

REGION

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GURMEET SINGH KHUDIAN ORDERS TO RELEASE OVER `1 CR TO SUGARCANE FARMERS



Only AAP talks about hospitals, schools, electricity, water & basic infrastructure : Bhagwant Mann

CHANDIGARH: Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convener Arvind Kejriwal and Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann addressed the people and party workers of Goa on the second day of their three-day visit to the state.

Addressing the public meeting, Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann said that today he got the opportunity to see the medical work done by the AAP MLA in Goa, which is amazing. Only the Aam Aadmi Party can do this. Only the Aam Aadmi Party talks about hospitals, schools, electricity, water and basic infrastructure. The rest of the parties do politics of caste, religion and hatred.

Arvind Kejriwal made government schools world class in Delhi. Mohalla clinics were set up at various places. Now we are building the world class government schools and mo-



halla clinics in Punjab also.

So far, about 700 Aam Aadmi clinics have been opened in Punjab. This number will increase to 800 on 26th January. So far 70 lakh people have got their free treatment done there. Apart from this, we are also appointing specialist doctors in government hospitals. In Punjab, we have given government jobs to about 40,000 youth in 20 months. Electricity

is now free in Punjab. 90% of the houses get zero electricity bills. Electricity is free in Delhi also. Mann said that in Punjab we have reversed the popular trend of privatising the government institutes. On January 1, the Punjab government purchased a 540 MW private thermal power plant. He said that other parties have stolen our 'guarantee' term. He quipped, "When alarm

bells started ringing for BJP, Modi remembered Kejriwal's guarantee." He said that earlier BJP used to have a resolution letter and manifesto. Now they say Modi's guarantee.

Mann said that Arvind Kejriwal is the only one in the entire country who is not afraid of Narendra Modi. BJP is sending ED to scare him, but Kejriwal is not afraid. ED CBI has no evidence against Kejriwal. People from ED people also tell us that we do not have any evidence but we have to come because of the boss's order.

Aam Aadmi Party does politics of work, other parties do politics of caste-religion, corruption, temple-mosque - Arvind Kejriwal*

While addressing the people, AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal said that Aam Aadmi Party does politics of work.

Traditional parties do politics of caste and religion in the country. There was a politics of corruption and abuse of power. There used to be temple-mosque politics. No one talked about the politics of work because no one did any work.

Leaders of other parties come into politics to earn money. They earn money for five years and then distribute the money just before the elections to buy votes. The game of power and money has been going on for the last 75 years. We have not come into politics to earn money. Traditional parties only looted the country.

We formed the government in Delhi twice in a row with a huge majority because we worked in Delhi. Before us, there were BJP and Congress governments in Delhi, but neither party did any work.

CORPORATES & INDUSTRY

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INDIAN RICE EXPORTERS EXCLUDED FROM UN TENDER AMIDST EXPORT BAN



POTPOURRI

8

ACTOR GIPPY GREWAL SET TO COME UP WITH THIRD INSTALLMENT OF 'ARDAAS' FRANCHISE



IMD issues red alert for north India, cold day & dense fog to continue for next 5 days



NEW DELHI: The India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Friday issued a red alert, saying that dense to very dense fog conditions are likely to continue to prevail over North India during the next five days while cold day to severe cold day conditions are likely to continue to prevail over North India during next three days.

The IMD said that "Jet Stream Winds" of the order of 130-140 knots at 12.6 km above mean sea level are prevailing over the plains of North India.

"It is leading to subsidence of cold air and enhancing cold wave/cold day conditions over North India. Similar intensity of Jet Stream is likely to continue during next 3-4 days," said the weather forecast agency.

In its bulletin, the IMD said that minimum temperatures are in the range of 2-5 degree Celsius in isolated pockets of north Rajasthan, south Haryana and in the range of 6-10 degree Celsius over most parts of Punjab, Chandigarh, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, remain-

ing parts of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

"These are below normal by 2-4 degree Celsius in isolated pockets of south Haryana, south Uttar Pradesh and north Rajasthan. Today, the lowest minimum temperature of 2.4 degree Celsius was reported at Bikaner (West Rajasthan) and Kanpur (East Uttar Pradesh)," said the IMD.

The IMD further predicted that dense to very dense fog conditions are very likely to prevail for a few hours in the night/morning over many parts of Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh till Saturday morning and in some parts for subsequent four days.

"Dense to very dense fog conditions are very likely to prevail for a few hours in the night/morning in some parts of Uttar Pradesh during Friday and Sunday morning and in isolated pockets for subsequent three days while dense to very dense fog conditions are also very likely to prevail in morning hours in isolated pockets over Uttarakhand till January 23," said the IMD.

RBI Governor Projects 7% GDP growth for India in FY25



NEW DELHI: Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Shaktikanta Das anticipates India's economy, the world's fastest-growing large economy, to achieve a remarkable 7 per cent growth in the fiscal year 2024-25.

Speaking at a CII session during the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos, Das expressed optimism about sustaining the country's growth momentum, highlighting the successful transition "from crisis to confidence."

Das underscored the government's commitment to supporting growth, focusing on achieving inflation targets, and mentioned the strong thrust on capital expenditure, private investment, and healthy aggregate demand conditions.

Additionally, Das praised India's burgeoning Fintech sector, noting an 87 per cent adoption rate, surpassing the global average of 67 per cent.

The sector is projected to reach USD 150 billion by 2025. Furthermore, the RBI Governor credited appropriate policy actions and liquidity measures for India's swift and sustained recovery from the pandemic, complemented by structural reforms in taxation, banking, and infrastructure.

Sown area under wheat, oilseeds rises as pulses dip in current Rabi Season



NEW DELHI: The sown area under wheat during the current rabi season has crossed 340 lakh hectares up from 337.50 lakh hectares sown last year, according to data released by the Department of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare on Friday.

Similarly, the area sown with Shri Anna cum coarse cereals such as jowar, bajra, and ragi has increased to 53.83 lakh hectares from 50.77 lakh hectares in the same season last year. This shows that the government's policy to promote these crops has started bearing fruit. The area under oilseeds has also increased to 109.88 lakh hectares compared with the 108.82 lakh hectares sown last year. This augurs well for the economy as edible oils have to be imported in large quantities which leads to a drain of valuable foreign exchange. However, there is also reason for concern as the area under pulses has declined to 155.13 lakh hectares from 162.66 lakh hectares. There is a large demand for pulses in the economy as it is the main source of protein in the country.

Union Cabinet approves MoU on Semiconductor Ecosystems with EU

NEW DELHI: The Union Cabinet has been informed about the approval of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Government of the Republic of India and the European Commission.

This MoU focuses on working arrangements concerning Semiconductors Ecosystems, including their supply chain and innovation, within the framework of the EU-India Trade and Technology Council (TTC).

The agreement, signed on November 21, 2023, aims to enhance the resilience of the semiconductor value chain in



both India and the EU.

The scope of cooperation outlined in the statement encompasses various areas such as research, innovation, talent development, partnerships, and the exchange of market information.

The MoU will be effective from the date of signature and will remain in force until both parties confirm the achievement of its objectives or until one side discontinues its participation. In its commitment to fostering a favourable environment

for electronics manufacturing, India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has actively engaged in international collaboration.

MeitY has entered into multiple MoUs and agreements to strengthen bilateral cooperation, facilitate the exchange of information, and bolster supply chain resilience.

The initial agreement on semiconductors was signed by Ashwini Vaishnav, Minister for Electronics and Information Technology and Thierry Breton, the European Commissioner for Internal Markets.

Punjab CM expresses profound grief and sorrow over martyrdom of Agniveer Jawan Ajay Singh

CHANDIGARH: Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann on Friday expressed profound grief and sorrow over the martyrdom of 23 years old Army Jawan Ajay Singh, who attained martyrdom while performing his duty.

In a statement issued here, the Chief Minister said that Agniveer Ajay Singh, who hailed from village Ramgarh Sardaran near Khanna, attained martyrdom in a landmine blast. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that brave jawan laid his life while performing duty at Jammu and Kashmir. He said that it is an irreparable loss for the country in general and for the distressed



family in particular.

The Chief Minister extended his sympathies with the bereaved family of the brave martyr and said that the Punjab government is with the family of Agniveer in this hour of grave crisis.

Rape convict Ram Rahim gets 50-day parole, 9th time in four years

CHANDIGARH: Rape convict and Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim, who is undergoing a 20-year sentence in Haryana for raping two disciples, was granted a 50-day parole on Friday, ninth time in four years. After the parole, he will be staying in his sect's Dera in Baghpat in Uttar Pradesh.

His last release from the jail was in November 2023 for 21 days. He was granted parole thrice last year. Till date, he has been granted parole and furlough for 184 days. He has been lodged in Sunaria jail since August 2017 after being convicted in rape and murder cases. He has a large number of



followers in Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. As per the jail manual, a convict is entitled for a 70-day parole in a year. Ram Rahim was sentenced to 20 years in jail in August 2017 for raping two women. A special CBI court in Panchkula in January 2019 also sentenced Ram Rahim and three others to life imprisonment for the murder of journalist Ram Chander Chhatrapati, 16 years ago.

Supreme Court refuses to cancel bail of Punjab Congress MLA Sukhpal Singh Khaira

CHANDIGARH: The Supreme Court on Thursday refused to interfere with the order of the Punjab and Haryana High Court granting bail to Congress leader Sukhpal Singh Khaira in a 2015 drug smuggling case.

A bench, headed by Justice Bela M. Trivedi, dismissed the special leave petition filed by the Punjab government against the decision passed by the High Court on January 4.

In its order, the High Court had granted bail to Bholath MLA saying that Khaira cannot be said to be prima facie guilty for any allegations.



A bench of Justice Anoop Chitkara of the HC had, however, clarified that its order granting bail will not limit or restrict the rights of the police or the investigating agency from further investigation as per law. Khaira, a former Leader of Opposition, was initially neither named nor prosecuted in the FIR, but his

role surfaced during a further investigation conducted by a new Special Investigation Team. The SIT claimed that they have collected sufficient evidence that prima facie points towards Khaira's dealings with the drugs trade and the international mafia operating at the Pakistan border.

Khaira was arrested on September 28, 2023. In his defence, Khaira claimed that he had been arrested because he parted ways with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and his arrest is a regime revenge by fabricating, padding, and creating false evidence.

Plastic Industry Seeks 100-Acre Land for Eco-Friendly Park in Ludhiana



LUDHIANA: The plastic manufacturing industry is urging the state government to allocate 100 acres of land for a specialised plastic park in the city.

This request was highlighted in three meetings between members of the Plastic Manufacturers and Traders Association and officials from the industry and commerce department.

Notably, last year, the state government set a three-year deadline for relocating industrial units situated in mixed land use and residential areas. Mankar Garg, the president of the association, emphasised the benefits of consolidating

the entire industry in one location.

According to Garg, this centralised approach would enable the industry to acquire machines that produce minimal pollution, facilitating the manufacturing of more environmentally friendly products. The proposal aligns with the state's initiative to streamline industrial operations and enhance environmental sustainability, as reported by TOI.

The plastic manufacturers believe that a dedicated plastic park would not only meet regulatory requirements but also foster the adoption of eco-friendly practices within the industry.

Bilkis Bano Case: SC dismisses plea by convicts seeking extension of time to surrender



NEWDELHI: The Supreme Court of India on Friday dismissed a plea by 11 convicts in the case of gangrape of Bilkis Bano and the murder of seven of her family members during the 2002 riots in Gujarat seeking an extension of time to surrender.

A bench of Justices B V Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan said the reasons cited by the convicts have no merits. "We have heard senior counsel and counsel for the applicants and the counsel for the non-applicants also. The reasons cited by applicants to seek postpone-

ment of surrender and report back to jail have no merit inasmuch as those reasons in no way prevent them from complying with our directions. Hence the miscellaneous applications are dismissed," the bench said.

Apex court on January 8 had quashed the Gujarat government's decision to grant remission to 11 convicts in the case, saying the orders were "stereotyped" and passed without application of mind. It had asked the convicts to surrender before jail authorities by January 21.

25 Crore people brought out of poverty in nine years: PM Modi

MUMBAI: At least 25 crore people have been lifted out of poverty in India in the last nine years as a result of the "tapasya" and true dedication of the government towards the poor, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said here on Friday.

He said that earlier, poverty alleviation programmes in the country lacked results owing to the absence of proper intent and the pilferage by the middle-men.

"This is the outcome of the clean intentions and policies favouring the empowerment of the poor plus the commitment to the nation," the PM said, adding that 'Modi ki Guarantee' is about the commitment to take the benefit of the government schemes directly to the beneficiaries.

The PM said in the last 10 years, more than Rs 30 lakh crore have been transferred directly to the accounts of farmers, women, youth and poor, while 10 crore fake beneficiaries were weeded out by using the 'JAM' mode -- Jan Dhan-Aadhar-



Mobile.

PM Modi said this while speaking at an event to hand over 15,000 houses at RAY Nagar Housing Society in Solapur under the Prime Minister Awas Yojana-Urban, while another 15,000 shall come up in the 350 acres housing complex.

This was a dream come true for the 15,000 family-beneficiaries like handloom and powerloom workers, construction labourers, street vendors, 'beedi' makers, drivers, rickshaw-pull-

ers, and others in the unorganised sectors, and PM Modi had laid the foundation stone for the complex in 2019.

The project was conceived by the former Communist Party of India-Marxist state secretary and 3-time MLA Narsayya Adam, 79, who struggled for long to ensure a respectable dwelling for the people eking out a living in the unorganised sectors.

Sharing the dais with PM Modi and other dignitaries,

Adam termed it as "a dream come true" for all the people in the informal sector, and along with the homes all other amenities like electricity and water would also be provided.

The RAY Nagar is sprawled across 350-acres of land and the project of 30,000 homes would also have seven water tanks, a sewage treatment plant, solid waste management facility, a government school and a hospital, good internal roads and other civic amenities.

Though the erstwhile Congress-Nationalist Congress Party regime decided to build the colony, it hung and only after 2014, when Bharatiya Janata Party-Shiv Sena's CM Devendra Fadnis took office, the project was fast-tracked and he even got it included under the PMAY. The project suffered another major delay during the Covid-19 pandemic years, plus the change of government in 2019, but finally the scheme was completed and launched by the PM Modi on Friday.

Gurmeet Singh Khudian orders to release over ₹1 cr to sugarcane farmers

CHANDIGARH: Punjab Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Minister Gurmeet Singh Khudian directed the department officials to transfer Rs. 1.05 crore into the bank accounts of sugarcane farmers from Sangrur area by Monday, besides, directing Deputy Commissioner, Sangrur to ensure the release of pending payment (around Rs. 6.95 crores) from the Bhagwanpura Sugar Mill to farmers by the end of this month.

These directions were issued by the Agriculture Minister during a meeting with Sangrur district administration, management of M/s Bhagwanpura Sugar Mill, Dhuri and representatives of Ganna Kashatkar Sangharsh Committee, Dhuri at his office here on Thursday.

Lending sympathetic ear to the concerns of sugarcane



farmers, S. Gurmeet Singh Khudian also directed Deputy Commissioner, Sangrur Mr. Jitendra Jorwal to ensure that the farmers should not face any hardship in selling their produce because of any unfair practice of slow purchase and lifting of the sugarcane crop.

Sangrur district authorities apprised the Agriculture Minister that around 2 lakh quintals sugarcane of the Bhagwanpura Sugar Mill has been crushed through mills situated at Amloh, Budhewal, Mukerian and Nakodar as the Dhuri unit was non-operational.

Reiterating the commitment of Chief Minister S. Bhagwant Singh Mann led Punjab Government for the welfare of the state farmers, S. Gurmeet Singh Khudian said that no one will be allowed to exploit the 'annadata' and interests of the farmers will be safeguarded. He said that Punjab is leading state in the country in providing the maximum State Agreed Price (SAP) to sugarcane cultivators. With the hike in SAP, now farmers are getting Rs. 391 per quintal for their yield.

Special Secretary Agriculture Mr. Sanyam Aggarwal, ADGP Jaskarn Singh, SSP Sangrur Sartaj Singh Chahal, Cane Commissioner Punjab Rajesh Kumar Raheja and other officials of the departments concerned were also present in the meeting.

Punjab gets new investment projects worth nearly Rs 1 lakh crore: Study

Investment of Rs 98,500 crore made in the state during the financial year 2018-19 to 2022-23

FW DESK Chandigarh

Punjab during the last FYs 2018-19 to 2022-23 has received new investment projects of Rs.98500 crore, completed projects of Rs.77810 crore and revived the pending projects worth Rs.8495 crore.

This has been revealed in a just concluded study undertaken by the MSME Export Promotion Council jointly with the Confederation of Organic Food Producers & Marketing Agencies (COIF). The study was released by the MSME EPC Chairman Dr D S Rawat (former secretary general ASSOCHAM) today.

Punjab has registered the fastest implementation rate in completing the projects. As per the data available through the Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy (CMIE) as on 12 December 2023, the new investment projects announced in 2018-19 were of Rs.43323 cr, 2019-20



Rs.12267 cr, 2020-21 Rs.15761 cr, 2021-22 Rs.23655 cr and in 2022-23 Rs.3492 cr.

It was found that in 2022-23, total investment projects outstanding were of Rs.139099 cr and under implementation of Rs.103680 cr. Therefore, Dr Rawat said, there is urgent need for a high powered committee to review each project and are cleared with immediate effect without any further escalation in the cost.

Referring the private sector investment, it was stated that Punjab has received the new investment projects from the private sector during the period of reporting of Rs.28308 cr and completed the projects of Rs.33155 cr; some of them were on-going.

The government's investment projects announced during the period were of Rs.70190 cr and completed the projects of Rs.44644 cr. It is stated that industry holds a prominent position in the state's economy as it contributed about 25 percent of total gross state value added in 2022-23 and has various direct and indirect linkages with other sectors significantly contributing to economic growth and employment. It has strong base of over four lakh micro, and small scale units belonging to auto components, bicycle parts, hosiery, sports goods, agricultural implements, and is on way of transition from agro-based to a technology-driven economy and has identified IT/ITes/ESDM as thrust sector. The state already has India's only large scale ASIC fabrication laboratory in SCL Mohali.

The study anticipates that in three years period towards the end of 2027, another 60,000 units shall be added generating direct and indirect jobs for over 2.5 lakh people. In Punjab, Ludhiana accounts for the highest number of MSMEs over 1.5 lakh followed by Jalandhar and Amritsar.

AAP and Congress are coming together to beat BJP in the mayoral election of Chandigarh



CHANDIGARH: The mayoral elections of Chandigarh took an interesting turn on Monday when AAP and Congress came together and nominated their joint candidates to face the BJP for the Mayor race. This alliance of the Aam Aadmi Party and Congress for Chandigarh Mayor seat will pave the path for the both parties to fight the general election together in Punjab, Chandigarh and Haryana to defeat the Bharatiya Janata party.

AAP will field its candidate for the Mayor post while Congress gets senior deputy mayor and deputy mayor positions. AAP and Congress together now have 20 councillors (13 councillors of the AAP and 7 councillors of Congress) and are clearly in a winning position for all three posts.

Congress's mayor candidate Jasbir Singh Bunt and AAP's senior deputy mayor and deputy mayor candidate Neha and Poonam withdrew their nominations. Now, AAP candidate Kuldeep Kumar Tita will challenge the BJP candidate for the Mayor's office and Congress's Gurpreet Gabi will fight for senior Deputy Mayor post and Congress's Nirmala Devi for Deputy Mayor.

Informing about the AAP-Congress alliance, AAP Chandigarh incharge Jarnail Singh said that together we will easily win this election and finally Chandigarh will have a Mayor other than the BJP. He added that we have had more councillors since the beginning but the BJP forcibly and unconstitutionally made their Mayor twice but this time they won't succeed. Jarnail Singh said that Chandigarh will set an example that together we can defeat the BJP.

Rahul Gandhi, instead of conducting a Nyay Yatra, if he undertakes a Prayschit Yatra, he will benefit more: Anil Vij



SATISH HANDA Ambala

Haryana Home Minister Anil Vij commented today on the Nyay Yatra initiated by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, saying, "Rahul Gandhi Ji, if he undertakes a Prayschit Yatra instead of a Nyay Yatra, will benefit more." Vij was responding to questions asked by the media person regarding Rahul Gandhi's Nyay Yatra. He suggested that Rahul Gandhi should embark on a Prayschit Yatra instead of a Nyay Yatra. Taking a dig at the opposition, he said that Congress should atone for the injustices committed by them alongside the nation. Sh. Vij mentioned that Congress had divided the country on Hindu-Muslim lines, captured more than 90,000 Prisoners of War in the 1971 war and released them without any conditions. Additionally, during the Emergency, they imposed a state of emergency by trampling the constitution, detained over a lakh people under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), without any evidence or appeal. He stated that constitutionally, Congress has toppled several governments without any forethought. In 1984, they orchestrated the Sikh massacre, and he supported it with a statement.

Punjab secures 2nd place in folk song and 3rd place in folk dance in National Youth Festival



CHANDIGARH: In the National Youth Festival organised by the Government of India, Punjab won the second place in the folk song competition and the third place in the folk dance competition. Youth Services Minister Gurmeet Singh Meht has congratulated the winning youth.

The 27th National Youth Festival was organised by the Ministry of Youth and Sports in the city of Nashik in Maharashtra in which youth from 28 states and 8 Union Territories of India participated. Under the leadership of Assistant Director of Youth Services Department Punjab Kulwinder Singh and Raghbir Singh Mann, 100 youth of Punjab participated in various competitions. Taranpreet Singh of Punjab won the second place in the folk song competition and the Bhangra team of Punjab won the third place in the group folk dance. The second place team got a cash prize of Rs. 1 lakh and the third place team got a prize money of Rs. 75 thousand.

Village headman shot dead in Tarn Taran district



JAGMOHAN SINGH Amritsar

On January 14 two unidentified motorcycle borne youth shot dead village serving Sarpanch (headman) at village Chabbal. The assailants after killing the sarpanch escaped away. Confirming the murder, police said that the deceased was identified as Chabbal village headman Avan Kumar alias Sonu Cheema. Police said that on Saturday, unidentified assailants pumped two bullets into Awan Kumar when he was sitting in the saloon for hair cutting. According to eyewitness one of the assailants came inside the saloon fired two gun shots from point blank range, came out and fled away with his accomplice who had already kept the bike's engine in running mode.

Police said that immediately after the incident, Awan was shifted to a private hospital in Amritsar where he succumbed to bullet injuries today on Sunday. So far, police were clueless about the accused as various police teams were working on it and a deep investigation was underway as CCTV footage of nearby cameras were being checked. It is said that Awan always carries weapon with him but today he kept his weapon in the car parked outside the saloon. At the time of crime no gunman was with him as he was having his own personal security but today his lapse costs life.

Modi Government's Sankalp Yatra Highlights Schemes in Rajasansi



JAGMOHAN SINGH Amritsar

On January 15 Modi government's Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra today reached the rural areas of the Rajasansi assembly segment, highlighting the various Central government schemes for the under-privileged and general public. The common people, BJP workers and leaders, apart from government officials thronged to welcome the Yatra and they were apprised of the number of pro-people schemes, initiated by the Government of India at their door steps.

BJP national Treasurer and Rajya Sabha MP Naresh Bansal along with BJP senior leader Rajinder Mohan Singh Chhina led the Yatra and they held the public meetings at village Lodhi Gujar, Nathupur and Kiralghar. The Sarpanches and common people in the area thronged to welcome the Yatra which had been roaming throughout Punjab, said RMS Chhina.

He said the purpose of the Yatra is to make the people aware about various benefits of the schemes for the lesser privileged and poorer

sections of the society. "The Yatra was unveiled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself two months back and had been spreading the message throughout the country", said Bansal who is in Amritsar Lok Sabha constituency for three days to oversee the arrangements of the program.

Bansal said so far crores of families in the country have taken the benefits of the digital platform where people get the Aadhar Card, Ayushman Card and many other services. "Thousands of the families have taken the benefit of these schemes. The people in general are showing lots of enthusiasm for the Yatra and I am happy to see the response", said he adding that these are flagship schemes of the Modi government.

On this occasion Suraj Bhardwaj, in-charge of BJP Punjab for Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra, Sushil Devgan, BJP District General Secretary of Amritsar Rural, Mukhinder Singh Mahal, BJP local in charge of Yatra, SS Bal BDO Chogawan, many government officials were present during the reception of Yatra.

"Shri Ram Yatra" turned Ambala Cantonment into a realm of Ram, with a grand welcome everywhere through a shower of flowers



Thousands of devotees joined the procession, welcoming it in squares, temples, gurdwaras, and markets

SATISH HANDA Ambala

A grand "Shri Ram Yatra" was organized in Ambala Cantonment under the leadership of Haryana's Home and Health Minister, Anil Vij for the consecration of the life idol at Ayodhya Shri Ram Temple. With the triumphant chants of "Jai Shri Ram," Home Minister Anil Vij waved the saffron flag.

A downpour of flowers welcomed the procession in every market and square. Under the guidance of Home Minister Anil Vij, the yatra began in front of Subhash Park, covering various markets in the Ambala cantonment and concluding in Subhash Park in the afternoon. People showered flowers on the yatra from the rooftops, expressing their reverence for the consecration of the idol in the Ram Temple. Fireworks and a floral shower greeted the procession in the markets.

The yatra covered Outer Large Road from Subhash Park, Chameli Bridge from Laxman Halwai, exiting from Kabadi

Bazaar Road, then Halwai Bazaar, Old Vegetable Market, DC Road, Sadar Bazaar Chowk, Nicholas Road, and finally, it culminated at Subhash Park from Punjab Mohalla Number One. During the yatra, devotees enthusiastically danced and swayed to devotional songs like "Shri Ram Ayenge, Ram Ayenge" and other bhajans.

Haryana Home Minister Sh. Anil Vij stated that "From today until January 22, when the life idol of Shri Ram will be consecrated in Ayodhya, people should clean their temples, shrines and gurdwaras in their areas morning and evening. Also, they should consume sattvic meals." He further encouraged the participants to maintain a sattvic atmosphere and consume pure, vegetarian food until the consecration ceremony. He emphasized that sattvic meals lead to a virtuous environment and positive thoughts.

Home Minister Anil Vij said, "Preparations are underway for the consecration ceremony on January 22, and the Prime Minister is also actively involved. Therefore, we need to make preparations at our level. Until January 22, only consume sattvic meals and avoid tamasic and rajasic foods. This will create a sattvic environment, fostering

good thoughts." He requested Ram devotees not to consume meat or alcohol until January 22 and join in cleaning religious places in their localities every day. Vij stressed that this effort is essential to create a sattvic atmosphere in preparation for the historic event after 500 years.

Sharing his experiences, Vij mentioned his participation in two movements for the Ayodhya cause, including an arrest and a 15-day stay in Unnao Jail. He expressed his commitment to visiting Ayodhya again, arranging a special train for the occasion.

Home Minister Anil Vij stated, "Shri Ram is returning after 500 years. People are very happy, and various programs are being organized everywhere. On January 22, Diwali will be celebrated, and preparations are being made to organize events in the temples of various areas. Therefore, everyone is requested to start cleaning their local temples today. Additionally, it is advised to consume sattvic meals, avoiding tamasic and rajasic foods, to ensure a pure environment for the event."

The entire Ambala Cantonment resonated with the triumphant chants of "Jai Shri Ram" during the Shri Ram Yatra. Home Minister Anil Vij, riding an open jeep with Shri Ram's flag, continuously waved it, while Ram devotees chanted and danced. The yatra covered various places where Ram devotees experienced a divine atmosphere. The procession saw the participation of devotees of all ages, with drums and trumpets accompanying their rhythmic dance. Women carrying kalash (decorated pots) on their heads led the procession.

Target for 50% reduction in road accidents & deaths in Haryana

SATISH HANDA

Haryana state government has fixed a target to have 50% reduction in road accidents and number of victims losing life in such mishaps every day in coming six years in the state. The state government is going to have a campaign in the state from 15th January 2024 to 14th February 2024 on road safety and bring awareness among people as well as youths in educational institutes. Information reveals that during year 2023 nearly 8% reduction in road accidents as compared to the previous year was identified. All Deputy Commissioners as Suprentendents Police has been directed to keep strict vigil on road safety in their district enabling to reduce road mishaps.

An information reveals that during year 2022, the number of road accidents were reported as 11130 in which 5621 person were died, whereas during year 2023 168 road accidents were reported in which the number of deaths was 5192. Information also reveals that there are as many as 696 illegal cuts on the roads in the state, which include 351 illegal cuts on the highways frequently causing



large number of road accidents in the state. However, 251 illegal cuts on the roads have been closed down by the PWD (B&R) in past couple of months.

Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari while talking to media persons said that the government's target was to reduce road accident deaths in India by 50 percent by the year 2024, but could not be achieved. While addressing a virtual session on 'Role of Corporates in Arresting Road Fatalities' organised by FICCI, Nitin Gadkari congratulated FICCI on the announcement of Road Safety consortium 'Safar', based on the safe system approach and release of a white paper on road safety for the corporate world. The Minister said that the World Bank and ADB have already sanctioned a scheme by which the Government is allocating Rs.14,000

crores for states, NHAI and other stakeholders to remove black spots.

According to Gadkari, his Ministry is striving hard to reduce road accident deaths in India by restructuring and strengthening 'E's of road safety which include Economy, Enforcement, Education as well as Road Accident Statistics. He suggested that the corporate world should carry out independent surveys to identify the reasons behind the accidents and a report may be submitted to the Ministry. The Minister pointed out that 50% of the road accidents are due to road engineering problems and now the government has taken special initiatives to improve the black spot which may contribute towards the vision of zero road accidents in the country. According to the latest report by MoRTH, the number of road accidents in India went up 12% to over 460,000 in 2022, resulting in deaths of 19 people every hour. The government now aims to reduce the number of road accidents and deaths due to accidents by 50% in coming six years.

Immigration fraudsters will not be allowed to stay in Haryana, the SIT has successfully apprehended more than 500 accused so far: Anil Vij

SATISH HANDA Ambala

Haryana Home and Health Minister Anil Vij said that immigration fraudsters will not be allowed to make frauds in Haryana, and strict action will be taken against anyone involved in immigration frauds. He mentioned that continuous action is being taken by the SIT in cases related to immigration fraud in Haryana, and so far, more than 500 such accused have been successfully apprehended.

Listening the grievances of the people of the state at his residence in Ambala, he stated that a special team has been formed in Haryana to continuously take action on immigration fraud cases. Vij said that Instructions were given to take action in various cases related to immigration fraud.

A couple from Gharonda informed about a fraud of 5 lakh rupees in the name of sending their brother abroad. A woman from Jind informed a fraud of 3 lakh rupees in the name of sending someone abroad, and in one or two other cases, complaints of fraud in the name of sending abroad were also reported. Anil Vij directed the SIT to take action in all these cases. Similarly, a couple from Firozpur Jhirka said that no action was taken against the accused involved in a case of sexual assault.

First Jan Aushadhi Kendra opened in government institution of Haryana



GULSHAN KUMAR Yamunanagar

Dass Arora inaugurated the state's first JAN AUSHADHI KENDRA at the Government Health Institution (Mukand Lal District Civil Hospital, Yamuna Nagar) on 18th of January 2024. Along with this, MLA also inaugurated a One-Day Swine Flu (H1N1) vaccination camp for the health workers working in the Hospital. On this occasion, Civil Surgeon Dr Manjeet Singh, PMO-MLDCH Dr Divya Mangla, Dr Vipul Goel, Dr. Nisha Gurava, Dr. VPS Dahiya, Dr. Shiv Kumar, DR. Reema Beri

Haryana Home Minister Vij urged to countrymen: dean temples and shrines, until the consecration of life in the Shri Ram Temple in Ayodhya

SATISH HANDA Ambala

Haryana Home and Health Minister Anil Vij today reached the Shiva Temple in Shastri Colony, Ambala Cantt, today in the morning and cleaned the temple premises and sought the Lord's blessings.

Vij, during the recent Shri Ram Yatra organized in Am-

bala, had urged people to clean religious places daily before the consecration in the Shri Ram Temple in Ayodhya on January 22. With this objective in mind, he personally initiated the cleaning today by reaching the temple in the morning.

During this time, interacting with the media persons, he said that by January 22, the day when consecration is scheduled

to take place in the Ayodhya Ram Temple, the entire country should prepare itself. He emphasized that all temples and shrines will also have events organized until the 22nd January, so daily cleaning of our temples and shrines should be done. In addition, to keep the mind pure, one should consume Sattvic food, avoid the consumption of Tamasic and Rajisik meals.

Modi announces two Landmark Boeing Initiatives to Advance the future of Aviation in India

ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

The Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, today dedicated two landmark Boeing initiatives that promise to significantly advance India's aerospace and defence industry.

Prime Minister Modi launched the Boeing Sukanya Program that aims to support the entry of more girl children from across India into the country's growing aviation sector. The program will provide opportunities for girls and women from across India to learn critical skills in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields and train for jobs in the aviation sector. For young girls, the program will create STEM Labs at 150 planned



locations to help spark interest in STEM careers. The program will also provide scholarships to women who are training to be pilots. Investments will support flight training curriculum, obtaining certifications, funding

Bengaluru. Built with an investment of INR 1,600 crore, the 43-acre campus is Boeing's largest such investment outside the U.S., and will become a cornerstone for partnering with India on next generation products and services for the global aerospace and defense industry.

The Prime Minister was joined by Thaawar Chand Gehlot, Hon'ble Governor of Karnataka; Siddaramaiah, Honorable Chief Minister of Karnataka; Shri R. Ashoka, Leader of the Opposition — Karnataka Legislative Assembly, Government of Karnataka, and Boeing Chief Operating Officer, Stephanie Pope, along with other senior Boeing executives.

"We are honored and privileged to support Prime Min-

ister Modi's transformative vision for India, and we are grateful to have him dedicate the Boeing campus to foster aerospace innovation in the country," said David L. Calhoun, Boeing president and CEO. Stephanie Pope, Chief Operating Officer, The Boeing Company, said, "We are thrilled for Prime Minister Modi to have personally launched the Boeing Sukanya Program. Together, we will help expand opportunity for women across India to pursue careers and leadership positions in the aviation sector." Over the years, Boeing India has grown its team in engineering and R&D talent to the largest number of employees in any country outside the United States, he added.

North-East is an important part of India, This is shameful that PM Modi didn't visit Manipur says Rahul Gandhi

KAVITA SHARMA
Mokokchung (Nagaland)

Senior Congress leader and former party president Rahul Gandhi have said that as an Indian he felt ashamed that the Prime Minister of the country did not visit Manipur after what happened there.

Addressing a large public gathering en route his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra here today, Gandhi said, the purpose of doing it (the Nyay Yatra) from the east to the west was to send a message that the North East is as important as any other part of India. "It does not matter if the population is less, importance has to be the same", he remarked amidst cheers and loud applause from the crowd.

Referring to the violence in Manipur, he said, he felt ashamed that the Prime Minister of the country had still not visited Manipur after what happened there. "Their politics has torn the state apart. They have divided the state. They have weaponised the state. They have burnt the state and they cannot set a foot in the state", he said, about BJP and RSS while referring to the violence in Manipur. He said, the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra is for fighting against this form of politics.

"I am feeling equally ashamed that the Indian Prime Minister made a commitment to the people of Nagaland nine years ago and has done nothing about it", he said, while referring to the Prime Minister not fulfilling the promises made in the Naga Accord in 2015.

"If you don't have a solution, you should not lie and say you have a solution", he told the



Prime Minister, adding, "sad having to say that what the Prime Minister committed nine years ago was an empty promise".

At the same time, Gandhi assured, "we are committed to do the hard work required to get a solution for you". He said, he understood that the issues concerning the Naga people are serious and there is a requirement for a solution.

Praising the people of Nagaland for their honesty, simplicity and straightforwardness, he said, once the yatra is complete, he will come back again to spend some time there. "You are straightforward, decent and honest people and I am also like you", he told the crowd, drawing huge applause and cheers.

He said he had noticed discipline among people in Nagaland, as there was no

pulling and pushing. "You respect other people's space and we want to build such type of India", he told the people gathered there, adding that he felt grateful to them and their ancestors for bequeathing such great and glorious traditions.

Spelling out the mission of the Nyay Yatra, he said, he sought parity in opportunities for different people; between the privileged and the less privileged pointing out how much difficulty students from the state will be facing in competing in various exams with those students who had better resources.

Besides, he added, the idea of the Nyay Yatra was to draw the attention of the rest of the country towards the people of Manipur, Nagaland, Assam and to the people who are not part of the development taking place".

101 kg of Sundarbans honey reached Ayodhya, Bengal's gift due to Ramlala's dedication Residents of Patharpratima sent a large quantity of honey to Ayodhya

MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA
New Delhi

At Ayodhya, Ramlala's Consecration will be on Monday. Ghee, honey and Milk will be needed along with holy water from different rivers, seas and lakes to bathe Ramlala. A Rama devotee of Patharpratima of Sundarbans sent 101 kg of honey to Ayodhya. Haripada Mandal and his son Gokul are also Rama devotees, residents of K plot in Achintyanagar village panchayat of Patharpratima in South 24 Parganas. The entire Mandal family is

happy with the news of the establishment of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. Haripadababu had already decided to send pure honey from the Sundarbans to Ayodhya for Ramlala's consecration. The son also fully supported the father's plan. He traveled from one end of the Sundarbans forest to the other to collect honey. Some is collected by himself and the rest is taken from the maulis. Little by little he collected about 101 kg of honey.

Haripada sent that honey through his son Gokul to Ayodhya. The purpose is to

use the honey sent by him for the purpose of Consecration of Ramlala. Gokulbabu carried that honey in the car, drove to Ayodhya. Haripadababu's son reached Ayodhya with 101 Kg of honey on Friday. Haripadababu was overjoyed to hear that his son had arrived in Ayodhya with honey. He said that he will be blessed if the honey sent by him is used in the Consecration of Ramlala. Not only honey from Sundarbans, Ghee from Bihar, Sandalwood from Karnataka and Green Coconut from Kerala have already reached Ayodhya.

Transforming cosmetic production with environmental evaluation : A.K. Pradhan

3900 edible plant species can be used for exporting Ayurveda products: Dr. Manoj Nesari Adviser Ministry of Ayush

NEW DELHI: In his special address, at the ASSOCHAM 5th Beauty, Wellness & Personal Care Symposium-cum-Felicitation Ceremony. A.K. Pradhan, Joint Drugs Controller (India), Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (HQ), DGHS, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, GOI, underlined the pivotal role of trust & credibility in the beauty and wellness industry. Focusing on regulatory collaboration, he highlighted the importance of growing the industry while ensuring quality standards and protocols for consumers. This practice can help products to pass the benchmark and reach more national and international markets.

Ayurveda is a medical system that is officially recognized in 24 countries throughout the Indian continent, according to Dr. Manoj Nesari, Advisor, Ministry of Ayush, Government of India. Products made from Ayurveda are exported to over 100 nations worldwide. In an effort to work with stakeholders and encourage out-bound investments, we started the Startup India initiative, he added. Outside of India, yoga is becoming more and more popular, and demand for therapies is increasing. In order to make it easier for foreigners to travel to India for yoga, therapeutic treatment, and wellness, Ayush Visa is introduced recently.

Recent reforms in BIS were discussed by Virendra Singh Scientist D, Member Technical Committee CHD 25, Bureau of Indian Standards highlighting the sustainability standards in the products. Modernisation of Cosmetic Regulations is the need of the hour as wellness and beauty standards are evolving among consumers, he said.

Dr. Blossom Kochhar, Co-Chairperson ASSOCHAM National Wellness Council



-Chairperson Aroma Magic Pvt. Ltd highlighted the symbiotic connection between lifestyle and beauty. She talked about the cosmetic industry's shift towards Holistic wellness in enhancing outer beauty. To look good, one has to feel good from inside, she added.

Dr. Ravi Gandhi, Group President, and Chief Public Policy & Regulatory Officer Reliance Retail Ltd. and Reliance Jio Infocom Ltd talked about the current trends in beauty and wellness industry that are sustainable, vegan and gender-neutral products that are cost effective. Market players and startups designing product lines parallel to the rising notion of beauty to engage with the ever-growing consumer base are gaining competitive advantage.

At the event, there was a felicitation ceremony where Bodyshop was named the Best Skin Care Product of the Year, NAT Habit was named the Best Natural/Organic Product of the Year, Marico Ltd was named the Best Hair Care Product of the Year, Hindustan Unilever Ltd was named the Best Body Care Product of the Year, and Konark Herbal and Healthcare Pvt Ltd was named the Best Manufacturer of Cosmetic Ingredients.

Beauty, Wellness & Personal Care Symposium concluded by Walk for Cause focused on Livelihood of Weavers of India to promote the essence of synergy between Ayurveda and cosmetics in wellness by Dr. Sanjana Jon, Film Maker, Social Activist, Motivational Speaker & International Fashion Designer.

NCC cadets are role models and inspire the youth: Defence Secretary

NEW DELHI: Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane said that for the country's youth, the cadets of National Cadet Corps (NCC) are the role models, who inspire them to excel in their respective field and contribute towards nation building.

The Defence Secretary visited the NCC Republic Day Camp at Delhi Cantt on Wednesday. He emphasised that the NCC, with its philosophy and vision, energises the youth and train them to become better citizens. The objective to expand the NCC is to motivate more and more youth across the country to join the largest uniformed youth organisation and explore its benefits, he added.



Aramane urged the youth to shed mediocrity and aim big to achieve their goals, which in turn help the country to reach greater heights. "The youth with lots of energy, when not properly directed, will end up doing anti-social activities. The youth has to be properly educated and should be given a task which is constructive and contributes to the nation's economy and prosperity. NCC cadets can be their inspiration to achieve this objective," the Defence Secretary said.

During his visit, Aramane witnessed a mesmerising cultural programme, featuring group dances and ballets that showcased our nation's rich cultural heritage by the NCC cadets. The themes depicted by the cadets ranged from unity in diversity, the oneness of the Indian source, the scientific temperament and the improvement to the economy, a Defence Ministry official added. The Defence Secretary also visited the 'Flag Area', prepared by 17 NCC Directorates showcasing various social awareness schemes depicted through sand models. He was also briefed on various projects undertaken by NCC cadets on 'Waste to Wealth'.

No alliance with INDIA or NDA for 2024 LS polls, says Mayawati

NEWDELHI: Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) President Mayawati, on Monday, said that her party would fight the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections alone and would not join hands either with the INDIA bloc or the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Addressing a Press conference on her 68th birthday, Mayawati said she had no plans to retire from politics, as was being reported in a section of the media. Asked about

her post-poll options, Mayawati said that she would take a decision regarding supporting government formation but would not join any government. Replying to a question, Mayawati said that she had received the invitation for the consecration ceremony of the Ram temple but had not taken a decision regarding attending it as yet. She welcomed the construction of the temple and said that the BSP would also welcome the construction of the mosque because the party did not differentiate between religions.

Supreme Court designated 11 Women out of 56 lawyers as Senior Advocates



MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA
New Delhi

The Supreme Court of India on Friday designated 56 advocates including 11 women as Senior Advocates. The Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) had in August last year, urged the CJI and other Supreme Court judges to adopt a liberal approach while designating deserving and meritorious advocates as Senior Advocates. At the time, the association had emphasized that due to a judicial challenge, coupled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the senior designation process of lawyers had happened only once in the last eight years.

The designations were made after a committee headed by Chief Justice of India (CJI) DY Chand-

rachud interviewed over 200 applicants for the gown. Then 56 lawyers have been conferred the gown. The last instance of senior designation of lawyers was in December 2021 when 18 lawyers were conferred the gown. In May 2022 and October 2023, the Court had conferred senior gown on retired High Court judges including Justices Talwant Singh, Dr. S Muralidhar and PN Prakash though no lawyers were given the gown in that round of designations.

Prior to this, the Supreme Court Advocate on Record Association (SCAORA) had filed an application before the top court seeking a direction to the Committee for Designation of Senior Advocates (CDSA) to conclude the process of appointing senior advocates with regard to applications that were invited in February 2022.

Army chief says, dealing with proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir

Indian Army Chief General Manoj Pande on Sunday highlighted the ongoing challenges faced by the security forces in dealing with a "proxy war" in Jammu and Kashmir.

In a message aired on All India Radio on the eve of Army Day on January 15, the Army Chief, while not explicitly naming Pakistan, alluded to the neighboring country's involvement in supporting proxy activities in the region.

"The Indian Army has a vital role to play in ensuring a stable and secure environment, which is crucial for the nation's progress to continue unabated," PTI quoted him as saying.

"The transition towards becoming a modern, agile, adaptive and technology-enabled, future-ready force, will continue as part of our transformation roadmap," he added.

General Pande emphasized the Indian Army's commitment to countering the proxy war with a professional ap-



proach and collaborative operations with other security forces in the region. He assured the nation that the Indian Army maintained a robust posture at the borders and was fully prepared to handle any threats, prioritizing the protection of the country's territorial integrity at all costs.

In his message, the Army Chief mentioned the achievements in capability development aligning with the concept of 'atmanirbharta' (self-reliance), to which the army was fully dedicated. General Pande outlined the army's commitment to transforming into a modern, agile, adaptive, and technology-enabled force, emphasizing the importance of technology as a catalyst for transformative change.

Working towards a more liberal regime to promote production & sale of ethanol, says V.K. Singh

NEW DELHI: "Today there is greater awareness on the need for alternative fuels to replace fossil fuels. With sustainability and environmental impact as primary concerns, the effect of cleaner alternative fuels will ensure that the air that we breathe is cleaner than what it is today. There are various alternative fuels available, and we are working towards a more liberal regime so that the production and sale of alternate fuels is made easier." Said Gen (Dr.) V.K. Singh, PVSM, AVSM, YSM (Retd.), Hon'ble Minister of State Ministry of Road Transport and Highways & Civil Aviation. Govt. of India at Fuels of Future 2.0 a conference organised by ASSOCHAM.

"We have also made a big push towards electric mobility where li-ion has been at the forefront but there is a great amount of research on sodium-ion and finding alternatives to li-ion so that we can become more independent of



the lithium cycle altogether. There is also a push on sustainable aviation fuel and we have conducted a trial of sustainable aviation fuels powered flight. The greatest challenge before us today is what alternative fuel we adopt and how we can bring about a change in mindset towards alternative fuels," he added.

Aswani Srivastava, Joint Secretary (Sugar), Department of Food & Public Distribution, Govt. of India in his address said, "The Government has limited the diversion of sugar to ethanol produced from Sugarcane juice and B-Hy molasses in view of the estimated drop in the production

of sugar in the country. We are committed to the target of 20 percent ethanol blending by 2025 for which around 1016 crore litres of ethanol for blending and 334 crore litres for other industrial use will be required. Considering plants run at 80% of their installed capacity about 1700 crore litres capacity should be in place by 2025. Today our capacity stands at 890 crore litres through molasses and about 510 crore litres from grain based feedstock. Additional capacity of 300 crore litres needs to be added."

Addressing the gathering at the conference, Kenneth Felix Haczynski da Nobrega,

Ambassador, Embassy of the Federative Republic of Brazil spoke on the need for greater co-operation between the two countries on sustainable energy sources. "The launch of Global BioFuel Alliance during India's G20 presidency is indeed a ground breaking endeavour in clean energy. It heralds the beginning of a new phase, one that will consolidate biofuel technology as an important option for decarbonisation of our economies. The Brazilian Presidency of the G20 will push forward the implementation of the GBA."

"The International Energy Agency has pointed out that without scaling up the use of bioenergy, the world will not reach its climate goals. It also calls for tripling of modern bioenergy supply by 2050 which can be achieved as long as proper policies, technology, finance and good practices are put in place. Brazil is a pioneer in the use of renewable energy in the transport sector.

Karnataka govt ambitious Yuva Nidhi scheme seen only 3k of 85,000 applicants meet eligibility criteria

ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

Karnataka Government's ambitious Yuva Nidhi scheme which Launched recently with much fanfare in Shivamogga has so far seen only 85,000 out of an estimated 5.29 lakh graduates and diploma holders apply for the benefits of scheme. Worse still, out of these only 3,000 or a meagre 3.5% have so far met the stringent eligibility criteria set by the Siddaramaiah government.

Yuva Nidhi is one of the five poll guarantees made by Congress party in Karnataka in the run-up to last year's assembly election. The scheme offers a monthly stipend of Rs 3,000 for graduates and Rs 1,500 for diploma holders. State government attributes the slow start to various factors, including delayed applications from students who graduated during 2022-23 academic year. The eligibility criterion that stipulates that gradu-



ates or diploma holders ought to be unemployed for minimum of six months to qualify for the scheme has put paid to the hope of many Yuva Nidhi aspirants because those who received their mark sheets degree certificates in June-July 2023 may not have fulfilled the mandatory six month unemployment period yet. Out of the estimated 5.29 lakh graduates and diploma holders, only 4.2 lakh mark sheets have so far been uploaded to the National Education Depository (NED). Government officials and academic experts point to a gap between the number of Yuva Nidhi applicants and the actual number of people unemployed in the state.

India sees rising tide of inflation amid global crisis

As the Consumer Price Index in December revealed, inflation has quickened to a four-month high, marking a concerning trend for economies worldwide. This rise is notably driven by an acceleration in food prices, particularly in cereals and pulses, which remain stubbornly high. The headline retail inflation edged up to 5.69 per cent, with the Consumer Food Price Index jumping significantly to 9.53 per cent. This surge in food prices, especially in cereals — the largest component of the 'food and beverages' group — is a worrying sign, with inflation in this category registering at 9.93 per cent. Though marginally slower than November's 10.3 per cent, the inflation rate for staples like rice, wheat, and coarser cereals continues to burden households without much respite. Particularly alarming are the sequential price gains in jowar and bajra, essential coarse cereals in rural diets, with increases of 63 and 106 basis points respectively. This trend disproportionately impacts those in the rural hinterland, already grappling with economic uncertainties. Moreover, pulses, a vital protein source, have hit a 43-month high inflation rate of 20.7 per cent. With the current rabi season's sowing of pulses down nearly 8 per cent from last year, the future price outlook remains bleak. In the vegetable sector, year-on-year inflation has skyrocketed by nearly 10 percentage points, led by soaring prices of tomatoes and onions. Despite month-on-month deflation in these items, the average retail price of most monitored food items remains higher than last year. This persistent high cost of food poses a significant challenge to policymakers tasked with containing food-price inflation. As households allocate more income to meet rising food expenses, there's a tangible risk of stifling consumption, potentially derailing broader economic growth. This scenario is exacerbated by the escalating crisis in West Asia, which adds another layer of uncertainty to global trade and energy costs.

LETTERBOX

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"The expert in anything was once a beginner"

Helen Hayes

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C.P. RAJENDRAN EXPLAINS HOW EDUCATION CENTRES' USE AS PROPAGANDA TOOLS STIFLES ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND DISCOURSE.

Are universities still conscience of society?

The University Grants Commission (UGC)'s directive to universities and colleges in the country to install the Union Government's Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) logo on their premises should be treated as another attempt to curtail academic freedom, which is already under siege. This is not a one-off incident. Such diktats from the government have been sent to these institutes previously too. Earlier, they were asked to conduct activities such as generating awareness on G-20 meetings and Swachhatha campaigns. As a repeat of such directives, the UGC, in a letter of December 1, required the colleges to create selfie points featuring the Prime Minister.

The aim of the selfie point, according to the letter, is to create awareness among the youth about India's achievements in various fields, particularly the new initiatives under the National Education Policy 2020. However, such moves aimed at advancing the political agenda of the ruling regime through the universities would seriously dilute the academic institutes' freedom and ability to follow their agenda of teaching and research that finally generates new ideas.

While the government's insistence that academic institutes act as carriers of their political propaganda is becoming more trenchant, the concept of universities being vehicles of free thought would fall by the wayside. Ironically, the current ruling establishment is led by those who fought the Emergency of the 1970s — the first attempt to drag independent India towards homogenisation and regimentation of thought. It appears that they are using the same playbook to stifle the higher study centres from maintaining spaces for dissent.

The last year saw several occasions that attempted to throttle academic freedom. Indian Institute of Science (IISc) — the country's top-ranking institute — had to call off a discussion on the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), organised by its students and faculty. Last March, the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) administration decided to impose fines to the tune of 20,000 for protesting on the



campus — a decision withdrawn later. The sanctity of academic freedom recently came into question when two important scholars resigned from their positions at Ashoka University following the publication of a paper that argued that the ruling party won a disproportionate share of seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. Can Democracy survive without dissenters and critical thinkers? What better platform than an academic institute to hold such discussions? Such discussions are crucial in a functioning democracy, regardless of anyone's ideology or belief system. Placing restrictions on the articulation of one's opinion or ideas can negatively impact academic work and hurt the research environment.

As it is clear from the speeches given in high-profile meetings like the G-20 Summit, even those who hold top positions in the current ruling dispensation are proud to single out India's role in upholding democratic values. The Prime Minister himself proudly proclaimed in a venue provided by the American Congress during his last year's visit to the U.S. that democracy is part of Indian DNA. But what is missing in such performative chest-thumpings on the Indian democracy is the lack of concern for the freedom to conduct civic discourses that are vital for participatory democracy to thrive.

The downward spiral of academic freedom is reflected in India's position in the indices prepared by the V-Dem Institute of the Uni-

versity of Gothenburg in Sweden. India's academic freedom index is in the bottom 30% among 179 countries, according to last year's report, published on February 2, 2023. On a scale of 0 (low) to 1 (high), India scored 0.38. The V-Dem Institute's indicators include freedom to research and teach; freedom of academic exchange and dissemination; institutional autonomy of universities; campus integrity; and the freedom of academic and cultural expression. What's ironic is that this score is lower than India's bête noire Pakistan's 0.43. Independent India had seen such low rankings only during the Emergency years of the mid-70s.

In recent times, we have seen many such examples of the government intimidating scholars working in the knowledge sector into submission, either by intimidation or sending them to jail. Unlike in New Zealand, academic freedom is not mentioned in the Indian constitution; it is subsumed in the concept of the right to free speech as a part of the fundamental rights. A guaranteed principle in the Indian constitution, it is subject to reasonable restrictions emanating from the considerations of sovereignty, integrity, security, public order, and morality. The constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech is often hindered by the application of sedition law (Section 124A) or more commonly misused clauses under Section 295A — hurting religious feelings. Defamation lawsuits are now becoming tools of harassment against artists and academic scholars.

The fading academic freedom is also reflected in the gradual erosion of institutional autonomy, including the selection of Vice-Chancellors and heads of academic institutes. The UGC Act of 1956 specifically says that its core function is to monitor the standards in universities, "in consultation with universities", besides regulating fees, determining the qualifications for faculty, and setting minimum standards of instruction. As Niraja Gopal Jayal wrote in one of her essays, the UGC "has seen a steady accretion

of power and displayed a heightened propensity to function as an instrument of the ministry". The lack of academic autonomy is the bane that extends to the State level, too, and numerous instances of academic interference by the State governments have come to public attention. It has now become a common practice, both at the Central and State government levels, to make university appointments on political considerations rather than merit. The poor leadership of universities thus developed works in tandem with the ruling parties to further their political interests, thus internally sabotaging the autonomy.

In a detailed analysis of academic freedom published in India Forum, Nandini Sundar and Gowhar Fazili say, "Contracts with faculty should include a clause on the protection of academic freedom, i.e., they will not be penalized for extra-mural activities... Global institutions can help by including 'Academic Freedom' as one indicator in university rankings..." It is time that universities and higher education centres formulate system-wide protections against restricting academic autonomy and freedom of expression, taking a leaf out of the Education Act legislated by the Government of New Zealand, wherein, among other points, academic freedom is defined as: "the freedom of academic staff and students, within the law, to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions".

The political parties, in the larger interest of the nation, must begin consultations with faculty bodies and students' associations to change the current sorry state of academic freedom and autonomy in the country. We are celebrating the 75th year of India's existence as a Republic. It is time to remember that we are yet to realise Tagore's vision of a nation, where the "mind is without fear", as invoked in his soul-stirring poem, which was written when India was still a colony of the British.

C.P. Rajendran is an adjunct professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru. Views are personal



AMAR PATNAIK EXPLORES WHY ONLINE GAMING'S RISE SPARKS ADDICTION, MENTAL ISSUES, FRAUD, AND SECURITY RISKS

Time to regulate India's online gaming industry

As we know, market failures manifesting in various forms such as monopolies, externalities, and information asymmetries not only diminish economic value but also erode societal well-being, which results in decline in the trust of users. It is precisely in these cases that government regulatory intervention becomes vital. The measure of adequacy in this context hinges on a simple criterion — the benefits of government intervention must surpass its potential costs. The benefits include safeguarding public interest and trust.

Online services have become central to how most of us live our lives. With a staggering 692 million Internet users, India has the world's second-largest Internet user base and ranks eighth globally in terms of time spent on mobile apps. The average daily mobile app usage has surged to 4.9 hours, a 32% increase since 2019. Notably, a significant 82% of usage is dedicated to media and entertainment with social media accounting for roughly half of this engagement. While this trend has generated significant benefits to people, it has also created new concerns. For instance, the Internet has been inundated with AI-generated deep fake videos of celebrities. These technologically advanced simulations have blurred the lines between what's real and what's not. Market failure in online services has taken new characteristics and complexities due to the intricate interplay of data and algorithms.

The government is responding to these challenges by proposing new forms of digital regulation. Within this landscape, an important sector is online gaming where market failure is becoming evident and yet there is no adequate regulation.



The online gaming industry in India is predominantly a home-grown start-up ecosystem growing at 27% CAGR. It is widely estimated that AI and online gaming can add up to \$300 billion to India's GDP by 2026-27. But with great leaps come inherent pitfalls. Similar to other forms of digital media, the meteoric rise of online gaming has brought with it an array of concerns such as addiction, mental illness, suicides, financial frauds, privacy and data security concerns. Money laundering and national security concerns are other realities. The situation is further exacerbated by the growth of illegal offshore gambling and betting markets wherein the volume of digital transactions provides fertile ground for financial malpractices. In July 2023, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance, of which I am a member, identified four major trends in cybercrime. Notably, one includes the use of international online betting sites for purposes

such as money laundering.

These issues are symptomatic of a larger problem of market failure, arising primarily out of insufficient regulation. Consider, for instance, the safety and financial ramifications of illegal offshore betting and gambling markets. No mechanism exists for individuals to differentiate between legitimate gaming platforms and illegal gambling/betting sites. In addition, in the absence of a specialised regulatory authority, enforcement is lacking. As a result, the number of illegal operators is multiplying by the day. The illegal offshore gambling and betting market receives \$100 billion per annum in deposits from India and has registered a growth rate of 20% in the past three years. Besides causing user harm, the clandestine and untraceable operations of these platforms are causing substantial losses to the exchequer. Estimates indicate that India lost \$45 billion per annum in taxation due to operations of illegal offshore markets.

These challenges call for an urgent need for robust regulation of the online gaming industry. Some State governments attempt to ban online gaming. However, the inherent cross-border nature of the Internet makes enforcing such a ban almost impossible, leading to the unintended consequence of legitimate, regulated platforms being replaced by unregulated and potentially harmful ones.

In this context, the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021

marked a commendable step towards oversight. However, the delayed notification of Self-Regulatory Bodies has stalled the progress. To protect 373 million gamers in India, who are potentially at risk, it is imperative that the sector is strictly regulated.

The global perspective

The U.K. has a centralised government regulator. In order to track the efficiency of measures undertaken, this body publishes quarterly the effects of regulation in the sector. The recent reports have shown that since 2017, operators who fell afoul of player protection requirements have been subjected to significant multi-million-pound fines. This strict enforcement, coupled with targeted efforts aimed at harm reduction during 2018-22, has led to a decline in both disordered gaming and medium-to-low risk gaming behaviour.

An unregulated market may not deliver the greatest benefit to society overall. According to the International Monetary Fund, a combination of high taxes and a weak, discretionary approach to regulatory enforcement creates the most fertile ground for the proliferation of a shadow economy — an environment in which the Indian online gaming industry is operating. Therefore, establishing a strict regulatory framework is an urgent need, not just for protecting our digital nagriks and national interests, but also to ensure responsible growth of the online gaming sector.

Amar Patnaik is a Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha, from Odisha, and an advocate by profession now. He is a former CAG bureaucrat. Views are personal.

BOOKS: REVIEW

Diary of a madrasa boy: Gull Mohammad's brush with realities

RIYAZ WANI

Although living a humble life of an ordinary madrasa boy, Mohammad, protagonist of Hamra Quraishi's eponymously titled book, *The Diary of Gull Mohammad* somewhat assumes the role of a chronicler of contemporary India, noting down his and that of his colleague's intermittent harsh encounters with the current political climate. His diary notings are thus a tiny piece of the observed history of today's India.

Madrasas are Islamic schools where generally religious education is imparted. Students are taught

scriptures, Islamic theology, jurisprudence, and Arabic language. Besides, they have to follow a strict daily schedule of saying namaz five times a day beginning with the first one at dawnbreak, in addition to intermittent recitals of Quran. This is a life dedicated to spiritual pursuit and disconnected from the rough and tumble of daily life. But the life of Gull Mohammad, protagonist of Hamra Quraishi's eponymously titled book, straddles this spiritual-wordly divide - in fact, looming larger towards the latter. So, more than the life within the madrasa, it is the one without that he ends up explaining and

illuminating; and it is the state of today's India.

Mohammad's is a unique vantage point: that of a Muslim and a Kashmiri to boot. He looks at the prevailing state of affairs from Kashmir to Kerala by recording it in his diary. His entries from Srinagar document a deeply troubled Kashmir grappling with the daily killings, crackdowns and protests.

"Maddening noise around! Crackdown! Gulzar (Mohammad's brother) wasn't moving away from the window ---, these security creatures started firing down the lane. Mother had been trying pulling him away but he not listening



The Diary of Gull Mohammad: A Kashmiri Muslim Boy's Journey From Kashmir To Kerala by Hamra Quraishi OUP India 192 pages; Rs895

(sic)," reads Mohammad's diary entry at 10 pm on August 2, 2016. "When will father get back! Will write again. So many screaming, pellets hitting at doors and windows."

In a subsequent diary entry on August 5, we are told that Gulzar's eyes have been hit by pellets and he is being treated at a Srinagar hospital.

"Mother shrieked and shrieked and told that inspector janab,

blocking the way that our Gulzar is dying, his eyes bleeding and only then he let us rush him to that big hospital named after our long-dead Maharaja Hari Singh (sic)," the entry reads. "Gulzar (has) been crying. Now no school for him. Now no homework for him. Now no more peeping out of the window." During the summer of 2016, Kashmir experienced a six-month long unrest following the killing of the militant commander Burhan Wani. Over a hundred people were killed and several hundred were blinded in the daily skirmishes between protesters and the security forces.

However, more than Kashmir, Quraishi's book speaks to the current situation in the country through Mohammad's bitter encounters with people which he duly records in his diary.

Indian Rice Exporters Excluded from UN Tender Amidst Export Ban



NEW DELHI: Indian rice exporters find themselves excluded from participating in the rice procurement tender for the World Food Programme (WFP) by the United Nations due to the restrictions imposed on rice exports by the Indian government.

The WFP tender explicitly stated, "Due to the export ban of rice in India, we are not able to accept Indian origin rice exported from India."

India, the largest global exporter of rice, initiated a ban on the export of broken rice in September 2022.

Following that, in July 2023, the government expanded the export prohibition to include non-basmati white rice.

This move was accompanied by the imposition of a 20 per cent export duty on parboiled

rice and the introduction of a minimum export price (MEP) of USD 1,200 per tonne for basmati rice in August 2023, as a response to the increasing prices in the domestic market.

Despite these export restrictions, India continues to export rice to friendly neighbouring nations, including Indonesia, Senegal, Gambia, Nepal and Bhutan, among others.

These transactions are facilitated through government-to-government arrangements and were overseen by the National Cooperative Exports Ltd (NCEL).

The WFP, established in 1961, serves as the United Nations' arm for food aid, focusing on eradicating hunger and promoting food security globally. More than 30 rice exporters enlisted with the UN for

their World Food Programme (WFP) are now experiencing financial setbacks.

This is attributed to challenges encountered by the specialised WFP-approved factories, as they grapple with the rigorous registration process, which typically extends over a year, as reported by an exporter affiliated with a WFP registered factory.

Despite the ban on wheat exports, the Indian government donated 50,000 metric tons of wheat grains to the UN WFP in Afghanistan.

This donation provided assistance to more than one million people in 2023 and 4.7 million people in 2022, as documented by the UN WFP in December 2023.

Global rice prices experienced a 9.8 per cent surge in August, reaching a 15-year high, according to the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) in a September report last year.

In December 2023, wholesale food inflation in India rose to 9.38 per cent, compared to a deflation of 1.02 per cent recorded in the same month the previous year, with paddy (rice) becoming more expensive by 10.54 per cent, as per the latest government data.

Indian Oil to hold vendor development programme for MSEs



NEW DELHI: The Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL) is organising a one-day "Vendor Development Programme (VDP)" on February 5, 2024.

The programme is aimed at enlightening Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) on the intricacies of tendering and public procurement policies.

The VDP will facilitate a unique platform for MSEs to interact with industry experts, gain insights into the tendering procedures of IOCL, and understand the various support systems available on the National Informatics Centre (NIC), Government e-Marketplace (GeM) portal.

Additionally, participants will be informed about the Public Procurement Policies, and MSME Schemes of the Ministry of MSME, Government of India.

It aims to facilitate MSEs' active participation in the procurement processes of large corporations, promoting inclusivity and fostering growth within the MSME sector.

In collaboration with the Government of India, Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME), and MSME-DFO, Okhla-New Delhi, the event is scheduled to take place at OIDD Bhawan, Noida. IOCL encourages MSEs to actively participate in this initiative, which promises to be an enriching experience for those looking to enhance their engagement with large-scale procurement processes.

Nova Agritech Rs 144 cr IPO for Agriculture sector



**DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai**

Agri-input manufacturer "Nova Agritech Limited" announced their IPO -- priced at between Rs 39 and Rs 41 per Equity Share aggregating to Rs 144 crores -- that will be opening on January 22 and closing on January 24, 2024.

Kiran Kumar Atukuri, Managing Director, Nova Agritech Limited, said the company offered soil health management, crop nutrition and crop protection products that were ecologically-sustainable and nutritionally-balanced with focus on tech-based, farmer-driven solution approach.

He said the technology involved here included usage of advanced multipurpose agriculture drones (called +NOVA AGRIBOT+) for "spraying an acre in barely six minutes" and for which NATL has signed an MOU with IoTechWorld Arigation Pvt Ltd. in 2022.

Noting that the company's objective is to become a one-stop, solution provider for the farming community, he said that the net proceeds from the fresh issue would be utilized for investment in its subsidiary Nova Agri Sciences Private Limited for setting up a new formulation plant, funding the company's capital expenditure, expanding its existing formulation plant, funding its working capital requirements, investment in its subsidiary

Nova Agri Sciences Ltd for funding working capital requirements, and general corporate purposes.

"Since 2007, our Company manufactures, distributes and markets in 16 Indian States and four countries a wide range of product categories consisting of: soil health management products, crop nutrition products, bio-stimulant products, bio-pesticide products, Integrated Pest Management products, new technologies and crop protection products," he said.

The company also runs a farmer outreach program called "Nova Kisan Seva Kendra" (NKS) to educate farmers on various crop management practices including need-based solutions, products, technologies, methodologies, knowhow and usage skills, thereby enhancing farm yield.

He said Nova Agritech's revenue from Operations increased by 13.47% to Rs 21,055.54 lakhs for 2022-23, as against Rs 18,556.77 lakhs during 2021-22. Profit after tax rose by 49.69% to Rs 2,048.95 lakhs for 2022-23, as against Rs 1,368.93 lakhs for 2021-22.

Revenue from Operations for the six months ending September 30, 2023 stood at Rs 10,321.60 lakhs and PAT stood at Rs 1038.22 lakhs, he added.

Keynote Financial Services Limited and Bajaj Capital Limited are the book running lead managers to the issue.

ASSOCHAM and CREDAI join hands to drive Sustainable Development in Indian Real Estate Industry

**FW DESK
New Delhi**

The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) and the Confederation of Real Estate Developers' Associations of India (CREDAI) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to foster collaboration and contribute to long-term development in the Indian business landscape in the real estate sector during the ASSOCHAM GEM 6th International Sustainability Conclave and Expo 2024 at New Delhi.

GEM green building certification program is a sustainability initiative of ASSOCHAM to care for the Mother Earth and is an indigenous program based upon BEE ECBC 2017 and NBC 2016 and includes Sustainability, Energy and Water Efficiency, Fire and life



safety, Indoor Air Quality, Daylight, Fresh Air and Human Comfort. ASSOCHAM awards GEM Green Building Certification Rating, to all GEM compliant buildings. According to the Memorandum of Understanding, ASSOCHAM and CREDAI are committed to collaborating in areas of mutual interest to promote long-term growth and development, leveraging both organisations' collective strengths and expertise for the benefit of their members and the industry as a whole. The key

objective of this relationship is the creation and promotion of training and educational programmes focused on sustainability and related topics. These projects seek to improve industry knowledge and skills while also actively contributing to the larger goal of encouraging sustainable practices in the corporate community. To encourage widespread participation and raise awareness, ASSOCHAM and CREDAI will actively promote these training programmes among their member organisations.

Edtech firm Adda247 posts 4X surge in losses in FY23, revenue up over 88%

NEW DELHI: Google-backed edtech platform Adda247 has posted a four times surge in its losses to Rs 110 crore in FY23 as compared to Rs 28 crore in FY22. Adda247's revenue from operations increased to Rs 115 crore in FY23 from Rs 61 crore in FY22 which is more than 88.5 per cent growth, according to its financial statements filed with the Registrar of Companies (RoC). However, the increase in employee benefits and advertising costs outpaced the revenue growth of the company, reports Entracker. The sale of online courses, e-books, and test series made 83 per cent of the operating revenue at Rs 96 crore in FY23. Adda247 registered overall expenditure at Rs 239 crore in FY23 from Rs 92 crore in FY22.

Fluence Named a Forbes 2024 Most Successful Mid-Cap Company

ARLINGTON: Fluence Energy, Inc. a leading global provider of energy storage products, services, and optimization software for renewables and storage, today announced that the company has been named a Forbes 2024 Most Successful Mid-Cap Company. Ranked 37 of 100, Fluence is one of only a few cleantech companies named to the Forbes annual list of America's Most Successful Mid-Cap Companies. The top 100 Forbes ranking is based on earnings growth, sales growth, return on equity, and total stock return for the last five years, with more of the ranking's weight given to the latest year's data.

"This recognition reiterates our position as a leading global provider of energy storage solutions and optimization software for renewables and storage. Our market advantage is fortified by

offering our customers an ecosystem of solutions and key competitive differentiators. Among those differentiators are bankability, scale, supply chain security, and industry-leading safety," said Fluence President and Chief Executive Officer Julian Nebreda. "Our strong performance in fiscal year 2023 serves as a solid foundation as we continue accelerating progress towards our mission of transforming the way we power our world."

Forbes used data from FactSet to find the best performers and compile its annual list of America's Most Successful Mid-Cap Companies. The process included screening more than 3,000 companies with a market value between \$2 billion and \$10 billion - only considering companies that also had positive sales growth over the past 12 months and a share price of at least \$5.

Lumina Datamatics Earns Great Place to Work Certification



MUMBAI: Lumina Datamatics, a leading partner in providing Content Services, Retail Support Services, and Technology Solutions to global companies in the Publishing and Retail industries is delighted to announce that it has been certified as a Great Place to Work®. This certification reflects the company's dedication to creating an inclusive and supportive environment for its employees.

The Great Place to Work® Certification acknowledges organizations that exhibit an outstanding workplace environment and practices for their employees. A mere 469 companies from a galaxy of about 25,000 large companies (1,000 employees or more) in India have been certified as a Great Place to Work in the last 12 months. With employee feedback and external evaluation being the basis of the Certification, Lumina Datamatics scored very high in various areas, leading to this prestigious recognition.

Speaking about this recognition, Sameer L. Kanodia, Managing Director & C.E.O., Lumina Datamatics, said, "We are delighted to receive the Great Place to Work® Certification. It validates our ongoing efforts to create a workplace where our employees feel valued, engaged, and motivated. We believe a positive and thriving work environment translates to the exceptional quality of services we provide to our clients."

Lumina Datamatics places a strong emphasis on employee empowerment, diversity and inclusion, and continuous learning. The company provides a collaborative and innovative work environment that encourages creativity and problem-solving. Additionally, the company prioritizes the health and well-being of its employees by offering flexible work arrangements and other initiatives aimed at promoting a healthy work-life balance.

Torque Pharma Reinvents Healthcare Dynamics with 'Better Together' – A New Era of Synergy and Wellness

**KULBIR SINGH KALSI
Chandigarh**

Torque Pharma, a leading pharmaceutical company, has unveiled a transformative brand identity under the theme 'Better Together.' This strategic rebranding, initiated in 2024 with a fresh team and forward vision, signifies Torque Pharma's commitment to fostering collaboration, synergy, and unity in delivering innovative and high-quality healthcare solutions. The bold, dynamic, and new logo unveiled in this process captures the essence of the 'Better Together' theme.

This rebrand aligns seamlessly with Torque's evolution, emphasizing crucial elements

such as partnerships, expert collaborations, and the cultivation of an efficient work environment, reflecting the company's growth trajectory. The overarching goal is to emphasize unity and a shared purpose among stakeholders, marking Torque Pharma's collective progress within the dynamic healthcare landscape. Key initiatives include partnerships with global research facilities, collaboration with expert scientists, and the cultivation of an efficient work environment, collectively contributing to Torque Pharma's commitment to bettering the health and well-being of its people, communities, and the planet.

A.I.S Bedi, Managing Direc-

tor of Torque Pharmaceuticals, said, "In 1985, Mr. PS Chhatwal and I founded Torque Pharma with a vision to make quality medicine accessible to all. Today, Torque Pharma stands tall, embodying four decades of remarkable growth and positive impact in healthcare. Beyond a pharmaceutical entity, Torque has been a force for positive change, committed to high ethical standards and excellence. Our journey, marked by perseverance and passion, has evolved into a mission for holistic wellness, making us integral to the communities we serve. Torque,

with a dedicated team of over 2000, is not just a company but a commitment to building a healthier and more accessible world. Our heartfelt thanks to everyone for being part of this transformative journey, contributing to Torque's success and vision for a better, more inclusive future."

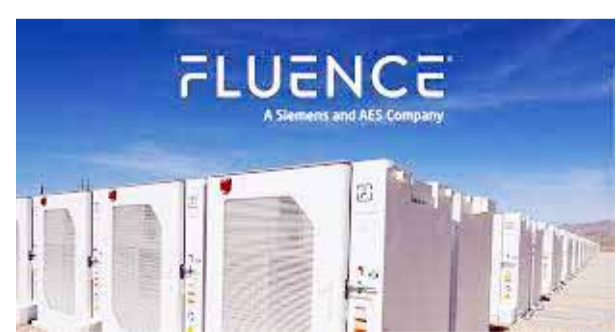
Mandeep Singh, Executive Director of Torque Pharmaceuticals, said, "Torque Pharma, marks a new era in its journey by unveiling a new dynamic logo in 2024. Beyond pharmaceuticals, our global expansion includes ventures into Ayurveda, wellness, and Jal Mineral Water. The 'Better Together' theme symbolizes collaboration, unity, and innovation in healthcare."

Fluence Surpasses 20 GWh of Deployed & Contracted Battery-based Energy Storage Systems Globally

This industry-leading milestone marks a new era of scale in battery energy storage and underscores the critical role of storage in enabling the energy transition and reducing the cost of clean and reliable power

Arlington : Fluence Energy, Inc. a leading global provider of energy storage products, services, and optimization software for renewables and storage, today announced the company has surpassed 20 GWh of deployed and contracted storage systems globally. This industry-leading milestone marks a new era of scale in battery-based energy storage installations and growth.

The global battery storage market is growing at rapid speed, with front-of-the-meter additions on track to hit approximately 158 GWh annually by 2030 according to the Bloomberg NEF 2H 2023 Energy Storage Market Outlook. The global transition from traditional power to renewable resources is driving the need for cost-effective and flexible



assets like energy storage. As the need grows, so does the scale of projects and the role of energy storage as a key enabler of the clean energy transition.

"As the scale and complexity of battery storage projects continue to grow, few technology providers can deliver the breadth of solutions and experience needed to succeed in this rapidly evolving market. This milestone highlights the trusted role Fluence plays for our customers and partners around the world. Our industry-leading scale and proven success in delivering on the needs

Fluence has partnered with customers to deploy some of the world's largest and most complex energy storage systems. The global fleet of Fluence assets has nearly 3 million operating hours to date. Most recently, Fluence was selected by AGL Energy Limited (AGL) to deliver a 500 MW / 1000 MWh energy storage system for the Liddell Battery Project in New South Wales. It is the biggest energy storage system announced to date that Fluence will be designing, engineering, and constructing in Australia and will provide critical firming capacity to help enable the country's energy transition. In 2022, Fluence announced commercial operation of the Luna Battery Storage Project and the Lancaster Area Battery system, a combined 227 MW / 908 MWh energy storage complex in California that utilizes Fluence storage products, services, and software to support resilient and flexible power grids.

of our customers - including competitive products, seamless digital integration, supply chain diversity and security, and best in class reliability, is what sets us apart in this market," said Fluence President and Chief Executive Officer Julian Nebreda. "As we enter this new era of scale in battery energy storage, Fluence is well positioned to deliver for our customers globally. We will continue bringing new products and capabilities to market while providing services, support, and digital solutions to help customers generate the most value from their operations."

Indel Money Limited announces Rs 200 crore 4th NCDs Issue

**DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai**

Indel Money Limited announced here recently the Public Issue of upto Rs 200 crores of Secured, Redeemable Non-Convertible Debentures (NCDs).

The Issue opens on January 30 and closes on February 12, 2024, with Secured NCDs tenure ranging from 366 days to 72 months and offering doubling of investment in 72 months (Option VIII), said Umesh Mohanan, Executive Whole-Time Director and CEO, Indel Money.

The funds raised through this issue will be used for onward lending, financing



and repayment/prepayment of principal and interest on borrowings of the company.

"About 90% of our portfolio is in gold loans and this is our 4th NCD Public issue with the three earlier NCD issues raising more than Rs 260 crores," he said, adding "Being one of the fastest-growing gold loan NBFC with profit growth over 13 times for the period ended September 2023 as against

Fiscal 2022, we are consistently focusing on optimization of operating expenditure and increase in branch productivity metrics."

"We have witnessed healthy AUM growth during the period ended September 30, 2023 and as one of few gold loan companies offering long-term gold loan schemes in India, we aim to grow out gold loan portfolio by expanding our branch network to further enhance revenue, profitability and visibility," he said while noting that "The NCD issue will help us diversify our borrowing and investor mix." The Lead Manager to the issue is Vivro Financial Services Private Limited.

India may be \$13 Trillion Economy with Net-Zero Emissions by 2050 : Wood Mackenzie

NEWDELHI: India holds the potential to transform into a USD 13 trillion economy by 2050 while achieving its ambitious net-zero emissions goal, according to a recent report by Wood Mackenzie.

The report envisions a scenario where India utilises clean energy technologies and market-driven policies to revamp its energy system, currently reliant on fossil fuels.

The report highlights India's potential in bioenergy, small modular reactors, and green hydrogen production, identifying these as key factors for success.

As the world's third-largest emitter, India's commitment to this shift could have a substantial global impact.

The report coincides with India's anticipated rise to become the world's third-largest economy by 2032, advancing



from its current fifth position. Wood Mackenzie's Vice President of Scenarios and Technologies Research, Prakash Sharma, expressed optimism about India's net-zero target, stating, "Our analysis shows that India's goal to reach net zero by 2050, which is two decades ahead of its current commitment, is not only ambitious but also achievable."

Sharma emphasised that this transition would be grounded in infrastructure investments and the optimisation of India's unique human talent. Central to India's strategy is the Panchamrit initiative, unveiled at COP26 in 2021, aiming for 500 GW of non-fossil-fuel electricity by 2030. Achieving this target requires India to nearly triple

its current non-fossil-fuel capacity in just six years. To align with the 2050 net-zero goal, India aims to boost its non-fossil fuel electricity generation to around 80 per cent, emphasising the development of domestic supply chains for solar and wind power.

However, achieving this scenario demands decades of steadfast political leadership and global cooperation.

Considerations for a compliance carbon market and a voluntary mechanism targeting a carbon price of USD 154/tonne of CO2 by 2050 are also underway.

Wood Mackenzie sees this as a unique opportunity for India to lead the way in rapid decarbonisation while marrying economic growth with sustainability, particularly in industries like cement, iron, steel, and chemicals.

New IT Rule for Timely Payments to MSEs to Come in force from 1st April 2024



NEWDELHI: From 1 April 2024, companies failing to make payments to MSMEs during the current fiscal will have to wait for a year for deductions under the Income Tax Act. The amendment was proposed by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman while presenting the Union Budget

2023- to address the longstanding issue of delayed payments to MSMEs.

The amendment inserted a new clause (h) in section 43B of the Act, making any sum payable to a micro or small enterprise beyond the time limit specified in Section 15 of the MSME Development Act 2006 deductible only upon

actual payment.

This move aims to promote timely payments and ensure a healthy cash flow for MSMEs.

The initiative responds to the significant challenge faced by MSMEs, estimated to deal with delayed payments totalling Rs 10.7 lakh crore annually, providing a potential boost to the sector.

Experts acknowledge the government's effort but stress the need for careful identification and examination of payments by taxpayers and auditors to avoid disallowance of deductions. The alteration specifically impacts small and medium enterprises, defining micro enterprises as units with an investment not exceeding one crore rupees and turnover below Rs 5 crore rupees. For small enterprises, the figures are Rs 10 crore and Rs 50 crore, respectively.

Citigroup to cut 20,000 jobs in big corporate overhaul



Global banking major Citigroup will reduce 10 per cent of its workforce, or about 20,000 employees, in the next two years in a major corporate overhaul.

About 20,000 employees will be let go over the "medium term", Citigroup said after presenting fourth-quarter earnings late on Friday. Citigroup CEO Jane Fraser hailed 2024 as a "turning point" for the US banking group, reports CNBC.

Citigroup had roughly 200,000 workers at the end of 2023, excluding Mexican operations. The bank posted a \$1.8 billion loss for the fourth quarter, after recording \$3.8 billion in restructuring, retreat from Russia and exposure to Argentina. "While the fourth quarter was very disappointing due to the impact of notable items, we made substantial progress simplifying Citi and executing our strategy in 2023," Fraser said.

Fraser had announced "a sweeping overhaul of the third-largest US bank by assets" in September last year. This year, Citigroup expects to incur as much as \$1 billion in severance and reorganisation costs.

"Given how far we are down the path of our simplification and divestitures, 2024 will be a turning point," said Citigroup CEO. The company has earlier executed several waves of layoffs, beginning with the top layers of the bank, with another round of cuts set for January 22, according to reports.

Reliance Retail delivers gross revenue of ₹ 83,063 crore for 3Q FY24



MUMBAI: Reliance Retail delivered gross revenue of Rs 83,063 crore for 3Q FY24, a growth of 22.8 per cent Y-o-Y led by Grocery, Fashion & Lifestyle and Consumer Electronics businesses.

Business posted an EBITDA of Rs 6,258 crore which was up by 31.1 per cent on a Y-o-Y basis. EBITDA before Investment Income was recorded at Rs 6,061 crore, up 30.1 per cent on a Y-o-Y basis. EBITDA margin from operations on net sales was at 8.1 per cent, up 40 bps Y-o-Y driven by operating leverage and continued focus on cost management. Depreciation increased on account of higher asset base due to addition of new stores and supply chain infrastructure.

Higher finance cost on account of increase in interest rate and borrowings for business expansion. The business expanded its store network with 252 new store openings taking the total store count at the end of the quarter to 18,774 stores with an area of 72.9 million sq ft.

The quarter recorded footfalls of over 282 million across formats, a growth of 40.3 per cent Y-o-Y. Digital Commerce and New Commerce businesses continued to grow and contributed to 19 per cent of revenue. Reliance Retail launched Swadesh, focusing on India's tradition & art forms, and AjoGram, a D2C focused content driven platform.

The business acquired Sephora India's franchise business and entered into an exclusive distribution arrangement with SMCPL to launch Sandro and Maje brands in India. Isha M. Ambani, Executive Director, Reliance Retail Ventures Limited, said: "Reliance Retail has delivered strong performance during the festive quarter."

Yes Bank makes biggest market cap gain among banks in Q4 2023



MUMBAI: Yes Bank posted the highest percentage increase in market capitalization among Indian banks in the quarter ended December 31, 2023. Market capitalization for the lender rose 24.4 per cent to Rs 616.94 billion from October to December, helping Yes Bank move two slots higher to 14th position in the list of top 20 Indian banks by market cap, according to S&P Global Market Intelligence data & analysis.

In terms of market cap percentage growth, Punjab National Bank was just behind Yes Bank with a quarterly increase of 19.4 per cent to 1.054 trillion in the three months ended December 31, 2023.

This saw it gain one spot from a quarter ago, to eighth position on the top 20 list, which had HDFC Bank Ltd. at its top. Overall, 14 of the 20

largest banks in India reported gains in market capitalization in the October-to-December quarter, eight of them with double-digit increases, according to S&P Global Market Intelligence data.

The top seven Indian banks retained their market cap ranking during the quarter, with HDFC Bank Ltd. cementing its lead as the biggest Indian lender. ICICI Bank Ltd. retained its second spot in the market cap ranking, while State Bank of India, the biggest Indian lender by assets, was third by market capitalization.

Some state-owned lenders posted declines in their market cap in the quarter. These included UCO Bank with a 8.7 per cent fall and Indian Overseas Bank with a 7.4 per cent drop, according to S&P Global Market Intelligence data.

India's Monetary Policy must stay disinflationary despite core Inflation Dip: RBI Governor

NEW DELHI: RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das emphasised the need for India's monetary policy to remain actively disinflationary, despite a recent significant decline in core inflation.

Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Das clarified that with inflation hovering around 6 per cent, it is premature to consider a pivot in monetary policy, reported Reuters.

While acknowledging the recent drop in core inflation

- excluding volatile food and fuel prices - Das expressed satisfaction that the monetary policy is effective.

However, he underscored that the monetary policy committee's focus remains on the headline number.

Highlighting global geopolitical volatility, the RBI chief warned of potential impacts on economies worldwide, especially regarding food inflation, susceptible to spikes due to disruptions in global supply chains and other risks.



Over Rs 1.03 Lakh Crore Investments attracted by PLI Schemes

NEW DELHI: The Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Schemes have seen an investment influx exceeding Rs 1.03 lakh crore until November 2023, leading to total production or sales of Rs 8.61 lakh crore and the generation of over Rs 6.78 lakhs in direct and indirect employment.

These schemes have also driven exports surpassing Rs 3.20 lakh crore, notably contributed to by sectors like Pharmaceuticals, Food Processing, and Telecom and Networking products. 746 applications have re-

ceived approval in 14 sectors, with an anticipated investment exceeding Rs 3 lakh crore, as of Wednesday.

176 Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), out of these applications, have benefited from PLI in sectors such as Bulk Drugs, Medical Devices, Pharma, Telecom, White Goods, Food Processing, Textiles and Drones, playing key roles as investment partners or contract manufacturers for major corporations.

The PLI Scheme for Food Processing has resulted in a sub-



stantial increase in the sourcing of raw materials from India, positively impacting the income of Indian farmers and MSMEs. Incentives totalling around Rs 4,415 crore have been disbursed under PLI Schemes for eight sectors, including Large-Scale Electronics Manufacturing (LSEM), IT Hardware, Bulk

Drugs, Medical Devices, Pharmaceuticals, Telecom and Networking Products, Food Processing, and Drones and Drone Components.

The PLI Scheme has notably led to a significant reduction in imports of raw materials in the Pharmaceuticals sector.

Across crucial sectors, PLI Schemes are playing a vital role in fostering global competitiveness for Indian manufacturers.

These initiatives are successful in attracting investments that focus on core competencies and cutting-edge technology.

Additionally, they ensure operational efficiencies and create economies of scale within the manufacturing landscape.

The schemes contribute significantly to the boost in exports, further establishing India as an integral part of the global value chain.

India's export basket has undergone a transformation under PLI Schemes, transitioning from traditional commodities to high-value-added products such as electronics and telecommunication goods, and processed food products.

Karnataka Bank & Clix Capital form Digital Co-lending alliance for MSME Loans

BENGALURU: Karnataka Bank (KBL) and Clix Capital have officially entered a strategic co-lending partnership using the Yubi Co.lend Platform, on Tuesday.

This collaboration, in line with Reserve Bank of India (RBI) guidelines, is dedicated to extending digital loans to the vital Indian Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) sector.

Bringing together Karnataka Bank's cost-efficient



partnership aims to offer seamless, economical digital financing solutions. The agreement, signed in Bengaluru, emphasises leveraging each other's strengths to cater to the unserved MSME segment. Srikrishnan H, Managing Director & CEO, Karnataka Bank, highlighted, "Our

co-lending partnership will ensure much-needed liquidity at affordable rates, contributing to the sustainable economic growth of the country."

Rakesh Kaul, CEO, Clix Capital, expressed enthusiasm about the co-lending agreement, stating, "This partnership allows us to combine our technological expertise and agility with Karnataka Bank's resources, to offer seamless and affordable business loans to MSMEs."

Budget 2024 - Unlocking Liquidity and Promoting Financial Inclusion



SUMIT SHARMA
As we eagerly await the unveiling of Budget 2024, one aspect that has captured the attention of financial experts and enthusiasts alike is the potential transformation of gold loans. Touted as the last resort in times of financial emergencies, gold loans possess the power to unlock liquidity at the grassroots level while instilling good financial discipline. This Budget 2024 can emphasize the need to classify gold loans under the priority sector and treating smaller quantum loans at par with microfinance lending.



as a symbol of wealth and security, is now emerging as a lifeline during financial crises. Gold loans, backed by this precious metal, offer individuals a reliable last resort, providing quick access to funds when needed the most. This aspect becomes crucial, especially for those at the bottom of the economic pyramid.

Unlocking Liquidity at the Bottom of the Pyramid:
By recognizing and encouraging gold loans, we can effectively unlock liquidity

at the grassroots level. This approach ensures that individuals from all economic strata have access to financial resources, empowering them to navigate unforeseen financial challenges with greater resilience.

Building Financial Discipline:
Beyond immediate financial relief, gold loans also play a role in fostering good financial discipline. Individuals are more likely to approach borrowing with a sense of responsibility when backed by a tangible asset

like gold. This, in turn, contributes to a healthier and more sustainable financial ecosystem.

Priority Sector Classification:

One of the key requests in Budget 2024 is the classification of gold loans under the priority sector. This move aims to recognize the social and economic impact of gold loans, aligning them with broader financial inclusion goals. In particular, the emphasis is on treating small quantum gold loans, up to INR 50,000, with an allowance of loan-to-value (LTV) beyond 75%, at par with microfinance lending.

Concessional Credit Measures:

Recognizing the vast potential of gold reserves lying dormant, especially in rural India where the credit supply is alarmingly low at 8%, Budget 2024 proposes

further measures for concessional credit in the gold loan segment. These initiatives aim to unlock the hidden potential of gold, channeling it towards productive economic activities and uplifting rural communities.

As we anticipate the outcomes of Budget 2024, the spotlight on gold loans as a financial instrument is undeniable. The proposed measures, if implemented, have the potential to reshape the financial landscape, fostering inclusivity and empowerment. By recognizing the value of gold loans and tailoring policies to enhance their accessibility, the government paves the way for a more resilient and financially secure future for individuals across the economic spectrum.

Author Sumit Sharma is Founder of Radian Finserv Pvt Limited

FinAGG Technologies Secures \$11 Mn to drive MSME Credit Solutions



NEW DELHI: FinAGG Technologies, a fintech startup, has successfully secured USD 11 million in its Series A funding round.

It is a noteworthy milestone in FinAGG's mission to drive credit solutions for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), reported Inc42.

This funding is co-led by BlueOrchard and Tata Capital Limited, with participation from Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) and existing investor Prime Venture Partners.

This substantial capital infusion is earmarked for expanding both offline and online presence, boosting global outreach, and driving innovative product solutions within the MSME credit sector.

Established in 2020 by Nipun Kohli and R. Srinivasan, FinAGG specialises in providing credit solutions to distributors, retailers, and MSMEs integrated into a brand's supply chain.

Utilising the digital infrastructure of India, the startup facilitates the onboarding and underwriting of clients, offering convenient working capital solutions directly to MSMEs.

Kohli said, "The focus is on introducing block chain technology to revolutionise borrower evaluation, bringing a fresh perspective and depth to the underwriting process."

Notably, strategic collaborations with BlueOrchard, Tata Capital, and SIDBI aim to drive climate insurance penetration, scale business operations, and enable

growth through access to cost-effective funds.

Srini Ramki, Co-Founder and CTO, FinAGG Technologies, said, "The funds secured will play a crucial role in expanding our reach pan India."

According to FinAGG, the untapped potential of the working capital industry in India exceeds USD 7.2 billion, with FinTechs anticipated to dominate, leveraging innovation to simplify the borrowing process.

In the fiscal year 2022-23, the start-up reported audited revenues of Rs 12.8 crore, projecting revenues of Rs 30 crore for FY 2023-24 and a substantial growth expectation to Rs 100 crore for FY 2024-25. FinAGG Technologies is poised to revolutionise MSME credit solutions with this significant funding boost.

US judge pauses decision on Trump's disqualification from presidential primary ballot



A judge has paused Maine's Secretary of State Shenna Bellows' decision on former US President Donald Trump's disqualification from the state ballot in the presidential primary election. In a 17-page order on Wednesday, Justice Michaela Murphy from the Superior Court in Maine said that a December 2023 decision from Bellows should remain on hold until the Supreme Court renders its decision in the Colorado dispute, reports Xinhua news agency.

Because there are many federal issues raised in the other dispute, "it would be imprudent for this court to be the first court in Maine to address them", Murphy said. Noting that Maine's primary is scheduled for March 5, Murphy wrote that "unless the Supreme Court before that date finds President Trump disqualified to hold the office of president, eligible Maine voters who wish to cast their vote for him in the primary will be able to do so, with the winner being determined by ranked-choice voting".

"Put simply, the US Supreme Court's acceptance of the Colorado case changes everything about the order in which these issues should be decided, and by which court," she noted. "And while it is impossible to know what the Supreme Court will decide, hopefully it will at least clarify what role, if any, state decision-makers, including secretaries of state and state judicial officers, play in adjudicating claims of disqualification brought under Section Three of the 14th Amendment." Trump's lawyers appealed in state court after Bellows' ruling but then asked the judge to pause proceedings to allow the Supreme Court to rule on a similar case in Colorado.

Over 60K foreign students became permanent residents of Canada in '23

Even as Canada considers capping the arrival of international students amid growing housing crisis, 62,410 of them became permanent residents of the country in 2023, according to the country's immigration data.

This number represented an increase of 9,670 from the 52,740 international graduates who became international students in 2022, a November 2023 Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) data said. Much of Canada's population growth -- now one of the fastest in the world -- comes from foreign students, non-permanent residents, and temporary foreign workers, according to immigration experts.

The nation opened its doors to immigrants to replace aging workers and fill labour gaps, but the boom in numbers has put a strain on the country's



resources. Last week, Immigration Minister Marc Miller said he will closely analyse the number of international students and temporary residents entering into the country with the government facing backlash over housing affordability and rising cost of living.

The minister said he is mulling over options, which include

reforming permits and capping intake of non-permanent residents. Meanwhile, Montreal-based Desjardins Securities warned that closing doors to temporary workers and foreign students allowed into Canada would blunt the country's economic recovery and deepen recession.

According to predictions by

the capital market company, the country's real GDP would drop by 0.7 per cent in 2024 and grow an average of 1.78 per cent annually over the following four years.

There are many pathways available to international students who want to transition to Canadian permanent residence, and the fastest among them is the Express Entry Program. International students form the biggest cohort opting for permanent residency in Canada every year with Indians grabbing the lion's share.

The number of permits given to Indian students declined by four per cent last year due to a diplomatic row between the two nations, but they remained the largest group, according to Miller.

There are approximately 330,000 new immigrants and students from India living in Canada as of 2023.

PM Modi, President Putin hold talks on stronger defence, trade ties



Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday held a telephonic conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the two reviewed the progress on a number of issues of bilateral cooperation in follow-up to recent high-level exchanges between the two countries, according to a PMO statement.

"Had a wonderful meeting with President Putin. We got the opportunity to discuss furthering India-Russia cooperation in sectors such as trade, energy, defence and more. We also discussed other bilateral and global issues," PM Modi posted on X.

PM Modi and President Putin positively assessed the developments in bilateral relations and agreed to develop a roadmap for future initiatives to further strengthen the India-Russia Special & Privileged Strategic Partnership, the PMO statement said.

PM conveyed his best wishes for Russia's Presidency of BRICS in 2024 and assured of India's full support. The two leaders agreed to remain in touch, the statement added.

"A number of international topics were touched upon, including the situation around Ukraine," the Kremlin's press service said following the conversation.

"Vladimir Putin and Narendra Modi expressed interest in further enhancing mutually beneficial bilateral ties and wished each other success in the upcoming presidential elections in Russia and parliamentary elections in India," the statement said.

Top Hamas leader Ghazi Hamad flees Lebanon fearing assassination



Ghazi Hamad, a top Hamas leader considered to be one of the masterminds of the October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, has fled Lebanon where he had been hiding in fear of a possible assassination attempt, sources said.

The highly-placed sources in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) told IANS that Hamad has left for Qatar.

The sources said that many other senior Hamas leaders fled Lebanon and have taken asylum in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Qatar.

The development comes almost two weeks after the Israeli assassination of Hamas leader Saleh al-Arouri in Lebanon on January 2.

Al-Arouri and six other Hamas members were killed in an Israeli drone attack that targeted an office of the Hamas militant group in the southern suburb of the Beirut.

Qatar -- which is one of the main mediators between Israel and Hamas for hostage release -- has already communicated to the Jewish nation el not to undertake any killing in its soil.

Hamas leaders, including Ismael Haniyeh and Khalid Meshel, are also reportedly in Qatar.

Ukraine claims to destroy Russian spy plane



Ukraine has claimed to destroy a Russian spy plane over the Sea of Azov. Ukraine's Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi initially said on Telegram on Monday that two aircraft had been destroyed, writing: "Warriors of the Air Force of the Armed Forces of Ukraine destroyed an enemy A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft and an enemy IL-22 air control centre," CNN reported.

He also thanked the Air Force for "the perfectly planned and executed operation" in southern Ukraine.

In a statement, the Ukrainian Air Forces called the special operation in the Azov Sea region "successful".

Yuriy Ihnat, a spokesman for the Ukrainian Air Force, later said in a post on Facebook that one of the Russian planes targeted was able to make a landing, but said it appeared "beyond repair".

"So, no matter how you slice it, the target is destroyed, and resuscitation will not help!" he wrote.

"The long-range radar detection aircraft A-50 was and is a priority target for us. And until today, the destruction of this aircraft seemed an impossible task for the Air Force."

India Takes Centre Stage at Davos, Showcasing Resilient Economy & Investment Opportunities

NEWDELHI: The Commerce and Industry Ministry announced that India is taking centre stage at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, showcasing its resilience in global economy and standing as a preferred investment destination, on Tuesday.

The Ministry stated that India will spotlight its opportunities, fostering discussions on manufacturing, technology, sustainability, mobility, startups, healthcare and Artificial Intelligence.

Shaktikanta Das, Governor, Reserve Bank of India, speaking at a Davos session, expressed optimism about India's strong growth prospects and highlighted the remarkable recovery in the country's banking sector.

He emphasised the international confidence in India and the stability offered by its macroeconomic and financial sectors.

India's impactful presence is underscored by securing four



exclusive spaces at WEF, each dedicated to presenting the India opportunity and its growth narrative to global investors, the ministry added.

The ministry detailed the four designated spaces -- India Engagement Centre, Experience India Centre, India Investment Centre, and We Lead Lounge.

The India Investment Centre, as described, will function as a hub for Government-to-Business (G2B) and Business-to-Business (B2B) networking, hosting roundtables and sessions.

Rajesh Kumar Singh from the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) is actively participating in the meeting.

Industry needs to aggressively realize market access created by FTAs: Commerce Minister Goyal

NEWDELHI: While India has signed ambitious Free Trade agreements with major trading partners such as UAE, Australia and Mauritius and more FTAs are being negotiated with UK and EU, Indian industry has not fully recognized and realized the potential, says Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal.

Speaking at the meeting of the Board of Trade- the apex body of trade under Ministry of Commerce and industries, he called on industry to aggressively explore and exploit the new market access opportunities created by FTAs while the industries in partner countries have more nimble footed.

"The recent FTAs such as India-Mauritius Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA), India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), India-Australia Economic Coopera-



tion and Trade Agreement (IndAus ECTA) are opportunities waiting to be realized", he said.

The Board of Trade comprises apex chambers and national trade bodies such as FICCI, ASSOCHAM, CII, FISME, LBU and EPCs.

He emphasized the need to expand exports as Internationalization of industry proved beneficial for induc-

ing quality and achieving scale which helped make industry competitive.

Exhorting the Ministry to look beyond the traditional export promotion measures, Goyal directed them to equally focus on export of services, e-commerce exports and greater use of GEM portal for boosting both domestic and international trade.

The meeting of the Board was held amidst rising uncertainties in global trade. The volume of global trade has shrunk by 7.5% (Dec-Jan 2023), Indian trade has remained marginally positive and grew by 0.4% during the period.

However, the regional conflicts and recession in western market pose a serious challenge for growth of merchandise trade.

How the Hamas-Israel war turned out to be a strategic advantage for Russia



This conflict has left the world and societies divided, raised questions over the extent of "self-defence" and the definition of genocide, and brought into sharp focus the differing approach to conflicts around the globe.

The Israel-Hamas war, which has entered its 100th day, has upended geopolitics in other ways too.

One unforeseen -- and unintended -- beneficiary is Russia.

While the diversion of attention - and of crucial funding and military aid - of the US and most European powers to Israel, leaving Ukraine and its grandstanding President Volodymyr Zelensky literally and figuratively in the cold, confer a marked strategic advantage to Russia, there are a host of other ramifications that portend favourably for it too.

Long pilloried by the Western powers and its allies over its military action in Ukraine, Moscow has now a sense of satisfaction of seeing the same Western powers attempting to justify their unqualified support to Israel in its extremely ruthless and indiscriminate response against the hapless Palestinians of Gaza.

The higher magnitude of civilian deaths and damage in Gaza, than in the entire Ukrainian conflict, has led to blowback from several countries of the Global South, across Africa and South America, as well as the Arab street - though not

the Arab governments.

Then, significant sections of citizens in Europe as well as the US are also on the streets to demand a ceasefire even as polite requests from the West for "restraint" evoke trenchant Israeli responses.

The protests in Europe and the US over the plight of the Palestinians and the socio-political tensions they are evoking -- given the gulf between the protesters and their government -- could turn out to be a potent destabilising factor - whether Russia chooses to utilise it or not.

While in the US, the Palestinian situation spells trouble for President Joe Biden and his Democrats ahead of the crucial 2024 Presidential and Congressional elections as key support demographics revolt against them, the consequences for Europe could be more dire.

On the continent, their equal blind support to Ukraine has not only left armoured arsenals bare in several European countries, but is also leading to economic distress -- due to the sanctions, particularly of fuel, and the consequent political turmoil as populist elements -- notoriously Eurosceptic too -- gain at the expense of the centrist parties.

And then as the UN, and its agencies are not spared too by Israel while proponents of the "rules-based" global order stay silent -- this too works to the

gain of Russia which has been calling for a multi-polar and equitable global arrangement over the current hegemony of the Western powers and global agencies.

Then, the ICC issued warrants against Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova over alleged shifting of children from war-torn Ukraine, it was called over for its silence in the case of detention, denial of rights, and much worse for Palestinian children in Gaza and West Bank -- despite the same Prosecutor visiting the region - though he did not go to Gaza.

Compare that to the shrill cries and condemnation over South Africa moving the International Court of Justice against Israel on charges of genocide. The differential treatment has again raised claims, evoked earlier in African circles, whether the ICC and other global institutions is only meant to be used against leaders from the continent, or a malefactor or two from the Balkans, while those from the rest of the world are immune from its remit. All this will not help the Western powers in their relations with the rest of the world, especially the Global South, and Russia is moving fast to supplant them.

France is fast losing influence in several of its erstwhile northwest and west African colonies, including Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and Russia, first through the Wagner PMC, and now the government itself, with Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov as its pointsman, is stitching up security deals.

Moscow is not neglecting the rest of the continent either, be it the south, east, or the key northern region, where even the UN is not much in favour - as demand for withdrawal of its forces from Congo shows.

232 confirmed dead in January 1 Japan earthquake



At least 232 people have been confirmed dead in the devastating 7.6-magnitude earthquake that struck Japan's Ishikawa prefecture on January 1, local officials said on Wednesday.

According to the prefectural government, the death toll was updated on Wednesday morning after an additional 10 casualties were reported by the city of Wajima, one of the worst-hit by the massive temblor, reports Xinhua news agency.

Local authorities said these fatalities were discovered in the vicinity of the Wajima Morning Market, a popular tourist spot that suffered extensive damage in the earthquake-triggered fires immediately following the seismic event.

Since last week, the Wajima Morning Market has been the focus of large-scale search and rescue operations. The number of individuals unaccounted for has decreased by one, leaving Wajima city with 17 missing persons and Suzu city with four, totaling 21 people. According to local media reports, the damage to residences has reached a staggering 22,374 confirmed cases, and there is a high likelihood that the number of affected buildings will significantly increase as further assessments are conducted.

In cities of Wajima and Suzu, the extent of the damage is still described as "numerous", with the actual situation remaining unclear, reported national news agency Kyodo. The January 1 temblor, officially named 2024 Noto Peninsula Earthquake, is the first to kill more than 100 people in the country since the 2016 Kumamoto tremors in Japan's southwestern region, which claimed 276 lives.

UN General Assembly President to visit India

UN General Assembly President Dennis Francis is to visit India later this month after attending the Nonaligned and Group of 77 summits in Uganda, according to his spokesperson Monica Grayley.

She told reporters on Tuesday that he is scheduled to visit India and China after his trip from January 17 to 21 to Kampala for the summits.

The itinerary for the India visit was not immediately available.

Security Council reform, South-South Cooperation and the UN's sustainable development goals are likely to figure in his interactions with officials in India.

During the trip, Francis will be accompanied by his Chief of Cabinet Collen Vixen Kelapile.

Francis, a career diplomat from Trinidad who was elected Assembly president last year, will highlight at the summits in Kampala "that at a time of unprecedented crises, the combined voice of the Global South is needed much more", he said at a roundtable on the



reform co-sponsored by India last month.

Francis has expressed appreciation for India's development efforts across the Global South.

At a meeting in November last year, he said the India UN Development Fund's contribution "is no small feat, especially in this age of shrunken fiscal spaces, compounded by the impacts of pandemic and other global shocks in recent years".

In his country, he said, "it supports innovative, Southern-owned and led demand-driven sustainable development projects".

Indian-American voters in Iowa 'feel abandoned' by Nikki Haley

With just a day to go for the Iowa caucuses, Indian-American voters in the state have said that they "feel abandoned" by 2024 Republican presidential aspirant and "proud daughter of Indian immigrants", Nikki Haley.

According to a New York Times report, while the lone woman in the presidential race has a number of prominent Indian-American donors, she has not aggressively courted voters from the community in the Hawkeye State, and rarely plays up her identity to pull in new votes.

The two-time South Carolina Governor and former UN ambassador officially launched her



presidential bid on February 15, calling herself a "proud daughter of Indian immigrants" who left Punjab in search of a better life.

Being among a handful of Indian-American candidates to ever run for president and second woman of colour to ever seek the GOP's nomination for the White House, has inherently generated interest in the In-

dian and South Asian-American communities

Speaking to the NYT, leaders of prominent Indian-American groups said they started reaching out to the Haley campaign at a time when she was still polling in the single digits, with hopes of hosting her at their temples, town hall-style events or house parties.

But so far nothing has worked, the leaders said, calling the lack of outreach as frustrating and alienating for some of their membership.

"It really raises the question: Who are you willing to engage in the dialogue? Do you want the support and do you support the engagement of Indian Ameri-

cans across the board?" asked Prakash Kopparapu, chairman of the Indo American PAC-IA.

Himanshu Pathak, who has served as president of the Indo American Association of Iowa, surmised that Haley perhaps saw the electorate as too small to make a difference.

That would be a mistake, he said, adding: "We are low in numbers -- but not that low. And we are increasing day by day".

On the contrary, Haley's fellow Indian-American presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy has made several appearances at the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center of Iowa.



A Sikh priest sits behind the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh's Holy book) during a display of Sikhism's symbolic items at Sri Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar on Wednesday, on the occasion of Parkash Parv of tenth guru of Sikhs Guru Gobind Singh. PHOTO-PRABHJOT GILL

Director Anurag Sharma honored with Yuva Ratna Award on Swami Vivekananda Jayanti



KULBIR SINGH KALSI
Panchkula

Well-known actor and director from Panchkula Anurag Sharma was honored with the prestigious Yuva Ratna Award on the occasion of Swami Vivekananda's birth anniversary. Anurag Sharma was given the award for his upcoming web series 'Two Great Masters'. It is noteworthy that in this series, Anurag Sharma has tried to inspire the youth with the teachings of Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa yogananda. The series has been produced by Amrit Gupta and co-produced by Sonu Tyagi. Rakesh Bedi is the lead actor in the series. It is also worth mentioning here that Anurag Sharma came into limelight with his film 'Juni- The Last Prayer', released in theaters last year, in which he portrayed the relationship between Human beings and the Almighty God in a very practical and heart-touching manner. Anurag Sharma was recently roped in as the brand ambassador of Shree Shyam Dairy Sector 12 Panchkula, and he will be seen promoting pure dairy products. On the occasion, Anurag Sharma expressed his elation over receiving the award and said that he will continue to produce such films for the youth, which will keep them attached with our religion, culture and society. He said that he will also announce the name of his upcoming film soon.



Guru Gobind Singh's sword worshiped in Jaipur on Prakash Parv

JAIPUR: Rajasthan Deputy Chief Minister Diya Kumari, on the Prakash Parv of Guru Gobind Singh on Wednesday, performed a special puja at the City Palace, where she worshipped his 338-year-old sword kept there. "The story of sacrifice, and bravery of Guru Gobind Singh will always inspire us all," she said.

A Shabad Kirtan was organised and prasad was distributed to everyone. On the occasion, the sword has been kept for tourists to see at Sarvotbadra Chowk of the City Palace. Guru Gobind Singh spent some time in Nahal in what is now Himachal Pradesh's Sirmour and while leaving, had presented his personal sword to the then ruler as a memento. Jaipur, titular Rajmata Padmini Devi, who is from Nahal, brought the sword to Jaipur a few years ago. Since then this sword has been in the City Palace. Members of the Sikh community expressed their gratitude to Padmini Devi for giving them darshan of the Guru's kirpan.

Like the earlier two franchises, Ardaas Sarbat De Bhale di will also be a socially relevant family drama high on emotions while being entertaining. Talking about the film, Gippy Grewal said, "Ardaas' is very close to my heart as I became a director of the film. The audiences have given the franchise much love and I feel an added responsibility towards them, to give them a film that will entertain and touch

Jamie Lever to make Telugu film debut with 'Aa Okatti Adakku'

MUMBAI: Actress-comedian, and daughter of actor Johnny Lever, Jamie Lever is set to make her debut in the South Indian film industry with the Telugu film 'Aa Okatti Adakku'. Expressing her joy about this milestone, Jamie said: "Making my debut in the Telugu industry with 'Aa Okatti Adakku' is a dream come true. This film is not just a professional journey for me, it's a personal homage to my roots." "Telugu is my mother tongue, and performing in it is a heartfelt tribute to my grandmother, who is more comfortable with her mother tongue." Jamie is set to play a pivotal role in the film, which is being produced by the acclaimed 'Chota Bheem' producer, Rajiv Chilaka. The project boasts an ensemble cast including veterans from the South Indian film industry. Expressing gratitude for the



opportunity, Jamie highlighted the significance of performing in her mother tongue, especially for her grandmother. "I feel blessed to have this chance to connect with my roots through cinema. This is not just a film; it's a celebration of language, culture, and family." As excitement builds for Jamie's debut in the Telugu industry, she shared her enthusiasm: "I'm super excited for my South debut. Telugu is not just a language; it's a part of my identity. I hope the audience enjoys seeing me in a new light, celebrating the richness of Telugu cinema."



Commuters make their way along a street amid dense fog on a cold winter morning in Amritsar on Thursday. The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) Thursday forecasted that very dense fog conditions are likely to continue to prevail over North India for the next 4-5 days causing disruption in flight services. PHOTO-PRABHJOT GILL

A 'Pran Prathistha' for Lord Ram

KAVITA SHARMA

As we all know that Ayodhya Nagri is all set to welcome Lord Ram on 22 January this month. For which a Pran Prathistha ceremony is being held at the Birth Place of Ram Lalla at Ayodhya. The choice of this date for Pran Prathistha in Ram Temple Ayodhya is also very auspicious, as it is Dwadashi Tithi. A day linked with Lord Vishnu and Shri Ram is considered the seventh Avatar of Lord Vishnu. The religious rituals have already been started from 16 January and it will continue for seven days till 21st January. The Pran Prathistha ceremony will be held on 22 January, in the auspicious Abhijit Mahurat of Paush Shukla Dwadashi by 12.20pm and conclude by 1 pm. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, RSS sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat, Governor Anandi Ben and various members of the Ram Janam bhoomi Trust will be present in the ceremony.



When the divine essence referred as prana is infused or transferred in an idol or image. According to beliefs and traditions it is a process which transforms any idol in to a living representation of the deity. Pran Prathistha is also done when a new temple is constructed or a new idol is placed in the temple. Here hymns and mantras are recited to invite the deity to be a resident guest and the Idol's (murti's) eye which is covered by a cloth is opened for the first time. The 51 inch idol has been sculptured by Mysuru based artist Arun Yogiraj.

Pran Prathistha is mainly practiced in Hinduism and Jainism, the ritual is considered to infuse life into the Hindu temple. Here the word "Pran" means life and Prathistha generally means stalled or consecrated. The phrase means establishment of the image in its vital breath. The ritual involves a puja with chanting of Sanskrit mantras. It includes inviting the deity to the temple as a resident guest, bathing and cleansing the deity. Then dressing and setting the deity to its desired place. This is followed by chanting of the mantras, various items like

Milk, flowers, fruits and sweets are presented to the deity as a symbol of devotion. After the infusion the deity is considered consecrated and blessed. The devotees seek blessings and offer flowers and sweets to the deity. Meanwhile the preparations in Ayodhya are in full swing. Thousands of people from all sections of the society are invited to attend this event. Many States like UP, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh etc have declared holiday on 22 January. All schools, colleges will remain closed on this day.

Gippy Grewal set to come up with third installment of 'Ardaas' franchise

CHANDIGARH: Punjabi superstar Gippy Grewal is set to take the 'Ardaas' franchise forward with its third installment.

The film, titled 'Ardaas Sarbat De Bhale Di' went on floors in Chandigarh on Monday. It stars Gippy Grewal along with Jasmin Bhasin, Gurpreet Guggi and Prince Kanwaljeet Singh is produced by Gippy Grewal, Kumar Mangat Pathak, Ravneet Kaur Grewal, Abhishek Pathak and Divay Dhamija.



Like the earlier two franchises, Ardaas Sarbat De Bhale di will also be a socially relevant family drama high on emotions while being entertaining. Talking about the film, Gippy Grewal said, "Ardaas' is very close to my heart as I became a director of the film. The audiences have given the franchise much love and I feel an added responsibility towards them, to give them a film that will entertain and touch

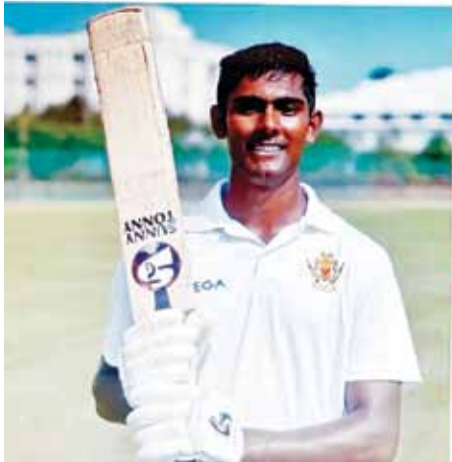
content and is helping put Punjabi cinema on a global map. We have had a wonderful experience working with him. 'Ardaas 3' being his directorial is all the more special." Presented under banners Panorama Studios and Humble Motion Pictures, the film will be shot in a start to finish schedule and will release later this year.

Bhumi Pednekar plays investigative journalist in streaming film 'Bhakshak'



MUMBAI: Bollywood Actress Bhumi Pednekar is set to portray an investigative journalist in the upcoming streaming film 'Bhakshak'. The film is a crime drama inspired by true events, and is directed by Pulkit. It also stars Sanjay Mishra, Aditya Srivastava and Sai Tamhankar in pivotal roles. 'Bhakshak' explores the journey of an unwavering woman's quest to seek justice. Bhumi Pednekar, as Vaishali Singh, portrays the role of an investigative journalist who wants to bring to light a heinous crime, laying bare the ground reality of crimes against women. Director Pulkit said in a statement, "Our aim was to shed light on the harsh realities of society and spark conversations that lead to meaningful change. I'm looking forward to more people joining this important dialogue." Expressing his thoughts on the film's release, Gaurav Verma, producer at Red Chillies Entertainment, said, "We believe in storytelling that not only entertains but also enlightens. This film is a testament to our commitment to narratives that provoke thought and inspire societal reflections. We're excited to collaborate with Netflix to share this impactful story with audiences worldwide." The film, produced by Red Chillies Entertainment, will drop on February 9 on Netflix.

Karnataka batter Prakhar Chaturvedi score unbeaten 404 breaks Yuvraj's 24 year old record



ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

Prakhar Chaturvedi, Karnataka's batter With a stunning knock, surpassed Yuvraj Singh's 1999 record of 358 runs



for Punjab in a game against Bihar. Karnataka's Prakhar Chaturvedi broke the 25-year-old record of India's star batter Yuvraj Singh with an unbeaten 404 runs off 636 balls in the U-19 Cooch Behar Trophy final

against Mumbai. BCCI on X posted, "Karnataka's Prakhar Chaturvedi becomes the first player to score 400 in the final of #CoochBehar Trophy with his splendid 404* knock against Mumbai," Chaturve-

di's prolonged and determined performance played a crucial role in Karnataka piling up a total of 890 for eight in reply to Mumbai's 380. Prakhar Chaturvedi missed out on being part of the quad that will be defending India's under-19 world title in South Africa later this month. But the Karnataka teen has ensured that selectors will be keeping a keen eye on his from here on. Prakhar playing a marathon knock that took 885 minutes, spread over two-and-half days, the right hander compiled a sensational unbeaten 404 to become the highest individual scorer in the final of the Cooch Behar Trophy, the national U-19 tournament. Cooch Behar Trophy has unearthed many legends. Indian cricket lovers will be hoping Prakhar too will join their ranks.

Sonu Sood receives deep fake video of himself, impersonator asks distressed family for money



MUMBAI: Actor Sonu Sood, who is known for 'Dabangg', 'Happy New Year', 'Aagadu' and others, recently received a deep fake video of him from one of his followers on social media. The actor took to his X on Thursday and uploaded the deep fake video to clear the air that the person featured in the video is not him. In the deep fake video call featuring Sood, the impersonator interacted with a family in need of funds for medical treatment, assuring them of financial assistance. He wrote in the caption: "My film FATEH is inspired by real life incidents involving Deep Fake and fake loan apps. This is the latest incident where someone tried to extract money from an unsuspecting family, by chatting with them through video call pretending to be Sonu sood. Many innocent individuals fall into this trap. I request all of you to be vigilant if you receive such calls. #fateh." Interestingly, inspired from such events, the actor turned writer and director for his new thriller, 'Fateh'. He wrote the story after over a year of research and interviews with victims, cybercrime police officers, and ethical hackers. In the film, he essays the role of an investigation agent who is on a mission to protect the country from cybercrimes.