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● Israel and Lebanon are prepping for a war neither wants

● Pak police raid central secretariat of Imran Khan's part: Report



● 'Life is a great battle': Hemant Soren, arrested by ED

● Rajasthan Congress terms Budget as disappointing, state BJP leaders hail FM

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DIPHU, KARBI ANGLONG

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PRICE ₹ 8



## Modi Sarkar ki Guarantee

PM SVANidhi ensuring self-reliance in business

Hamara Sankalp  
Viksit Bharat

Collateral-free loans to 78 lakh street vendors



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### HT BRIEFS

#### Rape victim

DIPHU: In a memorandum submitted by social organisations to the district commissioner of Karbi Anglong demands that swift and stringent action be taken against the accused in the rape and murder of a 12 year old minor girl in Karbi Anglong. The social organisations Karbi Nimso Chingthur Asong (KNCA), Karbi Students Association (KSA), Karbi Anglong Women Justice Forum (KAWJF), All India Progressive Women Association (APIWA), All India Students Association (AISA), Hills Committee, Students and Youth for Justice (SYJ) and Serpinding Serdihun Pirhak Asong (SSPA) while narrating the incident express shock and outrage. Terming the incident as barbaric and inhuman the organisations demand the application of POCSO Act and section 302 IPC. Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) is urged to ensure the security of women in the district.

#### Youths Club

BOKAJAN: Sot Recho Youths Club (SRYC) and Sot Recho Village Committee felicitated the 2024 Karbi Youths Festival (KYF) Miss KYF, Sami Serlika Rongpi, Rongpi, daughter of Rajendra Rongpi and Probhavati Beypi, previously was the runner-up of Miss Borjan. President, SRYC, Raju Englung; Secretary, Dilip Teron; Sot Recho Village headman, Anand Killing and others were present at the function.

#### Heroin recovered

BOKAJAN: The police in Karbi Anglong arrested a woman with heroin in a routine check at NH 39 under Khatkhati Police Station. The police intercepted an auto rickshaw and on searching found 176.72 gm of heroin which was packed in plastic cases. In this connection a woman Rupali Datta (38), resident of Mariani, Golaghat district was arrested. The recovered contraband is worth ₹15 in the market.

## No I-T rate change, cut in food, fertiliser and fuel subsidies

FM avoids populism in pre-poll interim budget: 11 pc increase in infra spend, measures for agri sector proposed

NEW DELHI, Feb 1: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday announced a ₹ 11.11 lakh crore spending on infrastructure and vowed to continue reforms as she resisted resorting to populist measures in Modi government's last Budget before general elections, instead choosing to stay on the path of cutting deficit while bolstering measures for focus groups.

Presenting a vote on account or an interim Budget for 2024-25, Sitharaman proposed no changes in income tax rates for individuals and corporates, as well as import duty but offered amnesty for disputed income tax demands of the period prior to 2014-15 as a relief to small taxpayers.

In her close to an hour-long Budget speech in the Lok Sabha, she listed her government's achievements across sectors in the last 10 years and announced measures to boost tourism, housing and renewable energy. Giving a sneak preview of what will be the Modi government's priority in the third term, if re-elected, she said economic poli-



cies that foster and sustain growth, facilitate inclusive development and contribute to generation of resources to power investments will be adopted towards making India a developed country by 2047.

"The next five years will be years of unprecedented development and golden moments to realise the dream of developed India by 2047," she said.

"Guided by the principle 'reform, per-

form, and transform', the government will take up next generation reforms, and build consensus with the states and stakeholders for effective implementation," she said. The interim Budget seeks Parliament's authorisation for spending for four months and the full Budget for the fiscal year starting April will be presented in July by the government elected in April-May general elections.

Sitharaman's Budget proposes to cut food, fertiliser and fuel subsidies by 8 per cent in 2024-25 over last year while keeping the allocation for rural employment scheme MGNREGA unchanged.

Spending on infrastructure such as roads, ports and airports has been raised by 11 per cent to ₹ 11.1 lakh crore in a bid to sustain the current world-record beating economic growth and create more jobs.

The Union government will also provide ₹ 1.3 lakh crore long-term loans to states to spend on infrastructure. The government will build 2 crore affordable houses in the next 5 years and (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

### Budget strengthens foundation of developed India: PM



NEW DELHI, Feb 1: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said the interim Budget presented by Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman offers the "guarantee" of strengthening the foundation of a developed India and carries the "confidence of continuity".

In a televised address following the budget, he said it will empower the four pillars of developed India -- the young, poor, women and farmers.

"This is a budget of creating India's future," Modi said, adding that it reflects the young aspirations of a young India.

While keeping the fiscal deficit under control, the prime minister noted that total expenditure has seen a historic increase to ₹ 11,11,111 crore in this budget. "In economists' parlance, this is a kind of sweet spot," Modi said. He said it will create millions of new employment opportunities for India's youth along with the creation of modern infrastructure of the 21st century. (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## Interim budget missing accountability, shows govt is 'of the rich, for the rich': Congress



NEW DELHI, Feb 1: The Congress said the interim budget presented by the government on Thursday is missing on both accountability and vision and questioned how many of the promises made in the last ten years have been fulfilled.

The opposition party alleged that the ruling NDA's approach to the economy and governance is biased in favour of the rich and the budget neither talks about the promised two crore jobs every year nor about taming inflation or doubling farmers' incomes.

"It is a government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich," former finance minister P Chidambaram alleged. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said the finance minister has said that they will present a white paper on the previous government.

"In this context, we ask the Modi Government, how many of the promises made by the government in the last 10 years have been fulfilled," he said, adding only big dreams have been shown to people, schemes re-launched by changing names, but what happened to old promises has not been told. "How will the new dreams being shown get fulfilled," he asked. "Both accountability and vision (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## Himanta lauds 'exceptional' interim Budget

HT Bureau  
GUWAHATI, Feb 1: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday praised the interim budget, affirming its exceptional nature and its dual purpose of positioning India as the world's fastest-growing economy for an extended period and laying the groundwork for becoming the third-largest financial power by 2029.

Sarma also said that the developmental data presented by union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman during her budget speech shows that people will elect Prime Minister for a record third time.

"The March Towards Viksit Bharat Continues! The Interim

Budget 2024-2025 sits on the pedestal of outstanding governance over the last 10 years. As a citizen, I take immense pride in the leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri @narendramodiji, who has delivered historic accomplishments in the last one decade, transcending the cumulative achievements of the past," he wrote on micro-blogging site X.

In a nutshell, this Interim Budget serves the twin aim of firmly establishing Bharat as the world's fastest growing economy for a sustained period of time and lays a strong foundation for the PM to lead the nation's journey in becoming the (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## Karbi tribes usher in New Year with traditional celebration 'Ningkan Kimi'

### HT Bureau

DIPHU, Feb 1: The Karbi community in Assam and neighboring states of Northeast India marked the advent of their traditional New Year -- Ningkan Kimi -- with vibrant festivities and cultural expressions.

Villages and towns resonated with the spirit of the occasion, as community members engaged in various activities throughout the day. Festivities included traditional games, sports events, community

meetings, and discussions, culminating in a communal feast and a cultural night in the evening.

Ningkan Kimi holds particular significance for the Karbi tribes, signifying the commencement of agricultural activities in the month of February. This period is regarded as the first month of the year for the Karbis. The month begins with tribesmen venturing into the jungles for selecting sites for agriculture. The jungle is cleared, dried for (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

## Current govt focused on providing major facelift to Guwahati: Himanta

### HT Bureau

GUWAHATI, Feb 1: The present government is focused on providing major facelift to Guwahati, said chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said here at an event in the city on Thursday.

He said the Guwahati Municipal Corporation has been making relentless efforts in resolving issues related to lack of public amenities within the largest city of Northeast India.

Sarma also appealed to the members of the general public to extend helping hands in maintenance of the public toilets, burial grounds and crematorium, and the community halls that were inaugurated today.

"The current government is focused on providing a major facelift to Guwahati. Numerous public infrastructure projects such as the flyovers at Super Market, Zoo Road and Maligaon that were inaugurated in the past three years are manifestations of the current government's commitments towards the residents of Guwahati metropolitan district," he added after laying the foundation stone for construction of a flyover with a project cost of ₹ 376 crore over Garbhanga road connecting

Cycle Factory with Lal Ganes measuring 2.84 kilometres in length and 12 metre in width. Besides this, Sarma also inaugurated a total of 24 numbers of public toilets, 31 community halls, (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

**CM lays foundation stone of ₹ 376 crore, 2.84-km long flyover connecting Lal Ganesh with Cycle Factory**

## NE LPG cylinder carriers end stir after admin threatens ESMA



GUWAHATI, Feb 1: LPG cylinder transporters of Indian Oil Corporation on Thursday called off their indefinite strike after the government threatened to enforce the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) on them, officials said.

The North East Packed LPG Transporter Association (NEPLTA) on Wednesday resorted to an indefinite strike, which was termed illegal by the Indian Oil Corporation, for the second time in less than two months, alleging pending dues and low rates in recently floated tenders.

"We have ended the strike after our discussions with the district administrations last night. We will decide about our future course of action in the coming few days," NEPLTA chief adviser Kumud Nath told PTI.

He, however, declined to share further details of the meeting and whether any resolution was taken regarding their demands. When contacted, a senior official of IndianOil said that the loading of cylinders had begun from 6 am on Thursday at all of its plants across Assam.

"District Commissioners of Kamrup, Tinsukia and Bongaigaon held separate meetings with the transporters of the plants in their districts. They told the agitators that ESMA was already promulgated and if the strike was not withdrawn, it would be enforced,"

he added. The official further stated that the entire matter is sub-judice before the Gauhati High Court and no strike can be called until the case is settled.

Earlier, the decision to go for a strike was taken after a meeting called by the Food, Public Distribution and Consumer Affairs Department of the Assam government on Tuesday between Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) and NEPLTA failed to bring out any solution to the prolonged stalemate.

The association had also written to the chief secretary of Assam on January 5, flagging the same issues and urged him to take urgent necessary steps to address their grievances. NEPLTA operates around 2,500 trucks to transport LPG cylinders from IOC's bottling plants to various distributors across the Northeast.

Because of the agitation, supplies to Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya were impacted, the senior official had said on condition of anonymity.

IndianOil-AOD, IOC's Northeast division, produces 1.4 lakh LPG cylinders every day from its nine operational bottling plants across the region.

Out of these, the strike had affected five plants located in Assam, having a combined output of 90,000 cylinders per day.

Earlier on December 4, the NEPLTA had suddenly stopped plying their trucks over the same issues of pending dues and low rates in tenders, thereby affecting the supply of LPG to various sectors in several Northeastern states.

## Assam to bring new law to promote tourism

GUWAHATI, Feb 1: The Assam government has decided that it will bring in a new bill to promote the tourism sector through various steps, including setting up a committee for safety audit of adventure sites and activities.

The decision for new legislation in the tourism sector was taken during a cabinet meeting, chaired by chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, on Wednesday night.

The cabinet approved the Assam Tourism (Development and Registration) Bill, 2024 for revitalising and promoting the industry, a communique shared by Sarma on X said. One of the key features of the bill will be the establishment of the Adventure Safety Audit Committee for conducting risk assessment of adventure sites and activities, it added. This new law will also enforce registration of all businesses and activities related to tourism, penalties will be levied in case of contraventions (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

CM emphasised govt's commitment to transform Sivasagar from a tranquil temple town into a prominent tourist center

## Himanta launches historic 'Rang Ghar Beautification Project' in Sivasagar

### HT Correspondent

SIVASAGAR, Feb 1: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma took a significant stride in preserving Assam's cultural legacy by inaugurating the "Bhumipujan" and "Aai leng din puja" ceremonies for the Rang Ghar beautification project here in Sivasagar on Thursday.

Covering an extensive area of over 83 bighas with an allocated budget of ₹ 32 crore, the initiative is anticipated to be completed within a span of two years.

Addressing a massive gathering, the chief minister delved into the historical significance of Rangpur, the erstwhile capital founded by Swargadeo Rudra Singha.

He also emphasised his government's commitment to transform Sivasagar from a tranquil temple town into a prominent tourist cen-



ter. The CM outlined various ongoing projects, including the upgraded Sivasagar University, Sivasagar Medical College, a proposed park on the eastern bank of Sivasagar Borpukhuri, and beautification endeavors focused on Ahom-era monuments. These initiatives, along with the proposal for Charaideo to attain UNESCO Site status, aim to elevate the undivided Sivasagar district's

prominence on a national scale.

Sarma further announced the commencement of construction for Sivasagar Medical College in the upcoming month and the ongoing progress of the ₹ 187 crore Nazira-Sivasagar road. Additional plans include relocating Sivasagar Jail, creating a modern park, and rebuilding the Circuit House to reflect the district's rich culture and heritage.

Reflecting on the achievements of the past three years, the chief minister expressed optimism about Assam's future, envisioning it as the number one state in India. He highlighted the transformative impact of the Charaideo Mega Heritage Project and Rang Ghar Beautification Project on the state's development. The event witnessed the presence of various dignitaries, (CONTD. ON PAGE-9)

# Paytm suffers ₹ 300-500 cr blow

Customers won't be able to top up wallets, PPBL accounts

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Fintech firm Paytm sees an impact of ₹ 300-500 crore on its annual operational profit as its customers will not be able to add money to their wallets, FASTag etc following RBI barring Paytm Payments Bank Ltd from accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer account.

In December, 41 crore UPI remittances were made through Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL).

The central bank on Wednesday barred PPBL from accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer account, prepaid instruments, wallets, and FASTags, among others after February 29, 2024.

The action against PPBL followed a comprehensive system audit report and subsequent compliance validation report of external auditors.

"Depending on the nature of the resolution, the company expects this action to have a worst case impact of ₹ 300-500 crore on its annual EBITDA going forward. However, the company expects to continue on its trajectory to improve its profitability," Paytm said in a regulatory filing.

One97 Communications Ltd (OCL), which owns Paytm brand, holds 49 per cent stake in PPBL but



classifies it as an associate of the company and not as a subsidiary.

"OCL, as a payments company, works with various banks (not just Paytm Payments Bank), on various payments products. OCL started to work with other banks after the embargo. We now will accelerate the plans and completely move to other bank partners. Going forward, OCL will be working only with other banks, and not with PPBL," Paytm said.

RBI has ordered PPBL to settle all pipeline transactions and nodal accounts (in respect of all transactions initiated on or before February 29, 2024) by March 15, 2024 and

no further transactions would be permitted thereafter.

On March 11, 2022, RBI had barred PPBL from onboarding new customers with immediate effect.

Earlier, Indian Highways Management Company (IHMCL), the arm of NHAI, had barred PPBL from issuing fresh FASTags after it found that it was not following the parameters prescribed in the service-level agreement.

"The next phase of OCL's journey is to continue to expand its payments and financial services business, only in partnerships with other banks," the filing said.

The company said that its finan-

cial services such as loan distribution, insurance distribution and equity broking, are not in any way related to PPBL and are expected to be unaffected by this direction.

"The company has been informed that this does not impact user deposits in their savings accounts, wallets, FASTags, and NCMC accounts, where they can continue to use the existing balances," the filing said.

The Paytm Payment Gateway business (online merchants) will continue to offer payment solutions to its existing merchants.

"OCL's offline merchant payment network offerings like Paytm QR, Paytm Soundbox, Paytm Card Machine, will continue as usual, where it can onboard new offline merchants as well," the filing said.

RBI also said the 'nodal accounts' of OCL and Paytm Payments Services (PPSL) are to be terminated at the earliest, in any case not later than February 29, 2024.

The filing said that OCL and PPSL will move the nodal to other banks during this period. "OCL will pursue partnerships with various other banks, to offer various payment products to its customers," Paytm said. (PTI)

## Paytm shares slump 20 pc; hit lower circuit limit

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Shares of One97 Communications Ltd, which owns Paytm brand, plummeted 20 per cent on Thursday as the RBI directed Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL) to stop accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer accounts, wallets, FASTags and other instruments after February 29.

The stock cracked 20 per cent to ₹ 608.80 -- its lower circuit limit -- on the BSE.

At the NSE, it tumbled 19.99 per cent to hit the lowest trading permissible limit for the day of ₹ 609.

The company's market capitalisation (mcap) also eroded by ₹ 9,646.31 crore to ₹ 38,663.69 crore in early trade.

However, any interest, cashbacks, or refunds may be credited back to customers anytime.

The direction follows persistent non-compliances and continued material supervisory concerns, the central bank said in a statement.

RBI also said the 'nodal accounts' of One97 Communications Ltd (OCL) and Paytm Payments Services are to be terminated at the earliest, in any case not later than February 29, 2024.

OCL, which owns Paytm brand, holds a 49 per cent stake in PPBL but classifies it as an associate of the company and not as a subsidiary.

The RBI's order will have an impact of ₹ 300-500 crore on annual operational profit of the company.

"Depending on the nature of the resolution, the company expects this action to have a worst case impact of ₹ 300-500 crore on its annual EBITDA going forward. However, the company expects to continue on its trajectory to improve its profitability," Paytm said in a regulatory filing. (PTI)

4.41 crore in optical fibre cables deal

2 booked for cheating Navi Mumbai businessman



**THANE, Feb 1:** Police have registered a case against two persons for allegedly cheating a 61-year-old businessman from Maharashtra's Navi Mumbai township of ₹ 4.41 crore in a deal pertaining to the optical fibre cables, an official said on Thursday. The victim, a resident of Kharghar area who operates a business of optical fibre cables, entered into a deal with the accused for taking the supply from them.

The businessman paid a total sum of ₹ 4.41, 64,000 into the account of the accused since January last year but the cables were not supplied, the official from CBD police station said. Based on his complaint, the police on Wednesday registered a case against two persons from Nagpur under Indian Penal Code sections 420 (cheating), 406 (criminal breach of trust) and 34 (common intention), the official said. A probe was on into the case. (PTI)

## FM announces plans to increase milk, dairy production

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday announced plans to increase milk and dairy production in the country.

India is the largest milk producer in the world but there is low productivity, the finance minister said.

India's milk production rose 4 per cent to 230.58 million tonnes in 2022-23.

She also said a strategy will be developed for Atma Nirbharta for oilseeds production.

Efforts of the value addition in agriculture sector and increasing farmers' income will be stepped up, the minister said. (PTI)

## New scheme to strengthen deep-tech for defence sector

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** A new scheme will be launched to strengthen deep tech for the defence sector, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Thursday.

Presenting the interim Budget 2024-25, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman also said the government will promote public and private investment in post-harvesting agriculture activities.

She said the application of nano DAP on various crops will be expanded in agri-climatic zones.

The finance minister said that three major railway corridors, including for cement, will be constructed, and 40,000 normal railway bogies will be converted to Vande Bharat standard. (PTI)

### AFFIDAVIT

My correct name is Uma Shankar Chauhan which was incorrectly recorded as Umashankar Chauhan in my son's school document. The name of my son is Bhuneshwar Chauhan, Roll No. 02001582032 and Passport No. M4870835, issue date 29/12/2014.

Uma Shankar Chauhan and Umashankar Chauhan are both my name and is the same person. Uma Shankar Chauhan, Vill.- Belbari No. 2, PO- Mailoo Bazar, PS- Kheroni, Dist.- West Karbi Anglong, Assam

### NAME CHANGE

I have Changed my name from Mohammed Saddam Hussain to Saddam Hussain by swearing a notarial affidavit at Sankardevnagar Hojai. From today onwards I will be known as Saddam Hussain for all purpose.

## India's manufacturing sector growth climbs to four-month high in Jan

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** India's manufacturing sector growth climbed to a four-month high in January as a sharper upturn in new orders boosted output amid mild cost inflation, a monthly survey said on Thursday.

The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) recovered from an 18-month low of 54.9 in December to 56.5 in January.

The latest reading highlighted the strongest improvement in the health of the sector since last September.

In Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) parlance, a print above 50 means expansion while a score below 50 denotes contraction.

"India's final manufacturing PMI showed that manufacturing activity accelerated in January. Current output expanded on robust demand, with domestic orders growing at a faster pace than export orders," Ines Lam, Economist at HSBC, said.

Lam further added that "the input price index inched up, but manufacturers were able to pass on some of the cost pressures to consumers, as suggested by the small rise in the output price index."

According to the survey, new orders placed with Indian goods producers rose at a sharp pace in January, and one that was the strongest in four months. Growth was reportedly boosted by marketing efforts and demand buoyancy.

International sales also expanded at a quicker pace. Goods producers reported stronger demand from clients spread across Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, the Middle East and the Americas.



"Collectively, the rate of expansion in international orders was the fastest since last October," the report said.

Goods producers collectively recorded the fastest increase in outstanding business volumes in 15 months, with demand strength reportedly exerting pressure on their capacities.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of survey participants opted to keep payroll numbers unchanged in January.

Companies scaled up input purchasing and became even more optimistic towards the year-ahead outlook for output.

"New product enquiries and diversification, alongside demand strength and publicity, boosted business confidence in January. Panellists were at their most upbeat towards the year-ahead outlook for output in 13 months," the survey said.

The HSBC India Manufacturing PMI is compiled by S&P Global from responses to questionnaires sent to purchasing managers in a panel of around 400 manufacturers. (PTI)

## Gold gains ₹ 100; silver plunges ₹ 600

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Gold prices increased ₹ 100 to ₹ 63,450 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday amid rise in the precious metal's prices in the overseas markets, according to HDFC Securities.

In the previous close, the yellow metal had finished at ₹ 63,350 per 10 grams.

However, silver prices plunged ₹ 600 to ₹ 76,100 per kilogram, while it had ended at ₹ 76,700 per kg in the previous trade.

"Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at ₹ 63,450 per 10 grams, up ₹ 100 against the previous close," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

In the international markets, gold was quoting with gains at USD 2,044 per ounce, up USD 4 from the previous close.

"Gold prices gained ground on Thursday due to demand for safe haven assets amid concerns over Middle East conflict as well as US Federal Reserve's less aggressive monetary policy outlook.

"...investors continue to be concerned that the escalating conflict in the Middle East could spark a broader war, which, coupled with China's sluggish economic growth, bolsters the value of the safe-haven precious metal," Gandhi said. However, silver was trading lower at USD 22.80 per ounce. (PTI)

## India close to achieving target of 3 cr houses under rural housing scheme: FM

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** The country is close to achieving the target of 3 crore houses under the rural housing scheme and two crore more will be constructed in the next five years, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Thursday.

Earlier this month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi released the first instalment of ₹ 540 crore to one lakh beneficiaries of a rural housing scheme under the Pradhan Mantri Janati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN) via video conferencing.

She said to meet investment needs, the government will prepare the financial sector in terms of size, capacity, skills, and regulatory framework.

The government will facilitate high and more resource-efficient economic growth to ensure energy security for the country. She added that India as a G20 host has showed the way forward and built a consensus for solutions for problems being faced by the world.

India organised the G20 summit here at Bharat Mandapam last year. (PTI)

## Stock markets close lower on Budget day

**MUMBAI, Feb 1:** Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty closed lower on Thursday as investors resorted to profit-taking in capital goods, metal and realty shares amid no big announcements by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman.

After shedding early gains, the markets turned volatile during the presentation of the interim Budget, where in the capital expenditure outlay was marginally hiked but there were no major announcements.

The 30-share BSE Sensex settled lower by 106.81 points or 0.15 per cent at 71,645.30. During the day, it gyrated between a high of 72,151.02 and a low of 71,574.89.

The Nifty dipped 28.25 points or 0.13 per cent to 21,697.45. It oscillated between the day's high of 21,832.95 and a low of 21,658.75.

Market sentiment was also dampened after the US Federal Reserve indicated it likely won't cut interest rates in March.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday hiked capital expenditure by 11 per cent for the next fiscal to sustain world-beating economic growth rate while trimming the deficit in a reform-oriented interim Budget that also gave relief to common man from disputed small tax demands of up to ₹ 25,000.

Presenting a vote on account or an interim Budget for 2024-25, Sitharaman proposed no changes in income tax rates for individuals and corporates, as well as customs duty.

In less than an hour-long budget speech, she presented the Modi government's achievements in the last 10 years that transformed India from being a 'fragile' economy to the world's fastest-growing major economy.

She hiked capital expenditure to ₹ 11.11 lakh crore for 2024-25 while trimming the fiscal deficit for this financial year to 5.8 per cent, from the budgeted 5.9 per cent of GDP, and further lowering to 5.1 per cent in the next fiscal. (PTI)

## BMW Group India presents India Art Fair 2024

BMW Group India has supported the evolution and exposure of modern contemporary Indian art and artists since 2012

**HT Bureau GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** BMW Group India is the presenting partner of the latest edition of India Art Fair from February 1-4 at the NSIC Exhibition Grounds in New Delhi.

India Art Fair is the leading platform for showcasing modern and contemporary art in India and South Asia. The fair has brought hundreds of artists from the region to the world's attention over its many successful editions.

Vikram Pawah, president, BMW Group India said, "BMW Group India is deeply committed to nurturing corporate citizenship and fostering intercultural dialogue, integral to our societal responsibilities. We are proud partners for the fair, as it celebrates 15 incredible years of establishing itself as the leading platform for discovering modern and contemporary art in India and South Asia. As the 'Presenting Partner' of the India Art Fair, we have been instrumental in promoting the growth and visibility of modern Indian art and artists. This year, BMW India is excited to unveil the third installment of the

'Future is Born of Art' commission. We invite art and automobile enthusiasts alike to join us in exploring new realms of creative expression at the India Art Fair."

BMW Group India has supported the evolution and exposure of modern contemporary Indian art and artists since 2012. Through this year's collaboration, BMW India will exhibit the first-ever fully electric BMW i7 sedan as part of third 'The Future is Born of Art' commission and host the BMW Art Talk on the theme 'Through the Looking Glass'.

The first-ever BMW i7 is a true all-electric luxury sedan that clearly demonstrates how an exclusive driving experience can be combined with an unwavering commitment to sustainability. The i7 offers all-electric innovation, visionary design, and powerful driving dynamics so that you can make a striking impression everywhere you go. Built for the luminaries with next-level style and substance, it is undeniably alluring from the inside out.

'The Future is Born of Art' commission is an initiative by BMW India and India



Art Fair which aims to propel emerging Indian artists and boost BMW Group's commitment to promote art, sustainability and innovation. BMW India will showcase its third commission based on the theme 'Forwardism'.

Sashikanth Thavudoz is the winner of the third edition of 'The Future is Born of

Art' commission, following Faiza Hasan and Devika Sundar, the winners of the 2022 and 2023 commissions, respectively. Selected by the advisory panel comprising of HRH Radhikaraje Gaekwad - a distinguished patron and conservationist, Jaya Asokan - director, India Art Fair, Veeranganakumari Solanki, curator and Sameer

Kulavoor, contemporary artist.

For his installation at the India Art Fair, titled 'Symphony of Nature: The Harmonic Forest', Thavudoz has combined materials and mediums from his past experiences and projects, including illuminated lights and wood blocks, into a multi-sensory and immersive experience. In-line with the theme 'Forwardism,' the installation is more than a concept. It is an ongoing journey of the artist emphasizing responsible creativity amidst change. It combines natural and manufactured materials that aims to highlight the fragility of this balance that we must all consider as we go into the future.

BMW Art Talk on the theme of 'Through the Looking Glass' will be hosted on 2 February 2024 at the India Art Fair. Three ground-breaking contemporary artists, Anita Dube, Barthélémy Toguo and Jitish Kallat share the inspiring stories of their creative journeys in a candid conversation with Prof. Dr. Thomas Girst, Global Head, BMW Group Cultural Engagement.

# Global indigenous traditions movement gains momentum: RSS general secretary

## 8<sup>th</sup> International Center for Cultural Studies for World Elders of Ancient Traditions concludes

**HT Correspondent**

**DIBRUGARH, Feb 1:** RSS general secretary Dattatreya Hosabale stated on Wednesday that the movement of global indigenous ancient traditions is flourishing and spreading extensively in terms of its dimensions and coverage.

Participating in the concluding ceremony of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Center for Cultural Studies for World Elders of Ancient Traditions in Dibrugarh, Dattatreya highlighted the theme of the conference.

"It has the prominent term 'prosperity,'" he said.

"The question is how prosperity should be sustained for a long time. Prosperity should not happen at the cost of the exploitation of Mother Earth."

Hosabale gave an example from the story of "Samudra Manthan", where Lakshmi, representing prosperity, emerged after a lot of churning. He emphasised the need for churning, indicating that prosperity requires effort and thoughtful processes.

"We engaged in a profound exploration during the conference for four days, and from this process, 'Amrit' or nectar will emerge. The conch (shankh)

is considered the brother of prosperity. The blowing of the conch is a significant ritual, especially during poojas. Our ancient elders have communicated this message to us through gentle stories, emphasising that prosperity should be sustainable and equitable."

"Spirituality is a common thread in ancient traditions, recognising the presence of divinity in every being. The planet provides sufficiently for everyone, and it is now our responsibility to preserve this divinity. Spirituality forms the soul of our culture and tradition, and across all cultures, there are commonalities. Ancient traditions are unique in acknowledging feminine divinity and promoting family values and sustainable living."

"Reviving traditions, ecological knowledge, and collaborative governance are crucial for achieving shared sustainable prosperity. Sustainable development can only be ensured through responsible consumption."

"The Sarkaryavah emphasised three follow-up action points for the conference. Firstly, indigenous tradition and culture should not be relegated to deco-



orative museums but should remain integral to mainstream culture. Secondly, as indigenous cultures have evolved over thousands of years, they hold the key to saving Mother Earth and fostering a better, sustainable humanity. Passing down these time-tested wisdom to the next generation is imperative. Thirdly, capacity building is essential for each community to fine-tune progress and materialistic development."

Hosabale further articulated, "Spirituality means all is one, and everything, whether living or non-living, possesses divinity. All our ancient traditions perceive divinity in everything, promoting

a life of unity. In India, we say 'Satahastha Samahara, Sahastra Hasta Bikira', meaning earn by a hundred hands and distribute by a thousand hands. It emphasises the concept of producing for distribution and living through sharing. That is the core message of this conference."

The conference adopted a resolution named 'Dibrugarh Declaration' with a three-point agenda: Reviving Traditions, Ecological Knowledge, and Collaborative Governance.

The Dibrugarh Declaration was presented by a representative from the Yoruba tribe residing in the United States.

Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu congratulated ICCS for selecting the theme of 'Shared sustainable prosperity' for this year's conference, expressing that the declaration would contribute to creating a harmonious society. India has been a shining spot in the world economy and is poised to guide the world. Arunachal Pradesh, with its 26 tribes coexisting harmoniously for centuries, values age-old traditions that shape lives and provide identity. The preservation and promotion

of indigenous culture align with the government policy of Arunachal Pradesh.

The newly inaugurated Greenfield Airport in Itanagar has been named 'Donyi Polo Airport', respecting the local indigenous belief where 'Donyi' means Mother Sun and 'Polo' means Moon God. The valedictory ceremony commenced with an auspicious prayer by a Yezidi Elder, expressing gratitude to Mother Earth, birds, ocean, sun, moon, and star beings. Thanks were also extended to participants, organisers, and ancestors for the positive thoughts and feelings shared during the event.

Dr Shashi Bala, president ICCS, Bharat chapter, extended felicitations to guests and dignitaries on the dais. Diganta Das, international coordinator of ICCS, provided a summary note of the conference. The event saw the participation of 125 foreign delegates from over 33 countries, representing their ancient traditional wisdom. A picturesque public rally in Dibrugarh on January 28 showcased the diverse traditions, and the total number of conference delegates, including both Indian and foreign participants, reached 400.

## Miscreants hijack areca nut loaded vehicle

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, Feb 1:** In a cinematic style, a group of unidentified miscreants allegedly hijacked a supari laden Bolero mini pickup van with registration number AS05C 3293 from Kaliabor Tinali on Wednesday night. The mini pickup van was transporting betel nuts from Upper Assam to Nagaon Amoni.

The driver and handyman of the mini pickup van reportedly filed a First Information Report (FIR) with Kaliabor Police Station regarding the incident. Kaliabor Police have registered a case and initiated an investigation into the matter. As of the time of filing this report, the police had not yet obtained any leads on the hijacked van, according to sources.

## Arogya Care Foundation conducts yoga workshop

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, Feb 1:** The Arogya Care Foundation, in collaboration with Morigaon District Jail, organised a yoga awareness workshop at the Yoga and Wellness Centre established in Morigaon District Jail under the National Ayush Mission, Assam on Thursday. Ranjan Chaudhury, superintendent of Jail, and Prashanta Saikia, jailer, attended the program. Yoga instructors Trishal Dey, Sunand Nath, and trainer Pratibha Kuri conducted the training for the jail inmates. Dhananjay Talukdar, accountant and program officer of Nehru Yuva Kendra, participated in the program as the master trainer and spoke on the importance of yoga in human life. Over a hundred jail inmates took part in the program. Addressing the occasion, Talukdar highlighted that yoga helps maintain a healthy mind and stability, contributing to a disease-free life. He emphasised that yoga is a complete spiritual science that generates energy in the body by subduing emotions.

## Guv Kataria to inaugurate electrical expo by GEMA

Grand showcase of electrical innovations at Aashi Apsara from tomorrow

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** Governor Gulab Chand Kataria will inaugurate the three-day eLECTROFEST Expo organised by the Guwahati Electric Merchants Association (GEMA) on February 3. This expo, scheduled to be held from February 3 to 5 at Aashi Apsara, Ulubari in Guwahati, will be the biggest electrical expo in the history of the North-East. A delegation from GEMA, led by president Naval Kishore Sarma, included vice president and expo chairman Gopal Pasari, secretary Saketraj Pugalia, expo convener Abhishek Kejrival, Saurabh Bothra, treasurer Naveen Sethia, and executive member Manish Singhi met Governor Gulab Chand Kataria and briefed him about the organisation's activities at Raj Bhavan.

Appreciating the work done by GEMA, the Governor accepted the invitation to inaugurate the eLECTROFEST Expo as the chief guest on February 3. State Housing and Urban Affairs minister Ashok Singhal, Industry and Commerce minister Bimal Bora, Power minister Nandita Gorlosa, and other VIPs are expected to register their presence at this expo. Preparations for the expo are in the final stages under the direction

## NER Directorate NCC contingent honoured by Governor Kataria

Governor commends dedication & unity displayed by 171 NCC cadets

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** On the occasion of the 75th Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi, the NER Directorate NCC contingent, representing NCC boys and girls cadets from all the North Eastern states, who participated in the Republic Day parade and PM's rally, called on Governor Gulab Chand Kataria at Raj Bhavan on Thursday.

A total of 171 NCC cadets, along with Junior Wing cadets for NCC girls band and 4 remount and veterinary company cadets, actively participated in the camp. Congratulating each member of the contingent, Governor Kataria said, "I am proud that in the Republic Day Camp organised in New Delhi from December 29 to January 29, you have demonstrated your dedication and love for service and national unity. By doing that, you have enhanced the pride of the North Eastern region. All you cadets have displayed your commitment towards national service and the spirit of unity by participating in the rally of the Prime Minister organised on January 29, 2024. This diverse group



from the North East region reflects a rich picture of talent and commitment."

The Governor commended the NCC North East Regional Directorate for selecting talented NCC cadets from different districts of the state and creating a representation that truly reflects the diversity and unity of the region.

The Governor also congratulated the contingent for being awarded the Best Cultural Team trophy. The award is a testament to the creativity and dedication of the

contingent. He motivated and inspired them to continue to excel in their future. He said that the NCC has a very important role to play in the development of youth, who are the future of the nation. He also said NCC strengthens the spirit of being an Indian.

Commissioner and secretary to the Governor, SS Meenakshi Sundaram, major general Gagandeep Singh, brigadier Dinar Dighe, brigadier Vijayant Mahadik, and officials from Raj Bhavan were present during the function.

## District level training underway at Biswanath

**HT Correspondent**

**BISWANATH CHARIALI, Feb 1:** A three-day district-level training for nodal teachers of Upper Primary (UP) level on 'Child Mental Health and Protection', organised by Samagra Shiksha, Biswanath, commenced on Thursday at Biswanath Commerce Senior Secondary School. The program was inaugurated by Bedabrat Bora, district programme officer. Resource persons Joonmani Mahanta, Anjan Baskota, and Barun Bhagawati conducted the training. One hundred teachers from various higher secondary schools, high schools, composite schools, and ME and MV schools participated in the training program under the Biswanath, Behali, and Chaiduar education block offices of Biswanath district. The training is scheduled to conclude on February 3.



of the organisation's president Naval Kishore Sarma and secretary Saketraj Pugalia. Project chairman and vice president of the organisation Gopal Pasari mentioned that more than 70 major electrical companies from the country will participate in this expo and showcase their products. Expo convener Abhishek Kejrival highlighted that the expo, being held for the first time, is bringing together all the electrical companies showcasing the latest innovations in electricals and is a must-see for builders, architects, contractors, traders, interior designers, and consumers from across the North-East.

Secretary Saket Raj Puglia added that stalwarts of the electrical, lighting, and power industry,

from manufacturers, OEMs, suppliers, and distributors to agents, will participate in this expo and provide ample business opportunities. Expo convener and GEMA treasurer Naveen Sethia mentioned that the expo is a platform where a common buyer can come and see the entire range of products related to electricals. The event is supported by ANCHOR by Panasonic and co-sponsored by KEI and Kolors, and affiliated by RR Kabel, Presto Plast, Berlia, and Izzok. He further stated that convenors Anil Dugar and Abhishek Kagiwal, and team members Mehul Pasari, Deepak Agarwal, Anshuman Dhanuka, along with all the members of the organisation, are working hard to make this event a grand success.

## Books unveiled at 11<sup>th</sup> Special Session of Axom Xahitya Xabha

**HT Correspondent**

**MORIGAON, Feb 1:** Five books, including a children's novel, were inaugurated by the secretary-general of Axom Xahitya Xabha, Dr Upendrajit Sarma, in the presence of the president of Axom Xahitya Xabha, Dr Surya Kanta Hazarika, in Bhupen Hazarika's Meeting Hall on the second day of the 11<sup>th</sup> Special Session of the Axom Xahitya Xabha 2024 at Pasuraja Samanai Khetra, Barapujia, Morigaon.

Amidst the tumultuous celebration of the 11<sup>th</sup> Session of Axom Xahitya Xabha, the writer of the books, Anita Hazarika, a retired principal (in-charge) of Charaibahi Anchalik Madhyamik Vidyalaya, was overwhelmed with joy at releasing the books in such a literary platform where distinguished and noted literary persons of the Axom Xahitya Xabha were in attendance.

The five books are: Children's novel- Kaka Deuta Aru Nati Lora (Grandfather and

Grandson) - The author has made us aware of how to be responsible to our elders and society from childhood; Bandar Aru Ekhan Sithi (The Monkey and a Letter) - A collection of science-based stories suitable for children. This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the book, which has already won the Children's Literature Award three times; Gite Mate Moinar A-B-C-D; Abari - A collection of short stories with proper guidance for the younger generation; Asomia Sahityat Pragyar Xhdhak - The collection of 28 essays on the history of Assamese literature, including the author's contribution to the history of Assamese literature.

Earlier, a total of 107 flags of the Axom Xahitya Xabha were hoisted by the president of Axom Xahitya Xabha, Dr Suryakanta Hazarika. Thereafter, the smriti tarpan was offered by the vice-president of Axom Xahitya Xabha, Dr Girish Handique.

## AASU protests in Nagaon



**HT Correspondent**  
**NAGAON, Feb 1:** The district unit of All Assam Students' Union (AASU) staged a demonstration on Thursday against the state government's alleged attempt to undermine the regional medium of instruction (MOI) in educational institutions. The protest took place near the office of the district commissioner, Nagaon, and attracted over a hundred participants from the district unit. The protesters demanded the immediate withdrawal of the decision.

During the demonstration, participants raised slogans against the government's initiatives. The students' community criticised the state government for imposing English as the medium for learning Mathematics and General Science from the sixth standard, stating that it contradicts the new education policy implemented by the central government.

Protesters argued that while the Prime Minister and Home minister advocated for the implementation of regional languages in

Medical Science and Engineering, the state chief minister and Education minister decided to suppress the mother languages of various ethnic tribes in the state, such as Assamese, Bodo, etc. The district body of the student organisation declared its intent to continue protesting until the government abandons this decision. Simanta Bora and Kankan Jyoti Boruah, respectively the president and secretary of the district unit, also participated in the protest, according to a release.

## Daylong event to include angling competition & exhibition of tourist attractions

## Dima Hasao District Day to be celebrated today

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** Following the directives of the state government, the Dima Hasao district administration, in collaboration with the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council, is gearing up to observe District Day on February 2, 2024. A vibrant rally is planned, starting from the Council Rotary Point to the NL Daulagupu Sports Complex at 9:00 am, with participants adorned in their traditional attire. All department heads have been instructed to join this rally along with their respective officials.

As part of the festivities, various departments will set up stalls for display and sale at the NL Daulagupu Sports Complex in Haflong. Concurrently, students will engage in competitions such as quizzes, essays, and debates at the District Library Auditorium, starting from 11:00 am.

Debolal Gorlosa, chief executive member (CEM) of Dima Hasao Autonomous Council, is invited as the chief guest, and state minister for Sports & Youth Welfare, Power, Cooperation, etc., Nandita Gorlosa, will also grace the event. A central meeting is scheduled at 3:00 pm, discussing various aspects of the district, followed by an extravagant cultural program at the Tularam Amphitheatre at Haflong Lake. Notable achievements will be felicitated during the central program.

The day-long event will include an angling competition at Haflong Lake from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm, organised jointly by the Tourism Department and the Fisheries Department. An exhibition cum display of photographs showcasing tourist attractions of Dima Hasao will be featured at the Tularam Amphitheatre.

## Assam Rifles organises basketball match

**HT Correspondent**

**BISWANATH CHARIALI, Feb 1:** Assam Rifles organised a 'Friendly Basketball Match' with locals on Thursday at Lokra Garrison, as mentioned in a press release. This event highlights the Assam Rifles' commitment to engage with the local community and provide an opportunity for residents to come together, enjoy friendly competition, and strengthen bonds. A total of 10 players from the Lokra Dribblers Youth Club and 10 Assam Rifles' personnel participated in the event. The match was witnessed by 119 Assam Rifles personnel and 70 locals.

## Villagers extend gratitude to election officer in WKA

**HT Bureau**

**DIPHU, Feb 1:** The election officer of West Karbi Anglong, Arnika Lekhtip, was felicitated by the villagers of Tirkim at the office chamber in Hamren. The residents expressed their gratitude for the establishment of a new polling station at Tirkim LP School in West Karbi Anglong, which is located 7 km from Hamren, the district headquarters.

A voter named Prodir Kro mentioned that in previous elections, the voters of Tirkim had to travel several kilometers to Langmet LP School to cast their votes. Recognising this inconvenience, the villagers had requested a separate polling station at Tirkim LP School, and their request was granted.

To convey their appreciation, the voters of Tirkim village presented the election officer with a traditional Karbi tarpan and basket. The inauguration of the new polling station took place on January 30 in the presence of MLA Rupsing Teron, Member of Autonomous Council Heading Rongphar, Village Defence Party chairman Njoying Kro, and president of BJP Socheng Mandal Committee Lahorsing Kro.

## Kopili Bridge at Jagiroad set for completion by June: Pijush

**HT Correspondent**

**JAGIROAD, Feb 1:** The much-awaited Kopili River Bridge at Jagibhakatgaon under Jagiroad LAC in the district of Morigaon will be completed by June, said Water Resource minister and MLA, Jagiroad Pijush Hazarika on Wednesday.

While addressing a public meeting here, the minister also said that the people of India have placed their trust in Prime Minister Narendra Modi and state chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. Consequently, the trend of joining the BJP is steeply rising among members of other political parties and the general public.

Additionally, Hazarika stated that Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on February 4 in Guwahati, would announce 17,000 crore schemes for the welfare of the people. The minister, while appreciating the successful APSC candidate from the locality, also announced the establishment of a civil service coaching centre at Ahataguri near here. It is further learned that about 400 Congress, AGP, and other party workers joined the BJP in the meeting held at the newly constructed multi-utility building on the day. The meeting was also attended by Kamalpur MLA Diganta Kalita, Lakhimpur MLA Manab Deka, Jagiroad Mandal BJP president Prabin Kumar Deka, among others.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Nothing is so permanent as a temporary government program. -Milton Friedman

A Budget of Hope

The interim budget unveiled on February 1 stands as a beacon of hope, anchored in the continued vigour of the Indian economy. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman deserves commendation for her succinct presentation, eschewing the verbosity that often characterizes such occasions. True to tradition, the interim budget refrained from major policy upheavals, instead focusing on providing a vote of account to sustain government expenditures. Yet, within these constraints, the budget outline delineates a vision of robust economic health. The finance minister's address paints a picture of a thriving economy, anticipating increased government revenues without resorting to tax hikes. Notably, the proposed research and development fund, with its extended lending horizon for startups and technology ventures, underscores a commitment to fostering innovation. These initiatives signal a departure from conventional growth models, embracing the transformative potential of technology-led advancements. Delving into the budget's core, it's evident that the finance minister opted to maintain the tax structure unchanged while earmarking ambitious capital expenditure. Despite this, a significant reduction in the fiscal deficit is projected, indicative of prudent fiscal management. Projections indicate a decline in fiscal deficit from 5.8% to 5.1% of GDP, coupled with a decrease in borrowing requirements for the upcoming fiscal year. This augurs well for the bond markets, with softened yields reflecting anticipation of lower government borrowing. However, the budget's aspirations hinge on sustaining high economic growth. The finance minister's pledge to ramp up public capital expenditure by over 11% underscores this imperative. Achieving such lofty goals necessitates a double-digit growth trajectory akin to that witnessed in neighbouring China, a challenging yet plausible feat given India's resilience amidst global economic slowdowns.

In catering to diverse constituencies, the budget strikes a balance between populism and pragmatism. Special emphasis is placed on addressing the needs of the poor, youth, women, and farmers. Initiatives ranging from poverty alleviation to women's empowerment underscore a commitment to inclusive development. Notably, the government's shift towards empowering the poor through developmental interventions marks a departure from traditional entitlement-based approaches. However, the budget's narrative is not without its lacunae. While it extols strides in education and skill development, it sidesteps the pressing issue of youth unemployment. Acknowledging and addressing this challenge is imperative to ensure sustainable economic growth. Furthermore, the focus on agricultural reforms and farmer welfare initiatives reflects an understanding of the sector's pivotal role in India's socio-economic fabric. The introduction of electronic trading platforms and crop insurance schemes aims to mitigate uncertainties and enhance farmer incomes.

As the finance minister seeks to position the budget as a testament to the government's economic stewardship, it is imperative to recognise that sustained growth hinges on policy continuity and prudent governance. The onus lies on the government to foster an enabling environment conducive to unleashing India's vast economic potential. As the interim budget offers a ray of hope amidst global uncertainties, it has set a course for economic resilience and inclusive growth. It underscores the imperative for concerted efforts towards realising India's aspirations on the global stage.

Undeterred by Nitish-Modi, Rahul marches ahead for mission 2024

Narendra Modi and Amit Shah's latest masterstroke might have gone awry, as their operation "destroy INDIA bloc" seems to have caused blowback and impaired their own interest. In their quest to project themselves as adroit political Svengalis, they have harmed their own cause more than inflicting damage to the Congress.

Their lending a helping hand to Nitish Kumar, in the tiff of one-upmanship, has projected the duopoly as the enemies of youths of Bihar. Youths of Bihar for decades have traditionally been quite politically sensitive. They have a glorious past of struggles. In recent times, especially the urban middle class youths have come to nurse a soft corner for Modi. But his move to engineer split and desertion of the opposition alliance by Nitish has turned the youth hostile. Though for common people of Bihar, Nitish is more like a political Natwarlal, for the youths, he is a Nero, who is least bothered of their welfare.

In an unexpected turn of events, the youths who were erstwhile divided on caste lines and stood by their caste leaders, have developed strong empathy for Tejasvi Yadav and Rahul Gandhi. Their fondness for Rahul and Tejasvi could be seen in their massive turn out at the Purnea rally of Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. They strongly hold the view that at the instructions of Modi, Nitish did the latest somersault to prevent them from really achieving caste justice and progressive development. The youths are also sceptical that Nitish in his new NDA avatar would abandon all the promises made by the Mahagathbandhan government to the youths.

The youths feel cheated. Modi must not take it as a storm in tea-cup. This anger that has burst barely two months before the Lok Sabha elections may prove disastrous for RSS and BJP. The anger among the youth is not only confined to Patna. This was seen even in the far corner of the state, Araria, the work place of famous rebel writer Phanishwarnath Renu. Even the seasoned Congress leaders were astonished at their presence at the meet to listen to Rahul.

For the state Congress leaders, the rally has come as a major morale booster. The rally drew massive response notwithstanding absence of RJD chief Lalu Prasad and Tejasvi Yadav. None of them were present to address the participants. While ED had summoned and grilled ailing Lalu for nearly eleven hours on January 29, it had summoned Tejasvi the next day. Both were interrogated in the alleged land for job scam.

However, the leaders of Grand Alliance see through this action of ED as a nasty plot to discredit the INDIA bloc, framed at the behest of Modi and Amit Shah, that with exit of Nitish Mahagathbandhan would lose its relevance and collapse in the state. Modi and Shah also nursed the opinion that a large chunk of Congress leaders and legislators would join the BJP.

Nonetheless, going by the mood of the participants and the enthusiasm that was visible at the ground, it could well be envisioned that both have failed. Their mission has suffered a miscarriage. The temper of the crowd, especially of the youths, was perceptible at the tu-



multuous cheers and clapping at Rahul's remark. "Mahagathbandhan will fight for social justice in

DEGREE OF THOUGHT By: Arun Srivastava

Bihar; we don't require Nitish Kumar for the cause. We don't require him at all". A message had gone that youths of Bihar would prefer to identify with the Congress.

Just after Nitish deserted INDIA bloc, the mainstream media had started creating the impression that the alliance was in tatters and it was not in the situation to pose a serious challenge to Modi. It might appear to be an exaggeration, but the fact is the rally sent a strong message that it was alive and thriving.

Seasoned Congress leaders, those who have been associated with the party from their student days, as activists and leaders of NSUI, the response at some level exhibited the sign of resurrection of the party in the state. They openly expressed that for some of the MLAs and leaders those who were in a state of confusion about their future moves, whether to shift to BJP, this rally would prove to be a major deterrent. Like

in other states, the feudal and landed gentry has a firm grip on Congress in Bihar. But they could not manifest their antipathy to Rahul's pitch that launching of caste census was the prime agenda for the party. His assertion of setting a new left-to-the-centre narrative, in contrast to the prevailing political line and philosophy of the party, apparently does not appear to face severe resistance. Leaders share the impression that in order to retrieve its lost ground it must have to follow the ideological narrative of Rahul. The party stands for Dalits, EBC, labourers and proletariat. Congress leaders have the habit of uttering populist schemes. But Rahul's reflection was different. Reminiscent of his thrust on alternate path and need for evolving new ideological narrative during the Bharat Jodo Yatra, Rahul made it liberally clear that the party must identify with the poor, dalit and proletariat if at all it has to survive and exist. Making a pitch for nationwide caste census, he said, "No one understands "samajik nyay (social justice)" better than Bihar. This country should know how many OBC, SC or ST people there are, for which a caste census is necessary. That will give every group an idea of what they de-

serve. That is actually the country's X-Ray". In fact at his rallies, whether it was in Kishanganj or Araria, he harped on social justice. "People must know what their rights are. This is what Congress promises to do." Moreover, INDIA leaders are not feeling betrayed and also are not scared of the ED and CBI. The cool posture of Rahul has a major inspiration for them. The Bihar Congress chief Akhilesh Singh even said, "We have no problems with whoever wants to leave. I can assure Rahul ji that even after Nitish's exit; Bihar's Mahagathbandhan (RJD, Congress and Left) alliance will win two-thirds of the seats in the Lok Sabha." This improved level of confidence simply reinforces the fact that Congress leaders are raring to take Modi head on.

Dipankar Bhattacharya, the general secretary of the CPI(M), the other major ally of Mahagathbandhan, while stressed on the need for pursuing a pro-people political line, he emphasised that the prevailing political situation was just akin to the time of freedom struggle. Calling upon the political parties to undertake the fight against inequality, Dipankar said not to compromise with the ideology and fight for social justice and democracy.

He said India was passing through the worst time. Secularism, Constitution, and the socialist character of the country were being annihilated by the Modi regime. He was sparing of Nitish. He said that Nitish had betrayed the legacy of Karpoori Thakur, who was the symbol of fight of poor against social and economic exploitation. In contrast Nitish was chief minister for nine terms but did nothing for the poor.

Emphasising that the INDIA bloc is a strong and viable force, the party chief Mallikarjun Kharge through his virtual participation told the audience that seat sharing would not prove to be a major hindrance. Talking to newsmen, Jairam Ramesh reiterated that one can't imagine INDIA bloc without Mamata Banerjee. It is expected that Kharge's team would soon finalise the seat-sharing and joint campaign arrangements with INDIA allies. Ramesh also took jibe, "Vishwas ghat karne mein visheshagya hain (Nitish Kumar is an expert at backstabbing). He changes his political colours like a chameleon... The entire drama was manufactured by the BJP, Prime Minister Modi and Amit Shah. However, it will not affect the INDIA bloc."

However, the remark of senior TMC leader Sudip Bandhopadhyay: "If Mamata Banerjee can reduce the Congress and the Left to zero (in assembly polls), it can also reduce the BJP to zero (in Lok Sabha elections)," has not been received well by the Congress leaders. They feel that instead of unnecessarily precipitating the issue, TMC leadership must maintain restraint. His observation: "We never received an invite from Rahul Gandhi. We received an invite from the party yesterday. What is the point of it when the Yatra has already begun," has also thrown open a debate in the party circle, whether this implied that the aides of Rahul were not carrying out his instruction in right manner. Rahul a couple of days back had told that he had written to Mamata Banerjee inviting her to join the rally. (IPA Service)

Western media's vituperation against Ram temple India's success story took centre stage at Davos

By: M.R.Lalu

amid shouts of "Jai Shriram" and hysterical sloganeering in spiritual composure, the city of Ayodhya witnessed a truly religious event on January 22. The consecration of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya triggered an intense churn of political discourse in India and abroad. There have been numerous write-ups appearing in international dailies questioning the overwrought mobilization by an elected government that stood in unison with the cultural sensitivity of a 'militant majority' in a country that was known, in real sense, for its secular values. Further accusing a particular community and the government at the centre, the vituperative media went on calling the event at Ayodhya a blot on India's existence as a civilization and therefore, should have been sidelined and neglected as the chronology of Ayodhya's journey to this stage of consecration was deeply dampened in blood and hatred. Extreme critical views on the 'Hindu triumphalism', as that is what they call it have appeared in the Washington Post, the Guardian and the Time. The new majoritarian momentum, according to them, has been in emergence in India ever since the Modi regime began to hold the reins of the country and the latest event, the temple consecration was its orchestration. They have only one remark to be made with vociferous malignity that a violent Hindu majoritarianism had almost swallowed the secular essence of India. The country of 1.4 billion is almost at the brink of a doom with its poor minority, especially the Muslims being tortured, bullied and deliberately alienated by an aggressive militant Hindu majority with the support of the present authoritarian government.

The saffron surge, as per the western media, is threateningly growing everywhere and the Muslims are vacating areas where such forces intensify their presence. The government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has no Muslim representation and the most populous state Uttar Pradesh is governed by a Hindu extremist monk Yogi Adityanath. Cries of Jai Shri Ram became a warmongering call in almost all cities and the situation is grim with a shadow of animosity hovering over the habitually amiable and secular Muslim population. A Muslim woman journalist who went to report the Ayodhya event was forced to wear a Hindu bindi and she had to leave the event before it culminated, reports the Time magazine. So Ayodhya temple, as the narrative goes, will remain a

huge monument of Hindu supremacy symbolizing its violent militancy. In another article the Time refuses to accept the Hindu claim on the historicity of the temple and its remnants buried under the mosque that existed before 1992. It calls the demolition of the controversial structure in 1992 an explosion of Islamophobic violence by a Hindu mob numbering at least 75000 people. Purely blaming the Hindus for the riots that followed after the demolition of the structure which killed about 2000 people, the western media pronounced its judgment on the Hindu majority. A violent Hindu nationalism had catapulted the Modi era to its rise in India in 2014 and Modi surreptitiously watered and furthered this majoritarian aggression. He could manage to enhance his fortunes immensely in his second term in 2019 and the national election 2024 and the temple consecration will be a shot in the arm, a plank that Modi will launch his political gimmickry, the narrative accuses.

This being the intellectual acrimony with which the western media handles the Indian sensitivity of Ram, what remains to be seen by them is the reality. The real aura, the ideal that Lord Ram upheld as he ruled his kingdom, has undoubtedly been a part of India's social discourse for generations through the great epic Ramayana. There hasn't been a speck of doubt with which you would study the glory of Ram. Centuries of agitation for a temple that people believed to have existed in the place of the controversial mosque with archeological evidence accentuating the claim scientifically, the woke media reflect, as usual, their negation calling it a framework of the oppressive Hindu majority. The country's apex court had unequivocally quashed the claims raised by the opposite side and pronounced its verdict favoring a temple at the disputed site. But outrageous on everything that India represents through its cultural legacy, more inflammatory remarks on the consecration and the Prime Minister's statements were tossed by the western media.

For instance, let us examine the viciousness in what the Guardian reports. It says, "While the Congress and other opposition parties boycotted the ceremony, they have failed to mount an effective challenge to Mr Modi's dangerous majoritarianism and have at times succumbed to its dominance." The paper, with its colonial calculative approach further estimates that the Modi regime, if repeated for the third time, would rewrite the country's constitution, giving

way to a dangerous and violent Hindu India emerging from the laments of a disconsolate minority.

We need to know the level of animosity towards the Hindu population that plays its ugly game in India and abroad. For almost 80 percent of India's Hindu population, the consecration moment was one of the holiest. An event that they believe would be remembered for centuries. Ayodhya would receive the best spiritual makeover throughout this revamping process and millions around the city, irrespective of their religious affinity would be benefited both socially and economically. The wait for a magnificent temple in the birthplace of their highly venerated Lord was a moment of joy, which was both spiritual and socially elevating.

Disregarding the legitimacy of India's legal process, media across various countries began to spit hate against the temple and the Hindus. Alarming, there is a visible repugnance to the Indian state, especially to its Hindu heritage. To stretch it further, what causes them to be seriously abhorrent about is the political triumphalism of the Hindu majority which the proponents of wokeism in the west and elsewhere think would successfully pull India giving it a powerful position. Modi is regarded as a persona non grata, who they think is the product of this majoritarian triumphalism that has been in power since 2014. The Hindus after the temple inauguration are expected to shoot their support for Narendra Modi and the western media's unwillingness to accept his rise once again is the principal reason behind their slanderous narratives.

Undoubtedly, Ayodhya is going to remain relevant throughout the battle readiness of Modi and his party. That is the threatening aspect that his opposition including the Congress was fearful about. A huge thrust in Modi's popularity was evident as the country joyfully danced in tune with his call for celebrating Ayodhya. Nullifying his severe spiritual austerities for the temple consecration as political gimmickry, the opposition parties lost their chance to join the cultural euphoria that would set the momentum for 2024. Denying India's inclusive majoritarianism outrightly, not only the western media but the naysayers in India also will lose the chance to keep pace with the rise of 'political Hinduism' consolidating its power. This has been a reality that began to vividly lit up India's political horizon with a saffron radiance. (The author is a freelance journalist who can be reached at mrlalu30@gmail.com)

By: Dipak Kurmi

The annual gathering of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in the picturesque Swiss ski resort of Davos stands out as an unparalleled congregation of global influence. With a participation of over 60 heads of state this year, representatives from diverse sectors such as business, government, civil society, academia, and media convene annually. Together, they collaboratively strategize on deciphering the imminent shifts in the global economic terrain and chart a course to steer it in the optimal direction. Steering clear of the customary worries surrounding government regulations, taxation, and trade dynamics, this year's assembly of delegates emphasized a shift towards prioritizing women's health as a crucial factor in the pursuit of prosperity. According to analyses conducted by the renowned global consultancy McKinsey, a strategic emphasis on empowering women and safeguarding their well-being has the potential to contribute a staggering trillion dollars to the global economy on an annual basis by the year 2040.

In the span of the last two centuries, spanning from 1800 to 2018, there has been a remarkable surge in global life expectancy, ascending from a mere 30 years to a commendable 73. Nevertheless, delving deeper into the statistics unveils a significant disparity: women, on average, endure 25% more of their lives in a state of poor health, totaling nine years. This health discrepancy not only hampers their effectiveness in domestic, professional, and communal spheres but also diminishes their earning potential. Bridging this gap holds the promise of lifting more women out of poverty, empowering them to secure better provisions for themselves and their families. The ensuing benefits encompass a ripple effect, offering increased opportunities for the business landscape.

In a noteworthy development, the traditionally divergent concerns of civil society - centered on health, equity, and inclusivity - and business entities seem to be finding common ground. A pivotal insight from this year's discussions is the acknowledgment of the imperative to place a special emphasis on India. Undergoing a rapid transformation, the country has positioned itself as the world's fastest-growing major economy. Policymakers are forward-looking, aspiring to shape a domain characterized by sustainable, inclusive growth and opportunities. McKinsey, in collaboration with some of India's influential thought leaders, has actively engaged in deciphering how to harmonize priorities for steering growth in the nation over the next quarter-century.

Nandan Nilekani, one of the founding figures behind Infosys and presently serv-

ing as its non-executive chairman, imparts a crucial message to entrepreneurs and leaders globally: "Harness technology in a manner that enhances the well-being of people." In his perspective, striking a balance between the public and private sectors is essential. While markets play a pivotal role in facilitating the integration of digital technology, certain aspects should be treated as public infrastructure. "If a billion people can benefit from something, that's a true advantage. A billion individuals can access education, improved healthcare, and career transitions through technology," he emphasized. Presently, India is navigating a transformative period spanning the last decade and the forthcoming years, where we anticipate witnessing a multitude of innovative ways in which digital technology will be employed for the greater public good.

Nandan Nilekani not only envisions the future but also delineates the rapid acceleration of growth within the IT services sector. Surpassing a significant milestone, it took three decades for the industry to attain \$100 billion in revenue. The subsequent \$100 billion materialized within a decade, and the anticipation is that the third \$100 billion milestone will be achieved in a remarkably compressed timeframe of three to four years. Reflecting on employment trends, the industry's workforce burgeoned from inception to 4.5 million employees over 40 years. Projections now indicate a substantial leap, with expectations reaching nine to 10 million individuals employed within the sector in the next decade. Nilekani's foresight is particularly bold given the contemporary landscape where leading IT firms are downsizing and exercising caution in campus recruitment due to the increasing automation of tasks through artificial intelligence.

In McKinsey's exploration of the trajectory of the Indian economy, another influential figure they engaged with is GV Prasad, the co-chairman and managing director of the renowned Indian pharmaceutical multinational, Dr. Reddy's Laboratories. Prasad's driving force stems from a profound belief in the transformative potential of science and technology to innovate, combat diseases, and enhance overall human health and well-being. Reflecting on the historical narrative and peering into the future, he emphasized that while the Indian pharmaceutical industry has excelled in developing generic products, there's a pivotal need for an exponential surge in expertise if the aim is to pioneer innovation and introduce novel therapies, including biology-based medicines such as antibodies, as well as groundbreaking cell and gene therapies, to the Indian landscape.

Drawing a crucial distinction between the software services sector and the phar-

maceutical industry, GV Prasad outlined a notable evolution in government involvement. In the case of the former, a pivotal shift occurred when Manmohan Singh assumed the role of Finance Minister. The government's successful strategy involved maintaining a hands-off approach, allowing the industry to progress without the constraints of the erstwhile license permit raj system. However, Prasad advocates for a different role for regulators in the pharmaceutical sector. Rather than staying on the sidelines, he envisions them as enablers, providing support to the industry in shaping its clinical development pathways and navigating the complexities of bringing innovation to patients in India. Emphasizing the need for regulatory guidance on effective innovation, he notes that, presently, companies often turn to the United States Food and Drug Administration or European agencies for such direction in drug development. Furthermore, Prasad highlights the necessity to augment funding for clinical development, urging investors to grasp the intricacies of the entire investment cycle involved in cultivating an innovative pipeline. Recognizing the inherent risks, he underscores the importance of investors exercising patience and acquiring a profound understanding of the industry to effectively finance its sustainable development into the future.

While Davos this year marked new frontiers by spotlighting concerns for women's health and acknowledging India's rising success, it also offered conventional insights. A paramount takeaway is the imperative for businesses to embrace sustainability, steering clear of an extensive carbon footprint that obstructs the path to achieving net-zero emissions. Companies at the forefront, strategically repositioning themselves ahead of competitors - illustrated by the transformation of steel mills from fossil fuel-driven blast furnaces to electric arc furnaces powered by green technology - are poised to emerge as the frontrunners in this transformative journey.

In addition, companies are urged to harness the transformative power of generative artificial intelligence, a rapidly evolving technology that holds the potential to reshape various functions including sales, marketing, customer operations, and software development. Those adept at leveraging this innovation stand to unlock trillions of dollars in value across a spectrum of sectors, ranging from financial services to life sciences. Thus, this year's World Economic Forum gathering transcended being merely a forum for business leaders; it served as a platform that generated novel ideas and perspectives amidst the scenic backdrop of a Swiss resort. (The writer can be reached at dipaknewslive@gmail.com)

# When Ravan triumphs in Ayodhya



By: Sachin Rao

January 22, 2024, was a historic day. It was a very sad day, but a historic day nonetheless. It was a sad day because along with the idol of the Maryada Purushottam in Ayodhya was also enshrined a new idea of India. An idea that recognises only one native, authentic, and legitimate version of India and views every other culture, belief, religion, and morality as interlopers to be at best tolerated and at worse put in their place.

As M. S. Golwalkar put it, "...in this country, Hindustan, the Hindu Race with its Hindu Religion, Hindu Culture and Hindu Language, (the natural family of Sanskrit and her off-springs) complete the Nation concept...in Hindustan exists and must needs exist the ancient Hindu nation and naught else but the Hindu Nation. All those not belonging to the national i.e. Hindu Race, Religion, Culture and Language, naturally fall out of the pale of real 'National' life." In this Idea of India, adherents of this one India have first and absolute right over her destiny.

The rest, in M. S. Golwalkar's chilling words, "... (minorities) in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment - not even citizen's rights".

In this idea of India, the majority may use any means

they choose to impose their desire upon the rest of us. This bulldozing of multiplicities and the dominance of the majority is regarded not just as legitimate but indeed patriotic, which brings us to the greatest tragedy of all. It is an idea of India, that dwarfs the spiritual universe of its people. It produces petty bullies full of fear, hate, insecurity, and suspicion who find validation in kicking their fellow countrymen in the teeth. The products of this idea of India can be true to neither their religion nor their nation nor indeed to their own full potential as human beings. The temple may have been dedicated to Ram, but it is Ravan who seems to have triumphed in Ayodhya.

Jan 22 was also a historic day. It was historic because this idea of India was celebrated that day not by a marginal group of private individuals or organizations but by the Indian state, its elected leadership and nearly every institution and domain with social power. In fact, it is the few who refused to celebrate the day that found themselves at the margins. It is this collective celebration of the powerful that made the event a consecration of a new idea of India.

The elected government, the Prime Minister, the administrative machinery made the construction of the edifice their personal project. The judiciary legitimized the project with its judgement and most of the media dedicated itself to the breathless celebration and a bevy of celebrities lent their prestige and respectability to the event.

Even the armed forces joined the party by showering the venue with flowers. But the ultimate consecration was in the popular imagination, visible in the form of florescent pinkish-orange

flags that took over our public spaces. These were not the pennants of fervent devotees. They were instead the standards of conquerors showing the rest of us our place in the new dispensation.

Those of us who disagree with this idea of India have responded to the events in Ayodhya in a variety of ways.

One approach has been to deny that the day was sad at all. It welcomes and celebrates the construction of the edifice in Ayodhya reserving its criticism only for the manner in which the ceremony was conducted. Rather than object to the fact that a riotous mob broke laws, violated human decency and mangled the national fabric to destroy a mosque and make way for the temple, it objects only to who was invited and who presided over the consecration. This is akin to criticizing the décor of a building constructed on stolen land. Would the project have been any more legitimate if it was conducted in strict accordance with scriptures without a BJP leader or flag in sight?

Another view denies that the day was historic at all. It sees the event at Ayodhya as just another in a string of unconstitutional acts rather than as the consummation of a long project to establish a new order. It takes refuge in the existence of the Constitution without recognizing that the Constitution itself has been usurped and confined to the pages it is written on. It holds hope in electoral arithmetic without recognising that a change in government does not necessarily imply a change in the order of things. It tiptoes around the venom that has seized our national consciousness and hopes that a variety of side narratives can somehow dilute the poison. But that is a denial of

the challenge that stands before us today.

There is a compelling logic for these positions. They come from the desire to preserve an existence in the new political mainstream so that we may survive to fight another day. But they come at the price of accepting and unwillingly legitimizing the new order. A price that I find too much to pay.

I propose another position. It is to call out and stand firm against the madness that has seized the Nation. This position requires us to recognize the human, constitutional, and spiritual tragedy that is the event in Ayodhya. It requires us to reject the idea that what happened at Ayodhya represents divinity, justice, or patriotism in any form whatsoever.

It requires us to reject the cheap counterfeit being peddled in Ayodhya as being Hinduism or the worship of Ram. It requires us to reject the idea that vengeance perpetrated upon our countrymen of today for the sins, real and imagined, of their co-religionists of the past can in any way be called justice. It requires us to reject the idea that what is wrong by any standard of humanity becomes right because a compromised justice system and a bevy of celebrities say it to be so.

This position also requires us to acknowledge that Ayodhya is more than just another event but is in fact the harbinger of a new, sinister idea of our nationhood. It requires us to recognise that the struggle is for something much greater than the outcome of one election, it is a struggle for how India understands itself and its purpose. This is a task that will be long and very often lonely. But most of all it requires us to stand publicly and somewhat outnumbered but without despair, anger or fear for what we believe to be true.

We in this position could indeed find ourselves to be irrelevant to the 'mainstream' of the new order, but in the exile of this irrelevance lies the possibility, no matter how remote, of becoming relevant in a politics of our choosing than in playing the domesticated roles in a politics we do not believe in.

We could also be accused of standing against the tide of history. But in that resistance lies the possibility, no matter how remote, of writing a history of our own. Jai Jagat. (Courtesy: The Wire)

# Pakistan: Imran Khan does not seem to have a viable path back to power

By: Gul Bukhari

We must not fall for the erroneous comparisons being made between Imran Khan's recent convictions and Mian Nawaz Sharif's convictions of 2018 ahead of the last general election in Pakistan.

First, even the judgments against Mian Nawaz Sharif document the lack of evidence of any corruption. In comparison, Imran Khan has himself admitted to the charges against him (for example meri ghari, meri marzi in the Toshakhana case i.e., to having sold off gifts and not declaring the income from them, and in the Official Secrets Act case, having taken 'my people into confidence' with regard to the contents of a secret document [the cipher] and subsequently having kept and then lost it).

Khan has been demonstrated in the Toshakhana case to have not only profited from the conflict of interest but also to have committed mis-declarations of income throughout his time in office. He breached the Official Secrets Act in full public view and disclosed the contents of a diplomatic cipher for personal political gain.

So, the first difference is between the fake and real cases against the two men. Yes, both men were knocked out of the general election because of their convictions, but that's where the similarities end.

**Imran's ouster followed a Constitutional process**

Second, all of Imran Khan's cases are in trial courts with due process of law and appeals available to him in the higher courts of the country. By comparison, Mian Nawaz Sharif was ousted by the highest court of the land, the Supreme Court, without a right of appeal available to him. In his case, the Supreme Court directed the National Accountability Bureau to try him and even appointed a 'monitoring judge' from the Court to oversee the NAB trials.

This was illegal, unconstitutional, unprecedented, and unheard of. Justice Ijaz ul Ahsan of the Supreme Court directed the NAB daily. He has recently resigned from his position to avoid facing references of misconduct. Who in the position of a senior puisne judge, about to become chief justice of a country in a mere eight months, would resign from their position if they were not steeped in guilt, and fear of being caught?

Third, Imran Khan was the first ouster of a Pakistani Prime Minister that followed a constitutional process, whereas Mian Nawaz Sharif was always ousted in extra-



constitutional coup d'états that often relied on framing him with false charges. There are differences galore, but anchors and analysts are drawing false parallels to be wary of.

There is a general bewilderment as to why two convictions of 10 and 14 years were returned just eight and seven days before a general election, when he was already convicted in the foreign funding (of the PTI) case and could not have contested the upcoming general election on 8 February 2024.

Yet, it is very apparent that the timing of these convictions is not a coincidence. To me, it appears to be signalling to Imran Khan's voters and his candidates for the national and provincial assemblies that he is neither coming out nor making a comeback, any time soon. The reverse is what Khan and his social media workers have been trying to convince people of so that his party and support do not scatter any further.

**Khan does not seem to have a viable path back to power**

The mirage of a certain comeback that Imran Khan was building, in the belief that it would eventually lead to some sort of reality, has been struck with these convictions. The long jail sentences, and a ten-year disqualification from running for public office, have put paid to that notion.

Further, the candidates Imran Khan is fielding in the general election are largely opportunist newcomers. The original ideological members of the PTI, like Javed Hashmi, Akbar S Babar, etc., are long gone. And relatively older political cadres like Fawad Chaudhry, Murad Saad, etc., are either in jail facing the 9 May cases or on the run. So any candidates from the newcomer opportunist pool, who happen to win their seats, will likely behave exactly how these convictions are meant to make them behave; prepare to join winning parties to get a share of power.

The opportunists do not contest elections to sit in the opposition; they always fly in the direction of the wind. These convictions aimed

to make that direction clear.

Moreover, Imran Khan's strategy to recruit and field only lawyers seems to have backfired spectacularly. These ticket-holding lawyers neither prepared for nor fought his cases sincerely or properly. They used every opportunity for self-publicity instead to be able to leverage Imran Khan's popularity for personal gain as ticket holders of the PTI. They knew fully well he was over, but that they could still catapult themselves on the back of his perceived persecution and victimisation. Even after the convictions, these lawyer candidates are exhorting PTI voters to come out in their droves on Election Day to exact revenge for Imran Khan's convictions, when they know fully well it will only benefit them and not him.

As to why Imran Khan could not strike a deal with the establishment despite continuous attempts on his part, the generals' experiences appear not to allow them to trust him again. They cannot afford more instability or another attempted rebellion within the armed forces, which he is sure to foment more effectively as a person outside of prison. As it is, his propaganda apparatus, consisting of social media tigers, works like a well-oiled machine even while he is incarcerated. They know the back-end of that machine because they constructed it, and they know how powerful it is. To let him loose on top of it would be fatal for them.

Even the option of exile for Imran Khan stands rejected for two reasons. First, because he is a blabbermouth with no statesperson-like qualities. He would spread all manner of lies and truths, especially if exiled to a jurisdiction with a tradition and legal framework that guarantees free speech. That leaves the Arab world, or the Chinese, where there seem to be no takers because he appears to have personally offended these world leaders. Khan seems to have sealed his political fate with his own deeds, and does not seem to have a viable pathway back to power. (Courtesy: The Quint)

# Drifting apart: Maldives' growing ties with other countries

By: N. Nathiva Moorthy

Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu's anticipated yet fast-tracked replacement of India with China as the preferred partner; his simultaneous new partnership with distant Türkiye in civil and military trade; and his open communication with the United States (US) that has a 'China-containment' strategy have all created a new strategic conundrum for the region to grapple with. In particular, his government joining China's Global Strategic Initiative (GSI) and also importing essential staples like rice and flour from Türkiye, so as 'not to rely on one country' have evoked curiosity and concern.

While the general focus is on his recent state visit to China, Muizzu's US\$ 37-million deal to procure 'military drones' from Türkiye, as if to replace the Indian aerial surveillance of the 900,000-sq km Maldivian exclusive economic zone (EEZ), may introduce a new player into the already crowded Indian Ocean Region (IOR) strategic space.

Yet, his decision to 'elevate' bilateral relations with China to 'strategic cooperation' too has triggered regional concerns. The presence of Chinese research/spy vessel Xiang Yang Hong 03 docking in Malé, soon after Muizzu's decision on the non-extension of the joint hydrographical survey with India indicates Muizzu's pro-China tilt. Maldives' explanation that the vessel visit was only to replenish stocks sounds hollow after Sri Lanka had suspended such calibrated Chinese operations culminating in actual 'research' (?) in the third of three visits in two

years. Similarly, Muizzu's decision to extend Aasandha public health insurance coverage to hospitals in Dubai and Thailand, beyond those in India and Sri Lanka, is also a calculated bid to hijack the 'India Out' agenda of former President Abdulla Yameen (2013-18).

**Full disclosure**  
Türkiye became Muizzu's first presidential destination for an official visit, but only after Saudi Arabia, the traditional ally and supporter of Maldives, had last minute, without explanations. Subsequently, Muizzu's visit to China implied that there was much to expect from it as if a lot of preparatory work had been done at short notice.

In China, Muizzu signed 20 agreements in the presence of President Xi Jinping in Beijing and more at Fujian, en route. Apart from the GSI, Maldives has joined China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) and also revived the Belt and Road Initiative and Free Trade Agreement (FTA) from the Yameen era, both of which successor Solih had sidelined. Muizzu's ambitious China-funded projects also include an ambitious transshipment port and the expansion of the Malé International Airport, which was at the centre of the 'GMR row' with India in 2011-12.

For Muizzu, the 1,153-hectare 'Ras Male' reclamation and construction project in Fushi Dhiggaru lagoon is the signature dream project. China has agreed to build 30,000 'community housing' units in Ras Male, once the Sri Lankan contractor completes the US\$ 700-million reclamation work in eight months, taking 70 hectares of land in the place of cash. Though housing is a

vote-catcher, Solih's defeat has proved otherwise. Job creation is the way out but in the traditional Chinese way, Muizzu's projects do not promise any.

**Parliamentary approval**  
Deep in debt, both internal and external, like the Sri Lankan neighbour, Maldives also need cash loans, or budgetary support, but China has only promised US\$ 130 million in developmental funding. Given the state of the inherited economy, the Muizzu government recently offered MVR 4.2 billion in treasury bills. His poll promise to not print currency, if kept, would pressure the highly-stressed banking sector even more or lead to more borrowing or both.

It also remains to be seen if Muizzu will keep the other poll promise to obtain parliamentary approval for all his overseas agreements. He can now hope to do so after 13 MPs crossed over from Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, fixed for 17 March. Reflecting the evolving voter mood, the defections and the new India approach are behind, that too, to fill the vacancy caused by his own elevation.

The MDP also has moved a bill to bar elections and electioneering during the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan, and in whose name, Muizzu has promised 10 kg each of rice and flour free from Türkiye, for every family. In between, friends and adversaries, both inside the country and outside, are awaiting the President's maiden parliamentary address, scheduled post-recess on 5 February, for substantiation of his policy orientation.

**On mission mode**



From time immemorial, India, along with Sri Lanka, has been the main supplier of essentials to the archipelago nation. On unforeseen occasions like the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, India as part of the 'Neighbourhood First' policy, chose the Maldives as the first beneficiary of food and medicines, including locally manufactured vaccine, all as a gift to the Maldivian people. In context, Muizzu's reiteration of the poll-time demand for India to pull out the troops engaged in medical and emergency evacuations and the consequent death of a teenager have left a bad taste.

Likewise, the 'India Military Out' call falls flat against past instances when Indian troops sent in on specific requests stuck to on the mission mode and withdrew immediately. 'Operation Cactus' (1988), followed by post-tsunami rescue and relief operations (2004), and the Malé drinking water crisis (2014), all are instances where the Indian troops left once the task was done.

Yet, in a veiled but caustic remark targeting India on his return from China, Muizzu declared that Maldives was 'not in anybody's backyard, but an independent and sovereign State and no one has a licence

to bully us'. That was after President Xi had told Muizzu in Beijing that China 'firmly opposes external interference in Maldives. It was a repeat of the Chinese official position when India criticised Yameen after the Maldivian Supreme Court ordered freedom for a jailed predecessor, Mohammed Nasheed, who then in self-exile, on 1 February 2018.

**Neo-nationalist chorus**  
Amid multiple developments and to ensure continued trust and confidence, the 'high-level core group' of the two governments, proposed by President Muizzu and PM Modi at their first meeting, met in Malé and held 'discussions on finding a mutually workable solution to enable continued operation of Indian aviation platforms that provide humanitarian and medevac services to the people of Maldives. The officials also discussed 'steps to enhance the partnership, including expediting ongoing India-funded projects', as sought by Muizzu, both before and after his election. Following up on the Malé meeting, the two Foreign Ministers, S Jaishankar of India and Moosa Zameer of Maldives met in Uganda, on the sidelines of the NAM ministerial meeting, again in a third-

nation venue. The Maldivian Foreign Ministry has since echoed the Indian sentiment on the core group discussions, however, punctuating it with an understanding on the troops' withdrawal.

In between, social media calls in India to 'Boycott Maldives' as a tourism destination after their Maldivian counterparts had posted derogatory and defamatory remarks. The Maldivian government's quick action of promptly distancing itself from the social media remarks of three deputy ministers and suspending them did not stop Indian celebrities, including Bollywood actors and cricketers, from joining what essentially became a neo-nationalist chorus.

Following the rushed restoration of the Yameen-era China ties, which resembles a yo-yo in the Maldives foreign policy with every government, India and Indians need to adjust to the new normal. From a Maldivian perspective, such predictability is absent in Türkiye's overnight entry and its impact on the nation's historic ties with viz Saudi Arabia and other Gulf partners.

**American foray**  
Amidst all this, Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, Adm John Aquilino's meeting with President Muizzu, a few days after the latter's return from China, evoked interest in India and the region as a whole. Ahead of Muizzu's China visit, the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken initiated a telephonic discussion with Maldivian Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer, and the two discussed bilateral cooperation.

As if in continuation of the agreement signed under the previous regime, Adm.

Aquilino 'reiterated his commitment to full assistance in strengthening capacity-building in the defence force' and 'additionally affirmed their support for the Maldives in maintaining peace and security while preserving its sovereignty'. Though Muizzu's approach to the US in the context of his China ties is unclear, his coalition then under jailed Yameen welcomed the October 2020 visit of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, amid his 'India Out' campaign.

There is a history to the US-Maldives defence cooperation. The US' bid for the Maldives to sign the 'Status of Forces Agreement' (SOFA) on military matters and set up a base in the archipelago-nation failed under the short presidency of Mohamed Waheed (2012-13) after the two sides had reportedly signed a 10-year 'Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement' (ACSA) under predecessor President Mohammed Nasheed (2008-12). At the time, Maldives was also known to have offered a military base for the US, but the proposal did not move further.

Be it as it may, normalising India-Maldives ties to whatever extent possible now depends also on the ability of the political leadership in the two countries to silence their neo-nationalist cadres.

Following the 'Boycott Maldives' calls in India, the pressure on Muizzu was so great that during his China visit, he asked China to reclaim (from India) the pre-COVID top-spot source-nation for Maldivian tourism. This was unlike any other agreement or commitment during the visit, which was seemingly being worked out over a long period. (Courtesy: ORF)

The prospect of a full-scale war between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia terrifies people on both sides of the border, but some see it as an inevitable fallout from Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza

# Israel and Lebanon are prepping for a war neither wants, but many fear it's becoming inevitable

**BEIRUT, Feb 1:** The prospect of a full-scale war between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia terrifies people on both sides of the border, but some see it as an inevitable fallout from Israel's ongoing war against Hamas in Gaza.



Such a war could be the most destructive either side has ever experienced.

Israel and Hezbollah each have lessons from their last war, in 2006, a monthlong conflict that ended in a draw. They've also had four months to prepare for another war, even as the U.S. tries to prevent a widening of the conflict. The 2006 war, six years after Israeli forces withdrew from south Lebanon, erupted after Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers and killed several others in a cross-border raid.

Israel launched a full-scale air and ground offensive and imposed a blockade that aimed to free the hostages and destroy Hezbollah's military capabilities - a mission that ultimately failed.

Israel bombing leveled large swaths of south Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburbs. Hezbollah fired thousands of unguided rockets into northern Israel communities.

The conflict killed some 1,200 Lebanese, mostly civilians, and 160 Israelis, mostly soldiers. A U.N. resolution ending the war called for withdrawal of Israeli forces from

Lebanon and a demilitarized zone on Lebanon's side of the border.

Despite the deployment of U.N. peacekeepers, Hezbollah continues to operate in the border area, while Lebanon says Israel regularly violates its airspace and continues to occupy pockets of Lebanese land. An Israel-Hezbollah war "would be a total disaster," U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned last month, amid a flurry of shuttle diplomacy by the U.S. and Europe.

Iran-backed Hezbollah seemed caught off-guard by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel, a regional ally. Since then, Hezbollah and Israel have exchanged daily cross-border strikes, escalating gradually.

Israel also carried out targeted killings of Hezbollah and Hamas figures in Lebanon.

More than 200 people, mostly Hezbollah fighters but also more than 20 civilians, have been killed on Lebanon's side, and 18 on Israel's.

Tens of thousands have

been displaced on both sides. There are no immediate prospects for their return.

Israeli political and military leaders have warned Hezbollah that war is increasingly probable unless the militants withdraw from the border.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah hasn't threatened to initiate war but warned of a fight "without limits" if Israel does. Hezbollah says it won't agree to a ceasefire on the Israel-Lebanon border before there's one in Gaza and has rebuffed a U.S. proposal to move its forces several kilometers (miles) back from the border, according to Lebanese officials.

Despite the rhetoric, neither side appears to want war, said Andrea Teneti, spokesman for the U.N. peacekeeping mission in south Lebanon. However, "a miscalculation could potentially trigger a wider conflict that would be very difficult to control," he said.

Both Hezbollah and the Israeli military have expanded capabilities since 2006 - yet

both countries also are more fragile.

In Lebanon, four years of economic crisis have crippled public institutions, including its army and electrical grid, and eroded its health system. The country hosts more than 1 million Syrian refugees.

Lebanon adopted an emergency plan for a war scenario in late October. It projected the forcible displacement of 1 million Lebanese for 45 days.

About 87,000 Lebanese are displaced from the border area. While the government is relying on international organizations to fund the response, many groups working in Lebanon can't maintain existing programs. The U.N. refugee agency has provided supplies to collective shelters and given emergency cash to some 400 families in south Lebanon, spokesperson Lisa Abou Khaled said. The agency doesn't have funds to support large numbers of displaced in the event of war, she said.

Aid group Doctors Without Borders said it has stockpiled some 10 tons of medical supplies and backup fuel for hospital generators in areas most likely to be affected by a widening conflict, in anticipation of a blockade.

Israel is feeling economic and social strain from the war in Gaza, which is expected to cost over \$50 billion, or about 10 percent of national economic activity through the end of 2024, according to the Bank

of Israel. Costs would rise sharply if there's war with Lebanon.

"No one wants this war, or wishes it on anyone," said Tal Beeri, of the Alma Research and Education Center, a think tank focusing on northern Israel security. But he said he believes an armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah is inevitable, arguing that diplomatic solutions appear unlikely and would only allow Hezbollah's strategic threats to increase. Israel has evacuated 60,000 residents from towns nearest the border, where there's no warning time for rocket launches because of the proximity of Hezbollah squads.

In a war, there would be no point in additional evacuations since the militia's rockets and missiles can reach all of Israel.

After the Oct. 7 attack, the war in Gaza had broad domestic support, even if there's now a growing debate over its direction. Around half of Israelis would support war with Hezbollah as a last resort for restoring border security, according to recent polling by the think tank Israel Democracy Institute.

In Lebanon, some have criticized Hezbollah for exposing the country to another potentially devastating war. Others support the group's limited entry into the conflict and believe Hezbollah's arsenal will deter Israel from escalating.

(AP)

# Putin vows to make military gains in Ukraine as he meets with his campaign staff



**MOSCOW, Feb 1:** President Vladimir Putin vowed on Wednesday to push back Ukrainian forces to reduce the threat of attacks on Russian territory as he met with activists running his campaign ahead of the March presidential election that he's all but certain to win.

Asked about plans for the military campaign in Ukraine, Putin said the line of contact needs to be pushed back to "such a distance from our territory that will make it safe from Western-supplied long-range artillery that Ukrainian authorities use for shelling peaceful cities."

He added the Russian military has been doing just that, "pushing the enemy back from vital populated centers."

"This is the main motive for our guys who are fighting and risking their lives there -- to protect the Motherland, to protect our people," he added.

Ukraine has struck inside Russia recently, including a December 30 attack on the border city of Belgorod that killed 25 people, injured over 100. Putin also said Russian investigators concluded that Ukraine used US-supplied Patriot air defense systems to shoot down a Russian military transport plane in the Belgorod region on January 24. Russian authorities said the crash killed all 74 people onboard, including 65 Ukrainian POWs heading for a swap.

Ukrainian officials didn't deny the plane's downing but didn't take responsibility and called for an international investigation.

Putin said Russia wouldn't just welcome but would "insist" on an international inquiry on what he described as a "crime" by Ukraine.

Putin, 71, who is running as an independent candidate, relies on a tight control over Russia's political system that he has established during 24 years in power.

With prominent critics who could challenge him either jailed or living abroad and most independent media banned, his reelection in the March 15-17 presidential vote is all but assured.

"Russia has been forced to defend its interests, including by military means," Putin told the meeting with his campaign staff, saying that even as the meeting was going on, Russian troops made new gains on the edge of the town of Avdiivka in eastern Ukraine.

"We are passing through a very difficult and important period in the development of our country, the strengthening of its independence and sovereignty in all vectors," he said. "Scum that is always present is being washed away bit by bit."

Under a constitutional reform that he engineered, Putin is eligible to seek two more six-year terms, potentially allowing him to remain in power until 2036. He is already the longest-serving Kremlin leader since Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, who died in 1953.

Three other candidates who were nominated by parties represented in parliament are also running: Nikolai Kharitonov of the Communist Party, Leonid Slutsky of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party and Vladislav Davankov of the New People Party.

All three parties have been largely supportive of the Kremlin's policies. Kharitonov ran against Putin in 2004, finishing a distant second. Boris Nadezhdin, a 60-year-old local legislator in a town near Moscow, also is seeking to run. He has openly called for a halt to the conflict in Ukraine and starting a dialogue with the West.

Thousands of Russians across the country signed petitions in support of Nadezhdin's candidacy, an unusual show of opposition sympathies in the rigidly controlled political landscape that raises a challenge for the Kremlin. On Wednesday, Nadezhdin submitted 105,000 signatures to the Central Election Commission, which is expected to review them over the next few days. (AP)

# Sri Lanka's controversial online safety bill becomes law

**COLOMBO, Feb 1:** Sri Lanka's Parliament on Thursday endorsed a controversial bill to regulate online content despite criticism from the Opposition that claimed it will stifle freedom of speech.

Parliament's communications office in a release said that Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena certified the bill with his signature. The Speaker's endorsement came despite demands internationally and locally to refrain from signing it.

The Parliament had approved the bill with amendments last week. The new legislation would lead to the establishment of the Online Safety Commission which is empowered to make punitive rulings on offenses.

A false statement online would be liable, if convicted, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or to a fine not exceeding five hundred thousand Sri Lankan rupees. Earlier, the bill was severely criticised as one which impinged on the freedom of expression.

The opposition argued, citing the Asian Internet Coalition (AIC), that the bill would hamper efforts to invite foreign investment.

The Opposition also vowed to repeal it when in power.

The AIC had said, "The proposed legislation, in its present form, poses significant challenges that, if not addressed comprehensively, could undermine the potential growth of Sri Lanka's digital economy."

The highest court had ruled to amend at least 31 of the full 57 clauses of the bill. (PTI)

# A HK court convicted 4 people of rioting over the storming of legislature in 2019 protests

**HONG KONG, Feb 1:** A Hong Kong court on Thursday convicted four people for rioting over the storming of the city's legislative council building at the height of the anti-government protests more than four years ago.

The break-in on July 1 in 2019 - the 22nd anniversary of the former British colony's return to China - was one of the most chaotic episodes of the massive protests sparked by a now-withdrawn extradition bill.

Hundreds of protesters swarmed into the legislature that night, defacing pictures and smashing furniture. Some spray-painted slogans in the chamber and painted over the territory's emblem on a wall before vacating the site as riot police cleared surrounding streets with tear gas and then moved inside.

The legislature eventually spent about 36 million Hong Kong dollars (US\$4.6 million) on repairing the damages, the court heard earlier.

Six defendants, including actor Gregory Wong and two reporters Wong Ka-ho and Ma Kai-chung, last year pleaded not guilty to rioting.

On Thursday, judge Li Chi-ho found four of the six defendants, including Gregory Wong, guilty of rioting. Wong Ka-ho and Ma were

acquitted of the rioting charge but were convicted for unlawful entry into the legislature.

Li said in his written judgment that there was a directive to ask all people to leave. "I can't see how the defense can distort the meaning of the word and exclude journalists from everyone," he said.

He added it was a "wrong idea" for Wong Ka-ho to think that reporters can stay there to document the developments.

During the trial, Gregory Wong said he was at the scene to deliver chargers to a reporter. But the judge challenged his arguments, saying he had hugged a protester before leaving the chamber as an expression of support.

"His intention of entering the legislature is obvious, it is to join this riot," he said.

Eight others, including activists Ventus Lau, Owen Chow and former student leader Althea Suen, were also charged for rioting in the same case



and previously entered a guilty plea.

The 2019 protests were sparked by a proposed extradition law that would have allowed Hong Kong criminal suspects to be sent to the mainland for trial.

The government withdrew the bill, but the protesters widened their demands to include direct elections for the city's leaders and police accountability.

The social movement was the biggest challenge against the Hong Kong government since the city's handover in 1997 and triggered Beijing to impose a national security law in 2020 to quell it. Following the introduction of the

security law, many of the city's leading activists were arrested, silenced or forced into self-exile.

More than 10,200 people were arrested in connection to the protests for various crimes, such as rioting and participating in an unauthorized assembly. (AP)

# Pakistan police raid central secretariat of Imran Khan's party: Report

**ISLAMABAD, Feb 1:** In a crackdown against Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan's party, police and security officials in plainclothes reportedly raided and took control of its central secretariat here and stopped members from entering the premises, a media report said on Thursday.

Quoting unnamed party sources, Dawn News reported that the raid happened a day after Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi were sentenced to 14 years of rigorous imprisonment each in a corruption case.

It came just before a general body meeting of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party on Wednesday in Islamabad's Sector G-8. The PTI general body, however, managed to hold a virtual meeting in which it decided to hold organisational elections within a fortnight.

Khan's party faced numerous troubles before the Feb 8 general elections starting with the denial of its election symbol, the cricket bat, to the rejection of nomination papers of Khan, former foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and several other party leaders.

An official of the capital police denied the allegation, pointing out that a raid could not be conducted without having permission from a magistrate and no such order was issued on Wednesday.

He claimed on condition of

anonymity they went there to provide security.

"[As] a judgement against Imran Khan and Bushra Bibi was announced, there was a possibility that a protest would be held there. Police did not enter the secretariat and remained outside," the unnamed official said.

A PTI representative, requesting anonymity, said the general body meeting was planned to be held in Islamabad, all provincial capitals and Gilgit Baltistan for which an arrangement was made to connect all stations through the internet.

"However, in Islamabad, police along with people in civil dress reached the central secretariat, removed guards and took control of the secretariat. Staff was told to go out and a few of them, who wished to stay there, were restricted to their offices.

"Police officials threatened the PTI members, who were reaching there to attend the general body meeting, and told them not to take part in any political activity if they don't want to face consequences," he said. "Later, members attended the meeting virtually," the representative said.

A "crackdown" similar to the one in Islamabad was launched against the party in Quetta but the members swiftly changed the venue of the meeting and managed to attend it physically, according to him. (PTI)

# EU leaders face a new showdown with Hungary as they seek to unblock economic aid to Ukraine

**BRUSSELS, Feb 1:** European Union leaders are gathering on Thursday to shore up financial support for Ukraine. The overwhelming majority of them — from 26 countries — agree that Europe's security is at stake, and that time is of the essence. Only one, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, stands in their way.

Almost two years since Russia invaded, the war has ground to a halt and Ukraine's war-ravaged economy desperately needs propping up. But political infighting in the EU and in the United States is depriving Kyiv of a long-term source of funding. More than \$100 billion is being held up.

In December, the 26 other leaders agreed on a package worth 50 billion euros (\$54 billion) for this year through 2027. They also agreed to make Ukraine a candidate for EU membership, which Orban reluctantly accepted.

"Securing agreement is vital for our credibility, and not least for our commitment to provide steadfast support to Ukraine," European Council President Charles Michel, who is chairing the summit, said in his invitation letter to the leaders.

Ukraine has improved conditions for its Hungarian minority. It might not be enough for Viktor Orban.

But the financial package is part of a review of the EU's continuing seven-year budget, which must be approved unanimously.

Orban, the EU leader with the closest ties to Russia, is angry at the European

Commission's decision to freeze his government's access to some of the bloc's funds. The executive branch did so over concerns about possible threats to the EU budget posed by democratic backsliding in Hungary.

In response, Hungary vetoed statements at the EU on a range of issues. Orban's also exported the problem to NATO, by blocking high level meetings with Ukraine until only recently. Budapest is also holding up Sweden's bid for membership in the military organization.

"I don't want to use the word blackmail, but I don't know what other better word" might fit, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas told reporters as she arrived at EU headquarters in Brussels for the meeting.

"Hungary needs Europe," she said, highlighting the country's own economic problems and high interest rates. "He should also look into what it is in it for Hungary, being in Europe."

Orban did not speak to reporters as he entered the meeting.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that "we want to finish what we started in December" and stressed that the planned 50 billion euros for Ukraine is "urgently necessary."

"I will make a great deal of effort, together with many others, to make a decision by 27 (member states) possible," Scholz said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is scheduled to address the leaders via video link. (AP)

# The bodies of 9 Pakistanis killed by unknown gunmen in Iran have been repatriated

**QUETTA, Feb 1:** The bodies of nine Pakistani laborers killed by gunmen in Iran last week were repatriated to their home country on Thursday.

It was still unclear who was behind the attack Saturday in a home in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province. Three Pakistanis wounded in the attack were still being treated at an Iranian hospital.

Tehran handed over the bodies of the slain men at the Taftan border crossing, local government administrator Waqar Kakar said. He said the bodies were being flown to the city of Multan and will be sent from there to their hometowns.

The killings occurred as tensions erupted between Pakistan and Iran after Pakistan launched retaliatory strikes inside Iran that were said to be targeting militant hideouts and killed at least nine people. An Iranian attack against alleged militant hideouts inside Pakistan killed two children in southwestern Baluchistan province.

Following the tit-for-tat attacks, both sides agreed Monday to improve their security cooperation.

The attacks appeared to target two Baluch militant groups with similar separatist goals. The two countries have accused each other of providing safe haven to the groups in their respective territories. (AP)

The fee hike, first after 2016, will come into force from April 1

# US hikes visa fees for various categories of non-immigrant visas like H-1B, EB-5 among others

**WASHINGTON, Feb 1:** The US has announced a steep increase in fees for various categories of non-immigrant visas like the H-1B, L-1 and EB-5, the most popular among Indians.

The fee hike, first after 2016, will come into force from April 1.

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise.

Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China.

The EB-5 programme, launched by the US government in 1990, enables high-net-worth foreign investors to obtain a US visa for themselves and their families by investing a minimum of USD 5,00,000 in a US business that helps create 10 jobs for American workers.

To come into force from April 1, the new H-1B application visa fee, which is form I-129, has been increased



from USD 460 to USD 780. The H-1B registration will increase from USD 10 to USD 215, but from next year.

The fee for L-1 visas has been increased from USD 460 to USD 1,385, and that of EB-5 visas, popularly known as investors visas, has jumped from USD 3,675 to USD 11,160, according to a federal notification issued on Wednesday.

The L-1 visa is a non-immigrant visa category in the US that is designed for intra-company transferees. It allows multinational companies to transfer certain employees from their foreign offices to work in the US temporarily.

The fee adjustments, as

well as changes to the forms and fee structures used by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), will result in net costs, benefits, and transfer payments, the Department of Homeland Security said in its federal notification.

For the 10-year period of analysis of the rule (FY 2024 through FY 2033), the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) estimates the annualised net costs to the public will be USD 157,005,952, discounted at three and seven per cent.

Estimated total net costs over 10 years will be USD 1,339,292,617 discounted at three per cent and USD 1,102,744,106 discounted at

seven per cent. DHS argued that the changes in the final rule will also provide several benefits to it and applicants/petitioners seeking immigration benefits.

For the government, the primary benefits include reduced administrative burdens and fee processing errors, increased efficiency in the adjudicative process, and the ability to better assess the cost of providing services, which allows for better-aligned fees in future regulations.

The primary benefits to the applicants/petitioners include reduced fee processing errors, increased efficiency in the adjudicative process, the simplification of the fee payment process for some forms, elimination of the USD 30 returned check fee, and for many applicants, limited fee increases and additional fee exemptions to reduce fee burdens.

In many categories, the federal notification has made a minor reduction in visa application fees as well. (PTI)

# Methane gas explosion behind Wokha coal mine accident

Accident in coal mine claimed six lives, injured five others on January 25



HT Correspondent

**DIMAPUR, Feb 1:** A fire and explosion of methane gas is what caused the accident at a rat-hole coal mine in Ruchayan village under Bhandari sub-division of Wokha district in Nagaland on January 25,

the state geology and mining department said on Thursday.

The accident in the coal mine had resulted in the death of six labourers and injury to five others.

The director of the department,

Kenyelo Rengma, in a release, said the fire and explosion of methane gas could have occurred due to a frictional spark while using a portable handheld drilling machine. He stated that a team of officials from the department had visited the mining site to assess the cause of the accident.

Rengma said on inspection and as per the record of the department, the coal mine was an illegal rat-hole mine of 4 feet by 4.5 feet which was being operated by locals in collaboration with some non-locals.

About 70km from Dimapur, the mine is located at an elevation of 252 m AMSL (above mean sea level), he said.

Rengma said, "The geology and mining department was trying to control illegal coal mining in the state. We are always ready to assist and support coal miners."

However, he said, the department accordingly expects the miners to cooperate with it and follow the guidelines of mining methods to avert mine accidents in the future.

The department expressed deep condolences to the families of the deceased and wished speedy recovery to the injured.

# Decomposed body of missing youth found in Manipur's Chandel

**IMPHAL, Feb 1:** The decomposed remains suspected to be of a 19-year-old youth, who had been missing since May last year were found in Sokom village in Manipur's Chandel district, police said.

Ngangom Navy of Sugnu in Kakching district had been missing since May 28 last year and has been presumed dead.

The search for Ngangom resumed on Wednesday after a video went viral on January 30 on social media where suspected militants were seen decapitating his head. Manipur Police identified the site where the video was shot and a renewed search was carried out during which the decomposed skeletal remains were found on Wednesday.

Clothes seen on the video seemed to match with those that were also recovered, police said, adding that "forensic experts are examining the remains to confirm the identity".

The remains had been deposited at the mortuary of the Jawahar Lal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences in Imphal. (PTI)

# Budget reiterates resolve to maintain pace of inclusive growth: Khandu

**ITANAGAR, Feb 1:** Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu on Thursday hailed the interim budget, saying it reiterates the collective resolve to maintain the pace of all-round inclusive growth in a seamless manner.

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday presented a vote on account or an interim budget for the 2024-25 fiscal.

"Encapsulating the vision of Hon'ble PM Shri @narendramodi ji to achieve the goal of #ViksitBharat, the interim #UnionBudget2024 presented by Hon'ble FM Smt @nsitharaman ji reiterates our collective resolve to maintain the pace of all-round inclusive growth in a seamless manner," Khandu posted on X.

He said that with a significant increase in the capital expenditure outlay to 11.1 per cent (₹ 11.11 lakh crore for FY 25), the budget propels India to-



towards the ambitious target of becoming a five trillion-dollar economy by 2027.

The extraordinary focus on research and development spending is also a decisive step forward, the chief minister said in another social media post.

The Union finance minister announced a ₹ 11.11 lakh crore spending on infrastructure and vowed to continue reforms as she resisted resorting to populist measures in Modi govern-

ment's last budget before general elections, instead choosing to stay on the path of cutting deficit while bolstering measures for focus groups.

Sitharaman also proposed no changes in income tax rates for individuals and corporates, as well as import duty, but offered amnesty for disputed income tax demands of the period prior to 2014-15 as a relief to small tax-

payers. (PTI)

# Dropping of cases against HNLC on case-to-case basis

**SHILLONG, Feb 1:** Meghalaya chief minister Conrad K Sangma has said that the dropping of cases against the proscribed Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) will depend on a case-to-case basis.

He said that the terms and conditions cannot be changed as they are the same for all militant organizations.

The HNLC has pulled out of the peace talks with the government alleging that the latter had failed to address its five core demands, which include dropping all cases against the leaders and cadres of the outfit.

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday, Sangma however, said that the matter related to amnesty has been discussed on a case-to-case basis.

"There are some cases which are heinous in nature,



So everything will be dealt with separately, but these cannot be talked about as blanket orders saying that all cases are being withdrawn as it depends on case to case to basis," he said.

Sangma also added, "There are standard conditions that

used and laid down for other organizations, the same conditions are applicable for HNLC peace talks also."

Sangma also said that the government has only seen a letter from the HNLC conveying its decision not to continue with the peace talks.

"Therefore, we have urged them (HNLC) that there will always be challenges, there will always be certain things which can be ironed out and ultimately, the desire to have peace is what is most important," he said.

Reiterating that the government is still open to discussion with the HNLC, the CM appealed to the outfit to reconsider its decision and continue with the peace talks.

"We are open to discussion and we urge them to continue with the peace talks," he added. (NNN)

# M'laya Residents, Safety and Security (Amendment) Bill to be reconsidered

**SHILLONG, Feb 1:** The Meghalaya government has decided to re-examine the Meghalaya Residents, Safety and Security (Amendment) Bill to ensure it addresses the concerns over influx in conformity with national laws.

Speaking to media persons, chief minister Conrad K Sangma on Wednesday said, "We have not yet gone into details, but we have had discussions about it. We are supposed to have a discussion with the stakeholders so we are yet to take a call on the date. Definitely we will examine the whole thing and

find out the best way in which where we are able to come out with provisions, achieve the goals and yet be in conformity with national laws and constitutional provisions."

Last year, the Union ministry of home affairs (MHA) had returned the Meghalaya Residents, Safety and Security (Amendment) Bill, 2020 and had pointed out that the move to set up facilitation centres or check gates under the Bill will affect the movement of people through Meghalaya, which is a transit state. (NNN)

# Road blockade over labourer's death in Arunachal

**ITANAGAR, Feb 1:** Hundreds of people on Thursday staged a road blockade in Dirak Gate area in Arunachal Pradesh's Namsai district in protest against the death of a labourer allegedly due to severe beating, police said.

Namsai Superintendent of Police Sange Thinley told PTI that the labourer, identified as 60-year-old Sab Taye, was severely beaten up by three other workers on Monday. All of them worked together at a construction site.

Taye, a resident of New Silatoo village in the district, later succumbed to his injuries. A case was registered and the three accused labourers were arrested, the SP said.

During interrogation, the accused claimed they beat up Taye after he was caught stealing a drilling machine and some other goods from the site, Thinley said.

On Thursday morning, hundreds of people from all walks of life staged a dharna and resorted to road blockade in protest against the killing. They demanded the arrest of a contractor, who had engaged the labourers in construction work. Later in the day, the road blockade was lifted, Thinley said, adding the situation is tense, but under control. (PTI)

# Meghalaya, Assam to resume border talks

**SHILLONG, Feb 1:** Meghalaya chief minister Conrad K Sangma has said Meghalaya and Assam will continue with the second phase of border talks to resolve the remaining six areas of difference.

"We don't know when the elections will be announced, but our talks will continue as per our pace. Of course when elections are announced it will become a bit of an inconvenience for everybody, but we will continue the process," Sangma told reporters on Wednesday.

Sangma also informed that he had unofficially discussed the matter with the Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma over breakfast last week.

"As you are aware these kinds of discussions need to take place at an official level and a lot also takes place at an unofficial level. We sit down together and really discuss the issues so the process is continuous. There are lots of informal discussions that are taking place without formal meetings. All these processes are continuing," he added. (NNN)

# Exotic animals, birds rescued in Mizoram

**AIZWAL, Feb 1:** Assam Rifles personnel with officials of Mizoram forest department have arrested two persons for smuggling exotic bird and animal species in East Mizoram's Champai town, the paramilitary force said in a statement on Thursday.

The incident happened near the Indo-Myanmar international border on Wednesday, it said.

The persons aged 20 and 29 years were arrested for smuggling the exotic species worth ₹ 68.4 lakh, it added.

The animals and birds were hidden in iron cages and plastic baskets and were being brought to Aizawl from Zokhawthar along the Indo-Myanmar border, it said.

The rescued exotic species as well as the accused were handed over to the forest department in Champai for further legal proceedings, it added. (PTI)

# Reverse decision to scrap FMR: ANSAM to Shah

**IMPHAL, Feb 1:** The All Naga Students' Association, Manipur (ANSAM) has requested Union home minister Amit Shah on Thursday for the reversal of the decision to scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR) and reinstate the same in Naga areas along the Indo-Myanmar border.

In a memorandum addressed to the Union home minister, which was submitted through the Manipur Governor, the Naga student body said that, acting as the voice of Naga students and youth in Manipur, "we respectfully request your kind consideration in reversing the decision made by the Indian government to revoke the Free Movement Regime (FMR) along the Indo-Myanmar border".

It said that, historically, the Indo-Myanmar border is an imposed imaginary line drawn between the families, and community without the consent and knowledge of the affected tribal populace residing in the contested borderline. The



ANSAM also said the Naga people living across the artificial borderline have been enduring injustice and facing untold hardship in terms of social, economic, political, etc. The reintroduction of FMR allowing the tribal living along the border to travel up to 16 km on either side of the country without a visa during 2018 under the Modi-led BJP regime was a welcoming step that has alleviated the hardship and enhanced the livelihood of the people residing along the borders, it added.

The people at large were expecting the expansion of the FMR with the rise of India as the

global leader. However, the Centre has taken a regressive step by scrapping the FMR under the pretext of illegal immigrants and insurgencies. The Indo-Myanmar border holds greater significance for the regional inhabitants than being merely a permeable or unfenced boundary. It symbolizes the interconnectedness of physical, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and fraternal ties. Those residing on both sides of the IMB share a profound emotional connection fostered by their common cultural affinity, ANSAM said.

Then central government can also deal with the issue of illegal immigrants by invoking various mechanisms like up dation of the National Registration of Citizen (NRC), constitution of Population Commission, strict implementation of Inner Line Permit (ILP), etc, the students' body pointed out.

"While we appreciate the initiative for restoration of peace over the persistent conflict in

parts of Manipur between two the Meiteis and Chin-Kuki-Mizos-, the decision to end FMR and installation of fencing along 1,643 km by dragging along the other Northeastern states is not justifiable for containing the Manipur crisis," ANSAM also said.

India is also one of the countries signatories and has ratified to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007 (UNDRP), wherein the Article 36 recognizes the rights of Indigenous peoples divide by international borders to maintain and develop contacts with their peoples across the border, particularly for spiritual, cultural and economic purposes, said the ANSAM.

"Moreover, the installation of fencing along the borders will also severely impact the pristine biodiversity and ecosystem. It will not only activate human crisis, but ecological crisis is also bound to erupt out of such exercise," the Naga student body said. (NNN)

# Musicians, artistes converge in Kohima for Music Summit

**KOHIMA, Feb 1:** Musicians and artistes from 12 countries have converged in Nagaland's capital Kohima for the three-day 4th Asia Music Summit.

The summit is hosted and co-organised by Task Force for Music & Arts (TaFMA), Nagaland government. Addressing the opening ceremony here on Thursday, chief minister Neiphiu Rio said traditional Indian music and the culture goes back thousands of years. "The richness of Indian music, the unique sounds and tunes of our tribal and indigenous people, and the fusion of traditional and modern have taken the creations of Indian artistes across the globe," he said. Rio said the Nagaland government has been making sincere efforts in promoting music and arts.

After declaring "music as an industry" within the state, the government has taken it as a mission to carefully nurture creativity from an early age, carefully allow it to grow and blossom, and then harness it as a collective mission towards societal transformation and creation of opportunities.

"Today, our musicians and artistes have become national and global ambassadors, and through their talents we are promoting Brand Nagaland and Naga Soft Power," he said. Across the globe, there is an increase in smaller and newer festivals, he said, adding that each of these festivals create work for artistes and indirectly offers hundreds of jobs to people who are not directly engaged in the creative sectors.

The chief minister expressed confidence that the delegates from different countries and participants of the summit will learn more from each other in the course of the next two days. (PTI)

# Tripura to unveil homestay policy to promote tourism

Govt to inaugurate 11 homestay facilities developed by local youths at Narikel Kunja

**AGARTALA, Feb 1:** The Tripura government will soon unveil a comprehensive home stay policy to boost tourism as a livelihood, said a minister on Thursday.

The Northeast state has recorded a steep increase in tourist footfall and revenue generation since October 2023 after former Indian cricket captain Sourav Ganguly became the state's tourism brand ambassador.

A total of 1,55,183 tourists visited the northeastern state in three months in 2023 against 84,217 in the same period in 2022. Revenue generation has also jumped to Rs 1.23 crore in 2023-24 from Rs 1.02 crore in 2022-23, he said.

"There has been a steep increase in tourist footfall and revenue during the past three months. It has



been possible because of Sourav Ganguly's support as brand ambassador," state tourism minister Sushanta Chowdhury said while interacting with the media. Ganguly, who was appointed as the state's tourism brand ambassador,

visited the northeastern state on December 11 and 12 and shot a few short films on tourism.

Chowdhury said the government will inaugurate 11 homestay facilities developed by local youths at Narikel Kunja in Gomati dis-

trict, one of the best tourist destinations of the bordering state, on February 12. Currently, a few cottages have been made functional at Narikel Kunja, a backwater-like location amidst several water bodies, by the Tripura Tourism Development Corporation Ltd (TTDCL).

DoNER has already sanctioned ₹ 30 crore to develop tourism facilities on the four islands of Dumbur Lake (waterbody), under the special infrastructure building scheme, he said.

The state tourism department is also working on two mega projects worth ₹ 140 crore for a facelift to Chaudash Devata temple in West Tripura district and the archeological site in Unakoti district, Chowdhury added. (PTI)

# ₹ 10,369 crores allocated for railway infrastructure projects in Northeast

**GUWAHATI, Feb 1:** Union railway minister Ashwini Vaishnaw an amount of ₹ 10,369 crores has been allocated for development of railway infrastructure projects in the Northeast region in the interim budget 2024-25.

The Union minister announced this on Thursday while interacting with media persons. Chetan Kumar Shrivastava, general manager of the Northeast Frontier Railway and other senior railway officials were also present during the interaction.

This allocation is 388% higher as compared to the average budget allocation of ₹ 2,122 crores during 2009-14. This year budget allocation shows unprecedented growth in several segments like new line and doubling projects, track renewal works, traffic facilities, road safety works, bridge works, signalling, workshop modernisation and customer amenities etc. Vaishnaw also informed that ₹ 81,941 crores is already being invested in the entire Northeastern region for development of railway infrastructure.

The Union minister informed that a capital outlay of more than ₹ 2.5 lakh crores have been provided in the budget for

the Indian Railways. Three major railway corridor projects will be implemented as announced by the Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her budget speech. These are energy, mineral and cement corridor, port-connectivity corridor and high-traffic density corridor. They will improve logistics efficiency and reduce transportation cost that will improve safety for passenger trains as well. Moreover, 40,000 normal railway coaches will be converted to Vande Bharat standards.

Vaishnaw said that 60 stations in Northeast are being redeveloped with world class amenities/facilities. The One Station One Product stall operational all over NFR are providing a direct selling market to locally produced items, which are getting a good response from passengers with a profitable growth.

During the interaction, the minister said that physical progress of all the ongoing projects in the Northeastern region are advancing at a good pace. Despite being in the Himalayan region and running through tough terrains, project works are being implemented round-the-clock for early completion.

## Rajasthan Congress terms Budget as disappointing, state BJP leaders hail FM



**JAIPUR, Feb 1:** The Congress on Thursday termed the Union Budget as disappointing, saying there was no new announcement for Rajasthan. The BJP, on the other hand, said every section of the society has been appropriately focused in the interim Budget.

Congress state president Govind Singh Dotasra said Rajasthan gave 25 MPs twice to the BJP government at the Centre, yet Rajasthan did not get any big announcement in this Budget presented by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman.

He said the Centre has yet not reviewed prices of petrol and diesel. The government does not have the objective to reduce inflation, provide employment to the unemployed, and provide electricity, water, roads and a better medical system.

Dostara said the BJP knows how to pitch one against the other in the name of religion. They know how to threaten and harass the opposition leaders with the help of Enforcement Directorate, he added.

On the other hand, the BJP leaders hailed the Budget. BJP state president C P Joshi described the interim Budget as comprehensive. It is meant for the upliftment of all sections of the society, including farmers, youth, and women and poor, he added.

Joshi said the Modi government at the Centre is moving forward on the path of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka

Vikas'. The Budget presents a detailed roadmap towards the goal of a developed India by 2047. The needs and aspirations of poor, women and young farmers are our top priority.

He said efforts are being made to bring change in the lives of the common people and work has also been done to empower the youth.

He said in the direction of women empowerment, a target has been set to create three crore 'Lakshpati Didis', bring a law for the reservation of women in Parliament and declare triple talaq illegal. The Modi government was successful in removing poverty of 25 crore people. It sent ₹ 34 lakh crore to the accounts of Gareeb Kalyan Yojana and provided free food grains to 80 crore people.

Rajasthan's School Education and Panchayati Raj Minister Madan Dilawar said the interim Budget of the Central Government is an all-inclusive and poor welfare Budget. It is a "guarantee" Budget of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government, he added.

Dilawar said the goal of making India a developed country by 2047 is clearly visible in the Budget. A target has been set to build two crore new houses under PM Awas Yojna in the next five years. With this, the dream of the poor people living in rural areas to build their own houses will come true. (PTI)

# 'Life is a great battle': Hemant Soren, arrested by ED

## Hemant was groomed in politics after his elder brother Durga died of suspected kidney failure in 2009

**RANCHI, Feb 1:** From taking charge of Jharkhand as its youngest chief minister at 38, Hemant Soren who was arrested by the ED has had a chequered career.

Not the first choice of his father Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) supremo Shibui Soren for inheriting his political legacy, Hemant was groomed in politics after his elder brother Durga died of suspected kidney failure in 2009.

"...Life is a great battle, I have fought every moment, I will fight every moment but I will not beg for compromise," he shared on X a poem in Hindi, which roughly translates to this, soon after his arrest. Born on August 10, 1975, in Nemra village near Hazaribag, Hemant did his intermediate from Patna High School and later joined Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra in Ranchi, but dropped out.

Known for his love of badminton, bicycles and books, Hemant has two children with his wife Kalpana.

He debuted as a Rajya Sabha member in 2009. Next year, he re-



signed from the Upper House of Parliament to take up the post of deputy chief minister in the BJP-led Arjun Munda government.

Two years later, the BJP-JMM government collapsed and the president's rule was imposed in the state.

In 2013, he took charge of the state as its youngest chief minister, with the support of the Congress

allow leasing out of tribal land for non-agricultural purposes, Soren led a massive agitation that paid him dividends three years later.

With the support of his allies Congress and RJD, he stormed to power in 2019, with his party, JMM, alone winning 30 assembly seats, its highest tally ever in the 81-member House.

During his political ascendancy, Soren was able to sideline senior JMM leaders such as Stephen Marandi, Simon Marandi and Hemlal Murmu, prompting them to quit the party.

While Murmu and Simon Marandi joined the BJP, Stephen Marandi floated a party along with the first BJP chief minister of the state Babulal Marandi. Stephen later returned to the JMM, accepting Soren as the party's leader.

Soren's tenure in the Chief Minister's Office has not been smooth.

In 2022, he was staring at disqualification as an MLA, which would have resulted in him losing the CM's post, as a mining lease given to him was allegedly re-

newed after he became the state's chief minister.

That year, three Congress MLAs from the state were caught with nearly ₹ 49 lakh in cash in neighbouring West Bengal. The Soren-led ruling coalition had alleged that they were part of an attempt by the BJP to topple the government.

Amid the conundrums, Soren established himself as a strong voice of the state's dominant tribal community. From ensuring doorstep delivery of services with initiatives such as 'Apke Adhikar, Apki Sarkar, Apke Dwar' to expanding the state government's pension scheme to include more people, social welfare has been a trait of his regime.

He has also been a strong advocate for the economic benefits of mining activities in the state reaching the tribals.

Soren, now 48, was arrested in a money laundering case linked to alleged land fraud after he resigned as the chief minister. Senior JMM leader Champai Soren was named his successor. (PTI)

## Cong hopeful of clinching seat-sharing deal with TMC in Bengal: Ramesh

**JANGIPUR (WB), Feb 1:** The Congress on Thursday remained optimistic about clinching a mutually acceptable seat-sharing arrangement with the TMC in West Bengal, despite TMC chief Mamata Banerjee's reluctance to concede seats to the grand-old party in the state.

Addressing reporters in Murshidabad district, once a bastion of the Congress, party general secretary Jairam Ramesh asserted that the paramount objective of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections is to unseat the BJP government at the Centre.

"In an alliance, there's a give-and-take dynamics. We are hopeful of reaching a consensus on a joint seat-sharing formula in the state that satisfies all parties involved. Mamata Ji has expressed her commitment to the INDIA bloc and we welcome this stance," Ramesh said. In Murshidabad, a minority-dominated district, the Congress presently has one out of the three seats.

Ramesh's confidence in getting the TMC along in the Lok Sabha polls in West Bengal follows Banerjee's declaration on Wednesday that she would not allocate any seats to the Congress, alleging that the party had aligned with the CPI(M) to bolster the BJP's prospects in the state.

"I have heard about her statement, but it reflects her opinion, not the consensus of the alliance. Both the TMC and the Congress share the common goal of defeating the BJP in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections," Ramesh remarked.

Regarding the Communist Party of India (Marxist) leadership's reluctance to engage in any coalition with the TMC in Bengal, Ramesh clarified, "Representatives from the CPI(M),

Congress, TMC, and other parties were present in all meetings of the opposition bloc."

Banerjee reiterated during a public distribution event on Wednesday that the TMC had opted to contest the upcoming Lok Sabha polls independently in the state after the Congress declined her proposal to contest two seats.

While the CPI(M), Congress and TMC are part of the 27-party opposition bloc INDIA, in West Bengal, the Congress has formed an alliance with the CPI (M) against both the TMC and BJP.

"Our objective in Bengal is clear: to oust the BJP. We must ensure that the BJP is defeated in the 18 seats it clinched in West Bengal during the last elections," Ramesh emphasised.

In the 2019 elections, the TMC secured 22 seats, the Congress won two, and the BJP bagged 18 seats in the state. (PTI)

## 'Confusion' in state: JMM leader Champai Soren

**RANCHI, Feb 1:** Jharkhand Governor CP Radhakrishnan invited the JMM-led alliance leaders for a meeting at 5.30 pm on Thursday, amid concerns among the ruling coalition over the delay in the appointment of JMM legislative party leader Champai Soren as the next chief minister.

Champai Soren, in a letter to the governor, said Hemant Soren had tendered his resignation as the chief minister on Wednesday night, which was accepted by the Raj Bhavan at 8.45 pm.

"There is no government in existence in the state for the last 18 hours. There is a situation of confusion...You are the constitutional head...We all the MLAs and the people expect that you will pave the way for the formation of a popular government...", the letter to the governor said.

Earlier in the day, state Congress chief Rajesh Thakur told PTI, "JMM legislature party leader Champai Soren, who is leading the alliance, has sought time from the governor at 3 pm today to prove the majority."

The governor allotted time to the JMM-led alliance in the state at 5.30 pm, a Raj Bhavan official said.

Jharkhand transport minister Champai Soren was named as JMM legislative party leader on Wednesday, after which he met the governor and staked a claim to form the new government in the state with the support of 47 legislators.

Claiming that the Governor told them that he would get back to them after reviewing all the papers, the alliance leaders expressed concerns over the delay.

"We are unaware of the reasons for the delay...In case the Raj Bhavan delays in extending an invitation to the alliance to form a government, lawmakers will fly to Hyderabad, in a bid to thwart any attempt of the opposition BJP to poach them," Thakur told PTI.

Sources in the ruling coalition also said steps were being taken to shift its MLAs to Hyderabad to prevent any poaching attempt by the BJP. (PTI)

## Landmark Indo-Pacific supply chain pact to come into force on Feb 24

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** The US on Thursday announced that a landmark agreement on supply chain resilience under the Indo-Pacific economic framework involving 14 partner nations, including India, Japan and Australia, will come into force on February 24. US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said the pact will facilitate a collaborative approach to strengthen supply chains and prevent potential disruptions.

The US Department of Commerce said the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) agreement relating to supply chain resilience will enter into force on February 24. The agreement is aimed at coordination among the IPEF partners on building resilient, efficient, productive, sustainable, transparent, diversified, secure, fair, and inclusive supply chains.

"This is a critical step in bringing the landmark, first-of-its-kind agreement into action and promoting coordination among the IPEF partners on building resilient, efficient, productive, sustainable, transparent, diversified, secure, fair, and inclusive supply chains," it said.

In line with Washington's long-term vision for the Indo-Pacific, US President Joe Biden launched the ambitious Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in May 2022. It is an initiative aimed at deeper cooperation among like-minded countries in areas like clean energy, supply-chain resilience and digital trade.

Besides India, Japan and Australia, the other member nations of the IPEF are Brunei Darussalam, Fiji, Indonesia,



South Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The IPEF member nations negotiated the supply chain agreement to establish a framework for deeper collaboration to prevent, mitigate, and prepare for supply chain disruptions, such as those experienced in recent years from the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I am thrilled to see the continued commitment and enthusiasm of the IPEF partners to make concrete progress and deliver tangible outcomes in record time," US Commerce Secretary Raimondo said.

"With the IPEF supply chain agreement shortly entering into force, we will now move forward and work collaboratively through this innovative framework with the goal of strengthening our supply chains and preventing potential disruptions before they arise for the collective benefit of our countries' workers and businesses," she said.

Since the signing of the IPEF supply chain agreement in November, five IPEF partners -- India, Japan, Singapore and the United States and Fiji -- have deposited their instruments of ratification, acceptance, or approval, facilitating the agreement's entry into force, the US Commerce Department said.

With the agreement's entry into force on February 24, the focus in the coming months will turn to various milestones set out in the pact related to establishing three supply chain bodies -- the supply chain council, crisis response network, and labour rights advisory board.

The main focus after the pact comes into force would be to identify the representatives to the three supply chain bodies by no later than March 25 and selecting the chair of each of the supply chain bodies by no later than April 24.

The priority would also be to develop the guidelines for the facility-specific reporting mechanism on labour rights inconsistencies in IPEF supply chains by no later than August 22.

The IPEF supply chain agreement was negotiated pursuant to the ministerial statement on Pillar II (supply chains) released during the IPEF ministerial meeting in September 2022 in Los Angeles. Negotiations were substantially concluded in May 2023 after approximately six months of deliberations.

The text of the agreement was made public in September 2023. On November 14, Raimondo and her counterparts formally signed the landmark agreement in San Francisco, according to the US Commerce department. (PTI)

## Cong MLA writes to CM Sukhu, highlights issue of providing jobs to unemployed youth

**SHIMLA, Feb 1:** Highlighting the issue of providing jobs to the unemployed youth in Himachal Pradesh as promised by the Congress party in the last assembly polls, Sujanpur MLA Rajinder Rana has written a letter to chief minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu stating the youth are "eagerly waiting for fulfillment of that promise".

"Nothing has been done even after 14 months of government formation."

"We had promised to provide employment to one lakh youth every year and the youth of the state are eagerly waiting for fulfillment of that promise", he said in his two-page letter also posted on Facebook on Thursday.

Rana, the two-time Congress MLA from Sujanpur assembly seat, praised the chief minister for his sensitivity and launching scheme like Sukhashraya aiming to take care, protect and making the orphan children in the state self-reliant.

"We had been raising the voice of the unemployed youth since we were in the opposition and now the youth is waiting for recruitments in

government jobs," he said.

Rana, who changed the complexion of Himachal politics by defeating former BJP chief minister Prem Kumar Dhumal in the 2017 assembly polls, was re-elected in 2022 defeating Captain Ranjit Singh of the BJP.

Rana said that lakhs of youths, who had appeared in the examinations, are feeling restless and impatient as the results have been delayed after scrapping of the Himachal Pradesh Staff Selection Commission (HPSSC), which has been replaced by the Himachal Pradesh Rajya Chayan Aayog.

The HPSSC was dissolved in February 2023, two months after the paper leak was unearthed on December 23, 2022, when the vigilance bureau arrested senior assistant of commission Uma Azad with solved question paper and ₹ 2.5 lakh in cash.

"We need to understand the sentiments of the people, especially the youth seeking jobs, and are answerable to them, and the entire youth cannot be punished for corruption of few persons," Rana said in his letter, which was

also followed by a video.

The youths have high hopes from the government and are questioning the elected representatives about recruitments and declaration of the results, he added.

"Many of these youths are becoming over aged and are worried about crossing the age-limit and becoming ineligible for the government jobs," Rana said and urged the chief minister to restore the HPSSC for early declaration of the results.

The Congress MLA further said about 5,000 youths is struggling to get jobs on compassionate grounds in various departments.

Asserting it becomes extremely difficult to run a family following the untimely demise of any earning member, Rana said the people then have high expectations from the chief minister and the government.

The letter has come at a time when Himachal Pradesh Congress chief Pratibha Singh has been vocal and said there is discontent among the hardworking party workers as they have not been properly accommodated. (PTI)

## Scientists decode reasons behind ongoing cold wave conditions in North India

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** The ongoing cold wave conditions observed over North India result from the intrusion of cold and dry air from the Siberian high, according to a study by researchers at IISER Mohali.

The Siberian High is a massive collection of cold dry air that accumulates in the northeastern part of Eurasia from November until February. The study, published in the journal Weather and Climate Extremes, sheds light on the underlying causes and alarming trends behind the frigid conditions.

The research, led by Professor Raju Attada from Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER Mohali), unveils crucial insights into the factors driving extreme winter temperatures.

A cold wave event is identified from the normalised minimum temperature anomaly, when the standard deviation is less than minus 1 for four or more consecutive days. A severe

cold wave event is identified from the normalised minimum temperature anomaly, when the standard deviation is less than minus 2 for four or more consecutive days.

Delhi and other northern parts experienced severe cold on Wednesday as many areas of the region received rainfall and snow. In Delhi, the maximum temperature was 18.6 degrees Celsius, four notches below the season's average, and minimum stood at 7.3 degrees Celsius, a notch below the normal, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

The study attributed the ongoing cold wave to the intrusion of cold and dry air from the Siberian high, intensified by the persistence of high-latitude weather systems known as 'Atmospheric blocking.' This atmospheric phenomenon leads to the buildup of cold air, causing extreme cold conditions in northern India, the researchers said.

The team, including K.S. Athira at



IISER Mohali and V. Brahmanada Rao from the National Institute for Space Research, Brazil, also noted that the winter atmospheric blocking this year has intensified cold waves and prolonged their persistence from the end of December to January.

The study, spanning the years 1982-2020, however, identified a reduction in the number, duration, and intensity of cold wave events during

this period.

This decline is linked to rising winter minimum temperatures due to global warming and a decreasing number of western disturbances (WDs), the researchers said.

Western disturbances are storms that originate in the Caspian or Mediterranean Sea, and bring non-monsoonal rainfall to northwest India.

## Case registered against AIMIM MP Jaleel over bank depositors' agitation

**CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR (MAHA), Feb 1:** An FIR has been registered against local AIMIM MP Intiaz Jaleel following an agitation led by him at the divisional commissioner's office here, police said on Thursday.

The MP had led a sit-in agitation here two days ago, demanding that the government speed up the process of returning the money of account holders of Adarsh Mahila Nagari Sahakari Bank whose license was cancelled by the RBI, and seven other financial institutions.

Police had used teargas to disperse the protesters. Following the protest, a First Information Report was registered against Jaleel and others at City Chowk Police station on Wednesday night under section 353 of IPC (assault or criminal force to deter public servant from discharge of duty), said an official.

A notice was also issued to Jaleel, asking him to remain present whenever called for inquiry, he said.

The MP said he had received a "love letter" from the police.

"This love letter is for an elected MP for fighting for the poor people who lost their life's savings in frauds committed by co-operative societies and banks. Reading the conditions in the notice, I felt as if I am some dreaded gangster," he told reporters.

Such notices will not deter him and he will continue to fight for the people, he added. (PTI)



# Hours after court orders, prayers performed in cellar of Gyanvapi mosque

**VARANASI, Feb 1:** Prayers were performed in a cellar of the Gyanvapi mosque here on Wednesday night following court orders allowing the resumption of a practice set to have been discontinued three decades back, Kashi Vishwanath temple trust president said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the district court ruled that a priest can perform prayers before the idols in a cellar of the Gyanvapi Masjid, a significant development in the legal battle over the mosque adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath temple.

"Vyas ji's cellar was opened after 31 years for prayers," temple trust president Nagendra Pandey told PTI.

He said the southern cellar was opened at around 10.30 pm on Wednesday.

Asked if prayers were performed in the basement, he said, "Yes."

"It was necessary to follow the court's orders, so the district administration made all the arrangements with great promptness," Pandey added.

District Magistrate S Rajlingam said, "I have complied with the court's order."

Some locals claimed that after cleaning the cellar, an 'aarti' of Goddess Lakshmi and Lord Ganesh was performed.

Official sources in the district administration said at around 9.30 pm on Wednesday, the members of the Kashi-Vishwanath temple trust were called and the barricades before the Nandi statue facing the mosque's 'wazukhana' were removed.

The court had directed the local



administration to make arrangements within seven days for prayers in the cellar. This will involve "proper arrangements" with metal barricades at the complex, it said.

Taking a swipe at the Yogi Adityanath government in the state, Samajwadi Party President Akhilesh Yadav said the haste displayed by the BJP in following the court orders is an attempt to prevent any legal recourse.

"Due process has to be maintained while following any court order. The Varanasi Court fixed a 7 day period for it (making arrangements). What we are seeing now is a concerted effort to go beyond the due process and prevent any legal recourse that can be taken," Yadav said on X.

The order by Judge A K Vishvesha came a day after an Archeological Survey of India (ASI) report on the mosque complex was made public.

The ASI survey, ordered by the same court, in connection with a related case, suggested that the mosque was constructed during Aurangzeb's rule over the remains of a Hindu temple.

Wednesday's order was delivered on the plea of Shailendra Kumar Pathak who claimed that his maternal grandfather, priest Sonmath Vyas, offered prayers till December 1993, according to Hindu side counsel Madan Mohan Yadav.

Pathak said the puja was stopped during the tenure of former chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav

after the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya was demolished on December 6, 1992.

During the hearing, the Muslim sides disputed the petitioner's version. It said no idols existed in the cellar so there was no question of prayers being offered there till 1993.

In an earlier order on January 17, the Varanasi court had directed that the district magistrate should take charge of the cellar. But it had not then given any directions on the right to offer prayers there.

Mumtaz Ahmed, who represented the Muslim side, said, "The district judge today gave his final verdict by giving the right of worship to Hindus. We will now go to the High Court against this decision." (PTI)

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# Arrest illegal, part of well-orchestrated conspiracy: Hemant Soren tells SC

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** JMM leader Hemant Soren, who had to step down as Jharkhand chief minister in the face of his imminent arrest, on Thursday accused the Enforcement Directorate of arresting him as part of a "well-orchestrated conspiracy" by the Centre ahead of the Lok Sabha elections due months from now.

In his plea before the apex court, Soren has urged it to declare his arrest as unwarranted, arbitrary, and in violation of his fundamental rights. The petition, which will be heard on Friday, seeks his immediate release.

Soren was arrested on Wednesday in a money laundering case linked to "illegal" possession of huge parcels of land and alleged association with the "land mafia".

"Declare the arrest and consequent detention of the Petitioner as unwarranted, arbitrary, illegal and violative of the fundamental right of the Petitioner guaranteed and protected under Article 21 of the Constitution of India and direct the Respondent to forthwith set the Petitioner free," the plea says.

Giving the sequence of his arrest, Soren, 48, said he had moved a plea before the top court on January 31 apprehending his arrest by the ED.

He said his lawyers mentioned his petition before the vacation deputy registrar for urgent listing and were told a prayer can be made before the court of Chief Justice DY Chandrachud on Thursday at 10:30 am.

"The counsel for the Petitioner immediately informed the outcome of the urgent mentioning to the officer of the Respondent

no.2 (Enforcement Directorate) through an e-mail dated January 31, 2024 sent at 9 pm. Even the petitioner himself intimated the same to officer of the respondent no.2. It was requested that Respondent No. 2 should await the outcome of the proceedings before the Supreme Court," the plea said.

It added that despite the intimation, the ED took him into "illegal custody with the deliberate intent to interfere with the present Writ Petition".

Soren said in the petition that he was arrested from the Raj Bhavan where he had gone to tender his resignation as the chief minister along with JMM MLAs and those of the allied parties who enjoy a clear majority in the state assembly.

"The arrest of the petitioner around 10.10 PM on January 31, 2024 is illegal and mala fide and without jurisdiction," it claimed.

The plea said Soren's arrest has curtailed his liberty and "the officers of the Respondent No.2 have abused their powers for extraneous considerations under the dictates of the Central government as the Petitioner is the leader of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, a prominent opposition party and an active constituent of the INDIA alliance.

"The arrest is a part of a well-orchestrated conspiracy which has been given shape at the anvil of the general elections slated in a few months," it said.

Soren alleged the ED's action, initiated at the behest of the central government, was aimed at toppling his democratically elected government.

"The ruling alliance headed by

Jharkhand Mukti Morcha has the support of 47 MLAs out of total 81 MLAs of the Assembly and they have elected Champai Soren to be their leader and to take over as new Chief Minister of the state of Jharkhand pursuant to the resignation of the Petitioner," it said.

The former chief minister said a perusal of the grounds of arrest shows they are specious and cannot justify the ED's action.

It said the alleged recovery of Rs 36 lakh from his Delhi residence on January 29 cannot be a ground for his arrest.

"The said premises is a leasehold property of the state of Jharkhand and is used for residential and office purposes by the State. No notice of the search was given to the state of Jharkhand or the Petitioner. It does not appear from the grounds of arrest that videography was made of the search. There is no material alleged in the grounds of arrest to link the cash amounting to Rs. 36 lacs allegedly recovered from the said premises with the predicate (main or scheduled) offence," he said. The petition said from the questions the ED posed to Soren on January 20, 2024, it appears that it is trying to make a "fishing and roving enquiry for the purpose of political gain at the dictates of Central government".

It accused the central agency of abusing its powers and claimed its actions are "vitiating by political considerations".

"The Respondent is acting contrary to the well settled principles of federalism enshrined in the Constitution of India," it alleged. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## No I-T rate change, cut

will launch a scheme for housing for the middle class. It will develop tourist centres and market them at global scale as also provide viability gap funding for harnessing wind energy potential for an initial capacity of 1 gigawatt.

Also, private and public investments will be promoted in post-harvest activities, including modern storage and supply chains, in addition to boosting self reliance on oilseeds. A comprehensive programme for the development of dairy farmers is being planned as also an increase in spending on fisheries to boost productivity of the sector. All this while sticking to the fiscal consolidation path which will see the fiscal deficit being reduced to 5.1 per cent of GDP in 2024-25 as compared to the revised deficit estimate of 5.8 per cent for the current financial year ending March 31. The deficit for the current fiscal is lower than the 5.9 per cent that was projected when Sitharaman presented her last Budget in February 2023.

On tax measures, the finance minister announced that investments by sovereign wealth funds and pension funds will be tax-free for one more year.

Total revenue receipts for 2024-25 were estimated at ₹ 30 lakh crore as compared to revised estimate of Rs 26.99 lakh crore in the previous year. Tax-GDP ratio is seen at 11.7 per cent as opposed to 11.6 per cent of GDP in 2023-24.

Stating that every challenge of the pre-2014 era was overcome through economic management and governance, she said the government, in its July Budget, will present a detailed roadmap to make India a developed country.

"We continue on the path of fiscal consolidation, as announced in my Budget speech for 2021-22, to reduce the fiscal deficit below 4.5 per cent by 2025-26," Sitharaman said.

Among the headline announcements in the Budget are rooftop solar installations at one crore households to deliver up to 300 free units of electricity per month, a corpus of ₹ 1 lakh crore for innovation and technology by providing financing at low or nil interest rates, and a new scheme to strengthen deep tech in the defence sector. While there were no tax proposals, she extended the sunset dates on tax holidays for startups, tax benefits to sovereign wealth funds and aircraft leasing businesses in IFSC.

Other announcements include viability gap funding for offshore wind energy projects, announcements related to clean energy, including setting up of coal gasification and liquefaction capacity of 100 tonnes by 2030, and phased mandatory blending of Compressed BioGas (CBG) in Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) for transport and Piped Natural Gas (PNG).

Sitharaman termed her government's track record on economy management as GDP - Governance, Development and Performance (GDP).

"Besides delivering on high growth in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the government is equally focused on a more comprehensive 'GDP', i.e., 'Governance, Development and Performance,'" she said.

The FDI inflow during 2014-23 was USD 596 billion, twice the inflow during 2005-14. "For encouraging sustained foreign investment, we are negotiating bilateral investment treaties with our foreign partners, in the spirit of 'first develop India,'" she said.

Commenting on the Budget, S&P Global Market Intelligence said the interim Budget reflected the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) mood for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. "Different from the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, today's interim budget announcement indicated high political confidence in the BJP's tone, with multiple references underscoring policy continuity and expansion for the post-election Budget announcement in July 2024."

The Budget speech was framed as a report card on government performance, with particular emphasis on social welfare expansion and infrastructure development. But the 11 per cent increase in actual capital expenditure outlay is well below the capital spending growth target of 33 per cent in the FY2023-24 Budget. This would nonetheless keep the government's infrastructure investment agenda rolling and, if realised, bring the capital investment share in GDP to a record 3.4 per cent.

A key area to watch would be how the new government in July 2024 leverages geopolitical tailwinds that are favouring India to realise domestic physical and digital infrastructure expansion, S&P said. (PTI)

## Interim budget missing

are missing from this interim Budget. We expected some new schemes to ease the suffering of the poor and middle class from this Interim Budget 2024," the Congress chief said.

Chidambaram said at a press conference that the finance minister spoke about GDP but didn't address per capita income. She barely referred to inflation, and she failed to mention that food inflation is currently at 7.7 per cent, he said.

The senior Congress leader said the fastest growing economy is not a badge of honour.

"China's GDP is five and a half times more than our GDP. If they grow at, say, three per cent in order to match their annual growth, we have to grow at 15 per cent ... So don't talk about GDP growth. Talk about the per capita income growth," he said.

The former finance minister said in the last three days, there has been a "tiresome repetition of boastful claims" by the government on how India has surged forward in the last 5-10 years.

"Before the President's address, the Ministry of Finance put out a 63-page mini Economic Survey and, today, the Finance Minister (FM) gave a speech on the Interim Budget. Thus, the same numbers have been trotted out thrice in three days. Every number has been challenged by economists and domain experts," he said.

Chidambaram said Sitharaman spoke about minimum government and maximum governance, but the 'minimum' government policy, in reality, has "undermined federalism, starved state governments of funds and virtually reduced the third tier of governance - panchayats and municipalities - to ciphers".

"The overwhelming majority of the people are dependent on the third tier of gov-

ernment for their services but that tier has been virtually deprived of human and financial resources. Federalism has been considerably weakened by the central government taking over - rather usurping - the executive and legislative powers of state governments," he alleged.

"The fundamental flaw in the NDA's approach to the economy and governance is that it is biased in favour of the rich. It is a government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich," he alleged.

The government is "either ignorant or callous to the fact" that the top 10 per cent owns 60 per cent of the nation's wealth and earns 57 per cent of the national income and that income inequality has widened significantly in the last 10 years, he said.

"This outcome is because of the lower growth rate during the 10 years (2014 - 2024) as against the UPA period (2004 - 2014).

"In the last year of UPA, 2013-14, we left a GDP growth rate of 6.4 per cent and an average growth rate of 7.5 per cent. In the NDA period the average growth rate has been less than 6 per cent," he said.

"We maintain our charge that this government is a government of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich. This govt has practically forgotten the bottom 50 per cent of the people," he alleged, adding "we will take this message to the people".

He expressed the hope that the people of India would recognise that the economic situation is "worse because of the 10 years of NDA government".

Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi said, "The poor did not get anything other than false promises in the last (interim) budget by the Modi government. This (central) government is of the rich, for the rich and run by the rich as this is what has been displayed in this budget."

However, BJP leaders lauded the budget, saying it has a host of measures focusing on realising the resolve of a developed India. (PTI)

## Himanta lauds 'exceptional'

third largest economy by 2029, he said. While listing a few salient features of the interim budget, Sarma opined that ₹ 75,000 crore interest free loan to state governments will give us greater elbow room to galvanise welfare schemes towards the larger goal of a Viksit Bharat.

"₹ 11 lakh crore capital expenditure proposal mooted in the budget will bring greater momentum in the creation of growth enabling assets. The target to support 3 crore Lakhpati Didis is nothing but revolutionary - which will transform the country's rural landscape like never before," he added.

He further said that Prime Minister's clarion call of Jai Anusandhan takes a firm shape in the form of a ₹ 1 lakh crore corpus for research and innovation, adding, "This shall expand our frontiers of Techade."

The chief minister also claimed that the reduction of fiscal deficit to 5.1 per cent - below market expectations - and bringing down borrowings compared to last year exemplifies the prudent fiscal management by the finance minister and her team despite global headwinds. "Last but not the least - by not imposing any additional taxes the Modi Government has once again demonstrated that taxpayer welfare remains its top priority. I congratulate Prime Minister and Finance Minister Smt @nsitharaman ji for this exceptional Budget!," he added.

## Budget strengthens foundation

Asserting that the budget carries the "confidence of continuity", he described it as "not merely an interim budget but an inclusive and innovative budget".

Citing the announcement of a ₹ 1 lakh crore fund for research and innovation, the prime minister noted that the "historic" budget has also offered rebates for start-ups. It has provisions for a huge capital expenditure of ₹ 11.11 lakh crore while keeping the fiscal deficit under control, he said.

The budget empowers the poor and middle class and will create countless employment opportunities for the youth, Modi said. Modi said the government sets a big goal, achieves it, and then sets an even bigger target for itself.

Highlighting the government's efforts for the welfare of the poor and the middle class, he referred to the construction of over four crore houses in villages and cities and increasing the target to build two crore more houses. Underlining the emphasis on empowerment of women, the prime minister said, "Our goal was to make two crore 'lakhpatis' among women. Now, this goal has been increased to make three crore 'lakhpatis'."

He also praised the government's flagship Ayushman Bharat scheme for its significant assistance to the poor, extending its benefits to Anganwadi and ASHA workers. Modi highlighted the government's emphasis on empowering the poor and the middle class by creating new opportunities for them in the budget. He spoke of the rooftop solar campaign where one crore families will avail free electricity while also earning an income of ₹ 15,000 to ₹ 18,000 per year by selling excess electricity to the government.

The income tax remission scheme announced in the budget, he said, will provide relief to about one crore citizens belonging to the middle class. Discussing the major decisions taken for farmers' welfare in the budget, Modi mentioned the Nano DAP (fertiliser), a new scheme for animals, expansion of the PM Matsya Sampada Yojana and the 'Atmanirbhar' oil seed campaign that will increase the income of farmers and reduce expenses. (PTI)

## Karbi tribes usher in New

a month, and then burned down before the sowing of crops begins. In recognition of the cultural importance of Ningkan Kimi, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) declared a holiday on February 1. Phonglangso village, under Ward No.14, took the lead in organising the Ningkan Kimi celebration. Led by village headman Nobin Englang, the villagers gathered at the village playground for the festivities. The celebration commenced with "Vur Kamatha," a ritual sacrifice of chickens per-

formed by Karbi priests Dhansing and Hukur Kro, seeking prosperity for the village and protection from evil. The day included a morning marathon race, drawing, extempore speech, and quiz competitions for village children. An all-Karbi Anglong Badminton Competition took place in the evening, followed by a prize distribution ceremony.

A community feast was organized in the late afternoon, and the cultural night featured performances by artists Sarhon Bey, Sarlongki Bey, Mirlongki Rongphar, and dancer Om Chetri.

Several churches also joined the celebration, conducting special worship services for Ningkan Kimi. Rongchingdon Baptist Church, for instance, held a morning service with prayers for elected representatives, including MPs, MLAs, chief executive member (CEM), executive members (EMs), and MACs of KAAC, seeking positive leadership and the peace and prosperity of the land.

The joyous festivities extended to various villages, including Sankur Anglong, Rongtharve, Rongkimi, Rongbin Aklam, and Matipung, as they embraced the cultural richness of Ningkan Kimi.

## Current govt focused

17 cremation grounds and 2 cemeteries extending across various wards of the Guwahati Municipal Corporation. Speaking further, the chief minister promised a greater number of such facilities within Guwahati city for the benefits of the public in days to come.

Sarma further exuded confidence the new flyover over Garbhanga Road, on its completion, shall contribute greatly towards easing of traffic congestion near Lal Ganesh and Cycle Factory, areas that witness the busiest traffic during peak hours of the day.

"The government aims to complete the Lal Ganesh-Cycle Factory flyover construction process within a period of less than three years. The new flyover will aid in smooth traffic flow during hosting of international cricket matches, Indian Premier League matches, cultural nites, among others, at the Assam Cricket Association Stadium at Barshapara," he stated.

Sarma informed that on coming February 28, the government intends to inaugurate the Bhoonath-Lachit Ghat stretch of the Guwahati-North Guwahati Bridge over river Brahmaputra, adding, "Coming November or December, the entire Guwahati-North Guwahati Bridge would be opened to the public."

While commenting on many other ongoing and upcoming Guwahati-centric projects such as Brahmaputra riverfront development, public parks, Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) and streetlight installation, the chief minister stated that by 2026, he wishes to see all diesel and other fossil-fuel-run buses off the road in Guwahati and only electric/green buses plying on the roads within the city limits.

"Also, Rs 300 crore has been allocated for completion of water supply projects in areas which are yet to receive water supply and a new agency roped in for the purpose," he added. He further said the North Guwahati water supply project would be completed in few days from now.

Speaking about the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit, Sarma urged the residents of the city to be present at the public meeting which will be addressed by the Prime Minister that day.

Chief Executive of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) Tuliram Ronghang, members of Legislative Assembly Siddhartha Bhattacharya, Ramendra Narayan Kalita, Atul Bora, Mayor of GMC Mrigen Sarania, commissioner of police of Guwahati Diganta Barah, along with a host of dignitaries were also present.

## NE LPG cylinder carriers

one month after the company agreed to several of the demands raised by the association. The NEPLTA had gone into strikes in 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 also over the same issue of renewal of contracts when the company had floated the tenders. The process was taken to the court by the NEPLTA in 2018. The company had later withdrawn the renewal of the contracts and extended the existing ones. (PTI)

## Assam to bring new

of the provisions of the bill. "The proposed bill will bring benefits such as ensuring economic growth via development of tourism, growth of tourism infrastructure and provide for responsible and sustainable development of tourism, safeguarding Assam's cultural and natural heritage," the note said.

Besides, the cabinet approved the construction of a new flyover in Guwahati from Cycle Factory junction to Lal Ganesh market on Garbhanga Road at a cost of ₹ 376.11 crore.

The government also accorded its nod to remove the provisions of village councils from different autonomous councils for Rabha Hasong, Sonowal Kachari, Deori, Thengal Kachari, Tiwa and Mising communities.

The cabinet further approved the transfer of public water supply schemes located in municipalities from the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) to the Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) for operation and maintenance of the same. (PTI)

## Himanta launches historic

including guardian minister and education minister Dr Ranuj Pegu, who delivered the welcome address. On the occasion, Pramatta Singha, credited with rebuilding Rangghar in 1746, was acknowledged for his historical contribution. Minister Jogen Mohan thanked Sarma for spearheading the massive beautification initiative, while Jorhat MP Topon Kumar Gogoi praised the chief minister's leadership and foresight.

On the other hand, Akhil Gogoi, Sivasagar MLA, expressed gratitude for the project, declaring it a landmark day for modern Sivasagar. Other notable figures, including Sushanta Borgohain, MLA Thowra, and Bhubon Gam, Majuli MLA, lauded the Sarma for transformative additions to modern Sivasagar.

# MARGOT ROBBIE ON BEST ACTRESS OSCAR SNUB: 'No way to feel sad, but Greta should have been nominated'

**LOS ANGELES, Feb 1:** Irrespective of not receiving a Best Actress Oscar nomination for Barbie, Margot Robbie says she is "blessed" for all the love that has come her way for the film, adding Greta Gerwig deserved to be part of the best director race at the upcoming awards.

Barbie, a summer mega-hit that grossed over USD 1 billion at the global box office, earned eight nominations, including a best picture and a twin nod in the original song category, at the 96th Academy Awards.

Robbie, who is a nominee in 2024 for best picture as she produced the comedy which emerged as a cultural

phenomenon, reflected on the snubs in a SAG-AFTRA discussion.

"There's no way to feel sad when you know you're this blessed. Obviously, I think Greta should be nominated as a director. What she did is a once-in-a-career, once-in-a-lifetime thing. What she pulled off, it really is. But it's been an incredible year for all the films," the actor-producer said.

Robbie said she is "beyond ecstatic" with the film's eight nominations, which also include best-adapted screenplay for Gerwig and Noah Baumbach, supporting actor for Ryan Gosling, supporting



actress for America Ferrera, costume design and production design.

"Everyone getting the nods that they've had is just incredible, and the best picture nod. We set out to do something that would shift culture, affect culture, just make some sort of impact. And it's already done that and some, way more than we ever dreamed it would. And that is truly the biggest reward that could come out of all of this," she added. The 33-year-old

said people's reactions to Barbie have been the "biggest reward".

"Whether it's seeing what people are writing online, or even just seeing how much pink I can see in this room right now... I've never been a part of something like this. Not like this. I've done comic book stuff and that gets a big reaction, but this felt very different. And I can't think of a time when a movie had this effect on culture. And it's amazing to

be in the eye of the storm," she said.

Robbie and Gerwig being ignored in the best actress and director categories at the Oscars sparked controversy. Gosling and Ferrera separately addressed the snubs and expressed disappointment with the Academy. Robbie, however, is nominated for best actress at the upcoming SAG Awards, where the cast of Barbies also competing for the top prize of outstanding ensemble in a motion picture. (PTI)

## KARTIK AARYAN COMPLETES SHOOTING OF KABIR KHAN'S 'CHANDU CHAMPION'

**MUMBAI, Feb 1:** Actor Kartik Aaryan has completed shooting for "Chandu Champion", his upcoming movie with filmmaker Kabir Khan.

The "Satyaprem Ki Katha" star shared the update with fans and followers in an Instagram post on Wednesday.

Aaryan, who was on a strict diet for his role of a sports hero in the film, shared a video from the film's wrap party where Khan is seen feeding the actor the rasmalai sweet.

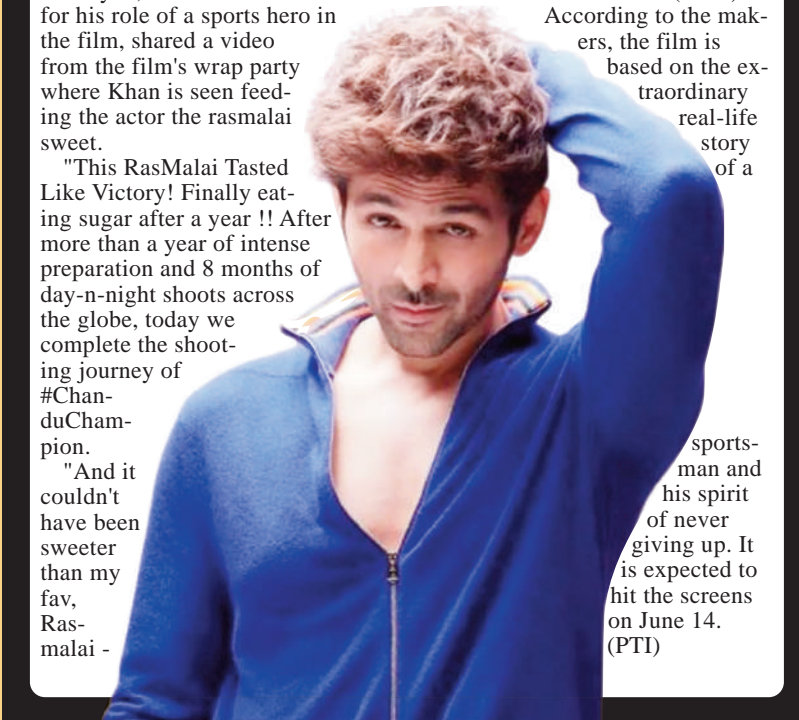
"This RasMalai Tasted Like Victory! Finally eating sugar after a year!! After more than a year of intense preparation and 8 months of day-n-night shoots across the globe, today we complete the shooting journey of #ChanduChampion.

"And it couldn't have been sweeter than my fav, Rasmalai -

from the Man himself who carved this challenging path for me... you have been a profound inspiration Sir! @kabirkhankk (sic)" the actor captioned the clip.

Aaryan started shooting for "Chandu Champion" in July 2023. It is backed by producer Sajid Nadiadwala's banner Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment (NGE).

According to the makers, the film is based on the extraordinary real-life story of a sportsman and his spirit of never giving up. It is expected to hit the screens on June 14. (PTI)



## BHANSALI'S 'HEERAMANDI: THE DIAMOND BAZAAR' TO ARRIVE THIS YEAR, NETFLIX SHARES FIRST LOOK

**MUMBAI, Feb 1:** Sanjay Leela Bhansali's first web series "Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar" will premiere on Netflix in 2024 and the streamer shared the first look of the much-anticipated project on Thursday.

Backed by Bhansali Productions, the upcoming show stars Manisha Koirala, Sonakshi Sinha, Aditi Rao Hydari, Richa Chadha, Sharmin Segal, and Sanjeeda Sheikh.

According to a press note issued by

the streamer, "Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar" is an epic saga of love, power, revenge and freedom.

"In the midst of a power struggle in Heeramandi, a young heir caught in the crossfire chooses love over succession, disrupting the status quo. Set in pre-independent India against a burgeoning freedom movement, the final thread holding the art of tawaifs (courtesans) is put to the test," read the synopsis of the series.

Based on the concept by Moin Beg,

the series is created and directed by Bhansali.

He also serves as a producer on the show alongside Prerna Singh. "Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar" is Bhansali's 14-year passion project. His last directorial effort was the Alia Bhatt-starrer "Gangubai Kathiawadi", which won five National Awards last year. Bhansali recently announced his next feature film "Love & War", starring Bhatt, Ranbir Kapoor and Vicky Kaushal. (PTI)



## 'Dune 3' should be last 'Dune' movie for me, says Denis Villeneuve



**NEW YORK, Feb 1:** Dune 3 is yet to be officially greenlit by Warner Bros and should the studio go ahead with the film, director Denis Villeneuve says it would be his last movie in the franchise based on Frank Herbert's books. The filmmaker's comments come ahead of the release of Dune 2 in March.

Herbert wrote four more 'Dune' novels, but Villeneuve said he would like to take up other stories after a third film — titled Dune Messiah — in the series. Dune Messiah should be the last Dune movie for me," he told Time magazine in an interview. Last August, Villeneuve said it would be "a dream" come

true if he succeeds in making a Dune trilogy. While adapting Herbert's books, the director said he wanted to stay as true as possible to the author's vision. "I was trying to be, as a filmmaker, as invisible as possible. I tried my best to keep the poetry of the book, the atmosphere, the colours, the smell, and everything that I felt when I read the book. I tried," said Villeneuve, known for Sicario, Arrival and Blade Runner 2049.

Going forward, the filmmaker wants to make an adaptation of Stacy Schiff's 'Cleopatra' and a version of Arthur C Clarke's futuristic classic 'Rendezvous With Rama'. (PTI)

## I have some good karma working for me: Raveena Tandon

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Fresh from the success of her new series "Karmma Calling", actor Raveena Tandon says she must have done some good deeds in her 33-year career to be part of great projects whether it is on the big screen or streaming platforms. The actor, who is receiving praise for her performance as a '90s Bollywood diva-turned-socialite, Indrani Kothari, in the Disney+ Hotstar show, said she is happy with how she is getting to play characters of varied hues in the last two-three years.

In 2021, she made her web series debut with Netflix's critically-acclaimed cop drama "Aranyak" and returned to the big screen next year with "K.G.F: Chapter 2", marking her Kannada cinema debut. In 2023, she was awarded the Padma Shri,

the fourth highest Indian civilian honour. "I strongly believe in karma. What you put out in this world takes a full circle and comes back. As you sow, so shall you reap. Whether the films I did earlier or the ones I'm doing now or even the web shows I'm doing like 'Aranyak'.

"It is a big hit and I won all the awards, it was a good year for me. Then 'KGF: Chapter 2' came. I'll say I have some good karma working for me that I'm getting these opportunities, be it on streamers or theatrical releases," Tandon told PTI in an interview.

The National Award winner, who is currently shooting for "Welcome 3", said it's a good time for actors as somewhere a balance has been struck between OTT and theatricals. "These mediums are going hand-

in-hand, helping out each other. It's a great time even for female actors. In the '90s, the shelf life of an actress would get over after she got married. She would probably retire or was expected to shift to mother or sister-in-law roles," she added.

Back in the 1990s, opportunities for women actors after they crossed a "certain middle age" were few and far between, said 51-year-old Tandon. "Today, it's exciting that most of the OTT shows are led by women and we are still getting powerful roles. Earlier, the time men would evolve into fine actors in their middle ages, they would continue to get even bigger and better roles.

"But the moment a woman reached a certain middle age, she was expected to hang up her boots

just when she had completely reached a point where she had refined her skills... When she had almost mastered her craft. The opportunities then were less. In today's world, I'm grateful for the opportunity," she said.

Tandon is unclear about when the season two of "Aranyak" would premiere, but said if all goes well "Karmma Calling" would return for another couple of chapters with a deeper dive into the film industry of the '90s. "Later on in the series, when you hopefully will watch season two and three, there are a lot of instances where you'll get to know that this really happens to actors and actresses in our industry. That's where you will feel that there is that bit of reality infused into fiction," she added. (PTI)



# Harmanpreet to lead 24-member Indian hockey team in home Pro League matches

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** Ace drag-flicker Harmanpreet Singh will lead the Indian men's hockey team at the upcoming FIH Pro League matches in Bhubaneswar and Rourkela, which are key to the side's preparation for this year's Paris Olympics.

Harmanpreet will have midfielder Hardik Singh as his deputy, as Hockey India on Thursday named a 24-member squad for the double-leg fixtures.

The Bhubaneswar-leg will begin on February 10 and end on February 16 while the Rourkela leg will commence on February 19 and conclude on February 25.

India will play against Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain, and Australia twice each across both legs. The hosts will begin their campaign against Spain on February 10.

The squad was on the expected lines with striker Bobby Dhama and goalkeeper Pawan missing out from the 26-member Indian team that toured South Africa last month.

The Indian goal post will be manned by veteran PR Sreejesh and Krishan Bahadur Pathak.

The defensive line includes Harmanpreet, Amit Rohidas, Jarmanpreet Singh, Varun Kumar,



Sumit, Sanjay, Jugraj Singh, and Vishnukant Singh.

The midfield will be marshalled by Hardik Singh, Manpreet Singh, Vivek Sagar Prasad, Shamsher Singh, Rajkumar Pal, Nilakanta Sharma and Rabichandra Singh Moirangthem.

The forward line has plenty of experience along with youthful exuberance in Lalit Kumar Upadhyay, Mandeep Singh, Gurjant Singh, Sukhjeet Singh, Abhishek, Akashdeep Singh, and Arajjeet Singh Hundal, who recently made his debut for the senior side during the South Africa tour.

"We've carefully selected a well-balanced squad, blending seasoned expertise with the vigour of youth. Our goal is to forge a cohesive unit capable of competing at the highest level," India's chief coach Craig Fulton

said.

"The FIH Pro League serves as an ideal platform to refine our strategies and measure our skills against top-tier opponents. The league's significance is paramount, with champions earning a coveted spot in the FIH Hockey World Cup 2026.

"Additionally, it offers a valuable opportunity to pinpoint areas for enhancement, playing a pivotal role in our preparations for the Paris Olympics. We hold the belief that this exposure will elevate our performance and equip us to confront the impending challenges with confidence," added Fulton.

Team: Goalkeepers: PR Sreejesh, Krishan Bahadur Pathak.

Defenders: Jarmanpreet Singh, Sumit, Jugraj Singh, Amit Rohidas, Harmanpreet Singh (C), Varun Kumar, Sanjay, Vishnukant Singh.

Midfielders: Hardik Singh (VC), Vivek Sagar Prasad, Manpreet Singh, Nilakanta Sharma, Shamsher Singh, Rajkumar Pal, Rabichandra Singh Moirangthem.

Forwards: Lalit Kumar Upadhyay, Mandeep Singh, Gurjant Singh, Sukhjeet Singh, Abhishek, Akashdeep Singh, Arajjeet Singh Hundal. (PTI)

## I'm relentlessly trying to learn from Kohli's batting: Patidar



**VISAKHAPATNAM, Feb 1:** Expected to make his India debut against England in the second Test here, prolific middle-order batter Rajat Patidar says he prides himself in being a good learner and has been trying to upgrade his skills by observing the iconic Virat Kohli.

The injury-forced absence of KL Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja is set to finally open a window of opportunity for the 30-year-old, who has scored tons of runs for Madhya Pradesh in the domestic circuit.

"I always observe his (Kohli) batting from back of the nets, especially his footwork and body movement while batting. I try to learn and add these things into my batting," Patidar told BCCI.TV referring to the time spent with Kohli in their IPL team Royal Challengers Bangalore.

Kohli has opted out of the first two Tests owing to personal reasons.

"It is not easy but I am relentlessly after it," Patidar said about his pursuit of excellence.

The right-hander from Indore also revealed that sharing the dressing room with chief coach Rahul Dravid and skipper Rohit Sharma in the ongoing five-match series has also benefited him immensely.

"I have played with many Indian players in the domestic circuit. I have been interacting with Rahul sir since the last two series.

"I had not spoken a lot with Rohit bhai but I got to speak with

him on this tour about batting. He shared his experiences in the nets, all this has increased my confidence," Patidar said.

The late bloomer said he won't curb his attacking style if he gets to make his Test debut on Friday.

"I have an aggressive batting style and I started playing shots since the beginning of my domestic career. It is in my habit and it's all about preparation. I have prepared myself that way, so it has become a habit now," he said.

"I study the pattern of opponent bowlers, their field placements. I observe how Rohit bhai makes his field placements. I try to add-on these learnings into my game," he explained.

It has not been smooth sailing for Patidar, who endured his fair share of injury setbacks.

The batter underwent a successful surgery to repair an Achilles heel injury that ruled him out of the last IPL.

"It is always difficult for a player when he gets injured. That time, I told myself I cannot change the time I will need to recover from the injury. I accepted this fact and worked in the present moment with a lot of focus," Patidar said.

"To make a comeback after injury, getting my first Test call-up has been the happiest moment for me. It was my dream to represent my country in Test cricket."

India are trailing the five-match Test series against England 0-1 after losing the opener by 28 runs in Hyderabad. (PTI)

## Indian High Commission hosts Davis Cup team

**ISLAMABAD, Feb 1:** The Indian High Commission hosted the national Davis Cup team, travelling to Pakistan for the first time in 60 years, ahead of its clash against the Asian neighbours at the Islamabad Sports Complex.

Geetika Srivastava, the first woman to head the Indian High Commission in Pakistan, accorded a warm welcome to the Indian players and officials on Wednesday.

The last time an Indian Davis Cup team travelled to Pakistan was way back in 1964.

The bilateral sporting ties between the two nations have been hit due to diplomatic tension.

"It's an honour to host the national Indian team here. It's a historic occasion that an Indian team is visiting Pakistan after such a long time. All of us here wish the team well for the match against Pakistan," Srivastava said.

The High Commission officials mingled with the players and asked questions about the game.

India and Pakistan will clash on February 3-4 in a World Group I tie. The winner will stay in Group I while the losing team will be relegated to Group II.

India have never lost a tie to Pakistan in Davis Cup history. (PTI)

## We have plans to counter England's aggression: K S Bharat

**VISAKHAPATNAM, Feb 1:** There is no panic in the injury-hit Indian camp, declared wicket-keeper K S Bharat on Thursday, asserting that the home side has made fresh plans to deal with England's attacking approach, including employing the sweep shot as and when required in the second Test here.

Bharat, who will be playing in front of his home crowd, said the team has worked on its shortcomings in the series-opener in which England staged a sensational comeback to win the game by 28 runs. Led by Ollie Pope, England batters threw the Indian spinners off their plans with a barrage of sweeps and reverse sweeps. They are set to maintain that intensity in the Test beginning here on Friday.

"They really played very well. Credit to them. Ollie Pope really played good shots," Bharat said in the pre-match press conference.

India would be without star all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja and top batter K L Rahul due to injuries.

"In our team meetings we spoke about the things we could have done better and yes, we certainly have few plans. (We are) definitely looking at the way how they went about the first game, playing some reverse. That's something we have definitely worked on," he added. (PTI)

## U19 WC: India face Nepal in final Super Six match, keen to seal semis berth

**BLOEMFONTEIN, Feb 1:** India will be eager to make their semifinal entry a grand affair when they face a struggling Nepal in their final Group 1 Super Six match of the ICC Under-19 World Cup here on Friday.

The top two sides from the two Super Six groups will progress to the semifinals of the marquee event.

Pakistan (+1.06) are close on their heels with six points but India (+3.32) occupy the top slot because of better net run rate. The tournament favourites under Uday Saharan are yet to taste defeat in the tournament, and Nepal is unlikely to even stretch this powerful side.

India's dominance is visible in the stats as well. They are on top of Group 1 with an all-win record and six points, while



Nepal is yet to notch up any victory. Musheer Khan, younger brother of prolific Mumbai batsman Sarfaraz, leads the batting chart with 325 runs averaging over 81 with two hundreds and his latest blitz came against New Zealand on January 30. Musheer's 131 off 126 balls was the leading light in India's thumping 214-run win over the Kiwis in their first Super Six match. Saumy Kumar Pandey then wreaked havoc on New

## Zero buzz in Islamabad for high-profile India-Pakistan Davis Cup contest

**ISLAMABAD, Feb 1:** Never has the Pakistan Tennis Federation (PTF) received requests for passes for a Davis Cup match from regions as far as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, but the city of Islamabad is not giving the remotest of hints of hosting a high-profile India-Pakistan contest.

Nothing, not even a single poster, in this beautiful city suggests that an Indian team has crossed the border for a Davis Cup match after 60 long years.

The Islamabad Sports Complex, the venue for the World Group I match, is not giving any buzz either, and the sprawling complex is out of bounds even for local media.

The PTF has pinned hopes of revival of the sport in the country on this tie but the promotion of the match through branding, advertisement, marketing and interviews is woefully lacking.

In a nutshell, the excitement and atmosphere, which is usually attached with an India-Pakistan match, is missing.

To top it, only 500 guests and fans will be inside the complex Saturday and Sunday, the match days. The entry will be on invitation, and PTF is picking only a niche tennis audience to attend.

The stiffness of security is such that the Indian players will not be able to enjoy Pakistani hospitality.

They have access just to the venue and the team hotel as the city will remain out of bounds for them.

With the security agencies keeping a tight watch on the Indians, they cannot even go to the nearby shopping mall, let alone paying a visit to the famous Margala Hill.

"We would have made it a grand show for the Indian contingent but are forced to keep it as a low-key affair," a key PTF official told PTI when asked why the buzz is missing.

"It has to be like that because of the security concerns raised by the Indian Federation. ITF has approved a plan, and we have to follow that.

We would have splashed the city with the posters of the players from India and Pakistan but our hands are tied."

PTF treasurer Muhammad Khalil Chughtai also lamented the fact that the tie is being played in a very restrictive environment.

"If the Indian team had come through the Wagah border, we would have organised a grand welcome event at Wagah itself," he said. "In 2017, Iran also raised security concerns, and accordingly security arrangements were made. Eventually, they themselves got fed up with being stuck in a hotel." The AITA had requested the ITF to shift the tie out of Pakistan, saying

the players will face security threats.

It had reasoned that Kashmir Day is on February 4, the second day of the tie, and it could cause some problems but the AITA got the date wrong since Kashmir Day falls on February 5, which is a public holiday.

The AITA also said the General Elections in Pakistan, scheduled for February 8, are close to the matches and it feared for pre-poll violence. AITA also said that India and Pakistan have been on opposite sides in the Israel-Palestine conflict, and it could pose a security threat to its players in that country. (PTI)

## SERVICES PIP ARMY IN ROWING NATIONALS

**PUNE, Feb 1:** Rowers from the Services Sports Control Board (SSCB) overcame stiff competition from Army Sports Control Board (ASCB) to win top honours in the men's section of the 41th Senior National Rowing Championship here on Thursday.

Services ended with 4 gold and 3 silver as against 3 gold and 4 silver by Army. Chandigarh claimed the lone title among state associations.

In the women's section, Madhya Pradesh (4 gold, 1 silver) claimed the top spot while Kerala (2 gold), Manipur (1 gold, 1 silver) finished behind in the seven-race schedule.

The men's section was exciting, with the first two finals going the Services and Army's way respectively.

In the double sculls event Services' Kulwinder Singh and Karamjit Singh -- 6 minutes 48.9 seconds -- pushed aside the Army duo of Gur-tap Singh and Ravi (6:55.2).

Army struck back, with Babulal Yadav and Lekh Ram edging out Services' Saneer Kumar and Iqbal Singh.

The next two races belonged to Services. The coxless fours had Jaswinder Singh, Bheem Singh, Punit Kumar, Ashish (06:27.3) getting the better of Army's Lakhveer Singh Harinder Singh, Ghurde Patil, Jasmal Singh (06:29.5).

The next race also went the Services way and took their tally to three as against one by Army. Services claimed their third when the lightweight double sculls duo of Nitin Deol and Ujjwal Kumar Singh (06:48.7) finished ahead of Army's Arwinder Singh and Rohit (06:51.2).

Army claimed their second title of the day by bagging the quadruple sculls. Ravi, Jaspinder Singh, Gurpartap Singh, Manjeet Kumar combined to clock 06:19.3, which was better than the 06:21.2 clocked by the Services quartet of Ashish Phugat, Jakar Khan, Karamjit Singh and Kulwinder Singh. (PTI)

## Stokes keeps his promise with Root, makes 'a bowler' out of the premier batter

**VISAKHAPATNAM, Feb 1:** Ben Stokes was on a mission to mould a bowler out of premier batter Joe Root, and the maverick England skipper can afford himself a satisfactory chuckle seeing his venture coming to fruition in the first Test against India in Hyderabad.

He had picked up five wickets in that match, four in the first innings and the all-important scalp of in-form KL Rahul in the second dig, to play a significant part in England's stunning come-from-behind 28-run victory.

Root got the ball to turn at a good pace and his straighter one also troubled the Indian batters.

With left-arm spinner Jack Leach out of the second Test, Root will be expected to shoulder more responsibility in an inexperienced spin department.

He had bowled 48 overs in the first Test.

"I did always say to Joe I thought he under-bowled himself as cap-



tain, and when he walked off with four-fer I did say to him, 'see, I told ya I'd make a bowler out of ya'.

Having someone like that out here who is not only someone to throw the ball to and change the pace of the game up -- he's bowled me lots of overs, Joe has -- then having him batting at four and the

runs he's scored and how important he is to us.

"To also have the benefit of Joe's bowling out here is obviously massive. I'm surprised he's not actually mentioned he's nipped above me, but I think we're just two people who don't really care about stuff like that," said Stokes on the eve of the second

Test.

England have brought in the evergreen James Anderson in place of Mark Wood while bringing in uncapped off-spinner Shoaib Bashir for the injured Leach.

Bashir arrived in India late because of visa issues and was not available for selection for the opener.

Anderson's return would allow England to do what Jasprit Bumrah did for India with the old ball -- getting reverse swing. Stokes said Anderson contributes to the team even when he is not playing, like it was the case in Hyderabad.

"Bringing Jimmy's experience, the class that he has, is great and I think it also goes under the radar how good his record in India is. "Considering what Jimmy is going for -- 'the swing king' and all that -- it just proves how good a bowler he is. He has different skillsets that I will be able to exploit in Indian conditions.

"It's not just picking Jimmy for the new ball, it's the other stuff he possesses as well. It's great that Jimmy is doing good things for the old boys out there. It's huge credit and lots of people should look up to Jimmy considering he is where he is at 41."

Anderson has taken 34 wickets in 13 Tests in India, averaging 29.32. The Hyderabad pitch offered turn from day one but Stokes reckoned the Vizag surface might be better for batting at least in the initial phase of the game.

"It might be a good wicket for maybe a day or two. But out here in India and other parts of the sub-continent, you tend to see it start to spin more and more as the Test goes deeper and deeper.

Even though it does look like there's a little bit more moisture in there with the heat -- and today is very hot again -- any footholes and stuff like that might come into play the further the Test goes. (PTI)

# Hurt India eye sweeping changes in approach in second Test; England bring in Anderson, Bashir

**VISAKHAPATNAM, Feb 1:** An under-pressure and under-resourced India will need to think out of the box to counter England's fearless bunch of 'Bazballers' in the second Test beginning here on Friday.

India are seldom stretched at home but following a dramatic loss in Hyderabad, they have plenty to ponder and the absence of injured Ravindra Jadeja and K L Rahul has made their task tougher. Three years ago, the mighty hosts found themselves in a similar situation having lost the opening Test to England at Chennai but bounced back to win the series.

However, the Joe Root-led side was a different breed then and this time India plan to fightback against a team that has redefined the way Test cricket is played and defied all probability to win the series opener after conceding a 190-run lead on a turning track.

England batters, led by Ollie Pope, swept and reverse swept their way to success in the first Test, taking Rohit and his bunch by surprise, while making the most potent spin trio in the world look ordinary.

India won't have the luxury of fielding Jadeja in this game but Ashwin, four

shy of the 500-wicket milestone in Tests, and Axar will need to redraw their plans to come back hard at their uber-aggressive opponents who are sure to employ the sweeping tactics irrespective of the conditions.

Left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav is expected to play in Jadeja's absence and it remains to be seen if India go in with only one pacer in Jasprit Bumrah and play another spinner, possibly off-spinning all-rounder Washington Sundar.

Uncapped left-arm spinner Sourabh Kumar has also been added to the squad.

Not just India's lethal spinners were tested against Bazball, their batters' struggles on turning tracks also came to the fore as left-arm spinner Tom Hartley transformed a seemingly forgettable debut into a match winning one.

Rohit, perhaps, was the only front-line batter who looked assured in the second innings while the young brigade, especially Shubman Gill, were guilty of playing the turning ball with hard hands.

The defensive approach of Gill, who had a breakout 2023 in the shorter formats, contributed to his downfall.

With Virat Kohli set to return in the



third Test, there will be immense pressure on the likes of Gill and even Shreyas Iyer to deliver here in Vizag.

The home team batters are not as comfortable as their English counterparts in playing the sweep but they need to find a way to match the visitors' high-

risk play.

Rajat Patidar, who was also a part of the squad in Hyderabad, is likely to replace Rahul.

After scoring a bagful of runs in domestic cricket, Sarfaraz Khan has finally got the selectors' nod and would be des-

perate for an India cap. However, the management will have a closer look at conditions before taking a final decision on the playing 11.

England, on the other hand, might sense a golden opportunity to take a 2-0 lead in the five-match series that can severely mount pressure on the Indians.

The way Stokes used and backed his resources in the opener was a captaincy masterclass.

The call to give an extended spell to debutant spinner Hartley in the first innings despite Yashasvi Jaiswal's brutal assault and learning from how Ashwin and Co. bowled spoke a lot about the leadership style of Stokes, who calls himself a great observer of the game.

The tourists also have a point of concern after experienced left-arm spinner Jack Leach has been ruled out of the match because of a knee injury and young off-spinner Shoaib Bashir will make his debut here.

Pacer Mark Wood had failed to make an impact in Hyderabad despite bowling 25 overs across two innings and for this match the visitors have replaced him with veteran pacer James Anderson, whose unerring accuracy can bring higher value if the track remains slow

and low.

In that context, England will not put into practice their coach Brendon McCullum's thought of fielding an all-spin attack for this game.

The ACA-VDCA stadium has staged two Tests till date and the pitch usually favours the batters in the first innings.

England have thrown down the gauntlet with a sensational result and it remains to be seen what kind of surface India go with as they seek to draw parity.

A downright turner could backfire on the hosts, though they would be tempted to take that punt.

**Squads: India:** Rohit Sharma (Captain), Shubman Gill, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shreyas Iyer, KS Bharat (WK), Dhruv Jurel (WK), Ravichandran Ashwin, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohd. Siraj, Mukesh Kumar, Jasprit Bumrah (VC), Avesh Khan, Rajat Patidar, Sarfaraz Khan, Washington Sundar, Sourabh Kumar.

**England (Playing 11):** Ben Stokes (Captain), Ben Duckett, Zak Crawley, Joe Root, Ollie Pope, Jonny Bairstow, Ben Foakes (wk), Rehan Ahmed, Tom Hartley, Shoaib Bashir, James Anderson. Match starts at 9.30 am. (PTI)

## Potts, Carse wreak havoc as England Lions bowl out India A for 192



**AHMEDABAD, Feb 1:** Durham pace duo of Matthew Potts and Brydon Carse wreaked havoc on a depleted India A side as they bowled the hosts out for a modest 192 to give England Lions upper hand in the third and final unofficial Test here on Thursday.

At stumps on the opening day of the four-day fixture, England Lions were placed strongly at 98/1, with Alex Lees batting on 48 (106b) in the company of Oliver Price (20; 63b). The visitors trailed by 96 runs in their first

innings.

Potts returned with excellent figures of 6/57, his second successive six-wicket haul, and now has 18 wickets from three matches.

Carse finished with 4/52 from his 12 overs as the duo ensured that the hosts, missing the services of Sarfaraz Khan and Washington Sundar, were bowled out inside two sessions.

In response, opener Lees anchored the innings with a composed knock and Keaton Jennings contributed 17 runs before being

dismissed by Akash Deep. Price and Lees then put together an unbroken 71-run stand to see through the opening day.

For India A, left-arm pacer Arshdeep Singh bowled a tight spell, but remained wicket-less (8-2-19-0) and he would look to give early breakthroughs to help his team regain control.

Leading the three-match series 1-0, the Abhimanyu Easwaran-led side was asked to bat first and faced an early setback when the skipper was trapped in front of the match's first ball.

After his patient approach, Tamil Nadu left-hander shouldered arm an incoming Potts delivery in another horror lbw dismissal, which left India A at 19/2 inside seven overs.

Potts continued his onslaught, grabbing Tilak Varma (22) and Rinku Singh who made a second successive duck in his debut India A series.

Karnataka batter Devdutt Padikkal emerged as the lone fighter with his 65 (96b) but lacked significant support from his teammates.

The England Lions pace duo of Potts and Carse maintained pressure on the Indians, with the latter chipping in with four crucial wickets after the early breakthroughs effected by his colleague.

India A, who won the previous unofficial Test by an innings and 16 runs, face a daunting challenge to fight back in this game.

**Brief scores:** India A 1st Innings 192; 50.2 overs (Devdutt Padikkal 65, Saransh Jain 64, Tilak Varma 22; Matthew Potts 6/57, Brydon Carse 4/52).

England Lions 1st Innings 98/1; 34 overs (Alex Lees 48 batting, Oliver Price 20 batting). Match to continue. (PTI)

## Sports Ministry gets ₹ 45 crore boost in Union Budget



**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** The Sports Ministry was on Thursday allocated ₹ 3,442.32 crore, a hike of ₹ 45.36 crore as compared to last year, in the interim Union Budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman.

In the previous budget, the Sports Ministry had got a revised allocation of ₹ 3,396.96 crore.

The Olympic Games in Paris, to be held from July 26 to August 11, will be the country's main focus during the 2024-25 financial year.

The ministry's flagship programme, Khelo India, was allotted ₹ 900 crore, an increase of ₹ 20 crore from the previous

budget.

The Sports Authority of India (SAI), which organises national camps, provides infrastructure and equipment to athletes, appoints coaches among others, saw ₹ 26.83 crore increase in its budgetary allocation from the previous year's revised expenditure of ₹ 795.77 crore.

The National Sports Federations (NSFs) will receive ₹ 15 crore more this time, as compared to the 2023-24 revised budget of ₹ 325 crore.

The National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) too got a raise with the government allocating ₹ 22.30 crore in the interim

budget as compared to ₹ 21.73 crore in 2023-24.

The National Dope Testing Laboratory (NDTL), which conducts the testing of dope samples, will receive ₹ 22 crore, ₹ 2.5 crore more than the previous budget.

The budget for National Centre of Sports Science and Research has been reduced to ₹ 8 crore from ₹ 10 crore previously, while the National Sports University will get an increased allocation of ₹ 91.90 crore from ₹ 83.21 crore of 2023-24 budget.

The budget for giving incentives to sportspersons saw a significant reduction from ₹ 84 crore to ₹ 39 crore.

The allocation for National Sports Development Fund was also reduced to ₹ 18 crore from ₹ 46 crore. The Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay National Welfare for Sportspersons scheme got ₹ 2 crore.

The allocation for 'Enhancement of Sports Facility in Jammu and Kashmir' was also brought down to ₹ 8 crore from previous budget allocation of ₹ 20 crore.

In the previous budget, the allocation for Commonwealth Games was ₹ 15 crore, which was brought down to ₹ 0.01 crore this time. (PTI)

## Sri Lanka to host ICC AGM in July

**COLOMBO, Feb 1:** With their suspension lifted, Sri Lanka will host the Annual General Meeting of the International Cricket Council (ICC) in July, the country's sports minister Harin Fernando said on Thursday.

Sri Lanka Cricket was suspended for government interference in its functioning. It cost the island nation an opportunity to host the Under-19 World Cup which is currently underway in South Africa.

"Sri Lanka gets to host the ICC AGM from July 19-22 in Colombo. This will be a great boost for Sri Lanka with regards to cricket and tourism," Fernando, who is also the minister of tourism, said in a statement. SLC was suspended in November for not meeting its ICC Member obligations, specifically, failing to independently manage its affairs and prevent government interference in the regulation and administration of cricket in Sri Lanka.

Roshan Ranasinghe, the predecessor of Fernando, appointed an interim committee, alleging corruption in SLC. The committee was headed by the former World Cup-winning captain Arjuna Ranatunga.

The ICC declared that Ranasinghe's action to appoint an interim committee was a serious breach of its governance rules.

However, the suspension was lifted on Sunday after Fernando, in December, annulled the gazette issued by Ranasinghe. (PTI)



## Treesa-Gayatri pair; Manjunath and Ashmita enter quarterfinals of Thailand Masters

**BANGKOK, Feb 1:** Sixth seeds Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand entered the women's doubles quarterfinals, but former world no.1 Kidambi Srikanth was upstaged by lower-ranked compatriot Mithun Manjunath on a mixed day for Indians at the Thailand Masters badminton tournament here on Thursday.

With the tough three-game win over Srikanth, Manjunath, along with Ashmita Chalaha in the women's draw, progressed to the last-eight stage of the singles' competition.

Treesa and Gayatri beat fellow Indians Tanisha Crasto and Ashwini Ponnappa 21-15 24-22 in their round of 16 match.

They will next be up against fourth seeds Febriana Dwipuji Kusuma and Amallia Cahaya Pratiwi of Indonesia.

Manjunath, the current national champion who is ranked 63rd in the world, had to sweat it out for 54 minutes to get the better of former world no.1 Srikanth 21-9 13-21 21-17 in a



round of 16 match. Manjunath will play Netherlands Mark Caljouw in the last-eight round. However, it was curtains for the other Indian in men's singles draw, S Sankar Muthusamy Subramanian.

Subramanian, a qualifier, lost 9-21 11-21 to Chinese Taipei's Chun-Yi Lin to exit the tour-

namment. Ashmita also made the next round, beating Chinese Taipei's Yu Po Pai 21-12 15-21 21-17 in women's singles.

But Malvika Bansod made an early exit in women's singles, losing 22-24 7-21 to local shuttler Busanan Ongbamrunphan in the pre-quarters. (PTI)

## AIFF president Chaubey serves legal notice to former AP official Kosaraju for 'defamatory allegations'

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** All India Football Federation President Kalyan Chaubey on Thursday served a legal notice to former Andhra Pradesh official Gopalakrishna Kosaraju for making "false, malicious and defamatory allegations", after the latter accused him of using AIFF credit cards for buying personal things.

Chaubey, through his lawyer, gave Kosaraju seven days to tender a public apology or face legal proceedings. The AIFF president also said that he "reserves the right to seek compensation for damages incurred as a result of the false and defamatory statements" against him.

Kosaraju, a former president of Andhra Pradesh Football Association, had on January 29 wrote an e-mail to the executive committee members of the AIFF, alleging that Chaubey had "misused these (AIFF) credit cards for the self purchase of shoes".

Chaubey "explicitly and unequivocally" denied the allegations and termed them "a creation of vindictive imagination" of Kosaraju.

"The unwarranted public dissemination of a defamatory e-mail, containing unsubstantiated allegations of financial misconduct, not only lacks accuracy but also unjustly undermines my client's well-earned reputation...caused substantial harm to (his) personal and professional standing," the legal notice, served by Chaubey's Kolkata-based lawyer Sudarshan Kumar Agarwal, said.

"News reports, tweets and videos, wherein the wild, unfounded, false, baseless and per se defamatory allegations imagined and conceptualized by the Noticee are being further propagated and thereby cause further prejudice, damage and injury to my client's reputation and goodwill before the public at large. (PTI)

## Pant reveals he feared leg amputation after life-threatening car crash

**NEW DELHI, Feb 1:** India wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant has revealed that he feared the amputation of his right leg in the aftermath of the horrific car crash which he survived 13 months ago.

Pant was driving from Delhi to his hometown Roorkee to meet his family when his car crashed into the median divider on the road in December, 2022.

He had just returned from Bangladesh after playing a major role in India's win in the second Test in Mirpur.

"If there was any nerve damage, there was a possibility of amputation. That is when I felt scared," Pant said in Star Sports series 'Believe: To Death & Back' which documents his recovery.

"I had taken an SUV, but what I was seeing was a sedan," he quipped as he remembered his mangled vehicle.

Recounting the initial moments after the crash, the 26-year-old said he was in excruciating pain as his right knee had dislocated, turning 180 degrees to the right as he lay face down.

"There was someone around so I asked if he could help getting the leg back in the position. He helped the knee get back in place."

Two persons Rajat Kumar and Nishu Kumar were able to pull Pant out of his SUV before it went up in flames.

"It was the first time I had such a feeling in life. At the time of the accident, I was aware of the wounds, but I was lucky as it could have been even more serious," he recollected.

Pant underwent initial treatment at a hospital in Dehradun and was later airlifted to Mumbai where he was under the care



of a specialist consultant brought in by the BCCI.

After undergoing surgeries to reconstruct all three ligaments in his right knee, Pant did his re-

habilitation at the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru. The big-hitter said the process is boring at best and frustrating at worst.

"I am focusing on recovery cut off from the world. It helps me in recovering fast, especially when the injury is so serious. For recovery you have to do the