

REGION

2

DELHI GOVT SANCTIONS AMOUNT OF RS 803.69 CRORE TO MCD



Budget Lays Blueprint for Future MSME Support Programmes: FISME

NEW DELHI: While retaining the allocation for the Ministry of MSME at the level of last year, Nirmala Sitharaman's Interim Budget succinctly posited the future direction of MSME support. Elaborating on the Strategy for 'Amirt Kaal', the Finance Minister alluded to future policies to ensure timely and adequate finances and "preparing the financial sector in terms of size, capacity, skills and regulatory framework".

She also underscored the MSMEs' needs of Technology, Training and 'orienting regulatory environment to facilitate growth'.

Welcoming the Interim Budget, President of Federation of Indian Micro and Small & Medium Enterprises (FISME) Prashant Patel said, "Acknowledging the critical needs of MSMEs with regard to access to finance, technology and enabling regulatory environment, the Budget notes that the Government intends to come out with a clear set of policies for promotion and regulation to help MSMEs in key areas."

In the pre-budget submission to the Government, FISME had



highlighted that the prevailing financial architecture was not being able to serve green field manufacturing projects and fast-growing MSMEs and needed revamp. FISME had also highlighted the need for massive technology up-gradation in MSME clusters. The FM noted in the Budget speech that it was an important policy priority for the Government to ensure

timely and adequate finances and that to meet the investment needs, the Government would prepare the financial sector in terms of size, capacity, skills and regulatory framework.

She also mentioned the need for 'relevant technologies and appropriate training for the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) to grow and also compete globally. Orienting

the regulatory environment to facilitate their growth will be an important element of this policy mix. "The Government intends to provide for the technology up-gradation needs of MSMEs and dovetail it with emerging requirements of resource efficiency and green energy," adds FISME.

After having shared the findings of the seminar 'Reducing

“The Government intends to provide for the technology up-gradation needs of MSMEs and dovetail it with emerging requirements of resource efficiency and green energy”

Cost of Litigation for MSMEs, FISME in the pre-budget paper had suggested a set of measures to make the process of arbitration effective and affordable. New initiatives are expected.

FISME welcomed enhancing allocation for infrastructure by 11% boosting the total infrastructure to 3.4% of GDP.

FISME feels that continued focus on housing in the Budget, with 2 crore more houses to be built next year, and new scheme for middle class living on rent to 'build or buy' new houses, would generate huge business opportunities for MSMEs.

BANKING & FINANCE

6

PRUDENT BUDGET WITH BOLD AMBITION TO MAKE INDIA VIKSIT BHARAT; FOCUS ON CAPEX STANDS OUT: ASSOCHAM



POTPOURRI

8

IRFAN PATHAN, UPUL THARANGA AMONG LEGENDARY CRICKETERS TO JOIN ASIAN LEGENDS LEAGUE



Average monthly gross GST collection doubles to Rs 1.66 lakh crore

NEWDELHI: The Union Minister for Finance and Corporate Affairs, Nirmala Sitharaman, while presenting the Interim Budget 2024-25 in Parliament today asserted that by unifying the highly fragmented indirect tax regime in India, GST has reduced the compliance burden on trade and industry.

"According to a recent survey conducted by a leading consulting firm, 94 per cent of industry leaders view the transition to GST as largely positive and according to 80 per cent of the respondents, it has led to supply chain optimization" she said. Smt. Sitharaman further added that at the same time, tax base of GST more than doubled and the average monthly gross GST collection has almost doubled to Rs 1.66 lakh crore this year.

Talking about the increased revenue of States, the Finance Minister said that States' SGST revenue, including compensation released to states, in the post-GST period of 2017-18 to 2022-23, has achieved a buoyancy of 1.22. In contrast, the tax buoyancy of State revenues from subsumed taxes in the pre-GST four-year period of 2012-13 to 2015-16 was a mere 0.72.

Unpacking a vision for development



ABDUL WASEY
Editor

Ahead of the upcoming general elections, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented a budget aimed at bolstering infrastructure and improving social welfare, signifying the government's intent to enhance the quality of life across India. This budget, potentially Sitharaman's last before the polls, lays out an ambitious vision for a "developed India" by 2047, featuring increased infrastructure spending and new initiatives like a home ownership scheme, free rooftop solar electricity, and expanded medical coverage for government employees.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is approaching the elections with confidence, buoyed by a strong parliamentary majority and a series of "golden moments" that Sitharaman predicts will lead to unprecedented development over the next five years. The finance minister's optimism, rooted in economic growth and a tax windfall, allows for increased public spending while aiming to reduce the budget deficit to 5.1 per cent of GDP, showcasing a commitment to fiscal prudence alongside developmental aspirations.

However, the true measure of success for this budget will lie in its implementation and the real-world impact of its provisions. While infrastructure development and welfare initiatives are crucial, addressing broader challenges such as employment, education, and environmental sustainability will be essential for realizing the envisioned path to development.

As India aims to cement its status as a global economic leader, the strategies and decisions outlined in this budget represent not just financial planning but a blueprint for the nation's future, underscoring the government's hope for a renewed mandate to continue its developmental agenda. The journey to 2047 is ambitious, and achieving a developed India will require strategic planning, fiscal discipline, and a dedication to inclusive growth.

"Empty vessels, trying to make fool! Modi government's interim budget" criticises by Opposition



The opposition termed the whole matter as a 'drama' of the finance minister

MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA
New Delhi

Modi government's interim budget is 'absurd'. Budget to fool people. The opposition criticized in this language on the interim budget before the Lok Sabha elections. They complained that there is no word how to reduce unemployment in the budget. Even, there is no exemption for the middle class. The opposition termed the whole issue as a 'drama' of the finance minister.

Trinamool's leaders said, "Budget is meaningless. Juggling of words, cheap tricks of language. The common man has no relief, no gain." They also complained, "Depriva-

tion of Bengal continues. Not a single word on Price-rise, this is hypocrisy budget. The finance minister is scripting an unrealistic drama outside of just approving the three-month budget".

Congress leader at Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury has given a punch in the tune of Trinamool. In his words, "Is this the budget for the employment of the unemployed? Or trying to win people's hearts by misrepresenting it in the year of Lok Sabha polls?" In the words of Sachin Pilot, another Congress leader of the party, "Hearing the budget speech of the finance minister, it seemed like she was campaigning for votes".

The Finance Minister's confident announcement, «The full budget in July will present the economic figures for the entire year». Nirmala has repeatedly explained in her speech that her government is returning, so she is not in favor of quick surprises. Akali Dal MP Harsimrat Kaur says, "This budget is empty. It is an expression of the arrogance of the government to return to power from now on".

AAP led Delhi govt alleges step-motherly treatment on Rs 1,168 cr Budget allocation

FW CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

The Union Territory of Delhi was allocated Rs 1,168 crore in the interim budget for 2024-25 on Thursday, the same as in 2023-24, with the AAP government accusing the BJP-led Centre of meting out "step-motherly" treatment to the national capital.

The transfer to Delhi from the Union home ministry included Rs 1,168 crore under the revenue head and Rs 0.01 crore under the capital head. In the 2022-23 budget, Delhi was allocated Rs 960 crore.



The amount was increased to Rs 1,168.01 crore in 2023-24 and it remains the same for 2024-25.

There were no grants in lieu of its share in central taxes and duties for Delhi. It was Rs 325 crore in the 2022-23 budget.

The grants in return of Delhi's share in the pool of central taxes and duties were clubbed under the "central assistance to Union Territories" in the budget estimates of 2023-24 and have remained so in the interim budget for 2024-25.

PM Modi to lay foundation for NLC India's 2,400 MW Odisha power project

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday will be laying the foundation stone for the first phase of the 3,200 MW pit head green field thermal power project in Odisha being built by the integrated lignite/coal mining and power generation company NLC India Ltd, said a top company official.

He also said the company plans a capital expenditure of about Rs 40,000 crore next fiscal and the lignite to methanol project is expected to be operational in 2027-28 and would produce 1,200 tonnes per day.

Speaking to reporters, Prasanna Kumar Motupalli, Chairman and Managing Director (CMD) said the first phase will be 2,400 MW (3x800 MW)



for which PM Modi will be laying the foundation stone. The second phase - 800 MW - plant will come up later.

The power project will be at Jharsuguda District in Odisha based on Ultra Super Critical Technology. Motupalli said the first phase will go on stream in

Several AAP leaders detained, volunteers stopped amid protest in Delhi, BJP demands Kejriwal resignation



YOGESH KANT
New Delhi

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Friday alleged that some of its leaders, including MLAs and councillors, were placed under house arrest or detained, while its volunteers stopped from participating in a protest outside the BJP headquarters here.

The AAP's protest, which is being attended by Delhi Chief Minister and party national convener Arvind Kejriwal, is against alleged "cheating" in Tuesday's Chandigarh mayoral polls, which the BJP won.

Moreover, BJP workers are also protesting near the AAP head office raised slogans against Delhi Chief Minister Kejriwal and demanded his resignation. The offices of both the parties are on the same road, a

few hundred metres from each other. "Kejriwal government has become synonymous with corruption. Every day a scam of the government is exposed before the people," Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva said. He alleged that a scam has taken place in the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) under the patronage of the Kejriwal government.

The BJP workers protesting near the AAP head office raised slogans against Delhi Chief Minister Kejriwal and demanded his resignation. The offices of both the parties are on the same road, a few hundred metres from each other. "Kejriwal government has become synonymous with corruption. Every day a scam of the government is exposed before the people," Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva said.

'Severe' air quality chokes Delhi most of the days in January

NEWDELHI: Throughout January, Delhi grappled with persistent air pollution, exacerbating a crisis that had already been worsening since the previous year. Unfavourable weather conditions, including fog, calm winds, and low temperatures, contributed to the deterioration of air quality.

According to information from the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), the average monthly Air Quality Index (AQI) exceeded 350. In comparison, the AQI for January 2023 was measured at 311.

The AQI serves as a gauge for the concentration of harmful particulate matter PM2.5, known to induce cardiovascular and respiratory ailments such as lung cancer, within a cubic metre of air.

The categorisation of AQI ranges from 0-50 as 'good', 51-100 as 'satisfactory', 101-200 as 'moderate', 201-300 as 'poor', 301-400 as 'very poor', and 401-500 as 'severe'. Any value surpassing 500 falls into the 'severe-plus or emergency' category.

However, the weather experts said that with two Western Disturbances in quick succession, the air quality is likely to improve in the coming days.

Health experts hail plan to set up more medical colleges, boost vaccination for girls



FW CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

Healthcare experts on Thursday gave a thumbs up to the Centre's plan to set up more medical colleges by utilising the existing hospital infrastructure, with some saying the move demonstrates a "holistic commitment" to health.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, while presenting the interim Union Budget for 2024-2025 on Thursday, among

other announcements, also said the government will encourage vaccination for girls in the 9-14 year age group for the prevention of cervical cancer. Serum Institute of India (SII) CEO Adar Poonawalla hailed the government's announcement. "I applaud the announcement to vaccinate girls aged 9-14 against cervical cancer. Let's pledge to prevent HPV (Human Papillomavirus) and ensure easy access to vaccination. Extending health cover for ASHA

and anganwadi workers, setting up more medical colleges and streamlining maternal and child healthcare schemes demonstrate a holistic commitment to health," he wrote in a post on X. Other medical experts said creation of more medical colleges in the country is "crucial".

Sitharaman in her address said several youths are ambitious to get qualified as doctors and they aim to serve the people through improved healthcare services.

"Our government plans to set up more medical colleges by utilising the existing hospital infrastructure under various departments. A committee for this purpose will be set up to examine the issues and make relevant recommendations," she said.

She further announced the extension of healthcare cover under Ayushman Bharat insurance scheme to all ASHA and anganwadi workers and helpers.

SC on internet restrictions in J&K: Not to be kept in cupboard, publish review orders

FW DESK

The Supreme Court has ordered the Additional Solicitor General (ASG) K M Nataraj, representing the Union Territory (UT) of Jammu and Kashmir, to publish the review orders related to internet restrictions in the region. The court stressed that these review orders should not be kept in a cupboard but should be made public.

During the hearing of a plea filed by the Foundation of Media Professionals seeking the publication of review orders pertaining to internet restrictions in Jammu and Kashmir, ASG Nataraj informed the bench comprising Justices B R Gavai and Sanjay Karol that the petitioner is seeking the disclosure of information regarding the deliberations on review orders.

Justice Gavai told Nataraj, "Forget about deliberations, you publish the orders....are



you making a statement that review orders will be published?"

Nataraj said he needs to get instructions on the matter.

The plea, represented by Advocate Shadan Farasat, argued that review orders, being statutory, must be published. Although acknowledging national security concerns, Farasat maintained that both the mother order and the subsequent review must be disclosed, as per the apex court's previous directive.

ASG Nataraj referenced past compliance with prayers during the period of restrictions following the abrogation of

Article 370. The court highlighted that the petitioner is now presenting a new prayer regarding a court-issued direction. Citing the Anuradha Bhasin judgment paragraphs, the bench emphasized that review orders should not be concealed and questioned Nataraj to demonstrate why it is not necessary to publish them.

Bhasin is editor of Kashmir Times, a regional daily in Jammu and Kashmir.

The apex court noted Farasat's reference to the Anuradha Bhasin case, where it was asserted that even review orders should be made public, and observed that this is not occurring in the UT of Jammu and Kashmir. ASG Nataraj sought a two-week extension to gather instructions on the matter. The court, after considering the submissions, granted the requested time in its order.

Mamata is visiting Delhi on coming Tuesday for a Political meeting, but with whom?



MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA
New Delhi

According to Nabanna sources, Mamata's Delhi tour schedule will be made public soon. However, sources close to Bengal CM in the Trinamool Congress have informed that Mamata Banerjee has an important political meeting in Delhi on Wednesday, February 7. Before that, she will also attend the state assembly session on February 5. She will also hold a meeting with her cabinet members in the second half of the assembly session on

the same day. The session of the Bengal state assembly is starting from Monday, February 5. There is also a possibility that the state budget will be presented on the next day Tuesday, February 6. According to Trinamool sources, Mamata can leave for Delhi in the second half after attending the assembly session in the first half of the 6th February.

Mamata's visit to Delhi is an important issue for politicians. In particular, Nitish's exit from the alliance to join the NDA ahead of the Lok Sabha polls and the arrest of INDIA ally JMM Chief Minister Hemant Soren in Jharkhand have raised questions about the alliance's future. Meanwhile, Congress MP Rahul Gandhi's Naya Yatra in Bengal also indicated a change in the equation between Congress and Trinamool. In this situation, Mamata Banerjee is visiting Delhi next Tuesday.

Delhi govt sanctions amount of Rs 803.69 crore to MCD

FW CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

The Delhi government has approved the release of Rs 803.69 crore to the municipal corporation so that civic employees continue to receive their salaries on time, officials said on Wednesday. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has been allocated Rs 2,642.47 crore in 2023-24 by the Arvind Kejriwal government, compared to Rs 854.5 crore in 2014-15, the office of Delhi Finance Minister Atishi said in a statement.

In addition, the MCD is provided funds under several heads by the Delhi government, it said.

"The Kejriwal government will not let the work slow



down in the MCD. In this direction, Finance Minister Atishi, under the direction of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, has approved the release of the third installment of Rs

803.69 crore for the MCD. This will ensure that MCD employees continue to receive their salaries on time," the statement said.

There has been a three-

time increase in funds allocated to the civic body compared to 2014-15. The MCD's funds have increased to two-and-a-half times in the past five years, officials said.

"The decision to release the installment of Rs 803.69 crore by the Kejriwal government will ensure timely payment of salaries and pensions to the employees of the MCD. In addition, sanitation workers, paramedical staff, doctors, etc in the MCD will also receive their salaries on time. This decision will inspire and motivate them to provide better services to the general public," the statement said.

The fund allocation for sanitation services is an important step towards achieving a clean and garbage-free environment in the city, it said.

AAP, BJP protests: Commuters stranded in long traffic jams, chokes central Delhi



FW CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

Protests by the BJP and the AAP a few hundred metres apart on the DDU Marg here left commuters stranded in long traffic jams in central Delhi as police barricaded roads and diverted vehicles.

Bumper-to-bumper traffic was also witnessed on the National Highway-24 and National Highway-9 near Akshardham.

While the AAP staged a protest over alleged cheating in the Chandigarh mayoral polls, the BJP protested against "corruption" in the Arvind Kejriwal government.

The headquarters of both the parties are on the Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya (DDU) Marg and the distance between them is less than 800 metres.

Traffic movement was affected on the DDU Marg and roads leading to it, with long

jams witnessed at the ITO, a major intersection of the city. With barricades put up on several areas in Central Delhi, other roads too saw traffic congestion.

"Movement of traffic is restricted on DDU Marg due to demonstrations. Traffic is heavy on Vikas Marg, IP Marg, Minto Road, JLN Marg and nearby areas due to diversion of traffic. Commuters are advised to avoid these stretches," the Delhi Traffic Police posted on 'X'.

"Diversion has been made for smooth flow of traffic. We are witnessing traffic on GT Karnal road and some parts of central Delhi. Staff have been deputed to manage the traffic jams," a senior official of the Delhi Traffic Police said.

There were long jams near India Gate, Bahadurshah Zafar Marg and Minto Road near Connaught Place. Traffic was crawling on Mathura also.

Yogi govt achieves 60% increase in revenue in January

LUCKNOW: In a major accomplishment, the Uttar Pradesh government has achieved 60 per cent increase in its revenue in the month of January 2024 compared to the revenue generated in the corresponding period last year, the data of revenue receipts released for the month of January reveals. According to the latest revenue data, the state government has accumulated total revenue of Rs 5, 005.06 crore in January this year. This reflects a significant growth of 59.17 per cent compared to the revenue receipts for the corresponding month of January 2023. As per the figures, the total revenue receipts until January 2024 stand at Rs 36, 122.36 crore, indicating a substantial increase of 15.60 per cent compared to the revenue receipts worth Rs 31, 246.62 crores in January 2023.



Union Budget will prove to be a milestone in the development of India with the Vision of Developed India-2047: Vij

AMBALA: Haryana Home Minister Anil Vij said that the Union Budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman ji will be a stepping stone in the direction of developed India. This budget focuses on comprehensive development in all categories and sectors with the fundamental principles of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas'.

Vij mentioned that the budget pays attention to the Vision of Developed India-2047, with a focus on all stakeholders. He stated that the goal of the Lakshmi Didi Yojana is being increased from 2 crore to 3 crore, as this scheme has brought about a significant change in the lives of 9 crore women.

Similarly, He said that steps are being taken in the direction of preventing cervical cancer, increasing vaccination in this regard, and the government will open new medical colleges. Vij said that in today's budget, the government is working with an approach to development that is all-round, all-pervasive and all-inclusive and in the next five years, two crore new houses will be built in rural areas.

Vij mentioned that Prime Minister Narendra Modi believes in focusing on the poor, women, youth, and farmers. In this direction, the union budget will introduce a scheme to assist residents living in rented houses, slums, colonies, or unauthorized colonies. Separate notifications will be issued for this.

Govt appoints 4 members of 16th Finance Commission

NEW DELHI: The Government on Wednesday appointed four members to the 16th Finance Commission which was constituted on December 31, 2023 with Arvind Panagariya, former Vice-Chairman of the NITI Aayog, as its Chairman.

The President of India has approved the names of Ajay Narayan Jha, former member, 15th Finance Commission and former Secretary, Expenditure, Annie George Mathew, former Special Secretary, Expenditure, Dr. Niranjana Rajadhyaksha, Executive Director, Artha Global as full time members while Soumya Kanti Ghosh, Group Chief Economic Advisor, State Bank of India has been appointed as a part time



member of the 16 Finance Commission.

The commission has been requested to make its recommendations on the distribution of taxes to states available by October 31, 2025, covering an award period of five years

commencing April 1, 2026.

The Cabinet had on November 29, approved the terms of reference for the 16th Finance Commission.

These include the distribution of the net proceeds of taxes between the Centre

and the states and the allocation between the states of the respective shares of such proceeds, the principles, grants-in-aid and the revenues of the states and measures needed to supplement the resources of the panchayats.

Several leaders of National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir join BJP

FW DESK

Several leaders of National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir have joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

This includes Sanjeev Khajuria, the senior leader and Kathua (Rural) district president of the National Conference, who joined the BJP along with other office bearers and party members.

Khajuria commended the impact of the Narendra Modi government's welfare schemes at the ground level and praised the Prime Minister's leadership on the global stage.

The development comes months before the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

The joining ceremony took place at the BJP's headquarters



in Jammu, with the party's Jammu and Kashmir unit chief, Ravinder Raina, welcoming the new members.

Raina emphasized the BJP's commitment to the welfare of

people, regardless of region or religion, highlighting the party's historic contributions in healthcare, education, infrastructure, and socio-economic development.

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Raina also commented on the opposition's INDIA bloc, stating that their alliance to impede Prime Minister Narendra Modi's welfare initiatives had failed due to the growing popularity of PM Modi.

In a separate event, former Deputy Chief Minister and senior BJP leader Kavinder Gupta urged party workers to strengthen the party at the grassroots level for success in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

MVA calls Nitish Kumar 'biggest Palturam'; exit won't impact INDIA bloc



MUMBAI: The Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) allies on Monday called Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar the country's 'biggest Palturam' (turncoat) and said his departure would not affect the national Opposition INDIA bloc's prospects in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) President Sharad Pawar and AICC General Secretary Ramesh Chennithala gave strong reactions to Nitish Kumar's "unprincipled politics" despite attending four meetings of the INDIA bloc in the last six months.

"I recall how he had invited all the Opposition leaders to

Patna a few months ago and waxed eloquent on how to rein in the Bharatiya Janata Party and he was working on those lines till recently... What happened in the last eight-two days I have no idea," said Pawar.

"Speaking Nitish Kumar for 'speaking one thing today and doing another the next day', Chennithala said trust is very important in politics and today "he has forfeited that trust."

Pawar said Nitish Kumar has made a record of sorts by allying with different parties twice in a single term in office as Chief Minister, by "discarding his ideology and joining the BJP" to form the government

in Bihar.

"Earlier, he was with the BJP, then he joined hands with the RJD, and now again he has allied with the BJP... Such a situation has never occurred in the country before and he has set a new record," said Pawar.

Chennithala said that now the Congress and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) are again contesting the elections together and will win the maximum number of seats as "the people of Bihar have realised what Nitish Kumar's ideology and ideals are."

The NCP supremo said that prior to this, the example of Haryana was given whenever "ayaram-gayaram" politics was discussed, but Nitish Kumar has gone much further, and "when the people go to polls, they will give a befitting reply."

Other Maharashtra leaders like Shiv Sena (UBT)'s Sanjay Raut and Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi President Prakash Ambedkar have also commented on the political upheavals that rocked Bihar during the weekend, besides posing question marks on the fate of INDIA bloc and its efficacy in challenging the BJP.

Won't contest LS polls, says Digvijaya Singh

NEW DELHI: Amid speculation of whether Congress stalwarts in Madhya Pradesh will contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha election, former Chief Minister Digvijaya Singh has said that he was not keen on contesting the polls.

Congress veteran leader said he won't contest the Lok Sabha election as his Rajya Sabha tenure has two more years to go. The two-time Chief Minister was elected as MP for the Upper House of Parliament in June 2020, and therefore, the six-year tenure will end in June 2026.

During an interaction with the press reporters in his home district Rajgarh on Sunday, he said, "The question of contesting the elections does not arise because I am a member of Rajya Sabha and still have over two years."

Singh ruled out the possibility of contesting the Lok Sabha election. However, the political circle was full of speculation that the Congress may field him from Rajgarh this time. Over the past week, Singh has been taking meetings of party workers in Rajgarh, Raghogarh and Khilchipur -- all these Assembly segments fall in the



Rajgarh Lok Sabha constituency.

Sources in the Congress told to media that there were very rare chances for the Congress to further give tenure as Rajya Sabha MP to Digvijaya Singh and wanted him to contest the Lok Sabha election.

Singh had contested from Bhopal Lok Sabha seat in 2019 but lost to BJP's Pragya Singh Thakur by a margin of 3.65 lakh votes.

Rajgarh Lok Sabha seat is the home turf of Singh, who hails from the Raghogarh

Assembly segment (Guna district) which falls under the Rajgarh parliamentary constituency. Singh had represented Rajgarh LS seat in 1984 and 1991.

He said the Congress party will decide the candidate for Rajgarh Lok Sabha constituency. Of the total 29 Lok Sabha seats in Madhya Pradesh, the BJP holds 28 and the Congress one. In the Assembly elections held last year in the state, the Congress recorded its worst performance under Singh and another veteran Kamal Nath.

Court seeks ED's reply on Sanjay Singh's interim bail plea to attend Parliament session

NEW DELHI: A Delhi court on Thursday issued notice to the ED on an application by AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh seeking interim bail from February 4 to 10 to attend the ongoing Parliament session.

Special Judge MK Nagpal of Rouse Avenue Court directed the ED to file its reply by February 3 on the application of the MP in the money laundering case related to the alleged excise policy scam.

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday reserved its judgment on Singh's bail plea.

Singh had moved the High Court seeking bail on January 4 after Special Judge MK Nagpal of Rouse Avenue Court on December 22 dismissed his plea. Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma reserved the order after hearing arguments from both the sides.

The ED on Tuesday had claimed before the court that Singh was involved in creating a special purpose vehicle (SPV) Arealis Hospitality Pvt Ltd to launder "proceeds of crime" linked to the alleged liquor scam, a result of changes in the excise policy.

In an affidavit, it alleged Singh's involvement in acquiring, concealing, and using proceeds of crime, and that he worked closely with individuals like Dinesh Arora and Amit Arora.

The ED further claimed that Singh received illegal money or kickbacks from the alleged excise policy (2021-22) scam and participated in a conspiracy.

Senior advocate Mohit Mathur, representing Singh, argued that his client has been in custody for three months without a clear attribution of



a role in the predicate offence.

Singh's arrest, according to Mathur, relied on the statement of the ED's "star witness". Justice Sharma had earlier issued notice to the probe agency on Singh's bail plea.

Denying him bail, the judge had said that the evidence demonstrated the accused's involvement in money laundering and that there were reasonable grounds to believe in the guilt based on the connection to proceeds of crime from scheduled offences investigated by the CBI.

The court also said that observations on the interpretation of Section 45 and 50 of the PMLA, made during the dismissal of bail applications for various accused, remained unaltered, and that reliance on a Supreme Court order granting bail to another accused in the case didn't provide contrary observations or establish parity.

It had also dismissed the argument regarding the absence of recovery during proceedings, stating that it is not always necessary.

Addressing the lack of documentary evidence connecting the accused to alleged proceeds of crime, the court rejected

the notion, citing the nature of cash transactions.

Dismissing the claim of approver coercion, the judge found no evidence of influence and affirmed the relevance of evidence collected by the ED while noting the accused's alleged role in influencing the excise policy and attempted creation of a partnership involving a dummy associate to generate proceeds of crime.

Statements of approver Dinesh Arora, accused Amit Arora, and witness Ankit Gupta were cited in relation to this aspect, revealing attempts to incorporate the applicant's personal assistant into the entity.

Singh's counsel had earlier noted that Singh was neither an accused, and was never arrested, or charge sheeted in the predicate offence (the alleged corruption in the excise scam) being probed by the CBI, and that he was not even summoned by the CBI in the corruption case.

His name did not appear in any of the supplementary charge sheets filed by the ED before his arrest. The financial probe agency arrested Singh on October 4, 2023 after carrying out searches at his residence in the North Avenue area.

Jammu and Kashmir Police ask aadhaar, phone details for security census



FW DESK

The Jammu and Kashmir police have embarked on a door-to-door census in parts of the Valley, collecting information about residents, particularly those working abroad or having connections to militancy, reports said. The exercise, informally known as the "police census," has raised concerns due to its recurrence, with fears of it becoming an annual ritual.

Residents in targeted areas have reported police officers visiting their homes, distributing forms, and requesting details such as names, phone numbers, and Aadhaar card information. Despite past instances leading to allegations of political profiling, some residents have noted their willingness to cooperate, citing the police's assurance that the exercise is for security reasons.

The police maintain that such exercises aid in keeping a close watch on militants, making policing more efficient. Despite concerns, a police officer stated that people generally cooperate with the authorities during these initiatives.

In addition to the door-to-door census, security forces have initiated various surveillance measures, including scrutinizing government employees. Government workers now find themselves required to obtain clearance from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and vigilance authorities for foreign travel, including pilgrimage to Haj, a process that can take weeks or even months.



Budget: Fiscal prudence or growth sacrifice?

In her sixth consecutive Budget speech, India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman delivered what felt like a pre-election, self-praising summary of the economic strides made under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership since 2014. She highlighted overcoming 'enormous challenges' through 'structural reforms, pro-people programmes,' and creating employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, attributing a reinvigorated economy to the broader reach of development benefits, instilling hope and securing a larger mandate in the past elections. Rather than focusing on specific voter demographics with targeted announcements, Sitharaman opted to emphasize the government's dedication to 'an inclusive and sustainable policy approach.' This approach purportedly achieved a 'comprehensive GDP' of governance, development, and performance, underlining a confidence in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government's return to power and casually mentioning plans for a 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047, based on an anticipated 'resounding' electoral victory. The Budget plans continue on the path of fiscal consolidation, with a slight improvement in the fiscal deficit as a percentage of GDP and a significant cut in effective capital expenditure. For the fiscal year 2024-25, Sitharaman envisions a tighter fiscal deficit, supported by a projected increase in revenue receipts, despite a more modest rise in capital expenditure than in previous years. While boasting a tripling in capital spending outlays and their impact on growth and employment, the Budget quietly underplays the reduced pace of increase in capital spending next year. However, the Budget's focus on fiscal prudence amidst the slowest growth in private consumption spending since the pandemic raises concerns about potential risks to economic momentum. The overshadowing challenge remains the growing specter of rising inequality, a critical issue that demands urgent attention if the government wishes to truly fulfill its promises of inclusive and sustainable development.

LETTERBOX

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I NEVER DREAMED ABOUT SUCCESS. I WORKED FOR IT.
- ESTEE LAUDER

THE FINANCIAL WORLD

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R. RAMAKUMAR EXPLORES WHY BUDGET LACKS PLAN FOR AGRICULTURAL GROWTH REVIVAL THROUGH POLICY, FISCAL SHIFTS

Agriculture sector remains in distress

The report released by the Finance Ministry and the vote-on-account presented by the Finance Minister are concerned more about portraying a glowing image of the government than about the financing plans for 2024-25. For the same reason, one is constrained to confine the discussion on the Budget to one question: was the distress in agriculture over the past decade alleviated by policy, or has it been exacerbated?

All official data appear to indicate the latter. First, there was a strong downward pull on agricultural prices leading to a squeeze on farmers' incomes. The sectoral deflator in agriculture and allied sectors — estimated as the difference in the growth rates of gross value added in current and constant prices — declined from 9.4 in 2013-14 to 5.0 in 2019-20 and 3.7 in 2023-24.

Second, the stagnation or fall of agricultural prices in the market was not ameliorated by any rise in minimum support prices (MSP). For major foodgrain crops, the MSPs rose by an average of 8-9% per annum between 2003-04 and 2012-13, but only by about 5% between 2013-14 and 2023-24. The refusal to adequately raise MSPs affected the government's ability to intervene effectively in the market to control prices — on the farmers' side as well as on the retail side.

Third, a promise was made that real incomes of farmers would be doubled between 2015 and 2022. But the issue appears to have disappeared from policy and media discourse in recent years. In fact, real incomes of agricultural households from cultivation fell by about 1.4% between 2012-13 and 2018-19. The fall of incomes from cultivation was not only owing to the stagnation or fall of agricultural prices, but also due to a sharp rise in the costs of inputs in agriculture, particularly fertilizers.



Fourth, rural unemployment rose between 2011-12 and 2018-19. For rural men, the rise was from 1.7% to 5.6%. For rural women, the rise was from 1.7% to 3.5%. Rural unemployment rates fell after 2018-19 but their levels remained higher than in 2011-12 in 2022-23: at 2.8% for men and 1.8% for women. More importantly, the fall of rural unemployment was accompanied by a rise in the share of self-employed women among all women workers. And most of this rise in the rural areas was in agriculture. In short, there was a crowding of the agricultural sector by unemployed workers from the non-agricultural sectors at a time when agricultural prices were not rising and agricultural incomes were falling.

Fifth, real wages in rural India have never risen after 2016-17 and have even fallen after 2020-21 — particularly in the context of the crowding of the agricultural labour market. These trends have been true for agricultural wages and non-agricultural wages in the rural areas. All rises in nominal wages were wiped out by inflation.

Finally, public investment in agriculture, in general as well as in specific fields like agricultural research and extension, were stubbornly stagnant, and occasionally even fell, over the past decade. Consequently, capital investment in agricultural and allied sectors did not rise. Most of the long-term bank credit supplied to agriculture was also diverted away as short-term loans to corporates and agri-business firms.

It is thus clear that incomes and profitability in rural India were under severe stress across the two terms of the Union government.

Painting a rosy picture

Yet, the Finance Ministry's report and the Budget speech attempt to paint a totally different picture. They cherry-pick and cite absolute numbers on the increases in agricultural production. But they ignore the fact that the index numbers of production of all principal crops grew by 3.1% annually between 2003-04 and 2010-11, but only by 2.7% annually between 2011-12 and 2022-23. If we consider the index

numbers of yield, the fall was sharper: from 3.3% per year to 1.6% per year. In short, the fortuitous spurt of agricultural growth during the pandemic years was inadequate to reverse the long-term decline of agricultural growth beginning from the early-2010s.

The Budget Estimates for 2024-25 also do not inspire confidence. There is no plan in the Budget to substantively reverse the decline of growth in agriculture — either through welfare measures or through investment measures.

In 2024-25, the most important heads and flagship schemes in agriculture and allied sectors are to face a spending cut. Fertilizer subsidies are to fall from Rs 1.9 lakh crore in 2023-24 to Rs 1.6 lakh crore in 2024-25. Food subsidies are to fall from Rs 2.1 lakh crore in 2023-24 to Rs 2 lakh crore in 2024-25. The allocation for the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana is to decline from Rs 17,000 crore in 2023-24 to Rs 12,000 crore in 2024-25. If Rs 90,000 crore was the spending under MGNREGS in 2022-23, the allocation for 2024-25 is only Rs 86,000 crore. The transfers under the PM-Kisan scheme remain the same as during its inception in 2019, implying a fall in the real value of cash transfers.

There was much mention in the Budget speech on blue revolution in the fisheries sector, but the budgeted allocation for the sector has been increased by only Rs 134 crore. The budgeted allocation for the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying has increased only by Rs 193 crore between 2023-24 and 2024-25.

The revival of agricultural growth from its long-term slump requires imaginative policy shifts and decisive fiscal measures. But the interim Budget provides no indications of such a plan or even intent.

R. Ramakumar teaches at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Views are personal.



VIVEK KATJU EXPLORES WHY THE GOVERNOR OF TAMIL NADU SHOULD REFRAIN FROM PUBLIC OPINION AIRING

What is needed from a Governor is reticence

The Tamil Nadu Governor, R.N. Ravi, has recently been in the news for the wrong reason. Instead of confining himself to his role which requires that Governors steer clear of controversies, especially those unconnected with their constitutional duties, Ravi has waded into the minefield of interpretation of historical events which led to India's Independence. Even a Governor with a background of historical studies should avoid this. But Ravi was a student of physics who joined the Indian Police Service and spent long years in the Intelligence Bureau (IB). He has obviously felt that he had the expertise to publicly express his opinions on an important period of Indian history.

There has been no indication from Ravi that he has made a detailed study of India's national movement which, under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, aimed at the comprehensive transformation of a feudal, largely obscurantist and hierarchical society along with the achievement of freedom from British colonialism. All the great leaders of the national movement played their part in this noble enterprise. In any event, it is intrinsically wrong for any constitutional authority to play up the role of some and denigrate that of others.

The Governor's view

Ravi has been reported as saying that the Quit India movement made little impact on the British decision to leave India. Instead, it was insecurity felt by the British at Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose forming



the Azad Hind Government and its army (INA) and in 1946 by the Naval Mutiny and the Air Force Rebellion. Apparently, Ravi formed this view from his reading of IB files of the relevant period. He has also cited a conversation between British Prime Minister Clement Attlee and an acting Governor of Bengal in which Attlee said that the impact of 'non-cooperation' was minimal but that the British left because they felt 'insecure' after the 'Naval Revolt and the Air Force Rebellion'.

A clarification

Under criticism for his assertions and views, Ravi clarified that he had the 'highest respect' for Mahatma Gandhi. At the same time, he reiterated his views on the departure of the British from India. There is no doubt that the loyalty of Indian

soldiers in the British Indian armed forces was a principal pillar of their rule in India. If not for the Indian soldiers who served in the armies of the East India Company, the British could not have conquered India. Most historians of the national movement also acknowledge that the INA and the naval mutiny shook British confidence in the loyalty of the Indian members of their army in India. And, obviously, after the Second World War, circumstances created by the national movement, Britain's economic weakening and the international situation simply did not permit them to even think of undertaking armed action to retain their rule in India.

Hence, Ravi was right in praising Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's great contribution in achieving Independence. This is almost universally acknowledged. Despite the great ideological differences in leaders of the freedom movement none of them ever denigrated Netaji or the INA. Had that been so, would it have been possible for so many of the lawyers among them to come together to defend the three officers — Prem Kumar Sehgal, Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon and Shah Nawaz Khan — at their court martial at the Red Fort in 1945-46? The great lawyer, Bhulabhai Desai, led the defence which included Tej Bahadur Sapru, Jawaharlal Nehru and Kailas Nath Katju. This writer would be forgiven for

making a personal reference. As Katju's grandson and Sapru's great-grandson, he knows full well the enormous admiration that Netaji evoked in them.

It would not be out of place to quote from Katju's unpublished biography of the impact of the INA trial. He writes that because of them "The excitement in the country was intense and indescribable". He goes on to note, "I am firmly of the opinion that just as the murders in Jallianwala Bagh in 1919 laid the foundation stone of our national struggle, similarly the Indian National Army trials were the definite cause of the withdrawal of the British rule in India in August 1947. The British discovered for themselves that it was impossible for them to continue..."

The last word

It is obvious that Ravi feels that Netaji was not given due recognition for his contribution to the country's Independence by the Congress party because of Jawaharlal Nehru and his successors, and that this lapse has now been corrected. It is Ravi's right to feel so. What is not open to him while holding the office of Governor is to make his views public. Governors are also not expected to make comparisons, however indirectly, of the impact of the actions of different leaders of the national movement. What is needed from Governors is reticence. As a former civil servant, Ravi should certainly know this.

Vivek Katju is a retired Indian Foreign Service officer. Views are personal.



BOOKS: REVIEW

Crafting hope from despair: The art of short storytelling revived

In "This Is Salvaged," Vauhini Vara takes a significant leap from the speculative landscapes of "The Immortal King Rao" to the complex terrains of human emotion and reality. This collection of short stories marks her second major publication, following her debut that clinched a spot as a finalist for the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Unlike her first novel, which sprawled across an imagined world, "This Is Salvaged" plants its roots firmly within the realm of the tangible, yet it explores the depths of the human condition with equal, if not more profound, complexity and sensitivity.

Vara introduces us to a spectrum of characters, each ensnared in their own moment of crisis, carrying burdens of loss, unfulfilled dreams, and the universal quest for connection. These individuals, with their flaws and vulnerabilities

laid bare, navigate the rough seas of their lives, often against the current. Vara's storytelling is imbued with a tender, compassionate gaze that invites the reader to engage with the characters without judgment, urging a shared perspective of empathy and understanding.

The narrative threads woven through the collection suggest that life's transience underscores the importance of meaningful relationships. Without these, individuals risk being adrift in a sea of isolation, underscored by a persistent air of melancholy and an undercurrent of quiet humor that lends a bitter-sweet flavor to the tales. Themes of loneliness, grief, alcoholism, and the struggle against the tide of adversity run deep, painting a poignant picture of human resilience and the pursuit of redemption.

Notably, "This Is Salvaged" is marked by its consistent qual-

ity, a testament to Vara's skilled craftsmanship. The titular story stands out, showcasing a masterful exploration of its protagonist in a format that demands brevity yet delivers depth. The narratives are predominantly voiced by women, each striving to forge meaningful connections amidst the complexities of their lives. These are not idealized heroines but real, imperfect individuals whose courage and determination illuminate their paths, however tumultuous.

Vara's prose is both affecting and evocative, capable of capturing the essence of the human spirit in a single line. Her voice, hailed as original and assured in her debut, resonates with even greater clarity and inventiveness in this collection. It's a voice that cares deeply, not just for the characters it brings to life, but for the broader human experience it seeks to explore.



This Is Salvaged
By Vauhini Vara
Fourth Estate,
208 pages; ₹399

"This Is Salvaged" is a compelling testament to Vara's evolving narrative prowess, her ability to traverse the landscapes of speculative fiction and the intimate terrains of short stories with equal adeptness. Her exploration of the complexities of life and relationships, marked by a blend of melancholy, humor, and resilience, showcases a remarkable depth of insight and empathy.

As readers turn the pages of "This Is Salvaged," they are invited into a world where the pursuit of connection and the struggle against life's relentless currents are portrayed with poignant clarity. Vara's collection is not just a series of stories; it's a mosaic of human experiences, each piece a reflection

on the fragility and the inherent strength within us all. In laying bare the trials and triumphs of her characters, Vara not only confirms her place as a significant voice in contemporary literature but also enriches the reader's understanding of the nuanced spectrum of human emotion.

"This Is Salvaged" is an exquisite collection that solidifies Vauhini Vara's reputation as a masterful storyteller. With its rich tapestry of characters and their life-affirming journeys, the book is a profound exploration of the human condition. Readers will undoubtedly be eagerly awaiting Vara's next literary endeavor, anticipating the further evolution of her distinctive and deeply human voice.

Beyond the thematic richness and the depth of character development, what sets "This Is Salvaged" apart is Vara's meticulous attention to language. Each story is crafted with a linguistic precision that elevates the narrative, transforming ordinary moments into profound insights.

