

# Across State

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## Jolt to Sharad Pawar, EC says Ajit Pawar faction 'real NCP'

New Delhi

The Ajit Pawar faction is the real Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), the Election Commission announced on Tuesday in a major setback to party founder Sharad Pawar.

The poll panel gave the NCP name and symbol "wall clock" to the Ajit Pawar faction in a significant order ahead of polls. The poll body took the decision to end the dispute between Sharad Pawar and his nephew Ajit after more than 10 hearings spread over six months.

The commission said the decision followed the laid-out tests of maintainability of the petition, which included tests of aims and objectives of the party constitution, test of party constitution and tests of majority — both organisational and legislative.

The Election Commission said the "test of a legislative majority" helped Ajit's faction clinch the NCP symbol in view of the disputed internal organisational elections. The NCP had witnessed a split in July last year after Ajit had rebelled against his uncle and joined the ruling BJP-Shiv Sena



government in Maharashtra.

Both factions had staked claim to the party name and symbol before the Election Commission.

"We humbly accept the decision given by the Election Commission after listening to the side presented by our lawyers," Ajit said in a post on X after the verdict.

The EC has provided the Sharad faction with a one-time option to name its new political formation and provide three preferences to the

commission by 4 pm tomorrow.

Meanwhile, Sharad's daughter and NCP MP Supriya Sule dubbed the EC decision as a conspiracy against Maharashtra and Marathi people.

"The ECI's decision is the victory of the invisible power. This is a huge conspiracy against Maharashtra and Marathi people. However, I am not at all surprised by this decision," Sule told reporters in New Delhi.

## Ajit Pawar faction files caveat in Supreme Court, seeks hearing if Sharad Pawar group challenges EC order

New Delhi

The Ajit Pawar faction on Wednesday filed a caveat in the Supreme Court seeking a hearing if the Sharad Pawar group moves before it challenging an Election Commission order recognising the party led by the Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister as the real Nationalist Congress Party.

The caveat has been filed through advocate Abhikalp Pratap Singh to ensure that no ex-parte order is passed against the Ajit Pawar faction if the other group moves the top court.

On Tuesday, the Election Commission (EC) announced that the Ajit Pawar faction is the real NCP, in a major setback to party founder Sharad Pawar.

The poll panel also allotted the NCP symbol 'clock' to the group led by Ajit Pawar.

The decision followed the laid-out tests of maintainability of such a petition which included tests of aims and objectives of the party constitution, test of party constitution and tests of majority both organisational and legislative, the EC said.

The Sharad Pawar-led group will move the Supreme Court against the Election Commission's ruling which recognised the Ajit Pawar faction as the real Nationalist Congress Party, senior leader Jayant Patil said.

"We will approach the Supreme Court as it is our last hope. It is our innocent expectation that the Supreme Court will stay the decision of the ECI. We have to stand firm behind Sharad Pawar. The party workers need not worry," said Patil, who heads the state unit of the NCP (Sharad Pawar) camp.

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# More ally power to NDA ahead of 2024 Lok Sabha elections; buzz over MNS and RLD joining BJP

## Mumbai

Even as the future of the INDIA alliance continues to remain uncertain, the BJP-led NDA appears to be adding more oomph to the alliance to fulfil Prime Minister Narendra Modi's prediction of 370 seats for the party and 400-plus for the alliance.

According to the latest buzz, after JD-U in Bihar and earlier Shiv Sena and NCP in Maharashtra, Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) and Jayant Chaudhary's Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) may also join the NDA.

According to reports, leaders from Raj Thackeray's MNS have held talks with Maharashtra BJP leader and Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis regarding the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. The MNS leaders were deputed by Raj Thackeray for discussions on seat-sharing, sources said.

Apart from the Lok Sabha, Maharashtra will also vote for its 288-member Assembly this



year.

With 48 Lok Sabha seats, Maharashtra is the second largest state after Uttar Pradesh so far as the strength in the Lower House of Parliament is concerned.

The ruling Mahayuti alliance in the state includes the BJP, Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party. The NDA is in a comfortable position in Maharashtra but the MNS and its firebrand leader will further enhance the saffron prospects

in not just the Lok Sabha and the Assembly elections but also the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation election, say observers.

BMC elections were last held in 2017 and it is currently under an administrator's rule, making it the longest tenure the civic body has been without elected representatives in its 150-year-old history, as per reports. It may not have done well in the Lok Sabha and Assembly polls but MNS has a good hold over the local

politics, say observers.

It is expected that elections to the BMC, which governs the country's financial capital, may be held in 2024.

So far as the RLD is concerned, the UP-based party with a primarily Jat vote base has not been doing so well for quite some time. According to sources, it may join the NDA in lieu of four seats in Western UP—Kairana, Baghpat, Mathura and Amroha.

Though RLD has support in Western UP, in the 2022 assembly polls it won just nine of the 30-plus seats it contested. In the Lok Sabha, it has no MP.

Apparently, Akhilesh Yadav's Samajwadi Party, which is part of the INDIA alliance, wanted to contest from Muzaffarnagar, Kairana, and Bijnor on the RLD symbol, which is not agreeable to Jayant Chaudhary.

"Even though this worked with RLD in the past, including the 2022 Assembly elections when Jayant Chaudhary agreed to field candidates of SP's

choice on the party symbol, this time the idea of 'your symbol, our candidate' seems to be not unacceptable to him", say sources.

So far there is no official announcement, but they add that "the BJP is in touch with Jayant Chaudhary".

What PM said

In the 2019 General Election, the BJP had won 303 seats while NDA's tally was 353.

Of the 80 seats in UP, the BJP won 62 and of 48 in Maharashtra, it won 23. In other words, the BJP believes that there is scope of adding 25 odd seats from these two states alone.

PM Narendra Modi on Monday predicted a landslide for the party—the BJP winning more than 370 seats on its own and the NDA crossing the 400 mark. "Although I am not in the business of predicting numbers, the BJP is definitely going to get more than 370, while NDA's total will cross 400," he said in the Lok Sabha.

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## Bombay High Court says arrest of Chanda Kochhar, her husband in ICICI Bank-Videocon loan case illegal

### Mumbai

The Bombay High Court on Tuesday held as "illegal" the arrest of ICICI Bank's former Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Chanda Kochhar and her businessman-husband Deepak Kochhar by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in an alleged loan fraud case.

A division bench of Justices Anuja Prabhudessai and NR Borkar confirmed a January 2023 interim order passed by another bench granting the duo bail soon after their arrest in the case.

The couple was arrested by the CBI on December 23, 2022, in connection with the Videocon-ICICI Bank loan case.

They immediately moved the HC challenging their arrest and sought it to be declared as illegal. By way of an interim order, they also sought to be released on bail.

On January 9, 2023, the HC, in its interim order, granted bail to the duo after coming down heavily on the CBI for making the arrest in a "casual and mechanical" manner and without application of mind.

On Tuesday, the bench led by Justice Prabhudessai allowed the duo's petition, thus declaring their arrest as "illegal" and confirming the earlier interim order.

Apart from the Kochhars, the CBI had also arrested Videocon group founder Venugopal Dhoot in the case. He, too, was granted bail by the HC in January 2023 in its interim order.

The central agency has alleged that ICICI Bank had sanctioned credit facilities to the tune of Rs 3,250 crore to Videocon Group companies promoted by Dhoot in violation of the Banking Regulation Act, Reserve Bank of India guidelines and credit policy of the private sector lender.



# BJP's keen eye on Maharashtra, Prime Minister set to visit state

## Mumbai

With the Lok Sabha elections approaching, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be in the key poll battleground of Maharashtra this month, his third visit to the state this year. Modi will be in the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) bastion of Satara that the BJP has never won. The seat is currently held by Shrinivas Patil who is in the Sharad Pawar faction of the NCP.

Modi will visit on February 19 on the birth anniversary of Chhatrapati Shivaji to receive the Shiv Samman Puraskar, which is awarded each year by the family that traces its lineage to the Maratha king. Rajya Sabha MP Udayan Raje Bhosale who is the 13th direct descendant of Chhatrapati Shivaji is expected to share the stage with the PM at the event.

A senior BJP functionary told The Indian Express that the PM's visit was planned to "generate political impact" and give the BJP candidate a headstart for the polls. There is also strong buzz that the BJP is keen on fielding Bhosale from Satara. A senior BJP leader said the party believes "Bhosale will be the best candidate to take on the Opposition".

A BJP leader involved in poll preparations said the party has a choice of two or more candidates in select constituencies and while

Bhosale is the "unanimous first choice for now" they may push for another candidate if the NCP fields current Baramati MP Supriya Sule, Pawar's daughter, from Satara. The NCP has not so far signalled anything to that effect.

Bhosale was earlier with the NCP and worked closely with the Pawar family. He is a three-time Satara MP, winning the constituency three straight times from 2009 onwards. Ahead of the Maharashtra Assembly elections in 2019, he vacated the seat after joining the BJP. He lost the October 2019 bypoll to Patil. An image of Pawar addressing a rally amid pouring rain during the bypoll campaign became a talking point at the time and signalled the importance the NCP attaches to the seat. Bhosale became a Rajya Sabha MP the following year.

Modi visited Maharashtra twice in January. First, on January 13 he unveiled Atal Setu, the country's longest bridge and inaugurated and laid the foundation of projects worth almost Rs 15,000 crore. A week later, he was in Solapur to inaugurate what has been billed as the largest low-cost housing project in the country and also laid the foundation of eight AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation) projects worth

around Rs 2,000 crore.

The PM's frequent visits to the state since the Eknath Shinde-led government came to power in June 2022 — Solapur was his eight visit — illustrate the BJP's attempts to leverage his popularity and his government's development message as it attempts to win at least 45 seats from Maharashtra. The state sends the most parliamentarians to the Lok Sabha (48) after Uttar Pradesh (80).

The BJP seemingly has the upper hand in Maharashtra at the moment since it has successfully split the Shiv Sena and NCP. But party leaders told The Indian Express last week there was still "hunger" for more. "There could be many surprises from the state ahead of the Lok Sabha polls," a BJP leader involved in the state unit's affairs said at the time.

Satara was a Congress stronghold from 1951 to 1991, the only exception being in 1957 when Nana Ramchandra Patil of the CPI bagged it. The state's first CM Yashwantrao Chavan, who went on to become a Union Minister, won from Satara from 1967 to 1980. In 1996, the Shiv Sena's Hindurao Nimbalkar won the seat but the Congress with its candidate, Abhaysingh Bhosale, clinched it back two years later. The Congress retained it till 2009.

# CM Eknath Shinde announces 120-acre Central Park at Mahalaxmi Racecourse

## Mumbai

A 320-acre central park of international standards will come up in Mumbai, for which 120 acres will be of the Mahalaxmi Race Course, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde said on Tuesday.

"Mumbaikars ke liye bohot badi saugat ho sakti hai (This can be a great gift for all Mumbaikars). We want to make a big international central park within the race course,"



said Shinde speaking at the 76th anniversary of Loksatta newspaper in Mumbai. Loksatta is a part of The Indian Express Group. Assuring that the race course will continue to exist, the Maharashtra CM said that the International Central Park will benefit all people living in the city. "Where can you find a big garden in Mumbai? We have demanded 120 acres of land from them (Royal Western India Turf Club). Along with that, there will be 200 acres of reclaimed land of the coastal

road in Worli.. thus a big central park spread over 320 cores will be built in Mumbai," he said. He added that this move will increase the green cover of the city and will be a place of pride for Mumbai as well as Maharashtra. "This will be an oxygen park. No building no construction will be there. Children can come and play there, and everyone from the women to the elderly can come there and have a good time," he said.

"Our effort is to make Mumbai the number one city in the world and the central park will prove to be a boon for the people," he said. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation had proposed to transform a part of the Mahalaxmi Race Course into a "theme park".

Last week, a majority of members of the Royal Western India Turf Club (RWITC) gave their nod to a proposal mooted by the BMC that stipulated that the lease of the century-old race course would be extended on the condition that the club hands over 120 acres of the 211-acre race course to the BMC.

On January 29 and 30, a total of 708 members participated in voting on the BMC's plan. Of these voters, 540 expressed support for the proposal, while 168 were opposed.

# Suspicious Boat Found Near Mumbai Coast, 3 On Board Being Questioned

## Mumbai

Mumbai police have launched a probe after a fishing boat was suspiciously found roaming near the city's coast area on Tuesday, officials said.

According to police, a suspicious boat named "Abdullah Sharif" was found roaming near the Gateway of India.

The boat had three people on board, all of them hailing from Tamil Nadu's Kanyakumari, and they are being questioned.

However, for now, nothing suspicious has been found from the suspects.

"The boat has arrived from Kuwait and has been impounded. The three people are being questioned. Colaba Police is present at the spot," officials said.

Further investigation is underway, they added.

# "Trying To Steal Our Reservation Benefits": Bhujbal

## Mumbai

Maharashtra minister Chhagan Bhujbal on Tuesday said various options are being explored, including the legal one, to protect the reservation of OBCs which is his priority.

He also lashed out at Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange, saying the latter should withdraw his demand for the reservation under the OBC category.

"He (Jarange) and his colleagues are trying to



steal our reservation benefits. He should first stop it at once. If he withdraws his demand to get the reservation under the OBC grouping, it will be a big favour to us," the OBC leader said.

Bhujbal said various options at legal and administrative levels are being explored to protect the OBC reservation.

"I am getting support from across the parties for this cause of protecting the OBC quota. I respect the democratic processes where people have the right to express their views," he added.

# "Congress Follows Nehru Blindly, He Was Against Reservation": PM Modi

New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday doubled down on his attacks on the Congress, declaring party stalwart and former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said he was against reservations for marginalised communities because it "promoted inefficiency in the system".

"I remember Nehruji a lot these days..." Mr Modi began, "He once wrote a letter to chief ministers, in which he said he was against reservation and that (it promoted) non-meritorious people."

"Nehruji used to say that if SC, ST or OBCs get reservation in jobs, then government work



standards will fall. He even stopped recruitment. What Nehruji said has been pathhar ki lakeer ('set in stone') for the Congress since. Your mindset can be understood through such examples," the PM lashed out.



"The party has always been against the interest of SC and ST communities."

"But we have always prioritised them... first Dalits and now Adivasis. Who are the beneficiaries of our schemes?

All our works are for the SC, ST, and OBC communities," the PM continued.

The PM also referred to President Murmu's election; she is the first tribal woman to hold the post.

"Your (opposition to Ms Murmu) wasn't for ideology. You made someone who went from BJP (former Union Minister Yashwant Sinha) the candidate. You were opposed to an Adivasi woman."

The sharp comments on the Congress - part of a vitriolic attack in the Rajya Sabha (following similarly sharp remarks in the Lok Sabha Monday) - come weeks before a general election the BJP is expected to win, and

one in which a caste survey/ census, and reservation, are likely to be key poll planks.

On Monday the PM targeted both Mr Nehru and another Congress stalwart and former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, claiming their speeches revealed they had no faith in Indians' abilities.

"The Congress never trusted India's potential. They always considered themselves rulers and belittled people," the Prime Minister claimed, before he attacked Nehru (again) for the situation in Jammu and Kashmir. "Kashmiris have paid a heavy price for Nehru's mistake..." he declared.

## "Mamata Banerjee Said Congress Won't Cross 40, I Pray..."

New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday borrowed from Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to take a swipe at the Congress ahead of a Lok Sabha election due in less than two months, declaring "I pray you can save at least 40 seats". The Prime Minister was in the Rajya Sabha to take part in the Motion of Thanks discussion on President Droupadi Murmu's address to Parliament.

"The challenged has come from West Bengal... that the Congress will not be able to cross 40 (seats)," Mr Modi chuckled to a soundtrack of BJP MPs thumping desks, "I pray you can save at least 40".

Ms Banerjee - whose relationship with the Congress and the party-led INDIA bloc is close to collapsing over a seat-sharing row - last week doubted the Congress' ability to win "even 40 seats".

The Congress has slumped to catastrophic defeats in the past two general elections, winning 72 seats in the 2014 poll and only 44 five years later. For contrast, in 2009 the party won 206 seats.

Her remarks followed Congress MP Rahul Gandhi's claim that seat-sharing talks are ongoing.

### PM Modi's Jibe

Questioned over the Bengal leader's apparent distancing

on Mr Gandhi's 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' - which has visited



from the INDIA bloc, Mr Gandhi indicated he remains optimistic an agreement between the two parties is still possible. "Neither Mamataji nor Congress has come out of the alliance... Mamataji is saying she is (still) in the alliance," he said.

The Bengal Chief Minister responded with a scathing attack

six districts as it marches to Maharashtra - and compared the foot march to a "mere photo opportunity" for "migratory birds", one aimed at dividing minority votes in the state.

"I proposed Congress contest 300 seats... but they refused. Now, they've arrived in the state to stir up Muslim voters. (Now) I doubt

whether they will secure even 40 seats if they contested 300."

Ms Banerjee then dared the Congress to take on and defeat the BJP in Hindi heartland states like the politically crucial Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh; these send 134 MPs to the Lok Sabha and are ruled by the BJP, which dumped the Congress out of the latter two in November.

Trinamool-Congress ties are nearly at breaking point as a result of disagreements over dividing Bengal's 42 Lok Sabha seats between themselves and Left parties, which are also INDIA members.

Last month Ms Banerjee declared her party will contest all 42 on its own, and only consider an INDIA alliance after the election results, indicating her distrust in the bloc's ability to challenge the BJP.

"I had no discussions with Congress. I have always said that in Bengal, we will fight alone. I gave them (the Congress) many proposals... but they rejected them. I am not concerned about what will be done in the (rest of the) country... but we are secular and, in Bengal, we alone will defeat BJP," she said.





*The Go...Goregaon Festival recently launched in the presence of Mr. Aaditya Thackeray, leader, youth icon and the motivation behind this festival. The organizer of the festival Mr. Ronaq Desai and other dignities were also present at the launch.*

## Cracker Factory, Where 11 Were Killed, Did Not Have License

### Bhopal

Eleven people were killed, and 174 others were injured after a fire erupted at an unlicensed firecracker factory in Madhya Pradesh's Harda on Tuesday, triggering several blasts. The factory, in existence for over two decades, had a history of operating without a valid license and lacking necessary safety precautions.

The roots of the problem trace back to 2017 when the owners of the cracker unit applied for a license renewal under The Explosives Act. The then Harda district collector discovered that the factory, located on the outskirts of Harda town, approximately 150 km from the state capital Bhopal, was manufacturing crackers without a required license. The existing permit only allowed the stocking and selling of crackers and sparklers, including those of Chinese origin. Despite this violation, the factory continued its operations until it was sealed by authorities in 2017, remaining non-operational at least until August 2018. However, the factory resumed operations in 2018-19, managing to renew its stocking and sale license until 2022. Another blast three years ago at the same factory claimed the lives of three women labourers from a



single family. In 2021, another incident took place, resulting in the death of three individuals. One of the factory owners, Rajesh Agrawal, was arrested in connection with the 2021 incident but was later released on bail. Despite the recurring mishaps and safety concerns, the factory's license was renewed in 2022, allowing the manufacturing of crackers to continue until the recent tragedy.

The Agarwal family, politically well-connected individuals who own

the factory, faced accusations of attempting to influence the Harda district administration to reopen the factory in 2017-18. However, their efforts were thwarted by the then-district collector, who prioritised safety over political influence. The factory owners, Rajesh Agrawal and Somesh Agrawal, have been arrested, while another individual, Rafiq Khan, has been detained in connection with the blast.

The blast resulted in black smoke engulfing the entire area, with shattered

window panes of nearby houses and shops bearing witness to the intensity of the explosion. A video capturing the horrifying scene showed tall flames and thick smoke billowing from the factory. On the adjacent road, residents were seen fleeing in fear as smoke engulfed the area. The aftermath revealed that dozens of houses in the vicinity were burned, and eyewitnesses compared the impact to an earthquake hitting Harda. Additionally, several vehicles were caught in the flames ignited by the explosions. Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav visited Hamidia Hospital in the state capital to meet the injured. "I have asked for an inspection report of similar places from all the districts. We will take action that they will remember," he said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi also extended his condolences to the victims of the tragedy. In an official statement from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), PM Modi said, "Distressed by the loss of lives due to the mishap at a cracker factory in Harda, Madhya Pradesh. Condolences to all those who have lost their loved ones. May those injured recover at the earliest. The local administration is assisting all those affected."

## None from Gandhi clan fit to fight from Uttar Pradesh: Anurag Thakur

### New Delhi

Union Information and Broadcasting Minister on Monday said no one from the Gandhi family of the Congress was "fit to contest Lok Sabha elections from Uttar Pradesh this year".

"No one from the Gandhi family is fit to contest from UP. Those who won never went (there) to show their faces. Those who lost didn't leave any opportunity

to insult North Indians. Those who criticised Lord Rama are now afraid of even setting their foot on the land of Ram Lalla," Thakur said.

He said those who fielded lawyers to defend the Babri Masjid will have no feet to stand on in UP.

"Their (read Congress) allies (read SP) opened fire on Lord Rama worshippers. Their steps are now faltering," the minister said.

Former Congress chief Sonia Gandhi was the lone party winner in UP (Rae Bareilly) in the 2019 LS polls. Her son Rahul Gandhi had lost Amethi to BJP's Smriti Irani and contested from Wayanad in Kerala and won. All eyes are on the Gandhi family amid speculation about their electoral future, the seats they choose and the route they choose (Rajya Sabha or Lok Sabha) to enter Parliament.

# Supreme Court To Examine Its 2004 Verdict On Sub-Classification Of Backward Classes

## New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Tuesday said it will examine the validity of its 2004 judgment holding that states do not have the power to further sub-classify the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes for grant of quotas.

A seven-judge Constitution bench headed by Chief Justice DY Chandrachud made clear that it will not get into the arguments related to the quantifiable data which led the Punjab government to provide for a 50 per cent quota inside the quota.

The bench, also comprising justices B R Gavai, Vikram Nath, Bela M Trivedi, Pankaj Mithal, Manoj Misra and Satish Chandra Mishra, was hearing 23 petitions, including the lead one filed by the Punjab government challenging the 2010 verdict of the Punjab and Haryana High Court.

The high court had struck down Section 4(5) of the Punjab Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes (Reservation in Services) Act, 2006 which provided 50 per cent quota and the first preference to 'Valmiki' and 'Mazhabi Sikhs' castes in public jobs within the SC quota.

The high court had held the provision as unconstitutional on grounds, including that the provision violated a five-judge Constitution bench judgment of 2004 of the Supreme Court in the case of EV Chinnaiah vs. State of Andhra Pradesh.

The Chinnaiah judgment had held that any 'sub-classification' of the scheduled castes would violate Article 14 (right to equality) of the Constitution.

The 2004 verdict had stated that only Parliament, and not state legislatures, can exclude castes deemed to be SC from the Presidential List under Article 341 of the

Constitution.

The top court is examining questions whether sub-classification inside the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe categories be permitted like in the case of other backward classes (OBCs) and if the state assemblies are competent to introduce laws empowering the states to undertake this exercise.

The bench said in case of OBCs, the Indra Swahney (Mandal case) judgment provided that there can be sub-classification or exclusion of creamy layers to ensure that more backwards among the classes get the benefit of reservation.

However, this was not extended for SCs and STs, the bench said, adding that it cannot gloss over the point of exclusion of some castes inside SCs.

"The theme is the same, the sub-classification, which is permitted in Indira Sawhney judgement (Mandal case) for the OBC is not permitted in case of SCs and STs. Because, they say it (SCs and STs) is one homogenous class and once Parliament has designated a class, you cannot subdivide.

"And your (Punjab) contention is that Parliament's power to designate is very different from the state's power to implement reservations under the Constitution," the bench said.

The bench asked whether the state can give 100 per cent or 50 percent quota of 15.5 per cent quota meant for SCs and STs to only few castes inside the group and said it may be hit by the exclusion principle.

"We cannot gloss over the point of exclusion. The same exclusion that applies to reservation per say when seats are reserved for backward communities (OBCs)... because we treat equality as a

substantive equality not formal equality," the bench said.

"The only question now is this - can that exclusion not be justified on the same yardstick which we have applied in the exclusion of the backward and forward context (meant for reservation for OBCs)," the bench said.

The CJI said there were two arguments and the first is that to attain substantive equality, the sub-classification among the SCs was also necessary.

"The second can be the federal argument that there was nothing in the constitutional structure to stop the state from making laws for its marginalised communities," the CJI said.

Once the bench asked whether Punjab has any data on what is the total population of SCs in the state and the break up of 'Valmiki' and 'Mazhabi Sikhs'.

However, later the bench said it will confine to the validity of the Chinnaiah judgement only.

Opening the arguments, Advocate General of Punjab Gurminder Singh referred to core issues, legal provisions and the reasons for making special provisions for two castes.

"Caste system has resulted in deep divides. Some castes have been marginalised and reduced to a situation of despair. What has come to those who have been marginalised is backwardness. Forwardness is an entitlement for those who have it and we need to look at backwardness which may be social, economical, educational, so on and so forth," he said.

The reservation in 2006 law was limited to 50 per cent and was implemented on a preferential basis and this was not an act

of exclusion by any standards and meant to bring most backward of the backward on the forefront, he said.

"Exclusion is not the answer. Exclusion is there and 100 per cent will be absolute exclusion and 50 per cent also creates exclusion but to create entry for those who have been deprived," the bench said.

The state law officer said the arguments against the quota are flawed.

He said that it is argued as to how it would be fair to give a seat to someone with 56 per cent marks as compared to others with 99 per cent marks.

"It is fair because the person with 56 per cent did not have the same opportunities and access to a dignified life as that of the 99 per cent candidate. By reservation we are trying to make him employed and become a part of the governance," he said.

The hearing will resume on Wednesday.

The Punjab government, in 2011, had approached the top court assailing the high court's verdict, saying the Supreme Court's 2004 judgment was not applicable to it.

Taking up the plea of the Punjab government, a five-judge bench headed by Justice Arun Mishra (since retired), on August 27, 2020, differed with the Chinnaiah judgment and referred it for adjudication by a larger bench of seven judges or more for an authoritative pronouncement.

In central government-funded higher education institutions, 22.5 per cent of available seats are reserved for scheduled caste and 7.5 per cent for scheduled tribe students.

The same yardstick is applied in the case of public employment as well.

In states like Punjab and Haryana, there is no ST population.

## Protect us from threats, extortion: contractors' SOS to Maharashtra's Shinde Govt

### Mumbai

Seeking protection from threats, extortion calls and hooliganism arising out of political rivalry, two organisations of state government-approved contractors and engineers engaged in various developmental projects have written a joint letter to the Maharashtra Chief Minister and the two Deputy Chief Ministers, demanding a law to protect them at work

sites. They have threatened to stop work from February-end if measures were not taken for their protection.

"Every district in Maharashtra state is facing the similar pattern where political opponents of the ruling side and also local-level politicians are forcefully stopping the on-going works, using physical violence against and extorting money from the contractor," said the letter

sent by the Maharashtra State Contractors Association (MSCA) and State Engineers Association (SEA) to Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, and Deputy Chief Ministers Devendra Fadnavis and Ajit Pawar.

"These groups cannot be controlled by government officials. Increased instances of threatening with physical violence; beating up the contractor if they registered an

opposition and dictating their own orders are growing across the state.

These groups are working in an identical manner all over, where they file written complaints against the contractor and later demand money," the letter dated February 3 said.

It said that the contractors were suffering silently because of the work they have taken and are bound to complete it.

The ruling MLAs, MPs and other elected representatives have managed to get sanction for huge amounts of developmental works in the state. While executing it, political groups who are in the Opposition are ensuring that the works are stopped. To do this, these groups are ganging up against the contractors and the labourers, and abusing as well as beating them to stop the work," it said.



## Of 1,643-km Myanmar border, fencing done along 10 km : Amit Shah

**New Delhi**

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday said fencing work on a 10-km stretch of the India-Myanmar border had been completed. The government plans to fence the entire 1,643-km-long border to ensure better surveillance and patrolling.

In a detailed post on X, Shah said, "The Modi government is committed to building impenetrable borders. It has decided to construct a fence along the entire 1,643-km-long Indo-Myanmar border. To facilitate better surveillance, a patrol track along the border will also be paved."

He further informed that out of the total border length, a 10-km stretch in Moreh, Manipur, had already been fenced. Furthermore, two pilot projects of fencing through a hybrid surveillance system were under execution, he said.

"Additionally, fencing work covering 20 km in Manipur has also been approved. The work will start soon," the minister added. The decision has come just three days after Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh had met Shah in Delhi. The February 3 meeting had taken place amid renewed violence in the state, and after the meeting, Singh had posted on X that "Rest assured, the Government of India is set to take some important decisions in the interests of the people of Manipur".

While addressing the Raising Day ceremony of Sashastra Seema Bal in Assam's Tezpur on January 20, the Union Home Minister had said that the Centre would soon fence the 1,643-km border and would consider ending its free movement regime (FMR) agreement with the neighbouring country.

## Lok Sabha passes Bill to curb malpractices during exams

**New Delhi**

The Lok Sabha on Tuesday passed the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Bill, 2024, which entails penal provision for those found guilty of exam paper leakages.

The Bill proposes a punishment of a minimum of three to five years of imprisonment to curb cheating and for those involved in organised crimes of cheating, there is a provision of five to 10 years of imprisonment and a minimum fine of Rs 1 crore. The Bill is aimed at curbing activities of organised gangs and institutions that are involved in unfair means for monetary gains.

Replying to a discussion, Minister for Personnel and Public Grievances Jitendra Singh said the Bill would safeguard the youth and children of the nation. Highlighting that the issue was

above politics, the minister said the Bill was concerned with safeguarding the future of the children by curbing the corrupt practice by unscrupulous elements, which even leads to



suicides by children.

He said various parts of the country had witnessed thousands of incidents of malpractices, paper leaks and impersonation in the recent past.

Highlighting the incidents of paper leakages in Rajasthan in 2022, the minister informed the House that there had been 12

incidents of malpractices since 2018 in the country.

The legislation focuses on curbing leaks, malpractices as well as organised malpractices in recruitment examinations like UPSC, SSC, etc. and entrance tests such as NEET, JEE and CUET, Jitendra Singh said in his reply to the discussion in which 25 MPs took part. The Bill will also cover entrance examinations held by the Union Public Service Commission, the Staff Selection Commission, the Railways, banking recruitment examinations and all computer-based examinations conducted by the National Testing Agency.

He said the Bill specifically addressed issues related to unfair means in the conduct of exams that were not covered under the purview of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

## 15 Former Legislators, Ex MP From Tamil Nadu Join BJP In Delhi

**New Delhi**

A number of leaders from Tamil Nadu, including 15 former MLAs and an ex-MP, joined the BJP here on Wednesday as the ruling party looks to strengthen its presence in the southern state in the run up to the Lok Sabha elections.

Most of these leaders are from the AIADMK, a former BJP ally in the state, and the joining took place in the presence of Union ministers Rajeev Chandrasekhar and L Murugan besides the state BJP president K Annamalai.

Welcoming them, Annamalai said they bring a wealth of experience to the BJP and want to strengthen the hands of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as he is coming back to power for a straight third term.

They have been seeing the happenings in Tamil Nadu, he said in an apparent swipe at the state's ruling DMK and its main rival AIADMK.

"Tamil Nadu is going the Bharatiya Janata Party way," claimed the young leader whose strong position on his party's ideological stand in the Dravidian state and sharp criticism of the entrenched parties has won him his share of admirers and detractors.

Chandrasekhar said the joining at such a big scale shows Modi's popularity in a state like Tamil Nadu, where the BJP has traditionally been not a big force.

Noting that PM Modi has projected that the BJP will win 370 seats in the upcoming Lok Sabha and the NDA will cross 400, he claimed that many of these new seats will come from Tamil Nadu.



*President Droupadi Murmu on Wednesday took a ride in Delhi Metro, officials said. This was the first time President Murmu took a ride in the metro after assuming the office of the president. The president, dressed in yellow saree, interacted with school students during her metro ride. She travelled in Delhi Metro's Violet Line -- that runs between Kashmere Gate and Raja Nahar Singh (Ballabgarh) in Faridabad, the officials added.*



## Special court directs Bengaluru Police to register criminal case against Deputy CM Shivakumar



### Bengaluru

A special court here has directed the city police to book a criminal case against Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar, along with Congress state IT cell head B R Naidu, for

allegedly using a morphed image of a protest by BJP leaders.

The BJP leaders had participated in a demonstration against the recent arrest of Srikanth Pujari, a Kar Sevak, who had taken part in the 1992 Babri

mosque demolition agitation.

The BJP demonstrators held placards which read: "I'm also a Kar Sevak, arrest me too."

The Congress IT Cell allegedly morphed the writing on the placards making it look like a confessional statement of scams and other irregularities and posted them on social media. The same was shared from the social media handle of Shivakumar, also the Karnataka Congress chief.

The BJP Legal Cell state convener Yogendra Hodaghatta lodged a complaint with the special court for MPs/MLAs stating that the post used a false document to create enmity between communities.

The court directed the station house officer of the High Grounds police station to book a case under Section 156(3) of the CrPC.

## Army Chief General Manoj Pande retiring in 4 months, Gen Upendra Dwivedi named Vice Chief

### New Delhi

Indian Navy Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar and Army Chief General Manoj Pande are slated to superannuate on April 30 and May 31, respectively. Two senior-most officers of each of the services are now Vice Chiefs.

In the Navy, Vice Admiral DK Tripathi took over as its Vice Chief on January 1 while the orders to post Lieutenant General Upendra Dwivedi as the new Army Vice Chief have been issued.

He will join on February 15 and would be replacing Lt Gen MV Suchindra Kumar. The latter has been posted as the Northern Army Commander headquartered at Udhampur.

Lt Gen Dwivedi has earlier been in the Army Headquarters as the Deputy Chief and Director General of Infantry. He served for two years in the operationally active Northern Command at the time when India and China have been engaged in a military standoff.

Within the armed forces, the posting of second senior-most officers as vice chiefs is seen as a move to position them for the next job – the chief. Rarely does seniority in service gets ignored for selection as chief.

In the past 10-years – that is both the terms of PM Narendra Modi – only once the government ignored the principle of seniority. This was when it posted General Bipin Rawat as the Army Chief in

December 2016 by superseding then senior -most Commanders, Eastern Army Commander Lt Gen Praveen Bakshi and Southern Army Commander Lt Gen PM Hariz.

Prior to that, it in July 1983, when Lt Gen SK Sinha, an Army commander, was superseded and General AS Vaidya was appointed Army Chief.

In the Navy, the last such break from the seniority principle was in April 2014, when the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government appointed Admiral Robin K Dhowan as chief of the Navy. That was after Admiral DK Joshi quit the post in the wake of a series of mishaps. Admiral Dhowan was appointed superseding Western Naval Commander Shekhar Sinha.

Admiral Joshi, who had 15 months left in service, resigned on February 26, following a mishap involving submarine INS Sindhuratna in which two Navy officers were killed and several others were injured. In August 2013, submarine INS Sindhurakshak sank at the Naval Dockyard in Mumbai, killing 18 personnel on board. The sudden resignation by Admiral Joshi changed the line of succession in the Navy.

Ready to succeed General Pande

Within the armed forces, the posting of second senior-most officers as vice chiefs is seen as a move to position them for the next job – the chief. Rarely does seniority gets ignored



## Bharat Joda Nyay Yatra: BJP, BJD have 'partnership' in Odisha, alleges Rahul Gandhi



### Rourkela

Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday alleged that the BJP and BJD have a "partnership" in Odisha and the Congress has been opposing them to protect the interest of the people of the state.

Gandhi resumed his 'Bharat Joda Nyay Yatra' in Odisha's steel city here.

In a brief speech, he said: "As you know Naveen Patnaik and Narendra Modi run a partnership government in Odisha. They both have joined hands and work in tandem. I find in Parliament that BJD supports the BJP. The BJD people also disturb us at the instance of BJP".

Gandhi claimed that it is the Congress party alone which has been opposing the BJD-BJP combine for the people of Odisha.

Gandhi said: "I have come to Odisha to open a shop of love in the market of hatred. ('Nafrat ki bazaar me mohabbat ki dukan khulne aaya hu')".

The Congress leader also came down heavily on Odisha's BJD Government saying that as many as 30 lakh people from the state have migrated as labourers to other states for livelihood as the state government "was not working for them".

"While 30 lakh people have migrated to other states for their livelihood, 30 crorepati from outside Odisha

have come here to loot the state's wealth", Gandhi said.

He said Odisha has a huge population of tribals, but they along with Dalits are being "neglected" in the state by the government. "I have come here to listen to your 'Maan ki baat' for 6/7 hours and speak a little for 15 minutes", Gandhi said.

He said the biggest problem in Odisha is unemployment as industries are not functioning properly.

Earlier, Gandhi began his Bharat Joda Nyay Yatra in Odisha's steel city by offering prayer at Vedvyas Shiv temple and started a 3.4-km-long padayatra from Uditnagar to Panposh Chhak here.

Accompanied by AICC Odisha in-charge Ajoy Kumar and OPCC president Sarat Patnaik, the Congress leader mingled with the people.

Gandhi is scheduled to take a lunch break at Bisra Munda Ground at Ranibandh and attend two more gatherings at Kutra and Baragaon later in the afternoon.

Thereafter, he will resume his yatra from Ranibandh and address a rally at Rajgangpur. He will undertake another 1-km padayatra in Sundargarh town from Bus Stand Chhak Sundargarh via Stadium Chhak to SBI Chhak, following which he will address another public meeting, before retiring for the night at Amlipali Ground in Jharsuguda.



## PM Modi wishes speedy recovery to King Charles



### New Delhi

PM Narendra Modi on Tuesday wished speedy recovery and good health to UK's King Charles III following news of his cancer diagnosis.

King Charles is undergoing treatment for cancer and his son William is expected to step up along with other family members to help carry out public duties during his absence. "I join the people of India in wishing speedy recovery and good health to His Majesty King Charles III," PM Modi wrote on 'X'.

Buckingham Palace said in a statement on Monday that King Charles III had been diagnosed with a form of cancer. The King has been advised by his doctors to postpone public-facing duties. He has already begun the schedule of regular treatments after the diagnosis. However, he will continue to handle official documentation and state business as usual throughout this time. The King underwent treatment for an enlarged prostate last week.

## Donald Trump not immune to charge of election subversion: Court

### Washington

A federal appeals court on Tuesday ruled that Donald Trump does not have immunity from charges that he plotted to overturn his 2020 election defeat, bringing the former US president a step closer to an unprecedented criminal trial. The US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit rejected Trump's claim that he cannot be prosecuted because the allegations relate to his official responsibilities as president. "For the purpose of this criminal case, former President Trump

has become citizen Trump, with all of the defences of any other criminal defendant," the unanimous panel wrote. "But any executive immunity that may have protected him while he served as President no longer protects him against this prosecution." The ruling, which Trump is almost certain to appeal, rebuffs his attempt to avoid a trial on charges that he undermined American democracy and the transfer of power, even as he consolidates his position as the frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination.

## Blasts near Pakistan candidates' offices kill 24 on eve of election



### Islamabad

Two blasts near electoral candidates' offices in Pakistan's southwestern province of Balochistan killed 24 people and injured dozens, local officials said on Wednesday, raising concerns over security in the lead up to Thursday's polls.

Pakistan goes to the polls amid rising militant attacks in recent months and the jailing of Imran Khan, the winner of the last national election, who has been dominating the headlines despite an economic crisis and other woes threatening the nuclear-armed country.

Authorities have said they are boosting security at polling booths.

The first attack, which killed 14, took place at the office of an independent election candidate in Pishin district. The second explosion in Qilla Saifullah, a town near the Afghan border, detonated near an office of Jamiat Ulema Islam (JUI), a religious party that has previously been the target of militant attacks, according to the province's information minister.

At least 10 people were killed there, he said.

It was not immediately clear who was behind the attacks.

Several groups, including the Islamist militant Pakistani Taliban and separatist groups from Balochistan, oppose the

Pakistani state and have carried out attacks in recent months.

"The Election Commission has asked the chief secretary and inspector general of Balochistan for immediate reports and instructed them to take action against those behind the events," an Election Commission spokesperson said in a statement.

Khanzai hospital, close to the site of the explosion in Pishin, gave the death toll as 14 and said more than two dozen were injured. The deputy commissioner of Pishin district, Jumma Dad Khan, said that the blast had injured many people.

The attacks came as political parties wrapped up their campaigning in the quiet period mandated by electoral rules the day before the election.

Jailed former Pakistani premier Khan earlier urged his supporters to wait outside polling booths after casting their votes, as rival political parties held large rallies to mark the end of the election campaign period.

Any large-scale gathering of Khan's supporters near booths could raise tensions because of what they call a military-backed crackdown on him and his party that has restricted campaigning.

The military denies interfering in politics.

"Encourage the maximum number of people to vote, wait at the polling station ... and then stay

peacefully outside the Returning Officer's office until the final results are announced," said Khan via his handle on social media platform X, accompanied by an undated photograph depicting him wearing simple black clothing.

The origin of the image, the first of Khan in months, was not clear. Previously Khan's supporters have disseminated his messages, including through AI-generated audio speeches, from notes he has passed on through his lawyers during prison visits.

Other political parties also wrapped up their campaigns.

Electoral frontrunner Nawaz Sharif led a huge rally in the eastern city of Kasur, with his brother, former Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, who is running in that constituency.

Amidst a sea of tens of thousands of supporters waving green party flags, Sharif called on the country's huge youth population to support his party and took aim at Khan who has previously attracted support from young voters in the area.

"Don't fall for him," Sharif said.

Supporters of the rival Pakistan People's Party also gathered in the southern city of Larkana led by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who could play king-maker if no one party receives enough parliamentary seats to form a government outright.



# Housing for all

A scheme for the middle-income group and the construction of two crore additional dwellings in rural areas are expected to spur the Centre's 'housing for all' agenda. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, in her interim Budget speech, announced the launch of a programme to help deserving sections of the middle class, living in rented accommodation, slums/chawls and unauthorised colonies, to buy or build houses. The green light to affordable and regulated housing projects for urban buyers is a welcome initiative. The flourishing business of unauthorised colonies, with sub-par facilities, thrives as it caters to the overwhelming demand. The routine regularisation of such illegal constructions by state governments, irrespective of the party in power, is also

an inescapable reality.

It is the election season and political motives are bound to be attributed to the



announcements. Even if that's the case, affordable housing schemes can have a transformational impact on the real estate and allied sectors. The regulatory framework that such schemes provide

also offers a cushion against falling into the trap of fraudsters and losing hard-earned money. The Prime Minister has also promised a relief in interest rates on loans. The contours of the urban programme would be keenly awaited.

A higher share of houses has been assigned to women under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin. The flagship Central scheme, involving the states, aims to provide pucca houses with a minimum area of 25 square metres and basic amenities to people in rural areas who are homeless or live in kutcha and dilapidated houses. It remains a popular initiative, helping push capital expenditure. The government claims that it is close to achieving the target to build three crore houses. There is a need to keep up the good work.

**// satyasya paramarṇ nidhānam //**

We would like to hear from you. Please share your comments on [editor.acrossstate@gmail.com](mailto:editor.acrossstate@gmail.com)

*Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else.*

*-Margaret Mead*

## Pragmatic Budget

### Focus on fiscal consolidation, capital expenditure

THE interim Budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman ahead of the General Election bears the stamp of a government that seems confident of getting another term and is looking at the long-term picture. Priority has been given to fiscal consolidation and capital expenditure, even as populism has taken a back seat. The fiscal deficit target for 2024-25 has been pegged at 5.1 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP); in 2023-24, the corresponding figure was 5.9 per cent, which was downwardly revised to 5.8 per cent. Fiscal deficit, described as the difference between the government's total revenue and total expenditure, is an indicator of the borrowings that the Centre may need. The government is keen on bringing it below 4.5 per cent of the GDP by the 2025-26



financial year.

A hike of 11.1 per cent in the capital expenditure outlay has been proposed. The allocation will rise to Rs 11.11 lakh crore in 2024-25, accounting for 3.4 per cent of the GDP, compared to Rs 10 lakh crore in 2023-24.

The capex push is an integral element of the government's roadmap to spur growth and achieve the goal of Viksit Bharat (developed India) by integrating infrastructure development with employment generation.

In terms of allocation, the

Defence Ministry (Rs 6.2 lakh crore) is at the top, while the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare (Rs 1.27 lakh crore) has ended up below several ministries. The interim Budget has given no fresh impetus to the farming sector, with the government mainly confining itself to reiterating how successful its existing schemes have been. Tax relief has eluded the middle class as various slabs have been left unchanged. It's clear that the government is bent on maintaining the momentum generated by high tax collections, which have more than doubled over the past decade, as per the FM. Largely devoid of big-bang announcements, the interim Budget sums up the government's self-assurance, which its detractors might construe as complacency.

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## Sextortion racket

Phone users must be vigilant, report promptly

THE busting of a multi-crore sextortion racket, in which an elderly man of Haryana's Bhiwani was last month blackmailed into paying Rs 36.84 lakh in two instalments to swindlers operating on WhatsApp, highlights the vulnerability of crores of smartphone users to various kinds of fraud. This instance holds a lesson to phone users: to be wary of the calls similar to those that

threatening calls by the fraudsters posing as police officials, asking for money.

The case also throws light on the way in which people can protect not only themselves from being targeted by online sharks but also save many others from falling prey to the gangs of tech-savvy fraudsters by helping the police catch them. The victim saved himself from shelling out a further Rs 20 lakh as he finally chose to confide in his family, which approached the police. Within three weeks, the cops had nabbed eight suspects and seized 19 mobile phones and found leads to around Rs 3 crore extorted by the gang by making calls to 728 persons across various states.

It is vital for people to be vigilant as cybercrime grew

the hapless victim received, for it is now a common modus operandi employed in the virtual world of crime. According to reports, when he answered a video call, he saw a woman undressing. He then received a video clip with his face morphed on that of the person who was with the woman. It was followed by

by a whopping 61 per cent between 2022 and 2023, with over Rs 10,000 crore lost to it in the past three years. Along with investment and banking frauds, sextortion is among the top cybercrimes nationwide, with Haryana's Nuh emerging as a hub of such illegal activities.



## Tackling corruption

Selective action undermines campaign

WEST Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee may well have been speaking on behalf of the entire Opposition with her remarks on the arrest of Hemant Soren. 'Are we all thieves and they are all saints?' she asked after her Jharkhand counterpart was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on corruption charges. It was in 2013, when the UPA was in power, that Justice RM Lodha of the Supreme Court described the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) as a caged parrot that speaks in its master's voice. It was a telling comment on not only the misuse of probe agencies but also the culture of corruption that has permeated all levels of the government. A year later, the BJP rode to power on the promise of a crackdown. It now faces charges of co-opting the corrupt and unleashing investigation agencies on those who refuse to switch over to the ruling party.

The BJP has repeatedly denied targeting its political rivals, saying that the government is probing allegations of corruption or fraud irrespective of the allegiance of the suspects. As one Opposition leader after another faces the ED and CBI heat, fingers are being pointed at the political weaponisation of the agencies. Buttressing the allegations of biased and partisan action is the fact that 95 per cent of the cases being probed are against leaders of Opposition parties.

Probe agencies are meant to derive their legitimacy from being independent and impervious to political meddling. In a polarised political atmosphere, they must be seen as impartial. The reality presents a picture to the contrary. Condoning corruption is no one's case — take the corrupt to task without fail. It is selective action that dilutes the fight and casts a shadow that can make victims out of suspects.



IN a major step forward for the India-US strategic partnership, the Joe Biden administration has notified the US Congress of its decision to sell 31 MQ-9B armed drones to India. The acquisition of these high-altitude, long-endurance UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) at an estimated cost of \$3.99 billion is expected to make India better prepared to counter current and future threats by enabling unmanned surveillance and reconnaissance patrols in sea lanes. Under the proposed deal, the Indian Navy will get 15 SeaGuardian drones, while the Army and the Indian Air Force will get eight each of the SkyGuardian variety.

According to US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller, the drones will enhance India's maritime security and domain awareness capability. Even as the details of the deal and the delivery timeline will be worked out by the two governments in the coming months, Miller has asserted that America's partnership with

## US drones

### Deal on course, to boost surveillance & firepower

India is 'one of our most consequential relationships'. The drone agreement reflects the maturity of the bilateral ties. Both sides have not allowed the dissonance caused by the Gurpatwant Singh Pannun case to undermine their strategic and defence cooperation. The probe into the allegations of an Indian hand in a plot to kill the designated terrorist has witnessed a steady exchange of inputs.

The importance of maritime security

cannot be overstated, especially in view of the alarming resurgence of piracy and the targeting of ships in the Red Sea by militant groups. Indian warship INS

Sumitra, assisted by a leased MQ-9B drone, recently carried out anti-piracy operations and rescued two hijacked fishing vessels along with their crew members. With the US Congress expected to give the go-ahead to the drone deal, the Indian defence forces are on course to augment their firepower and surveillance prowess.



# Criminal defamation

## Misuse of the law remains rampant

DESCRIBING the right to reputation as a facet of the right to life and personal liberty, guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution, the Law Commission has recommended retaining the criminal defamation law. In its 285th report submitted to the government, the panel said the right to reputation needed to be adequately protected against defamatory speech and imputation. Given that Article 19(2) provides for defamation as a ground for the imposition of 'reasonable restrictions' on the freedom of speech and expression guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a), the commission's recommendation is understandable. Also, the Supreme Court had in May 2016 upheld the validity of the law under Sections 499 and 500 of the Indian



Penal Code — which prescribed a maximum two-year jail term and fine — and ruled that there was nothing wrong in sending a person to prison for defaming someone.

There can't be any disagreement with the basic proposition that the right to reputation ought to be

protected. However, the misuse of the criminal defamation law to silence political adversaries, activists and journalists is causing a 'chilling effect' on free speech. The panel's argument that the law 'ensures a balance between freedom of expression and the right

to reputation' is not borne out by facts.

In the past decade or so, many politicians have filed criminal defamation cases against their rivals and media houses. During 2002-11, the Tamil Nadu government filed over 140 such cases against media houses and journalists. The law's abuse is also evident in the filing of 'strategic lawsuits against public participation'. It's for this reason that the Editors Guild of India has been demanding decriminalisation of defamation. Several countries, including the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Sri Lanka, have decriminalised it. India must move in this direction as civil remedies are already available to a person wronged in terms of harm caused to his/her reputation.

## Imran in dire straits

### Powerful military shows who's the boss

Why are you in a hurry?' former Pakistan PM Imran Khan asked the judges on Wednesday, the day he and his wife Bushra Bibi were sentenced to 14 years in jail in the 'Toshakhana' corruptoin case. It seems the judges are indeed in a hurry



to pin down the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leader — he was given a 10-year jail sentence for violating the Official Secrets Act on Tuesday. The two verdicts come just days before the February 8 general election. They only lengthen the security establishment's shadow over the power structure. The military leadership had once propped up Imran's government. On the receiving end then

was Nawaz Sharif, who was removed from office in 2017 and convicted of corruption. He returned to Pakistan last year after years in self-imposed exile. In a twist of fate symptomatic of Pakistan's military-guided model of democracy, he is now in contention for a fourth stint as Prime Minister.

The rules of the game remain crystal clear — those who confront the Generals in Rawalpindi run the risk of being removed from the scene. Imran, who is serving a three-year prison sentence in a corruption case, faces nearly 150 cases. His latest convictions stem from allegations that he violated secrecy laws when he waved a diplomatic cable at a rally, and that he acquired gifts from the PM 'Toshakhana' at low prices and sold them at huge profits. The former cricket star, who remains a popular leader, has been barred from contesting elections.

India has for long borne the brunt of the weakened polity in Pakistan. The military's distrust of civilian leaders makes dealing with any government an exercise fraught with risks. Political polarisation is only expected to widen and the instability offers little hope of mending the ties between the two countries.

## Spy with ISI links

### India needs to step up surveillance

IT is a matter of grave concern that an Indian national working at the country's Embassy in Moscow was allegedly involved in espionage on behalf of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The Uttar Pradesh Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS), which arrested Satendra Siwal last week, has stated that he was taking money to provide confidential information regarding the activities of the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Indian military establishment. Siwal had been working for the MEA and was posted as an 'India-based security assistant' at the Embassy in Russia since 2021. According to the ATS, electronic and physical surveillance revealed that he was carrying out anti-India activities in league with a network of ISI handlers.

Even as the MEA and the ATS try to get to the bottom of the spy ring, the episode is a grim reminder of the machinations of the ISI, which has been at the forefront in implementing Pakistan's military doctrine of bleeding India with a

thousand cuts. The spy agency's role in fanning the flames of terrorism in J&K and Punjab over the decades is no secret. This is the third time in the past seven months that an MEA staffer has been arrested for links with the ISI, which leaves no room for doubt that Pakistan is using Indian citizens to commit espionage against India.

New Delhi needs to be watchful of Pakistan's gameplan, especially with the neighbour set to have a new government after the polls to be held this week. Surveillance must be increased at Indian embassies and missions around the world. The recruitment of non-diplomatic and junior staff should also be done with due diligence. Thorough verification of their credentials is an imperative. Counter-espionage and counter-intelligence techniques should be fine-tuned to weed out the moles before they cause irreparable damage. India cannot afford to let the ISI infiltrate its embassies and sensitive offices in a bid to destabilise the country.



# India's Russian oil import hits 12-month low but long-term appetite remains intact

**New Delhi**

India's crude oil imports from Russia fell for a second straight month in January to its lowest in 12 months but the nation's insatiable appetite for Russian crude remains for the long term, according to data from energy cargo tracker and industry officials.

Russia supplied 1.2 million barrels per day of crude oil to India in January, down from 1.32 million barrels in December and 1.62 million barrels in November 2023, according to data from energy cargo tracker Vortexa.

Russia however continues to remain India's top oil supplier, accounting for a little less than a quarter of 4.91 million barrels a day of oil that the world's third largest energy consumer imported in January.

The decline in cargoes from Russia was made up by increased sourcing from Iraq, which supplied 1.1 million barrels per day (bpd) in January, up from 985,000 bpd in the previous month.

Supplies from Saudi Arabia declined to 659,000 bpd from 668,000 bpd in December. India is more than 85 per cent dependent on imports for its needs of crude oil, which is converted into fuels such as petrol and diesel at refineries.

Its appetite for Russian oil swelled ever since such oil started trading on discount as the West shunned it to punish Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine.

According to Vortexa, an energy intelligence firm, India imported just 36,255 bpd of crude oil from Russia in December 2021 as compared to 1.05



million bpd from Iraq and 952,625 bpd from Saudi Arabia.

There were no imports from Russia in the following two months but they resumed in March, soon after the Ukraine war broke out in late February.

Imports from Russia soared to an all-time high of 2.1 million bpd in June last year, accounting for almost 40 per cent of all oil India imported.

According to Serena Huang, Vortexa's head of APAC analysis, the reason for the fall in Russian crude oil import in last couple of months was the narrowing of Russian crude discounts versus Middle Eastern crude, recent US sanctions on shipowners carrying Russian crude above the price cap and rising tanker premiums as a result of the Red Sea attacks.

Also, some state refiners rushed to fulfill term commitments with Middle Eastern suppliers, industry officials said adding the removal of sanctions on Venezuela has whetted the appetite of private Indian refiners to resume purchases from the South American supplier.

Indian refiners started snapping up crude shipments from Venezuela after a three-year suspension in September 2020. These developments together have contributed to a slowdown in Russian purchases.

Industry officials said the long-term demand for Russian crude oil remains intact. "A dip in one month and rise in another doesn't tell you the entire story. The fact remains that Indian companies will continue to buy Russian crude oil as

long as they make economic sense," an official said.

Indian state firms buy Russian crude oil on a delivered basis, meaning the supplier has to make arrangements for shipping and the buyer pays only when oil is delivered at the receiving port. This is unlike sourcing from the Middle East where the buyer pays for shipping and insurance.

"Till such time that the delivered cost of Russian crude oil is less attractive as compared to alternate sources, Indian refiners will buy," another official said.

Trade sources and analysts also said that refiners are currently expressing increasing concerns about rising shipping costs and insurance.

The US in December imposed sanctions on ships and vessel operators carrying Russian oil sold above the USD 60 a barrel cap set by the Group of Seven nations.

Several tankers had to divert as banks and service providers were asked to ensure cargoes do not breach the price limit. Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) chairman Pushp Kumar Joshi at an investor call last month said Russian oil made up for 30 per cent of all oil that the company imported and that the company has tied up supplies from Russia and other sources till mid-April.

Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) chairman G Krishnakumar at an earning call late last month stated that 40 per cent of all crude oil that the firm imported in December quarter came from Russia.

## Compliance issues with Paytm led to RBI action

**New Delhi**

What exactly led the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to take action against Paytm Payments Bank was the fact that there were several accounts created on its platform without proper identification.

According to reports, more than 1,000 users were said to have linked the same PAN to their accounts and compliance issues were also inconsistent, which led to curbs imposed on Paytm Payments Bank by the Central bank. The Comprehensive System Audit report and subsequent compliance validation report of the external auditors revealed persistent non-compliance and continued material supervisory concerns in the bank, warranting further supervisory action, the RBI had said while imposing restrictions on it.

Finance Ministry sources have indicated that if any illegal activity is found, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) will probe Paytm Payments Bank. A basic question



being asked by lakhs of Paytm users across the country is whether they will be able to use the digital platform after February 29, which is the deadline fixed by the RBI on Paytm Payments Bank. After February 29, Paytm

wallet balances can still be topped up and money can be transferred. However, this would no longer be done through Paytm Payments Bank.

Users will be able to add funds through other financial institutions and use their existing balances for bill payments. This is so because the RBI has barred Paytm Payments Bank Limited, an associate of One 97 Communications Limited, from taking further deposits or undertaking credit transactions or top-ups in any customer accounts, prepaid instruments, wallets, FASTags, or National Common Mobility Cards, after February 29.

However, it will be allowed to credit interest, cashbacks, or refunds into these accounts at any time, and customers are also free to withdraw or use balance in these accounts without restrictions. Paytm FASTag, which is connected to the Paytm wallet, will continue to function. Users with UPI addresses linked to other banks though can continue transactions beyond February 29 as usual.



# Salary, pension arrears eat into SBI Q3 profit, down 35% to Rs 9,164 crore

## Mumbai

A steep Rs 7,100-crore one-time provision towards salaries and pensions ate into the profitability of State Bank of India to the tune of 35 per cent on-year at Rs 9,164 crore in the December quarter, the nation's largest lender said here on Saturday.

Had it not been for this one-time provision, which takes care of the entire additional provisions needed towards salaries and pensions arising out of the higher 17 per cent wage settlement reached with employee unions, net profit would have been Rs 16,264 crore, SBI chairman Dinesh Kumar Khara told reporters here.

On the back of a nearly 15 per cent growth in advances, the chairman guided towards better days ahead saying, "I am very confident of maintaining credit growth at this level or even



bettering it as the fourth quarter is a busy season and given that the bank is sitting on a loan pipeline of Rs 4.5 lakh crore.

On the need to raise capital given the high-interest rate regime, he said, if need be we will look at an equity raising but with our profitability level, we can easily plough back Rs 40,000 crore to core capital for funding. Even without that we

have the liquidity buffer to lend an additional Rs 7.5 lakh crore.

"Don't worry, we have enough capacity to fund the economy as of now and if the demand rises, we will look at funding options," the chairman said.

Explaining the impact of the wage settlement, Khara said, "Of the Rs 7,100 crore total payout, Rs 5,400 crore is towards pensions, due to some anomalies

in the way our pensions since 2002. Some of the employees were getting 40 per cent and some were getting 50 per cent and the matter has been subjudice since 2002.

"Now that there is legal clarity, we thought of clearing this at a go with this Rs 5,400 crore allocation. Following the court order, we have decided to pay every one of the 1.8 lakh pensioners at 50 per cent of the last drawn wage. This allocation takes care of the entire backlog till December 2023," he said.

Khara further said in fact the bank has been setting aside 10 per cent towards salary and pension arrears so far and this totals up to Rs 13,400 crore till December 2023. We will have to set aside Rs 5,490 crore more in the March quarter. Also, Rs 1,700 crore of the total Rs 7,100 crore has been made towards clearing dearness allowance dues, again arising from the wage hike.

In the reporting quarter, net profit declined by 35 per cent to Rs 9,164 crore compared to Rs 14,205 crore in the year-ago period.

The wage hike impact was so high, even a massive improvement in the asset quality, and the resultant gains from lower provisions did not help.

Its gross bad loans came down by 72 bps to 2.42 per cent or at Rs 86,749 crore, and net bad loan pile declined to over a 10-year low of 0.64 per cent, down 13 bps to Rs 22,408 crore, the chairman said and exuded confidence in further improving the same. Its provision coverage ratio stood at 91.59.

It can be noted that at 64 bps, State Bank's NPA level is better than the best private sector peers.

The quarter also saw the operating profit declining 19.36 per cent to Rs 20,336 crore from Rs 25,219 crore, due to an increase in the wage bills, he said.

Due to the increase in interest rate, and the resultant jump in deposit cost, the key net interest income in the quarter edged up by 4.59 per cent, Khara said, adding the cost of deposit for the bank jumped by 40 bps, led by an increase in higher priced

term deposits and a 330 bps fall in the low-cost Casa deposits to 41.18 per cent.

While whole bank NIM inched down by 1 bp to 3.28 per cent while domestic NIM declined by 8 bps to 3.41 per cent and the management is confident of maintaining it at 3.25-30 per cent.

Gross advances rose 14.38 per cent to Rs 35.84 lakh crore, of which corporate advances rose 10.71 per cent to Rs 10.24 lakh crore, retail personal rose 15.28 per cent to Rs 12.96 lakh crore, of which home loans grew 13.16 per cent to Rs 6.94 lakh crore.

Overall deposits of the bank gained 13.02 per cent to Rs 47.62 lakh crore. Of this domestic Casa declined by 330 bps to Rs 18.86 lakh crore but term deposits rose 19.54 domestic to Rs 26.86 lakh crore.

Of the overall credit growth domestic advances grew 14.47 per cent. Of this corporate and SME loans crossed Rs 10 lakh crore and Rs 4 lakh crore respectively, clipping at 10.71 per cent and 19.24 per cent respectively; agri loan jumped 18 per cent and retail personal advances grew 15.28 per cent. Loans from its overseas offices grew 13.90 per cent.

Whole bank deposits grew at 13.02 per cent, of which Casa deposits grew 4.48 per cent and Casa ratio stands at 41.18 down 330 bps from year ago.

And Khara was very vocal about the asset quality of the unsecured book saying "my unsecured loans are more secure than the secured book. As much as 90 per cent of the personal loans are given to those who have salary accounts with us."

Interest income for the quarter rose 23.23 per cent to Rs 1,06,734 crore, and interest expenses rose 37.84 per cent to Rs 66,918 crore, giving it the key profitability gauge of net interest income at 39,816 crore, which was only 4.59 per cent more than the year-ago period.

The bank has made a Rs 240 crore provision towards its Rs 1,000-crore exposure to alternate investment funds following the mid-December RBI circular towards the same and Khara said the bank may have to make some more incremental provisions towards this going forward.

## M-cap of eight of top-10 most valued firms climb Rs 2.90 lakh-crore; Reliance shines

### New Delhi

The combined market valuation of eight of the top-10 most valued firms climbed Rs 2.90 lakh-crore last week, with Reliance Industries emerging as the lead gainer, amid optimism in equities.

Last week, BSE benchmark Sensex jumped 1,384.96 points or 1.95 per cent.

From the top-10 pack, Reliance Industries, Tata Consultancy Services, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Infosys, LIC, State Bank of India, and Hindustan Unilever were the gainers, while Bharti Airtel and ITC faced erosion of their valuation.

The combined market valuation of eight of the top-10 most valued firms stood at Rs 2,90,267.98 crore.

The market capitalisation (M-cap) of Reliance Industries jumped Rs 1,38,290.85 crore to reach Rs 19,72,028.45 crore. Shares of the company jumped 7.54 per cent last week.

Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) added Rs 57,867.9 crore, taking its valuation to Rs 14,51,307.84 crore.

The market valuation of



State Bank of India climbed Rs 33,467.29 crore to Rs 5,80,456.76 crore and that of Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) zoomed Rs 26,153.87 crore to Rs 5,97,490.91 crore.

The M-cap of ICICI Bank advanced by Rs 10,522.67 crore to Rs 7,19,033.83 crore and that of Infosys surged Rs 9,566.79 crore to Rs 7,03,024.44 crore.

The valuation of HDFC Bank went up by Rs 8,771.34 crore to Rs 10,98,772.65 crore

and that of Hindustan Unilever rallied by Rs 5,627.27 crore to Rs 5,76,601.44 crore.

However, the M-cap of ITC fell by Rs 18,931.64 crore to Rs 5,49,330.64 crore and that of Bharti Airtel declined by Rs 5,231.18 crore to Rs 6,47,176.65 crore.

In the ranking of most valued firms, Reliance Industries retained the number one title, followed by TCS, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Infosys, Bharti Airtel, LIC, State Bank of India, Hindustan Unilever and ITC.



## Indian economy to grow at 6.7 per cent between fiscal years 2024 to 2031: CRISIL

Kolkata

The Indian economy is expected to grow at an average rate of 6.7 per cent per annum until the end of the decade, CRISIL said in its latest report.

The economy will grow at this rate between the financial years 2024 to 2031, a notch above the pre-pandemic average of 6.6 per cent.

According to CRISIL, the key contributor to this trend will be capital.

This is a result of the investment-driven strategy of the government when the private sector was shy of making investments.

The government increased capital expenditure significantly to support building expenditure and providing interest-free loans to states to bolster their own investment efforts, the report said.

CRISIL said that after a robust 7.3 per cent growth this fiscal year, there would be moderation to 6.4 per cent growth in the next financial year.

There is also a need to monitor



the impact of the escalation of the Middle East conflict on energy and logistics costs, it said.

In India, the inflation level of 5.7 per cent in December 2023 was driven solely by volatile vegetable prices and foodgrain inflation, according to the report.

This will keep RBI cautious on the rate front as it eyes the four per cent inflation target, CRISIL said.

The continued softening of core inflation and deflation in fuel prices gives us hope, but the

persistent high price levels of the food items, which has substantial weight in consumer price index, keep the risks of its transmission to non-food components, the report said.

CRISIL said the Federal Reserve of the US is expected to cut rates this year. The strong labour market data and higher-than-expected inflation have once more cast doubts on the timing and the extent of rate cuts expected to begin this year.

## Jobs in manufacturing grew 7% after pandemic



New Delhi

Employment fell marginally in 2020-21 due to the pandemic but gained momentum in 2021-22 with 7% year-on-year growth in the manufacturing sector, according to the Annual Survey of Industries. "In fact, the estimated number of persons engaged in this (manufacturing) sector in 2021-22 has exceeded the pre-pandemic level (that is 2018-19) by more than 9.35 lakh," a Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) statement said.

At the same time, it added that average emoluments also registered an increase. Average salary earned per employee in this sector had gone up by 1.7 per cent in 2020-21 and 8.3 per cent in 2021-22, in comparison to respective previous years, it explained.

The number of persons engaged in industries dipped from 1,66,24,291 in 2019-20

to 1,60,89,700 in 2020-21, but increased to 1,72,15,350 in 2021-22, showed ASI. The MoSPI has released the results of the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) for the reference periods April 2020 to March 2021 (i.e. the financial year 2020-21) referred to as ASI 2020-21 and for the reference period April 2021 to March 2022 (i.e. the financial year 2021-22). The results for the year 2021-22 exhibit the resilience shown by the Indian manufacturing sector and tell the unique turn-around story of the Indian manufacturing sector after the adverse effect of the pandemic witnessed in 2020-21.

### 9.35 lakh more jobs

The estimated number of persons engaged in manufacturing sector in 2021-22 exceeded the pre-pandemic level by more than 9.35 lakh, says Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

## Paytm Shares Jump After Reports On CEO's Met With RBI, Finance Minister



Bengaluru

The shares of Paytm climbed as much as 10% on Wednesday after media reported that the embattled digital payments firm's CEO had met Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and the RBI to try to resolve a regulatory crackdown on its payments bank business.

Paytm shares climbed as high as 496.25 rupees but remained far below their level before Jan. 31, when the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) ordered Paytm Payments Bank to stop accepting new deposits in its accounts and its popular digital wallets from March, citing supervisory concerns and non-compliance with rules.

The share price rise added to gains on Tuesday when reports of talks with government and central bank officials emerged.

"Discussions are on about addressing the regulatory concerns and compliance issues with both the RBI and the ministry," a source with direct knowledge of the talks told Reuters on Tuesday.

The company has sought an extension of the Feb. 29 deadline from the RBI and has also been seeking clarity from the central bank regarding the transfer of its licence for the wallets business and digital highway toll payment service FASTag, the source said.

"Investors are getting some confidence from the fact that the CEO has met the regulators," said Kranthi Bathini, equity strategist at WealthMills Securities.

## RBI cautions against KYC-linked frauds

New Delhi

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has cautioned the public against frauds in the name of KYC update in the wake of continuing incidents of customers falling prey to frauds.

It said the modus operandi for such frauds usually involved customers receiving unsolicited communications through which they were manipulated into revealing personal information or installing unverified apps through links provided in the messages. The fraudsters often employ tactics of creating a false urgency and threatening of account closure, if the customer fails to comply.



# An Interim Budget for the transforming economy

It is possibly easier to read out an interim budget in an election year for any dispensation than for analysts and economists to analyse it. This is more so because the interim budget, in no way, dictates the path of the economy for an entire year, but needs to be construed as a “make-shift” arrangement that may indicate either continuation of past policies or mark broad contours of the plans that a dispensation may undertake if incumbency continues. “Populism” often becomes a hallmark of an interim budget in an election year, which is readily interpretable. Therefore, for an existing dispensation the canons of an interim budget in an election year are very well etched out.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman just took a leaf from all the canons mentioned above. In the process, the Budget does not have anything that is dramatic or entails any paradigmatic shift from past trends. As such, given the present geopolitical and global economic scenario, that is not needed either. Indian economy is the best-performing economy among all the major economies, and according to Standard and Poor’s Global Credit Outlook 2024, the stage is set for India to emerge as the third-largest economy by 2030, with the economy’s projected GDP likely to grow from 6.4 percent in 2023 to 7 percent in 2026. If this is true, India is slated to emerge as the fastest-growing major economy in the next three years. Needless to say, the Indian economy has undergone a transformational change over the last few years, and it is still transforming!

So, all the FM needed to do at this stage is not to tamper with the growth parameters that have, by policy design or organically, already taken centre stage and driving the economy towards the avowed goal of collective prosperity. The vision of collective prosperity has been the key mantra of this dispensation and has been aptly summarised in the phrase: “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, and Sabka Vishwas”. The phrase has been reverberated in this Budget as well.

In the Budget Speech, the FM emphatically mentions: “... Our development philosophy covered all elements of inclusivity, namely, social inclusivity through coverage of all strata of the society, and geographical inclusivity through the development of all regions of the country”.

Over the last few budgets, the government has made one thing clear: though its “growth-centricity” in the development vision remains, that is not at the cost of distributive justice and sustainability. Rather, on certain counts the last few budgets give a sense that the government is steadily thinking of growth

being driven by human capital and natural capital, and should be sustained. In the Budget Speech, the FM emphatically mentions: “... Our development philosophy covered all elements of inclusivity, namely, social inclusivity through coverage of all strata of the society, and geographical inclusivity through the development of all regions of the country”. This is a



significant vision of this dispensation, which emphasises regional development and the development of social capital through social mobility.

Therefore, the Interim Budget sticks to the very basics of the ‘Inclusive Wealth’ approach—nudging on all its four parameters—physical capital, natural capital, social capital and human capital. On the physical capital front, the Indian economy has been on a roll over the last four years by tripling the capital expenditure (capex) outlay for developing physical capital for connectivity and asset creation. In the Interim Budget, the outlay for the next year is being increased by 11.1 percent which is tantamount to 3.4 percent of the GDP. It is noteworthy that the multiplier effect of capex has been estimated at 1.5–3 times larger than revenue expenditure multipliers under various scenarios. Apart from the indications of the connectivity initiatives in terms of railway, metro, etc., what is important is that capex generally brings down the transaction costs of doing business and augments the business-enabling environment. On the other hand, social capital has been enshrined in the broader vision of “Sabka Saath”, thereby, making the poor empowered partners in the development process. This brings in the social justice and equity concerns that are embodied in Direct Benefit Transfer schemes using PM-Jan Dhan accounts. However, the important

element of human capital seems embedded in youth and women skilling, empowerment and entrepreneurship. The tricky part of the natural capital has also been addressed through the concerns of green growth, e.g., EV ecosystem incentivisation, bio-manufacturing and bio-foundry, and most importantly, the blue economy.

Regional development as a factor of

equity and efficiency

The Budget speech states: “... Our development philosophy covered all elements of inclusivity, namely,

social inclusivity through coverage of all strata of the society, and geographical inclusivity through development of all regions of the country.”

The first part, ‘social inclusivity’, is purely a concern of distributive justice. The second part, ‘geographical inclusivity’, addresses both equity and efficiency concerns. The efficiency concern arises from the fact that the Budget Speech talks of the development of the eastern part of the country – regional development is important from an equity perspective, but here it is even more important as the eastern region harbours rich natural capital, and has a large pool of cheap human capital. This makes the eastern region a perfect hinterland to support the growth of the economy. More importantly, abundant and cheap human capital and natural capital can bring down the cost of production, enhance efficiency, and cater to the growing consumption demands of the comparatively richer western and southern parts of India. Further, this can also help India in using its competitive edge more prominently in the scenario of global business’ China+1 strategy.

Consumption, savings, and investments

The Interim Budget, quite logically, has not brought about any change in the

tax structures. The tax benefits that are slated to expire by the close of March 2024 have been extended till March 2025. These involve the benefits given to the start-ups, sovereign wealth or pension funds’ investments, and the exemptions on certain income of some IFSC units. Further, the non-reconciled or disputed direct tax demands up to INR 25,000 for the period up to financial year 2009-10, and up to INR 10,000 for financial years 2010-11 to 2014-15 are withdrawn. This helps reduce the unnecessary hassles of honest tax-payers and brings down the cost of compliance.

Consumption as the sole growth driver ever since the liberalisation of the economy, does not augur well with the economy.

However, in the long run, it needs to be kept in mind that while the Indian economy has largely encountered consumption-driven growth so far, there is an utmost need to garner private savings to promote investments. Consumption as the sole growth driver ever since the liberalisation of the economy, does not augur well with the economy. There is an utmost need for domestic private investments and FDI to play important roles along with consumption. Therefore, while tax rationalisation and GST’s implementation, deepening, and broad-basing have played important roles, the importance of savings cannot be overemphasised. Therefore, though PM Jan-Dhan has been helping the cause of poors’ savings, it also needs to be remembered that savings propensity increases with an increase in disposable incomes and savings rates. The future India will need a multi-pronged growth strategy.

This Interim Budget can be summarised through two points. First, it is a continuation of what transpired over the years, but with an attempt towards fiscal consolidation. Given the sudden spike in fiscal deficit due to the shock of COVID-19, fiscal consolidation over time is a mandatory step. This Budget projects the deficit of 2024-25 at 5.1 percent thereby sending signals that the economy is well on its path to reducing the deficits below 4.5 percent. Second, the Interim Budget is an indication of what is in store in future if the ruling dispensation comes to power. It has some long-term goals to achieve for the Amrit Kaal, and therefore shorter milestones need to be achieved—it realises the importance of sub-national development for Viksit Bharat.

Rest assured that the economic thinking behind this Budget is in the right direction—India is slated to have capital-driven growth in the coming future. By capital, what is meant are the four forms: human, natural, social, and physical—and none can be substituted by the other.



# Governing Urban Wetlands in India: A Pathway to Sustainable Urbanisation

In recent years, India has experienced multiple extreme floods, highlighting the urgency of creating an ecologically sensitive governance mechanism for spatial geographies. In addition to economic losses, flooding has also resulted in the loss of lives across the country,[1] showcasing the perils of building cities (through land expansion, infrastructural activities, and other forms of urban development) without consideration for the region's socioecological history.[2]

Many present-day Indian cities, such as Kolkata, Allahabad, Pune, Ahmedabad, and Patna, were built along riverbanks. Others, like Mumbai, Chennai, and Kochi, have grown along coastlines. While the proximity to water bodies has historically played a key role in the formation and development of urban centres,[3] contemporary urban planning disregards urban geography's connection to water bodies, floodplains, and catchment areas.[4] Such urban transformation is largely driven by the idea of turning Indian cities into specimens of a 'world city', to emulate the functional and visual stature of cities like Dubai, Singapore, Shanghai, and London. As a result, Indian cities are expanding by transforming adjoining rural and peripheral areas with real estate development, while drastically altering environmental and biophysical conditions. India's urbanisation since the 1990s has been largely driven by capital-intensive interventions, characterised by "high risk multi-million dollar international loans and large-scale obligations of debt finance".[5] Such interventions sharpen the tendency of capital to appropriate resources that have vague ownership status, and urban wetlands are a prime victim of such appropriation by capital in Indian cities.[6]

Wetlands are an area of land either covered with water or saturated with water. [7] Wetlands are significant in terms of their ecosystem services, contributing to human health and wellbeing, and broader ecological and sustainability goals in a cost-effective manner. They perform critical ecological functions, such as groundwater recharge, carbon storage, and water regulation, which support wildlife habitat and serve as a vital interface between multiple forms of geography and environments (built and natural). Wetlands also help in flood control, natural sewage treatment, and fish production. Importantly, wetland management and conservation align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG-11 (sustainable cities and communities), SDG-6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG-13 (climate action), and SDG-14 (life below water).[8]

Still, across Indian cities, wetlands have been co-opted for real estate and construction activities in recent decades. Between 1970 and 2015, Chennai lost 90 percent of its wetlands, Hyderabad 55 percent, Mumbai 71 percent, Bengaluru 55 percent, Pune 37 percent, and New Delhi-National Capital Region lost 38 percent. [9] The general lack of awareness about wetlands and their vital ecosystem functions also contributes to the governing agencies'

negligible efforts to preserve wetlands. In addition, while the state wetland authorities (SWA) are the nodal agencies for wetland management in each state, multiple state and central agencies have wetlands under their jurisdiction despite wetland management not necessarily being a part of their agenda. For example, wetlands in Delhi are under the jurisdiction of the Delhi Jal Board, Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, Public Works Department, Archaeological Survey of India, and Forest Department, but only the Forest Department and Delhi Jal Board have any expertise in wetlands management.

India is poised to see significant rapid urbanisation in the coming years, with over 50 percent of its citizens expected to reside in urban areas by 2050.[10] India's ability to fulfil its climate and net-zero commitments will depend on how it governs its existing and emerging cities,[11] including making them livable for urban residents (for instance, by tackling hazards like flooding and heatwaves). Recent flood events in cities across India have highlighted the mismanagement of water resources, with the idea of economic growth driven by real estate value addition superseding ecological considerations.[12] Ecological and environmental governance in Indian cities has often been limited to the beautification of certain parts of the city, which may involve the eviction and displacement of marginalised groups, including those in informal housing.[13] At the same time, cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Kolkata have experienced development driven by real estate, which often involved subverting the guidelines of environmental protection by taking advantage of the administrative grey areas generated by what is termed the 'informality of the state'. [14] Notably, during flood situations, such as the 2005 Mumbai deluge or the landslides in the hill areas, the public discourse often implicates the informal housing practices of the poor and marginalised groups through the 'encroachment' narrative while mostly remaining silent about the state and capital-driven developments that significantly impact environmental resources, such as wetlands and water bodies, at a large scale.

## Legislative Measures in India

In recent years, the Indian government has introduced multiple legislative measures to prioritise the conservation and management of wetlands. In 2016, the Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules 2010 was brought under the umbrella of the Environment (Protection) Act 1986 to strengthen the legal framework protecting wetlands while strengthening the institutional framework of SWAs.[15]

The Wetland (Conservation and Management) Rules (2017) stated that several different kinds of water bodies can be classified as wetlands, including marsh, fen, peatland or water, lakes/ponds, oxbow lakes, riverine wetlands, tanks, lagoons, and mangroves.[a]

In 2018-19, the Ministry of Jal Shakti launched a census of water bodies across the country (published as a 'census report' in

2021).[16] which was carried out alongside the Sixth Minor Irrigation Census.[b] According to the census report, India has 24,24,540 water bodies, 97.1 percent (23,55,055) of which are in rural areas, with the remaining (69,485) in urban areas. About 55 percent (13,38,735) of the documented water bodies are owned by private entities, while 44.8 percent (10,85,805) are public. Among the Indian states, West Bengal has the highest number of ponds and reservoirs, Andhra Pradesh has the highest number of tanks, Tamil Nadu has the highest number of lakes, and Maharashtra has the highest number of water conservation schemes. The census report also noted that 1.6 percent of the documented water bodies were under encroachment,[c] 95.4 percent of which were in rural areas and the rest in urban areas. Of the encroached water bodies, 67.6 percent (26,005) are ponds, 21 percent (8,082) are tanks, 4.5 percent (1,745) are water conservation schemes/check dams/percolation tanks, and the remaining 6.9 percent are lakes, reservoirs, and other water bodies.

In January 2021, the National Mission for Clean Ganga formulated a local stakeholders-focused toolkit for wetland management in cities to protect "the ecological processes that sustain water resources in urban settings," "mainstream [the] protection of water bodies in the urban planning process," and "provide a step-by-step approach to identify, prioritise and prepare an action plan for protection of water bodies in urban areas".[17] The toolkit recognises wetlands' productive biosystem that helps in "recharging groundwater, increasing the base flow of rivers, and helping in erosion control".[18] In essence, the toolkit seeks to help identify urban wetlands for conservation and create an action plan for these water bodies by involving urban local bodies.

The toolkit advocates using GIS and remote sensing technology for the "preparation of interactive databases of city, urban wetland/water bodies and its associated attributes". The toolkit recommends the involvement of different departments and agencies in collecting data to map city-level information. For instance, administrative inputs (planning boundary, municipal boundary, ward boundary) and infrastructure and water demand inputs will be collected by the Municipality and Development Authority (MDA), and natural resource input (temperature, humidity, land cover and groundwater data) will be collected by the Indian Meteorological Department, MDA, Geological Survey of India, Soil and Land Use Survey of India, Central Ground Water Board & Central Ground Water Authority.

In 2023, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change formulated the National Plan for Conservation of Aquatic Ecosystems (NPCA), which "seeks to conserve and sustainably manage wetlands across the country and aims to stem their continued loss and degradation by promoting a cross-sectoral policy, planning and decision-making environment." [19]

The NCPA guidelines stress the formulation, implementation, progress, and review of an integrated management plan (such as the East Kolkata Wetlands Management Action Plan) for wetlands.[20]

These initiatives align with the 'Convention on Wetlands', also known as the Ramsar Convention, that India became a party to in 1982. India has since designated 75 wetlands covering an area of 13,26,677 hectares as Ramsar sites. Ramsar sites are 'wetlands of international importance', designated as such based on nine criteria, including species and ecological communities, waterbirds, fish, and other taxa.[21] Currently, India has the most Ramsar sites in Asia. Notably, declaring a wetland as a Ramsar site does not automatically guarantee wetland conservation as there is no binding legal obligation on governing agencies for wetland management; it merely requires the authorities to prepare a management plan within six months of the declaration.

The Ramsar Convention acknowledges that urbanisation poses a significant threat to wetlands conservation and management in urban areas.[22] To advocate and encourage efficient wetland management in the cities of the signatory countries, the convention has introduced a 'wetland city accreditation scheme' for cities to voluntarily showcase how they value their wetlands "to gain international recognition and positive publicity for their efforts".[23] The scheme urges for wetlands to be considered as "prize land and not wasteland" and to be integrated into city development and management plans. Thus far, 43 cities worldwide have been accredited as wetland cities, but none are in India. Given that several of India's Ramsar sites—such as Deepor Beer in Guwahati, Assam; East Kolkata Wetlands (EKW) in Kolkata, West Bengal; and Thane Creek in Thane, Maharashtra—are located within urban boundaries and play a critical ecological role for the city, India must aim to have at least one city recognised in the wetland city accreditation scheme to serve as a model for emulation across the country. Notably, Udaipur (Rajasthan) and Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh) have submitted proposals to the Ramsar Secretariat to be recognised as wetland cities.[24] Additionally, the Indian government's new 'Amrit Dharohar' initiative aims "to promote unique conservation values of the Ramsar Sites in the country while generating employment opportunities and supporting local livelihoods" by focusing on species and habitat conservation, nature tourism, wetlands livelihoods, and wetlands carbon. Still, India's urban wetlands face significant challenges. The rising incidents of urban flooding in multiple Indian cities in recent years have resulted from encroachment on wetlands by haphazard real-estate development.[25] In most cities, urban planning has disregarded the historical use of land and water bodies, adding to extreme climate events such as excessive rainfall and high summer temperatures.

# Elected Women Representatives in Local Rural Governments in India: Assessing the Impact and Challenges

There is a growing recognition of the crucial link between local governance, development, and gender equality. Women play a critical role in emphasising local priorities, have an impact on developmental outcomes, and are essential in ensuring sustainable development in the spirit of decentralised governance. Research suggests that women political representatives have ensured better distribution of essential public goods than men, strengthening sustainable development at the grassroots in the true spirit of inclusive and decentralised democratic governance. By bringing attention to inclusivity, prioritising policies that support families, and advocating for gender equality, women contribute to creating more equitable and responsive local communities.

Until the 1990s, India accorded little priority to women's political participation, even as the number of women voters increased steadily. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment sought to upend the prevalent traditional structures and entrenched systems of male-dominated political patronage in rural areas, empowering women to participate in political processes hitherto dominated by men. Gender-related indicators from when the amendment was introduced in the early 1990s point to the severe constraints women faced as they entered grassroots politics for the first time. The literacy rate of rural women in 1992-1993 was 34 percent compared to 65.9 percent in 2019-2021; the total fertility rate of rural women was 3.7 children per woman in 1992-1993, reducing to 2.1 in 2019-2021; the median age of marriage for women (in the 20-49 age group) has also improved, from 16.2 years in 1992-1993 to 19.2 years in 2019-2021. In the decades since the amendment, India has witnessed increased women's representation in local governance. The impact can be felt in the improved delivery of public goods in villages with female leaders, and the weakening of stereotypes about women's abilities to lead.

However, there appears to be a "conspiracy of silence" around the good work of local governments in India. This is even more conspicuous when the elected representatives are women. The contributions of elected women representatives (EWRs) are largely undervalued and neglected, with studies from several Indian villages showing that EWRs are likely to receive less favourable reactions even when their performance is better than that of male elected representatives.

This paper attempts to review the role of women in local governance in rural India (at the panchayat level) over the years, delineate the achievements, and

analyse persisting challenges. The paper also presents policy recommendations for enhancing women's participation in local governance. The paper draws insights from secondary literature, including books, research articles, news reports, and survey reports in this domain. The authors have also interviewed women panchayat-level representatives, officials, and bureaucrats who have worked in PRIs, as well as representatives from civil society organisations engaged in capacity-building initiatives for EWRs. These have been used as primary data to substantiate the paper's findings. This study is only confined to women's representation in local governance structures at the rural level. The state of women's representation in urban bodies of local governance is beyond the scope of this paper.



## The Evolution of Women's Representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions

India's federal political system provides for three tiers of government—national, state, and local levels. Local-level institutions of self-governance fall under two categories: municipal bodies and town councils in the urban areas and PRIs in the rural areas. A sizeable majority (65 percent) of the total population in India resides in rural areas. This makes the PRIs a crucial instrument of political representation that impacts everyday governance and welfare for considerable sections of the populace. The panchayat system comprises councils at the village level (gram panchayat), block level (panchayat samiti), and district level (zilla parishad), with responsibilities for managing local public resources. Members of these councils are elected by local residents. The size of the gram panchayat can vary significantly in terms of the number of people and villages it covers, a variation observed across different states. During elections, locals vote to select council members and, in most states, directly elect a pradhan (council chief). Typically, candidates for these positions are put forward by political parties, but they must be residents of

the villages they seek to represent. The council relies on majority voting for decision-making, and the pradhan does not possess the authority to veto decisions made by the council.

Although local village-level structures of self-rule have a long history, the idea of promoting local self-government, as enshrined in Article 40, was positioned within the non-enforceable Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian Constitution without any explicit mention of women's representation. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), appointed to examine the working of India's community development programme to address issues of decentralisation, recommended that the 20-member panchayat samiti should co-opt or nominate two women with an "interest

The same recommendation was put forth in the unsuccessful 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill of 1989. Eventually, in 1993, Panchayati Raj was formally incorporated into the Constitution through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (for panchayats at the village, block, and district levels) and the 74th Constitutional Amendment (for municipalities) Acts, with both providing for the reservation of one-third of elected seats for women. According to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, "Not less than one-third of the total number of seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes or, as the case may be, the Scheduled Tribes." It also provides that "Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat."

Before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment mandated the reservation of seats for women at the local level, certain states had already taken steps to implement women's reservations in panchayats. After Maharashtra adopted the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Committee in 1961, Karnataka initiated (in 1985) a 25 percent reservation for women in the mandal praja parishads (local people's council) along with an additional reservation for women from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Similarly, in 1986, Andhra Pradesh established a reservation of between 22 percent and 25 percent for gram panchayats, with the provision of co-opting two women in the panchayat samiti in addition to the elected women members. However, it is the constitutional amendments that had a transformative impact, resulting in the eventual elevation of over 1.45 million women to leadership positions in India's local governance (see Table 1). Presently, 20 states—Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal—have expanded the reservation for women in their PRIs to 50 percent. In some states, like Karnataka, women have even surpassed this threshold, with more than 50 percent representation in PRIs, indicating that women are now succeeding in electoral wards that were not specifically reserved for them.

The Committee for the Status of Women in India, in its report titled 'Towards Equality' (1974), strongly highlighted that the concerns and viewpoints of rural women had not received adequate consideration in the government's plans and development policies. It also proposed the establishment of statutory women's panchayats at the local level but did not advocate for reservation. In 1978, the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions (also called Ashok Mehta Committee) recommended reserving two seats for women in each panchayat. The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988) recommended that 30 percent of the executive-head positions from the village to the district levels should be reserved for women.



# Harmony on the plate: nourishing ourselves and the planet through sustainable nutrition

In a world grappling with the dual challenges of personal health and environmental sustainability, the concept of sustainable nutrition emerges as a beacon of hope and conscientious living. At its core, sustainable nutrition is a holistic approach that transcends the mere act of eating for sustenance. It is rooted in three fundamental pillars: environmental responsibility, social equity, and economic viability (figure below). This triad forms the basis for a dietary philosophy that goes beyond personal well-being to embrace the interconnectedness of human health with the health of the planet.

The environmental aspect of sustainable nutrition examines the ecological footprint of our food choices. It challenges us to consider the impact of our dietary preferences on land use, water resources, and greenhouse gas emissions. From farm to fork, the lifecycle of our food contributes to the larger narrative of environmental sustainability. Social equity within the framework of sustainable nutrition calls for the inclusivity of our food systems. It prompts considerations about food access, labor conditions within the agricultural sector, and the equitable distribution of resources. Economic viability acknowledges that sustainable practices must be economically feasible in the long term. It challenges the misconception that eco-friendly and socially responsible choices are inherently more expensive or impractical. In fact, sustainable nutrition recognizes the value of investing in practices that ensure the resilience and longevity of our food systems.

From farm to fork, the lifecycle of our food contributes to the larger narrative of environmental sustainability.

A plant-centric approach often characterizes sustainable nutrition, recognizing the environmental benefits of reducing reliance on animal products. This doesn't necessarily mandate a strict vegetarian or vegan diet but advocates for a mindful balance that minimizes the environmental impact of our dietary choices. Mindful eating practices are another cornerstone of personal nourishment within the realm of sustainable nutrition. The crux of sustainable nutrition lies in its recognition that our dietary choices have far-reaching consequences on the

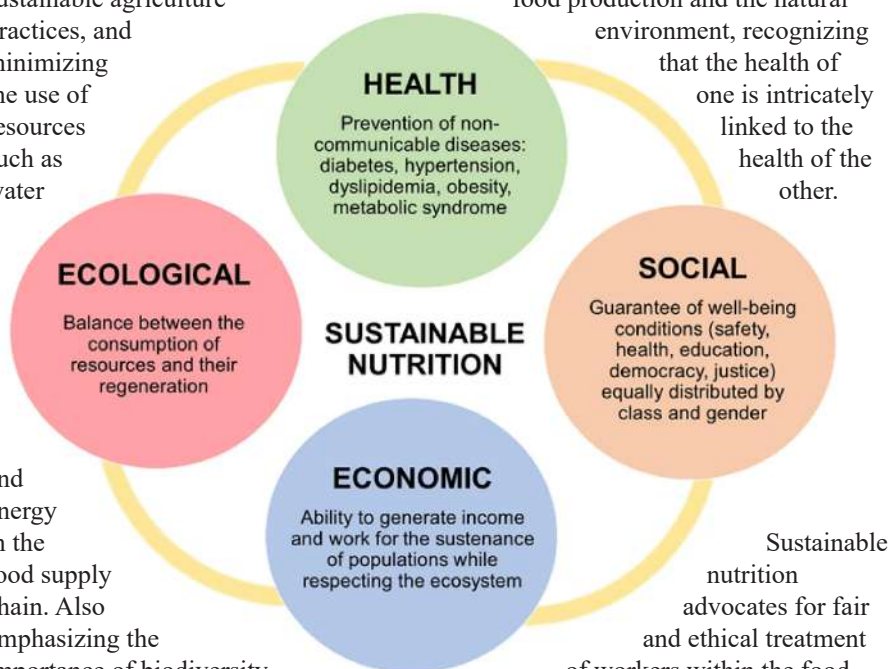


health of the planet. This environmental imperative challenges us to adopt practices that not only sustain ourselves but also contribute positively to the ecosystems that support life on Earth.

By minimizing ecological footprints, sustainable nutrition seeks to reduce the environmental impact of food production and consumption. This involves choosing foods with lower carbon footprints, supporting sustainable agriculture practices, and minimizing the use of resources such as water

and energy in the food supply chain. Also emphasizing the importance of biodiversity in ecosystems, sustainable nutrition supports agricultural practices that preserve and enhance biodiversity, like promoting diverse crop varieties, reducing monoculture, and preserving natural habitats. Diversity in our food choices, particularly embracing locally sourced and indigenous ingredients, becomes

a celebration of culinary biodiversity that is environmentally sustainable and contributes to community identity. Central to this environmental narrative is an examination of food production methods. Sustainable agriculture, with its focus on regenerative practices, minimizes soil degradation, preserves biodiversity, and mitigates the use of synthetic inputs. The goal is to create a harmonious relationship between food production and the natural environment, recognizing that the health of one is intricately linked to the health of the other.



Sustainable nutrition advocates for fair and ethical treatment of workers within the food system. This includes supporting fair labor practices, ensuring equitable access to food resources, and addressing issues of social justice within the food supply chain. Promoting food security is a key aspect of social equity. Sustainable nutrition encourages policies and practices that ensure all individuals have access to nutritious and culturally

appropriate food, addressing issues of food affordability and distribution.

Sustainable nutrition encourages and ensures responsible consumption by reducing waste at the consumer level and prioritizing recycling, resources invested in food production are utilized more efficiently.

Economic Viability by recognizing the importance of supporting local farmers and businesses. This principle encourages consumers to choose locally produced and sourced foods, fostering economic viability within communities and reducing the environmental impact associated with long-distance transportation. It promotes investments in practices that ensure the long-term resilience and viability of the food system by supporting agricultural methods that are economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and socially responsible. Reducing food waste emerges as a critical component of nourishing the planet sustainably. The staggering amount of food that goes uneaten contributes not only to economic losses but also to environmental degradation. Sustainable nutrition encourages and ensures responsible consumption by reducing waste at the consumer level and prioritizing recycling, resources invested in food production are utilized more efficiently.

The adoption of sustainable nutrition practices proves to be a pivotal solution to the challenges posed by climate change, deforestation, and resource depletion. By embracing plant-based diets, reducing food waste, and supporting local and regenerative agriculture, individuals can actively contribute to the preservation of biodiversity and the mitigation of environmental degradation. Moreover, sustainable nutrition recognizes the importance of ethical treatment of animals, emphasizing humane practices and responsible sourcing. Thus achieving harmony on the plate involves a symbiotic relationship between the choices we make for our nourishment and the impact on the planet. By adopting sustainable eating habits, people are contributing to a healthier, more balanced world, creating a future where eating is seen as a conscious and meaningful part of our collective mission to create a more sustainable and more harmonious world.

# Sushmita Sen: Ram Madhvani revealed new layers in my acting

Actress Sushmita Sen expressed her delight in working with director Ram Madhvani, and shared how the latter has revealed new layers in her acting that she never knew existed.

Sushmita is seen as the lead in Ram Madhvani's crime thriller series 'Aarya'.

Sharing insights on working with the 'Neerja' director, Sushmita said, "Working with Ram Madhvani is always a delight. I truly admire his genius. He transformed Aarya from a naive, sheltered woman to someone resilient in facing life's challenges."

"Off-screen, Ram revealed new layers in my acting that I never knew existed. The trust he has in me is incredible; he saw Aarya in me before I could," said the former Miss Universe.

Sushmita added, "For 'Aarya Antim Vaar', Ram and I spent time understanding Aarya's soul. When he asked me to look into my soul, I followed his advice and isolated myself. You can see the pain and anger on screen - Ram's guidance brought those emotions to life." 'Aarya Antim Vaar' would be streaming on Disney+ Hotstar from February 9.



# Alia Bhatt boards Richie Mehta's 'Poacher' series as executive producer

Streaming platform Prime Video, on Tuesday, announced that actor Alia Bhatt is turning executive producer for its upcoming Amazon original series 'Poacher'.

Emmy Award winner Richie Mehta of 'Delhi Crime' fame has directed the crime drama, which is set to premiere on Prime Video from February 23. It is produced by QC Entertainment.

An investigative crime series based on true events, 'Poacher' unearths the largest ivory poaching ring in Indian history, the makers said.

Bhatt joins the project as an executive producer via her banner Eternal Sunshine Productions.

Being part of 'Poacher' is an honour for both her and her team at the production house, the actor said.

"The impact of 'Poacher' was deeply personal, and Richie's

portrayal of the urgent issue of wildlife crime resonated strongly with me and the team. The storytelling genuinely moved me, especially knowing it's based

considerate towards all living beings. It's a call to embrace coexistence and I am genuinely thrilled to be collaborating with Richie, QC and Prime Video and to contribute to this narrative," Bhatt said in a statement.

"Alia coming on board 'Poacher' is truly a dream come true. In addition to being a world class actress she has proven to be a selfless philanthropist channelling her well respected and earned celebrity status for championing positive causes," added QC principals Edward H Hamm, Raymond Mansfield and Sean McKittrick.

Mehta has created, written and directed the series that boasts of a diverse and talented cast comprising Nimisha Sajayan, Roshan Mathew and Dibyendu Bhattacharya in pivotal roles. The story of 'Poacher' would unfold primarily in Malayalam, Hindi and English.



on true events, that sheds light on brutal crimes occurring in our forests.

"I am confident that 'Poacher' will serve as an eye-opener, delivering a powerful message to be more compassionate and

# 'Hugely gratifying to see 'Black' receiving so much love': Rani on film's OTT release



and to date, it is being loved by moviegoers.

On witnessing audience's love for Black on OTT, Rani said, "It is overwhelming and hugely gratifying to see that 'Black' is receiving so much love from the audience even after 19 years, with its OTT release. The film holds a very special place in my filmography. The experience of working with legendary Amitabh Bachchan and being directed by my favourite filmmaker of all times Sanjay Leela Bhansali, is something that will stay with me forever."

She added, "I am glad that the film is out on Netflix and all those who missed watching the magic of Black in theatres when it released 19 years ago, will be able to witness it, on their screens. It is always humbling to see your work reach a wider audience."

Megastar Amitabh Bachchan and actor Rani Mukerji's iconic film recently marked its debut on OTT.

The digital journey of 'Black' kickstarted on February 4 on Netflix to mark 19 years of the film, which was directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. Interestingly, it's been almost 20 years since the film was released

The film won the National Award for Best Feature Film. Also, Amitabh Bachchan won the National Award for Best Actor. It's the first film to have won 11 awards at the Filmfare Awards.

The film draws inspiration from the life of Helen Keller, as well as the 1962 film based on her autobiography, The Miracle Worker.

# Nora Fatehi to set the stage of Dance+Pro on fire

Star Plus is back with the seventh season of Dance Plus, Dance+Pro. With the camaraderie of Remo D'Souza and the other captains, Shakti Mohan, Punit Pathak and Rahul Shetty, Dance Plus has kept audiences hooked on their television screens.

One of the major highlights of the show is going to be Nora Fatehi, who will groove along with Super Judge Remo Dsouza, the captains, and the contestants.

Remo shares, "It was a fun experience with Nora Fatehi gracing the stage of Dance+Pro.

She is an incredible dancer we all know but she is also a very humble and gentle human being. It is a blessing to have her around, as she brings along with her a different energy and vibe that is radiated

to us. Nora will be showcasing her stellar moves and will also be grooving along with the contestants. Brace yourselves for the dhamakedaar performances.





# Five Indians bag Grammys, Zakir Hussain gets three

India shone at the 2024 Grammy Awards with five Indian musicians, including tabla maestro Zakir Hussain and flautist Rakesh Chaurasia, picking up the coveted prize at a glittering ceremony held at the Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles on Sunday night.

While Hussain was India's big winner with three Grammys, Rakesh Chaurasia picked up two. Singer Shankar Mahadevan, violinist Ganesh Rajagopalan and percussionist Selvaganesh Vinayakram, Hussain's collaborators in the fusion group Shakti, won one Grammy.

Shakti won the 2024 Grammy Award for best global music album for *This Moment*. The album features the four Indians as well as its founding member, the legendary British guitarist John McLaughlin. *This Moment*, which released to critical acclaim in June 2023, is the group's first studio album in more than 45 years. Besides his award for



Shakti, Hussain won two other awards — the best global music performance for *Pashto* and best contemporary instrumental

album for *As We Speak*.

Rakesh Chaurasia, nephew of legendary flautist Hariprasad Chaurasia, won two Grammys as

part of the ensemble of American banjo player Bela Fleck and American bassist Edgar Meyer for *Pashto* and *As We Speak*.

This is not the first win for Hussain at the awards organised by the US-based Recording Academy. He earlier won Grammys, across categories and in solo capacity as well as in collaborations, in 1991, 1996 and 2008. The *As We Speak* team — Hussain, Meyer, Fleck and Chaurasia — were also nominated for best instrumental composition for motion.

Sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar was the first musician from India to win a Grammy Award (best chamber music performance) in 1968.

## Rapper Killer Mike arrested after winning three awards

Rapper Killer Mike, whose real name is Michael Santiago Render, was taken away in handcuffs. This is after he had won three awards before the main

broadcast. He was arrested due to an alleged physical altercation with a security guard at the event, according to law enforcement officials.

## Kylie Minogue wins for Best Pop Dance Recording

Singer Kylie Minogue has taken home the golden gramophone in an all-new category, Best Pop Dance Recording, for *Padam Padam*. The win marks Minogue's second Grammy win after six career nominations. She had previously won Best Dance Recording for *Come Into My World*. It was one of three new categories introduced at the 66th Grammy's, the other two being Producer Of The Year, Non-Classical and Best African Music Performance. *Padam Padam* charted at No. 7 on Billboard's Hot Dance/Electronic chart; it was a much bigger hit in the UK, where it was a No. 1 hit. The song was embraced by the LGBTQ+ community on both sides of the Atlantic.

## 'Lahore 1947' a reunion with most talented people: Rajkumar Santoshi

Filmmaker Rajkumar Santoshi says he is collaborating with A R Rahman and Javed Akhtar on *"Lahore 1947"*, a film that also marks his reunion with actors Aamir Khan and Sunny Deol.

Santoshi directed Aamir in *"Andaz Apna Apna"* while he and Deol have worked extensively on hits like *"Ghayal"*, *"Damini"* and *"Ghatak"*. Aamir is producing *"Lahore 1947"* with Deol playing the lead role.

"*Lahore 1947*" is a very special film. Also, it's a reunion with the most talented people. I worked with Aamir in *'Andaz Apna Apna'* and this time, he is collaborating as a producer. With Sunny Deol, we made most loved films like *'Ghayal'*, *'Damini'*, and *'Ghatak'*," Santoshi said in a statement.

"For a film of this magnitude, I can't think of anyone else than A R Rahman as a music composer, he is

one of the top composers in the world right now. Javed Akhtar and I share a very good bond with each other for many years, having him for this project as a lyricist is a delight.

This is truly the best dream team and rare to come together. With all the positivity and full of energy, we will commence the shoot for the film very soon," he added.

The filmmaker is also known for hits like *"China Gate"*, *"Pukar"*, *"Lajja"*, *"The Legend of Bhagat Singh"*, *"Khaki"* and *"Ajab Prem Ghazab Kahani"*, said they begin shooting the film soon.

"We look forward to collaborating with the immensely talented Sunny, and one of my favourite directors Raj Santoshi. The journey we have embarked on promises to be most enriching," the statement read.



## Shahid Kapoor reveals how Dhan Te Nan helped him understand his role in Kaminey

Among the many mesmerising performances on Indian Idol 14, it was Anjana Padmanabhan, who shone bright and once again impressed everyone by singing *Gulaboo*, *Thunkeshwari*, and *Dhan Te Nan* from the movies *Shaandar*, *Bhediya* and *Kaminey*, respectively. Shahid Kapoor was

shared how this track helped him prepare for his role as Guddu in the film *Kaminey*. He said, "Before doing *Kaminey*, I had just finished *Jab We Met* and was confused about the movie's zone. It was different from what had been introduced in India so far, so I wasn't sure how to approach it. I remember



left amazed by Anjana's performance and said, "You're so good; you're a powerhouse performer. And what you did with your voice today is unbelievable. You're very special."

While listening to Anjana's rendition of the song *Dhan Te Nan*, Shahid Kapoor

we were in Vishal sir's office discussing the costume and other things when he handed me the headphones and asked me to listen to this song. That's when I first heard *Dhan Te Nan* and it gave me an understanding of what I had to do in the movie."



# Magical Bumrah was difference between two sides in 2nd Test, says former England captain Nasser Hussain

## London

The magical first innings spell by Jasprit Bumrah was the difference between India and England in the just-concluded second Test, according to former England captain Nasser Hussain, who said the visitors were powerless against the Indian pacer's genius.

India's go-to bowler in all formats, Bumrah displayed brilliance with the ball to play a key role in the team's series-levelling 106-run win.

The pacer put up a reverse swing master-class in England's first innings that yielded him six wickets (6/45), following it up with a three-wicket haul in their second essay for match figures of 9 for 91.

"I think, really, it was just the magic of Jasprit Bumrah that was the difference. He got three-for today (Monday), but it was that incredible spell in the first innings, 6-45, that blew away England for 253 on a really good, flat pitch," Hussain wrote in his column for 'Sky Sports'.

Bumrah's bowling and young Yashasvi Jaiswal's first innings double ton were the highlights of India's win in Visakhapatnam.

Hussain felt that England could do nothing but "doff their cap" to the genius of Bumrah.

"Sometimes you can be critical of your own team, look at your performance



and say, 'what could we do better?' But sometimes you also have to just doff your cap to the opposition and say they were touched by genius.

"That's exactly what happened. That spell from Bumrah in England's first innings was genius. Reverse swing, with his slightly unorthodox action and the way he leans across to the offside, he creates angles," he added.

Bumrah dismissed Joe Root for the eighth time in Test cricket before producing a ripping yorker that bamboozled an in-form Ollie Pope in England's first innings.

"He's all over Joe Root at the moment - he's got him out eight times in Test cricket - and he got Ollie Pope with an absolute beauty of an in-swinging yorker.

"He also bowled Ben Stokes from round the wicket, who dropped his bat in

disbelief."

Series set up perfectly ahead of third Test

Hussain feels England should be prepared for an even stronger hit-back from the hosts in the remaining three Tests.

"It is set up perfectly, with three Tests to play. I think it will be a tight series but England are going to have to expect India to come back even harder."

In the opening two Tests, India were without the services of Virat Kohli, who opted out due to personal reasons and the injured Mohammed Shami.

The hosts suffered another blow when Ravindra Jadeja and KL Rahul were ruled out of the second Test as well.

"India have missed quite a few key players so far. Mohammad Shami, I think, is out for the series, Ravi Jadeja could well be out for another Test match and Virat Kohli has been out of the first two. We are talking about some serious cricketers there.

"Kohli may well come back in, KL Rahul also, so I would expect a stronger Indian side in those last three games of the series. England will know that they're going to have to up their game," Hussain said.

The third Test will begin in Rajkot on February 15.

## New Zealand's Kane Williamson becomes joint-second fastest to score 31 Test tons

### Bay Oval

New Zealand batter Kane Williamson smashed a superb 109 during the first Test against South Africa on Tuesday, at Mount Maunganui Cricket Stadium, becoming the joint second-fastest to reach 31 Test tons.

Williamson is racing alongside Australia's Steve Smith as the joint second-fastest to achieve the feat in 170 innings, but narrowly missed out on Sachin Tendulkar's record of fastest player to reach 31 centuries in 165 innings.

Moreover, it was the first time Williamson had scored two centuries in the same Test match, with the No.1 ranked Test batter in the world adding to his 118 in the first innings by continuing his excellent recent form and



reaching triple figures yet again.

Williamson also became the fifth player from New Zealand to two centuries in a Test match after Glenn Turner (1974), Geoff Howarth (1978), Andrew Jones (1991) and Peter Fulton (2013).

The 33-year-old's second innings heroics were nothing short of spectacular, as he blazed

his way to a majestic 109 off just 132 balls, adorned with 12 fours and a towering six.

His heroics headlined yet another dominant day for New Zealand as New Zealand went to stumps on Day 3 at 179/4 and with an overall lead of 528 runs with two days remaining.

## Atletico strike late to hold Real



### Madrid

Just a minute away from beating their city rivals for the second time in less than a month and taking a four-point lead of the La Liga, Real Madrid couldn't hang on. Madrid's improvised defence faltered at the end, and Atletico Madrid scored a stoppage-time equaliser in a 1-1 draw on Sunday. Marcos Llorente scored with a header three minutes into added time after Brahim Diaz had put the

hosts ahead in the first half at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium.

The late goal prevented Madrid from exploiting second-place Girona's 0-0 draw with Real Sociedad on Saturday. Madrid lead Girona by two points before the teams meet next week. "We played a very good match, we were in control," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "We were unlucky to concede that goal in the end, but we lacked height in the defence and we knew it."



# 'Messy' tour around the world



## Tokyo

It's all been very messy. We're talking about Lionel Messi and Inter Miami's global tour of exhibition games where the main show has been Argentina's 2022 World Cup-winning captain.

The matches are about promotion and marketing, hoping to build a new brand by using stars like Messi and Uruguayan Luis Suarez. Instead, the tour is getting mostly bad PR, and results that have not been much better in matches that have stretched from El Salvador, through Dallas, into Saudi Arabia, and then Hong Kong on Sunday.

The next stop is Tokyo's National Stadium on Wednesday against Vissel Kobe, a wrap-up match on February 16 in

Florida against Newell's Old Boys - Messi's boyhood club in Argentina, and the club that might be his final destination before retiring. Inter Miami has been outscored 12-7 through five games and won only once. And that was Sunday in Hong Kong, where a 4-1 victory over the local team was overshadowed by angry fans holding up signs demanding a refund and booing since neither Messi nor Suarez played — both out injured and ageing. Messi is 36 and Suarez is 37, and both are more and more subject to nagging injuries.

It's anyone's guess if Messi will play on Wednesday in Japan, and if so, how much. Coach Gerardo Martino will certainly be under pressure to use him some.

## Davis cup: India blank Pakistan 4-0, seal place in World Group I



## Islamabad

The Indian Davis Cup team capped its historic visit to Pakistan after 60 years by sealing its place in the World Group I. India blanked Pakistan 4-0 with Yuki Bhambri and Saketh Myneni recording a comfortable victory and Niki Poonacha making a winning debut. Taking the court with a 2-0 lead in pocket, Bhambri and Myneni subdued the home

team of Muzammil Murtaza and Aqeel Khan 6-2 7-6(5) in the doubles rubber to extend India's dominance over Pakistan in the tournament. Bhambri and the big-serving Myneni did not put a foot wrong in the match. Myneni hardly lost a point on his serve and was also superb at the net. The 28-year-old Poonacha was then asked to play the dead fourth rubber against Muhammad Shoaib, which he won easily 6-3 6-4. It was India's eighth win against Pakistan in as many meetings in the event. India will compete in the World Group I in September.

# I was just sleeping, waking up, and working; it's a great feeling: India batter Yashasvi Jaiswal



## Visakhapatnam

If Yashasvi Jaiswal is happy slamming his first Test double hundred in only his sixth match, he is happier just being able to sleep, wake up, and work.

Jaiswal lays great emphasis on routine and goes about his job in a manner that suits his internal clock, leading to good health and better productivity in whatever he does in the field.

The 22-year-old left-handed India batter has become the toast of the nation after slamming a magnificent double hundred against England in the second Test, which the hosts won by 106 runs here on Monday to level the five-match series 1-1.

Jaiswal came close to scoring a double ton in the West Indies last year, only to miss the landmark by 19 runs.

"The last time, when I had scored 171 (against the West Indies), I wanted to score the double-hundred, but it didn't happen. I always think that if I focus on my daily routine, the runs will come.

"The process is very important in my life, whatever discipline I follow. What time I sleep, what I eat, how well do I practice. I think if all of this is maintained well, the performance will stay good as well," Jaiswal said after the second Test during an interaction with JioCinema.

The hardworking youngster added, "When I go to the ground,

I feel confident because I know the hard work that I have put in, and I just need to go there and express myself.

"I always try to play for the team. In the last match, they had told me I could play as many shots as I wanted, and I played differently. Here, I thought the wicket was great and if I stayed patient, I could get a big innings.

"We lost wickets initially, so I thought I should take responsibility and play as deep as I could."

At 22 years and 36 days, Jaiswal last Saturday became the third youngest Indian after Vinod Kambli and Sunil Gavaskar to score a Test double ton.

Jaiswal prefers to keep things simple and avoids social media. On his daily routine, he said, "I get no time (to scroll Instagram). We go (for practice and matches) in the morning, come back by evening, and then sleep for recovery.

"For the first three days, I was just sleeping, waking up, and working. It's a great feeling. I am very happy that I have been able to do this. In the first three days of this match, I went out in the morning to bat and I enjoyed it a lot because I knew it was important to enjoy this moment."

With his fine run of form, Jaiswal has vindicated the faith shown in him by the team management.

Asked about his conversations

with the coach and captain, he said, "With Rohit, Rahul sir, and Vikram sir, the discussion was that if any batter gets set in their innings, he should play till the end. This was my attempt as well.

"We all believe in each other and have been working hard together. Whoever is performing on that day, they should try to complete the job for the team."

During his fluent knock that came off just 290 balls, Jaiswal smashed 19 fours and seven sixes and helped India to post a challenging first-innings total. He also attaches great importance to fielding.

"I have a process for my fielding. It's a crucial part of playing, across all formats. I am working very hard on my fielding to contribute to the team. The more I practice, the better I will get."

On his thoughts while facing the peerless James Anderson for the first time, Jaiswal said, "I wasn't thinking much. When I saw the wicket, my first thought was to see how it is playing. Rohit and I were discussing the same as I played Anderson's first over.

"Slowly, I understood how the wicket was behaving and where I could score my runs."

Jaiswal also said that batting great Sachin Tendulkar, who is his idol, congratulated him and asked him to keep working hard.



अक्रॉस स्टेट एंटरटेनमेंट प्रस्तुत

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