children, regarding the unparalleled martyrdom of the younger Sahibzadas. He emphasized the importance of remembering the great sacrifice of the younger Sahibzadas as crucial for reinforcing human rights values. Eulogizing the supreme sacrifice

of younger Sahibzadas and Mata Gujri Kaur Ji, Bhagwant Singh Mann said that these sacrifices were unprecedented in the annals of the history of mankind across the globe.

Chief Minister said the entire world was proud of this unique and unparalleled sacrifice which was a matter of great honor not only for the Punjabis or our countrymen but everyone living across the globe. Bhagwant Singh Mann said the history of Punjab was replete with countless sacrifices that had derived inspiration from our great Gurus like Sri Guru Arjun Dev Ji, Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Ji and Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji who laid down their lives for the sake of mankind. Stating that the month of December, in which the entire family of the tenth Guru, Sri Guru Gobind Singh

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## UNION FM SITHARAMAN ASKS STATES TO CLEAR MSME PAYMENTS DELAYED BY STATE PSUS



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## KANGANA RANAUT TO TAKE POLITICAL PLUNGE, LIKELY TO CONTEST 2024 LOK SABHA ELECTION



## Amit Shah's statement about Sikh Prisoners contrary to Centre govt's own notification: Dhama

**AMRITSAR:** Reacting to the statement given by Home Minister Amit Shah about Sikh prisoners in the Parliament of India, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) President Harjinder Singh Dhama said that the human rights of the Sikh prisoners imprisoned in the country's jails for three decades should not be ignored by any constitutional office-bearer. He said that the Sikhs already feel that they are not getting justice in their own country and now the latest statement given by the Home Minister in the Parliament has once again deeply hit the minds of the Sikhs.

Harjinder Singh Dhama said that the government should never forget the 90 percent sacrifices of Sikhs for India's freedom. The parliament in which the home minister is giving his statement is also standing only



because of the sacrifices of the Sikhs, he said.

Harjinder Singh Dhama said that the demand for the release of Sikh prisoners is within the scope of the Constitution. The Centre government has also approved it through its notification in 2019 on the occasion of 550th Prakash Gurburb (birth anniversary) of Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji. The government should implement its notification of 2019, he said.

The SGPC President said that the statement of Home Minister Amit Shah is completely contrary to the spirit of the government's own notification and it is surprising.

## Govt extends zero import duty & agri-cess exemption on masur till March 2025



**NEW DELHI:** The government has extended current effective zero import duty on masur dal (lentil) till March 2025 in order to ensure steady supply of the key pulse from international market and keep domestic prices under check. However, the government has not extended the current import duty structure on three crude edible oils -- palm oil, soybean oil and sunflower oil. According to a finance ministry notification, the exemption of zero import duty on masur as well as agri-infra cess of 10 per cent has been extended till March 2025. In some of the pulses, we don't produce as much as we consume. For stability of import policy, the current exemption has been extended on masur till March 2025 so that farmers of the producing countries get clear signal from India and plan their sowing," Consumer Affairs Secretary Rohit Kumar Singh told to news agency. The basic import duty on masur was reduced to zero in July 2021, while the exemption from 10 per cent agri-infra-structure cess was given in February 2022. Since then, it was extended multiple times and currently was valid till March 2024. A finance ministry official said that the notification is only for extending zero duty and exemption of agri-infra cess for masur alone, not three crude edible oils. India is the world's largest producer and import of pulses. It imported 24.96 lakh tonnes during 2022-23.

## Four soldiers killed, 3 injured in terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir's Rajouri



**FW DESK**

Four soldiers were killed while three others were left injured after heavily armed terrorists ambushed two Army vehicles in Jammu and Kashmir's Rajouri district on Thursday, officials said.

The attack occurred as the personnel were en route to a cordon-and-search operation. According to army sources, the assailants struck at a blind curve at Dhatyar Morh between Dera Ki Gali around 3:45 pm.

"The ambush resulted in the loss of four valiant soldiers, and three have sustained injuries," confirmed the officials.

The People's Anti-Fascist Front (PAFF), identified as an offshoot of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), has taken responsibility for the act.

Security forces have launched a thorough search operation in the forest area of Dera ki Gali, the site of the attack.

## Mamata, Kejriwal propose Mallikarjun Kharage's name as leader of India-Alliance

**What will be the alliance figure? Mamata's proposal, let the Congress contest two seats in the Bengal, leave one in Meghalaya**

**MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA**  
New Delhi

The INDIA alliance's future hangs in the fine string, seat compromise by December 31 is considered virtually impossible. This is what the political circles think after the 'India Alliance' meeting in Delhi. However, although there was a long discussion in today's meeting, the RAFA Sutra was not clearly agreed. It is probably still not clear how to match.

According to the sources, the results of the Congress in the three states have been discussed many times in today's meeting. Congress has practically been washed away there. The Congress camp had to hear harsh criticism from other anti-BJP parties over this defeat. According to sources, Mamata Banerjee was practically silent in this whole process. When Sonia Gandhi requested her to speak, she discussed the details one by



one point. Trinamool leader Mamata Banerjee's biggest strategy change at India Alliance meeting. So far, Mamata Banerjee's name was being floated by the Trinamool as the leader of the alliance. But the Trinamool leader herself proposed the name of Congress president Mallikarjun Kharage as the leader of the India alliance in the alliance meeting. Aam Aadmi Party supremo Arvind Kejriwal again supported Mamata's proposal. She made her position clear at the beginning of the speech. She said, "There is nothing to talk about. First discuss the seat sharing formula". In fact, from the beginning she was trying to reach a political end of the anti-BJP alliance, it goes without saying. Even today, she has been

seen taking a positive role in that sense. After that she gave several suggestions to Rahul Gandhi. She said that the Congress should talk to Akhilesh Yadav first in UP-ruled Delhi and Punjab and in Uttar Pradesh.

After that she also came to the context of West Bengal. Mamata today suggested that Trinamool is ready to fight in West Bengal leaving two seats to Congress. Mamata also wants to know the position of the Congress on which two seats will be vacant. She also said that in Meghalaya Trinamool got more votes than Congress in terms of percentage. She said to leave one seat for Trinamool Congress there. Mamata has proposed that the Congress should fight in three hundred seats across the country.

## Congress calls Sakshi Malik's retirement as a 'Dark Chapter' in Indian sporting history

**KAVITA SHARMA**  
New Delhi

The Congress said that the retirement of Sakshi Malik, the first wrestling Indian Olympic medalist from the sport, is the darkest chapter in the sporting history of India.

Addressing a press conference here today, Congress general secretary Randeep Singh Surjewala and veteran boxer Virender Singh pointed out, how Malik the first women wrestling Olympic medalist was forced to retire after she failed to get justice on the



sexual harassment case.

Randeep Singh Surjewala observed, it was shameful that the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) had elected Brij Bhushan Singh's portege Sanjay Singh to succeed him. Over and above, they pointed out how arrogantly Brij Bhushan Singh was behaving by claiming that "dabb-dabba tha, dab-

dabba rahega" (meaning he was in control of WFI and he will continue to remain in control).

Surjewala referred to 49 days' protest by female wrestlers who were demanding justice for being sexually exploited by Brij Bhushan Singh. He pointed out, despite their complaints to the Prime Minister and the Home Minister they did not get any justice. It was only after the Supreme Court's directions that an FIR was registered against Singh and even then he was not arrested.

## Delhi court grants police 60 more days to complete NewsClick probe

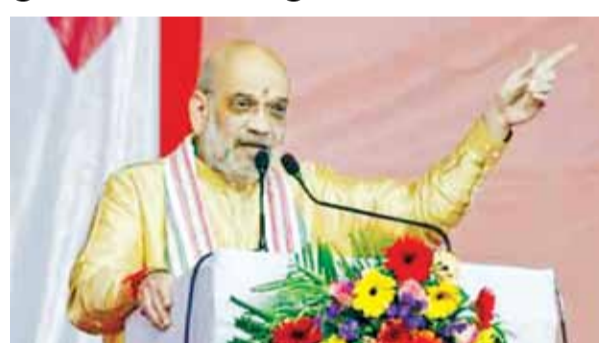
**OUR CORRESPONDENT**  
New Delhi

A Delhi court on Friday granted the city police 60 more days to complete its probe in the case lodged under anti-terror law UAPA over allegations that news portal NewsClick received money to spread pro-China propaganda in India.

Special Judge Hardeep Kaur also extended the judicial custody of the news portal's founder and Editor-in-Chief Prabir Purkayastha and Human Resources department head Amit Chakravarty

till January 20. The court passed the order on a plea moved by the Delhi Police that sought more time to complete the investigation. The Special Cell of Delhi Police had arrested Purkayastha and Chakravarty on October 3. According to the FIR, a large amount of funds to the news portal came from China to "disrupt the sovereignty of India" and cause disaffection against the country. It also alleged Purkayastha conspired with a group -- People's Alliance for Democracy and Secularism (PADS) -- to sabotage the electoral process during the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

## Bhagavad Gita a solution to global challenges: Amit Shah



**KURUKSHETRA:** Home Minister Amit Shah on Friday underscored the timeless wisdom embedded in the Bhagavad Gita as a solution to individual, societal, national, and global challenges.

While addressing a gathering in Kurukshetra -- in the ongoing International Gita Mahotsav (IGM) -- Shah not only lauded the Manohar Lal Khattar-led the government to elevate cultural harmony globally through the IGM since 2016 but also highlighted the historical significance of Kurukshetra, where over 5,000 years ago, Lord Shri Krishna delivered the profound message of Gita. Shah said the purpose of spreading the knowledge of the Gita is not merely to prevent wars but to motivate individuals for a righteous cause. He emphasised that Lord Krishna imparted this knowledge to Arjuna for the establishment of religion on earth and the welfare of society.

Sharing a personal anecdote, Shah revealed that the teachings of the Gita, instilled by his mother since childhood, have been a guiding light, helping him navigate life's challenges without succumbing to disappointment and sorrow.

Shah also praised the Haryana Chief Minister for giving the Gita Mahotsav an international character, expanding its format, and facilitating the global dissemination of Gita's timeless wisdom.

He also commended leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, stating that from 2014 to 2024, decisions have

been made to awaken India's self.

"These decisions include the construction of the Shri Ram temple, the abrogation of Article 370, and transformative developmental projects," Shah said.

He said the initiatives like IGM play a pivotal role in spreading the teachings and knowledge of the Gita to the masses, contributing to the re-establishment of Gita's profound principles worldwide.

The Chief Minister acknowledged recent legislative developments, with three new laws related to CRPC and IPC passing in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. He applauded the Centre government's efforts to unite the country by dismantling remnants of colonialism that persisted for 75 years after independence.

Khattar referred to the Prime Minister and Home Minister as the 'Iron Man' for taking these transformative decisions.

He said that the message of Gita given by Lord Shri Krishna to Arjuna in the Mahabharata war thousands of years ago is not just the reading of the book but it is eternal, universal, everlasting. Emphasising the timeless and universal nature of the Bhagavad Gita's teachings, the Chief Minister recalled Modi's acknowledgment of Kurukshetra's special significance in 2014.

"Celebrating Gita Mahotsav at the International level has been initiated since 2016. Today, every country in the world wants to organise an IGM in their country."

## Bajrang Punia to return Padma Shri in protest over the election of WFI chief Sanjay Singh

**OUR CORRESPONDENT**  
New Delhi

Olympic medallist grappler Bajrang Punia on Friday decided to return the Padma Shri award in protest over the election of Sanjay Singh, a Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh loyalist, as the president of Wrestling Federation of India (WFI).

"I am returning my Padma Shree award to the Prime Minister. This is just my letter to say. This is my statement," read a post shared by the Tokyo Olympics bronze medallist wrestler on X, formerly Twitter. On Thursday, Sanjay was elected as the president of the WFI after the panel led by the close aide of Brij Bhushan won 13 of the 15 posts.

Sakshi Malik, Bajrang and Vinesh Phogat addressed a press conference after Sanjay's election in which Sakshi, a bronze medallist at the 2016 Rio Olympics, announced that she would quit the sport as a mark of protest. In a letter addressed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Bajrang wrote: "Dear PM Ji, hope your health is well. You must be busy in many work but I am writing this to draw your attention to



the wrestlers of the country.

"You must be aware that the women wrestlers of the country started a protest in January this year against Brij Bhushan Singh accusing him of sexual harassment. I too joined their protest. The protest stopped after the government promised strong action." Expressing his disappointment, the star wrestler added, "But there was no FIR against Brij Bhushan even after three months. We again took to the streets in April so that the police at least file an FIR against him."

"There were 19 complainants in January but the number came down to 7 by April. This means Brij Bhushan exerted his influence on 12 women wrestlers." Bajrang was stopped at the Kartavya Path by Delhi Police officials when he tried to reach the Parliament to meet PM Modi and hand over his letter in protest against Sanjay Singh's election.

## Lok Sabha passes Press and Registration of Periodicals Bill

**USHERS IN A NEW ERA OF PRESS FREEDOM AND EASE OF DOING BUSINESS**

**FW DESK**

In a historic decision, the Lok Sabha passed the Press and Registration of Periodicals Bill, 2023, repealing the colonial era law of the Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867. The Bill has already been passed by Rajya Sabha in the Monsoon Session.

The new statute -- The Press and Registration of Periodicals Bill, 2023 makes the process of allotment of title and registration of periodicals simple and simultaneous, through an online system without the requirement of any physical interface. This would enable the Press Registrar General to fast track the process, thereby ensuring that publishers, especially small and medium publishers, face little difficulty in starting a publication. Most importantly, the publishers would no longer be required to file a declaration with the District Magistrates or the local authorities and get such declarations authenticated. Furthermore, printing presses would also not be required to furnish any such declaration; instead only an intimation



would be sufficient. The entire process presently involved 8 steps and consumed considerable time.

Introducing the Bill in the Lok Sabha, Minister for Information & Broadcasting Anurag Singh Thakur said "the Bill reflects yet another step of the Modi Government towards jettisoning mentality of slavery and bringing new laws for new India". The Minister further added that it has been the priority of the Government to end criminality, improve ease of doing business and ease of living through new laws and accordingly, efforts have been made to substantially decriminalize the colonial era statute. For certain violations, financial penalties have been proposed instead of conviction as earlier. Further, a credible appellate mechanism, headed by the Chairperson, Press Council of India has been provided for.

Stressing upon the ease of doing business aspect, Shri Thakur said title registration process, which sometimes took 2-3 years, would now be done in 60 days.

The Act of 1867 was a legacy of the British Raj which intended to exercise complete control over the press and the printers and publishers of newspapers and books along with heavy fines and penalties including imprisonment for various violations. It was felt that in today's age of free press and the Government's commitment to uphold media freedom, the archaic law was totally out of sync with the current media landscape.

**SALIENT FEATURES OF PRESS AND REGISTRATION OF PERIODICALS BILL 2023**

**I. Grant of title allotment and Certificate of Registration Periodicals**  
The Bill provides for a simple

online mechanism to apply for title verification and grant of certificate of registration by the Press Registrar General to a periodical as a simultaneous process.

There is no requirement of furnishing any declaration before the local authority or its authentication by the local authority. A person who has been convicted by any court for an offence involving terrorist act or unlawful activity, or having done anything against the security of the State shall not be permitted to bring out a periodical. Facsimile edition of a foreign periodical can be printed in India with prior approval of the Central Government and its registration with the Press Registrar General.

**II. Printing Presses**

A printer of a periodical to furnish an online intimation to the Press Registrar General and the local authority. No requirement by the Printer to file any declaration before the local authority or obtain authentication from the authority.

**III. Role of District magistrate/local authority**

The Bill envisages minimalistic role of the District Magistrate/local authority with regard to grant of Certificate of Registration and title allotment.



# Banks in Punjab told to speed up disbursal of self-employment loans

**CHANDIGARH:** Punjab Finance Minister Harpal Cheema and Member of Parliament Vikramjit Singh Sahney on Friday reviewed the progress of sanctioning and disbursement of loans under various schemes for self-employment with state heads of 40 banks here.

The banks were asked to present their performance for giving loans, among other schemes, under Mudra Scheme for providing bank loans up to Rs 10 lakh for micro enterprises and the PM Employment Generation programme for loans up to Rs 50 lakh in manufacturing, business and service sector.

Sahney pointed out that



there was gross underutilisation of the loan amounts for various schemes in many districts of Punjab, and banks should spur up all their branches to sanction and disburse loans to skilled workforce, women self-help groups and marginal farmers expeditiously.

He also stated that in Ludhiana district 632 applications for self-employment by ITI

graduates were submitted but only 52 loans have been sanctioned. He added there are 6, 300 bank branches in Punjab and even if each bank sanctions five loans each, there should be a minimum 30, 000 beneficiaries.

Finance Minister Cheema reiterated that performance of the banks in disbursing the loans for self-employment and startups is not meeting targets and the state government would take a serious view if banks don't sanction loans to economically weak applicants.

He also said a special task force under chairmanship of the Secretary Finance would be made to review the progress in this regard on a periodic basis.

# Give representation to Punjab in fixing MSP of crops : Sahney

**NEW DELHI:** Demanding representation of Punjab in fixing the minimum support price (MSP) of crops, Rajya Sabha Member from Punjab, Vikram Sahney, on Tuesday raised issues relating to supplementary demand for grants Bill presented in Parliament.

He highlighted that the net additional cash will be Rs 58,378 crore and it will add to the already high fiscal deficit of 5.9 per cent of the GDP against the mandated limit of three per cent by the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act.

On agriculture, Sahney demanded that there should be representation of Punjab in the minimum support price (MSP) and Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices committees. The MSP should be actually given for crops other than wheat and rice as notified. Sahney given example that MSP



on corn is Rs 2,090 per ton but actually it is being sold between Rs 700 and Rs 1,000 per tonne.

He sought suitable budgetary provisions to provide crop residue machines like Happy Seeder and baler to remove and collect the stubble for use in renewable energy. Sahney mentioned that inflation, especially food inflation, is very high. He gave the example of McDonald taking tomatoes out of its food items due to unaffordable prices.

Supporting supplementary demand of Rs 649 crore for higher education, he said there is hardly any additional alloca-

tion for skill development and the allocation for State Skill Development Mission is declining in the past two years. He said the allocation for Skill Development to Punjab has been reduced to 92 per cent. Sahney said no further funds have been allocated to price stabilisation fund.

Supporting additional allocation of Rs 7,000 crore demand for Food and Public Distribution, he demanded that the government should invest more in cold chain infrastructure and food processing as 40 per cent of the vegetables and fruits are going to waste.

As regards fertilizers, Sahney expressed concern over reduction of 30 per cent of the fertilizer subsidies in the last quarter and demanded that it should be reviewed in January to ensure optimum availability of fertilizers to the farmers.

# Punjab Congress divided on alliance with AAP, Raja Warring and Navjot Sidhu in favour, Bajwa opposes it



**CHANDIGARH:** PPCC president Amarinder Singh Raja Warring today said that they were preparing to contest all 13 Lok Sabha seats in Punjab but they will accept the decision of party high command on forging any alliance with AAP. Statement of Raja Warring is in contrast with the stand taken by CLP leader Partap Singh Bajwa while Navjot Sidhu is on board with Raja Warring.

Talking to media persons, Raja Warring said that party supremo Sonia Gandhi and central leaders would take the final call and if they decide to forge an alliance, they would accept it. Raj Warring was earlier against striking an alliance with AAP in the Lok Sabha poll claiming that they are the main opposition of AAP government in Punjab. He also led a party delegation alongwith Bajwa to apprise the party high command of views of PPCC.

The statement of Raja Warring came a day after former PPCC president Navjot Sidhu announced that he full go with the party high command decision if INDIA (alliance) decided to go for alliance in Punjab. AAP and Congress are part of INDIA.

Punjab Congress CLP

leader Partap Singh Bajwa is opposed to any alliance with the AAP in Punjab. He said that they would contest all 13 seats and their main fight is with AAP in the state. Bajwa had also questioned Navjot Sidhu for singing different tone. He accused that Congress has come down from 78 to 18 seats under the presidency of Sidhu. He advised Sidhu to speak from the Congress party platform. He invited him for two rallies of Congress party.

Navjot Sidhu today rebutted the Bajwa's statement and said that let Bajwa make it clear he would accept the party high command decision or not. He alleged that collusion between Bajwa with Akalis for taking turn to rule has resulted in defeat in assembly. He also said that his pro Punjab agenda was changed to pro dalit agenda which resulted in defeat.

The AAP leaders in Punjab were also opposed to alliance with Congress however party supremo Arvind Kejriwal may take a decision for an alliance on the ground of fighting with the common enemy BJP. There are also reports of possibility of an alliance between BJP and SAD. BSP is already in alliance with SAD but not part of INDIA.

# Digital Media Association mourns demise of senior photographer Santokh Singh



**CHANDIGARH:** Digital Media Association Punjab today expressed deep condolence over the sad demise of senior photographer Santokh Singh who was most popular among the media fraternity.

The Association members mourned the sudden demise of S.Santokh Singh, working for the Rozana Spokesman from Chandigarh..Baljit Balli Chief Patron, Satinder Bains Chairman and Davinderjit Singh Darshi President, H.S.Bawa. Parminder Jattipuri, Davinder Singh Kohli, Mahavir Jain and Prashant Sharma all office bearers of the association said Santokh Singh was very social and cheerful person and dedicated to his profession.

The Association members remembered the services of Santokh Singh in the field of journalism during over 50 years of his profession. The Association members prayed to the Almighty to grant eternal peace to the departed soul.

# Report on former Akal Takht Jathedar Gurdev Singh Kaunke's disappearance released

**AMRITSAR:** Mysterious disappearance and alleged murder of former Akal Takht Jathedar Gurdev Singh Kaunke, an inquiry report has been made public for the first time after 31 years

The report, which was submitted to the SAD government in July 1999, was released by the Punjab Human Rights Organisation (PHRO), an NGO.

The probe, ordered by the Punjab Government in 1998 following the allegations of extrajudicial killing of Kaunke, was carried out by then Additional Director General of Police (Security) BP Tiwari.

The report has raised questions over claims of the police and recommended FIR against the then Jagraon SHO Gurmeet Singh for wrongful confinement and falsification of records, besides further probe into the incident. It also recommended investigating the role of other cops and raised questions on the police claim that Kaunke had escaped from custody.

Though Kaunke was taken into custody, yet it could not be proved that he was tortured to death in the police custody, mentions the report.

"It would be appropriate



to register an FIR on charges of wrongful confinement and falsification of records against Inspector Gurmeet Singh, the then SHO, who was later promoted as DSP. Role of other cops and officials should also be investigated," the report concluded. The NGO submitted the report to Akal Takht Jathedar Giani Raghbir Singh yesterday.

In 1986, Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale's nephew Jasbir Singh Rode was appointed Jathedar of Sikh's temporal seat. As he was in the jail, the Sarbat Khalsa

appointed Kaunke as acting Jathedar.

On December 20, 1992, Kaunke was picked up from his house by SHO Gurmeet, but due to untimely demise of his grandson, he was released following intervention of villagers. He was again arrested on December 25, 1992, and never came back. After allegedly keeping him in illegal confinement, he was shown arrested in a murder case on January 2, 1993, and later shown absconding from the police custody.

# 314 points prone to road accidents identified in Haryana

SATISH HANDA

State detective department Haryana has identified as many as 314 very dangerous spots including T-points on the roads, prone to frequent accidents due to the fog condition during present winter season, which include highest number of 29 spots in Hisar district, followed by 24 black spots in Yamunanagar and 23 black spots in Nuh district. At the same time among the districts having lowest number of black spots on the roads in Haryana state are Panipat district having 6 black spots, Gurugram district having 7 and Palwal district having 8 spots.

Information reveals that the department has suggested to develop road safety committees in every district in the state to curb the fast increasing number of road mishaps in the state in which large number of accident victims either lost their lives or were injured. The department has directed Public Works Department and National Highway Authority of India, Municipal Authorities and the Forest Department to undertake safety measures or get repair of damaged roads to avoid mishaps on the roads.

# Pakistan Occupied Kashmir belongs to India, and India will retain it: Anil Vij



SATISH HANDA

Ambala

Haryana's Home and Health Minister Anil Vij said that Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) belongs to India, and India will continue to retain it. Vij was interacting with the media persons today. In response to Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury's statement suggesting bringing apples from PoK if courageous, Minister Anil Vij countered, saying that India will retain PoK, just wait for the right time. In response to Congress leader P. Chidambaram's statement, Home Minister said that the BJP fights for the nation's development, aiming to build a developed India by 2047, therefore BJP members are fighting with all their might. It is noteworthy that P. Chidambaram had stated that the BJP fights every election as if it's the country's final battle. Regarding Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's comments on the Parliament attack, Home Minister Anil Vij remarked that Rahul Gandhi should feel ashamed because an attack occurred on Parliament, and he's stating it as if it's a matter concerning his relatives.

# Haryana first in the country blocked more than 55000 mobile numbers: DGP

SATISH HANDA

Addressing media persons, Shatruijit Kapoor Director General Police said that Haryana state is first in the country have blocked more than 55000 mobile phone numbers related to cyber fraud and has saved nearly Rs 66 crore of the people of the state from being cheated till November 30 2023. He said that Haryana police making efforts towards cyber security through cyber police stations in every district across the state, succeeded in arresting 1707 cyber fraudsters and registered 2354 cyber fraud cases. Giving information about this, Director General of Police said that as a result of continuous actions being taken against cyber criminals, it has helped a lot in controlling cyber crimes.

Kapoor said that in order to keep a check on cyber criminals, Haryana Police is organizing cyber workshops everywhere including in educational institutes to bring awareness about such crimes. He said, apart from this, Haryana Police is working towards preventing cyber crime by holding meetings with representatives of financial institutions and trade organizations, including banks so that bank accounts can be frozen as soon as a cyber fraud is reported as such the number of policemen deployed on the cyber helpline number has been increased from 35 to 70.

DGP said that till the end of month November this year the state police has registered 2354 cases regarding cyber crime, out of which 409 were high profile cases. In these cases, the state police has succeeded in arresting 1707 cyber cheats with the amount of fraud in these high profile cases was



more than Rs 5 lakh in each case. He said, the cyber team has reported about 59,195 mobile numbers used in cyber fraud in the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, out of which more than 55,933 mobile numbers have been blocked.

Kapoor said that the state police is committed to saving the earnings of the general public. In this direction, 27 police personnel have been appointed as incident managers at the National Cyber Helpline 1930 headquarters located in Panchkula. He told that it is the responsibility of these incident managers that if the fraud reported on helpline registered on 1930, they should immediately contact the nodal officer of the bank where the fraud amount has gone and get the fraud amount frozen, due to this in the month November only this year the State Police has succeeded in saving a record amount of Rs 6.77 crore from fraud, whereas in the state police was able to save amount worth Rs 4.80 crore from fraud in the month of October this year.

Kapoor disclosed that, due to joint efforts of the nodal team and field units of the police, we have been successful in saving Rs 66.92 crore in the

just past 11 months this year, which in itself shows the efforts and determination of the state police was able to save hard earned public money. DGP said, Rs 38.11 crore has been saved by the state's Panchkula cyber helpline team and Rs 28.81 crore has been saved by the district cyber units. Apart from this, in a major case of cyber fraud, Team 1930 had got frozen the cyber fraud amount of more than Rs 51 lakh in the bank accounts itself. He disclosed that nearly one lakh complaints related to cyber fraud till 30th, 2023 were received on toll free number 1930, on which more than 51 thousand complaints have been resolved and work is being done on the remaining complaints. This year, 2354 cases were registered under the IT Act, out of which the state police has already disposed of 647 cases, which included 409 high profile cases.

According to a report from Gurugram cyber police cell, during the last week of month April this year during hitech action against cyber 'thugs' nearly 100 cyber cheats were arrested by them in which more than 2900 mobile sims were blocked. During month November this year Gurugram cyber crime cell has started a campaign cyber cheats and identified as many as 42 villages in Mewat where 2900 fake sim cards were found working, said sidhant Jain DCP Cyber Crime that hundreds of call were being made on these mobiles everyday and most of the numbers were found registered in another states and it was detected that these mobile phones were linked with nearly 2600 bank accounts being used for transferring money.

# Haryana government is planning to purchase 2300 acres of land for the expansion of the Saha Industri Growth Center : Anil Vij

SATISH HANDA

Ambala

Haryana's Home and Health Minister, Anil Vij, said that everything in Ambala depends on Ambala's science industry, and for the encouragement of entrepreneurs, the state government is planning to purchase 2300 acres of land for the expansion of the Saha Growth Center which was started years ago when Om Parkash Chautala was chief minister in the state. Transportation is improving for the science industry, as the construction of a new freight terminal on the Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor is in progress, he added.



Anil Vij addressed the science entrepreneurs of Ambala during the launch program of Asima's (Ambala Scientific Instrument Manufacturer Association) digital directory last late evening. He stated that Ambala's science industry has propelled big doctors, engineers, space scientists, and others forward, owing to the microscopes or

other equipment produced by Ambala's science industry. The science industry in Ambala has a significant contribution to Ambala's development.

Vij said that Ambala's industries now have access to electricity, water, transportation, and other facilities, which has increased business. Roads are being constructed in Ambala; the Ambala-Saha road has been widened, making it easier for entrepreneurs to travel to the Saha Industrial Growth Center from Ambala. Similarly, the construction of Ring Road, Ambala to Delhi via Shamli Expressway, Ambala-Kala Amb, and Ambala-Chandigarh Greenfield Expressway is underway.

# 'Badlav Yatra' by AAP exhibiting Kejriwal's vision in Haryana

SATISH HANDA

Ambala

10 days state level 'Badlav Yatra' organized by Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Haryana led by the National Deputy General Secretary Nirmal Singh former Union Minister and state deputy president Chitra Sarwara to exhibit Kejriwal's vision and party's policies is being warmly welcomed in the state claimed by Sarwara while talking to media persons here. Sarwara said that farmers in the state are facing problem in getting fertilizers and are forced to remain in long queues for long time, government schools in the state are facing severe crisis having acute shortage of teachers and most of the schools are not having toilets, provision for drinking water and electricity, similar is condition of government hospital in the state having shortage of doctors as well as para-medical staff, shortage of medicines and medical instruments. He said that people in the state wants to have a change



in government.

Chitra Sarwara said that Haryana chief minister had made nearly 1770 developmental announcements in the state, of them hardly 270 programs have been completed so far and nearly 1500 developmental programs are yet lying incomplete so far or have not been started. She said that a female coach in state sports department accused sports minister allegedly sexually assaulted her but she has not been provided justice since past several months and the state government saving the alleged accused. She said that the government hospital in Charkhi Dadri does not

have power supply and it was observed that the major surgeries and deliveries in this hospital were seen conducted in mobile phone torch light. She said that on the other hand electricity department in Punjab was having loss worth Rs 1550 crore, but after the AAP came to power in the state now having profits in crore at present.

Sarwara said that Arvind Kejriwal when became chief minister have changed the structure of Delhi which is being appreciated not only in the country but also in abroad. She said that in spite of spending huge amount at Ambala in past nine years of BJP rule the roads are in bad shape.

SATISH HANDA

After the recent incidents of deaths at Yamunanagar and Ambala district due to spurious liquor, Haryana state government has declared alert against the sale of spurious liquor in the state. Deputy chief minister Dushyant Chautala ordered special teams to crack down on the illegal manufacturing, rebottling and supply of liquor business in the state and to form special teams to crack down on the counterfeit liquor business in the state. On information Its how traders buy used, high-end liquor bottles from scrap dealers, fill them with cheap whisky, slap on new labels and caps, seal them and sell them to vendors, shops and even bars.

After the report published in newspapers, Chautala, who is also the state excise and taxation minister said that the state government will work to stamp down on the sale of fake liquor in the state. He also warned action will also be taken against liquor companies if such liquor is found in shops. He said, it is also the responsibility of the brands to keep a check on their sales, and they should collect samples for testing. Brands are liable to check the dispatch of their consignment, hologram and batch number mentioned on the liquor, and if there are irregularities inform police as well as the excise department in the district.

Information revealed that a large number of such cases came at Gurugram and Faridabad. Gurugram deputy commissioner Nishant Kumar Yadav said the state government's order will be implemented immediately. Meanwhile, the Gurugram and Faridabad excise departments swung into action and began checks at outlets and liquor shops. Inspectors combed through liquor stores and bars to ensure bottles bore holograms and batch numbers and if the labels wear those assigned by the

excise department," said Yadav.

According to information, the illicit business has rumbled on unchecked for years in the state with little action by the police and excise officers so far. After the incident of recent deaths of about 22 persons in Yamunanagar and Ambala district due to spurious liquor illegally manufactured in a closed factory at a lonely place under Mullana police station in Ambala district police started raids at liquor suppliers all over in the state and recovered thousands of spurious liquor bottles within a short span of few days only.

According to police reports from Karnal, Kurukshetra, Hansi, Kaithal, Jind and Bahadurgarh districts, 43 persons were arrested from whom 458 bottles of illicit liquor were recovered during raids in Karnal. Similarly, 10 persons were arrested while selling spurious liquor at Hansi. Kurukshetra police recovered 212 bottles spurious liquor from 26 persons arrested by the police and cases were registered against them. In Kaithal district during raids police arrested 31 persons while selling 354 bottles of illicit liquor along with 1250 liter 'Lahan' used to manufacture spurious liquor. Police at Jind during 22 raids at different places arrested 22 persons selling spurious liquor from whom 234 bottles liquor along with 250 liter 'Lahan' was recovered. On a secret information Bahadurgarh police recovered a huge quantity of spurious liquor bottles during raid at a general merchant shop.

The deputy CM Dushyant Chautala while talking to media persons said, efforts are being made to identify a third party to conduct these lab tests to ascertain if the alcohol packed in branded bottles is genuine or not, since the reports of tests conducted by the companies mostly found nothing spurious.



# Dhankhar been imitated by Kalyan, acting video shoot by Rahul Gandhi, opened his mouth amid controversy

MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA  
New Delhi

About 150 opposition MPs have been suspended from the two houses of Parliament, Opposition MPs staged a mock parliament outside the parliament building on Tuesday in protest. It was said there that Trinamool MP Kalyan Banerjee was accused of impersonating Rajya Sabha Chairman and Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's name was involved in this controversy because when Kalyan Banerjee was allegedly imitating Jagdeep Dhankhar, Rahul Gandhi was seen filming the scene. After this incident, the BJP started criticizing Rahul more



than Kalyan Banerjee. Jagdeep Dhankhar himself questioned the role of the Congress leader and finally Rahul opened his mouth in this debate. When Rahul was questioned about this today, the Congress MP claimed that he

had only videoed the protest of the opposition MPs sitting together, not the mockery. The top Congress leader said, "Who and how insulted whom? All the MPs were sitting there, I took the video, which I still have on my phone". He again

questioned, "who filmed me when I was making Video? Aaplog sob jante hai, kuchh uspar bhi highlight kar dikhaaye, likhen". Instead, raising a counter question, Rahul said, "About 150 of our MPs have been thrown out. There is no discussion about it. There is no discussion in Parliament about the increasing unemployment in the country".

However, Kalyan Banerjee himself claimed on this day that he had no intention of hurting anyone. At the same time, the Trinamool MP claimed, "Mimicry is also an art. After becoming Prime Minister in 2014, Narendra Modi himself has done this. If you want I can show you that video".

# Lok Sabha Passes Criminal Law Bills Seeking to Replace IPC, CrPC and Evidence Act without opposition

MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA  
New Delhi

The 'Criminal Law Bill' is passed in the Lok Sabha today and tomorrow it will be passed in the Rajyasabha also. Union Home Minister Amit Shah introduced three bills in the opposition-free Lok Sabha on the thirteenth day of the winter session, on Wednesday. The bills were passed within hours time. It should be noted that three bills were presented in the Lok Sabha once before. There are several amendments recommended after that the bill was introduced on this day.

A total of 97 opposition MPs from Lok Sabha have been suspended since the start of the winter session. More 2 MPs were suspended on Wednesday also till around noon. After that, the Home Minister started discussing the 'Criminal Law Bill' in a practically without presence of the opposition in Lok Sabha. He said that these three bills have been prepared by giving priority to the Indian Constitution. Along with the development of our people, Indianness has also been given importance in the new bills.

It is to be noted that Shah introduced three revised criminal law bills, namely, the Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita, proposing to replace the Indian Penal Code, the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita, proposing to replace the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Sanhita, which seeks to replace the Indian Evidence Act at the



last day of the last session of the Parliament. The bills were then referred to the Parliament's Standing Committee on Home Affairs for discussion. The anti-ruler conflict also peaked during the committee meeting. The bills were passed along with certain new amendments moved by Union Home Minister Amit Shah. One of the amendments relate to giving exemptions to doctors in cases of death due to medical negligence.

The proposed criminal law bills have been under scrutiny, with concerns raised previously by opposition leaders such as Adhir Ranjan Choudhary and Senior Advocate & Former Minister & MP Kapil Sibal, who have highlighted potential violations of human rights and the inadequacy of safeguards against excesses by law enforcement agencies. The members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies, however, have defended the bills, saying that while the extant British-era criminal laws are centred around punishment and deterrence, the proposed bills shift the emphasis to justice and reformation, keeping with the

changing needs of modern-day India. Endorsing the bills, Biju Janata Dal legislator Bhartruhari Mahtab reasoned during the debate on the bills, «It is imperative that our outlook is changed and that law and order is viewed outside the colonial lens.»

BJP Member of Parliament (MP) Tejasvi Surya, explained that the bills are an attempt to make the citizen the centre of the criminal justice system. «Swarajya has finally attained true meaning because our country is moving towards respecting swabhasha, swadharma, and swadesha,» she said. The bills' focus on digitisation and information and communication technology, among other things, gained the members' approval. «This is the age of communication and technology, and communication and technology is power,» said senior advocate and former law minister Ravi Shankar Prasad.

Prasad pointed out that while there were 511 sections in the IPC, the corresponding new bill has 356. He said while 176 sections have been changed completely, eight new have been added. He also

pointed out that 22 sections have been deleted.

Dissenting voices were also conspicuously absent, apart from a handful of opposition members. Notably, All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen MP Asaduddin Owaisi raised concerns over the prejudice in the implementation of criminal laws against religious minorities and other vulnerable communities like Dalits and Adivasis. He also voiced his apprehensions about a provision in the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita allowing police custody beyond 15 days, pointing to potential violation of civil liberties.

Lok Sabha took up the bills, with some MPs saying these will provide justice rather than punishment and others pointing to "loopholes" that they claimed will give discretionary powers to enforcement agencies.

Shah said, he had held at least 158 meetings with regard to the three new bills and personally checked all of them in detail. "I have gone through every comma, full stop of the new criminal laws," he added.

The minister said there will be no argument on "saving" terrorists. "I am astonished at how some people defend and save the lives of terrorists in the name of human rights when, in fact, it's terrorism that kills not just humans but human rights as well. Remember, this is neither the rule of Britishers nor the Congress. This is the rule of the Modi government. No arguments to save terrorists will be entertained here," he added.

# Raghav Chadha named leader of AAP in RS in Sanjay Singh's absence



NEW DELHI: The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Saturday named Raghav Chadha as the party's leader in the Rajya Sabha in the absence of Sanjay Singh, who is under judicial custody following his arrest in connection with the Delhi excise policy case.

The AAP said, "In the absence of Sanjay Singh, the party has announced Raghav Chadha as the leader of AAP in the Rajya Sabha."

Singh was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on October 4 this year in connection with the alleged excise policy scam. The ED had also arrested former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia in connection with the case on March 9 this year, days after his arrest by the CBI on February 27 in the same case. Sisodia is also under judicial custody presently.

# All India Professionals' Congress launches membership drive...

PARTY EXPANDS AMBIT TO INVOLVE MORE PROFESSIONALS

KAVITA SHARMA  
New Delhi

All India Professionals' Congress (AIPC), the professionals' body of the Congress party, today launched a fresh membership drive after expanding its ambit for greater and broader involvement of the professionals with the party.

Announcing this here today, the newly appointed Chairman of the AIPC Praveen Chakravarty along with Pawan Khera and Supriya Shrineta said that after the Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's invitation to professionals to join the party, lot of them representing varied fields and professions had involved themselves with the party.

He pointed out, during the Bharat Jodo Yatra, a number of professionals participated in the yatra. He said, as the second phase of the Yatra was being planned, more and more professionals were coming forward to join.



Chakravarty identified six broad domains of professions under which the professionals can join the party. These include Business, Arts and Culture that includes movies also, Academia and Civil Society, Sports, Gig Economy and Workers and Self Employed like lawyers, doctors, chartered accountants, architects and others.

The AIPC Chairman also referred to the appeal by Mr Gandhi to professionals to join the struggle to reclaim the original idea of India. He said it had found great reso-

nance and response among the professionals who had joined the party.

"Professionals played a pivotal role in India's fight for independence. It is time again for professionals to step up and contribute actively for a progressive & prosperous India", Rahul Gandhi said in a tweet, while appealing to the professionals to join the All India Professionals' Congress.

Three leading professionals in their respective fields CK Kumaravel, Arjun Gupta and Sangam Tripathi joined the AIPC on the occasion.

# INS President applauds the passing of Press and Registration of Periodicals Bill, 2023

FW DESK

On behalf of the Members of the Indian Newspaper Society (INS), Rakesh Sharma, President, INS applauds the passing of Press and Registration of Periodicals Bill, 2023, yesterday in Lok Sabha.

He mentioned that this momentous occasion marks a



crucial step towards modernizing the regulatory framework governing the press in India by replacing the Press and Registration of Books

Act, 1867.

The Press and Registration of Periodicals Bill, 2023 addresses the evolving needs of the print media industry in the digital age. He also appreciates the efforts of lawmakers in recognizing the importance of updating legislation to meet contemporary challenges faced by the

vibrant and dynamic print media.

He further mentioned that the Society is committed to working closely with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting during the subsequent stages of the legislative process, contributing insights to further refine the regulatory framework.

# Jamaat-e-Islami Hind voices concern over the suspension of Opposition MPs from Parliament and calls it 'perilous' for democracy

KAVITA SHARMA  
New Delhi

The Vice President of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, Prof Salim Engineer has voiced concern over the suspension of 141 Opposition MPs from Parliament and called it "perilous" for democracy.

In a statement to the media, the JIH Vice-President said, "We are deeply concerned over what is happening in Parliament. More than 141 Opposition MPs have been suspended for demanding a statement from the Home Minister regarding the recent security breach in Parliament. Jamaat feels the suspension is unprecedented, unjust, high-handed, and perilous for democracy. The Opposition plays a crucial



role in holding the government accountable, representing alternative viewpoints, and ensuring a checks-and-balances mechanism. Arbitrarily suspending the Opposition undermines these fundamental principles, and the consequences can be detrimental to our democracy and constitutional values. A Parliament without any space for Opposition is the hallmark of totalitarian and fascist regimes and we must avoid moving in that dangerous direction.

Without an Opposition, there will be zero accountability for the government, and nobody to question the government's decisions and actions."

Prof Salim Engineer pointed out, "With almost the entire opposition kept out for the Winter Session, all Bills (including some draconian laws) tabled in Parliament will be passed without any discussion. The suspension of MPs goes against the tall claims of the ruling party leadership of being guardians of the mother of democracy and exposes their authoritarian mindset. Jamaat-e-Islami demands the government to revoke the suspension of the MPs and appeals to all lawmakers to respect the dignity of people and the decorum of the house."

# Rahul Gandhi raises issue of unemployment in country, Blames BJP government for security breach in parliament



KAVITA SHARMA  
New Delhi

Lashing out at the Bharatiya Janata Party government at the centre for the security breach in the parliament, former Congress President Rahul Gandhi today said that equally important issue was the reason behind the breach which was widespread unemployment prevailing in the country.

Addressing the protest organized by the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) at the Jantar Mantar here today, Gandhi also told the BJP government that it was mistaken if it thought that it can intimidate the people of the

country, particularly the youth.

He pointed out how about 150 MPs were suspended just because they wanted to know how the security breach took place. He said, the MPs are representatives of lakhs of people from across the country.

"You have not just suspended 150 MPs, but tried to gag the voice of 60 percent of the people of the country", Gandhi told the BJP government, while adding, "but they will not be scared or intimidated".

He pointed out how the government tried to threaten the youth who were protesting against the Agniveer scheme that they would be barred from government jobs.

The Congress leader hailed the entire opposition for displaying unity against the hatred of the government. He said, no matter how much hatred the government may try to spread, the opposition will fight against it and defeat it. "The more hatred the BJP spreads, the more love and brotherhood INDIA parties will spread," he added.

Gandhi also took a dig at the efforts the issue was being diverted. He pointed out there was no discussion in the media about the security breach or the suspension of 150 MPs. The only thing they discussed, he added, was that he had made a video outside the parliament.

# 'Didi-Modi' relation, the meeting is not just to get dues, its more than that

MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA  
New Delhi

Before meeting to PM Modi, as usual to maintain good relation, she sent Bengali sweets and gift which she brought from Kolkata to PM after she landed in Delhi, according to sources. "How are your feet"? PM asked her at the first good wish exchanged at the meeting. Modi inquired about Bengal CM's health at face-to-face meeting.



the state governments, discuss the problem to arrive at a solution. After the meeting with duo, Central Government send GST dues to all state government including West Bengal. Mamata has met Modi thrice on this dues to state issue and written numerous letters to him, but the central funds remain withheld. PM asked to Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee's team, as she told to media, that there might have been some discrepancies over the funds received by Bengal so far, an allegation on the basis of which the funds were stopped, she said, the Centre was free to

stop the funds wherever there had been misappropriation, if any. She said, when addressing to Media at Vijay Chowk, "But it is not good to stop poor people's funds/dues". She argued, "As many as 155 teams have visited Bengal, and we have given all clarifications but got nothing".

In a 3-page memorandum submitted to the prime minister, Bengal CM claimed "nearly Rs 1.16 lakh crore" worth of funds under 'core of the core' social schemes like MNREGA, PMAY, PM Gram Sadak Yojana and the National Health Mission.

# Mamata burst into anger over the huge suspension in Parliament, said, "Lucky that I am not an MP now"

MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA  
New Delhi

Trinamool supremo Mamata Banerjee was practically furious after hearing the news of the huge number of MPs suspension. She said, "What is going on is absolutely not desirable. I am lucky not to be an MP anymore now". Mamata Banerjee said, "Saugat Roy is a top senior leader. He was not spared either. Suspended everyone, in this way the entire house is suspended. This behavior is being done so that the opposition cannot move on various issues."

In Mamata's words, "The Law Bill is very important. Despite having such a majority, BJP is afraid. So the opposition is being suspended. This is ridiculous for

democracy. By stifling the voice of the opposition, the voice of the common people is being stifled".

Kakali Ghosh Dastidar, Shatabdi Roy, Prasoon Banerjee, Pratima Mandal, Aparupa Poddar, Saugat Roy, Kalyan Banerjee, Sunil Mandal, Asit Mal, total 9 Trinamool MPs from Lok Sabha. Sukhendushekar Roy, Shamirul Islam, Mausam Noor, Abir Ranjan Biswas, Shantanu Sen, Nadimul Haque, total 8 Trinamool MPs were suspended. Rajya Sabha Trinamool MP Sukhendushekar Roy said, "We have raised questions about security in Parliament." We have demanded a statement from the Home Minister. He can speak on television channels, the Prime Minister can open his mouth to special media and Parliament is



going on. Why not speak here? Trinamool MPs and other opposition parties were suspended for making this demand. This act of stifling dissenting voices is highly reprehensible."

On the 13 December, some young people breached the Security of the Lok Sabha and carried out a gas attack. So far

6 people have been arrested by Delhi Police. An on-site investigation into the security incident is underway. At the beginning of the session of the parliament today, the opposition started demanding a statement from the home minister on the security breach issue.

Meanwhile, around the same

time, Trinamool supremo Mamata Banerjee sat in a meeting with the parliamentary party at Banga Bhaban in Delhi, this news reached there. Hearing that, she practically burst into anger. She said, "What is going on in the parliament is not desirable at all. Lucky that I am no longer an MP". All the MPs of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha were present in Mamata Banerjee's meeting that day. And significantly, Mahua Maitra was also present in this meeting. A few days ago, he was expelled from the Lok Sabha for raising questions about money in Parliament. The entire party including Mamata Banerjee stood by him. In this situation, Mahua's presence in this meeting is quite important.

legitimate demand. "All that the opposition Members of Parliament asked for was a statement to be made by the Home Minister in the Lok Sabha addressing the extraordinary events of December 13. There are no words to describe the arrogance with which this request was treated," the Congress leader said. Referring to the security breach in the Lok Sabha on December 13, she said, "What happened on December 13 is inexcusable and cannot be justified. It took four days for the Prime Minister to address the nation and express his views on the incident, and he did so outside of the Parliament."

meanwhile, around the same



## Telecom Bill should balance progress and privacy

The introduction of the Telecommunications Bill, 2023, marks a significant stride in the Union government's ongoing efforts to reshape and modernize the regulatory framework for wireless networks and Internet service providers. This 46-page statute, while retaining the core of existing regulatory structures, introduces commendable simplifications in bureaucratic procedures such as applying for licences and permits for telecom operators. The move towards digitizing licensing processes is a welcome development, offering telecom operators streamlined channels for compliance, dispute resolution, and the establishment of infrastructure on both public and private properties. A notable relief comes for the satellite Internet industry, which now finds itself free from the burden of bidding for spectrum. This decision aligns India with global practices and opens promising avenues for remote area connectivity. Industry bodies have rightly lauded the Bill for streamlining their regulatory landscape and enhancing ease of doing business, laying a foundation for the next phase of telecom expansion. Given that over half of India's population is still on the fringes of digital connectivity, this Bill could be a game-changer. However, the Bill is not without its challenges. Its broad definition of telecom services encompasses a wide range of services, inadvertently raising concerns about state authority, privacy, and surveillance. These apprehensions are not unfounded, especially in light of past allegations of state-sponsored snooping. Although the Bill attempts to address issues like spamming, the solutions proposed seem to require compromises to privacy, a trade-off that needs careful consideration. The Bill, in its current form, grants significant powers to the government. This necessitates a commitment to transparency and public consultation, particularly since many of the Act's provisions hinge on subordinate legislation by the Department of Telecommunications. The government must approach these concerns with an open and consultative mindset, ensuring that the regulatory framework for the digital age is robust, fair, and respectful of individual rights.

### LETTERBOX

Readers' feedback adds value to the newspaper. Please email comments on reports, features and columns to [fwletters@gmail.com](mailto:fwletters@gmail.com). We will publish them on this page.

**“Don't sit down and wait for the opportunities to come. Get up and make them”**

Robert Cellier, Writer

## THE FINANCIAL WORLD

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AIR VICE MARSHAL MANMOHAN BAHADUR ON WHY EXAMINING DEFENCE BUDGET, NATIONAL SECURITY WITH ELECTORAL FOCUS IS UNPROFESSIONAL.

## Defence budgeting and the deterrence point

The Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) programme of the Indian Air Force (IAF) earned the sobriquet of being the 'mother of all procurements' due to its cost, pegged at around \$10 billion in 2007. A decade later, the purchase of 36 Rafale jets was of limited value because the requirement was for 126 aircraft. Consequently, many IAF chiefs have spoken of the depleting squadron strength in the IAF, which is now an abysmal 32. It would take another 10 years before it reaches 35 squadrons, as stated by the current IAF chief. The Indian Army and the Indian Navy fare no better either with the media reporting major deficiencies with them too. With India in election mode and sops being showered on the electorate (even more certain before the general election in 2024), the allocation for defence in Budget 2024-25, which starts getting planned now, could take a hit. This could impact India's deterrence posture, which defence preparedness is all about.

### Need for judicious assessment

The question is whether 'affordable defence' — due to the perennial guns versus butter dilemma — will be the driving factor. Or, will 'affordable effectiveness' drive the defence Budget allocation? This is best illustrated by the IAF going in for 97 more Tejas Mk1A fighters to overcome the deficit in squadron strength, though this was to be achieved by the 114 multi role fighter aircraft project that the IAF has been pushing for. So, to rephrase the question, should Budget (allocation) be allowed to determine defence potency (remember General V.P. Malik's quip during the Kargil conflict: "We will fight with what we have")? Or, should the required potency drive allocations for defence?

The threat on the northern borders is a



war with the industrial base you have, not the industrial base you want', weighs in on the debate with its clairvoyant deductions, and needs to be studied given the publicity around the Atmanirbhar Bharat drive.

### The indigenous drive, R&D

It needs no reiteration that the armed forces should be technologically modern at any given time. However, developing a local defence industry takes decades, necessitating a smart balance to be maintained between imports and indigenous accretions to ensure the required potency. The Atmanirbhar Bharat public relations drive notwithstanding, a hard clinical view is required on the realities of the armament supply chain that would be in place in the near to mid-term.

India's defence Budget, in real terms, has been more or less stagnant. Defence expenditure (revenue and capital), as a percentage of central government expenditure, has been declining — from around 16.4% in 2012-13 to 13.3% in 2022-23. The Ministry of Defence had asked for Rs 1,76,346 crore in 2023-24 for capital acquisitions but only Rs 1,62,600 crore was allotted, creating a deficit of Rs 13,746 crore.

In the sphere of research and development, the picture is not rosy either. The Global Innovation Index 2022 pegs India's research and development expenditure at just 0.7% of its GDP which places it 53rd globally. China, incidentally, spent \$421 billion in 2022, which is 2.54% of its GDP. Though the research and development

allocation needs a substantial jump, it is good that 25% of the allocation was for the private sector.

The government's emphasis on indigenisation through the Innovations For Defence Excellence (iDEX) scheme and service-specific projects such as the Baba Mehar Singh competition for unmanned aerial vehicles by the IAF, and similar ones in the other two services, are laudable. Similarly, the restructuring of the Ordnance Factory Board and promulgation of negative lists for imports instil confidence in the private sector for assured contracts. While all these are welcome, and the increase in defence exports heartening, it must be accepted that this drive still has a long gestation period. The momentum should be sustained with a continuum in policy making and adequate defence budgeting by making them election-proof in our boisterous democracy — bipartisan statesmanship would be key in this endeavour.

Costs are important and one must not spend scarce monies to face a 10 feet tall adversary when a pygmy exists on the other side. But what if there are two of them, both militarily adept, and not pygmies? And, India is not 10 ft tall either. China's belligerence has resulted in the doubling of Japan's defence budget, the increased arming of Taiwan by the United States, a reshaping of regional alliances and a historic U.S.-South Korea-Japan summit. It would be naive, nay unprofessional, if our defence Budget is not given its due and national security imperatives overridden by electoral imperatives.

Air Vice Marshal Manmohan Bahadur VM (retired) is former Additional Director General, Centre for Air Power Studies. Views are personal.



HARISH S. WANKHEDE EXPLAINS HOW BJP'S 'SUBALTERN HINDUTVA' IS A STRATEGIC SUCCESS, BUT LACKS BROADER SOCIAL IMPACT

## Subaltern rise: How BJP is reshaping Indian political arena

In the recent Assembly elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, statistical analysis by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies shows that a significant section among the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) backed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), thus making the party a formidable force in democratic battles. It is an important development as just a decade ago, the BJP was often cornered by the Opposition as being the party of the social elites. With the arrival of Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister of India, there has been an elevation of the party as one for the socially marginalised Hindu masses — a phenomenon now understood under the 'Subaltern Hindutva' rubric.

In north India's Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Chhattisgarh, the BJP is now a dominant political force. These are also the States where the population of OBCs, SCs and the STs is above the national average. In the last two decades, the BJP has successfully mobilised these groups through innovative political strategies and by curating influential cultural events. However, the actual benefits of economic developments and political change have been overtly controlled by the conventional social elites, a development that often relegates the Dalit-Bahujan masses as passive peripheral spectators in the rapid election of the right-wing. With the general election to be held next year, the party should address the issues of social discrimination and economic injustice more sensitively.

### Outlining the party's strategy

There are three fronts to the BJP's mobili-



sation strategies towards the Dalit-Bahujan masses. First, marginalised social groups will benefit from general welfare measures (freebies, loan waivers, women-centric policy benefits) and the government will provide basic amenities to the poor (free food grains) without identifying them on the basis of caste. Second, the BJP has alleged that dominant OBC castes (Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) have exploited social justice policies, and, therefore, a special reservation quota should be mooted for the Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs). Third, the BJP engages the lower strata through curating emotive narratives about their history, icons and caste pride, using various religious events and cultural fronts influenced by the BJP. On the flip side, the actual issues of substantive land distributions for the landless communities, representation of the Dalit-Bahujan groups in the high echelons of power and their participation in the neo-liberal economic growth as major shareholders do not form the mainstream discourses within the BJP's 'Subaltern Hindutva' strategies.

### The Bihar caste report

Bihar's Caste Survey report, that was released recently, shows that the worst-off social groups, especially EBCs, still face precarious economic conditions, social insecurities and are distanced from the basic human entitlements. It is apparent that EBCs and Dalits in other States face similar conditions. However, the BJP is yet to engage with these issues and has not offered much resolutions to contest the prevalent issues of poverty, social backwardness and landlessness. The 'Subaltern Hindutva', while appearing to be mainly strategic in ensuring the BJP's electoral victories, offers no mandate to satisfy the aspirations of the worst-off social groups.

With Vishnu Deo Sai and Mohan Yadav as the Chief Ministers of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, respectively, the BJP has demonstrated its willingness to promote new leadership from the subaltern groups, initiating a process of democratisation of the top political positions. Such initiatives should also be supplemented by effective policies for the empowerment and participation of the marginalised social groups in the economic development and social change.

The BJP must pass the social justice test as sections among the historically disadvantaged have moved to the BJP with deep expectations for their economic welfare and elevated political participation. In Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, while the combined population of Dalits and Adivasis is close to 40%, their share in political power (cabinet ministries and other important portfolios) is negligible. Similarly, EBCs are another neglected group when it comes to the distribution of important political assets. The social elites, though small in number, remain the torchbearers of

Hindutva's developmental agenda.

Second, the BJP should also ensure that a new impressive class among Dalits and Adivasis should emerge as the new leaders, business entrepreneurs and influencers in the economic sphere. Such a directive will radicalise the conventional social justice policies that often address Dalit-Adivasi groups as the passive recipients of the state's welfare packages. Instead, Dalits and Adivasis should be identified as the essential components of neo-liberal economic development and have an equitable share in the profits of urbanisation, industrial production and technological development. More policy directives and affirmative action policies are required so that the Dalit-Adivasi class emerges as the crucial influencers in the global economy.

### The possibility of a democratisation

One can expect that the new arrival of the subaltern social groups into the right-wing platform to curtail the BJP's aggressive communal rhetoric and force the state to deal with the concerns of social justice. The development has the possibility to make the right-wing platform conducive to the values of social reforms, to understand the ecological perspectives of Adivasis, and to democratisate the higher strata of power. Such assurances and their effective implementation will make the BJP a substantive democratic party, responsible for the welfare and empowerment of India's subaltern masses.

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### BOOKS: REVIEW

## Shared skies over divided streets: The story of Aligarh

In "City on Fire: A Boyhood in Aligarh," Zeyad Masroor Khan's debut book, the author delves into the complexities of communal violence and the search for identity in a divided world. Echoing Hannah Arendt's exploration of the "banality of evil" in her 1961 essay, Khan brings a similar perspective to the communal riots in his hometown of Upar Kot, near Aligarh, India.

Khan's narrative begins with an intense and personal account of a riot in Upar Kot, underscoring his family's concern for his pregnant sister amid the chaos. This opening sets the tone for a memoir that oscillates between the tensions of communal strife and the pursuit of everyday joys and normalcy. The author's love for comics and ventures into Hindu-dominated areas, despite his mother's warnings, adds a layer of innocence and bravery to his storytelling.

The memoir offers a vivid portrayal of Aligarh's historical signifi-

cance, particularly in the context of the Partition of India and Pakistan. Khan's family history, with his uncles migrating to Pakistan while his father chose to stay in India, adds depth to the narrative, highlighting the personal impacts of political decisions.

Khan's recounting of his childhood is punctuated by gripping episodes. Notably, his accidental triggering of a riot-warning mechanism in his home reveals the constant undercurrent of tension in Upar Kot. Another harrowing incident on a school bus, where a Hindu man named Bablu protects Muslim children from a mob, poignantly illustrates the complexity of human relationships amidst communal conflict.

As the narrative progresses, Khan's journey takes him to Delhi for journalism studies, where he confronts the ongoing reality of sectarian violence, particularly during the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act protests in 2020. These experi-

**Khan's family history, with his uncles migrating to Pakistan while his father chose to stay in India, adds depth to the narrative, highlighting the personal impacts of political decisions**

ences lead him to introspect on the broader questions of Hindu-Muslim relations, and he arrives at an understanding of shared human emotions across community lines.

"City on Fire" is more than just an autobiography; it is a reflection on the Muslim community's struggle against everyday communalism in India. Khan's story is a poignant reminder of the choices and challenges faced by those who chose to



City on Fire: A Boyhood in Aligarh  
By Zeyad Masroor Khan  
HarperCollins  
312 pages; Rs 599

stay in India during the 1947 Partition. His narrative is a testament to the resilience and complexity of human spirit in times of division and conflict.

Khan's writing is immersive, blending personal anecdotes with historical context. His ability to maintain a balance between the portrayal of communal tensions and the more tender, human moments of his life makes the book a compelling read. The memoir is not just about the violence and the fear; it's about finding small pockets of happiness, understanding, and humanity in a world often torn apart by hate.

Zeyad Masroor Khan's exploration extends beyond his personal experiences, encompassing the broader socio-political landscape that has shaped Hindu-Muslim relations over decades. Through his

eyes, readers witness the transformation of Upar Kot, a microcosm of the larger Indian society grappling with the legacy of partition and the evolving dynamics of communalism. Khan's narrative offers a poignant critique of the political machinations that often fuel religious strife, subtly hinting at the role of political leadership in either exacerbating or calming communal tensions. His observations about the manipulation of communal sentiments for political gains are particularly incisive, providing a nuanced understanding of how ordinary people become pawns in larger political games.

Khan also delves into the psychological impact of growing up amidst such turmoil. He portrays how fear, suspicion, and prejudice can be ingrained from a young age, affecting one's worldview and interactions with others from different communities. However, he also emphasizes the transformative power of education and exposure to diverse perspectives. His time at Jamia Millia Islamia, a university known for its pluralistic ethos, serves as a turning point, offering him insights into the complexities of Indian identity beyond communal lines.



## Union FM Sitharaman Asks States to Clear MSME Payments Delayed by State PSUs

**NEW DELHI:** Calling out the State governments, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Tuesday that State PSUs owe a large amount to the MSMEs and they should quickly clear the bills.

Speaking in the Lok Sabha on questions on the GST dues owed to MSMEs, she said that the central government has been "fairly sensitive to the needs of MSMEs".

"The central government enacted a provision in the budget to ensure that the credit and tax incentives to larger companies and PSUs would be held back until actual payment of dues to MSMEs has been accounted for in that fiscal," she said.

"This understanding that PSU means central (PSU)



may not always be correct. Yes, there are central PSUs which owe money to MSME and all of us ministers have been very keenly observing them so that the delay should not be beyond 45 days, and the central PSU largely now go by that understanding," FM told

the Parliament.

"But I don't have an authority to speak about state PSUs and it is not a secret that state PSUs owe a large amount to MSMEs, and the problem therefore remains for the MSMEs but it is outside of my realm. It is very much

the realm of the states where the same concern for MSME should be understood by the state governments and they should quickly clear the bills," she said.

The lower house of the Parliament also passed the Central Goods and Services Tax (Second Amendment) Bill, 2023, on Tuesday, following a discussion on the subject and in line with the recommendation of the 52nd GST Council held earlier in October.

The bill, which was introduced on December 13, sought to incorporate the legislative changes in Sections 109 and 110 of the CGST Act, 2017, for the council's recommendation to increase the age limit of the judicial authorities of the GST Appellate Tribunal.

## Torque Pharma Introduces its Newest Nutraceutical under the brand "Multipower"

**KULBIR SINGH KALSI**  
Chandigarh

Torque Pharma, a leading entity in the pharmaceutical industry, has introduced its Multipower Soft Gelatin Capsules, a Nutraceutical Endowment designed to promote health and wellbeing. This innovative product combines the advantages of Multivitamin with Calcium, Zinc, Iron, Minerals, and Ginseng. It helps to enhance immunity and energy, catering to daily nutritional requirements. The Multipower Soft Gelatin Capsules contains Ginseng extract, vital vitamins like vitamin A, B1, B2, B6, B12, C, E, B3 & minerals like Calcium, Copper, Iodine, Iron, Manganese & Zinc that addresses nutritional deficiencies.

## Usha Cable Industries starts manufacturing of 630 sq mm underground cable

**KULBIR SINGH KALSI**  
Chandigarh

Usha Cable Industries started manufacturing of fire proof house wire under its brand Usha Cable as per the new technology which is getting huge demand from the markets of Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Himachal Pradesh of North India. The company has already been manufacturing best quality Summer Sable Cable Multi Core Round Rubberized Silicone Soft PBC Cable at minus up to 30 degree temperature. Company Director Aman Gupta said that while moving towards self-reliance in the matter of wires and cables, the company has also started manufacturing cables for WiFi and all these cables of the company are available in all the major markets of the country.

## Trident Group secures a prestigious win with the Best Design and Concept Award at PaperEx'23

**KULBIR SINGH KALSI**  
Chandigarh

Trident Group, a global conglomerate and one of the largest wheat-straw based paper manufacturers, clinched the prestigious Best Design and Concept Award at PaperEx'23, held at the India Expo Centre, Greater Noida. The accolade is conferred upon Trident in acknowledgement of its exemplary demonstration of innovation and commitment to sustainability in the paper industry, aligning seamlessly with the event's theme for a greener tomorrow.

Renowned as a global platform, PaperEx attracts key players, innovators and stakeholders from around the world, fostering collaborations and showcasing the latest advancements in paper manufacturing. Trident Paper seized the opportunity to exhibit its latest range of notebooks and relaunched its Enviro Paper Copier in 65 GSM at PaperEx'23. With a firm dedication to forging a greener tomorrow, the organisation meticulously integrates sustainable practices into its manufacturing practices. The newly launched notebook designs encapsulate the essence of Indian culture, capturing a sparking interest.

## India Aims to Reduce Coal Imports Dependency by 2025

**NEW DELHI:** Union Minister of Coal, Mines, and Parliamentary Affairs, Pralhad Joshi has stated that India's coal import for the power sector is projected to reduce to 2% by 2025, attributing the decrease to a substantial increase in domestic coal production. Joshi indicated that the total coal production for this year is poised to exceed one billion tonnes.

Launching the 9th round of commercial coal mine auction, the Minister emphasized the contribution of the coal sector to the nation's energy security and economic development. Joshi underscored India's commitment to sustainable coal mining practices, positioning the country as a global leader in emissions containment.



He also highlighted the allocation of INR 6000 crore as incentives for coal gasification and stated that coal Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) have planted 100 million saplings in recent years to promote sustainable mining.

Within the framework of the 9th round of commercial coal mine auctions, a comprehensive offering includes 31 coal mines,

encompassing 26 from the 9th round and 5 from the 2nd attempt of the 7th round. These mines are situated in states abundant in coal/lignite resources, such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana.

The efforts in commercial coal mining are expected to draw in fresh investments, leading to the creation of both direct and indirect employment opportunities. The revenue generated through these auctions will be allocated to coal-bearing state governments, providing a boost to states including Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, and Assam.

## Dominica consolidates regulations, underscoring Programme's integrity

**ROSEAU:** In a proactive move demonstrating Dominica's commitment to the integrity of its Citizenship by Investment Programme, the country has implemented watertight regulations to reinforce the legal framework of the Programme and its Unit. The new regulations are the next step in Dominica's due diligence vision.

The new regulations strengthen the position of the Citizenship Unit, with the added support and oversight by the Committee, led by the Government's attorney general. These new regulations formally protect the Government of Dominica's ongoing commitment to due diligence. By consolidating its regulations into a single set of regulations that encompasses all aspects of the citizenship by investment process.

Dominica's international partnerships are more important than ever to maintain, given the nation's integral role as a leading member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Commonwealth of Nations and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS).

In a step indicating Dominica's multilateralism and deep commitment to its international partners, the nation builds on cross-country collaboration by denying citizenship to applicants who were denied any visa or right to enter the EU, UK,



USA, or Canada, and to any other country that Dominicans can travel visa-free to.

The new regulations also enshrine into law information sharing between the CBI Unit and the Joint Regional Communications Centre (JRCC). This means that information sharing between CBI countries and other jurisdictions is, and will remain, paramount.

Therefore, Dominica continues to take a proactive approach in making sure international partners are kept apprised of the CBI process and advancing the due diligence protocols to ensure the country continues to meet international best practice. Dominica is ensuring all loopholes are closed and are strengthening every part of the Programme.

Dominica set the standard for CBI due diligence earlier this year as the first country to introduce mandatory interviews as part of the country's CBI application process. These regulations continue the work of the nation's CBI Unit to uphold the Programme's reputation of transparency and accountability.

## Lecco Cucina expands Bangalore footprint with Italian design-inspired modular furniture experience centre



**ARUN KUMAR RAO**  
Bangalore

Lecco Cucina – the maker of Italian-design-inspired modular kitchens and wardrobes, is expanding its footprint in the highly style-conscious Bangalore market with the addition of its latest experience centre. Experience Centre showcases the best of designs for discerning customers that is home to a bevy of start-ups and IT companies.

The bouquet of two exquisite experience centres

modular furniture that embodies the legendary Italian perfection.

A winning combination of aesthetics and utility, Lecco Cucina ushers in a new paradigm for Indian consumers who appreciate the good product. With their vision of bringing the best of Italian design and innovation to Indian homes, Lecco Cucina has quickly established a reputation in the region. Opting for the franchise route to expand its footprint in the region, the brand's wide range of stylish and quality products quickly acquired an enviable reputation across south India.

"We aim to close the calendar year 2023 with 10 Franchise sign-ups, including the seven that are currently operational. We are targeting 30 outlets in 2024 and 100 outlets by 2027 across tier 2 & tier 3 cities across South, West, and Central India," said Trishul Devanga, Business Head – Lecco Cucina.

The Lecco Cucina growth story is fuelled by the vision and ambition to bring Italian elegance to Indian homes at reasonable prices. Lecco Cucina leverages Italian designs with German technology to fashion furniture that is attractive, functional, and cost-effective.

## Meta & ONDC Partner to Fuel Digital Commerce for 500,000 Indian MSMEs



**NEW DELHI:** Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with social media giant Meta on Tuesday, in a strategic partnership aimed at empowering 500,000 Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) over the next two years, propelling them onto the e-commerce stage.

This collaboration entails comprehensive capacity-building initiatives integrating social media skills, AI-enabled tools, and an open technology network architecture, levelling the playing field for MSMEs operating in the digital commerce landscape. Thampy Koshy, CEO of ONDC, and Sandhya Devanathan, Vice-President of Meta India, shared their visions for supporting small businesses and their perspectives on the flourishing digital commerce domain in India.

Koshy articulated ONDC's predominant vision to ensure equal opportunities for small enterprises in the digital realm, steering away from the dominance of a few major players.

He highlighted the ONDC protocol's role in unbundling business building blocks and fostering interoperability.

"While everyone has equal opportunities, they may not have equal capabilities. So ONDC is taking special efforts to help small and micro enterprises leverage the network. The collaboration with Meta will provide small businesses with tools, training, and capacity building so they can build on this network," Koshy said. In concurrence, Devanathan from Meta emphasised the organisation's commitment to skill-building for small businesses entering the network.

Through Meta's Small Business Academy, the company aims to train a substantial five million small businesses in digital marketing skills over the next two years to facilitate their growth, she added.

"We will also provide engineering support for business solutions providers to build seamless buyer-seller experiences on WhatsApp integrated with ONDC. Additionally, we are working with ONDC

on their Sahayak chatbot for easy seller onboarding," said Devanathan.

Devanathan highlighted how Meta's platforms—Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp—enable small businesses to experiment, iterate, and cost-effectively expand their audiences.

Generative AI, she added, will aid in creating customised ads and campaigns, allowing small businesses to concentrate on their core offerings.

ONDC's open network, democratising access, will empower small sellers to showcase their catalogues to a broader audience, with a specific focus on supporting women-led small businesses through skilling and enablement initiatives, said Devanathan.

Regarding observed trends in the Indian digital landscape, Devanathan underscored the unprecedented, sophisticated growth of the Indian internet through UPI and digital public infrastructure.

She also noted the rising number of creators expressing themselves on platforms and India's potential as a global leader in technology innovation.

Similarly, Koshy highlighted Indian entrepreneurs crafting home-grown, original solutions for national and global markets, emphasising the significance of leveraging ONDC and Meta's offerings for small businesses to reach wider customer bases.

## IndiaBonds.com Launches a Portfolio Analysis tool for Retail Investors

**NEW DELHI:** The fintech bond platform, IndiaBonds.com, announced the launch of the Portfolio Analysis Tool for retail bond investors. This tool is designed to cater to the convenience needs of retail bond investors wherein they can now carry out their portfolio analysis, manage cashflow timelines, and also receive cashflow payout reminders.

Owing to this tool, retail investors will be enabled to have a comprehensive analysis of their bond portfolio across risk factors like credit ratings of the bond, exposure, and concentration. It will also help them to plan their finances better as they will be able to see their entire future cashflows from all bonds including interest and redemption. Additionally, they can now even add bonds that may be bought anywhere else to see entire risk in one place.

Vishal Goenka, Co-Founder, IndiaBonds.com, said, "For ease of doing bond investment, we have heavily invested in our technology and are continuously striving to provide seamless user experience to our investors. Through our fintech-led online bond platform, we are empowering our investors to navigate through their bond investment journey and the free Portfolio Analysis Tool is a must have for everyone." He added, "To overcome the awareness-related barrier, we have plugged in educational content in written and video formats. Additionally, we have an in-built Bond Calculator which enables users to instantly calculate bond yield and price; and get complete transparency on pricing of thousands of bonds and make easy calculations of Government and Corporate Bonds."

## AI-Driven Warehouse & Retail Automation Leader GreyOrange Closes on \$135M Growth Financing



**Funding will further accelerate GreyOrange's growth and industry defining leadership in automation fulfillment and retail markets**

**NEW YORK:** GreyOrange Inc., a leader in AI-driven fulfillment automation, today announced the first close of its Series D funding, securing \$135 million. Led by Anthelion Capital (formerly Cowen Sustainable Investments) this investment reinforces GreyOrange's innovative approach to transforming warehouse and retail store operations through a hardware-agnostic software platform and a dynamic range of certified robotic and sensing technologies. The company's growth and adoption rates with market leading Fortune 500 customers validates GreyOrange's capability to lead tech transformation in the global supply chain automation space.

"Not only has GreyOrange automated the movement of goods within the warehouse, but the company has also built a network that optimizes how retailers move their goods across their entire supply chain," said Vusal Najafov, Co-Founder, Anthelion Capital. "Their capability to improve operational efficiency in various settings and their innovative approach in transforming inventory into a more productive asset in warehouses and retail spaces are key reasons for our excitement in leading this funding round."

GreyOrange's latest funding round also reflects a strong vote of confidence from existing investors such as Mithril, 3State Ventures, and Blume Ventures. Their continued support, coupled with significant capital from previous rounds, underscores their unwavering commitment to GreyOrange. GreyOrange will deploy the growth capital to accelerate the company's technology leadership, continue its global expansion, and further support

the adoption of GreyOrange's fulfillment orchestration platform in warehouses, distribution centers, and retail stores.

"As we scale our technology and enhance customer experiences and operational efficiency, we recognize that keeping the needs of our customers at the center of our product and solution roadmap has proven essential for our customers' success, as well as our own," said Akash Gupta, Co-Founder and CEO, GreyOrange. "This Series D funding amplifies our commitment to leadership within the AI and robotics orchestration space and affirms our thought leadership within this market."

"GreyOrange's technical and commercial advances reinforce our shared mission to bring game changing automation and productivity to retail," said Ajay Royan, Founder and Managing General Partner of Mithril Capital. "GreyOrange's thoughtful implementation of their pioneering technology has earned the trust of the world's largest retailers and logistics partners. GreyOrange is leading a major shift in productivity, safety, and novel forms of convenience that will benefit hundreds of millions of consumers."

The overall growth seen in the warehouse automation sector will continue to be a strong tailwind for GreyOrange. According to the 2023 Gartner Hype Cycle™ for Supply Chain Execution Technologies report, "by 2027, over 75% of companies will have adopted some form of cyber-physical automation within their warehouse operations."

The Gartner report also details that, "As companies expand their use of robotics, most will eventually have heterogeneous fleets of robots from different vendors performing various tasks, which will require standardized software that can easily integrate to a variety of agents and robot platforms."

## MSME Ministry's RAMP Program Offers Three New Schemes, Waives ZED Scheme Fees for Women

**NEW DELHI:** Union Ministry of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) has introduced three sub-schemes under the RAMP (Raising and Accelerating MSME Productivity) program on Wednesday, emphasising the adoption of sustainable technology, boosting the circular economy, and addressing delayed payments.

Launched by Union Minister for MSME Narayan Rane at the 2nd meeting of the National MSME Council, these schemes include the MSME Green Investment and Financing for Transformation Scheme (MSE GIFT Scheme), MSE Scheme for Promotion and Investment in Circular Economy (MSE SPICE Scheme), and MSE Scheme on Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) for Delayed Payments.

To foster women's entrepre-



neurship in the MSME sector, the ZED Scheme of the Ministry has been made completely free for women-led enterprises and the government also guarantees 100 per cent financial support for the certification cost. The MSME GIFT Scheme aims to assist MSMEs in adopting green technology by providing interest subvention and credit guarantee support. Meanwhile, the MSE

SPICE Scheme targets to support circular economy projects through credit subsidies, contributing to the MSME sector's goal of achieving zero emissions by 2070.

Additionally, the MSE Scheme on ODR for Delayed Payments pioneers legal support with modern IT tools and Artificial Intelligence to address delayed payments for Micro and Small Enterprises.

## Venus Remedies' R3SET Takes Strategic Leap into Wellness with Holistic Health Innovations

**CHANDIGARH:** Venus Remedies Limited unveiled a significant transformation of its consumer healthcare division, R3SET. This strategic pivot marks R3SET's foray into the wellness arena. The Ministry solidified these initiatives through Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with implementing agencies Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI), for MSME GIFT and MSME SPICE schemes and National Informatics Centre Services Inc. (NICSI), for MSE ODR scheme.

Chaired by Union Minister Narayan Rane, the 2nd meeting of the National MSME Council emphasised the need for states and union territories to actively contribute to the promotion and development of the MSME sector.

"R3SET's entry into the wellness domain is not just an expansion; it's a reflection of our ethos that wellness should be an intrinsic part of everyday life."



# Global Growth likely to go-slow in 2024: RBI

**NEW DELHI:** Global growth may slow further in 2024 while disinflation at varying paces in different geographies may pave the way for interest rate reductions, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said on Wednesday in its latest bulletin.

The central bank provided insights into the economic landscape, government finances, inflation dynamics, and monetary policy.

In India, ongoing economic revitalisation is anticipated to continue, driven by decreasing input costs and improved corporate profitability.

Despite a spike in CPI inflation to 5.6 per cent in November, largely attributed to recurring food price hikes, it is projected to ease to 4.6 per cent in the first three quarters of 2024-25.

The real economy's enduring strength has buoyed domestic financial markets.

In a comprehensive half-yearly review, analysts Harshita Yadav, Kovuri Akash Yadav,



Rachit Solanki, Saksham Sood, Anoop K. Suresh, Samir Ranjan Behera, and Atri Mukherjee examined the financial status of the Indian government for 2023-24.

Noteworthy points included the resilience of the fiscal position during the first half of the fiscal year, impressive growth in major central taxes, and a robust increase in capital expenditure, supported by revenue mobilisation and the 'Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment' scheme.

Deba Prasad Rath, Silu Muduli, and Himani Shekhar looked at the risk of stag-

flation in India. Stagflation is when the economy isn't growing much, but prices are rising.

They found that certain events, like the Asian crisis, the global financial crisis, the taper tantrum, and the COVID-19 pandemic, increased the risk of stagflation. 'Taper tantrum' refers to a period of financial market volatility that occurred in 2013 when there was speculation and anxiety surrounding the potential tapering, or reduction, of the US Federal Reserve's bond-buying programme known as quantitative easing.

# India Debunks IMF's Assessment About Excessive Currency Intervention



**NEW DELHI:** India has hit back at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for saying the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) intervention in the foreign-exchange market was excessive.

It indicated that the country was trying to influence the level of the rupee. The Washington-based lender said the currency moved within a very narrow range from December 2022 to October 2023, suggesting the central bank's intervention "likely exceeded levels necessary to address disorderly market conditions." As a result, the IMF re-

classified India's foreign-exchange regime to a "stabilized arrangement" from a "floating" system, it said in its annual Article IV country report released on Monday. India "strongly disagreed" with the assessment, calling it "unjustified," the IMF said. The Reserve Bank of India stated that the period was restricted to a short-term, and that the IMF's assessment would fail over a two to five-year horizon, the fund said. "The RBI strongly believes that such a view is incorrect as, in their view, it uses data selectively," the IMF said in its report.

# 6% Growth Rate Not Enough for India to Rise above Lower Middle Economy: Raghuram Rajan

**NEW DELHI:** India will remain a lower middle economy if the growth rate continues to be 6 per cent annually without any rise in the population by 2047, said former Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor, Raghuram Rajan.

He noted that the Indian economy will remain a lower middle one by 2047 (Amrit Kaal) and would reach the end of the demographic dividend by then.

Addressing an event in Hyderabad, the former RBI official said, "If the country does not grow faster, it will grow older (demographically) before it gets richer, which means there is the burden of an aging population to deal with also at that point," reported PTI.

The economist stated that GDP growth in India for the last two quarters remained around 7.5 per cent and 'if one looks at the labour force participation, it is very low and when it comes to female participation, it is the lowest in the G20'.



"India's growth potential is today about 6 per cent a year, GDP growth. If you do the math, at 6 per cent a year, you double every 12 years and therefore in 24 years, we'll be four times our per capita income. Today, the per capita income in India, as you know, is just a little below USD 2,500 per person. Multiply by four, we get USD 10,000 per person...So if you do the math, at our current rate of growth, you know, strong as it is highest in

the G20, we don't get rich but we stay lower middle income till 2047," Rajan added.

Certain southern states are growing in terms of population below reproduction rate, which is weakening growth.

He noted that if the economy doesn't grow faster, the country will grow old before it grows rich. Therefore, he stated, the current pace of growth is insufficient to give employment to all individuals entering the labour force.

# IMF Forecasts India's Economic Growth At 6.3%, Highlights Potential for Expansion with Reforms



**NEW DELHI:** The International Monetary Fund (IMF) anticipates India's economic growth at 6.3 per cent for both the current fiscal year and the next, according to its recent Article IV consultation report released on Monday.

The report, assessing the nation's current and medium-term economic outlook, underscores the crucial role of India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) and robust government programs in sustaining growth.

"India has potential for even higher growth, with greater contributions from labour and human capital, if comprehensive reforms are implemented," the IMF said.

Despite this optimistic outlook, the IMF's growth projection falls below the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) forecast of 7 per cent for the current financial year ending on March 31, 2024, as per the report.

Addressing economic concerns, the IMF acknowledged, "Headline inflation is expected to gradually decline to the target although it remains volatile due to food price shocks."

Addressing economic concerns, the IMF acknowledges the volatility in headline inflation, expected to gradually decline to the target, driven partly by food price shocks.

In November, volatile food prices raised retail inflation to 5.55 per cent, up from 4.87 per cent the previous month, while within the RBI's tolerance band of 2-6 per cent, but still exceeding the 4 per cent target.

The IMF report highlights the Indian government's commitment to maintaining a 4.5 per cent fiscal deficit target.

"The adjustment will be implemented approximately evenly over 2024-25 and 2025-26. State government deficits are expected to remain below the 3 per cent of GDP ceiling, in line with their historical performance," the IMF added.

# India : EIB Global announces \$40 million for private equity fund supporting digitalisation of Indian SMEs

The investment by EIB Global in the private equity fund Amicus Capital Partners II leverages digitalisation and technology to overcome geographic limitations.

Through its digitalisation and market access investment themes, the fund will target sectors like healthcare, consumer products and services, financial services, technology and business services, and specialty manufacturing.

New Delhi : Kris Peeters, Vice-President of the European Investment Bank (EIB) and Mahesh Parasuraman, Partner and Co-founder of Amicus Capital, announced the signing of an EIB investment of up to \$40 million in the private equity fund Amicus Capital Partners Fund II. It will support investments in Indian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in various economic sectors.

The fund seeks to leverage digitalisation and technology to overcome geographic limitations and facilitate deeper market penetration. It does this by prioritising investments in digital-first business models, working with companies to strengthen their existing technology infrastructure, and helping management design clear digitalisation roadmaps to boost digital transformation in conventional businesses.

The fund's strategy of using digitalisation to support market access across a range of economic sectors is well aligned with the objectives of the Global Gateway initiative. Global Gateway supports sound projects that improve global and regional connectivity, and works with partner countries to address the digital divide and further integrate into the global digital ecosystem. Amicus Capital Partners Fund II will also help local businesses expand, providing goods and services to underserved regions and populations and fostering sustainable, inclusive growth.

"I'm delighted to announce this EIB support for Amicus Capital Partners Fund II, a fund that pursues a targeted investment strategy combining digitalisation and market access to foster inclusive economic

growth across various sectors in India, in alignment with the strategic EU priorities in India. In a challenging fundraising environment, this investment promises high additionality, and will promote crowding-in and the diversification of the investor base," said EIB Vice-President Kris Peeters.

Mahesh Parasuraman, Partner and Co-founder of Amicus Capital, added, "We are excited to bring the EIB on board as a key investor in the fund. This represents a significant milestone in our journey. The EIB's participation will further catalyse private capital into Amicus Capital Partners II. The fund will leverage on the global investment experience of the EIB team to help Amicus Capital support middle-market companies in India in their digitalisation and market access efforts."



# Sovereign Credit Ratings Inconsistent, Not Transparent: CEA

**NEW DELHI:** The Chief Economic Adviser (CEA) of India has criticised the sovereign credit rating methodologies employed by leading global agencies such as Fitch, Moody's, and Standard & Poor's, citing their opacity and failure to accurately represent the underlying economic fundamentals of the Indian economy, in a report released on Thursday.

The report strongly advocates for a rating upgrade, highlighting the inconsistency in India's sovereign ratings, which have remained static at BBB- over the past 15 years.

Despite ascending from the 12th largest global economy in 2008 to the 5th largest in 2023, with the second-highest growth rate among comparator economies during this period, the nation's ratings have not reflected this economic evolution, the CEA's office noted.

The BBB- rating by Fitch and Standard & Poor's is considered the lowest investment grade, with an equivalent rating of Baa3 by Moody's.

In the introduction to the report entitled "Re-examining Narratives - A Collection of Essays," Chief Economic Adviser V Anantha Nageswaran and Senior Adviser Rajiv Mishra articulated that "these ratings are important as they are bind-



ing constraints for developing economies, hindering their ability to attract necessary funds."

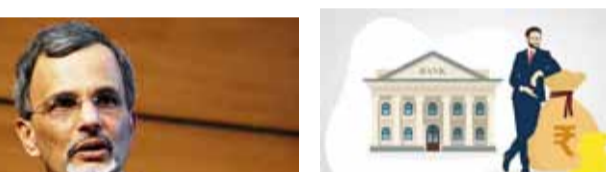
Calling for urgent reforms in the credit rating system, the report emphasises the need for ratings that genuinely reflect a developing economy's willingness to pay.

These reforms are expected to enhance the ability of developing countries to secure long-term financial resources from both domestic and international markets by significantly reducing funding costs, thereby supporting their development goals.

"Just as countries are obligated to be as transparent as possible with the rating agencies to be viewed favourably, the obligation must extend the other way around, too," the report stated.

The report additionally observed that credit rating

# Portal Launched to Capture MSME Bank Grievances



**NEW DELHI:** Federation of Indian Micro and Small & Medium Enterprises (FISME) has launched a portal to capture the grievances of MSMEs related to Banks. The portal was launched by Convenor of group 'Friends of MSMEs in Parliament' Rajendra Agrawal recently in the 3rd Samwad- dialogue with MSMEs in New Delhi. "Business environment has become extremely dynamic but the processes of Banks though digitally enabled have become more rigid. Branch managers today are a poor shadow of their empowered predecessors who could take fast decisions. Therefore, grievances of MSMEs are piling unaddressed", according to Neeraj Kedia, Chairman, Banking Committee of FISME. "FISME has been continuously receiving complaints about excesses of Banks about such as over charging interest rates, Foreclosure charges from MSEs, Not-releasing documents after payment of dues, Sanctions or disbursement delay, Demand for additional collateral, Unfair loan agreement, Non-compliance charges, Freezing services without intimation etc," he added.

agencies typically maintain an extensive database of globally recognised best practices, which they ostensibly depend on to formulate their assessments.

"This knowledge must be shared with the countries they rate so that appropriate action can be taken on a sovereign's part to improve its creditworthiness," it said.

Drawing parallels with India's success in improving its Ease of Doing Business ranking, the report highlights the role of two-way transparency and engagement with the World Bank, allowing the government to identify and address critical reform areas in a timely manner, the CEA's office noted.

India's substantial leap of 79 places in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business ranking between 2014 and 2020 is attributed to periodic discussions and engagement with the World Bank, allowing the government to identify and address critical reform areas in a timely manner, the CEA's office noted.

# Prior MSME Registration No Bar for Filing CIRP under IBC

**NEW DELHI:** In a significant judgment with far-reaching implications for distressed Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), the Supreme Court of India has carved a pathway for resolution plans presented by promoters even when they meet certain disqualification criteria under Section 29A of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016 (IBC).

The landmark decision in the matter of Shree Aashraya Infra-Con Limited ("Appellant") vs. NCLT & IBBI ("Respondents") lays down a crucial interpretation of Section 240A's carve-out for MSMEs, potentially revitalising the resolution landscape for this vital segment of the

Indian economy.

The case involved Shree Aashraya Infra-Con Limited, an MSME undergoing Corporate Insolvency Resolution Process (CIRP). The Resolution Professional (RP) proposed a plan backed by the promoters and approved by creditors. However, the plan was rejected based on a previous interpretation of the IBC that disqualified promoters with certain financial misdeeds from submitting plans.

The court examined clauses (c), (g), and (h) of Section 29A of the IBC Code and emphasised that this section was introduced with the intention of addressing issues related to individuals responsible for a company's financial troubles



attempting to submit a plan and acquire control over the company.

The court took note of the argument that the three clauses in Section 29A were specific to promoters and highlighted that the company's promoter, in this case, was not disqualified or ren-

dered ineligible to present the plan.

In an earlier order, the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) and the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) determined that promoters of MSMEs that were registered as such subsequent to the commencement

of insolvency proceedings are deemed ineligible.

The court noted that the exclusion of such industries from disqualification under Sections 29A (c) and (h) is imperative, as these industries might not readily come forward. Such reluctance could inevitably result not in resolution but in liquidation.

The Court appointed an Amicus Curiae (Friend of Court), Adv. Bishwajit Dubey to address the matter. He asserted that in construing Section 240A, individuals or entities registered as MSMEs prior to the submission of the Resolution Plan (bid) should qualify for exemption, regardless of the initiation date of the CIRP proceedings.

# RBI Broadens Card-On-File Tokenization Scope for Digital Payment Security



**NEW DELHI:** In an effort to enhance the security and reliability of digital payments, the Reserve Bank of India has now enabled card-on-file tokenisation (CoFT) through card issuing banks and institutions. Previously confined to merchant applications or websites, individuals now have the option to tokenize their cards using internet and mobile banking services.

To mitigate the risk of data breaches and leaks, RBI implemented the rule of tokenisation in September 2021. Under this regulation, rather than storing actual card details, a unique token, specially generated for each transaction, is securely saved with the merchant.

Earlier, it was a common practice for merchants to retain card information, and in certain instances, users were frequently required to save their card details on the merchant's app or webpage prior to finalizing a transaction. However, this practice of indiscriminately storing such sensitive information posed risk to the security of users' financial data.

"It has been decided to enable card-on-file tokenisation directly through card-issuing banks/institutions also. This will provide cardholders with an additional choice to tokenize their cards for multiple merchant sites through a single process," stated the RBI circular. The circular further stated that the generation of Card-on-File Tokenization (CoFT) must be carried out solely upon explicit customer consent and with the validation of an Additional Factor of Authentication (AFA). Additionally, the card issuer is required to furnish a comprehensive list of merchants for whom it is equipped to offer tokenization services.

# CPSEs Outperform with 34.63% Procurement from MSMEs in FY24, Exceeding 25% Mandate: FM Sitharaman

**NEW DELHI:** Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) achieved a remarkable 34.63 per cent procurement from Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) during the financial year 2023-24, surpassing the mandated 25 per cent, highlighted Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday.

Leading a Consultative Committee meeting on the 'Performance of Public Enterprises', the minister stated that as per public procurement norms, CPSEs are required to allocate 25 per cent of their annual



purchases to Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs).

Within this target, she added, 4 per cent is designated for MSEs led by Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe entrepreneurs (SC/ST), and 3 per cent for women entrepreneurs.

As of December 21, CPSEs

procurement from MSMEs reached Rs 35,836 crore, benefiting 1.25 lakh MSEs out of the total Rs 1.03 lakh crore procurement made by CPSEs in the current fiscal year, according to data from the MSME Sambandh public procurement monitoring portal.

# Over 32,000 MSMEs Shut Shop Across India In 3 Years, Maharashtra Tops List

**NEW DELHI:** Indian Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) have faced closures of nearly 32,385 units in the last three and a half years, disclosed Union Minister of State for MSMEs, Bhanu Pratap Singh Verma, in the Rajya Sabha on Monday.

These MSMEs have cancelled their registrations on the Udyam portal, marking the end of their operations between July 1, 2020, and December 11, 2023, reported the Union Minister.

The most notable closures occurred in Maharashtra, where 3,066 MSMEs shut down operations this year alone, closely followed by



Tamil Nadu with 1,740 closures and Gujarat with 1,218.

Even the relatively smaller Chandigarh region has been affected, with 1,590 MSMEs shutting down since July 2020. This includes 1,081 closures

in Haryana, 340 in Punjab, and 128 in Himachal Pradesh.

Despite the concerning closure statistics, the minister added, the government has implemented financial support mechanisms across the nation.



# INTERNATIONAL

## India's Onion Export Ban Majorly Impacts Asian Buyers

**NEW DELHI:** The prices of onion have increased for Asian buyers because of India's ban on the export of the vegetable, reported Reuters.

India banned shipments of onions on December 8 after the world's biggest exporter saw twofold increase of domestic prices in three months following a drop in production.

Now retail shoppers from Kathmandu to Colombo are struggling with high prices, since traditional Asian buyers, such as Bangladesh, Malaysia and Nepal, and even the United Arab Emirates, rely on imports from India to bridge domestic gaps, reported Reuters.

From the belacan shrimp paste of Malaysia and Bangla-



deshi biryani to chicken chilies in Nepal or Sri Lankan fish curry, Asian consumers have built up a serious dependence on Indian supplies of onions to lend spice to their favourite dishes.

Traders estimate that India accounts for more than half of all imports of onions by Asian countries. Its shorter shipment times against those from rival exporters such as China or Egypt, are key to preserv-

ing the taste of the perishable commodity.

India exported a record 2.5 million metric tons of onions in the financial year that ended on March 31, with 671,125 tons going to neighbouring Bangladesh, its biggest buyer of the vegetable.

To overcome the shortage, Bangladesh is trying to source more from China, Egypt and Turkey, said commerce ministry official Tapan Kanti Ghosh.

Even worse is the situation in landlocked Nepal, which imports most of its onions. Nepal is considering imports from China and may ask India to make an exception and allow exports, said ministry spokesperson Gajendra Kumar Thakur.

## Israel to begin selection of Construction Workers in India from next week

**NEW DELHI:** Israel's senior delegation will visit India next week to start selection of construction workers at screening centres in Delhi and Chennai, reported Indian media.

A team of "selectors" from Israel visited India last week and another senior delegation will leave for India next week to start the process of recruiting thousands of workers to be brought to the country to fill in the acute shortage faced by its construction industry, a senior executive at the Israel Builders Association said on Wednesday.

"We will start the process in Delhi and Chennai next week on December 27. At the moment we are looking to bring in 10,000 as per government approvals and this will scale up



to 30,000 in the near future depending on how it goes. It is an ongoing exercise and will take months," Deputy Director General and Spokesperson for the Israel Builders Association

(IBA), Shay Pazner, told to media. "The selection starting next week will last 10-15 days," Pazner said. A delegation led by Izchak

Gurvitz, who heads the IBA's division dealing with workers' issues and the selection team, was in India last week and would be joining CEO Igal Slovik again next week with other members of the IBA team, he said.

Director General of the Ministry of Construction and Housing Yehuda Morgenstern will also be accompanying the delegation leaving for India next week.

During a telephonic conversation with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi on Tuesday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "discussed advancing the arrival of foreign workers from India to the State of Israel," the Office of the Prime Minister of Israel said in a statement.

## Teen charged with murder of Indian security guard in New Zealand

A 17-year-old teenager was charged on Friday in connection with the murder of a 25-year-old Indian security guard in a suburb of West Auckland in New Zealand. Ramandeep Singh was reported unresponsive just after midnight on December 18 and was pronounced dead after being found at the Royal Reserve carpark in Massey, the New Zealand Herald newspaper reported. Born and raised in Kotli Shahpur village in Gurdaspur, Punjab, Singh had moved to New Zealand on a study visa in 2018 to pursue higher education. He was his parents' only son. The latest arrest comes after a 26-year-old man was taken into custody on Monday and also charged with Singh's murder.

## India Rejects EUs proposal to settle ICT duty case through arbitration; approaches WTO's appellate

**NEW DELHI:** The European Union (EU) is disappointed over India's move to approach the WTO's appellate body in a case related to customs duties on certain information and communications technology (ICT) products, reported ET.

On December 8, India appealed against a ruling of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) trade dispute settlement panel, in a case filed by the European Union against New Delhi's import duties on certain ICT products including mobile phones and components, base stations, integrated circuits and optical instruments.

Stating the right of countries to appeal, India called for early restoration of the non-functional appellate body of WTO so that the panel's errors can be corrected and the dispute can be resolved expeditiously.



India has also rejected the EU's request to settle the dispute through arbitration.

On this request, India said that such interim arbitration agreements undermine the right of countries to appeal to a permanent standing body, which is fundamental to the multilateral trading system.

The panel in April had ruled that import duties imposed by India on certain ICT products violate global trading norms. Appellate body is the final authority to decide on trade disputes in WTO. However, it is not functioning as the US has been blocking appointments of judges in the body.

## Missing Indian student found dead in East London, cops appeal for assistance

**LONDON:** The body of a 23-year-old Indian student, who went missing in the UK last week, has been found near a lake in East London, police said, appealing for assistance to help piece together his last known movements.

Gurashman Singh Bhatia, a student of Loughborough University, was reported missing from Canary Wharf after a night out with friends on December 14.

He was last seen on CCTV in the South Quay area at around 04:20hrs on December 15, according to the police.

"Officers carried out extensive enquiries, including viewing CCTV, speaking to witnesses and analysing phone and financial data. Water searches were also carried out," the Metropolitan Police said in a statement on Wednesday.

On Wednesday afternoon, police divers found his body in the water in South Quay,



and officers are now appealing for assistance to help piece together his last known movements.

Although formal identification has not yet taken place, Gurashman's family in Jalandhar has been informed.

"Gurashman's death is being treated as unexpected, and while there is nothing to suggest it was suspicious, we will ensure our investigation is as thorough as possible to confirm this," Detective Chief Superintendent James Conway, responsible for local

policing in Tower Hamlets, said.

"Because of this, we are releasing a CCTV image of Gurashman that was taken before his disappearance and would like anyone who may have seen him in the Marsh Wall area on the evening of Thursday, 14 December and in the early hours of Friday, 15 December, to contact us," he said.

On December 17, BJP leader Manjinder Singh Sirsa took to his X handle to inform about the missing Indian student in London.

Seeking External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's assistance, he also urged Loughborough University and the Indian High Commission to locate Gurashman.

Reacting to Gurashman's death, Sirsa said in a video posted on X: "Deeply saddened to hear about the passing of G S Bhatia, a Loughborough University student who was missing since December 15th. Our thoughts are with the family and friends during this difficult time."

Last month, another 23-year-old Indian student who moved to the UK from India on September 19, was found dead on the bank of Thames river, four days after being reported missing by his family.

Mitkumar Patel's body was found on the riverbank at Caledonian Wharf, on the Isle of Dogs, at roughly 10.45 a.m. on November 21 by a passerby.

## UK rows back salary threshold for family visas after backlash



**LONDON:** Following widespread backlash, the UK government has rowed back on plans to hike the salary needed to bring family members to the country from GBP38,700 to GBP29,000, the BBC reported. An estimated 300,000 non-Britons, many of them Indians, were left in shock after the increase -- from the current level of GBP18,600 -- was announced earlier this month as part of a plan to reduce net migration. The change of plan was confirmed by Lord Sharpe of Epsom in answer to a parliamentary question. He said the threshold would now rise to GBP29,000 in the spring, before then rising "in incremental stages" to give "predictability".

## Migration threatens to 'overwhelm' Europe nations: Rishi Sunak

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has said "enemies" want to use migration as a "weapon" to deliberately drive people to their shores to 'destabilise the society'.

In one of his strongest attacks on illegal immigration, Sunak warned that the growing number of migrants could "overwhelm" European countries if swift action is not taken to address the issue, The Evening Standard reported.

"Criminal gangs find the ugliest ways to exploit our humanity and don't have a problem with putting people's lives at risk by putting them on boats," Sunak said, addressing a gathering of Italian Conservatives and Right-wingers in Italy.

"If we do not tackle this problem, the numbers will



only grow. It will overwhelm our countries and our capacity to help those who actually need our help the most."

The Prime Minister also said changes to global refugee rules could be needed to tackle illegal migration.

"Because if we don't fix this problem now, the boats will keep coming and more lives will be lost at sea," Sunak added.

Sunak's remarks come after he narrowly escaped a rebellion by his MPs over the Rwanda Bill last week.

For the moment, they refrained from pulling the rug

on Sunak on the basis that he had indicated to them that he was willing to accept amendments that would tighten the Bill, media reported earlier.

The Rwanda Bill forms the core of Sunak's policy to stop the boats -- one of five key priorities, which he set out at the start of the year.

Once the bill -- one of the toughest immigration legislation ever introduced to the UK Parliament -- receives Royal Assent, it will pave the way for the UK to begin next steps in processing people for relocation and starting removal flights to Rwanda.

## Powerful storm batters US, 3 people dead

**NEW YORK:** A powerful storm battered parts of the US East Coast and the Northeast, killing three people, knocking out power, washing out roads and prompting the evacuation of a community.

While two of the deaths were reported in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, where the storm system unleashed strong winds and dumped heavy rain throughout Monday, the third fatality occurred in South Carolina, which was hit by the storm over the weekend, reports CNN.

The storm system unleashed strong winds and heavy rain across the Northeast on Monday, dumping 2-4 inches of water over much of the region within 24 hours, with reports of more than five inches of water just northwest of New York City.



On Monday, the New York City Emergency Management temporarily closed the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge linking Staten Island and Brooklyn; Throgs Neck Bridge linking Queens and Bronx and Cross Island Parkway between Northern Boulevard; and the Throgs Neck Bridge, reports Xinhua news agency.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority also reported suspension, rerouting or delays with multiple subways.

The Management said the city's power supplier Consolidated Edison, Inc. had over 10,000

customers without power.

There were 237 reports of downed trees across the city.

New York's LaGuardia and John F. Kennedy airports and Boston's Logan International Airport have had around 400 flights cancelled, according to data from FlightAware.

Meanwhile, more than 4,700 flights were also delayed on Monday. Local governments in New York issued warnings and travel advisories in advance with about 5,000 utility crews deployed across the state. In the Northeast, more than 660,000 customers were without power as of Monday night, according to poweroutage.us. The vast majority of them were in Maine, where more than 420,000 customers were in the dark out of the more than 852,000 tracked.

## Hong Kong plummets to 46th spot in latest Human Freedom ranking as China continues to violate "one country, two systems" pact



**TORONTO:** As a result of increasing restrictions on liberties in Hong Kong—once among the freest places on earth—it now ranks 46<sup>th</sup> in the latest *Human Freedom Index* report, released today by Canada's Fraser Institute and the U.S.-based Cato Institute.

As recently as 2010, Hong Kong was the 3<sup>rd</sup> freest jurisdiction on earth. Mainland China has always been less free than the territory and this year, China ranks 149<sup>th</sup> out of 165 jurisdictions.

"Freedom has suffered a precipitous decline in Hong Kong, but its tragic descent into oppression provides important lessons about the value of freedom," said Fred McMahon, resident fellow at the Fraser Institute and co-author of this year's report.

The index measures personal freedom—the rule of law, safety and security, identity and relationships (i.e. the freedom to choose your relationship partner), freedom of movement, speech, assembly and religion—alongside economic freedom, the ability of individuals to make their own economic decisions.

This year's report ranks 165 jurisdictions around the world. It finds that from 2019 to 2021 (the latest year of available data), 89.8 per cent of the world's population experienced a decline in freedom.

In Hong Kong, the areas that show the most pronounced declines in this year's report are: The rule of law, freedom of expression,

and freedom of association and assembly.

"Suppression in Hong Kong continues to ramp up as the jailing of journalists and pro-freedom advocates grows, with arrest warrants issued for exiled activists to quash even overseas dissent," said Ian Vásquez, report co-author and vice president of international studies at the Cato Institute.

Switzerland, once again, tops this year's freedom ranking followed by New Zealand, Denmark, Ireland, Estonia and Sweden (tied for 5<sup>th</sup>). The five least-free countries are (in descending order) Iran, Myanmar, Sudan, Yemen and Syria.

Overall worldwide rankings for other significant countries include Taiwan (12), Canada (13), Japan (16), the United Kingdom and the United States (tied at 17), Germany (21), South Korea (28), France (39), Ukraine (83) Mexico (95), and India (109).

Crucially, people in freer jurisdictions are more prosperous than those in less-free jurisdictions. For example, the average per-capita income for the top-quartile of jurisdictions on the index was US\$47,421 compared to US\$14,157 for the least-free quartile in 2021.

"Human freedom increases prosperity and human well-being and has powered the growth of some of the most remarkable jurisdictions in the world, including Hong Kong," McMahon said.

## US records over 2,300 deaths from flu this season



There have been at least 3.7 million illnesses, 38,000 hospitalizations and 2,300 deaths from flu so far this season in the US, according to the latest estimates released Friday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Seasonal influenza activity is elevated in most parts of the country, with the southeast, south-central, and west coast areas of the country reporting the highest levels of activity, Xinhua news agency reported, citing the CDC weekly review.

The number of weekly flu hospital admissions continued to increase.

Two influenza-associated pediatric deaths were reported during the week ending December 9, bringing the 2023-2024 season total to 14 pediatric deaths, according to the CDC.

The CDC recommends that everyone 6 months and older get an annual flu vaccine.

## Prime Minister Terrance Drew Unveils St Kitts and Nevis 2024 Budget Address

**BASSETERRE:** Prime Minister of St Kitts and Nevis, Honourable Dr Terrance Drew, delivered a comprehensive analysis of the nation's fiscal performance and outlined future economic plans during his 2024 Budget Address.

2024 Budget Address Theme: Marching Forward on the Journey to a Sustainable Island State

The central theme of the 2024 budget speech is "Marching Forward on the Journey to a Sustainable Island State." The budget address, presented on 13 December 2023, underscored the government's commitment to transforming into a sustainable island state.

Seven Pillars of Sustainability Honourable Dr Drew outlined the seven pillars forming the foundation of a sustainable island state:

Water Security Energy Transition Food Security Sustainability Industry Sustainable Settlements Circular Economy Social Protection These pillars serve as the focal points for the 2024 budget address, laying the groundwork



for sustainable development in St Kitts and Nevis.

St Kitts and Nevis' Achievements in 2023

Honourable Dr Drew acknowledged the achievements in tourism that received international recognition, positioning St Kitts and Nevis as a prominent destination in the Eastern Caribbean. The 2024 Budget Address reflects the government's commitment to sustainable development, fiscal responsibility, and the well-being of St Kitts and Nevis' citizens. The outlined initiatives and improvements aim to strengthen the nation's economy, infrastructure, and

overall prosperity.

Fiscal Landscape of St Kitts and Nevis

Overview of 2022 Fiscal Performance Honourable Dr Drew highlighted the 2022 fiscal landscape, emphasising challenges and achievements, particularly in debt management and economic recovery.

Revenue and Grants for 2022-2023

In the past fiscal year, a deficit of US\$99.2 million for the Overall Balance and a Primary Balance deficit of EC\$82.9 million were reported. Total Revenue and Grants amounted to

EC\$1.12 billion, with Recurrent Revenue at EC\$1.1 billion and Grants totalling EC\$14.0 million.

St Kitts and Nevis Citizenship by Investment Programme

Honourable Dr Drew highlighted the Citizenship by Investment (CBI) Programme's remarkable contribution, exceeding budget expectations by 54.9 per cent. Honourable Dr Drew emphasised the importance of supporting the CBI Programme for sustainable economic development.

The CBI Programme is managed with transparency, accountability, and a strategic vision, and contributes significantly to the economic, social, and environmental well-being of St Kitts and Nevis, ensuring a more prosperous and resilient future.

Government 2022 Expenditure

Honourable Dr Drew detailed that the 2022 expenditure surpassed the budget, attributed to various government initiatives, income support programmes, and a CBI Dividend payment.

A notable decrease in the Total Public Sector Debt to EC\$1.6 billion or 60.2 per cent of (Gross

Domestic Product) GDP was highlighted, reflecting a decline of EC\$6.5 million and an 8.9 per cent point decrease in the Debt-to-GDP ratio. Honourable Dr Drew credited this reduction to the expansion in economic activity for 2022 compared to 2021.

St Kitts and Nevis Pension Plan for 2024 Honourable Dr Drew announced the imminent launch of a Contributory Pension Plan, aimed at enhancing the welfare and financial security of public sector employees. The plan is strategically designed for a secure and sustainable pension system.

Honourable Dr Drew provided historical context, acknowledging the role of the St Kitts and Nevis Labour Party Administration in 2012, which laid the groundwork for the Contributory Pension Plan.

Government Commitment to Kittians and Nevisians Honourable Dr Drew reiterated the government's commitment to improving citizens' lives, expressing confidence in the Contributory Pension Plan's role in securing a prosperous future for public sector employees.



# Pankaj Tripathi says, he can write a book on Atal Bihari Vajpayee



**MUMBAI:** Pankaj Tripathi, who's all set to be seen playing the role of Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the biopic 'Main Atal Hoon', said that he has read so much about the former prime minister that he can now write a book on him.

He was speaking to the media in Mumbai at the trailer launch of the film, which is scheduled for release on January 19, 2024.

Talking about his role, Tripathi said, "We have tried to showcase those moments of his life in the film which are not known to the public

and which are not available on any public platform. I have read so much about him that I can write a book on him and it will be bigger than this film. I have seen all his interviews, read so much about him that I have understood his persona."

On the use of prosthetics to get his look right, Tripathi said, "It used to take two hours daily. We shot this film in May and June when it was scorching hot. And it was really difficult to shoot after donning that look. I have literally shed my blood and sweat for this film."

Directed by Ravi Jadhav, 'Main Atal Hoon' captures the multifaceted personality of the country's 10th prime minister, who was widely hailed as a poet, a gentleman and a statesman.

# Kangana Ranaut to take political plunge, likely to contest 2024 Lok Sabha election

**Kangana's father Amardeep has confirmed this news and said that she will contest exclusively on a BJP ticket**

**CHANDIGARH:** The intersection of the entertainment industry and politics has been a longstanding phenomenon, with several celebrities trying their fortune in the politics. The latest one to take the political plunge is none other than the 'Queen' of Bollywood Kangana Ranaut.

The Bollywood star is set to launch her political career by contesting elections next year. Kangana's father Amardeep has confirmed this news and said that she will contest



on a BJP ticket. Rumours of Kangana joining politics had been doing the rounds ever since she met BJP's National President J P Nadda at her residence in Kullu on December 17.

Kangana had also earlier hinted at joining politics in some media interviews. She has been quite vocal in her support for the Modi government

and the BJP and has backed several of their initiatives as well as their ideological stance.

The reasons behind actors joining politics are as diverse as the individuals themselves, and the impact they have on the political landscape can be significant. Celebrities joining politics is a trend that is not confined to any particular country or era; rather, it is a global phenomenon that has been observed for decades.

On the work front, Kangana will soon be seen playing former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in a biographical historical drama film, 'Emergency', a movie based largely on the Indian Emergency between 1975 and 1977.

# Brij Bhushan-aide Sanjay Singh elected new WFI chief

**NEW DELHI:** Sanjay Singh, a close aide of deposed WFI chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, was on Thursday elected as the new president of the Wrestling Federation of India.

The electoral battle saw Sanjay defeating Commonwealth Games gold medalist wrestler Anita Sheoran by a substantial margin, with a vote tally of 40-7.

Voting took place earlier on Thursday following a lengthy legal tussle as the federation remains suspended by the international federation United World Wrestling.

The elections were held for 15 posts, including the president, treasurer, secretary-general, and senior vice-president.

Sheoran faction secured the crucial position of secretary general with Prem Chand Lochab, a former RSPB (Railway Sports Promotion Board) secretary,



triumphing over Darshan Lal with a 27-19 vote tally.

Devender Singh Kadian, who is considered close to the protesting wrestlers, claimed the senior vice president's post, beating I D Nanavati 32-15.

The Brij Bhushan faction secured all four vice president

positions with Jai Prakash from Delhi (37), Asit Kumar Saha from West Bengal (42), Kartar Singh from Punjab (44), and N Phoni from Manipur (38) emerging victorious.

Satyapal Singh Deshwal, who is also from the Brij Bhushan camp, became the new treasurer.

The newly elected WFI chief promptly addressed the ongoing issues in Indian wrestling community, targeting top wrestlers like Bajrang Punia, Sakshi Malik, and Vinesh Phogat, who were at the forefront of a protest against former WFI chief Brij Bhushan Sharan earlier this year.

"Those who want to compete, they should wrestle. Those who want to do politics, should do politics. Those who want to do in politics will be answered in the political arena," said Sanjay Singh after his victory was declared.

allegations of sexual assault. Bajrang and Sakshi, both prominent figures in Indian wrestling, had reportedly sought the intervention of Union Sports Minister Anurag Thakur. They had recently met sports minister seeking ways to prevent Brij Bhushan's aide from contesting for president but to no avail.

With the conclusion of the elections for the office bearers in WFI, a path has been paved for United World Wrestling (UWW), the global governing body for wrestling, to lift the suspension imposed on WFI.

The suspension was a result of WFI's failure to conduct elections within the deadline set by UWW in August. Consequently, Indian wrestlers had been compelled to compete as neutral athletes in global events over the preceding months.



A man rides a horse along a street amid dense fog along a street in the outskirts of Amritsar on Friday. Fog engulfs many parts of the country during the winter months, disrupting normal life and throwing rail and road traffic out of gear. PHOTO-PRAHJOT GILL

# Milind Soman concluded 200-kilometer EV expedition as part of Green Ride 3.0 riding the TVS iQube Electric

**ARUN KUMAR RAO Bengaluru**

Milind Soman, India's fitness icon, concluded a 200-kilometer electric vehicle (EV) expedition in Bengaluru. This is part of the Green Ride 3.0 initiative, aimed at promoting eco-friendly transportation and reducing carbon footprint to combat pollution. Milind, an advocate for healthier and environmentally conscious living, chose the TVS iQube Electric for this ride, symbolizing the importance of adopting clean and wise commuting alternatives in urban spaces.

As part of the broader Green Ride 3.0 initiative, Milind initially embarked on a cycling



journey on Lifelong Cycles from Pune on December 11th, making his way to Vadodara with a planned stopover in Mumbai & Surat, he also covered a total of 200 kilometers

excitement, addressing press conference said, "Choosing the TVS iQube Electric for this EV expedition is a conscious step towards advocating cleaner and smarter commuting options. Let this journey inspire others to make eco-friendly choices, contributing to a healthier planet."

The Green Ride 3.0 spanned various cities, navigating through diverse terrains to symbolize the collective endeavour required for a healthier planet. Milind Soman, extends an open invitation to all to become part of this movement, advocating for fitness, environmental consciousness, and the relentless pursuit of a healthier, sustainable future.



# Kareena Kapoor talks about her characters Khushi, Sanjana & Tina

**MUMBAI:** Actress Kareena Kapoor Khan has given several memorable performances in a career spanning 23 years.

Poo and Geet are much talked about but there is Khushi from the 2003 film 'Khushi' and Sanjana from 'Main Prem Ki Diwani Hoon' and Tina from 'Mujhse Dosti Karoge', which one can't forget even today.

The actress finds it heartening that these roles are still etched in everyone's mind.

Kareena's portrayal of Khushi (Khushi), Sanjana ('Main Prem Ki Diwani Hoon'), Preet ('Uda Punjab'), Riana ('Ek Main Aur Ekk Tu') and Simrita Rai ('Kambhakt Ishq') among many others keep finding their way back on social media reels -- a testimony to the fact that all the characters in her filmography you have portrayed are unforgettable, despite whatever the film's fate.

Talking about the same, Kareena told to media: "Honestly, it's so wonderful to know that these characters refuse to fade away."

The actress has given her 100 per cent to each role that has come her way.

"I've always believed in giving my all to each character, and it's incredibly rewarding to see that effort resonate with the audience," she added.

Kareena has lent her voice to Black Widow in 'Marvel Wastelanders: Black Widow', the third instalment of the Hindi Audible podcast series.

On the acting front, Kareena will next be seen in 'The Crew' and 'Singham Again'.



Indian Hindu pilgrims react as they leave for the Katas Raj Temple situated in Pakistan, in Amritsar on Tuesday. PHOTO-PRAHJOT GILL

# PHULKARI TREASURE TRAILS in Collaboration with Jaycee Motors: Amritsar's First-Ever All-Women Car Rally



**PRAHJOT GILL Amritsar**

More than just a rally, this event signifies a significant stride towards fostering women's empowerment within the community. By showcasing their skills and resilience in a traditionally male-dominated arena, the participating women aim to challenge societal norms and break through stereotypes.

Phulkari Treasure Trails and Jaycee Motors invite the community to join us in celebrating this day of fun, camaraderie, and adventure. Let us come together to witness and support these women as they pave the way for a more inclusive and empowering future.

# Snow transforms Gulmarg into a winter wonderland



**A WEAK WESTERN DISTURBANCE IMPACTED JAMMU AND KASHMIR, RESULTING IN LIGHT TO MODERATE SNOWFALL IN HIGHER ELEVATIONS AND RAINS IN THE PLAINS. GULMARG RECEIVED AROUND SIX INCHES OF FRESH SNOW, TRANSFORMING IT INTO A WINTER WONDERLAND**

**FW DESK**

Gulmarg, a famous hilly resort in Jammu and Kashmir, was blanketed by

snow on Sunday. The resort is captivating both locals and tourists, who are arriving in the Valley from the different parts of the country to witness snow, a novelty in the rest of the country.

This has temporarily relaxed the cold wave in the Valley, although the night temperatures continue to be subzero. Srinagar saw temperatures drop to a low of minus 1.3 degrees Celsius, while Pahalgam, a key spot for the Amarnath Yatra, recorded a chilling minus 5.1 degrees Celsius. Gulmarg experienced temperatures as low as minus 2.8 degrees Celsius.

A weak western disturbance impacted Jammu and

Kashmir, resulting in light to moderate snowfall in higher elevations and rains in the plains. Gulmarg received around six inches of fresh snow, transforming it into a winter wonderland. Snowfall was also observed in Sonamarg tourist resort and along the Zojila axis.

The fluctuating weather conditions are expected to continue as the western disturbance is anticipated to linger till Sunday morning. The meteorological department predicts a temporary rise in minimum temperatures due to this disturbance, followed by an expected decline by one-to-three notches afterward.

# Kashmir braces for Chilla-i-Kalan, its harshest winter phase



**FW DESK**

The onset of Chilla-i-Kalan marks Kashmir's most severe winter period, plunging temperatures well below freezing across the region. Srinagar, the summer capital, experienced a low of minus 4.3 degrees Celsius, while Pahalgam hit minus 5.8 degrees Celsius. Gulmarg and other areas recorded temperatures below freezing as well.

The frigid weather has frozen slow-moving water bodies and water supply pipes, impacting the region. The biting cold has prompted residents to layer up and use traditional earthen firepots, known as Kangri, for warmth, particularly due to erratic electricity supply.

The intense cold snap has also led to increased respiratory issues among vulnerable groups like children and the

elderly. As Chilla-i-Kalan settles in, the region anticipates frequent snowfall, especially in higher elevations, often causing disruptions.

The 40-day Chilla-i-Kalan period, lasting until January 31, is known for its freezing temperatures and heavy snow, limiting outdoor activities and forcing people indoors. While once reliant on dried vegetables due to closed Srinagar-Jammu highways, frequent closures are now uncommon, ensuring a steadier supply of fresh produce.

Following Chilla-i-Kalan, Kashmir braces for a 20-day 'Chillai-Khurd' and a subsequent 10-day 'Chillai-Bachha,' extending the cold wave's impact beyond the harshest phase. Despite these challenges, locals adapt to the harsh weather, engaging in indoor activities and traditional remedies to weather the winter.