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## Not encroached on the land allotted to Delhi High Court, AAP tells SC

**NEWDELHI:** The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has filed an application before the Supreme Court saying that it has not encroached on the land allotted to the Delhi High Court and the premises were officially allotted to it by the Delhi government in May 2015.

The application said that such allotment of office space for official party work is an essential element of public funding of elections in India and is designed to level the electoral playing field.

It added: "The applicant (Aam Aadmi Party) has risen to become a national political party. This change in the applicant's character and status has further enhanced its need for, as well as its entitlement to, office spaces in the New Delhi Municipal Area, at par with the 5 other national parties each of which are enjoying, at least, similar allotments in similar locations."

Referring to the guidelines issued by the Union government's Land & Development Office, the ruling party in the national capital said that it is entitled to two office spaces -- one for its National Unit and another for its Delhi State Unit.

However, as of now, it said that it has been allotted office space only for its Delhi State Unit.

"Far from being an instance of 'encroachment', the Subject Premises were officially allotted to the Applicant (Aam Aadmi Party) by the government of NCT of Delhi on 31.12.2015 for its State Unit Office. This was strictly in accordance with the applicant's entitlement as (at that time) a State Party under the Office Memorandum dated 14.10.2015," said the intervention application filed on Friday.

The application asserted that the Aam Aadmi Party has been occupying the premises since 2015 way before it was earmarked for extending the Rouse Avenue Court Complex.

The party led by Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said that it has no cavils about relocating its State Unit Office to an alternative space as it is cognate of the necessity of judicial infrastructure for the welfare of citizens of the national capital.

Further, the Aam Aadmi Party claimed that no space has been allotted for its National Unit despite repeated letters to the Union government.

It said: "While the applicant remains ready and willing to vacate the Subject Premises, it is submitted that this honourable court direct that such vacation be required only after at least one of the two office spaces that the applicant is entitled to are allotted to it in the New Delhi Municipal area of a nature appropriate to the applicant's status as a national party."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is slated to visit Jammu and Kashmir on February 20, where he plans to distribute over a lakh appointment letters at a Rozgaar Mela, as per reports. Alongside, the Prime Minister will inaugurate several significant projects, including the establishment of an AIIMS in Vijainagar.

This visit to the Union Territory is perceived as a strategic move to engage and win the support of the region's youth in anticipation of the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. Union Ministers Dr Jitendra Singh and Ashwini Kumar Choubey are expected to participate in the job distribution Mela at BSF Headquarters Paloura in Jammu.

Additional information suggests that Union Minister of State for AYUSH, Women and Child Development, Mahendra Munjpara, will be present at the Rozgaar Mela in Srinagar. Meanwhile, Union Minister of State for Agriculture and Farm Welfare, Kailash Choudhary, will oversee the distribution of appointment letters to the youth at the Rozgaar Mela in Leh.

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## We will give legal guarantees on MSP if Congress forms Govt : Rahul



Rahul Gandhi said. He said that land snatching from farmers is currently underway in the country and the government has not given adequate compensation to them. "During our government, we brought Land Acquisition Act and as per the guidelines of this act, the farmers were getting four times higher price from the market value for their lands," he said. He said that there was also a provision in the act that land could not be acquired without the permission of farmers. He said that if the land acquired by the company was not used for five years, the state government returned the land to the farmers but BJP nullified the act," Rahul Gandhi said. "I want to promise to the farmers that if our government comes back to power, we will reinforce the Land Acquisition Act," he said.

## India has a balanced approach to Intellectual Property Rights in Trade Deals: GTRI



**NEW DELHI:** In proposed trade agreements, India's stance on intellectual property rights (IPRs) and pharmaceutical issues strikes a balance between fostering innovation and addressing public health needs, according to a report by the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI).

This approach ensures the availability of affordable medicines and supports the growth of the generic medicine industry. The GTRI paper highlights India's commitment to balancing innovation with public health needs, adopting a flexible interpretation of Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) to align with its developmental goals, and preventing the establishment of unfair monopolies, especially in the pharmaceutical sector.

India's position underscores a broader endeavor to safeguard traditional knowledge and guarantee access to cost-effective medications, addressing substantial global healthcare and IPR challenges. The significance of this issue is emphasized by the consistent pressure exerted by developed nations on developing countries like India.

They aim to make additional commitments regarding IPR matters in FTAs beyond those agreed upon in the TRIPS Agreement of the World Trade Organization (WTO). This phenomenon is commonly referred to as "TRIPS-plus" in trade terminology.

Ajay Srivastava, Founder, GTRI, affirmed India's stance, stating that it reflects the country's commitment to balancing interests and fostering economic ties through trade agreements. India has consistently opposed TRIPS-plus provisions, safeguarding the interests of its domestic generic drug industry in FTAs.

## Farmers Protest: 3rd round of Centre-farmers talks ends on 'positive' note; next meeting on Feb 18

**CHANDIGARH:** The third round of talks between the Central government and farmer leaders ended on early Friday with Union Minister Arjun Munda saying a "very positive" discussion happened.

It has been decided that the next meeting will take place on Sunday, February 18, at 6 p.m. "We all will find a solution peacefully," Munda told the media here after the talks that lasted for nearly five hours.

The third round of talks between farmer leaders and Union ministers -- Munda, Piyush Goyal and Nityanand Rai -- started after a delay of three hours on Thursday evening.

The farmer leaders who took part in the meeting included Jagjit Singh Dallewal, Sarwan Singh Pandher and Jarnail Singh.

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, who was also present in the meeting, said that the talks were held in a "cordial atmosphere" and he is hopeful of finding a solution to end the deadlock.

The previous two rounds of dialogue on February 8 and 12 -- remained inconclusive.

of farmers' unions has evolved since 2020, with the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha leading the charge for 'Delhi Chalo 2.0'. Factionalism within unions like the Bhartiya Kisan Union and Samyukt Kisan Morcha, which played prominent roles in 2020, is evident.

Change in Leadership: Prominent figures from the 2020 protests, including Janginder Singh Ugrahan, Rakesh Tikait, and Gurnam Singh Charuni, are notably absent from the current demonstrations. Instead, leaders like Jagjit Singh Dallewal and Sarwan Singh Pandher have taken the helm.

Heightened Security Measures: Unlike in 2020, where farmers successfully reached the national capital, pre-emptive measures, including barbed wire, cement barricades, and roadblock installations, have been implemented to thwart entry into Delhi. Section 144 has been imposed, and Haryana-Punjab borders sealed.

Government Response: The government initiated negotiations ahead of the Delhi Chalo march this time, with meetings between farmer leaders and Union ministers held on February 8 and 12. While the government agreed to withdraw cases against farmers from the 2020-21 agitation, MSP remains unguaranteed.

**Leadership :** The landscape of farmers' unions has evolved since 2020, with the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha leading the charge for 'Delhi Chalo 2.0'. Factionalism within unions like the Bhartiya Kisan Union and Samyukt Kisan Morcha, which played prominent roles in 2020, is evident.



Positive discussions held on 13-14 demands... I requested the Centre to direct the Haryana government to maintain peace in (interstate) border areas," Mann said.

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## How Dilli Chalo is different from 2020 farmers' protest?

**CHHAVI BHATIA**  
New Delhi

Farmers from Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh are gearing up for a major protest, set to march to Delhi on Tuesday following inconclusive talks with Union ministers. Despite Minister Arjun Munda stating that consensus was reached on most issues and proposing a committee to address the rest, farmer leaders remain unsatisfied, citing a lack of clarity on legal guarantees for minimum support prices (MSP).

Scheduled to commence at 10 am, the 'Delhi Chalo' march faces obstacles, with the Haryana government erecting significant barriers along the state borders to prevent entry from Punjab. In anticipation of a repeat of the 2020-21 protests, Delhi's borders have also been fortified.

Here are five key differences between the ongoing farmers' protest, dubbed "2.0," and the 2020 demonstrations:

**Reason for Protest:** Unlike the 2020 protests against the now-repealed farm laws, the current agitation, initiated in 2023, demands a legal guarantee for MSP across all crops, implementation of the Swaminathan Commission's formula, full debt waiver, pension for farmers and laborers, and withdrawal of cases stemming from the previous protests.

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## Farooq Abdullah says his party won't go for any pre-poll alliance in J&K

**FW DESK**  
In a major jolt to INDIA bloc, National Conference (NC) president and incumbent Member of Parliament from Srinagar constituency, Dr Farooq Abdullah on Thursday put all speculations to rest, stating that the party will not enter into any pre-poll alliance, a local news agency KNO reported.

Talking to reporters at party headquarters in Srinagar, Dr Abdullah said that he wants to make it clear that NC is not going to enter into any alliance before the polls and will contest independently.

On being asked about assembly polls in J&K, he said that they are expecting that the

elections will simultaneously be held with the Lok Sabha polls. "I think that Assembly elections in the state will be held with the Parliamentary elections. As far as seat sharing is concerned, NC will contest alone and there's no doubt about it," he said.

## SGPC President condemns anti-Maryada acts by police in Haryana Gurdwaras



**JAGMOHAN SINGH**  
Amritsar

The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) President Harjinder Singh Dhama has condemned the alleged violation of Maryada (conduct) by the government nominated Haryana Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (HSGMC), at the historical Gurdwaras of Ambala, Sri Manji Sahib and Sri Panjokhara Sahib.

He said that it has been brought to his notice by the Sikh Sangat of Haryana that the police, who were called to stop the farmers struggling for their demands on the Shambhu border, have been given stay in the Sarais (inns) of these Gurdwaras. He said complaints have been received from the Sangat that the police personnel have allegedly consumed alcohol, tobacco etc. inside the Sarais, which have also been recovered from the spot.

Dhama said that the apprehension of the SGPC and



# Blow to INDIA bloc as AAP decides to go solo in Delhi too

**CHANDIGARH:** A day after announcing that the AAP will contest all 13 seats in Punjab, party convener and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday said that it will also fight and win all seven Lok Sabha seats in the national capital in the upcoming elections.

Kejriwal's announcement on Saturday to fight solo in Punjab came at a time when Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge was in the state for a meeting to discuss the upcoming poll strategy and concerns about indiscipline within the party.

"The BJP is scared that if AAP works so hard, it'll be inevitable for us to win...We will win all seven Lok Sabha



seats in Delhi...I am sure the people of Punjab will give us a historic mandate by giving us all 13 seats in Punjab," he said, adding "the BJP is scared of only one party, the AAP". Kejriwal was addressing a public rally in Tarn

Taran along with his Punjab counterpart Bhagwant Mann. Meanwhile, Kejriwal and Mann will visit Ram Mandir on Monday. During their visit, families of both the Chief Ministers will also accompany them.

# Delhi's Tikri border sealed in view of farmers' protest

**NEW DELHI:** After the farmers heading to Delhi clashed with police at Haryana-Punjab Shambhu border, the Delhi Police sealed the Tikri border by blocking the movement on both carriageways with five feet long cement blocks with multilayer barricades.

The Delhi Police also closed all the entry and exit points of the nearby streets connecting the highway. Heavy police force including RAF, SSB, CRPF with anti-riot gears have been deployed at Tikri border. The force also includes three women companies of para-military force.

On Tuesday morning, massive traffic jams were witnessed at the entry and exit points of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh as police and paramilitary personnel



equipped with anti-riot gear placed multiple layers of barricades, concrete blocks, iron nails and walls of containers in view of the 'Delhi Chalo' march call of farmers. To stop the farmers from entering the national capi-

Delhi Police on Monday had invoked section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) citywide and fortified the borders as a precautionary measure. Delhi Police Commissioner Sanjay Arora issued these directives for the next 30 days to ensure law and order amidst planned farmer protests against the central government.

A total of 114 companies, including 64 from paramilitary forces and 50 from the Haryana Police, have been deployed across various districts. Equipped with anti-riot gear, these units are stationed in the border areas and sensitive districts.

Additionally, surveillance technologies such as drones and CCTV cameras are being utilised to monitor any disruptive activities

# Sanjay Singh files petition in SC against Delhi HC's decision denying him bail



**NEW DELHI:** AAP Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh has filed a petition in the Supreme Court (SC) against the decision of the Delhi High Court rejecting his bail plea in money laundering case linked to the alleged excise policy scam.

The special leave petition challenges the February 7 order of the Delhi High Court dismissing Singh's bail application.

Last week, a bench of Justice Swarna Kanta Sharma of the Delhi High Court said that no ground is made out for releasing the AAP leader on bail. However, it directed to expedite the trial once it starts to protect Singh's rights as an accused.

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.

The top court is already seized of another petition filed by Singh challenging his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and subsequent remand.

# Uttar Pradesh: Women, above 60, to get free travel in UPSRTC buses



**LUCKNOW:** Women above 60 years will get to travel for free in UP State Roadways Transport Corporation (UPSRTC) buses soon. To ensure transparency, UPSRTC will issue cards to the eligible women. The card will have the personal details of women passengers. "We are working on the project. The card will help the corporation maintain a record of the number of women using the facility and other details," said general manager (IT), UPSRTC, Yajuvendra Kumar. The scheme will come into effect once the govt order (GO) on it is issued. UPSRTC had done a survey between March 2022 and March 2023 and found that over 3.7 lakh women passengers travelled in its buses daily. This was more than 30 per cent of the total passengers boarding UPSRTC buses daily.

# Mayawati asks Centre to consider demands of farmers



**NEW DELHI:** Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) President Mayawati, on Wednesday, said the Centre should initiate talks with protesting farmers instead of taking action against them.

Mayawati said the government should take seriously the demands of the hardworking farmers who have made India self-reliant in food production. "The Centre should resolve their issue in a timely manner so that the farmers are not forced to protest again and again in support of their demands," the former Uttar Pradesh chief minister said in a post on X.

"Instead of taking strict action against the agitating farmers under the current campaign of 'Dilli Chalo', it would be better if the Centre tries to end their movement by having proper talks with them," she added.

Her remarks come as the protesting farmers from Punjab made an attempt to march to Delhi to press for their demands.

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (non-political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha have announced that more than 200 farmer unions would march to Delhi to press the Centre to accept several demands, including enactment of a law to guarantee a minimum support price (MSP) for crops.

# No farmer organization will be allowed to take the law & order into their own hands: Vij



**SATISH HANDA**  
Ambala

Haryana Home and Health Minister Anil Vij, commented on the farmers' protest in Delhi, stating that they are determined to ensure the safety of Haryana. If the farmer organization takes the law into their own hands, permission will not be granted at all. Vij replying to the questions asked by the media persons. He said that Union Ministers are talking to farmers in Punjab.

Responding to statements made by INLD MLA Abhay Chautala about the MSP guarantee, Home Minister Anil Vij said that the government wants to work for the rights of farmers. The Prime Ministers Kisan Samman Nidhi amount of three installments (More than two lakh Crore rupees) has been given to farmers, and now central ministers are talking to farmers in Punjab. Vij emphasized that the government wants to engage in dialogue with them (farmer organizations) because a resolution can only be reached through discussions. Regarding Rahul Gandhi's statements about the Prime Minister, Anil Vij commented, "It seems Rahul Gandhi is confused due to frustration. Therefore, he is unable to understand what he should do.

# Excise policy case: Delhi court grants 3-day interim bail to Sisodia to attend kin's wedding

**NEW DELHI:** A Delhi court on Monday granted three-day interim bail to former Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, arrested in the excise policy case, to attend his niece's wedding.

Special judge M.K. Nagpal of the Rouse Avenue Court, who is hearing the case, allowed Sisodia's application seeking the relief and granted him interim bail from February 13 to 15. On February 5, the court had extended Sisodia's judicial custody till February 22, but permitted him to visit his ailing wife once a week during the period.

The judge had directed the



Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to submit a detailed status report on the case by the next date of hearing, expressing concerns over incomplete disclosure about the probe's status. The central agency had also filed a report stating that the investigation is ongoing and at a crucial stage, with

completion regarding the 16 charge sheeted accused persons. However, the defence counsel had objected, citing incomplete status reports and the need for time to scrutinise translated documents received recently. The court, recognising the complexity of the case, had directed the CBI to install necessary software in the laptops of defence counsel for efficient access to the voluminous case files.

The alleged excise policy scam is being probed by both the enforcement agencies – the Enforcement Directorate and CBI.

Judge Nagpal had also

adjourned Sisodia's bail application in cases by both the agencies. Sisodia had asked for custody parole for twice-weekly visits to his ailing wife. However, the court granted a weekly visit and adjourned the bail application.

Recently, the same court had asked for a fresh status report from the CBI in the case. The judge had also closed the opportunity for accused persons to inspect documents at the CBI office, stating sufficient time had been given. The court had directed that the matter should now be listed for arguments to frame charges.

# Farmers assembled at Punjab-Haryana borders, over 13000 industries & nearly 7 lakh workers affected due to farmers protest in Haryana



**SATISH HANDA**

The third round of talks between farmers and the government remained inconclusive and the protesting farmers along with hundreds of tractor trolleys have gathered at the borders of Punjab and Haryana over their various demands. A five-hour meeting, which started around 8:45 pm on Thursday, between three Union ministers and the farmer leaders too remained inconclusive. The two sides will now meet on February 18 for the fourth round of talks. Union Agriculture and Farmer Welfare Minister Arjun Munda, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai represented the

Centre at Thursday's meeting over the farmer unions' various demands, including a law guaranteeing a minimum support price (MSP) for crops.

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha's 'Delhi Chalo' call to press the BJP-led central government to accept their demands is being prolonged and in past four days more than 13000 Industries in Haryana state has already suffered heavy loss, adversely affecting the employment of more than seven lakh workers in the state, as told by Subhash Jagga President Bahadurgarh Chamber of Commerce & Industry. Information reveals that more than 200 trucks plying on the roads have come to halt due to farmers protest and sealed borders and nearly 5000

drivers and cleaners of these vehicles are sitting idle as a result goods of value worth over Rs 1000 crores and passengers to go to Delhi are forced to spend three times fare while travelling, since large number trains in Ambala rail division have either been cancelled or their routes have been diverted. According to railway department information five trains in the division have been cancelled, whereas the route of another five trains have been diverted.

Punjab CM Mann said he raised with the Centre the issue of suspension of internet services in certain areas in Sangrur, Patiala and Fatehgarh Sahib and seven districts in Haryana, besides Haryana security personnel using a drone to drop tear gas shells and rubber shots on protesters inside Punjab's territory. Information reveals that as many as 25 police men which included 18 persons from police force and seven persons from para-military forces sustained injuries, which included two officers of DSP rank. Sources reveal, the farmers were having modified tractor trolleys having sufficient quantities of food rain having arrangement to protest for a long time and 'gherao' Lok Sabha.

# Because of lapses by the government industry owners facing heavy losses due to farmers protest: Ashok Buwaniwala

**SATISH HANDA**  
Gurugram

The present crisis being faced by the people, especially those in trade and industry, due to ongoing farmers protest in which the life of common people in Haryana state has been completely disturbed, talking to media persons Ashok Buwaniwala, National President Jan Udyog Vyapa Sangathan said that in case the government had accepted farmers demands timely such situation would have been avoided. He said that as a result of present farmers protest the industry in the state facing heavy losses and people in Haryana state suffering a lot, merely due to carelessness of the government.

Buwaniwala said that all roads to capital Delhi have been closed down by the police and as many as 50 para-military trams are struggling a lot in Haryana state to maintain peace and loss to the public due to unwanted incidents.

# Trade & industry squeezing due to erratic government policies in Haryana: Bajrang Das Garg

**SATISH HANDA**

Addressing a large gathering of trade and industry in the state during a business seminar held at Tohana in Fatehabad district recently, president of Haryana Vyapar Mandal Bajrang Das Garg, a former CONFED Chairman in the state, strongly condemned Haryana state government policies responsible for constant downfall of trade and industry in the state since past few years, he said as a result employment opportunities in the state are fast reducing. He assured that injustice to any person in trade and industry in the state will not be allowed at any cost.

# Farmers Protest: Security intensified on Delhi borders



**NEW DELHI:** For the second consecutive day, the police along with paramilitary forces continued to intensify its security measures on Delhi borders, including Tikri, Singhu and Ghazipur with cement blocks and pickets with nails installed, a day ahead of 'Delhi Chalo March' call given by farmers.

The two districts of Delhi Police, Shahdara and Northeast, have also imposed section 144 (prohibitory orders) CrPC ahead of the protest.

"Whereas, information has been received that some farmer organisations have given a call to their supporters to gather/march to Delhi on 13.02.2024 in c/w their demands of law on MSP etc. They are likely to sit at the border of Delhi till their demands are met," read the orders.

"Keeping in view, the kind of behaviour and adamant approach farmers showed in the past, there is a possibility of mobilization/activities of farmers/supporters from their respec-

tive districts to Delhi along with Tractor/Trolleys/Arms etc. Farmers will also come from Haryana, Punjab, UP, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, MP etc.

"And Whereas, in order to avoid any untoward incident and to maintain Law & Order, a precautionary Order of Section 144 Criminal Procedure Code, 1973, is required to be issued to save the life and property in the area," the order added.

Meanwhile, large containers to block the road if needed have been kept on borders beside multiple security barricades, which have already been installed there to stop the farmers from entering the city.

As per officials, over 5,000 cops, including paramilitary forces, were on their toes to maintain law and order situation on the Delhi borders.

"We have started checking vehicles on the border areas and we are also keeping eye on the other mode of transport which protesters can take," said a senior police official.

# Khattar challenges no-confidence move by Hooda against Khattar government in Haryana

**SATISH HANDA**

Leader of opposition in Haryana Vidhan Sabha Bhupinder Hooda for chief minister recently announced that a no-confidence motion will be brought against the Manohar Lal Khattar-led state government in the upcoming Budget session over large number of scams, increasing crimes and unemployment to youths and its failure in almost every sphere. The veteran Congress leader said the party would also raise the issues including in cooperatives and illegal mining sector seeking answers from the ruling government on common man issues like increasing unemployment, irregularities in the skill employment sending the innocent youth to war-zone Israel and giving priority to outsiders in Haryana's recruitment.

While talking to media persons Hooda said that apart from this, the Congress would also raise issues like increasing drug abuse in the state, stoppage of scholarship for scheduled castes and backward class children, fall in level of education, condition of farmers, damage caused by inclement weather and compensation for damage caused by floods. He further added the public in the state has no expectations from the upcoming state Budget as the government has not done any work except in-



creasing the debt of the state. On the increasing incidents of extortion and firing, Hooda said the BJP-JJP alliance has pushed the law and order system in a state of disarray. The Budget session of the Haryana Assembly will start on February 20, which will certainly be the last Budget to be presented by the ruling incumbent BJP-JJP alliance government before the 2024 Assembly polls.

However, Haryana CM Manohar Lal Khattar accuses Bhupinder Singh Hooda of making 'wrong statement' on state-debt Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar accused Leader of Opposition Bhupinder Singh Hooda of making a wrong statement on the state's outstanding debt. Opposition leader said that Haryana has a debt of more than Rs 415,000 crore while the amount of debt on Haryana in 2021-22 has been shown at Rs 239,000 crore in the Accountant General report. Alleging that Hooda's statement untrue, Khattar said a debt of

Rs 227,697 crore was recorded in the Haryana government's account books, the state does not have a debt of Rs 415,000 crore in any respect, Khattar said the state's debt position should always be disclosed correctly and the facts placed before the House be correct. Khattar, holding the Finance department portfolio, apprised the House that Haryana's economic condition was better than other states, adding that during the Covid period, the Centre had fixed the loan limit at 4% of the Gross State Domestic Product while the Haryana government managed to maintain up to 2.99%. He said that according to the Centre's norms, Haryana could have taken a loan of Rs 40,661 crore during the Covid period, but took Rs 30,000 crore, he informed the House.

Khattar said, the policy's objective by present government is to ensure rapid development with the voluntary participation of landowners, for this the landowners who choose not to challenge the land acquisition and accept the approved amount will be adequately compensated. He said a new system had been formulated to increase the powers of new panchayats, besides large number of proposals are being introduced for the welfare of people in the state. Khattar said, we are prepared to face opposition in the house.



# BJP will win 370 seats in Lok Sabha polls, says PM Modi

**NEW DELHI:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi on February 11 said the BJP -- without its alliance partners -- will win 370 seats in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

"The NDA will return to power for the third consecutive term with 400 seats," Modi said while addressing a rally in Madhya Pradesh's Jhabua.

He said that even the opposition leader say that BJP will win 400 seats in the upcoming Lok Sabha election.

"I have not come to Jhabua to campaign. The kind of support BJP has received in Madhya Pradesh shows that the people have trust in BJP's double-engine government," he said.

He also took jibe at Congress saying the grand-old party and its allies have already accepted their defeat and they have started using their last tactic -- 'loot and divide'.

"Knowing the results, the



Congress and its allies are now using their last weapon to divide the people in the name of religion, caste and creed. But, the people of this country will not let them succeed," Modi said.

He said that after losing the state assembly election recently, the Congress has witnessed a major crisis and many of them are willing to run away from the party.

He said that people of Madhya Pradesh have given a befitting reply to the Congress during the assembly election however their (Congress) sins will be cleansed after the Lok Sabha elections.

"Congress has always considered the tribals as their vote bank. We do not consider them a vote bank. They are the pride of our country. Our main motto is to uplift the

community by providing them their rights. They have been deprived of their rights for several decades," Modi said.

He said that by making changes in the Forest Property Law, the BJP government has returned the rights related to forest land to the tribal society.

During his first visit to Madhya Pradesh ahead of the Lok Sabha election -- Modi who is seeking a third term -- also announced several projects and also laid the foundation stones of some of the projects.

"Congress comes to you (tribals) to seek your support during the elections only. The BJP has set an example by appointing a tribal, Droupadi Murmu, as the President. Congress -- which claims to be sympathisers of the tribals -- had put in all efforts not to let it happen," Modi said in Jhabua -- a tribal dominated area of the state.

# Farmers back on road again seek their key demands

**FW CORRESPONDENT**  
New Delhi

Tens of thousands of farmers from Punjab and Haryana are once again making their way to the national capital to demand guaranteed crop prices, renewing a movement from two years ago that succeeded in getting the government to repeal contentious new agricultural laws.

Moreover, the police used tear gas, detained a number of farmers and heavily barricaded border points to block the protesters from entering New Delhi. In an effort to prevent a recurrence of the 2020-2021 protests, which were labeled as one of the largest agitations globally involving over 250 million farmers, stringent security measures have been put in place, putting Delhi on high alert. Section 144 has been imposed, internet services to several districts have been suspended, and the borders with Delhi have been sealed.

This protest emerges about two years after farmers called off their year-long agitation in December 2021, following assurances from the government



that their demands would be considered, particularly regarding guaranteed prices for all agricultural produce.

However, farmer unions argue that the promises made by the Modi government have not been fulfilled.

**Why are the farmers protesting once again?**

In 2020, farmers from various North Indian states, including Haryana, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, protested against three new farm laws introduced by the government. These laws were perceived by many farmers as unfair and detrimental to their livelihoods, as they aimed to reform the agricultural sector. The laws undermined the

existing system of government-regulated wholesale markets (mandis), lacked legal assurances for Minimum Support Price (MSP), and facilitated more flexible contract farming agreements.

The protesting farmers demanded the repeal of these laws and the implementation of a law mandating MSP for all crops to ensure fair prices. They also sought relief from escalating electricity bills, which exacerbated their financial burdens.

After nearly a year of protests, the government finally agreed to repeal the laws in November 2021 and accepted most of the farmers' demands, marking a significant victory for the agricultural community.

However, two years later, farmer unions argue that the government has not followed through on its promise to legally guarantee Minimum Support Price (MSP). In a video message shared by Kisan Mazdoor Morcha coordinator Sarvan Singh Pandher on X on February 7, he outlined ten demands from the government, including promises made during the previous protest regarding MSP legislation, justice for the events in Lakhimpur Kheri, withdrawal of all Delhi cases against farmers, commitment to not implement the new electricity bill, and exemptions for farmers from pollution regulations. Additionally, there is a new demand for debt relief for farmers and laborers.

Pandher, a key leader of the protest, stated on Saturday that they would peacefully march to Delhi on February 13. He urged farmers and laborers nationwide to join the protest, emphasizing that it would be a decisive battle to secure all their demands. He emphasized the importance of maintaining peaceful protest despite any actions taken by the government, urging patience and perseverance in their fight.

## Will look into winding up of the United Nations' office in Kashmir: J&K LG

**FW DESK**

Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha on Sunday expressed the government's intention to examine the possibility of "winding up the office of the United Nations in Kashmir." Responding to a specific query at a press conference in Jammu about the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) office located in Sonwar, Srinagar, LG Sinha stated that the government would consider the



matter. The LG's response came in response to question about the closure of UNMOGIP in Kashmir in conjunction with the realization of LG Sinha's earlier promises, such as the reopening of cinema halls in Kashmir, dismissal of government employees involved in terror-related activities, and the hoisting of the tricolour at Lal Chowk.

## Instead of forcibly stopping protesting farmers, government should solve their problems: Harjinder Singh Dhani

**Condemned Haryana government's forcible action of police firing tear gas shells on farmers**

**JAGMOHAN SINGH**  
Amritsar

The Haryana government's forcible action of police firing large number of tear gas shells on the farmers protesting for their demands and suppressing them by using force is against the democratic structure, about which the Centre government should think seriously.

Expressing this, the Shriomani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) President Harjinder Singh Dhani in a statement issued here today said that agriculture is the backbone of the country and the demands of farmers should not be ignored. Condemning the use of police force to stop the farmers, he

said that it is everyone's right to demonstrate peacefully for their rightful demands in a democracy, so the government should immediately solve the problems of the farmers and not complicate the matter further by torturing them.

He said that the farmers of the country have been on the path of struggle with their demands for a long time but the governments have remained ignorant. Farmers of India are known as the breadwinner not only of the country but of the entire world and if these farmers are on the path of struggle today, then it is time for the governments to think. The SGPC President said that the government should focus on solving the farmers' issues instead of forcibly stopping them from peaceful protest. He also strongly condemned the targeting of journalists in the action taken by the Haryana Police.

## President prorogued Lok Sabha & Rajya Sabha, General Elections are likely in April-May



**MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA**  
New Delhi

The Budget session was the last session of the 17th Lok Sabha. General elections are likely to be held in April-May. President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday on 15th February prorogued both the Houses of Parliament after the conclusion of the Budget session last week.

"The Rajya Sabha which adjourned sine die on the 10th February, 2024 has been prorogued by the President on the 15th February 2024,"

## Only long-term solution to challenges faced by Indian Muslim Community: Husaini

**KAVITA SHARMA**  
New Delhi

The President of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind (JIH), Syed Sadatullah Husaini has called on the Indian Muslim community to galvanize itself to confront the coming challenges which mandate a long-term solution.

In a video address, Syed Sadatullah Husaini said, "The challenges faced by the Indian Muslim community in the context of approaching elections are increasing by the day. Those promoting communalism and sectarianism are shamelessly corrupting our democratic institutions for narrow political and ideological interests. There is considerable anger and anxiety among Muslims. However, we should not be disappointed or scared. The need of the hour is to exhibit determination and courage, and work continuously to overcome these challenges. It is not the first time the Indian Muslim community has faced such challenges. From the 1857 Mutiny to India's independence, the partition of the country and many other trying instances have been part of our history, and by the Grace of God, we have faced these challenges and overcome them."

The JIH President reminded the Muslim community saying, "We must be aware of our power; it is rooted in our religion and its noble and pristine teachings and principles. We act as a bulwark against oppression and exploitation. Hence, we are targeted and subjected to trials and tribulations. We must understand that there is no quick fix to our challenges. It is only long-term. We must try to bring about change in our immediate circle of influence. I am proposing six action points for the community: (1) Build good relations with your fellow countrymen. Remove their misconceptions about Muslims and Islam and convey the true picture. (2) Try to improve the condition of the Muslim community. Focus on their education, their economy, and removing their weaknesses. Most importantly, improve their moral character and adherence to religion. (3) Play the role of the "Khair-e-Ummat" (best community) (4) Stand up for justice for all the weak and oppressed regardless of religion, caste, and community.



## Congress urges Prime Minister to speak directly to farmers

**KAVITA SHARMA**  
New Delhi

Supporting the farmers' agitation for the fulfillment of their demands, the Congress today condemned the BJP governments at the centre and in various states for resorting to authoritarian and dictatorial ways to curb it and prevent their march towards Delhi.

The party urged the Prime Minister Narendra Modi that he should directly talk to the farmers to provide them justice. Party general secretary and MP Randeep Singh Surjewala asked as to why were the farmers not being allowed to lodge their protest when they had a record of always maintaining peace.

Referring to the heavy barricading of Delhi, Surjewala asked, whether the central government considered it as an attack from some enemy country that the roads were being blocked with boulders, heavy vehicles and at several



places with deep and wide ditches.

The Congress leader observed that the farmers were only demanding the implementation of the promises that had been made to them two years ago, like the guarantee on the Minimum Support Price and waiving off debts of farmers and farm labourers.

He warned that this was just the beginning of the stir and only the farmers from Haryana and Punjab were participating right now. He said farmers from across the country will soon be joining them and it will be difficult for the government to control the situation.

# Bharat Ratna Award for 90s Financial Reforms

**DR P S VOHRA**

There has been, once again, much discourse recently about the economic reforms of 1991 around us, as the Central Government announced the highest civilian award "Bharat Ratna" for former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao during the final Parliamentary session prior to the elections. Meanwhile, Modi also praised Manmohan Singh in the Rajya Sabha. It is a fact that the economic reforms of the 90s are indispensable to Indian society and the economy. They are unforgettable. That's why India is now the fifth largest economy. Giving P.V. Narasimha Rao the Bharat Ratna and praising Manmohan Singh holds great significance in the political scenario, but it is also essential to understand that the foresight of both these leaders has shown the path of economic progress to the country in reality after five decades of independence. And today, while following the same footsteps, India has achieved the milestone of being the fifth largest economy in the world. However, in this global race, we have based GDP as the basis, while the other aspect of the picture is that we are taking time until 2047 to develop per capita income.

On June 24, 1991, the day when the then Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh said before presenting his budget in Parliament that "there is no power on Earth that can stop an idea whose time is certain to come," can be understood with this perspective today. It indicates that the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, considering India's weak economic situation at the time, was very convinced that Finance Minister Manmohan Singh should initiate economic liberalization then, or else it would be too late in the future. However, the question still arises many times whether economic reforms in India were

delayed. But no one can forget the contribution of journalist Shankar Aiyar's story published in the Indian Express. It would be absolutely wrong, as it established in the common people's minds that India was going through a severe economic crisis, and that's why the Indian government was pledging its gold in foreign banks to increase foreign currency reserves in India. This caused such a stir in Indian society that Narasimha Rao foresaw the fear of democratic opposition and finally initiated economic reforms through Manmohan Singh. It is thanks to these reforms that from the then \$270 billion, today India's GDP has reached around \$4 trillion.

Here we must understand, beyond political ideology, that the selection of the late Narasimha Rao for the Bharat Ratna is indeed due to the highly positive impacts of the economic reforms he undertook as Prime Minister of India. It is also true that because of these economic reforms, ordinary Indians could realize their dreams in ways that were not possible in the decades post independence. Moreover, if these economic reforms had been initiated some time earlier in this country, India would undoubtedly have been a much bigger economic super power in the world today, both in terms of per capita income and overall economic development. Remember, in the first three to four decades after independence, India's economic growth rate was only around three to four percent, whereas since the 1990s, it has been 7 percent or more. This is why today, the third generation of independent India finds itself economically more prosperous than the previous two generations, and hence, these economic reforms are also regarded as the biggest economic event in the history of independent India. Let's take a step back and recall that era of Indian society when it took 2 to 3 years of waiting just



to get a telephone connection at home, and today we are the largest consumers of internet technology on mobile phones in the world. Since the beginning of economic liberalization, the life of the common man has completely changed, with much luxuries added to their personal lives. Gone are the days when there was only one TV at home, and even to watch Doordarshan, one had to go up to the roof to adjust the antenna multiple times. Now, it's the era of satellite TV, and the number of channels is countless. The established craze of multiplexes and malls in metro and large cities has been challenged by sudden innovations in the entertainment sector post the COVID-19 pandemic, giving OTT platforms a prominent position. The trend of consumer purchases on occasions like Diwali and Dhanteras is rapidly changing each year. Economic analysts start to anticipate a slowdown in India if there is a decrease in the percentage of sales of two-wheelers and cars during these festivals. The allure of India's vast market, where the purchasing power of its consumers holds significant sway, is captivating the entire world. Behind the reality of the present time, the cornerstone of economic reforms since the 1990s is "LPG" (Liberalization, Privatization, Globalization). It

must also be understood that the utmost importance was given to liberalization during those reforms because it encouraged private investment first and then attracted foreign investors to India. Consequently, the Indian economy stands at a point where the central government allocates a significant amount of 10 lakh crore in the budget for capital investment, while private investment is continuously increasing. As a result, India is now the most attractive investment destination for foreign investors.

Here, if we don't acknowledge the immense progress of the Indian capital market over the past two to three decades, a significant aspect of the economic reforms of the 90s would be overlooked. However, Dr. Manmohan Singh, argues that the growth of the stock market does not reflect the real progress of the economy. Nevertheless, it must now be understood that today India's capital market is also moving towards self-reliance to some extent. Now, investing in SIP (Systematic Investment Plan) holds its own attraction among Indian investors. It's worth noting that investing in SIP through mutual funds significantly reduces the risk in the stock market. This is why the perception of foreign investors towards the Indian capital market has also changed.

In spite of all these, if today India is unable to find a real solution to poverty, then one reason behind it is also that the private sector has benefited the most from the economic reforms of the 1990s. As a result of this a problem like economic disparity in India, which is perceived as a gap between the rich and the poor, has greatly increased. It is very surprising that according to GDP levels, a country with the world's fifth-largest economy also holds approximately 20 percent share in global poverty, and although we have left countries like England behind in GDP, in terms of per capita income, we are still far behind because perhaps there was no solid option to increase per capita income with the economic reforms of the 1990s. It is not very logical to always walk with India's vast population in a negative aspect because the purchasing capacity of the middle-class individual amidst this population is the main cornerstone of economic development, so why is the eradication of the poor strata of the population not expected? Perhaps the answer to this lies only with the creator of economic reforms, the late P.V. Narasimha Rao, and the real implementer of these reforms, Dr. Singh.

Ultimately, we must understand that the election season has almost begun, and if economic issues are influencing political decisions and discussions at this time, it is a good start for a clean democracy. Yet, how much does the common man understand politics? In this same session, while the current government honors PV Narasimha Rao, the architect of economic reforms, with the Bharat Ratna, it is the same government led by economist Manmohan Singh that, through a white paper, ranks the 10 years of his leadership as the lowest in India's economic progress.

*Dr P S Vohra is a Writer, columnist and financial thinker. View are personal*

## 'One Nation, One Election' offers multiple benefits

**NEW DELHI:** With the Tamil Nadu Assembly having adopted the resolution against the Central government's proposed 'One Nation, One Election' policy, the spotlight is once again on the debate over the feasibility of this 'critical reform' that the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led regime is keen to go ahead with.

While the resolution moved by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin highlights various points of 'objections' to the move, it 'conveniently' chooses to ignore the benefits that the proposed electoral exercise offers.

'One Nation, One Election' refers to the idea of simultaneously holding the general and state elections. A high-level committee (HLC), headed by former President of India, Ram Nath Kovind, is already in the process of exploring the possibility of 'One Nation, One Election'.

The panel constituted by the Modi government has so far consulted a galaxy of constitutional and legal luminaries of the country as part of the exercise. The panel has held



fresh consultations with the state election commissions this week in a bid to expedite the process.

The parties opposed to this reform agenda of the Modi government have not yet offered any substantial ground to punch holes in this plan. They appear to be deliberately trying to shift the public focus away from the positive sides of this endeavour that the government has so far showcased.

One of the most important benefits that the Tamil Nadu Assembly seems to have overlooked while passing the resolution against 'One Nation, One Election' is that synchronising the Lok Sabha and Assembly election cycles will help the government fast-track the development schemes and the programmes aimed at augmentation of financial system of the country and the states.

## Farooq Abdullah again skips ED summons in money laundering case

**FW DESK**

Former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister and National Conference (NC) chief Dr Farooq Abdullah, has once again skipped the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) summons in connection with a money laundering case. This marks the second instance in the past month that the 86-year-old politician has not appeared before the ED.

Abdullah was required to be present at the ED office in Srinagar on Tuesday, but he informed the authorities that he



was not in Srinagar and, therefore, unable to comply with the summons. Earlier, on January 11, he had cited health reasons for missing the ED summons.

The ED has been investigating Abdullah in connection with the alleged misappropriation

of funds from the Jammu and Kashmir Cricket Association during his tenure as its President between 2004 and 2009. The case is based on an FIR filed by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which accused Abdullah and former JKCA office-bearers of siphoning off over Rs 113 crore in funds.

The scandal came to light in 2012, and in 2022, the ED filed a chargesheet against Farooq Abdullah. The ongoing investigation continues to probe the financial irregularities within the J&K cricket body.





## Rural resilience: Farmers march for rights and reforms

In a vivid display of dissent, thousands of farmers from Punjab have congregated at the border with Haryana, their passage to Delhi barricaded by authorities. Their demands are clear: a legally guaranteed Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crops, debt forgiveness, the revocation of international agreements detrimental to agriculture, and a baseline pension of 5,000 for both farmers and agricultural laborers. Echoes of these demands trace back to the mass protests of 2021-22, which led to the withdrawal of three contentious agricultural laws by the BJP-led central government. The movement, led by the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), a non-political faction diverged from the original protest leaders, underscores the persistent divide among agrarian communities across Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Concurrently, multiple protests ripple through the region: from the farmers in western Uttar Pradesh grappling with the repercussions of the Jewar airport project and the Yamuna Expressway, to the land acquisition dissent in Haryana's Sonapat. The original SKM alongside several trade unions called for a comprehensive rural and industrial strike on February 16, amplifying the chorus of demands with the addition of labor code repeals. Negotiations have commenced with Punjab's farmers, yet the prospect of a legal MSP guarantee remains bleak. The plight of subsistence farmers in less affluent regions, sidelined by this scheme, underscores the urgent need for a reformed approach to public support in agriculture. As the Lok Sabha election looms, the political resonance of these protests cannot be ignored. India's agricultural sector is at a crossroads, necessitating a departure from market dependency towards a robust model of government-led support. Achieving this requires broad political dialogue and a commitment to diversifying and enhancing agricultural productivity. The call for national consensus on reforming agricultural support is not just timely but imperative, underscoring the critical intersection of politics, policy, and the plight of the Indian farmer.

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“Don't worry about being successful but work toward being significant and the success will naturally follow.”  
— OPRAH WINFREY

### THE FINANCIAL WORLD

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PRABHASH RANJAN SAYS PARLIAMENTARY PANEL'S ADVICE ON RESEARCH ADDRESS PRESSING ISSUES EFFECTIVELY

## Time to strengthen legal education

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law, and Justice recently submitted a significant report on legal education, making several path-breaking recommendations to strengthen the quality of legal education in India. Since Independence, legal education, unlike medicine and engineering, has not been a top priority for India's policymakers.

Things started to change for the better in the 1990s with the advent of the national law universities (NLUs) in India. Buoyed by the winds of liberalisation and globalisation, the Indian economy in the 1990s threw up many new opportunities for lawyers, which, in turn, led to bright young students opting to study law right after school. Several NLU graduates got placed in high-paying law firm jobs while many others went abroad to study at top universities, with quite a few bagging prestigious scholarships such as Rhodes and Chevening.

However, the same cannot be said about hundreds of other law schools nationwide that essentially represent a "sea of institutionalized mediocrity". Most of the NLUs too, while successfully attracting excellent students, have failed to emerge as centres of excellence in legal research. This is borne by the fact that only two Indian law schools, Jindal Global Law School and National Law School of India University, figure in the QS rankings of the top 250 law schools worldwide.

### A new regulator

Against this backdrop, a key recommendation of the committee is to limit the powers of the Bar Council of India (BCI) to regulate legal education. The BCI's role in regulating legal education that pertains to acquiring basic eligibility to practise in the courts is indispensable.

However, several other facets of legal education, especially at the post-graduation level, do not pertain to litigation. The



committee recommends, and rightly so, that regulating these parts of legal education should be entrusted to an independent body called the National Council for Legal Education and Research (NCLER). This proposed body will develop qualitative benchmarks to regulate legal education. Eminent legal academicians who deposed before the parliamentary committee batted for the creation of the NCLER. In addition to judges and practising lawyers, the NCLER should have eminent law professors with an unimpeachable track record of research and serving legal education.

### Bolstering research

Many of India's 1,700-odd law schools principally focus on teaching, with scant attention to research. Consequently, India is chiefly the consumer of legal knowledge generated in the West, not its producer. An important data point that reveals this is that out of more than 800 law journals globally indexed in Scopus (an internationally recognised database that lists leading journals in all fields) barely a handful are Indian law journals. This shows the abysmally poor level of research in India's law schools.

The committee emphasises the need

to prioritise and promote research in legal education, which, in turn, will lead to better teaching outcomes and help students develop a critical perspective. As Albert Einstein said, "The value of a college education is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think" To strengthen research, there is a need to recruit "world class global faculty who are top researchers". While this is easier said than done, the fact that the committee has highlighted this aspect is an encouraging development.

As the committee remarks, augmenting the research ecosystem in our law schools undoubtedly involves a greater need for state funding. Bolstering research will also equip India's law schools to thrive in the globalising world. The committee is cognisant of the effect of globalisation on legal education. It thus correctly recommends developing and delivering a global curriculum, promoting student and faculty international exchange programmes, incorporating more international law courses in the curriculum, and increasing students' exposure to different legal systems.

### Changing mindsets

The parliamentary committee's sug-

gestions are like a breath of fresh air that may help many law professors keep their chin up. In some form or the other, such suggestions have been made before. But none of this will be implemented as long as higher education does not become the topmost priority for everyone.

Additionally, legal education reform is impossible without these: first, the leadership positions in our university's law faculties and law schools should be held by passionate, charismatic, and visionary academicians who inspire and create an enabling and supportive environment that allows younger academicians to realise their potential as outstanding teachers and brilliant researchers. Sadly, barring a few notable exceptions, the deans of law faculties and vice-chancellors of law universities in India have failed to provide professional leadership. These flawed academic leaders detest talented professors and are the biggest bottleneck in striving for excellence. No amount of money or perks can overcome such a primary institutional deficiency.

Second, to boost the culture of legal research in our law schools, there should be complete academic freedom and autonomy. As Jawaharlal Nehru said, "a university stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for the adventure of ideas and for the search of truth". A law school or any other academic institution can accomplish this goal only if academicians are free to offer their well-researched views without any fear, even if these views are at variance with popularly held beliefs in society or contest the dominant ideas of the time.

The parliamentary committee's intervention is a welcome development, and one expects all stakeholders to work together to improve the quality of legal education in India.

Prabhash Ranjan teaches at the Faculty of Legal Studies, South Asian University. Views are personal.



DAMINI CHOPRA EXPLAINS WHY MENSTRUATION LEAVE RAISES AWARENESS BUT RISKS EXACERBATING GENDER DISPARITIES

## A demand that could hamper gender equality

The Sabrimala temple issue was one that ruled our collective consciousness. It was unfathomable that menstruating women were deemed 'unfit' to enter a temple. Echoes of 'menstruation is not a disease, but a natural phenomena' could be heard all around. This was a case that highlighted the ongoing struggle to eliminate discriminatory practices related to menstruation, and to promote gender equality.

The demand for paid leave for menstruation works to undermine it.

Menstrual cycles can be challenging — almost debilitating for some — but to collectively label all those belonging to a gender without considering the potential adverse effects, is trivialising the women empowerment movement.

### On the global gender gap

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021 says that the gender global gap has widened (instead of shrinking). In the current situation, it would take the world 135.6 years to achieve gender equality. Looking at it specifically at the workforce level, a woman earns 84 cents for every dollar that a man makes. The participation of women in the labour force is significantly lower than that of men, and even fewer women hold leadership positions. If one adds mandatory paid leave for periods to this, it would end up further dissuading companies from hiring women.

If the government ratifies 'special status' for menstruating women, it validates the social stigma around menstruation. It



would exacerbate period shaming in a country where large swathes of people (both men and women) consider menstruation to be 'impure'.

The most recent National Family Health Survey (NFHS) report has highlighted how approximately 50% of women between the ages of 15 to 24 in India continue to rely on the use of cloth for menstrual protection. Experts caution that reusing cloth can increase the risk of contracting multiple infections, attributing this practice to a combination of insufficient awareness and societal taboo around menstruation. Girls are often compelled to leave school or face social exclusion during their menstrual cycles.

Arguments in favour of paid leave for menstruation will claim that granting special status to menstruation would aim to create subject awareness. But this would only magnify it. It could turn out to be another well-meaning step, but one that ends up widening the gender gap inadvertently.

### The case of Japan

There are countries such as Japan that provide leave for painful menstruation-but it is mostly unpaid, and unused. Women claim that they are reluctant to avail this leave and 'broadcast' that they are on their period, for the fear of sexual harassment. This is the situation (today), even though this policy was introduced in Japan more than seven decades ago. Data show(s) that a mere 0.9% of women in the workforce avail menstrual leave days in Japan. As per the World Economic Forum's ranking in 2019, Japan ranked 121 out of 153 in terms of gender equality. It has slipped to the 125th position in 2023. It is interesting to note that though young women in Japan have higher education levels than men, it is in the workforce that disparities creep in. Women in Japan are less likely to be employed (even with the same credentials) than men, and are often paid lesser.

Let us assume that we have in place

paid leave for periods. Now comes the implementation. Who is to say when such leave would be taken rightfully, and when they would be misused? Further, who is to say which enforcement methods would be acceptable, when used by the employer? In 2020, 66 girl students in an institute in Bhuj in Kutch, Gujarat, were forced to strip to check who was menstruating. This mirrors an incident in 2017 in Muzaffarnagar, where 70 girls in a residential school were compelled to undress by staff to check for menstruation.

### A fight that continues

In the recent past, women have fought to be on the front line in a war. The Supreme Court of India even urged the government to enable equal evaluation of women, and to have them undergo the same standards of testing as men. In response, the government argued that women are not suitable for ground combat roles. Women in corporate organisations are fighting for pay that is the equivalent to that drawn by their male counterparts.

As a woman, I understand the issue and am empathetic towards period pain and symptoms. But I am averse to terming it a blanket biological disadvantage. Recognising the diverse nature of menstrual experiences is essential. Tailoring support and being accommodative on a case-by-case basis promotes inclusivity, while also addressing the individual needs of those navigating their (difficult) periods.

Damini Chopra is an actor and humanitarian. Views are personal.



### BOOKS: REVIEW

## Beyond the gold: Neeraj Chopra and India's athletics ascent

In "The Neeraj Chopra Story," veteran sports journalist and former athlete Norris Pritam delves into the life of the iconic Indian javelin thrower, Neeraj Chopra, with an intimate and heartfelt narrative that transcends the traditional sports biography. The book, graced with a foreword by the legendary boxer M.C. Mary Kom, follows Chopra's journey from a modest upbringing in Haryana to becoming a global star and Olympic gold medallist, capturing the essence of his remarkable ascent in the world of athletics.

Pritam's prose, characterized by its simplicity and ease, invites readers into Chopra's world, offering a fresh perspective on his life and career despite the extensive

media coverage surrounding him. The author's inability to cover the Tokyo Olympics firsthand does not detract from the narrative. Instead, Pritam compensates with diligent research and exclusive insights into Chopra's life, engaging with those who have been instrumental in his development as an athlete and a person.

The book pays homage to Indian athletics' rich history, contextualizing Chopra's success by revisiting the stories of past greats like Milkha Singh and P.T. Usha, whose near misses at Olympic glory underscore the challenges faced by Indian athletes on the global stage. Through these tales, Pritam sheds light on the systemic issues that have historically hindered India's athletic achievements, emphasizing that the

nation's lack of Olympic medals is not for want of talent.

Pritam's narrative style seamlessly blends his observational prowess with personal anecdotes, making for a compelling read. His recounting of the first encounter with Chopra adds a personal touch to the biography, while interviews with Chopra's family, friends, and mentors paint a comprehensive picture of the athlete's life, from his humble beginnings to his monumental achievements on the world stage.

The inclusion of perspectives from Chopra's rivals and legends of the sport, like Klaus Wolfermann, lends credibility and depth to the narrative. Pritam also addresses controversies, such as the javelin use during the Tokyo



The Neeraj Chopra Story  
By Norris Pritam  
Bloomsbury  
236 pages; Rs 399

Olympics, with sensitivity and insight, clearing the air on issues that have clouded Chopra's achievements.

One of the book's strengths lies in its portrayal of Chopra as a catalyst for a javelin revolution in India, highlighting the emergence of talented throwers inspired by his success. This narrative thread not only celebrates Chopra's accomplishments but also looks optimistically towards the future of Indian athletics, bolstered by his influence.

Pritam's book is more than a sports biography; it's a testament

to the power of determination, hard work, and the impact of one individual's success on an entire sport's landscape in a country hungry for Olympic glory. The detailed accounts of the struggles faced by previous generations of athletes serve as a poignant reminder of the progress made and the long road ahead.

The book is an essential read not only for sports enthusiasts but for anyone interested in the journey of overcoming adversity to achieve greatness. Norris Pritam's meticulous research, combined with his narrative skill, makes this biography a captivating and inspiring account of one of India's finest athletes. As the world gears up for another Olympic year, this book stands as a timely tribute to a young man who has already left an indelible mark on the world of sports and the hearts of millions, promising to inspire future generations to dream big and aim for the stars.



# Sanjay Jain took charge as IRCTC CMD

MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA  
New Delhi

A qualified Chartered Accountant (CA), Sanjay Kumar Jain (IRTS: 1990) has taken over the charge of Chairman and Managing Director (CMD) of Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation Ltd (IRCTC). Sanjay Kumar Jain had more than three decades of extensive experience of handling important portfolios in Ministry of Railways, PSUs and Department of Public Enterprises, Ministry of Finance, Government of India. Jain's career is a blend of leadership roles in policy making, commercial ventures and developmental ventures of the Government of India and PSUs.

His impressive leadership roles include Principal Chief



Commercial Manager (CCM), Northern Railway, Group General Manager (North Zone), IRCTC, Divisional Railway

Manager, Mumbai, Central Railway, Joint Secretary in the Department of Public Enterprises, Part-time Chairman & CEO of National Land Monetization Corporation Limited among others.

Notable part of his career, as Group General Manager (North Zone), IRCTC, he was instrumental in giving the luxury train 'Maharaja Express' a new dimension through unique marketing initiatives. He was also instrumental in launching India's first 'Executive Lounge' on the lines of Airport Lounges at

New Delhi Railway Station. The Financial and Operational Model developed for 'Jan Ahar - New Delhi' during his tenure was later replicated throughout IRCTC. During his leadership, the tourism business of IRCTC, North Zone grew by 35 times over a period of 5 years. During his tenure as Divisional Railway Manager, Mumbai, he successfully led a force of nearly 30000 manpower, handling the largest Suburban Railway Network to provide daily services to approximately 40 Lakhs commuters. In order to make the 'Swachhata Mission' a success, carried many initiatives for which 'The Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CSMT)' was conferred with the 'Best Iconic Swachhata Place Award' by Jal Shakti Ministry.

# BEL receives orders worth ₹2,282.06 cr



ARUN KUMAR RAO  
Bengaluru

Navaratna DPSU Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) signed a contract for a value of Rs.2,167.47 Crs plus taxes with the Indian Navy for supply of state-of-the-art, indigenously designed and developed EW suite for use onboard warship, BEL press statement said here.

This EW suite is a big leap for BEL's Aatmanirbhar Bharat initiative. The company has also received additional orders worth Rs.114.59 Crs since the last disclosure on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2024 and these orders pertain to the supply of SDRs, HD VLF receivers, EVMs, etc. With the above, BEL has received cumulative orders of Rs.30,776.06 Crs in the current financial year.

# DP World signs agreement as title partner of Delhi capitals women's team in a historic move



ARUN KUMAR RAO  
Bengaluru

DP World and Delhi Capitals today announced a new long-term partnership in presence women cricketer Jemimah Rodrigues, and Alice Caspey. DP World, a leading provider of smart end-to-end supply chain solutions, is now the Title Partner of the Women's Team of Delhi Capitals from 2024. The new multi-year partnership, unveiled today at an event held in Bengaluru, will see DP World strengthen its relationship with the franchise. As part of the partnership, DP World will feature prominently on the front of Delhi Capitals official match jersey, alongside the training jersey. As the current Global Logistics Partner of Delhi Capital's Men's Team, DP World will also become Global Logistics Partner of the Women's Team.

DP World, through its world-class multimodal

logistics capabilities spread across more than 75 countries, ensures seamless movement of trade around the world, including India. From transporting the cork of cricket balls to moving the willow that's used for making bats, DP World's agile, reliable, and transparent supply chain solutions help make the game accessible to all.

Speaking about the new partnership, Sukhvinder Singh, CEO, Delhi Capitals said: "Delhi Capitals is thrilled to have on board DP World as the Title Partner of our women's team. DP World's long-term commitment towards the women's game is commendable, and we couldn't be more excited about this partnership. After a successful innings with our IPL team, this collaboration was a natural one. It's a milestone moment for both teams - Delhi Capitals and DP World, as we look forward to kicking off the season in style."

# Signpost India Limited listed on BSE and NSE



DOMINICK RODRIGUES  
Mumbai

Signpost India Limited (SIL) has become the "first leading DOOH media enterprise in India" to be listed on the major stock exchanges, after it was listed recently on the BSE and NSE.

"Our listing on BSE and NSE symbolizes a new era for Signpost India and we are committed to driving innovation and creating meaningful connections between brands and a rapidly-evolving consumer base," said Shripad Ashtekar, Chairman and Managing Director.

Ashtekar told media here recently that Signpost India highlights 'cutting edge' DOOH solutions, specializing in programmatic digital advertising portfolio including billboards, transit media (skywalks, bus panels,

airports, metro stations, bus queue shelters and smart mobile vans) and innovative assets like kiosks, traffic booths and electric public bicycle stations.

Now, through its recent merger with the well-established Pressman Advertising Ltd, SIL is highlighting its full suite of advertising services including print, digital marketing and public relations, he said while noting the company's clientele spanning consumer goods and services, BFSI, lifestyle, real estate and construction, media and entertainment, education, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, automobile and hospitality.

SIL, during FY2022-23, clocked Revenue of Rs 342 crore with 84% growth and Net Profit of Rs 35 crore with CAGR growth of 30% over the last three years.

# Hyatt-affiliated Juniper Hotels IPO for Rs 1,800 crores

DOMINICK RODRIGUES  
Mumbai

Juniper Hotels Limited announced their Initial Public Offering (IPO) that has been priced between Rs 342 to Rs 360 per equity share, and will be opening on February 21, 2024 and closing on February 23, 2024.

The Equity Shares are proposed to be listed on the BSE and NSE. Juniper is a luxury hotel development and ownership company and the largest owner - by number of keys - of "Hyatt" affiliated hotels in India as of September 30, 2023.

Arun Kumar Saraf, CMD, Juniper Hotels Limited, said the Rs 1800 crore IPO would



be utilized towards repayment/prepayment/redemption, in full or part, of certain outstanding borrowings availed by the Company and Subsidiaries, besides general corporate purposes. "Our growth strategy includes: refurbishment of our rooms, creating very high MICE space, creation of 317 more rooms, 'Greenfield' development,

increasing market share and focus on select geographies.

The Company is promoted by Saraf Hotels Limited and its affiliate, Juniper Investments Limited and Two Seas Holdings Limited - an indirect subsidiary of a global hospitality company - Hyatt Hotels Corporation.

The Company owns and manages a portfolio consisting of

seven hotels and service apartments and operates total 1,836 keys of "Hyatt"-affiliated hotel keys in India as of September 30, 2023. Its hotels and service apartments are classified under: Luxury, Upper Upscale and Upscale. The Company's Revenue for fiscal 2023 increased by 116.03% to Rs 6,668.54 million against Rs 3,086.89 million in fiscal 2022. The revenue for six months ended September 30, 2023 stood at Rs 3,361.12 million. JM Financial Limited, CLSA India Private limited and ICICI Securities Limited are the book-running lead managers to the issue and KFin Technologies Limited is the registrar to the issue.

# BPCL to set up green hydrogen plant in Cochin airport

COCHIN: The Cochin International Airport Ltd (CIAL), the world's first airport fully powered by solar energy, has entered a Memorandum of Understanding with Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) for setting up a Green Hydrogen plant in the premises of Cochin airport.

This collaborative effort, combining technological prowess and infrastructure, will result in the world's first Green Hydrogen plant and fuelling station located within an airport setting, the CIAL said.

Green hydrogen, produced from water using renewable energy sources, is recognised as a future fuel and aligns with zero-carbon energy strategies. CIAL now has a cumulative installed capacity of 50 MW



-- solar and hydel put together -- producing two hundred thousand units of power a day.

Ever since the installation of its first plant with a capacity of 12 MW, it has been augmenting its capabilities and now inked an MOU for a strategic collaboration with BPCL for setting up a 1,000 KW pilot

project at the airport premises.

Under the agreement, BPCL will oversee the establishment of the integrated Green Hydrogen plant and fuelling station at Kochi Airport, providing technology and managing the operations.

CIAL will contribute suitable land, water, and green

energy resources.

The initial output of the plant will be utilised for powering vehicles within the airport.

"As pioneers in sustainable aviation, CIAL is happy to start a groundbreaking journey with BPCL towards establishing the country's first Green Hydrogen plant in an airport at CIAL," said CIAL Managing Director, S. Suhas.

He also said that this strategic collaboration underscores CIAL's commitment to green energy and propels closer towards a zero-carbon future in the aviation landscape.

BPCL's Chairman & Managing Director, G. Krishnakumar, highlighted the collaboration as a pivotal moment in the journey towards sustainable solutions.

# Confidence Petroleum launches Type 4 green hydrogen cylinders



DOMINICK RODRIGUES  
Mumbai

Confidence Petroleum Limited announced here recently the launch of its "Type 4 cylinders," which are expected to play a crucial role in efficient storage and transportation of green hydrogen.

Nitin Khara, CMD, Confidence Petroleum Limited, told media that the Confidence Group is venturing into the green hydrogen market by using its state-of-the-art German technology with innovative designs to optimize storage efficiency and enhance overall reliability of hydrogen-based solutions. This cylinder is being manufactured by 'Silversky Exim Pvt Ltd', a subsidiary of its subsidiary company Confidence Futuristic Energytech Ltd, he said, adding that the Type 4 cylinders will be designed and manufactured with focus on

minimizing environmental impact. The Type 4 cylinders are made primarily from carbon composite with polymer liner: are lighter by 70% compared to metal cylinders; transport 3 times more gas than metal cylinders; are completely corrosion-resistant (Inert Liner); shatterproof/fireproof.

While the Type 4 cylinder would be slightly more costlier than the metal cylinders, it would however carry three times more gas and was much safer, he said while pointing out that this cylinder would provide the solution to the increasing demand of clean energy storage worldwide, thus contributing to reduction of carbon emissions. Khara said the Confidence Group is also actively engaging in partnership with key players in the green hydrogen ecosystem including technology providers, energy companies and research institutions.

# Many States yet to implement High Security Registration Plates scheme



DOMINICK RODRIGUES  
Mumbai

Many States in India are yet to implement the Scheme of +High Security Registration Plates (HSRP)+ for vehicles, which would highlight 'road safety for commuters, security of citizens and the nation's safety,' according to Dr Kamaljeet Singh Soi, Member of National Road Safety Council and founder-member, Raahat (The Safe Community Foundation).

The Government of India had, in March 2001, issued a notification under provisions of section 41(6) of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, and introduced a new Scheme regulating issuance and affixation of HSR plates, he stated, add-

ing that with Supreme Court intervention, several States had implemented this scheme from 2021.

The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) had issued Gazette Notification and S.O. in December 2018 making the HSR plates mandatory on all vehicles sold on or after April 1, 2019.

However, a few States including Maharashtra - which is the financial hub of India and has 2.0 crore vehicles-- are yet to finalise and commence using the HSR plates.

Dr Soi told media here recently that the Maharashtra Government had floated a tender for selection of HSRP suppliers several times but failed to draw any bids, even as the tender published on

“The Maharashtra Government had floated a tender for selection of HSRP suppliers several times but failed to draw any bids, even as the tender published on August 28, 2023 "is still live."

August 28, 2023 "is still live."

In fact, the Maharashtra Government had extended the last date for this tender bid submission several times in the last 5 months, he said, adding that no State Government in the country has been able to implement the HSRP scheme by selecting a supplier through tender process in the last 8-9 years.

However, some States including the latest being Karnataka have been implementing this Scheme through the OEM dealer network which has multiple OEM-authorized HSRP suppliers, rather than one single supplier through the tender process, he said.

Dr Soi appealed to the Maharashtra Government to 'immediately adopt the OEM channel to implement the HSRP scheme on old vehicles in the State.'

# Vitafoods Expo highlights growing billion-dollar Nutraceuticals market



DOMINICK RODRIGUES  
Mumbai

The Indian Dietary Supplements market is expected to reach \$ 10 billion by 2026 from \$ 4 billion in 2020 with a notable 22% y-o-y growth rate, while the vitamins & minerals market is expected to surge, reaching revenue of \$ 2.63 billion by 2024 with annual growth rate of 7.71% from 2024 to 2028.

This was highlighted here recently by Informa Markets India, organisers of the three day 2nd edition of 'Vitafoods India' - a dedicated Expo showcasing the fast-transforming Indian nutraceuticals market.

Aatram Dharamraobaba Bhagwantrao, Maharashtra Minister of Food and Drugs, who was the Chief Guest at the event, said any hurdles faced by this Expo would be removed by the Maharashtra Government.

Women's health and malnutrition levels needed to be focused on in Maharashtra, he said while describing Mumbai as a big hub for foods and nu-

trition in the goal of providing people good food and hygiene.

"Eat Right" is my department's campaign and we are joining hands with the pharmaceutical industry in this regard," he added.

India is often called the "Diabetic Capital of the World" and a study by ICMR revealed that India has over 101 million people with diabetes. However, some Indian companies are projecting effective nature solutions through their products.

Nitta Gelatin India Limited is highlighting its 'First in the world' patented +Collagen D-Peptide for Diabetes care+, which has been clinically studied as an add-on therapy for management of Type-II diabetes, according to Saaj U. S., Marketing Manager.

"The anti-diabetic herb 'Hintonia latiflora' has been well-researched with European clinical trials on Type-II diabetes people," according to Gunjan Singhal, Vice-President, Medico Marketing, Ishaanav Nutraceuticals Pvt. Ltd.

The herbal product was in-licensed from Gerhlicher,

Germany by Ishaanav Nutraceuticals, which then exclusively introduced it in India and conducted clinical trials on Indian subjects for management of blood glucose level in Pre-Diabetes and Type-II diabetes.

"The combination of proven anti-diabetic herb and a natural analgesic PEA (Palmitoylethanolamide) - a natural cannabinomimetic compound that has been well-researched in almost 15 kinds of pain - highlights the product Hintodol P, which is claimed to be highly effective in controlling 'painful diabetic neuropathy,'" Singhal added.

Yogesh Mudras, Managing Director, Informa Markets India, said 100 exhibitors from 20 countries were in this Expo which was expecting 5,000-plus visitors and 40 speakers.

He said India possessed a vibrant ingredients market that encompassed a diverse array of vitamins, minerals, botanicals and plant/animal-derived components. "Agriculture stands as one of the country's largest industries supplying abundant raw materials essential for production of nutraceuticals and functional foods," he added.

"India's industry is poised for significant expansion with the projected growth of this sector by 11.4% annually through 2030," Mudras said in underscoring the immense potential for further development, and also highlighting importance of initiatives driving innovation and sustainability within the industry.

# Euronet Announces Acquisition of Infnitium

FW DESK  
Leawood

Euronet a leading global financial technology solutions and payments provider, announced the acquisition of Infnitium Holdings Pte. Ltd (Infnitium), a digital payments company and provider of risk management and payments authentication services based in Singapore. Infnitium's products will be integrated with Euronet's Ren payments platform to provide additional protection against consumer fraud and merchant chargebacks in online transactions.

Infnitium is a leader in providing risk management and payment authentication services such as 3D Secure (3DS), which helps address fraud in eCommerce or "card not present" (CNP) transactions. This authentication step adds an extra level of security, reducing the risk

of unauthorized transactions and enhancing overall online payment security. The company also offers next-generation, omnichannel payment gateway services for merchants and acquirers, enabling them to operate their services efficiently across diverse channels. Its customers include large banks and merchants in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Brunei, Cambodia, the Philippines and India.

Regulators in the European Union, India, Singapore and other countries have made 3DS mandatory to provide additional protection against consumer fraud and merchant chargebacks. Regions such as the United States and Latin America have not yet mandated 3DS, but the need to reduce CNP fraud is expected to grow as the global e-commerce market reaches an expected US\$8.1T by 2026.



# Union Bank of India offers easy loans to MSME



**MANGALURU:** In a bid to bolster Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), the Union Bank of India has introduced a time-bound MSME New Year Festival Bonanza campaign. The primary aim of this initiative is to support and promote MSME units, providing them with much-needed financial assistance. During the campaign period, eligible customers can avail themselves of loans at highly attractive interest rates, coupled with nil processing charges. This move is poised to significantly ease the financial burden on MSMEs and facilitate their growth and development. Under the purview of the regional office in Mangaluru, a customer outreach-cum-meet event was organised on Tuesday. At this gathering, sanction advices were presented to numerous esteemed MSME enterprises. Renu K Nair, the General Manager and Zonal Head of Mangaluru, presided over the meeting, which also saw the participation of Mahesha J, the Deputy General Manager and Regional Head of Mangaluru. The attendees lauded the bank's proactive approach in expediting sanction processes and applauded the array of customer-friendly services and schemes it offers. This gesture underscores Union Bank of India's commitment to fostering a conducive environment for the growth and prosperity of MSMEs in the region. By facilitating access to affordable financial solutions, the bank is not only empowering MSMEs but also contributing to the overall economic development of the region. With its concerted efforts, Union Bank of India continues to be a catalyst for progress and prosperity in the MSME sector.

# Newly constructed 16th Finance Commission held its first meeting



**MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA**  
New Delhi

Dr Arvind Panagariya, Chairman of Sixteenth Finance Commission held its first meeting at Jawahar Vyapar Bhawan, Janpath, New Delhi. The Chairman and Members were welcomed by Secretary, Sixteenth Finance Commission, Ritvik Ranjanam Pandey and other officials of the Finance Commission. The Sixteenth Finance Commission discussed its Terms of Reference, as per the order made by the President of India and notified by the Ministry of Finance vide Notification S.O. 5533(E), dated December 31, 2023. The Commission acknowledged the need for wide ranging consultations with various stakeholders, including State Governments, Local Bodies, Ministries of Government of India, and experts. The Commission recognised that it will be carrying out detailed analytical work and would require to rope in

all the expertise that it can garner, including that from leading research organisations, leading think tanks and other organisations working in the area of fiscal federal relations. The Commission approved the setting-up of its office at Jawahar Vyapar Bhawan on Janpath in New Delhi. The Commission will make its recommendations available by 31st October, 2025, covering an award period of 5 years commencing 1st April, 2026.

# RBI Deputy Governor warns MFIs on High Interest Rate Practices

**NEWDELHI:** Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Deputy Governor M. Rajeshwar Rao has strongly criticised Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) for imposing higher interest rates on borrowers, warning against irresponsible practices within the sector.



Expressing concern, Rao highlighted instances where certain MFIs have significantly increased their profit margins under the new regulatory framework, cautioning that any misuse of regulatory freedom would result in regulatory intervention. In 2021, the RBI granted entities full autonomy over interest rates for microloans by lifting the previous cap of 24 per cent. However, Rao emphasised the need for responsible lending practices, noting that while lenders swiftly passed on increased costs to borrowers, they were hesitant to extend the benefits envisioned under the new framework. Additionally, Rao addressed concerns regarding Non-Banking Finance Companies (NBFCs) advocating for bank-like status, emphasising that NBFCs play distinct economic roles and should not aim to emulate banks. He further highlighted issues within peer-to-peer (P2P) lending among NBFCs, pointing out deviations from regulatory guidelines. Rao stressed the importance of educating lenders about credit risks and condemned any breaches of licensing conditions or regulatory standards within the NBFC-P2P sector. He warned against downplaying risks to lenders and reiterated the RBI's commitment to upholding regulatory integrity and consumer protection.

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# Indian banks face a slowdown in growth and profit margins as deposits lag

**MUMBAI:** Indian banks face a slowdown in growth and profit margins as deposits lag despite higher interest rates. In the 2023 October-to-December quarter, most major banks reported income gains, but net interest margins (NIM) declined due to tighter liquidity and rising funding costs. Among large banks, only Punjab National Bank saw an increase in NIM for the fiscal's third quarter, according to data compiled by S&P Global Market Intelligence. State Bank of India, India's largest bank by assets, posted lower net income after factoring in a 71-billion-rupee expense related to a wage bill increase. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) recently barred banks and non-bank financial companies from investing in AIFs holding the lenders' customer assets. This move aims to prevent loan evergreening. Lenders must divest AIF holdings within a month or set aside provisions. Industry groups anticipate the directive will affect billions in bank investments and potentially hinder growth, the report said. Indian bank deposit growth continues to lag behind credit growth. RBI data released in December 2023 shows an 11% deposit growth in fiscal 2022-2023, compared to 15% credit growth.

# Rs 25,000 Cr Semiconductor Packaging Plant in Pipeline for Assam

**GUWAHATI:** Union Minister of State for Electronics and Information Technology, Rajeev Chandrasekhar, announced that Assam is poised to get a Rs 25,000 crore semiconductor packaging plant, on Thursday. During the inauguration of the Digital India Future Skills Summit at Gauhati University, Chandrasekhar highlighted Assam's pivotal role in emerging technological advancements, attributing the development to the leadership of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. Underlining the significance of preparing the youth for the burgeoning sectors of electronics, semiconductors, cybersecurity, and AI, Chandrasekhar emphasised Prime Minister Modi's leadership in fostering



growth opportunities in these domains. The summit, organised under the auspices of the Ministry of Electronics and IT (Meity), served as a platform for discussions on strategies to nurture future-ready talent not only for India but also for global markets. Reflecting on India's technological evolution, Chandrasekhar noted the shift from being technology importers to exporters, particularly in the mobile phone and technology sectors. He highlighted Prime Minister Modi's ambitious vision to propel India as the

world's third-largest economy by the next decade, underscoring the pivotal role of the country's youth in achieving this milestone. "Youth here in the northeast have immense opportunities in semiconductors, AI, electronics, and cyber security sectors," the minister said, mentioning plans for collaboration between major corporations and colleges in the region to enhance skill development initiatives. Furthermore, Chandrasekhar highlighted the participation of leading global technology companies like NBDR, Intel, AMD, HCL, Wipro, and IBM in the summit, signalling ample job prospects for skilled individuals in the evolving technological landscape.

# CAIT Urges Finance Minister to Delay Enforcement of IT Payment Provisions

**Due to the lack of clarity surrounding the law's applicability and related provisions, CAIT called for the suspension of its implementation until sufficient clarification and nationwide information dissemination are achieved**



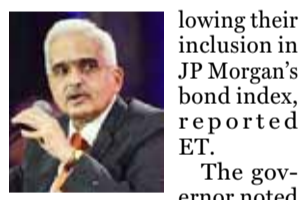
**NEWDELHI:** The Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) has stepped up its efforts to address concerns surrounding Income Tax Law 43(B)H among traders nationwide, including those in Delhi. CAIT representatives engaged with Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to convey these concerns and propose a solution, on Wednesday. The association appealed to the government to postpone the implementation of the law from April 1, 2024, to April 1, 2025, providing traders with a one-year deferral period. This delay would provide traders with sufficient time to understand and comply with the law effectively, CAIT argued. During the meeting, Praveen

Khandelwal, Secretary General, CAIT, recognised the government's progressive move in introducing the provision aimed at improving financial liquidity for micro and small enterprises (MSMEs). However, he stressed the importance of raising awareness among traders about this beneficial provision and suggested a one-year postponement of its implementation. Finance Minister Sitharaman attentively listened to the concerns raised by Khandelwal and assured a comprehensive consideration of the matter. In its memorandum, CAIT welcomed the government's decision, emphasising the significance of ensuring timely payments to the MSME sector within 45 days to maintain

uninterrupted cash flow for traders. However, due to the lack of clarity surrounding the law's applicability and related provisions, CAIT called for the suspension of its implementation until sufficient clarification and nationwide information dissemination are achieved. Both CAIT National President B C Bhartia and Secretary General Praveen Khandelwal reiterated the importance of addressing the financial challenges faced by the MSME sector. They emphasised the need to clarify ambiguous provisions and enhance awareness among traders through collaborative efforts involving the Income Tax Department, the Ministry of MSMEs, and trade organisations.

# Lower Government Borrowings to Stabilise Inflation, Boost Investments: RBI Governor

**NEWDELHI:** According to RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das, lower government borrowings compared to street predictions will open up more resources in the banking system, facilitating private sector investments and inflation stabilisation. Das expressed confidence in the Reserve Bank's ability to manage the anticipated surge in foreign inflows into Indian government debt fol-



lowing their inclusion in JP Morgan's bond index, reported ET. The governor noted that the current borrowing levels are below initial market projections, suggesting that this reduction would enhance liquidity in the banking sector, facilitating

increased credit availability for private sector endeavours. He underscored the potential of reduced borrowing to contribute to inflation moderation, although refrained from specifying the extent of its impact. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's interim Budget for 2024-25 proposes a borrowing target of Rs 14.13 lakh crore through dated securities, lower than the previous

year's gross borrowing estimate of Rs 15.43 lakh crore, driven by escalating tax revenues and adherence to fiscal consolidation objectives. Das highlighted the crucial role of borrowing quantum in shaping monetary policy, citing, "While making monetary policy it is one of the factors which is taken into consideration. I would say it is growth inducing, and it helps in moderating inflation levels."

# Co-operative Banks in India: Relevance & Challenges



**JAG MOHAN THAKEN**  
Established with the noble objective of liberating the poor from the clutches of dodgy and mammoth moneylenders, who demanded high pitch interest rates from the lower strata people, the cooperative banks in India have played a pivotal role in uplifting the poorest of the poor and the socio-economically underprivileged strata. However, there are commercial and nationalized banks also spreading up in most of the areas of the country, but in the earlier stages they were found to be serving the higher ranks and files of the society. The poor were very much hesitant even to enter into these high-profile banks. So, the need was felt to expand such banks which can serve at the lowest level. To fulfil the gap, Cooperative and Regional Rural Banks were inflated, which are serving the lower strata masses in an exemplary mode. The major difference in the working and serving between a commercial bank and a cooperative bank lies in their approach to revenue generation. Where commercial banks follow the rule of earning maximum profits, cooperative banks work on the principle of "Service with No Pick-Pocketing". The primary role of cooperative banks is to extend financial assistance to the needy masses at the most nominal interest rates with a

smiling service. The Cooperative banks in India work at three levels- The State Cooperative Bank functions as the apex body and works as a bridge between District Cooperative Banks and RBI. District Cooperative Banks operate at the district level and their primary role is to dispense funds to the primary cooperative banks. The third wing and the actual body, Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACs), which functions at the grassroots level directly cater to the local populace by offering loans and other services. Initially, the cooperative banks were to assist the populace in tiny offices, having one table and one chair for the secretary at PACS, who worked with a lengthy ledger-'Bahi Khata' to keep all types of records, with powers of small financing just to uplift them upto a level of self-dependency. But now they have emerged to compete with the commercial banks in all fields, having an adorable office set-up with a computerized system. Union Home and Cooperation Minister, Amit Shah, has taken more than 54 initiatives in a short span of time. "Computerization of PACS" project is one of the major initiatives of the Ministry under which 63,000 PACS are being computerized with the total financial outlay of Rs.2,516 Crores. Till now, more than 12,000 PACS have been computerized across 28 States/UTs. The Ministry of Cooperation had invited the Chairpersons of around 250 beneficiary PACS



and their spouses from 24 States and 2 UTs across the country to witness the Republic Day celebrations. On the eve of Republic Day, Union Minister of State for Cooperation B.L. Verma interacted and had dinner with the Special Guests. During the interaction, Verma highlighted many significant initiatives taken by the Ministry of Cooperation. He also assured the Chairpersons of PACS about the Ministry of Cooperation unwavering commitment to furthering the strengthening of the cooperative sector. Some of the Chairpersons shared their experiences about the benefits derived from the PACS Computerization Project to their respective Societies. **A case study of Haryana's Apex Bank** What the baseline reality is? Interacting with the Ground Post, the newly joined Managing Director of "The Haryana State Co-operative Apex Bank Ltd." (HARCO BANK), Dr. Prafulla Ranjan, claims that we are fully complying with the government's guidelines and policies. While issuing a brief statement about the activities of the bank,

vices to the people of the state, the Core Banking System (CBS), RTGS, NEFT, SMS Alert, ATM, Micro ATM Card facility have been introduced in Harco Bank and 19 district central cooperative bank branches. Mobile Van Banking is operational and HARCO Bank has started providing the facility of Phone pay, G Pay on UPI on mobile apps to its customers. **Sharing the figures of the bank, Dr. Ranjan stated that the** Paid-up Share Capital of the HARCO bank was Rs. 363.13 crore as on 31.01.2024 and the bank's own funds as on January end was Rs. 1315.89 crore. With a solid working Capital of the bank as on 31.01.2024 Rs. 10365.51 crore, bank has earned a net profit of Rs 88.52 crore for the year 2022-23 whereas it was Rs. 67.84 Crore for the year 2021-22. With a strong base of the deposits of the bank Rs. 5021.41 crore as on 31.1.2024, the bank during the Rabi Season 2023-24 has advanced a sum of Rs. 3773.10 crore against the disbursement target of Rs.7673.00 crore till 31.01.2024 and we are sure that we will achieve the target upto March end. To boost the 'Beti Bachao - Beti Padhao' mission of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, HARCO Bank is soon going to implement 'Hamari Bithiya' scheme, under which more interest will be given on recurring deposits / fixed deposits for minor female children, so that the said deposits can be used for their bright future, added Dr. Ranjan.

**Challenges before Co-operative Banking channel** Despite these charming working figures of the Apex HARCO Bank, its root level PACS are facing hardship in recovering the loan amount in time and the Kharif Season recovery of District Central Co-operative Banks (DCCBs) as on 31.01.2024 remained 23.99%, which shows the critical position of these institutions. Commenting over this, HARCO Bank's MD Dr. Ranjan says that there are some issues which are being resolved and the recovery position will improve upto the March end, however, the recovery position of the Apex bank is very appreciable and the NPA of the Apex bank is less than one percent. **Now the question arises, what are the reasons behind lower recovery at PACS level?** Despite their substantial role in the agriculture sector, cooperative banks- especially PACS, particularly in the rural sector, often face challenges in risk management. This leads to issues like default in loans and hindrance in their ability to lend effectively. When analysed, it was found that failure of crops due to natural calamities, faulty Fasal Bima Yojna, unnecessary insurance claim rejection by the insurance companies and a longer delay in settlement of claims lead to the default in loan repayment by the farmers. Uncertainty of MSP also creates resentment and feeling of revenge in the farmers, which causes non-repayment of the loan. Farmers' agitation and luring slogans of loan waiver by

the politicians to woo the farmers' votes are also major factors in default for recovery. Other loanee- small shopkeepers, agricultural labourers and persons involved in small scale service sectors, in the villages are also dependent upon the farmers, hence they also get caught in default, resulting in deterioration of the health of PACS. But, now the central government, through the Union Home & Co-operative Minister Amit Shah's 54 initiatives, providing lucrative schemes, has undertaken to improve the health and working of PACS and make them profitable. Implementing best practices in timely risk assessment, regular loan monitoring, and effective debt collection will be key to strengthening the financial resilience of these root level institutions and safeguarding sustainable growth in the agricultural sector. S N Sharma, a retired AGM, having a vast experience in rural banking, now associated with HARCO BANK as a Resource Person in Business Diversification and Product Innovation cell, says, "A bright future is awaiting ahead for the Co-operative Banking Sector - especially the PACS, as the co-operative banks are present in each nook and corner of state mostly in remote areas where the commercial banks feel shy to work. Their presence is upto grassroots level. These are the backbone of the rural economy." But, keeping in mind the relevancy of these institutions, the strenuous efforts are required from grassroots to top level. This is the only solution.

# Carbon Tax Imposition Unjust For Developing Nations: CEA



**NEW DELHI:** Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran expressed grave reservations regarding the imposition of tariffs by certain advanced economies on high-carbon goods from other sources. He argued against penalising developing countries, emphasising their significant contribution to global economic activities. Nageswaran underscored the vulnerability of developing countries transitioning towards renewable energy, especially amidst geopolitical tensions. The CEA highlighted the vital role developing nations play in sustaining lives and businesses in developed countries, questioning the fairness of their treatment in return. "If so, what is the premium they are getting in return for taking action on their part to ensure economic activity in the developed world? So, that is also something we need to think about and obviously, the kind of premium that the developed world is contemplating paying to the developing world cannot be the carbon border adjustment mechanism," Nageswaran said.

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



## INTERNATIONAL

# Russian Opposition leader and Putin critic Alexei Navalny dies in prison

**MOSCOW:** Alexei Navalny, Russia's most famous Opposition leader, died on Friday after collapsing and losing consciousness at the penal colony north of the Arctic Circle where he was serving a long jail term, the Russian prison service said.

Navalny, 47, rose to prominence more than a decade ago by lampooning President Vladimir Putin and the Russian elite whom he accused of vast corruption, avarice and opulence.

The Federal Penitentiary Service of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District said in a statement that Navalny "felt unwell" after a walk at the IK-3 penal colony in Kharp, about 1,900 km (1,200 miles) north east of Moscow.

He lost consciousness almost immediately, it said. "All necessary resuscitation measures were carried out, which did not yield positive results. Doctors of the ambulance stated the death of the convict," the prison service said, adding that causes of death were being established.

Putin has been told about Navalny's death, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. Putin,



who is running for re-election in a month, was shown on a television clip visiting a factory in the Urals.

Supporters of Navalny said they could not confirm he was dead, but that if he was then they believed he had been killed.

"Russian authorities publish a confession that they killed Alexei Navalny in prison," Navalny aide Leonid Volkov wrote on social media. "We do not have any way to confirm it or to prove this isn't true."

Condemnation quickly poured in from Western governments.

"Dreadful news about Alexei Navalny... If the report about his

position leader Alexei Navalny was "murder", and said that he believed harsh treatment had led to his demise.

"My sincere belief is that it was the conditions of detention that led to Navalny's death... His sentence was supplemented by murder," Muratov said, offering condolences to his family.

Navalny earned admiration from Russia's disparate opposition for voluntarily returning to Russia in 2021 from Germany, where he had been treated for what Western laboratory tests showed was an attempt to poison him with a nerve agent.

Navalny said at the time that he was poisoned in Siberia in August 2020. The Kremlin denied trying to kill him and said there was no evidence he was poisoned with a nerve agent.

In an interview in Moscow in 2011, Navalny was asked by Reuters if he was afraid of challenging Putin's system.

"That's the difference between me and you: you are afraid and I am not afraid," he said. "I realize there is danger, but why should I be afraid?"

# Rishi Sunak has suffered a double-blow after losing two by-elections to Labour



**LONDON:** UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has suffered a double-blow after losing two by-elections to Labour Party, overturning significant majorities in both, the media reported.

Both Kingswood and Wellingborough turned from blue to red, meaning this government has seen the most by-election losses of any Con-

servative administration since the Second World War, Sky News reported.

The losses do not bode well as Downing Street continues its preparation for the general election due this year.

The results also provide some relief for Keir Starmer after a challenging week for the Labour leader, having scaled back his party's green invest-

ment plan and been embroiled in an anti-semitism crisis.

Labour's wins in Kingswood and Wellingborough mean the Conservatives have now lost 10 by-elections in the course of this Parliament — two more than the eight defeats suffered by the 1992-97 Conservative administration led by John Major, The Guardian reported.

It means the Conservative government has lost more by-elections than any previous government since the 1966-70 Labour administration of Harold Wilson, which endured 15 losses, The Guardian reported.

The size of the majority Labour overturned at Wellingborough — 18, 540 — is the third biggest Tory majority the party has overturned at a by-election since the war, behind those in Mid Bedfordshire in October 2023 (24, 664) and Selby & Ainsty in July 2023 (20, 137).

1 in 9 adults in US experience Long Covid: CDC



**NEW YORK:** About one in nine adults in the US who have ever had Covid-19 continue to experience Long Covid with a wide range of symptoms, according to new data of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

To bolster Long Covid research efforts, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced on Tuesday that it is investing an additional \$515 million over the next four years into the Researching Covid to Enhance Recovery (RECOVER) Initiative, a nationwide research program to fully understand, diagnose and treat Long Covid.

Nearly 90, 000 adults and children are participating in RECOVER observational studies through more than 300 clinical research sites across the country, Xinhua news agency reported, citing NIH.

## Indian Army fires upon Pakistani UAVs in Poonch region



FW DESK

Indian Army troops engaged Pakistani quadcopters by opening fire in the Balno-Mendhar and Gulpur sectors in Poonch district.

The flying objects, suspected to be surveillance drones from Pakistan, briefly entered Indian territory but retreated upon facing gunfire. Following the encounter, a search operation was initiated in both sectors to ensure no weapons or narcotics were dropped by the quadcopters.

According to officials, the troops observed two quadcopters entering the Mendhar area around 6.30 am, prompting the Indian forces to open fire. Similarly, in the Gulpur sector, a couple of quadcopters were spotted around the same time, and firing by Indian troops compelled them to return.

This incident follows a similar event on February 12 when Army troops fired on an enemy drone detected in the Mendhar sector.

The use of drones by Pakistan to drop narcotics and weapons in Jammu and Kashmir has raised concerns, leading the local authorities, including the Jammu and Kashmir Police, to announce a cash reward of Rs three lakh for information on drones flown from across the border with the intent of smuggling illicit items.

## Indian Govt Launches Digital Payment Connectivity with Mauritius & Sri Lanka



**NEW DELHI:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi, along with his counterparts from Mauritius, Pravin Kumar Jugnauth, and President of Sri Lanka, Ranil Wickremesinghe, participated in the virtual launch of RuPay cards and Unified Payment Interface (UPI) connectivity between India and the respective countries on Monday.

In his remarks, Modi expressed hope that the new fintech services would benefit the two nations and emphasised the role of UPI in uniting partners with India.

"Today marks a special day for the three friendly countries

of the Indian Ocean Region as we connect our historic ties with modern digital technology," stated the Prime Minister.

He highlighted the revolutionary change brought about by digital public infrastructure in India and reiterated the country's focus on its neighbourhood-first policy.

With this connectivity, Indian travellers to Mauritius can now pay merchants using UPI, while Mauritian travellers can do the same in India using the Instant Payment System (IPS) app of Mauritius.

Additionally, the adoption of RuPay technology through the

MauCAS card scheme enables banks in Mauritius to issue RuPay cards domestically, usable at ATMs and PoS terminals both locally and in India.

Mauritius thus becomes the first country outside Asia to issue cards using RuPay technology. Indian RuPay cards will also be accepted at ATMs and PoS terminals in Mauritius.

The digital payments connectivity with Sri Lanka enables Indian travellers to make QR code-based payments at merchant locations in Sri Lanka using their UPI apps.

These projects, developed and executed by NPCI International Payments Limited (NIPL), along with partner banks and non-banks from Mauritius and Sri Lanka, received guidance and support from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

Operational through select banks, non-banks, and third-party application providers in India, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka, these facilities will be scaled up in the future, according to a statement issued by the RBI.

## Attack on Indian students: US says 'working very hard' to address the issue

**WASHINGTON:** Asserting that there is no excuse for violence based on race or gender, the White House has said that the US is working very hard to thwart and disrupt attacks on Indians as well as Indian-origin students.

A series of attacks beginning this year has put the focus back on the security and safety of the Indian students across the country which has witnessed more than four deaths from the community.

"There's no excuse for violence, certainly based on race or gender or religion or any other

factor. That's just unacceptable here in the United States," John Kirby, Coordinator for Strategic Communications at the National Security Council in the White House, said on Thursday.

Allaying the fears of parents in India as well as in the US, Kirby said President Joe Biden and his administration are working "very hard" to address the situation.

"The President and this administration have been working very, very hard to make sure we're doing everything we can to work with state and local authorities to try to thwart and



disrupt those kinds of attacks and make it clear to anybody who might consider them that they'll be held properly accountable," Kirby said in response to

a question.

Five Indian students have died in quick succession in the US since the start of this year, including Shreyas Reddy Benigeri in Cincinnati and Purdue University's Neel Acharya in Indiana.

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said that the welfare of Indian students abroad is one of the foremost priorities of the government.

Indian students constitute more than 25 per cent of the over one million foreign students studying in the US, according to a November 2023 Open Doors report.

The number of Indians who travelled to the US for higher education increased by 35 per cent and resulted in an all-time high of 2, 68, 923 students in the academic year 2022-23, the report said.

Last year, the US consular team in India issued over 140, 000 student visas — more than in any other country in the world, setting a record for the third year in a row.

## India Rejects Data Exclusivity Demand in FTA Talks to Support Generic Drugs Industry

**NEW DELHI:** India has firmly rejected the demand for 'data exclusivity' provision in the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations, affirming its commitment to supporting the interests of its generic drugs industry.

Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal emphasised this stance, stating that India stands with its generic industry and will not compromise its interests in any FTA agreements, reported businessline.

The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) bloc, which includes Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland, had pushed for the inclusion of data exclusivity in the proposed FTA with India.

However, India dismissed this demand, signalling its dedication to protecting the flourishing generic drug industry.

This decision brings relief



to the Indian generic industry, especially amidst ongoing negotiations with the UK and the EU, where demands for concessions beyond the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement have been made. Despite pressure to extend commitments, India remains steadfast in its support for generic drugs.

Notably, data exclusivity is not mandated under the TRIPS Agreement, and Indian laws do not provide for it.

for a specific drug, hinders generic competitors from seeking regulatory approval based on the originator's data.

India's rejection of this provision underscores its commitment to preventing monopolies on original drugs, which would adversely impact generic drug manufacturers.

Notably, data exclusivity is not mandated under the TRIPS Agreement, and Indian laws do not provide for it.

## Two Indian-origin men indicted for committing visa fraud in US

**NEW YORK:** Two Indian-origin men have been indicted by a federal grand jury in Boston for allegedly staging armed robberies to commit visa fraud in the US state of Massachusetts.

Rambhai Patel, 36, and Balwinder Singh, 39, from New York staged armed robberies so that "victims" could apply for immigration benefits in exchange for thousands of dollars. The two were indicted last week on one count each of conspiracy to commit visa fraud, according to the US Attorney's Office for the District of Massachusetts.

Patel was arrested in Seattle on December 13, 2023, and following an initial appearance in the Western District of Washington, he was ordered detained pending trial.



Singh was also arrested on the same day in Queens and had his initial appearance in the Eastern District of New York.

According to the charging documents, beginning March 2023, Patel and his co-con-

spirators, including at times Singh, set up and carried out staged armed robberies.

These were carried out at eight convenience/liquor stores and fast food restaurants across the US, including at least four in Massachusetts.

It is alleged that the purpose of the staged robberies was to allow the clerks present to claim that they were victims of a violent crime on an application for U non-immigration status (U Visa).

A U Visa is available to victims of certain crimes who have suffered mental or physical abuse and who have been helpful to law enforcement in the investigation or prosecution of criminal activity.

In the course of the alleged staged robberies, the "robber" would threaten store clerks and/or owners with an apparent firearm before taking cash from the register and fleeing, while the interaction was captured on store surveillance video.

The clerks and/or owners would then wait five or more

minutes until the "robber" had escaped before calling the police to report the "crime".

The "victims" are alleged to have paid Patel to participate in the scheme. In turn, Patel allegedly paid the store owners for the use of their stores for the staged robberies.

One purported victim allegedly paid \$20, 000 to participate as a victim in one of the staged armed robberies.

It is alleged that at least two purported victim co-conspirators submitted U Visa applications based on being victims of the staged armed robberies.

The charge of conspiracy to commit visa fraud provides for a sentence of up to five years in prison, three years of supervised release, and a fine of \$250, 000.



# Book Launch 'An Uncommon Love' Narayana Murthy & Sudha Murthy's 46<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

ARUN KUMAR RAO  
Bangalore

In a celebration as sweet as love itself, Sapna book house and Juggernaut Books, launch of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's newest gem, "An Uncommon Love: The Early Life of Narayana Murthy, Infosys founder and wife Sudha Murthy. Commemorating the 46th wedding anniversary of the iconic couple.

"An Uncommon Love," published by Juggernaut Books, delves into the love saga of Narayana Murthy and Sudha Murthy in a manner that not only touches the heart but also tickles the funny bone. Guided by the literary finesse of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the creative force behind bestsellers like "The Palace of Illusions," this collaboration with the Murthys weaves a narrative that exudes charm and authenticity.

Chitra intricately hand-picks significant incidents and conversations from the couple's lives, expertly moulding the narrative to



encapsulate their growth. Through carefully chosen events, «An Uncommon Love» skilfully transports readers to a distinct time and place, offering a compelling journey into the essence of the characters' evolu-

tion and their loved ones as well.

On this special occasion, Narayana Murthy family, including Akshata her daughters and Rohan Murthy, as they gathered to celebrate four decades of love

and companionship. The launch wasn't just a book but a love-infused experience, adorned with heartwarming conversations with Narayana Murthy, Sudha Murthy, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

# Team ISRO, Bollywood actress Taapsee Pannu set new Guinness World Records

ARUN KUMAR RAO  
Bangalore

Bajaj Allianz Life, one of India's leading private life insurers, organized the 4th edition of #Plankathon in Bengaluru's Sri Kanteerava Outdoor Stadium to celebrate the Indian Space Research Organization's (ISRO) remarkable achievements with Chandrayaan and the Solar Mission, Aditya L1. The on-ground Plankathon event was a culmination of the Company's hugely popular campaign #PlankForAces that invited Indians to come together to thank the brilliant scientists at ISRO, by uploading their video of holding the abdominal plank.

The Plankathon event in Bengaluru also brought in a team from ISRO scientists led by N Sudheer Kumar, Director, Capacity Building & Public Outreach, ISRO, HQ. Popular Bollywood actress Taapsee Pannu, who has several popular Hindi movies under her belt including Mission Mangal and most recently



Dunki championed the entire Plankathon event on ground. Tarun Chugh, MD & CEO, Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance, were also present along with actress Pannu. Guinness World Records adjudicator declared Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance as a new GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS title holder for largest online video album of people holding the abdominal plank position. #PlankForAces saw 5,194 vid-

eos being uploaded by people from all segments.

Taapsee Pannu, commented, "The #PlankForAces movement was especially close to me and was equally inspirational as it was such a unique campaign on fitness that brought so many people together, as it was an opportunity to thank our scientists from ISRO! I congratulate Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance on their fourth edition of Plankathon

and for their new GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS title I hope everyone who planked today, or uploaded their videos for #PlankForAces, continue their health and fitness movement and many more join as well for us to be healthier and more vibrant community." She added.

Taapsee Pannu led the on-ground event of #PlankForAces of Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance not only because of her immediate association with the popular Indian movie Mission Mangal, but also for the fervour and enthusiasm that the actor brings to all her roles. She has played the lead in several movies across genres that either have a flavour of strong message for the society, being independent, fitness or of sports. These attributes made her the prime choice to lead the fourth edition of Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance's flagship event Plankathon, which was designed to promote India's uniqueness as well as health and fitness amongst the citizens.

# Shahid-Kriti film drives Raghav Mathur's 'Teri Baaton' track up to YouTube's top ranking



MUMBAI: Indipop artist Raghav Mathur is over-the-moon as his 2000's hit track "Teri Baaton" has made it to the top spot on Youtube, courtesy Shahid Kapoor and Kriti Sanon-starrer "Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya". He says the reprised version is a tribute to my ever-evolving journey in the music industry. Raghav said: "I've always believed that your patience should never undermine your dreams. And this I guess is the universe's way of celebrating the wait! I am humbled and grateful for the overwhelming response 'Teri Baaton' has received over the years and 'Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya' testifies the relentless love and support of my fans. "They have been my constant armour and I owe my success to them. Also, my mum and lyricist for giving me a masterpiece called "Teri Baaton" decades ago. The reprised version is a tribute to my ever-evolving journey in the music industry and a reminder of my existence as an artist to the glory of my fans."

# Official language Award Conferred to Satish Singh

AHMEDABAD: Rajbhasha Hindi Samman Competition was organized by Café Social and Inbook Foundation in November 2023, in which entries of stories were invited. The result of the competition was announced in the first week of February 2024. The story "Ilzaam" by Mr. Satish



Singh, a banker, poet, storyteller, and senior columnist, was awarded the second prize in this competition, while Mrs. Meenakshi Dubey of Indore, Madhya Pradesh got the first prize and Mr. Chandraprakash of Akola, Maharashtra got the third prize & consolation prizes were given to other 5 storytellers. Mr. Singh will be given Rs.25,000/-, Mrs. Dubey will be given Rs.51,000/- and Mr. Chandraprakash will be given Rs.15,000/- while each consolation prize winner will be given an amount of Rs. 2,500/-.

Satish Singh is a Postgraduate in Hindi Literature, Mass Communication and MBA (Finance) and has also done Diploma in Hindi Journalism from the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi in the session 1994-95. Mr. Singh has been writing freelance on banking and economic topics for the last 15 years and had also been actively involved in mainstream journalism for 5 years.

# "The UP Files" first look unveiled with Chief Guest Anupam Kher

DOMINICK RODRIGUES  
Mumbai

"Making the film - "The UP Files" - was the need of the hour," said veteran Bollywood actor, director and producer, Padma Shree/Padma Bhushan awardee Anupam Kher, while speaking during the poster launch and viewing of the film's teaser here recently.

"The film +Kashmir Files+ opened the way for making such films and we can expect more such films like the UP Files in the future," Kher - who was the Chief Guest at the function -- said while expressing admiration of the actors and others involved in the making of the film.



The event marked a significant milestone as Anupam Kher unveiled the 'first look' materials including the teaser

and posters, while also providing a glimpse into the world of "The UP Files."

Describing the journey of

producing "The UP Files" as both +challenging and rewarding,+ the film's Producer Kuldeep Umrao Singh said "We believe in the power of storytelling and with this film, we aim to create an immersive experience that lingers in the hearts of our viewers."

The film's Director Neeraj Sahai said +The UP Files+ is a "labor of love, a culmination of dedicated efforts to bring forth a compelling narrative that resonates with the audience."

Actor Manoj Joshi, who also acts in the film, noted that UP as a state has undergone significant changes in the past few years and that films are an important medium to share the stories of the people of India.

# Shivangi confident of hearing "good things" from participants as Assam readies for KIUG 2023

KAVITA SHARMA  
Guwahati

Assam swimmer Shivangi Sharma, who was part of the quartet that created a national record in women's 4x200m freestyle relay at the Hangzhou Asian Games, expressed her delight about the prospects of her home state gearing up to host the forthcoming Khelo India University Games 2023, as a major sporting event returns to the Northeastern state after a four-year wait.

Shivangi, who sizzled in the pool four years ago when Assam hosted the third edition of the Khelo India Youth Games, winning five medals, expressed her confidence on the state's preparedness for the KIUG as she awaits to hear "nice things" about her state.

"I'm extremely happy that Assam is hosting the Khelo India University Games. When I participated at the KIYG, I saw how our state government made a wholehearted effort in arranging the event, and everyone loved it," she narrated.

"The arrangements were superb, everyone had said that the people were nice, the management was superb. So I am looking forward for the KIUG, as it always feels nice to hear good things about your own state. It's been a long four year wait, Khelo India is back in Assam," said Shivangi.

The youngster, who is currently training in New Delhi, spoke highly about the infrastructure back in her state, while also citing the improved facilities at the Dr Zakir Husain Aquatics Complex, at the Sarusajai Sports Complex - the venue for the swimming events at the upcoming KIUG.

"If I start talking about sports in general in Assam, it wasn't that great earlier but after Prime Minister Naren-



dra Modi launched so many schemes like Khelo India, Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), the focus has shifted to sports in Assam like other parts of the country. During KIYG, there were a lot of changes that the government invested in," she said.

"I never trained in Sarusajai but I saw that entire pool there is so well maintained. In the month of January, it's normally super cold in Guwahati, and they turn on the heater so that the swimmers could train in warm water. It's comfortable for the swimmers. The only thing Assam needs is more trained coaches as there is no dearth of talent in the state. But overall, Assam has all the facilities and the infrastructure to host multi-discipline events," she counted.

The ace swimmer felt that hosting the prestigious KIUG in the state will be a great learning experience for the budding athletes, as they will witness more than 4,500 athletes from over 200 universities in action.

"People will be more aware, as they will be watching the seniors and top university level athletes (in her case swimmers) competing. It will be a nice experience for the budding athletes to learn from the seniors, and work harder towards their goals of achieving sporting excellence," she said.

Reflecting on her experience at the Hangzhou Asian Games, Shivangi said, "After participating in the KIYG 2020, I made up my mind that I needed to get into the Asian Games squad, no matter what. I had to keep my promise made to the people of my state. And finally when it came true, it made me believe in myself more and I was extremely happy. But this is the first milestone that I have hit, and actually proud of myself."

"It was an amazing experience for me, it was a dream come true meet for me, so more than the result, I was looking forward to the experience of competing against the world's best swimmers in Hangzhou," she added.

# Yuvraj Singh may join BJP and replace Sunny Deol from Gurdaspur



MEENAKSHI BHATTACHARYA  
New Delhi

As General Election is knocking the door, many things can happen within a few days. Former cricketer Yuvraj Singh is likely to join the BJP ahead of the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections. There is Speculation is rife

that he may be fielded by the saffron party from the Gurdaspur seat in Punjab replacing Bollywood actor Sunny Deol. Gautam Gambhir is very unlikely to be repeated from Delhi. Yuvraj Singh entering politics gained ground after his recent meeting with his Mother with Union Minister Nitin Gadkari. Ater many, now this is

SIDHU HAS BEEN FACING A TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LOCAL CONGRESS UNIT EVER SINCE HIS ENTRY INTO THE PARTY. THE FUTURE OF THE CONGRESS IN THE STATE IS ALSO IN DOLDRUMS.

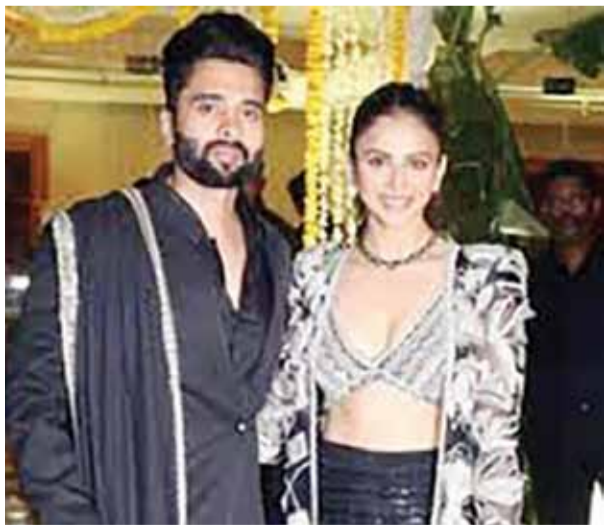
the turn of Senior Congress leader, Comedian and former Punjab Congress president Navjot Singh Sidhu may re-join the BJP. He is believed to have sought time from the senior BJP leadership as he wants to placate the leaders to seek a re-entry. Sidhu has been facing a troubled relationship with the local Congress unit ever since his entry into the party. The future of the Congress in the state is also in doldrums.

# Vidyt lauds Arjun Rampal for seamlessly moulding into any character



MUMBAI: Action star Vidyut Jammwal, who is gearing up for the release of his upcoming theatrical film 'Crakk', has heaped praise on his co-actor Arjun Rampal. The 'Commando' actor said that it's a delight to work with Arjun as he can seamlessly mould into any character given to him. Elaborating on the same, Vidyut said: "He is amazing. He can mould himself into any character's requirements. He works so hard on his techniques to seamlessly get into any role. It was a delight watching him as a co-star, and see him get into this zone." Arjun explained why the film is titled 'Crakk' as he said: "The reason this film is called 'Crakk' is because everyone is cracking at some point of time in it because of the pressure put on them.

# Rakul Preet Singh, Jackky Bhagnani opt for eco-conscious nuptials



MUMBAI: Bollywood couple Rakul Preet Singh and Jackky Bhagnani, who are all set to get married on February 21, will be having an eco-friendly wedding in the picturesque locale of Goa.

The three-day affair, starting on February 19 and culminating in their marriage on February 21, stands out for its green initiatives.

Sources reveal that the

couple has skipped on paper invites in favour of digital-only announcements to guests. In keeping with their eco-friendly theme, the wedding will feature no firework displays.

Taking their commitment a step further, Rakul and Jackky are working with experts to assess and offset their wedding's carbon footprint.

These specialists will calculate the environmental impact

of their festivities and advise on the quantity of trees to be planted to balance it out. Following this advice, the couple plans to plant these trees, symbolising their dedication to the environment either immediately after their wedding or the next day.

On Monday, their digital wedding card surfaced and the opening card had the hashtag #ABDONOBHAGNA-NI.

After dating for a few years, Rakul and Jackky chose Goa to be their wedding venue as they had reportedly fallen in love in the same location, according to reports.

Jackky's debut film was 'Kal Kissne Dekha', which came out in 2009. He then starred in films such as 'F.A.L.T.U.', 'Ajab Gazabb Love', 'Rangrezz' and 'Youngistaan', among many others. Rakul made her acting debut with the Kannada film 'Gilli' in 2009. She stepped into the world of Hindi cinema with 'Yaariyan' after which she starred in films such as 'De De Pyaar De', 'Runway 34', 'Chhatrivali', 'I Love You' and 'Doctor G' among many others.

# Tisca Chopra Unveils 'Mandeep Meets Mandeep': An Inspirational Book about a Blood Cancer Survivor's Journey

NEW DELHI: In a moving course of events, a one-of-its-kind book named "Mandeep Meets Mandeep" was launched in New Delhi in the presence of renowned Bollywood actress and author Tisca Chopra. The book is non-fiction and based on a real-life story about a patient named Mandeep who won his battle against blood cancer when his namesake Mandeep came forward as the perfect match for a stem cell transplant.

The book "Mandeep Meets Mandeep," which is authored by Dr. Sonu Sharma, a medical professional and writer, is based on true events that unfold a remarkable tale of two lives, both named Mandeep, intertwined by fate and a shared HLA-type. Mandeep, a blood cancer survivor and 35-year-old farmer from Punjab, was diagnosed with Chronic Myeloid Leukemia in 2009. Unfortunately, though



Mandeep was advised for a stem cell transplant, he could not find a Human Leukocyte Antigen (HLA) matched stem cell donor within his family. Mandeep had to wait for over 3 years before an HLA-matching

unrelated donor was identified with the help of DKMS BMST Foundation India, and he underwent a stem cell transplant in January 2020. Despite diverse backgrounds, their unique genetic match

offered a chance at survival. The story weaves through sacrifice, community support, and the delicate balance of life, connecting two individuals destined for an extraordinary encounter.