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CBI TO PROBE INTO SUPPLY OF SUBSTANDARD MEDICINES IN DELHI GOVERNMENT HOSPITALS



Arvind Kejriwal will cooperate if ED sends 'legal' summons: AAP leaders

FW CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

AAP leaders reportedly said the alleged Delhi liquor scam was bogus and asserted that Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal will cooperate with the ED if it sends "legal" summons to him.

Kejriwal, the national convener of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), refused to appear before the Enforcement Directorate in connection with the Delhi excise policy case on Wednesday, calling the summons "illegal" and "politically motivated".

Kejriwal, the national convener of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), refused to appear before the Enforcement Directorate in connection with the Delhi excise policy case on Wednesday, calling the summons "illegal" and "politically motivated".

AAP leader Jasmine Shah said the investigation into the alleged liquor scam has been going on for the last two years but so far, no recovery has been made as evidence by the ED.

"The so-called liquor scam investigation is fake. The inquiry in this case has been going on for the last two years and the ED has called more than 500 witnesses and con-



ducted over 1,000 raids but so far, not even Rs 1 has been recovered as evidence," Shah said. It is a conspiracy to target the top leaders of the INDIA bloc and also arrest Kejriwal ahead of the Lok Sabha elections to stop them from campaigning, he added.

"The AAP and Arvind Kejriwal are ready to cooperate in any investigation on the condition that the summons is legal," he said.

Highlighting an alleged pattern in the arrest of AAP

leaders by the ED, Shah said the BJP leaders reveal the action to be taken even before the ED takes a step.

In the previous two incidents of Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh's arrest in the alleged liquor scam case, a similar pattern was observed, he claimed.

AAP chief national spokesperson Priyanka Kakkar said the leaders from her party have been imprisoned one after another without any evidence but they have always

The so-called liquor scam investigation is fake. The inquiry in this case has been going on for the last two years and the ED has called more than 500 witnesses and conducted over 1,000 raids but so far, not even Rs 1 has been recovered as evidence"

come out clean.

"In this case also, it may take some time but justice will be served. We believe in the law," she said. Kejriwal had earlier refused to appear before the ED on November 2 and December 21.

BANKING & FINANCE

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INDIAN ECONOMY GROWTH PROJECTED 6.2 PER CENT FOR 2024: UNWESP



ED summons: Sharad Pawar backs AAP chief Kejriwal, accuses Centre of misusing power



FW CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

Backing Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal over Enforcement Directorate summoning him, Nationalist Congress Party president Sharad Pawar on Thursday said the Centre was misusing power to discourage those who do not have similar political views.

Addressing party workers here, Pawar said summons

have been sent by the central probe agency to Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren as well and feared he too could be arrested.

Pawar said in the last 10 years, people have voted Kejriwal to power, adding that Aam Aadmi Party ministers have been jailed and steps were being taken to arrest him as well.

"He has been issued notices to appear before the ED. The chief minister of the country's capital. Everyone in Delhi

knows he is a simple man with a clean image. It will not be surprising if he is arrested," Pawar claimed.

"This means efforts are being made to discourage those who do not have similar political views by misusing power," Pawar alleged.

Kejriwal, who is also the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convener, had skipped the Enforcement Directorate summons on Wednesday.

He has so far skipped three summons by ED for questioning in connection with a money laundering case linked to the alleged liquor scam.

The alleged liquor scam is related to the excise policy 2021-22 that was scrapped by Kejriwal's government last year after Delhi Lieutenant Governor VK Saxena recommended a CBI probe into "lapses and irregularities" in its implementation.

Optimistic for India to be \$5 Tn Economy in next 2 to 2.5 years: Piyush Goyal



NEWDELHI: India is poised to achieve a USD 4 trillion economy before the upcoming general elections and be USD 5 trillion economy in next 2 to 2.5 years, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal announced on Wednesday.

Speaking at the inauguration of the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Utsav, Goyal expressed optimism that India would have the third largest GDP in the world latest by 2027, as per every street estimate.

Goyal's ambitious economic vision aligns with Bibek Debroy, Chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister.

In an opinion piece for the Economic Times on December 31, Debroy affirmed the certainty of India reaching the USD 4 trillion mark in 2024.

As general elections in India approach, scheduled for around April-May 2024, the nation is on a trajectory toward significant economic milestones.

Rajasthan CM gives general consent to CBI to investigate cases in state

NEW DELHI: Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma gave a general consent to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) for investigation in matters related to the state.

According to the notification issued by the Home Department, now the CBI will not require the permission of the state government to investigate any case in the state.

The previous government had withdrawn the general consent given to CBI for investigating matters in the state. But now, after the Chief Minister's decision, the CBI will not be requiring state government's permission to investigate any matter.

Transporters call off strike after assurance from Govt

Transporters and truck drivers have been opposing this provision and they have demanded that it should not be implemented



NEW DELHI: Countrywide protests by transporters against the increase in quantum of punishment in hit-and-run cases under the new criminal code ended on Tuesday night after the Centre's assurance that it will have a discussion with them before implementing the provisions.

Representatives of All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC) met Union Home Secretary Ajay Bhalla on Tuesday. During the meeting Bhalla told them that provisions under the new law has not been notified yet. He also assured them that the ministry will have a discussion with AIMTC before implementing it.

After the assurance that

provisions will be discussed before implementation, AIMTC appealed to the drivers to end the strike.

According to AIMTC Chairman Malkit Singh Bal, Section 106 (2) of the new law has a provision of up to 10 years' imprisonment and fine in 'hit-and-run' cases. Transporters and truck drivers have been opposing this provision and they have de-

SC refuses to form SIT to probe Adani-Hindenburg controversy

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court on Wednesday refused to form any SIT or group of experts to conduct an investigation into the Adani-Hindenburg controversy.

"SEBI should take its investigation to its logical conclusion in accordance with law. The facts of this case do not warrant a transfer of investigation from SEBI," held a bench presided over by CJI D.Y. Chandrachud.

Taking note of the submission made by Solicitor General Tushar Mehta that 22 out of 24 investigations relating to the allegations against Adani group of companies have already been finalised, the bench, also com-



prising Justices J.B. Pardiwala and Manoj Misra, asked the market regulator to complete the pending two investigations "expeditiously within a period of three months".

The top court said that re-

AAP picks Swati Maliwal for Rajya Sabha; renominates Sanjay Singh and ND Gupta

FW CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

Swati Maliwal resigned as the chief of the Delhi Commission for Women after she was nominated for the January 19 Rajya Sabha elections by the Aam Aadmi Party on Friday.

The Aam Aadmi Party renominated Sanjay Singh and ND Gupta for a second term in the Upper House of Parliament, party sources said on Friday.

The party's political affairs committee (PAC) announced the nominations.

"DCW chairperson Swati Maliwal has been nominated for the first time. The PAC



has decided to continue with Sanjay Singh and ND Gupta for their respective second term as Rajya Sabha members," news agency quoted sources as saying.

Sushil Kumar Gupta, whose tenure will end this month as

lowered Sanjay Singh, arrested in the excise policy money laundering case, to sign forms and documents for his Rajya Sabha renomination.

Special Judge MK Nagpal passed the order on an application filed by the politician, who submitted that his present term as a member of the Rajya Sabha is expiring on January 27 and the Returning Officer has issued a notice on January 2 for conduct of the election and nominations for the same are to be submitted by January 9.

The application sought a direction to the Tihar Jail Superintendent to allow Singh to sign the documents.

"Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra" to cover 15 states involving 100 LS constituencies

Congress announces route of Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra after Kharge chairs meeting of PCC presidents, CLP leaders

KAVITA SHARMA
New Delhi

The 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' being started from Imphal on January 14 by Rahul Gandhi will cover 15 states covering a distance of 6,713 kilometers involving 100 parliamentary constituencies and 110 districts.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on January 4 chaired a meeting of the PCC presidents, CLP leaders and AICC general secretaries/in-charges of states. The meeting among others was also attended by former president Rahul Gandhi.

In his opening remarks at the meeting, Kharge recalled how under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi, the United Progressive Alliance defeated the BJP led National Democratic Alliance 20 years ago, in 2004. He said, at that time every worker across the country had worked hard to defeat the NDA and now the time has come when the workers need to work with the same zeal and dedication once again. He said, time has come for the same dedication, commitment, zeal and hardwork to ensure the party's victory in 2024 General Elections.



Kharge listed some important steps the party has taken including "Donate for Desh" 'crowd-funding' ahead of the General Elections. Besides, he added, general secretaries' and in-charges' duties have been finalized while the Manifesto Committee has also been constituted.

Asserting that the NDA existed just in name now, Kharge said, in comparison, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) was emerging stronger with parties having strong grass-roots cadres across the country, being part of it.

Taking a dig at the Modi government, Congress President said, it had not done a single thing in the last ten years that could be termed as a milestone. "Politics of arrogance and lies comes with an expiry date", he remarked while referring to the BJP government.

Later briefing reporters,

There was a unanimous view that the momentum generated by the Bharat Jodo Yatra and the transformation it brought to Indian politics, needed to be carried forward"

6,713 kilometers mostly by bus. However, Rahul Gandhi will also walk on some stretches along the Yatra route. In the 15 states it will cover 100 Lok Sabha constituencies and 337 assembly segments involving 110 districts.

The 'Nyay Yatra' will spend a maximum eleven days in Uttar Pradesh where it will travel a distance of 1,074 kilometers covering 20 districts. The 15 states which will be covered by the 'Nyay-Yatra', include Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra.

PM Modi urges people not to visit Ayodhya on Jan 22



AYODHYA: Prime Minister Narendra Modi has urged the public not to visit Ayodhya on January 22 for inauguration of the Ram Temple.

"As bhakts, we would not like to cause any problems to Lord Ram. You all can come starting January 23 till eternity... Ram Mandir is now there forever and ever," Prime Minister Modi said on Saturday. He also asked everyone to light a diya in their house on January 22.

The Prime Minister said

that Ram Lalla has got a new permanent home in the form of the Ram temple in Ayodhya after "spending years in a tent".

He said that houses have been constructed for both Ram Lalla and four crore poor people of the country.

Prime Minister Modi also said that the government is taking steps to improve connectivity to Ayodhya from several places in the country.

He made the remarks after inaugurating the Ayodhya

Security forces execute anti-terror operation in Kulgam



Dham railway station and Maharishi Valmiki International Airport. The Prime Minister also flagged off eight new train routes on the day.

Addressing a public event in Ayodhya, Prime Minister Modi said, "December 30 has been a very historical date in the history of the country. On this day in 1943, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose hoisted the flag in Andaman and proclaimed the Independence of India."

He further said that if any country wants to reach new levels of development, it has to preserve its heritage.

Prime Minister Modi said that today's India is an "amalgam of the old and the new".

"We are moving ahead in the digital age and are also preserving our heritage. Development must come with preservation of heritage and carry forward Viksit Bharat," he pointed out.

The Prime Minister added that the completion of the Ram temple is a moment that the world was waiting and the excitement is palpable on the streets of Ayodhya.

Security forces are engaged in an anti-terror operation in Kulgam district of Jammu and Kashmir as they pursue two to three terrorists reportedly holed up in the Hadigam area of the district. The encounter started on Wednesday evening during a search operation conducted by the Jammu and Kashmir Police, Indian Army, and CRPF. "Encounter has started at Hadigam area of Kulgam district. Kulgam Police, Indian Army and CRPF are on the job. Further details shall follow," said Jammu and Kashmir Police in a statement on Wednesday.

CBI to probe into supply of substandard medicines in Delhi Govt Hospitals

FW CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

The Union Home ministry has ordered a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry into the supply of substandard medicines in Delhi government hospitals and whether the drugs were also distributed through mohalla clinics, sources said on Friday.

The CBI probe was ordered following a recommendation by Delhi Lt Governor V K Saxena on the matter in December last year. Saxena said the drugs allegedly "failed quality standard tests" and had the "potential of endangering lives" in hospitals run by Delhi government.

The Delhi government's Directorate of Vigilance had written to the home ministry



requesting the probe. "It also needs to be investigated whether the same drugs which have been procured by the Central Procurement Agency (CPA) are also being distributed to the patients through the 'Mohalla Clinics' or not," the communication read.

The letter said any action

for supplying 'Not of Standard Quality' drugs should not be confined to the CPA and there is need to investigate the entire supply chain -- the role of the suppliers who procured from manufacturers and provided supply to the end users, that is, hospitals (patients).
«Besides, there is a need to lift

the corporate veil to understand the gravity and motives of supplying «Not of Standard Quality» drugs,» read the Directorate of Vigilance letter. The drugs that were found to be of «substandard quality» included critical life-saving antibiotics used for the treatment of lung and urinary tract infections such as Cephalixin, according to officials.

The list also included a steroid, Dexamethasone, used for curing life-threatening inflammation in the lungs and joints and swelling in the body, anti-epilepsy and anti-anxiety psychiatric drug Leveticetam and anti-hypertension drug Amlodipin, the officials said.

«In this context, it is not out of place to mention that the matter of «Mohalla Clinics» was already entrusted to the

CBI and a Preliminary Enquiry (PE) was also registered... » the communication read.

According to a vigilance department report submitted to the lieutenant governor, of the 43 samples of drugs sent to government laboratories, three failed the test and 12 reports were pending. Further, out of another 43 samples sent to private laboratories, five failed.

Drugs such as Amlodipine, Leveticetam and Pantoprazole failed the test in both government and private laboratories. Cephalixin and Dexamethasone failed the test in private laboratories.

Delhi Health Minister Saubh Bharadwaj had demanded action against the city's health secretary in connection with the matter.

IMD predicts 'cold day' in Delhi, city records 9.4 degree Celsius as min temp

NEW DELHI: The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted a "cold day" in Delhi on Friday with maximum temperature to hover around 13 degree Celsius. However, the city recorded minimum temperature of 9.4 degree Celsius, two notches above the seasonal average.

The city also witnessed dense to moderate fog affecting traffic and rail movement. "The dense fog was for a brief period of two hours and during this period, Palam recorded the lowest visibility of 150 m at 3:30 a.m.," said the weatherman. At 8 a.m., the visibility at Palam and Safdarjung was at 400 m each.

According to Indian Railways, delays affecting 22 trains bound for Delhi stem from various factors, including fog-related issues in the northern region. The highest delay reported in



trains arriving in Delhi is five to six hours. Meanwhile, the Air quality continued to remain in 'very poor' category at several stations across the city.

At the Anand Vihar area, PM2.5 levels were recorded to be in 'very poor' category standing at 318 and PM10 reached 191 or 'moderate', according to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).

The Air Quality Index (AQI) between zero and 50 is considered 'good'; 51 and 100 'satisfactory'; 101 and 200 'moderate'; 201 and 300 'poor'; 301 and 400 'very poor'; and 401 and 500 'severe'.

The Indira Gandhi International (IGI) Airport T3 also witnessed PM2.5 levels at 206, the 'poor' category while the PM10 was at 129, falling under the 'moderate' category, respectively.

UP Police arrested 3 person for woman's murder in April 2023



FATEHPUR: Police in Uttar Pradesh's Fatehpur district have arrested three persons in connection with the murder of a 20-year-old woman whose body was found in a thicket in April last year.

The arrested persons are a 22-year-old man, his 45-year-old mother and his brother-in-law, 30.

The victim, a Dalit, had been in a relationship with the 22-year-old man, who is also a Dalit, police said.

In 2021, she had eloped with him, police said.

Later, when she refused to marry him and allegedly threatened to frame him and his family members in a false case, they killed her.

The search is on for the father of the accused.

According to the police, the case dates back to April 12, 2023, when the body of a woman was found.

Police found that a name was written on her hand.

"Fearing that they might be implicated in a false case, the man and his brother-in-law brought the woman to Fatehpur from Ludhiana district, Punjab, on the pretext of meeting his parents. While on the way to her residence, the three accused strangled her to death and later dumped the body in a thicket. The accused removed her clothes and ornaments in a bid to conceal her identity," said a police officer.

Delhi HC extends Hyd bizman Arun Pillai's interim bail till Jan 8 in excise policy case

NEW DELHI: The Delhi High Court on Thursday extended till January 8, interim bail of Hyderabad-based liquor businessman Arun Ramchandra Pillai, who is an accused in the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy case.

Pillai, who has sought relief to look after his ailing wife in Hyderabad, was produced before Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma on expiry of his previously-extended interim bail.

It has been submitted that complications developed after the discharge of his wife from hospital. In November last year, the court had granted two weeks' interim bail to Pillai who was arrested on March 6.

Appearing for Pillai before Special Judge MK Nagpal of the Rouse Avenue Court, advocate Nitesh Rana had claimed that his client's wife was to undergo a surgical procedure as she was extremely sick. He added that she had no one to look after her as she lived alone.

Earlier, the ED had filed a reply before the Delhi High Court on Pillai's bail plea. It



also filed a response on another petition terming his arrest as illegal, and violative of Section 19(1) of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act.

Citing the Supreme Court mandate of providing grounds for arrest as mandatory and of utmost importance, in the petition, Pillai had stated that no grounds for arrest, either oral or written, were ever provided to him, as was required under Section 19(1) of the PMLA.

His plea further stated that none of the impugned remand orders record any satisfaction of whether the ED had materials on record to form "reasons to

believe" that Pillai was guilty of an offence under the PMLA.

"It is pertinent to mention that the purported facts that have been asserted by the respondent agency (ED) in the remand application were asserted even in the first prosecution complaint filed," the plea read.

"The petitioner/applicant has appeared before the ED at least on nine occasions after the filing of first prosecution complaint and at least on three occasions after filing of the second prosecution complaint on which occasions the petitioner/applicant was never arrested by the respondent agency," it stated.

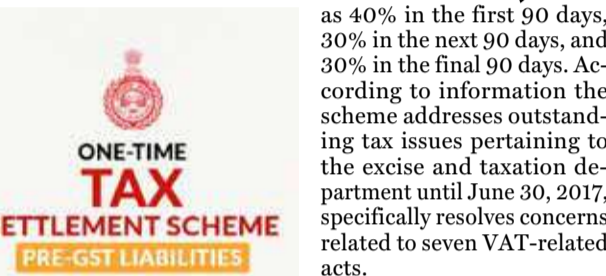
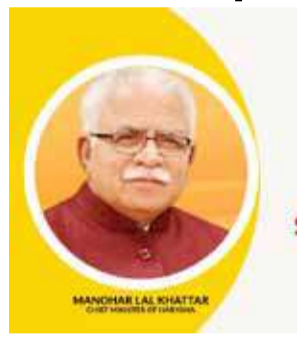
One-time settlement scheme pre-GST tax dues launched in Haryana

SATISH HANDA

Responding to the demands of traders and industry organisations in the state, the Haryana government taking decision to establish branches of the GST Tribunal in Gurugram and Hisar as such Haryana chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar

launched One Time Settlement-2023 scheme, which was a long-standing demand of traders and the business community in the state to settle pending tax payments pertaining to pre-GST time, he said that the scheme will be operational from January 1 to March 30. While introducing the scheme in Gurugram a couple of days ago, the CM also announced to open a GST training institute at Gurugram and said that the government plans to establish branches of the GST Tribunal in Gurugram and Hisar. Deputy Chief Minister Dushyant Chautala who holds the portfolio of excise and taxation department also addressed the gathering.

Under the One Time Settlement scheme, the tax amount will be divided into four categories, starting with an undisputed fee category



for cases without dispute. Taxpayers will pay 100% of the amount in this category, with no penalties or interest, an official spokesperson of the department said. Whereas, in case of disputed taxes under Rs 50 lakh, taxpayers will have to pay 30% of the outstanding amount and if the disputed tax amount is above Rs 50 lakh, they will have to pay 50%. In the third category, undisputed taxes will be assessed by the department where no appeal was made. The taxpayers will pay 40% if the amount is below Rs 50 lakh and 60% if it is above Rs 50 lakh. In this category there will be relief for taxpayers from penalties and interest. However, in the fourth category to include

outstanding amounts due to differences in tax rates. Here, the government has discounted the amount, requiring taxpayers to pay only 0% of the total.

While offering tax relief, the scheme also providing easy instalment options to taxpayers on a condition that the taxpayers with outstanding amounts below Rs 10 lakh must have to pay the entire sum in one lump sum before March 30. In case the outstanding amount is between Rs 10 lakh and R 25 lakh, the amount can be paid in two instalments and in case the outstanding amount of tax is more than Rs 25 lakh the payment can be spread across three instalments such

as 40% in the first 90 days, 30% in the next 90 days, and 30% in the final 90 days. According to information the scheme addresses outstanding tax issues pertaining to the excise and taxation department until June 30, 2017, specifically resolves concerns related to seven VAT-related acts.

While addressing, Dushyant Chautala said the Haryana government has implemented this scheme for the welfare of traders and industrialists. He said, a new bill has been passed in the recent past assembly session for this purpose enabling traders to receive exemptions in outstanding tax cases for the period till June 30, 2017. He said the implementation of the scheme, granting one-time exemption to traders in cases where consent of outstanding tax amounts are promptly given. He said, the state government has initiated various important schemes to provide relief to people in trade and industry offering this relief to waive the amount of interest and penalties on seven types of outstanding taxes.

Reduction in crimes in Haryana during 2023: Shatrugit Kapoor

SATISH HANDA
Panchkula

Addressing a press conference in his office Haryana Director General Police Shatrugit Kapoor said, there has been a 12 per cent decline in crime against women in the state, whereas much decline in various type of crimes has been recorded in the state during the year 2023. He said, a reduction in crimes of various



categories has been recorded in the year 2023 due to the strict working style of the Haryana

Police. As per the state official release apart from 12 per cent decline in crime against women, the robbery cases have seen a decline of 30%, dacoity cases witnessed 28.9% fall, snatching cases dropped by 3.9%, kidnapping cases dropped by 7.2%, rape cases declined by 6.9%, sex molestation of females cases dropped by 7.9%, murder cases dropped by 9.5% and dowry demand and torture cases wit-

nessed 8.4% fall. He said that there has been an 18.33 per cent decline in snatching cases and an 8% decline in serious injury cases in comparison to 2022.

DGP Kapoor said that feedback is taken when the complaint of a crime against a victim woman regarding the cases related to crime against women is registered or it is resolved in which nearly 71 complainants expressed satisfaction.

Massive fire at factory in Delhi's Bawana, no injuries

NEW DELHI: A massive fire broke out at a factory in the outer Delhi's Bawana area, a fire department official said on Wednesday, adding that no one was injured in the incident.

According to Atul Garg, the Director of Delhi Fire Service (DFS), a call regarding the blaze was received at 1:38 a.m. from a factory in the area.

"Total 25 fire tenders were rushed to the site and the flames have been brought under control. "So far no injuries/causality," Garg added. However, the reason for the fire is yet to be ascertained.



Youth studied up to class 6th cheated nearly 2700 persons worth Rs 8 crore on-line arrested

SATISH HANDA

Bhiwani police station in Haryana arrested a youth identified as Wasim a resident of Nuh in Mewat district of Haryana allegedly cheated nearly 2700 persons worth crores of rupees in cyber crimes by collecting mobile phone numbers, photographs and passwords from G mail accounts of people. The alleged accused cheated two persons Parveen a resident of village Asalwas Sarheta and a female resident of village Madhan in Bhiwani district and cheated amount worth Rs 5000 in both cases on December 18, 2023 demanding money posing as one of their close relative in case of Parveren whereas asked to inform bank account number to the female in order to remit money in their account against loan taken by him from her husband. The cyber crime police in the district started investigation and finally reached up to the cyber 'Thug' who was master mind running a racket along with two others. Police trying for the arrest of both companions of Wasim.

Wasim studied up to class 6th, used to collect datas as well as photographs from the Gmail account. During preliminary investigation the cyber police branch was able



to find out that the alleged accuse Wasim had cheated a large number of people by transferring the amount in his account through credit card. According to Vikas Kumar SHO Cyber police station Bhiwani that during investigation it was found that Wasim was involved in nearly 2700 on-line cheating frauds for amount worth crores of rupees and the gang of three used to recover data from Gmail accounts and usually demanding money required in emergency to be remitted through UPI on Watts up and in some cases they were convinced to see the photograph in the Watts up message. Vikas Kumar of cyber crime branch made an appeal to people not to share Password or deal of their bank account or mobile phone number with any one, since wasim used to convince people refund the money taken as loan to find our bank account number to withdraw money from the accounts.

Haryana Ration Depot on strike from January 1 in support of their demands

SATISH HANDA

Haryana Ration depot holders are holding strike from January 1 this year demanding old rules in the federation, though this call for indefinite strike have not left any ill effect so far due to the beginning of the month and the ration card holders usually visit these depots from the second week of the month. The depot holders of Haryana feel affected by the new rules issued by the government on August 1, 2022 and are demanding the government to withdraw them saying that the new rules will violate the interests and rights of ration depot holders. Although the government has increased the margin money by Rs 200 per quintal, but due to this decision there is a possibility of increase in snatching of ration depots and card holders. The government has decided to license of one depot on 300 ration cards, whereas earlier there were rules for granting license of ration depot on 600 to 1200 ration cards. The Federation of Haryana has demanded restoration of the old rules.

Federation State President Sheeshpal Godara, Executive President Rambir Safidon, General Secretary Rajbir Singh Nain, Treasurer Rajendra Sharma and Convener Shivkumar Garg while talking to



media persons said that the government is trying to eliminate employment by imposing unfair conditions on 300 ration cards. The age limit of 60 years for depot holder should be completely removed on the lines of other states, since there is no justification for such a condition for the licensees, they said that if the government has to give permission to run the license only till the age of 60 years, then by declaring the depot operators as contract employee all the old age depot operators should be given monthly pension of Rs 15,000 and insurance scheme on the lines of journalists, besides minimum two percent reduction towards handling loss and shortages should be given during distribution of ration and if the ratio is found more or less by five quintals during physical verification, permission should be given to complete the ration.

The federation demanded financial help to be provided to depot holders who lost their lives during the Corona epidemic outbreak. Ration depot holders also demanded that the earlier reduction of Rs 400 per quintal in levy sugar should be reinstated and said that ration depot shops should be allotted to family members of depot holders who lost their lives during service period and Corona period on the basis of compassion (PDS Control Order-2002). They demanded financial assistance of Rs 50 lakh should be given to the dependents of depot holders who lost their lives during the Corona period, on the lines of the Rajasthan government. They said that all fair price depot holders will remain on strike until the government accepts their demands for restoration of old rules in the federation.

Meeting on the S.Y.L. issue was held as per the orders of the Supreme Court: Vij



SATISH HANDA
Ambala

Haryana's Home Minister Anil Vij said that Under the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the country is progressing and improvements are being made. He mentioned that progress is being seen everywhere, and the Vande Bharat Express trains are being run as a part of this progress, replying to the question asked by the media persons he said, a meeting on the S.Y.L. issue was held as per the orders of the Supreme Court.

Regarding the statement from opposition leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda to implement the Supreme Court's decision on the S.Y.L. issue rather than playing games, Vij responded by saying that Hooda has been the Chief Minister twice and also a Member of Parliament. However, he should know that the meeting regarding the S.Y.L. issue was held as per the Supreme Court's orders. It would be a disrespect and contempt of court to term it as playing games.

First disease control centre for 4 state in Ambala



SATISH HANDA
Ambala

Union Health Minister Dr Mansukh Mandaviya laid the foundation stone of a branch of the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) to be constructed in a four acre area at Naggal in Ambala to be built at the cost of Rs 14 crore. The NCDC branch first in the area will carry advanced tests of the patients of four states: Haryana, Punjab, Himachal and Chandigarh. Haryana Home and Health Minister Anil Vij and Rajya Sabha MP Kartikeya Sharma were present on the occasion. In his address, Mandaviya said, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, healthcare facilities are being strengthened all over in the country, where Ayushman Bharat, ser-

vices are being provided free of cost. The NCDC branch being inaugurated here will further help patients suffering from diseases in the area, he said.

Vij said, a state-of-the-art lab equipped with hi-tech instruments will be set up here. Samples will initially be sent to the NCDC at Delhi, but soon the facility to test for diseases and viruses will be undertaken in this lab. Vij said that earlier, outpatients suffering from serious diseases had to go to AIMS New Delhi for the treatment, but now these are available within the state and there are 150 medical colleges set up within the state. Vij said that the construction will start soon and land for the same has already been handed over for this project, and the building would have three floors

Indian Textile Industry eyeing \$350 billion trade by 2030

DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai

The Indian textile industry has set a goal of earning a whopping \$ 350 billion by 2030 and the tenacious efforts of this sector's participants in making this goal a reality has resulted in them winning related awards, said Dhiraj Raichand Shah, former chairman and Convenor, Export Award Committee, SRTEPC, recently.

As many as 65 awardees receive trophies of gold, silver and bronze, besides certificates of Merit, at a function held in Mumbai recently. The event witnessed the Chief Guest — Union Minister of Textiles, Commerce and Industry, Piyush Goyal assuring the textile industry of obtaining investment from the Central Government, while also helping the sector to cope with the numerous associated challenges.

India is one of the largest producers and consumers of

textiles and apparel in the world, accounting for 4% of the global trade in this sector. The focus is now on attracting investment into quality textile processing to enable India to leverage its strengths in the textile industry such as: abundant raw material availability, and also overcome its weaknesses like: low quality, high costs and environmental pollution. The textile sector ranks among the top job generators in India by providing employment to over 4.5 crore people, even as it focuses on making its presence felt in the global market through significant exports, he said.

India imported 1300 tons per day of knitted fabric worth Rs 6073 crores in 2022-23 from various countries comprising mainly China, besides Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Bangladesh, while efforts are on towards identifying import/substitution opportunities in this regard, according to industry sources.



The reasons for India's such imports include: the country's increasing domestic market for textiles and apparel that require variety of fabrics; its strong export-oriented textile industry that supplies garments and other products to global markets including the U.S. and the EU — which emphasize preference for high quality and compliance standards.

A market review noted that China is "controlling" over 90% of the market share in quantity related to synthetic fabric

products category. The price/kg of such fabric yarn imports is much lower than Indian prices. For import substitution of such products, the Indian sector would require about 53 manufacturing setups with average capacity of 10 tons per day.

China also holds 75% market share in global exports of knitted or crocheted fabrics, and India would require 3 manufacturing setups with average capacity of 10 tons per day. For import substitution of "Other Pile Fabrics of Man-made Fibres" (where

again China holds 75% market share), India would need at least 6 manufacturing setups with capacity of 10 tons per day.

India faces a gap in domestic production due to lack of adequate and modern technology, infrastructure and skills in the textile processing sector, besides this sector being also largely fragmented, unorganized and inefficient — resulting in high costs, low quality and environmental pollution.

India needs to invest in improving quality and competitiveness of its textile processing sector to reduce its dependence on imports, while simultaneously increasing its value addition and profitability in the textile value chain.

India also needs to upgrade its technology and machinery, develop related infrastructure and logistics, enhance skill and innovation, and ensure environmental and social sustainability of the textile processing sector, the sources added.

The idol of Lord Rama, carved by Arun Yogiraj from Mysore will be installed in Ayodhya

ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru



The Ram Lalla idol carved by distinguished sculptor Arun Yogiraj from Mysore, Karnataka, has been selected by the temple trust in Ayodhya. Confirming the same Union minister Pralhad Joshi posted in a social media post on X, said "The selection of the idol for the Prana Pratishthapana of Lord Rama in Ayodhya has been finalized. The idol of Lord Rama, carved by renowned sculptor of our country Yogiraj Arun, will be installed in Ayodhya." Union minister Joshi said the idol carved by Yogiraj will adore the grand Ram temple days after the idol was finalised for 'Pran Pratishtha' (consecration) ceremony to be held on January 22.

Karnataka BJP unit has kicked off celebrations against the idol of Ram Lalla skilfully crafted by renowned Mysuru sculptor Arun Yogiraj to be consecrated in the sanctum sanctorum of Ram

temple in ayodhya. Former Karnataka CM posted in X, "The idol of Lord Rama sculpted by the sculptor Arun Yogiraj of Mysuru has been selected for installation in the magnificent Sri Rama Mandir of Ayodhya, which has doubled the pride and happiness of the entire Rama devotees of the Karnataka state. Heartfelt congratulations to 'Shilpi @yogiraj_arun'. Sculptor Arun Yogiraj hailed from a lineage of five generations of renowned sculptors in Mysore. Yogiraj started his

sculpting career at a young age and was highly influenced by his father, Yogiraj, and grandfather, Basavanna Shilpi, who enjoyed the patronage of the King of Mysore. After pursuing an MBA and working in the corporate sector, Yogiraj started pursuing sculpting full time from 2008. Besides Ram Lalla idol, Yogiraj has carved an array of impressive sculptures, including a 30-foot statue of Subhash Chandra Bose displayed behind the Amar Jawan Jyoti near India Gate in Delhi.

Amit Shah likely to visit J&K on Jan 9



FW DESK

Union Home Minister Amit Shah is likely to visit Jammu and Kashmir on January 9 to assess the security situation in the region following the recent Poonch attack. The attack resulted in the loss of four soldiers, with two others sustaining injuries after heavily armed terrorists ambushed two Army vehicles. Shah's visit comes in the wake of escalating tensions in Jammu and Kashmir, particularly after the deaths of three civilians in Poonch subsequent to the attack. His agenda includes a thorough review of the anti-terror operations in the border areas and a security assessment meeting in Jammu.

YS Sharmila sister of Andhra Pradesh CM Jaganmohan Reddy joins Congress

SAYS SHE WILL WORK TO FULFIL HER FATHER'S DREAM TO SEE RAHUL AS PM

KAVITA SHARMA
New Delhi



YS Sharmila, the sister of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Jaganmohan Reddy and daughter of former Chief Minister YS Rajasekhara Reddy today joined the Congress after merging her party YSR Telangana Party into the Congress.

She was inducted into the party by the Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge in presence of former party president Rahul Gandhi and other senior leaders including general secretary organisation KC Venugopal.

Speaking on the occasion, Sharmila said, it gave her im-

mense pleasure that the YSR Telangana Party has merged with the Congress. She said, her father late YS Rajasekhara Reddy not only served the Congress party his entire life, but also gave his life serving the Congress party.

Sharmila said, she had decided to join the Congress as it was the only true and largest secular party in the country. She said, it always

upheld the culture of India serving all sections and uniting people of India.

Sharmila said, she was deeply pained and anguished over what happened in Manipur. She said this can always happen if a party like Congress is not in power.

Sharmila disclosed that it was her father's dream to see Rahul Gandhi as the Prime Minister of India and she was glad that she was going to be a part of making that happen. She said, whatever role the Congress party will give her, she will perform it with loyalty, integrity and diligence. Welcoming her into the party, the Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge said: "We welcome Y. S. Sharmila in the Congress party. The strong emotional bond which the Congress party enjoys with the people of Andhra Pradesh shall be strengthened further."

BJP to flag off New Year with 'Lok Sabha Yojana' brainstorming across country

NEW DELHI: BJP is on a mission to secure a massive victory for the third time in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections after 2019 and 2014, and is going to hold 'Lok Sabha Yojana Baithak' across the country in the first week of January this year. This is aimed at holding deliberations within the party regarding its preparations ahead of the upcoming parliamentary polls.

The BJP High Command has written a letter to all the state in-charges of the party, state presidents and general secretaries of the party organisation across states.

The party high command has also given instructions to discuss in detail the social and political issues affecting the party organisation, organisational preparations and party activities, publicity campaigns and political narratives run on



various platforms and media sources (such as social media etc). The saffron party is also paying special attention to the time regarding various preparations for the 2024 general election.

As the election dates have not been announced yet, the party has postponed the date of counting of votes from January 10 on the basis of the calendar of dates of Lok Sabha elections held in 2019.

BJP has asked all the state in-charges, state presidents and general secretaries of the party to hold Lok Sabha Yojana Baithak before January

7, and has also directed them to send the details of these meetings to party's national president J.P. Nadda.

In the guidelines sent by the party's national general secretary and headquarters in-charge Arun Singh on behalf of Nadda to all the states for the Lok Sabha Yojana Baithak, it has been said that "a meeting should be organised for detailed discussion regarding the preparations for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections in the presence of a national party official before January 7. The expected party representatives in larger states may be between 40-50 and in small states their strength should be 20-30."

"All discussions held in the Lok Sabha Yojana Baithak will have to be documented and sent to the BJP National President for approval."

Arrest of Kar Sevaks based on Court orders: CM Siddaramaiah



ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

As the inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya approaches, the Karnataka police department has initiated investigations against Ram Mandir activists involved in alleged property destruction and other offences during Ram Mandir movement in 1992, a special team has been formed to probe cases, and arrests are being made. In Hubballi, Srikanth Poojari was arrested in connection with the alleged torching of shop owned by minority community member on Dec 5, 1992. Poojari is the third accused in the case, and efforts are underway to apprehend eight other suspects.

Telangana CM urges Centre to collect Rs 408 crore from AP for state

NEW DELHI: Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy on Thursday urged the Centre to collect Rs 408 crore from Andhra Pradesh for its using Telangana properties even after bifurcation of the state and pay the sum to Telangana.

Making the request during a meeting with Union Home Minister Amit Shah in New Delhi, he said that he wanted the money to be collected from Andhra Pradesh for using the buildings like Raj Bhavan, High Court, Lokayukta and State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) in Hyderabad. In his first meeting with Amit Shah after assuming office, Revanth Reddy requested him to allocate 29 additional IPS officers to Telangana in view of creation of new districts and supervision of various departments.

PM Vishwakarma Yojana scheme launched in J&K



NEW DELHI: Jammu and Kashmir Administration on Tuesday launched PM Vishwakarma Yojana (PMVY) at Industrial Training Institute (ITI) in Shopian district.

An official statement said that the scheme will be a significant step towards empowering the craftsman community of Jammu and Kashmir as it will enhance their competence and empower them regarding self employment as well as equip them with industry-relevant skills.

The scheme aims for recognition of artisans and crafts of people through PM Vishwakarma certificate and ID card as well as basic training of five to seven days and advanced training of 15 days or more, with a stipend of Rs 500 per day.

The scheme will also provide modern toolkit of Rs 15000 free of cost to trained Vishwakarmas besides linkage with credit based soft loans and marketing support for expansion of their business will also be provided under the Yojana.

Punjab Tableau Row: A Political Agenda or Vendetta?

JAG MOHAN THAKEN

Punjab has always served as a shield against external or internal attacks on India. To forget the sacrifice of the heroes here is to forget Indian history. Here, while the youth had kissed the noose with a smile, the Gurus, who had always given the message of humanity, not only got their heads chopped off but had also gotten their innocent children stuck in the wall so that the religion and honour of the country could be kept intact. Even today the words of the Gurus provide coolness to the mind and give the message of peace and brotherhood. In such a situation, if the Government of India does not see any merit in the tableaux of Punjab for the Republic Day and these tableaux are not even considered worthy of display, then it is not only surprising but also saddening and forces one to think that after all, "Why don't we see the qualities worthy of display in our sacrifices and culture?" Is this being done due to some special agenda or political discrimination as alleged by Punjab Chief Minister, Bhagwant Singh Mann? Definitely the question will arise.

Punjab government had submitted three ideas viz. Punjab-history of sacrifice and martyrdom, Mai Bhago-the First Lady warrior of Sikhism (women empowerment) and Rich heritage of Punjab. CM Mann said that these ideas were duly submitted on time with the Union government for their approval, but the union government had ignored the immense contribution of the state by rejecting these ideas. Slamming the BJP led Union government for rejecting the tableau of state for the Republic Day parade, the Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann, on December 27, alleged that the 'power mad' centre government is demeaning and humiliating the enormous sacrifices made by Punjabis in the national freedom struggle. "This is not for the first time



but last year also the BJP led Union government had done the same mischief and by rejecting the tableau this year too, centre has rubbed salt into wounds of the state" said the Chief Minister in an official release on December 27.

Mann alleged that for the last two years, the Modi government has deliberately kept Punjab out of this mega national event. This year also more than 90% states that have been selected for tableaux are being ruled by the BJP, which indicates the ongoing saffronisation of Republic Day and Independence Day by the Modi government.

Criticizing the action of the central government, Shiromani Akali Dal President and former Deputy Chief Minister of Punjab, Sukhbir Singh Badal, in a tweet on December 28, states, "How can any national event be deemed complete without highlighting the heritage of the great Guru Sahiban, the Sahibzadas and countless heroes and martyrs of freedom struggle like Shaheed-E-Azam Sardar Bhagat Singh, Sardar Kartar Singh Sarabha, Sardar Udham Singh, Lala Lajpat Rai? Anyone responsible for this injustice to the land of martyrs deserves to be identified and held accountable."

He further adds, "I strongly urge Prime Minister Sh. Narendra Modi to intervene against discrimination against proud, patriotic and valorous Punjab

and Punjabis through the exclusion of the state from R-Day parade."

Punjab State Congress President Amarinder Singh Raja Warring, while questioning the decision of non-inclusion of Punjab Tableaux, tweeted on December 29, "It is highly improbable that Punjab's Tableau has been denied for the 26th January parade. All Tableaux are inspected by a central team & released only if nothing is objectionable. The central govt could have suggested changes if any but outrightly rejecting our Tableau proves that they discriminate against Punjab. This is not in the spirit of CO-OPERATIVE FEDERALISM."

Why the tableaux not considered?

The Ministry of Defence on Sunday, December 31, clarified that the tableau proposal of Punjab was considered in the first three rounds of meeting of the expert committee comprising eminent persons in the field of art, culture, painting, sculpture, music, architecture, choreography, etc.

After the third round of meeting, the tableau of Punjab could not be taken forward by the committee for further consideration for not aligning to the broader themes of this year's tableau. Explaining further an official with the Defence Ministry said, "As states have to be treated equally, it is essential that states should be given the opportunity to

display their tableaux as per a formula. Hence, the criticism by these states (Punjab and West Bengal) is baseless."

To give further chance to the rejected category states, the MoD official divulged, "Moreover, the states and UTs not being selected for the Republic Day Parade are being invited to showcase their tableaux in Bharat Parv at Red Fort, New Delhi, during January 23-31."

Strongly criticizing the suggestion of MoD to the states that they can showcase their tableaux in Bharat Parv at Red Fort, New Delhi, during January 23-31, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann categorically said that the state government will not send its tableau in the rejected categories list of the Modi led Union government as the martyrs of the country do not need NoC from BJP.

In a statement, the Chief Minister said that the great martyrs including Shaheed Bhagat Singh, Shaheed Rajguru, Shaheed Sukhdev, Lala Lajpat Rai, Shaheed Udham Singh, Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha, Mai Bhago, Ghadri Baaba and others cannot be kept in rejected category. He said that the union government is trying to belittle their contribution and sacrifice of these heroes by not including their tableaux in the Republic Day parade. Mann said that this cannot be tolerated as it is the grave insult of these great patriots and national leaders.

How the GOI should have ensured its decision fair and free from biasedness?

Commenting over the issue, a senior Punjab journalist, Jai Singh Chhibber says, "The celebration of 26 January (Republic Day) is a matter of pride for Indians. The Republic Day parade should not be politicized in the name of tableaux. Martyrs do not belong to any party or religion, rather they have given martyrdom for the country. Through tableaux, developments in various fields, progressive works or schemes initiated by the government and where India or the state stands in the modern arena are expressed. Indians are proud of their martyrs. It was because of the martyrs that the country became independent, and the Constitution came into force on 26 January, due to which this day is a day of great pride for Indians. To ascertain that no controversy regarding the tableau arises at any point, the Government of India should have issued guidelines in advance or the states' Rotation should be done so that all the states get a chance to participate in the parade. Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann should also have raised this issue with the Government of India instead of holding a hasty press conference regarding the tableau."

Analysing both ends—MoD decision and criticism by all major political parties of Punjab—Congress, Aam Adami Party and Shiromani Akali Dal, one cannot ascertain up to the mark that the decision is biased, or vendetta based, but it does not sound fully transparent and beyond doubt even, as it has failed to satisfy the questions being raised in the public mind. To prove unbiasedness and fairness, every decision of the authority should be as transparent as crystal water. While deciding an issue, the authority should always keep in mind the dictum laid down by Lord Hewart, the then Lord Chief Justice of England, "Justice must not only be done but must also be seen to be done."

Jag Mohan Thaken is a Haryana based retired Senior Bank Manager, views are personal.

Defence Ministry Inks Rs 802 Cr Procurement Order for Indigenous BOMs & MMMEs

NEW DELHI: To give boost to domestic indigenous manufacturing and encouraging private sector participation, Ministry of Defence signed two contracts worth Rs. 802 crore for the procurement of military equipment on Thursday.

According to the reports, 697 Bogie Open Military (BOM) Wagons would be procured valuing Rs 473 crores. The BOMs—designed by the Research Design and Standard Organisation (RDSO), serve as specialised rail vehicles for the Indian Army's mobilisation. These units will be manufactured by Jupiter Wagons Limited.

This Critical Rolling Stock, represented by BOM wagons, ensures the swift and simultaneous induction of army units and equipment into operational areas during conflict situations. Additionally, it facilitates the peacetime movement of military assets for exercises and the relocation of units from one station to another.

Another order had been for



procurement of 56 units Mechanical Minefield Marking Equipment (MMME) Mark II valuing Rs 329 crores to be manufactured BEM Ltd.

Marking all minefields is a compulsory obligation under the amended Protocol-II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, to which India is a signatory. In adherence to this protocol, the MMME has been developed to fulfil this crucial requirement.

The MMME is specifically designed to operate efficiently across varied terrains, carrying a complete load of stores. Its primary function is to conduct the marking of minefields with minimal time

and manpower requirements. The BOM Wagons and MMME will be manufactured using equipment and sub-systems from indigenous sources and underscores the effort to encourage private sector participation in defence production.

These wagons play a crucial role in transporting various military assets, including light vehicles, artillery guns, BMPs (infantry fighting vehicles), and engineering equipment.

The incorporation of such advanced systems not only streamlines the process of minefield marking during military operations but also significantly reduces the time and manpower involved.

M. SURESH BABU EXPLAINS WHY FISCAL CORRECTION IS CRUCIAL IN ELECTION YEAR TO AVERT WORST OUTCOMES



The dispute on debt burden



ing countries, as the number of countries where interest spending represents 10% or more of public revenues increased from 29 in 2010 to 55 in 2020. IMF's worst-case scenario projections for India need to be viewed in this context of persistent debt conundrum in developing countries.

The challenge for India

Apart from managing public debt deftly to ensure that it does not breach sustainable levels, India faces challenges in enhancing its credit ratings. As elucidated by S&P Global Ratings, "Credit ratings are forward-looking opinions about the ability and willingness of debt issuers, like corporations or governments, to meet their financial obligations on time and in full. They provide a common and transparent global language for investors and other market participants, corporations and governments, and are one of many inputs they can consider as part of their decision-making processes". Elevated debt levels and substantial costs associated with servicing debt impact credit rating.

Even with the tag of being the fastest-growing major economy and being called a 'bright spot' in the global economy, sovereign investment ratings for India have remained the same for a long time. Both Fitch Ratings and S&P Global Ratings have kept India's credit rating unchanged at 'BBB- with stable outlook'. It should be noted that BBB- is the lowest investment grade rating and India has been on that scale since August 2006. Though one could raise methodological issues and biases on the rating process, rating agencies believe that India's stronger fundamentals are undermined by the government's weak fiscal performance and burdensome debt stock. Further, India's low per capita income is a major factor that pulls down score in the sovereign rating.

The central government's debt was Rs 155.6 trillion, or 57.1% of GDP, at the end of March 2023 and the debt of State govern-

ments was about 28% of GDP. As stated by the Finance Ministry, India's public debt-to-GDP ratio has barely increased from 81% in 2005-06 to 84% in 2021-22, and is back to 81% in 2022-23. This, however, is way higher than the levels specified by the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act (FRBMA). The 2018 amendment to the Union government's FRBMA specified debt-GDP targets for the Centre, States and their combined accounts at 40%, 20% and 60%, respectively. Part of the present high levels of debt-GDP ratio can be attributed to the disruptions due to the pandemic, which resulted in a major deterioration in the debt-GDP ratios across the board.

Adding to this are the emerging worrying signs on the fiscal front. Despite handsome growth in tax collections, there is the possibility of a fiscal slippage in FY24, according to a report by India Ratings and Research (IR&R). IR&R attributes this to higher expenditure on employment guarantee schemes and subsidies. They state that budgeted fertilizer subsidy of Rs 44,000 crore was almost over by end-October 2023 and the Union government has now increased fertilizer subsidy to Rs 57,360 crore. Similarly, due to sustained demand for employment under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), a sum of Rs 79,770 crore has already been spent till December 19, 2023, as against the budgeted Rs 60,000 crore and an additional sum of Rs 14,520 crore has been allocated through the first supplementary demand for grants. Increased subsidies do not come as a surprise as the country is heading for general elections next year, but the MGNREGA outlay increase raises questions about employment growth and livelihoods in rural areas. Though the IMF's debt projections could be viewed as worst-case scenarios of the medium term, the short-term challenge of sticking to the fiscal correction path in an election year might go a long way towards avoiding worst-case scenarios.

M. Suresh Babu is Professor of Economics at IIT Madras. The views expressed are personal. Views are personal.

Two recent observations by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) sparked reactions from the Indian Government. First, the IMF has raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of India's debts. Second, it reclassified India's exchange rate regime, terming it a "stabilised arrangement" instead of "floating". These emerged from the annual Article IV consultation report, which is part of the Fund's surveillance function under the Articles of Agreement with member countries. The report also acknowledged India's effective inflation management and projected a balanced outlook for India's economic growth. While the remark on the exchange rate can be viewed as comments on 'excessive management', as the rupee moved in a narrow band due to Central Bank interventions, the concerns on debt sustainability can be construed as a call for more prudent management of debt in the medium term.

The IMF, in the report, states that India's general government debt, including the Centre and States, could be 100% of GDP under adverse circumstances by fiscal 2028. According to them, "Long-term risks are high because considerable investment is required to reach India's climate change mitigation targets and improve resilience to climate stresses and natural disasters. This suggests that new and preferably concessional sources of financing are needed, as well as greater private sector investment and carbon pricing or equivalent mechanism." The Finance Ministry refutes IMF projections as this is "a worst-case scenario and is not fait accompli".

Worrying global trends

There are no two arguments on the fact that government borrowings can play a vital role in accelerating development, as governments can use it to finance their expenditures and invest in people to pave the way for a better future. However, the weight of debt can act as a drag on development due to limited access to financing, rising borrowing costs, currency devaluations and sluggish growth. As noted by the United Nations, "Countries are facing the

impossible choice of servicing their debt or serving their people." According to the UN in 2022, 3.3 billion people live in countries that spend more on interest payments than on education or health.

Global public debt has increased more than fourfold since 2000, outpacing global GDP, which tripled over the same period. In 2022, global public debt reached a record USD 92 trillion. Developing countries accounted for almost 30% of the total, of which roughly 70% is attributable to China, India and Brazil. Public debt has increased faster in developing countries compared to developed countries over the last decade. The rise of debt in developing countries is due to growing development financing needs — exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and climate change. As a result, the number of countries facing high levels of debt increased from 22 in 2011 to 59 in 2022.

Further, the burden of debt is asymmetric between developed and developing countries as the latter — even without considering the costs of exchange rate fluctuations — have to pay higher interest rates than the former. It has been well documented that countries in Africa borrow on average at rates that are four times higher than those of the United States and even eight times higher than those of Germany. This higher borrowing costs undermines debt sustainability of develop-

ABHIJIT SINGH ON HOW MALDIVES' PACT DECISION REFLECTS ITS STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT SHIFT TOWARDS CHINA



How the 'India out' initiative could reshape Maldives

The recent decision by the Maldives to revoke an agreement with India for joint hydrographic surveys in Maldivian waters has caused considerable dismay in Indian media and strategic circles. Inked during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the islands in 2019, the pact was seen as a symbol of India-Maldives defence ties.

The move by Male, in mid-December 2023, came a few weeks after the archipelagic state formally asked New Delhi to withdraw its Indian military presence from its shores. As if to emphasise its reservations about defence engagement with India, Male also skipped the latest meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave, also in December.

That trust between India and the Maldives is at a low ebb is manifestly evident. Since the election of Mohamed Muizzu as Maldivian President in November 2023, there has been a deliberate, if predictable, attempt by Male to create a distance with New Delhi. The Maldives would like the world to believe that terminating the hydrography pact is a way of asserting its autonomy and agency. It is not. Far from balancing ties with India, Male has thrown in its political lot with China. The Muizzu administration's refusal to renew the hydrography pact seems less to do with the President's sensitivities about sovereignty than with his special relationship with Beijing. Getting Indian hydrographic ships out of Maldivian waters appears intended to aid China's marine surveys of the surrounding seas.

The dual nature of hydrography

It is worth noting that hydrographic data inherently has a dual nature in that the information collected from the seas can be used for civilian and military purposes. Marine scientists maintain that the data that helps



advance non-military objectives, such as ensuring navigational safety, marine scientific research, and environmental monitoring, can also be used to facilitate military aims such as surveillance of a nation's vital coastal installations and war-fighting assets.

Even so, China is unique in using its marine and seabed surveys to advance a largely strategic agenda. The country has an expansive oceanographic research programme, in which "scientific research vessels", in particular the Shi Yan class of oceanographic survey vessels and the Yuan Wang series of intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance ships are regularly deployed in the Indian Ocean. Their presence goes largely unnoticed, eclipsed by China's growing naval footprint. For China, however, marine surveys and reconnaissance are critical enablers of the People's Liberation Army Navy's maritime strategy in the far seas. It is no happenstance that Chinese authorities approached Sri Lanka and the Maldives many times last year to allow the docking of marine research ships.

On China's surveys

Indian observers point out that China's

ocean surveys play an important part in enhancing China's antisubmarine warfare capabilities. The mapping of the ocean's temperature profile and the study of other oceanic phenomena such as currents and eddies, they contend, is meant to improve sonar performance and detection of enemy submarines. Studying the marine environment also aids in the development of systems that help Chinese submarines elude detection and fine-tune tactics for littoral combat.

However, China's oceanographic surveys in the waters of friendly South Asian states are potentially hampered by the presence of Indian hydrographic ships in the area. The Indian Navy has the capability to track foreign ships' subsurface sensor activity. Chinese hydrographers suspect the Navy's operations in the waters of Indian Ocean island states could interfere with China's own marine survey efforts.

Meanwhile, speculation abounds in New Delhi of a Chinese plan to develop a naval base in the Maldives. In 2018, China planned an ocean observatory in Makunudhoo Atoll, north of Male — not far from India's Lakshadweep Islands. Maldivian opposition leaders had then expressed reservations about the observatory's potential military applications, including a provision for a submarine base. There is no evidence yet that China has revived that proposal, but recent developments suggest that the possibility cannot be discounted.

Male's concerns

For its part, the Maldives has apprehensions about India's hydrographic activity being a form of intelligence collection. Its concerns are not entirely unfounded — not because Indian activity in Maldivian waters is suspect, but because the laws and legal framework governing hydrography are not different

from the norms governing military surveys. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) does not explicitly authorise a coastal state to regulate hydrographic surveys or military surveys conducted beyond its territorial sea; a littoral state may only regulate marine scientific research in its exclusive economic zone (EEZs). By implication, foreign maritime agencies conducting hydrographic surveys are free to map the seas outside a coastal state's territorial waters. It is this prospect that Male finds problematic.

The discrepancy, though glaring outwardly, is better understood if one considers that the aim of hydrography is not to collect data about topography and geophysical processes for the sake of knowledge. Instead, it caters to a specific demand, which can come either from marine ecologists, scientists, and the maritime industry, or military strategists and national security planners. That does not alter the reality that many navies, in particular India's, have an exemplary track record of hydrographic surveys in their neighbourhoods. The Indian Navy has rendered hydrographic assistance to Mauritius since the 1990s, charting the vast Mauritian EEZs and helping build capacity, even assisting with the setting up of a hydrographic unit for skill development among Mauritian hydrographers.

The best bet for the Maldives to enhance maritime awareness and security remains a partnership with India. The Muizzu administration must recognise that it is not India but China that seeks to weaponise ocean surveys. The eagerness for a strategic concert with Beijing, driven plainly by political compulsions, could entail adverse consequences for Male.

Abhijit Singh is Head of the Maritime Policy Initiative at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi

LETTERBOX

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"I think a simple rule of business is, if you do the things that are easier first, then you can actually make a lot of progress."

- Mark Zuckerberg

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BOOKS: REVIEW

Decoding Pranab: A daughter's chronicles of political legend

"Pranab, My Father: A Daughter Remembers" by Sharmistha Mukherjee is not just another political biography; it's a heartfelt memoir that weaves the personal and the political into a rich tapestry. The author, daughter of the late President Pranab Mukherjee, navigates the complex intersections of being a daughter and a witness to a life steeped in India's post-independence political history.

Sharmistha's narrative transcends the typical confines of political memoirs, offering a unique dual perspective. While it delves into Pranab Mukherjee's exten-

sive diaries, providing insights into significant national events and the inner workings of Indian politics, the book's soul lies in its personal anecdotes and reflections. It's as much about the man behind the public persona as it is about the author's journey as his daughter.

A striking example of this blend is the story of the 'Basanter Kokil' (springtime Koel), symbolizing the transient nature of political friendships. This anecdote not only reflects the fickleness of relationships in the political sphere but also serves as a life lesson for young Sharmistha, shaping her understanding of the realities of

It's as much about the man behind the public persona as it is about the author's journey as his daughter

a political family.

The book also sheds light on the personal relationships that Pranab Mukherjee nurtured, notably with Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. The emotional depth of these ties is poignantly illustrated at Geeta Mukherjee's funeral, attended



Pranab, My Father: A Daughter Remembers
By Sharmistha Mukherjee
Rupa,
368 pages; Rs 595

by Sheikh Hasina, where shared grief transcends mere political alliances.

Sharmistha Mukherjee skillfully intertwines her father's public life with private moments, offering a comprehensive view of his personality. From his famous temper to his attempts at shielding his daughter from the impermanence of political privileges, these insights add layers to our understanding of the late

President. "Pranab, My Father" is more than a historical account; it's a daughter's homage to her father. It's about the human side of a political titan and the intricate dynamics of a family living in the public eye. The book's structure, balancing the personal with the political, makes it a compelling read not just for those interested in Indian politics, but for anyone who appreciates the complexities of life in the public sphere.

The memoir also takes a deep dive into the political landscape of India, as seen through the eyes of Pranab Mukherjee. His insights into pivotal moments in Indian politics, from emergency to economic reforms, are not just historical records but reflect his own interpretations and decisions during those times.

Mumbai 'City of Dreams' & 'City That Never Sleeps' highlighted textiles industry

DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai

Piyush Goyal, Union Minister of Textiles, Commerce and Industry, has urged the textiles industry to highlight the challenges facing them, which he would "seriously" address in helping the industry to grow and become a top global performer.

The Minister was speaking at the annual export award function of the Synthetic & Rayon Textiles Export Promotions Council (SRTEPC) - now called MATEXIL - held in Mumbai recently.

Going down memory lane in history where he described Mumbai - the economic hub of India -- as "The City That Never Sleeps" and the "City of Dreams," Goyal said the city's rise to fame came off its aspirations for transformation and achieving audacious goals in which the textile industry played a great part in rising from a "fledgling"



sector to "nationally exporting to 150 countries today."

"The +Never Say Die+ spirit of the textile sector is constantly witnessed right from the times of COVID-19 to ongoing international conflicts including the present attacks by "Houthis" on the high seas," he said while noting that nevertheless, India continues to grow +enroute to becoming the largest global economy by 2047.+

While MATEXIL's enthusiastic growth witnessed successful forays into the interna-

tional sector, there is a need to give value to the domestic manufacturing chain without which this industry would +suffer+ massively, he said while pointing out that a "Northern neighbor had been +dumping+ their goods at +abysmally+ low prices into India."

"Unless we support our local manufacturing, the long run will witness India suffering. India's future lies in attracting a greater degree of investments, innovations and other related factors,"

The Minister often had his audience in splits of laughter with his witty comments, including one directed at himself. "I don't shop for clothes as my wife does this for me. However, since there's no model to check my size then at shopping, so please don't mind if my clothes don't fit exactly," he replied tongue-in-cheek even as the crowd roared approvingly.

Goyal said while calling for increased +certified+ training of the workforce, and also a dedicated "Task Force" for the commerce and textiles industry.

Highlighting the Government's assistance to them, he urged the textile sector to "tell us what you require. There is no limit and the Government of India will invest, but don't look for +crutches+," he said while urging them to come up with ideas that he could sup-

port as the concerned Minister.

"No target is impossible as there is a path to success. There is no impediment that cannot be overcome," he emphasized, adding "We need to think about Innovation - Individually and Collectively."

Earlier, Bhadrash Dodhia, chairman, SRTEPC, outlined the "BharatTex" event that would be held in Delhi and draw global participants.

Describing 2023 as a +good+ year for the textiles sector, he said the sector was expecting the same this year -- despite cargo shipping being attacked in transit through the Red Sea.

"The present transit time for our cargo shipping has risen to between two to three weeks, while freight rates have shot by 200 percent to 500 percent -- and exporters a taking a hit in business," he said, adding "We are adopting a +wait and watch+ attitude as this is causing a great disruption for the textile community."

Tata Passenger Electric Mobility launches its first Pure EV architecture - 'acti.ev'

Reveals Punch.ev - the first product to be launched on this Electric First Architecture

ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

Motors showrooms authorized for EV sales or Tata.ev stores by making a payment of just Rs 21,000. Bookings can also be made online..

Tata Passenger Electric Mobility (TPEM), the pioneer of the EV evolution in India, today introduced its first advanced Pure EV architecture - acti.ev (pronounced as active). acti.ev stands for (Advanced Connected Tech-Intelligent Electric Vehicle) and will underpin future products from the TPEM portfolio, according company press statement here. Punch.ev will be the first product based on this Pure Electric Architecture, which will spawn a variety of products with multiple body styles and sizes. Starting today, customers can book their Punch.ev by visiting their nearest Tata

rapidly developing EV market. This architecture has been meticulously designed to enable class leading efficiencies, maximizing space, battery capacity and enhancing the overall driving experience. acti.ev is a global ready, future-facing pure electric architecture that enables the implementation of software oriented features, ensuring that our vehicles are not only technologically advanced but also future-proof."

He further said, "With this, we are doubly excited to announce the unveil of the first product made on this advanced, multi-layered architecture - the Punch.ev. The Punch.ev is our introduction to the next generation of EVs from TPEM. As has been the case with our current portfolio of EV products, we are confident that future products made on the acti.ev architecture will continue to spark delight in our ever growing community."

Retailer Associations and VMentor.ai Join Hands for Retail Education in India



MUMBAI: Retailers Association of India (RAI), the unified voice representing Indian retailers, and VMentor.ai, a leading technology-driven mentoring company, have unveiled a ground-breaking collaboration with the aim of transforming retail education in India.

In this strategic alliance, RAI and VMentor.ai will collaboratively develop and launch specialised short-term courses tailored for the retail industry.

These courses, meticulously designed, target current employees of RAI member organisations, equipping them with cutting-edge knowledge and practical skills essential for thriving in the dynamic retail landscape.

The curriculum will be delivered through a hybrid model, seamlessly blending in-person instruction with online learning to ensure accessibility for participants.

Participants in these courses will undergo a rigorous training process, concluding with a certification upon successful completion.

This certification not only enhances their professional profiles but also contributes to elevating the standards of retailing in India.

The partnership emphasises continuous improvement and adaptation, with regular assessments and evaluations to ensure the courses remain relevant and impactful.

35% Stainless Steel MSMEs in Gujarat Shut as Chinese Imports Surge

GANDHINAGAR: The Indian stainless steel sector is dealing with the adverse effects of a substantial surge in inexpensive Chinese imports, leading to the closure of approximately 30-35 per cent of medium and small businesses in Gujarat between July and September of the previous year.

Rajamani Krishnamurti, President of the Indian Stainless Steel Development Association (ISSDA), disclosed this information in an interview with Money Control. He highlighted the severe impact on Gujarat, which represents 80 per cent



of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in the industry. To navigate the challenging circumstances, many other MSMEs in the region have been forced to reduce their capacities to ensure survival.

The influx of low-cost Chinese imports has exerted significant pressure on the profit margins of domestic stainless steel players.

In response, the industry took collective action by filing a petition last year, urging the government to impose Countervailing Duty (CVD) on Chinese stainless steel products. It's noteworthy that steel imports were previously subject to duty until the 2021 union budget removed such levies. Subsequently, most MSMEs have had to operate on a diminished scale, with some transitioning to trading activities. Krishnamurti emphasised the dire situation by revealing that 20 out of 80 induction furnace companies in Ahmedabad have ceased operations.

DPIIT rules out more sectors under PLI Scheme

NEW DELHI: Rajesh Kumar Singh, Secretary of the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) stated that the government currently refrains from introducing production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes in new sectors and emphasises the enhancement of existing ones.

While speaking on the sidelines of the 27th World Investment Conference in New Delhi, Singh stated that PLI schemes are active in 14 sectors and the government now focuses on refining existing initiatives, making them



more appealing and industry-friendly.

"The government would prefer to see how these 14 sectors do. The plan is to let them all stabilise and do well and consider more sectors thereafter.

But at the moment, there are no plans or consultations for any new PLI schemes," he clarified.

Singh highlighted the scheme's notable success in certain sectors, while others are gradually gaining momentum.

"Mobile manufacturing has led to a lot of increase in exports and sales within the country. PLI schemes for pharmaceutical and food processing sectors are also doing reasonably well," he mentioned.

Regarding the adjustments to existing schemes, he stated

"Consultation process is on. Textile and pharma are two such sectors. It is not because they are not attractive at the moment, but because there is a need for some flexibility in timelines, in terms of product lines and things like that."

According to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, out of the 733 applications selected under various PLI Schemes, 176 PLI beneficiaries are MSMEs in sectors such as bulk drugs, medical devices, pharma, telecom, white goods, food processing, textiles & drones.

Maidaan Bags Fresh Funds From IPV, EvolveX

FW CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

A social edutainment platform Maidaan raised an undisclosed amount in a Pre-seed Round led by Inflection Point Ventures (IPV) and EvolveX. We Founder Circle also participated in the round. The funds will be utilised primarily for driving product development, innovating on content, games, and tournament formats, the company said in a statement.

Maidaan stands as an innovative peer-to-peer edutainment platform, redefining the educational landscape for school children in India. Through its live, bite-sized Olympiads and tournaments, Maidaan aims to let everyone explore education and a peer group beyond regular school. With a vision to make interaction with peers beyond school affordable and accessible, it aspires to empower over 100 million Indian students from an early age. Maidaan's mission not only broadens horizons but also fosters an environment where learning and growth transcend classroom boundaries, shaping a brighter future for K-12 education in India.

Both founders, raised in Indian Army households, underwent schooling in over 10+ cities across India, instilling in them an early appreciation for diverse exposure. Co-Founder, Judhajit Bal, a



management graduate from MDI, Gurgaon, previously successful with myHQ and with experience from Coca-Cola, shapes Maidaan's vision. Co-Founder, Shashank Awasthi, an ISB graduate, brings over a decade of tech expertise from HSBC, Jivox, and Publicis Sapient, driving Maidaan's product and platform growth.

Rahul Wagh, Managing Director, Inflection Point Ventures, says, "Today when everything is digital, our education still relies on outdated methods and uninspiring textbooks. Maidaan addresses this by integrating learning into interactive games and quizzes, challenging the conventional notion that education is limited to the classroom. By breaking down the boundaries between learning and gaming, With Maidaan, children can seamlessly blend education with play. It shows a bright and promising future not just to kids but to investors as well."

Commenting on Maidaan's potential, Bhawna Bhatnagar, Co-Founder of EvolveX, ex-

pressed, "For most of the students, the first taste of competition beyond school walls occurs at a national level. Being unprepared for this reality results in an unpleasant shock, fostering self-doubt and a life-long fear of competition, which hinders progress in a competitive life thereafter. Parents are well aware of this challenge but lack easily accessible means to alleviate this fear. Maidaan seeks to transform this narrative by providing every aspiring individual a stage to discover themselves. At EvolveX, we are committed to supporting Maidaan in this mission through continuous assistance, mentorship, and guidance."

Maidaan's strengths lie in its gaming-centric approach to skill-building, its unwavering commitment to student engagement, and its focus on fostering peer-to-peer interactions through skill-enhancing gaming experiences.

The pilot version of Maidaan has successfully engaged students from over 100 schools spanning across 25+ cities in

India. The platform has initiated strategic annual and quarterly collaboration plans with schools, with Pune as its initial focal city for expansion.

Judhajit Bal Co-Founder & CEO, Maidaan, says, "Beyond the top 5% elite in India, millions of students don't get a chance to experience a world beyond the walls of their schools before Class 12, reducing the potential of social mobility. The only way to solve this is to make exposure-beyond-school truly accessible and affordable in a language & format that students understand and speak themselves. We're thrilled to have IPV & EvolveX onboard and backing us to solve this."

In just 9 months, Maidaan achieved remarkable milestones, growing its user base tenfold to over 2000 users. The platform has secured pivotal strategic collaborations with schools on annual and quarterly levels, all while maintaining exceptional engagement and robust user retention rates on the platform.

In Middle-India households, the age group of 5-15 is projected to exceed 100 million children by 2030, indicating a substantial market. Additionally, the supplemental learning segment, encompassing education beyond schooling, is forecasted to reach a significant USD 5 billion market value in India alone by 2030.

UP Govt Infuses Rs 6.55 Lakh Cr in Loans for MSMEs, Catalysing 2.5 Crore Jobs

LUCKNOW: The Uttar Pradesh government has allocated loans amounting to Rs 6,55,684 crore to strengthen the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector within the state, in the past six and a half years.

This strategic initiative has led to the creation of 2.5 crore jobs, providing significant employment opportunities for the youth.

Remarkably, the government has consistently surpassed its annual loan distribution targets, demonstrating its commitment to fostering entrepreneurial endeavours.

"It is noteworthy that the MSME sector, which was dying of neglect, got a fresh lease of life when various initiatives were launched such as the One District, One Product (ODOP) scheme, Mukhyamantri Gramodyog Rojgar Yojana, Mukhyamantri Yuva Swarajgar Yojana and Vishwakarma Shram Samman Yojana among others," as per a press release from the Chief Minister's office.

These programs aim to cultivate self-reliance among the state's youth, women, and small businesses, benefiting numerous artisans, craftsmen, and small entrepreneurs.

"The Mukhyamantri Gramodyog Rojgar Yojana,



Mukhyamantri Yuva Swarajgar Yojana, Vishwakarma Shram Samman Yojana and several other schemes are designed to benefit artisans, craftsmen, small businesses, and small entrepreneurs associated with the MSME sector," as per the release.

This concerted effort not only revitalises the MSME sector but also amplifies employment prospects for the youth, bring in international recognition for their diligence and craftsmanship.

In a bid to facilitate entrepreneurship, the Yogi government has organised annual loan fairs, providing aspiring entrepreneurs with opportunities and essential facilities to establish units.

Consequently, the state currently boasts over 90 lakh operational MSME units, as per the release.

In the fiscal year 2022-23, the government set an annual loan distribution target of Rs 78,360 crores.

Remarkably, it exceeded expectations by distributing Rs 1,50,032 crores, achieving 191 per cent of the target.

Looking ahead to the financial year 2023-24, the Yogi government set a target of Rs 1,00,815 crore in loans. As of December 2023, loans totalling Rs 1,73,336 crores have already been distributed, surpassing the annual target by an impressive 172 per cent, well before the financial year's conclusion.

Zymeworks Announces Additional Leadership Appointments

FW DESK
Vancouver (British Columbia)

Zymeworks Inc., a clinical-stage biotechnology company developing a diverse pipeline of novel, multifunctional biotherapeutics to improve the standard of care for difficult-to-treat diseases, today announced significant additions to its leadership team. These additions to the leadership team highlight Zymeworks' commitment to nurturing and advancing internal talent to key leadership roles while strengthening the capabilities and experience of the organization.

"At Zymeworks, we recognize that our greatest asset is our people. Elevating talented individuals is a reflection of their strong performance for the company, our confidence in their

abilities and the emphasis we place on cultivating leaders from within. As we continue to grow, their expanded roles will play crucial parts in advancing our '5 by 5' development programs into the clinic in 2024 and 2025, planning to develop our ADVANCE preclinical programs into clinical studies by 2027 and helping to form the necessary collaborations and partnerships for our emerging product portfolio," said Kenneth Galbraith, Chair and Chief Executive Officer of Zymeworks.

Dr. Jeffrey Smith has been promoted to Executive Vice President and Chief Medical Officer, where he will play a key role in leading the clinical development of our early-stage programs and overseeing our integrated global early-stage development group.

Qualcomm unveils new chip for more realistic mixed reality experiences

Qualcomm unveils new chip for more realistic mixed reality experiences. Chip-maker Qualcomm has announced a new Snapdragon chipset to create more realistic, detailed experiences in mixed reality (MR) and virtual reality (VR) with higher GPU frequency.

The Snapdragon XR2+ Gen 2 Platform is a single chip architecture that unlocks 4.3K spatial computing at 90 frames per second for better visual clarity across work and play. Samsung and Google will provide new extended reality (XR) experiences by utilising Snapdragon XR2+ Gen 2, according to the company "Snapdragon XR2+ Gen 2 unlocks 4.3K resolution which will take XR productivity and entertainment to the next level by bringing spectacularly clear visuals to use cases such as room-scale screens, life-size overlays and virtual desktops," said Hugo Swart, vice president and general manager of XR, Qualcomm Technologies.

Samsung Biologics selects Rapid Micro Biosystems' Growth Direct® platform to automate critical microbiology quality control testing

Companies share commitment to innovating quality control processes to meet biomanufacturing challenges such as scale, data integrity and accelerating time to market

FW DESK
Lowell, Mass

Rapid Micro Biosystems, Inc., an innovative life sciences technology company providing mission critical automation solutions to facilitate the efficient manufacturing and fast, safe release of healthcare products, today announced that Samsung Biologics (KRX: 207940.KS) has selected the Growth Direct® platform to automate its microbial quality control processes to deliver increased efficiency, more robust data integrity and scalable quality control operations.



"Samsung Biologics is a leading global contract development and manufacturing organization (CDMO) and has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to automation and quality management in biopharmaceutical manufacturing," said Robert Spignesi, President and CEO of Rapid Micro Biosystems. "The Growth Direct" improves operational efficiency and data integrity in the quality control microbiology lab, and we are proud to partner with Samsung Biologics."

Global pharmaceutical manufacturers rely on the Growth Direct platform to meet both

today's microbiological quality control standards and tomorrow's challenges. It is the only fully automated, non-destructive growth-based platform for microbiology quality control testing that offers faster time to results, improved data integrity, and enhanced accuracy, with greater sample capacity.

Rapid Micro Biosystems is an innovative life sciences technology company providing mission critical automation solutions to facilitate the efficient manufacturing and fast, safe release of healthcare products such as biologics, vaccines, cell and gene therapies, and sterile injectables. The Company's flagship Growth Direct system automates and modernizes the antiquated, manual microbial quality control ("MQC") testing workflows used in the largest and most complex pharmaceutical manufacturing operations across the globe.



People wait for fuel at a gas station in Amritsar on Tuesday. A nationwide strike called by transport associations has caused disruption in fuel supply. The strike was called to protest against stringent jail and penalty regulations for hit-and-run cases. PHOTO: PRABHJOT GILL

Indian Economy Growth Projected 6.2 per cent For 2024: UNWESP



NEW DELHI: According to the United Nations World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) 2024 report, India is forecasted to achieve a growth rate of 6.2 per cent in 2024, slightly below the 6.3 per cent estimate for 2023.

The report, launched on January 4, emphasizes India's robust domestic demand and

impressive growth in the manufacturing and services sectors.

Despite concerns about erratic rainfall impacting agricultural output, the Indian economy is expected to remain strong, with a projected GDP increase of 6.6 per cent in 2025.

The UN report outlined potential risks, including global factors and India's vulnerability

to climate change. The country's largely farm-based economy could face disruptions due to climate-related shocks, affecting food and fuel prices. Consumer price inflation is expected to decelerate, but the risk of a surge remains, influenced by commodity prices and climate events. In the labor market, improvements were noted in India, with increased labor force participation and declining youth unemployment rates.

The Reserve Bank of India has cautiously managed financial market openings, implementing risk management systems. On a global scale, the UN projects a slowdown in economic growth from an estimated 2.7 per cent in 2023 to 2.4 per cent in 2024. While 2023 exceeded expectations, persistent challenges include high-interest rates, escalating conflicts, sluggish international trade, and climate disasters.

Former Niti Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya Appointed Chief of 16th Finance Commission

NEW DELHI: The Central government named Arvind Panagariya, former Niti Aayog vice-chairman, as the head of the 16th Finance Commission, on December 31.

Having served in the role of Niti Aayog Vice-Chairman from January 2015 to August 2017, Panagariya, a distinguished economist, presently imparts his expertise in economics at Columbia University.

In August 2017, Panagariya's unexpected departure from Niti Aayog prompted speculations about his relationship with the Centre.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, however, lauded Panagariya's contributions, recognising his instrumental role in shaping the new body that succeeded the Planning Commission.

Expressing gratitude, PM Modi stated, "I want to especially thank Niti Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya, who is showing how work is done in mission mode. He



has done good work and the country will always remember him and his contribution"

could secure the position of the world's third-largest economy by 2026. Citing an annual average growth rate of 10.22 per cent in current dollars over the past two decades, he predicted India's GDP to reach USD 5 trillion in 2026 and USD 5.5 trillion in 2027, potentially outpacing existing forecasts for the nation's economic standing.

Earlier this year, Panagariya projected that India

"I want to especially thank Niti Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya, who is showing how work is done in mission mode. He has done good work and the country will always remember him and his contribution"

could secure the position of the world's third-largest economy by 2026. Citing an annual average growth rate of 10.22 per cent in current dollars over the past two decades, he predicted India's GDP to reach USD 5 trillion in 2026 and USD 5.5 trillion in 2027, potentially outpacing existing forecasts for the nation's economic standing.

Wall Street hits record high in 2023



NEW YORK: Wall Street hit record high after record high in 2023, a year investors had feared would be a washout as elevated interest rates threatened to grind the economy to a halt, media reports said.

However, a resilient job market, robust consumer spending and easing inflation kept investor confidence high — helping propel all three indexes to double-digit gains.

S&P 500, the broadest measure of the US stock market closed 0.28 per cent lower on Friday, leaving it just under 30 points away from a record-high close, it gained 24 per cent this year, ending 2023 with a bang. It also notched its ninth-straight weekly gain — the longest streak since January 2004. This year has been much kinder to the market than last: The benchmark index fell by about 20 per cent in 2022, CNN reported.

Dow Jones Industrial Aver-

age reached multiple record highs in December, including notching records in each of the past five trading sessions. It was down 0.05 per cent Friday, closing at 37,689. In 2023, the Dow gained 14 per cent.

The tech-heavy Nasdaq index was the year's biggest star, however. Although it was down 0.56 per cent Friday, closing at around 4769, it rose by 43 per cent in 2023 — its best performance since 2020. It remains about 1,000 points below the all-time high it reached in November 2021, demonstrating what a horrendous year tech had in 2022 — and how much room it still has left to recover, CNN reported. It's been a strong year for supersized tech and AI stocks. Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon, Nvidia, Meta Platforms and Tesla, known collectively as the 'Magnificent 7,' dominated the S&P 500 and soared well over 100% in 2023, CNN reported.

Dow Jones Industrial Aver-

48.80 Lakh Apply for PM Vishwakarma scheme ; 1.32 lakh successful applicants



NEW DELHI: The PM Vishwakarma Scheme has achieved remarkable success, boasting a total of 48.80 lakh enrolments and registering over 1.32 lakh successful applications, as of December 30, 2023, according to a MSME Ministry release, on Wednesday.

Under this initiative, registered applicants undergo a five-day 'Basic Training,' following successful training, those who opt for credit support can benefit from collateral-free credit.

Launched on September 17, 2023, the Scheme focuses on enhancing the quality and reach of products and services offered by artisans and craftspeople.

The ultimate aim is to integrate 'Vishwakarmas' into both domestic and global value chains.

The scheme has a broader goal of providing comprehensive end-to-end support to Vishwakarmas, enabling artisans and craftspeople to ascend the value chain in their respective trades.

As a fully funded Central Sector Scheme by the Government of India, it carries an initial outlay of Rs. 13,000 crore for the period 2023-24 to 2027-28.

NEDFi Channels Rs 547 Cr For 5,338 Projects In Northeast Region: DoNER

NEW DELHI: The North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Limited (NEDFi) has allocated more than Rs 547 crores for the Northeast region between January 1 and November 30, according to a report from the Union Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER).

NEDFi plays a crucial role in facilitating the establishment of new projects in the industrial and service sectors within the region.

"The Corporation assisted around 5,338 projects, with total sanctions and disbursements of Rs 766.47 crores and Rs 547.11 crores respectively, in diverse sectors such as education and training food processing, handlooms and handicrafts, healthcare, hotels



and tourism, microfinance etc. between January 1 to November 30, 2023," the ministry announced in a communique.

The ministry further mentioned that to foster the development of the Micro and Small Enterprises (MSE) sector, NEDFi has undertaken initiatives to identify and nur-

ture potential first generation local entrepreneurs. It aims to provide financing on favourable terms to assist them in establishing viable industrial projects.

NEDFi has extended credit schemes at concessional interest rates within the micro and small enterprises sector. More-

over, it has initiated activities to promote and develop the microfinance sectors in the region, it said.

"NEDFi in collaboration with the DoNER Ministry has set up the North East Venture Fund (NEVF), a dedicated venture capital fund, to encourage start-up ventures in the region," stated the ministry.

"The fund's capital commitment amounts to Rs 100 crores, with contributions from DoNER at Rs 45.00 crores, NEDFi at Rs 30.00 crores, and the Small Industries Development Bank of India at Rs 25.00 crores," it specified.

"The fund generated a lot of enthusiasm among the start-ups from the region," the ministry further stated.

Consumer discretionary categories barring jewellery, travel staring at moderating growth

MUMBAI: Despite a promising start to the festive season, most sectors, excluding jewellery and travel, seem to have hit the snooze button, as per a report released by HDFC Securities.

Several factors contribute to this, including the normalisation of ticket sizes and purchase frequencies, weak footfalls (on a per sq ft basis), and a trend towards downtrading.

With a few exceptions, SSSG (especially for apparel and footwear) has ranged from -5 per cent to 2 per cent.

Both retail and distribution channels continue to grapple with elevated inventory levels.



This has led to an early commencement of End of Season Sales (EoS) by 2-3 weeks and higher discount levels in the system. Consequently, margins are likely to be weak, the report said.

"Our interaction with key stakeholders/companies suggested that although the initial

response in the festive season was healthy, demand took a beating from mid-November onwards in apparel, innerwear, and footwear. Sales densities were weak, with SSSG ranging from -5 per cent to +2 per cent by the third week of December," the report said.

In terms of sub-categories, Indian ethnic wear performance was good courtesy the festive/wedding season; however, menswear and women's western wear, winter wear and innerwear continue to struggle, it added.

Given the gold price tailwind (up 13 per cent YoY till December 20, 2023), most jewellery

companies continue to do well in terms of growth. However, ticket sizes have inched down for the industry. Grammage (per store basis) continues to decline. Most companies have been aggressive in expanding YoY; hence growth rates are expected to be in the high-teens to mid-20 per cent, the report said.

Most discretionary categories, excluding jewellery and travel, are staring at moderating growth, negative-to-flat SSSGs, and potential contraction in margins.

"Hence, we suspect the earnings downgrade cycle to continue," the report said.

Gold still Glittering



SATISH SINGH
Gold has always been the safest and most profitable investment option in India. In times of crisis, its demand increases further, because investing in gold is always gives good returns to the investors. Due to inflation being under control, expectation of USA's Federal Reserve Bank cutting interest rates in 2024, reduction in the price of crude oil in the international market and the Indian economy continuing to strengthen & shine, investors are likely to invest in gold in 2024 & the number of investors will also increase significantly.

At present, the challenge before developed and other countries is to increase the pace of development. For this, the Federal Reserve Bank & Reserve Bank of India can cut the interest rate in the upcoming monetary reviews. Generally, the central banks of all the countries of the world follow the footsteps of the Federal Reserve Bank. Hence, it is believed that when the Federal Bank cuts the interest rates, the central banks of other countries will also cut the interest rates, which will reduce the interest rates of both loans and depos-

its. When deposit interest rates come down, people will invest in gold for better returns.

Today investors are getting good returns in gold. For example, investors investing in gold in the year 2023 have got a return of 16.4 per cent, which is much better than banks or other safe investment options. In the last 10 years, gold has given a return of 105 per cent, while the price of gold has increased by 63 per cent in the global market.

In June 2008, the price of 10 grams of gold was Rs.11,901, while in June 2014, the price of 10 grams of gold was Rs.25,924, whereas in June 2017, the price of 10 grams of gold was Rs.29,499. There was an unprecedented increase in the price of gold in August 2020 and it reached the level of Rs.56,499 and in October 2023 its price became Rs.62,193, whereas on December 29, 2023, the price of gold was Rs.63,332 per 10 grams, whereas, in the international market, the price of gold per ounce was \$2050.

Owing to the continuous increase in the number of people investing in gold, it is being speculated that by the end of 2024, the price of 10 grams of gold will cross the level of Rs.70,000 and the price of gold per ounce in the international market will reach \$ 2400. Looking at the 50-year his-



tory of gold price fluctuations, it shows that major fluctuations in the price of gold continue for about 5 to 6 years. In such a situation, there are speculations that the price of gold will remain at a high level for the coming few years.

According to BOFA Global Research, central banks around the world have purchased significant amounts of gold in 2022 and 2023. For the first time in 2022, central banks bought more than 1000 tonnes of gold. Even in 2023, central banks have purchased more than 1000 tons of gold, which is 2.5 times more than 2021 and 4 times more than 2020. At present, gold accounts for 20 per cent of the reserves of all the central banks of the world. The Reserve Bank of India purchased 9 tonnes of gold in September 2023, while the People's Bank of China purchased 78 tonnes of gold during

September to December 2023. Since the start of 2023, China's central bank has increased its gold holdings by 181 tonnes to 2,192 tonnes. Based on the analysis of historical data, it is believed that even in 2024, all the central banks of the world will buy gold to expand the scope of their deposit base.

Due to the Corona pandemic, global uncertainty, and the ongoing slowdown in the economy globally, the pace of improvement in the economies of all developed countries including USA is slow. At the same time, due to the ongoing war between Hamas and Israel, tension remains in the Middle East and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has also not stopped, due to which the supply chain of many products is disrupted. As a result, people are investing in gold. However, India is an exception in this matter, as here people

invest in gold even in recession and when the economy is rosy, because investing in gold has been prevalent in India since time immemorial.

The wedding season has started in India from December and despite the skyrocketing gold price, people are buying gold as per their financial capacity or condition. The most important thing is that gold has always been popular in India, since women in India are crazy about gold and this craze has been there since time immemorial. In ancient times, along with women, men also used to wear gold ornaments. Gold is so deeply embedded in the lifestyle, civilization, and culture of Indians that their life is incomplete without it. For Indian women, gold is not just a jewel, but a symbol of their well-being, self-respect, and pride. Gold transactions are done in 16 Sanskars of Hindu religion i.e., from birth to death.

Not only this, in Hindu religion there is also a tradition of offering gold to the gods and goddesses or making the gods and goddesses wear gold crowns. Because of this, many tons of gold are deposited in the temples of India. The World Gold Council (WGC) had released a report in the year 2020, according to which more than 4 thousand tonnes of gold is deposited in the major temples of India.

Since India is unable to meet the domestic demand for gold on its own, India has to depend on other countries to meet its domestic needs. For this, India imported maximum gold from China in 2022, while from Switzerland in 2021. However, due to global uncertainty, gold imports in India decreased by 24.15 per cent to \$ 35 billion in the financial year 2022-23, but this is only a provisional state. If the situation changes, India will start importing gold again.

Switzerland accounts for 22.6 per cent of global gold imports and is the world's largest importer by value, while China is in second place with 17.6 per cent of imports. However, China produces 10.6 per cent of the total gold production in the world. Today the highest gold in the world is in USA with 8133.47 tonnes, second place is Germany with 3359.09 tonnes of gold.

At present, due to almost controlled inflation, low interest rates on deposits in banking and other financial sectors, geopolitical crisis, fear of global recession, etc., people's trust in other means of investment has reduced. People feel that by investing in gold they can keep their money safe and get good returns.

Satish Singh, Ahmedabad based Senior Columnist, Views are personal

India's FY24 Economic Growth Expected to Surpass 6.5%: Finance Ministry

NEW DELHI: The Finance Ministry, in its half-yearly economic review report released, anticipates that India's economy will comfortably exceed the government's growth projection of 6.5 per cent for the fiscal year 2023-24 (FY24).

According to the report, the momentum gained by the Indian economy in the second quarter of FY24 is expected to endure through the subsequent December quarter, with sustained growth in consumption demand.

The half-yearly economic review for 2023-24 highlights a significant real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 7.7 per cent in the first half of FY24, following a 7.6 per cent expansion in the second quarter (Q2).

As per the report, strong domestic consumption and investment are cited as the driving forces behind this growth, with Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE) experiencing a 4.5 per cent increase, contributing 60.4 per cent to GDP — its highest in H1 since FY12.

"The better-than-expected growth in Q2 of FY24 and the emergence of India as the fastest-growing major economy in H1 of FY24 have improved the growth prospects and prompted various domestic and international agencies to upgrade GDP growth projections for FY24," the report noted.



The Finance Ministry report also expresses optimism about India's external sector, citing the relatively stable Indian rupee and adequate foreign exchange reserves.

On the inflation front, the report notes a declining trend in headline inflation, attributing it to stable core inflation and ongoing deflation in fuel inflation.

Despite temporary disruptions from food prices, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) projects an average inflation rate of 5.4 per cent for FY24.

On indirect taxes, the report underscores the momentum in economic activity through GST collections. The gross GST collection for November 2023, at Rs 1.68 lakh crore, is 12 per cent higher on a YoY basis.

The report concludes with information on merchandise exports, which contracted by 8.8 per cent in H1 of FY24, leading to a reduction in India's overall trade deficit to USD 39.9 billion compared to USD 75.3 billion in H1 of FY23.

INTERNATIONAL

UN Chief condemns 'epic human suffering' in Gaza amid Israeli offensive



UN Chief Antonio Guterres has condemned the epic human suffering and collective punishment of Palestinian civilians, media reports said.

Reports said that he and other world leaders have repeatedly called for a ceasefire while Israel has vowed to push on until Hamas is defeated, a position backed by its powerful ally the United States.

"Far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has called for the return of Jewish settlers to Gaza after fighting, saying its Palestinian population should be encouraged to emigrate," media reports said.

"If we act in a strategically correct way and encourage emigration, if there are 100,000 or 200,000 Arabs in Gaza and not two million, the whole discourse of the day after will be completely different," Smotrich told Israeli army radio.

Media reports said that there was no suggestion that the minister's proposals had the support of the government as a whole but Hamas swiftly condemned his comments as a call to expel two million Palestinians and a war crime.

Gaza war can spill into a regional conflict: UN Chief

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has reiterated his concerns that the war in Gaza can spill over into a regional conflict, media reports said.

"There is a continued risk of wider regional conflagration, the longer the conflict in Gaza continues, given the risk of escalation and miscalculation by multiple actors," media reports quoting Guterres as saying in a statement.

He said that the burgeoning violence against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank by Israeli forces and Israeli settlers is extremely alarming.

"As is fighting between Hezbollah and Israel across the south Lebanon border, attacks from Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis attacking shipping in the Red Sea," the UN Chief said.

He has again appealed to all members of the international community to do everything in their power to use their influence on the relevant parties to prevent an escalation of the situation in the region.

Unless India hits where it hurts Canada, Trudeau not likely to relent

OTTAWA: Though India-Canada relations have seen many lows—such as Ottawa's sanctions on New Delhi after the 1974 and 1998 nuclear tests and the bombing of Air India Kanishka in June 1985—over the years, they have touched a new low in the wake of the killing of Khalistani activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar outside a Surrey Gurdwara in June 2023.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau dropped a bombshell on September 18 when he alleged in the House of Commons that the agents of the Indian government were behind the killing of Nijjar.

As he made these allegations, Canada suspended the on-going trade talks on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, expelled Indian diplomat Pavan Kumar Rai and asked India to cooperate in the Nijjar investigation.

India denied the allegations and hit back by expelling 41 diplomats and stopping visa services in Canada.

Trudeau has upped the ante since then, making periodic statements on India's alleged role in the Nijjar killing even as New Delhi has repeatedly said that it has not been given any credible evidence by Ottawa.

The Canadian Prime Minister has used the indictment of Indian national Nikhil Gupta in an alleged plot to kill Khalistani leader Gurbaj Singh Panun to support his allegation.

The latest twist in this entire episode—that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) is about to arrest two persons in connection with the Nijjar killing—is an ominous sign that India-Canada relations are not going to improve anytime soon.



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Whatever these two persons reveal after their arrest and how much more it will harm the bilateral relationship will be known only in the weeks to come.

Apart from the argument in some Indo-Canadian quarters here that Canada and the US are weaponising the Khalistani issue because of India's Ukraine policy and its strategic autonomy, Trudeau's somewhat personal grudge against New Delhi about what happened during his 2018 and September visits to India may be playing into this diplomatic crisis.

But despite this crisis, Canada is getting what it wants from India—thousands and thousands of new immigrants and students. For Ottawa, trade with India is not a big deal.

New Indian immigrants and students bring in billions of dollars into Canada. Indian students keep hundreds and hundreds of private colleges running and provide low-wage labour for Walmart, Tim Hortons, Amazon, and security companies. The majority of frontline workers at these companies in Canada today are Indian students.

If Indian students were to stop coming here, hundreds of private colleges will shut and Walmart, Tim Hortons and Amazon will struggle to find low-wage workers.

Not surprisingly, Canadian study visas for Indian students are being issued faster now despite the expulsion of 41 Canadian diplomats.

Unless India hits where it matters by putting in place new measures, Ottawa won't relent and rein in anti-Indian elements.

Japan earthquake toll increases to 92 as aftershocks hinder rescue



The death toll from a series of powerful earthquakes that struck the central Japanese prefecture of Ishikawa earlier this week, increased to 92 on Wednesday, with continued aftershocks and severe weather conditions hindering rescue work.

The worst-hit city of Wajima in Ishikawa has confirmed a total of 92 deaths, Xinhua news agency quoted Japan's Kyodo News as saying citing local authorities.

In a series of aftershocks experienced by the region, one with a magnitude of 5.6 on Wednesday morning and one with a magnitude of 4.6 on Tuesday evening struck off the Noto Peninsula, both at shallow depths and measuring upper 5 on Japan's seismic intensity scale which peaks at 7, according to the Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA).

The full extent of the quake remains unknown as rubble and severed roads still prevent search and rescue operations on Wednesday, two days after the 7.6-magnitude quake on Monday caused extensive structural damage and fires in Wajima.

According to the prefectural government, more than 100 people in a state of isolation due to cut-off roads in at least three municipalities, including the severely hit city of Nanao.

The National Institute for Land and Infrastructure Management announced on Tuesday that they detected a significant uplift in the ground surface, reaching approximately four meters in the city of Wajima.

The JMA issued warnings of potential mudslides for Ishikawa prefecture with intermittent rain expected through Thursday in the disaster-hit areas, including some cut-off villages.

A heavy rain alert has been issued for the most-devastated city.

Ishikawa prefectural authorities have asked the central government to send Self-Defense Forces (SDF) personnel for disaster relief, and the forces were set to use helicopters to deliver supplies to cut-off areas, according to local media reports.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told a press conference on Wednesday that the government had decided to double the number of SDF

members in the disaster-hit region from 1,000 at present.

A day after a tragic collision between a Japan Airlines plane and a Japan Coast Guard aircraft carrying relief goods at Tokyo's Haneda airport, Kishida said the accident has no impact on disaster relief work and transportation of relief supplies to the areas has been progressing steadily.

A series of strong earthquakes, with a major one of 7.6 magnitude, on Monday struck at a shallow depth in the Noto region of Ishikawa prefecture.

The JMA has officially named it the 2024 Noto Peninsula Earthquake.

Centered around 30 km east-northeast of Wajima, the devastating quake registered a maximum intensity of 7, which would make it impossible for people to stand.

The earthquake, categorised as a seismic swarm, had a length of up to 150 km in the epicentre area, leading to unprecedented scale and shaking intensity, said a JMA expert, noting that such a temblor was last recorded in 2018 in Hokkaido.

In the aftermath of the quake, nearly 34,000 households, as of Wednesday morning, still suffered power outages in Ishikawa prefecture, where over 33,000 people have taken shelter, according to local authorities.

Reports of damages and several cases of people being buried or trapped under collapsed homes in the quake-hit areas kept coming in, according to municipal authorities.

The interaction between the two distinguished parliamentarians centered on fostering deeper understanding and cooperation on issues pertinent to the Sikh community, as well as broader global political affairs. The deliberations aimed at identifying pathways to enhance collaboration and solidarity between Canada and the United Kingdom while addressing shared concerns and interests of the Sikh diaspora worldwide.

London: The Sikh Member of Parliament from Britain, Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, hosted a meeting with Canadian counterpart Iqwinder Singh Gaheer during the latter's visit to the United Kingdom. The meeting took place in Slough, where both MPs engaged in discussions covering a wide array of political and global Sikh matters.

In a statement, Tan Dhesi hailed Iqwinder Singh Gaheer as a promising and dynamic individual, possessing immense potential to contribute significantly to the welfare of the Sikh community in Canada. "It was an enriching discussion revolving around various facets of international politics, recent global Sikh concerns, and the exploration of opportunities to fortify the bilateral relationship between our nations," stated Dhesi.

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NEW DELHI: The Indian demand for Canadian education declined significantly with the number of study permit applications processed going down by more than 40 per cent since July 2023, according to a newly-released data. The Canadian government processed almost 146,000 new study permit applications for Indian nationals from July to October 2022.

But across the same period in 2023, it processed fewer than 87,000, representing a year-over-year decrease of 41 per cent, data released by ApplyBoard, an online platform for international student recruitment, said.

Canadian MP Iqwinder Singh Gaheer meets UK MP Dhesi in Slough



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This means that almost 60,000 fewer student visas were processed for Indian students from July to October 2023 than over the same period in 2022.

From January to June 2023, the Canadian government processed 25 per cent more study permit applications from Indian students than it did over the same period in 2022. The sharp drop comes even as the Canadian government announced last month that it will more than double the cost-of-living financial requirement for incoming international students beginning January 1, 2024.

So going forth, a single applicant will need to show they have 20,635 Canadian dollars (\$15,181) in addition to their first year of tuition and travel costs.

Negative sentiment on social media

While it remains to be seen how the announcement will impact international students in terms of numbers, the reason for the drop in later part of 2023 was attributed to a growing number of Indian students taking on to social media to speak about the hardships they faced in Canada, specifically calling out the high cost of living and lack of opportunity promised.

The ApplyBoard found that between April and August of 2023, the number of articles written about housing in Canada increased fivefold versus the same period last year. Additionally, the percentage of content flagged as negative rose from 12 to 30 per cent, with Indian students' financial hardships and unemployment challenges a consistent theme. In September last year, students from Punjab actively took to 'X' to speak about skyrocketing house rents in the country, which was forcing many of them to stay in cramped basement setups, compromising their safety.

Humanitarian aid delivery blocked in Gaza: UN

The UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that for the past three days, the world body and other partners have been unable to deliver urgently needed life-saving humanitarian aid north of Wadi Gaza—the coastal wetland located along the central part of the besieged enclave.

Around half of the Hamas-controlled enclave lies north of Wadi Gaza. In its latest situation update, the OCHA said the delivery of the humanitarian assistance was not possible "due to access delays and denials, as well as active conflict". According to the UN body, the aid included medicines that would have provided vital support to more than 100,000 people for 30 days, as well as eight trucks of food for people who currently face catastrophic and life-threatening food insecurity.

"Humanitarian organisations are calling for urgent, safe, sustained and unhindered humanitarian access to areas north of Wadi Gaza, which has been severed from the south for more than a month," the OCHA said in its update.

On Wednesday, the World Health Organization (WHO) had said that in the past three days, 13 trucks carrying crucial medical supplies for surgeries and anaesthesia were delivered to Gaza via the Rafah crossing.

Canadian study permit applications processed for Indians down over 40% since July 2023: Report



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Indo-US Ties Cooling Off!

Dumb-wits in White House Trigger off Deep State against India, New Delhi Hits Back



GOPAL MISRA

The Indian diplomacy ascends, reaches at its zenith in 2023, PM Narendra Modi and US President Joe Biden frequently interacted in various international forums. It appeared that New Delhi and Washington are poised to jointly work for peace influencing geo-politics even amidst Russia-Ukraine War. Yet their relations nosedived just before the year ended. A mirthless 2024 dawns with both sides examining and exploring whether the deep state has sabotaged the common agenda of cooperation.

The visit of Biden in New Delhi on the eve of G-20 session in September 2023 further warmed their ties. The two countries have been engaged for re-orienting their ties following the visit of Indian PM Narendra Rao to Washington in 1994. Both sides may not admit but just before the year ended to become a history, the year-long intense efforts making their ties impacting the geo-politics appear to be in the process to be buried in the archives.

The scholars and experts in strategic and foreign affair in New Delhi, naturally, are perplexed by this sudden downturn in the warmth of India-US relations; they are at wits end



that how their relationship could suddenly plummet that too on some frivolous issues like Indian conspiracy to eliminate a supporter of Khalistan in USA.

India's Matured Diplomacy Compared to Indian diplomats, most of the officials serving in the office of the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken are considered dumb wits. In spite of Biden's long innings in various capacities in directing and monitoring foreign affairs, the recent campaign against India deliberating accusing India of violating human rights. Rao is being continued to be remembered as the 'shrewd Chankaya', who could rescue Indian economy by changing the Industrial Policy Resolution, considered 'holy cow' by his own party, and had fathered economic reforms simultaneously laying the foundation for the India-US close ties.

Rao continues to influence the generation next in South Block to be vigilant and be ready to respond to a challenging situation. The five-day visit of India's

External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, to Moscow signing number of strategic agreements is just an example that India adheres to agreements, but they should really be delivered. The delay on the part of the US authorities not supplying drones as scheduled or engines for India's own aircraft Tejas must have alarmed New Delhi.

Also, perhaps, the strengthening of the Chinese troops on 3000 kilometre on the India-Tibet border accompanied by a new wave of terrorists from Pakistan to Jammu and Kashmir could also have necessitated keeping India's old ally adequately informed.

Also, much to the surprise of Washington, the Modi Government's overtures towards Moscow are being appreciated in the country transcending political spectrum. Earlier, Indian responses to a situation have been slow. It had taken more than decade for India to seek American support; on the other hand, China had already initiated policy of luring American

capital and technology during Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping's 1979 visit to America.

The comments in Indian media and news papers in the West, including American, that the recent India-Russia agreements only reveal either their ignorance or partisan approach towards global power play. They have to explain how India's co-operation in sensitive field of defence production, expansion of nuclear power houses and other areas with Russia hurts the US interests. The Indo-US defence cooperation is still at nascent stage, and it needs much more effort for augmenting their ties.

China Revises its Strategy In recent years, the world has been witnessing two trends in the international diplomacy; the Chinese wolf warrior diplomacy and pedestrian tit for tat approach. It, however, appears that these approaches have become redundant with the dawn of 2024; the world powers have to reinvent their ties; the proxy war between the US-led West against Russia using as their Ukraine has failed. Similarly, the American rhetoric describing India as its close ally, while its deep state, CIA, quietly supporting the Khalistani separatists, is bound to hurt their ties despite having a friendly set up in New Delhi.

It is for Washington to understand that Indians do not want any further weakening of American presence in the

geo-politics, because India is for democracy, secularism and evolution of a plural society. The other players in the world politics, Russia and China do not subscribe to human rights and democracy. Among the western leaders President D. Roosevelt was opposed to the partition of India; he had advised British statesman, Winston Churchill not to divide India during the high-level talks at Potsdam; however, most of the successive administrations in Washington had little concern towards India's sensitivities. Much before the fall of Dacca and President Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing, America had sent its Seventh fleet armed with nuclear missiles to the Indian Ocean in favour of the Pakistani army committing genocide against Bengali Muslims in 1971. Also, CIA operatives were active in India's north east supporting Mizo insurgency and hobnobbing with the Chinese, during the past three decades. Washington has to realize that Indians have elephantine memory; they neither forget their supporters nor ignore those who had worked against democracy and her national interests.

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

Indian-American medical biller arrested for stealing over \$1 mn

NEW YORK: A 61-year-old Indian-origin medical biller has been arrested for allegedly stealing more than \$1 million intended for surgeons who provided care to injured workers in New York.

Amrith Patel and his two companies—Medlink Services and Medlink Partners—were charged on Wednesday with 27 felony counts for the thefts they allegedly committed from January 2012 through January 2019.

Patel, who was arraigned before the Honorable Holly Trexler in Albany City Court, provided billing services to a Brooklyn-based orthopedic surgery practice, according to the Office of the New York State Attorney General.

He allegedly submitted falsified claim forms to the New York State Insurance Fund (NYSIF) to steal at least \$1.1 million in workers' compensation reimbursements for himself.

"Doctors and health care professionals provide crucial care to our communities, and they rely on accurate and ethical billing to sustain these services and ensure our well-being," said New York Attorney General Letitia James.

"When money is illegally diverted away from doctors and providers, all New Yorkers suffer as a result. Fraud of any kind will never go unchecked in our state, and



my office will continue to use every measure to hold accountable those who seek to cheat New Yorkers for personal gain." As outlined in the 27-count complaint, Patel abused his position as a medical billing agent over the course of nearly seven years by diverting payments meant for surgeons.

Starting in 2011, Patel and his companies were responsible for submitting billing for surgeries related to work-related injuries under the New York State Workers' Compensation Law.

Under the law, authorised providers are reimbursed for their treatment of injured workers by the insurance carrier for the employer.

Under the terms of their client agreement, Patel submitted bills for surgical procedures to NYSIF, the workers' compensation carrier in this instance, and then the payments would subsequently be

issued directly to the surgical practice or its doctors. In exchange for these transactions, Patel and his companies were paid

monthly service fees. However, he allegedly submitted falsified claim forms to NYSIF and requested that the payments be sent to his companies instead of the doctors.

In total, Patel allegedly stole at least \$1.1 million in payments originally intended for three doctors for services provided between January 1, 2012 and January 4, 2019.

The felony counts against him and his companies included, one count of Insurance Fraud in the First Degree; one count of Grand Larceny in the First Degree; one count of Grand Larceny in the Second Degree; one count of Grand Larceny in the Third Degree; one count of Scheme to Defraud in the First Degree; 11 counts of Falsifying Business Records in the First Degree, and 11 counts of Workers' Compensation Fraud.

Patel was released with electronic monitoring and a \$100,000 bond.

Ram temple's 100 doors will be like steel, this kind of wood will be brought to Ayodhya after selecting it from Hyderabad forests

MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA
New Delhi

The consecration of Lord Ram will take place in the Ram temple on 22 January. Preparations for this are going on in full swing. Skilled artisans from different parts of the country are engaged to make the temple grand. A wood company from Hyderabad is working rapidly to provide 100 doors for the temple. Chaudhary Sarath Babu, managing partner of Anuradha Timbers International, has been traveling between Ayodhya and Hyderabad since the month of June to ensure timely delivery.



The Ayodhya Temple Trust, in collaboration with Larsen & Toubro and Tata Consultancy Services, had asked the companies three years ago to make a wooden model of the temple. A wooden model was placed on the Darshan Marg to give a glimpse of how the new temple would look. **18 doors are plated with gold.**

There are symbols of elephants, peacocks and various deities on the doors. There is a carving of a peacock on the door of the sanctum sanctorum. It is a foldable door, whose height is 8 feet and width is 12 feet. The firm has made a variety of doors, including those with domes. All the doors inside the temple are plated with gold, including 18 doors on the ground floor.

contract, they found high quality trees from Balharshah forest in Maharashtra, whose average age is 100 years and there was no visible defect in them.

While selecting the trees, it was ensured that there were no cracks, knots or any kind of moisture in the wood of those

trees. These trees then again went through a hard process of selection and only 20 percent of the wood collected from them was selected to be used for the inner complex of the temple. There is very little chance of termites infesting teak wood and it is not affected by weather.

'Keep myself out of arguments', Kareena shares her New Year Mantra



MUMBAI: Bollywood actress Kareena Kapoor Khan, who is on her annual vacation to snow-capped Switzerland with her family and friends, has shared her 2024 mantra, and it is all things funny.

The 'Jab We Met' actress is on a vacation with her husband and actor Saif Ali Khan, her kids Taimur and Jeh, and close friend Natasha Poonawalla. Kareena, who is an avid social media user, is updating her fans about her holiday by sharing pictures from her year-end trip.

On Saturday, she took to Instagram Stories, and revealed her New Year mantra. "I'm at the stage of my life where I keep myself out of arguments. Even if you tell me 1+1=5, you're absolutely correct, enjoy," she wrote in the post. The '3 Idiots' fame actress captioned the post as: "2024 Mantra."

Janhvi Kapoor opens up on rumoured beau Shikhar Pahariya



MUMBAI: Actress Janhvi Kapoor, who is set to appear on the upcoming episode of the streaming chat show 'Koffee With Karan' along with her sister Khushi Kapoor, has opened up about her rumoured boyfriend Shikhar Pahariya.

Janhvi Kapoor and Shikhar Pahariya have been papped together at numerous occasions and also engage on social media with their comments.

Talking about it, Karan Johar asked: "You have had an interesting path of love, you were dating Shikhar, and then you dated someone else and now you are dating Shikhar again. True or False?"

"I won't say that but I will say this, he is, not just for me, but for her (Khushi), for dad and everyone in our family, he has been there from the start as a friend. Not in a way that made me feel like he is expecting anything or he is a pushover or any of those things."

"He was just there in a very selfless dignified way and in a way that I have not seen many men capable of being there for another human being," Janhvi Kapoor said.

Water, bodies freeze in Kashmir as temperature plunges further

FW DESK

A chilling cold wave has tightened its grip on Kashmir, plunging temperatures well below freezing across the region. Srinagar witnessed a bone-chilling low of minus 4.8 degrees Celsius, causing a thin layer of ice to encase the surface of the iconic Dal Lake, officials said.

Residents residing in houseboats navigated the challenge of breaking through the ice to reach the banks.

The extreme cold has taken its toll on the region, freezing water supply pipes in multiple areas, disrupting daily life. Pahalgam, a crucial base camp for the annual Amarnath Yatra, recorded a low of minus 6.2 degrees Celsius, while Gulmarg's famed skiing resort registered a freezing minus 4 degrees Celsius.

Other areas such as Qazi-



gund, Kokernag, and Kupwara also experienced plunging temperatures, with the mercury dropping well below zero.

Adding to the woes, Kashmir has faced a prolonged dry spell with a staggering 79% rainfall deficit in December. The absence of snowfall in most parts, both in the plains and upper reaches, exacerbates the situation. Clear skies have

contributed to further dips in temperatures, intensifying the ongoing 'Chilla-i-Kalan,' the 40-day harshest winter period, causing water bodies, including the Dal Lake, and supply lines to freeze.

Forecasters predict no respite for the next six days, painting a harsh picture for residents as they brace for an even more frigid start to 2024.

Professor Prabina Rajib Appointed Director of BIMTECH



DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai

The Birla Institute of Management Technology (BIMTECH) has announced the appointment of Professor Dr Prabina Rajib as its Director. Dr Rajib, who succeeds Dr Hariwansh Chaturvedi as Director, is a distinguished Professor in Finance & Accounting at IIT Kharagpur's Vinod Gupta School of Management.

She has authored and co-authored two influential books - "Commodity Derivatives and Risk Management" (2014), and "Stock Exchanges Investment and Derivative" respectively.

Dr Rajib, with leadership roles including Dean VGSOM and her

expertise in guiding numerous PhD theses, has presented and published extensively in national and international journals and conferences. The new Director's research interests span the commodity spot and derivatives market, focusing on commodity hedging strategies, besides various aspects of modeling and pricing of derivatives.

In the Indian capital market, Dr Rajib delves into IPO pricing, buybacks, delisting of companies, and ADRs/GDRs issued by Indian companies, besides also exploring various aspects of FDI entry strategy and foreign (technological and financial) collaborations by multinational companies. Meanwhile, the outgoing Director Hariwansh Chaturvedi, who is the longest-serving Director of BIMTECH with 25 years tenure, will assume the role of Chief Educational Advisor, Birla Global University - and mentor them.

Ananya Panday, Aditya Roy Kapur's picture of ice skating in UK goes viral



MUMBAI: Rumoured Bollywood couple Ananya Panday and Aditya Roy Kapur, who were earlier spotted leaving Mumbai together for New Year celebrations, were seen enjoying ice skating in the UK in a recent picture.

A picture from their outing has gone viral on social media. In the picture, Ananya can be seen wearing a black trench coat over a pair of wide-legged pants and a sweater. Aditya, sported a pair of denims, a black puffer jacket and a grey beanie. He can be seen holding Ananya from behind to help her with the balance on the ice.

The two are currently back in Mumbai after the New Year celebrations. Earlier, both Aditya and Ananya were asked about their relationship on the streaming chat show 'Koffee With Karan' by the show host, Karan Johar.

Aamir Khan's daughter Ira Khan marries Nupur Shikhare



MUMBAI: Superstar Aamir Khan and film producer Reena Dutta's daughter Ira Khan on Wednesday tied the knot with her long-time partner Nupur Shikhare.

Ira, who is the founder and CEO of a mental health support organisation, registered her marriage with Nupur, a celebrity fitness trainer, at a five star hotel in suburban Bandra.

The marriage was attended by their close family members, including Aamir, his ex-wives Reena Dutta and Kiran Rao, among others. The ceremony was followed by a reception at the same hotel.

The wedding venue was seen packed with guests.

Ira Khan and Nupur Shi-

khare are now married. A video of the couple registering their marriage has surfaced online and is now going viral. In the video, Nupur was seen seated on the stage in a pair of white colour shorts with a black vest while Ira was decked up in a beautiful traditional lehenga.

Nupur was seen getting married in the same clothes as that he sported at the baraat. The groom ditched the traditional baraat to jog to his wedding. He was seen wearing a pair of gym clothes for the run and participated in the baraat dance outside the wedding in the same clothes. A video from inside the wedding shows he opted to sign the marriage papers in the same outfit.

MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA
New Delhi

The grand Ram temple in Ayodhya is almost ready. Ramlala is ready to sit in the Ram temple. The temple is going to be inaugurated on 22 January. On this day, Ramlala's life will be consecrated in the temple with full rituals. The special thing is that before the consecration of Ram Lalla, hi-tech security arrangements are being made in the temple. The temple of Lord Ramlala has been equipped with CCTV cameras.

CCTV cameras installed in the Red Zone and Yellow Zone adjacent to the Ram Janmabhoomi complex will be monitored. This master plan has been made for the security of Ram Janmabhoomi complex before the consecration of Ram Lalla. Rs 38 crore was approved by the government

India beat South Africa by 7 wickets in the second Test to level the series



SUNIL THAPLIYAL
New Delhi

The Indian team created history in Cape Town by defeating South Africa by seven wickets in the second Test to end the series in a 1-1 draw. This victory represents a significant record for the Indian team as it is the first Asian country to beat South Africa in a Test match in Cape Town. It is also the first time in 31 years that the Indian team has won in Cape Town. Earlier, the Indian team had suffered a defeat by an innings and 32 runs in the first Test match.

This match is also the shortest Test match in the history of Test cricket as only 107 overs were played. In the first innings, the South African team, who usually dominate against India in Cape Town, were dismissed by just 55 runs. Aiden Markram scored a quick hundred in the second innings, but the entire team could only

score 176 runs.

This win in South Africa is the fifth time India have won a Test match against the country. Previously there were victories in 2021, 2018, 2010 and 2006, but this is the first time India have won in Cape Town. In the second Test, South Africa could only score 55 runs in the first innings, while India scored 153 runs to take a significant lead of 98-run lead. South Africa then collapsed in the second innings with 176 runs and set India a target of just 79 runs. The Indian team achieved this target in just a day and a half, losing just three wickets in the process. Mohammad Siraj and Jasprit Bumrah were the heroes of India's victory. Siraj picked up six wickets for just 16 runs in the first innings while Bumrah caused havoc with six wickets for 61 runs in the second innings. Batting first, Virat Kohli top-scored with 46 runs in the

first innings, followed by Shubman Gill with 36 runs and Rohit Sharma with 39 runs. In the second innings, Yashuvi Jaiswal top scored with 28 runs while Rohit remained unbeaten on 17 runs. South Africa made three changes to their line-up for the second Test, while the Indian team made two changes.

In the hosts' team, Lungi Ngidi made his debut in place of Gerald Coetzee, Tristan Stubbs replaced Temba Bavuma and Keshav Maharaj replaced Keegan Pietersen. At the same time, India have brought in Ravindra Jadeja in place of Ravichandran Ashwin and Mukesh Kumar in place of Shardul Thakur.

In the 147-year history of Test cricket, it has never happened before that a player of a team has lost seven times in an innings. In the Test between India and South Africa, which began on 3 January, six batsmen were out for 0. Team India came very close to equalling this shameful record. Had any other batsman of the Indian team also been out for 0, it would have been the first time in the 147-year history of Test cricket. For the first time, six Pakistani players were out for not out against the West Indies in Karachi in 1980. After that, there have been many times in Test cricket when six players have been out for not out in an innings.

POTPOURRI

Rakul Preet Singh, Jacky Bhagnani to get married next month in Goa



MUMBAI: Actress Rakul Preet Singh and actor-producer Jacky Bhagnani are set to tie the knot in February. The couple will get married in Goa in an intimate ceremony.

The couple made it official on Instagram back in October 2021. Earlier this year, Jacky Bhagnani shared a reel featuring the moments he and Rakul have spent together so far, wishing the actress on her birthday. The reel features glimpses of their vacation diaries, dinner dates, red carpet walks as well as on stage performances.

Jacky also penned a special note for his girlfriend, as he wrote: "On your special day, I want to express my admiration for the one who always leaves me in awe. With you, every day feels like an incredible journey, and there's never a dull moment."

He further mentioned: "You're more than just my companion; you're my confidant, my partner-in-crime, and the one who fills my life with love and laughter. On your big day, I wish you everything you have ever dreamt of, and more."

Compulsory Teaching of Bhagavad Gita in Schools



VIJAY SINGAL

In recent months, some of the state governments have declared their intention to include Bhagavad Gita in the school curriculum. There is even a proposal to introduce it in schools, all over India. This proposition has understandably evoked sharp reactions, both in favour of and against this move.

Teachings of the religious scriptures like Bhagavad Gita are gradually gaining importance as ethical practices and moral values of the society are going down, day by day. There is no doubt that Gita is an unparalleled treatise of philosophy and religion, which can provide a badly needed direction to the thought process of today's youth. It is a storehouse of not only spiritual but also worldly knowledge. Initiation into the philosophy of Gita at young age would not only inculcate good habits in the students, but would also motivate them to study it further, at a later date.

Bhagavad Gita teaches noble principles of righteous behaviour. The universal doctrines of selfless service, renunciation of ego ; and the honest pursuit of one's calling in life can certainly make one a better human being. But any hasty decision with regard to compulsory teaching of Bhagavad Gita in schools can be more harmful than beneficial. Before making any such decision in this land of huge diversity, all its pros and cons would have to be considered by the education experts and other men of



learning. It has to be ensured that the invaluable lessons of human behaviour are not lost in the social disharmony, political competitiveness or in the religious rigmarole.

If an impulsive decision in this regard is taken at state or national level, there can be many consequences. Moreover, there would be many practical difficulties in implementing such a decision. Being a text of profound philosophy, various shlokas of Gita have been interpreted, by different scholars, differently. Such variety of nuanced expressions and opinions can confuse the uninitiated teachers and the tender minds of the students.

It would be virtually impossible to find appropriate teachers for imparting spiritual knowledge. Teaching Bhagavad Gita is not the same thing as delivering lectures on mathematics, geography or history. Can ordinary teachers in schools be intellectually equipped enough to appreciate the metaphysical concepts of this philosophical treatise ; and further make their pupils to understand the deep meaning of terms

like atman, pramatman and yoga etc. The abstract ideas like attaining moksha can be misunderstood by the teachers and students alike.

Theoretically knowing about the teachings of the Gita is one thing, and imparting them to the children is another. If the teachers themselves do not realise the core values of the Bhagavad Gita like equality of the mankind, equanimity of the mind and unattached work etc. ; how can they inculcate these values in the students ? How can such teachers convey the essential message of the Gita that serving creation of the God, is serving the God himself ? Therefore, first the teachers would have to be sensitised so that they are able to impart knowledge of the Bhagavad Gita at different depths of understanding, at different levels of classes.

Coercion in anything often proves to be counter-productive. Compulsion in spiritual education can be still worse. In schools, children may not be mature enough to critically examine and rationally evaluate whatever is being taught to them. When unable to understand the real meaning and the underlying idea of the verses, the students may tend to memorise them. Simply cramming, without comprehending the sense of the verse, would feel like a burden. Instead of appreciating the real import of this great work, the students will consider it as an annoying task. Such a resentment can create a vague disinclination towards the great cultural heritage of ancient India, in

the minds of future generations. What is required at that age, in fact at any age, is not to learn verbatim the Sanskrit shlokas, but to imbibe the values propagated in these words of supreme wisdom. Therefore, instead of any compulsive indoctrination, learning of Bhagavad Gita should be more as voluntary participation.

Debate in favour of and against the compulsory introduction of Gita teachings continues. In fact Sri Krishna has himself answered many of such questions in shlokas from 18.67 to 18.69. He has declared that imparting the knowledge of Gita to his devotees, was the highest devotion to him. But he has also warned that Gita gyaana should never be spoken to anyone who is devoid of austerities, who has no devotion in him, who speaks ill of him ; or who does not want to hear it. In other words, Gita should be taught to those who have faith, devotion, discipline ; and who are willing to learn. Bhagavad Gita should, therefore, not be thrust upon anyone. It can be kept as an elective subject so that those who are really keen are benefitted from this ocean of wisdom.

To conclude, no purpose can be served by the rote learning of Gita verses by the students. Instead of memorising shlokas by heart, the students should be encouraged to understand their real meaning ; so that they can rise above the sickening materialism on the one side, and repulsive religious superstitions on the other.

The security of Ram temple will be impenetrable, it will be monitored with 110 CCTV cameras

MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA
New Delhi

The grand Ram temple in Ayodhya is almost ready. Ramlala is ready to sit in the Ram temple. The temple is going to be inaugurated on 22 January. On this day, Ramlala's life will be consecrated in the temple with full rituals. The special thing is that before the consecration of Ram Lalla, hi-tech security arrangements are being made in the temple. The temple of Lord Ramlala has been equipped with CCTV cameras.

CCTV cameras installed in the Red Zone and Yellow Zone adjacent to the Ram Janmabhoomi complex will be monitored. This master plan has been made for the security of Ram Janmabhoomi complex before the consecration of Ram Lalla. Rs 38 crore was approved by the government



to purchase security equipment. Let us tell you that in the first phase, the city of Ramlala will be protected, it will also be equipped with machinery and equipment and a third eye along with the security forces will monitor the city of Ramlala.

According to the members of Ram Mandir Trust, Ramlala will be equipped with heavy

security equipment by 25th December. Along with this, security equipment procured by the Uttar Pradesh government including scanner prescription machine will also be installed in the campus by December 20. By December 30, the work of security, lighting and passenger transportation facilities will be completed in the Ram Janmabhoomi complex.

Katrina Kaif, Vicky Kaushal spend 'teen khoobsurat din' full of 'pyaar, aram, sunsets'

MUMBAI: Actress Katrina Kaif on Wednesday shared glimpses of her "teen khoobsurat din" with husband and actor Vicky Kaushal from their New Year getaway to Rajasthan.

On December 31, Katrina and Vicky were seen walking hand in hand at the airport, as they were flying for new year's eve. Taking to Instagram, the 'Race' actress shared her holiday album wherein she can be seen playfully basking in the winter sun.

Katrina is wearing a checkered print dress with bell sleeves. She is sporting a no-makeup look, and her hair is kept open.

One picture shows Katrina sitting on the lap of Vicky, and the 'URI' actor is looking at his ladylove. He is wearing a pine green coloured sweater, black cap and sunglasses.

Another photo features the lovebirds sitting in the midst of a desert and romantically gaz-



ing at the mesmerising sunset. The post was captioned as: "Teen khoobsurat din... pyaar, aram, sunsets aur thand! New Year mana liya... now it's time for #MerryChristmas!!"

It was liked by Alia Bhatt and Ananya Panday.

Meanwhile, on the work front, Vicky was last seen in 'Dunki'. The comedy drama stars Shah Rukh Khan in the lead. He next has 'Mere Mehboob Mere Sanam', and 'Chhava' in the pipeline.

Katrina was last seen as Zoya in Salman Khan-starrer 'Tiger 3'. She next has 'Merry Christmas' in her kitty. The romantic thriller film is directed by Sri-ram Raghavan, and stars Vijay Sethupathi, alongside Katrina.